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Fact and Fiction: Writing the Difference Between Suicide and Death

John Carvalho

Abstract

Did Michel Foucault die of AIDS or did he kill himself? Did he knowingly infect others in the bath houses in San Francisco or was he unaware that he was ill and of how less-than-safe sex could spread the same virus that infected him? What did he know about AIDS/HIV and what do we know about what he knew? Answers to these questions are ambiguous. This is due, in part, to the culture of homosexuality and the cultural response to AIDS/HIV at the time. It is also due to the conflicting reports about what Foucault knew, and when, in the press, in biographies and in a *roman á clef* that claims to tell the truth about Foucault in fiction. What are the facts in this case and where do we find them? This essay explores how facts became fiction and fiction became fact in the life and death of Michel Foucault.

Key Words

AIDS/HIV, Foucault, Deleuze, Nietzsche, fact, fiction, suicide, death

1. Reports of Foucault's Death

In December 1983, I had an invitation to meet socially with Michel Foucault at the apartment in San Francisco he was renting while teaching what had become an annual schedule of seminars for the French Department at the University of California at Berkeley. The invitation was not addressed to me personally. It was arranged by a friend, Joseph Pearson, who was tape-recording Foucault's seminar that semester and meeting with Foucault to clarify details he had captured on tape.^[1] I was not then (or am I now) overwhelmed by Foucault's notoriety; having audited the seminar, however, I was curious and so sincerely disappointed when Foucault canceled at the last moment because he was feeling ill. It was not apparent then that there was anything more to think about it. Within a week, Foucault returned to Paris; six months later, he was dead.

At that time, we did not have the instant access to the French press the internet affords us today. First-hand information came from obituaries published in the *San Francisco Chronicle* and the *New York Times*.^[2] The original reports about the cause of death were ambiguous and contradictory. This was seriously frustrating. What had caused Foucault to die apparently so suddenly and prematurely? Was it really AIDS? Foucault's fondness for San Francisco bath houses was widely discussed at the time. What we knew about AIDS, however, was not entirely clear. Nor was it clear what exactly was at stake in thinking AIDS was the cause of Foucault's death. In 1984, it was possible (it still seems plausible, today) to believe in an AIDS conspiracy, in campaigns of disinformation disseminating news about the "gay plague," and in a practiced neglect of AIDS cases because they were reported by homosexuals. ^[3] If Foucault had died of AIDS, would it be

used to support this conspiracy and to intensify the animosity toward homosexuals in general? Would it be used to discredit Foucault himself, the way syphilis was used to discredit Nietzsche? If Foucault had died of AIDS, had it been the result of neglect or of a will to ignorance about an illness striking down gay men? How much had Foucault known about AIDS and about his own illness? Had he wanted to die? Had he endangered the lives of others?

The reports from the French papers, when they arrived a week later, did little to answer these questions. Buried in the eulogies that filled the pages of *Le Monde*, 27 June, two days after Foucault's death, a small, unsigned column, titled "*Le communiqué des médecins*," declared the following:

M. Michel Foucault entered the clinic for maladies of the nervous system at the hospital of the Salpêtrière in Paris, 9 June 1984, for further examinations made necessary by the manifestation of neurological events complicating a septicemic state. These examinations revealed the existence of several areas of cerebral suppuration. Antibiotic treatment, at first, had a favorable effect; last week, a remission permitted M. Michel Foucault to take notice of the first reviews following on the publication of his last books. An abrupt worsening dashed all hope of effective therapy, and death came 25 June at 1:15 p.m.

The statement, seemingly authoritative, issued by the doctors at the Salpêtrière with the agreement of Foucault's family, was the apparent basis for the reports in the English language papers in the days and weeks that followed. That same day, 27 June, a reporter in Paris writing for the *London Guardian* gave the cause of death as "a rare brain infection." An obituary in the *London Times*, also 27 June, avoided all mention of the cause of Foucault's death. The notice in the *New York Times*, that same day, said something about a neurological disorder but concluded by saying "the cause of death was not immediately disclosed." Two weeks after the fact, on 9 July 1984, *Time* magazine would report that Foucault had died of cancer. Unless this designation was a concealed and abbreviated reference to "homosexuals' cancer," as the disease was sometimes called then, there was no mention of AIDS in the official account of the cause of Foucault's death.

Of course, this apparently official and obviously ambiguous account did little to settle the matter. Already, by 27 June, an unsigned letter to the quotidian *Libération* gave the failure to name a determinate cause in the case an unfortunate cast.

As soon as he died, rumors began to circulate. It is being said that Foucault died of AIDS. As though an exceptional intellectual seemed, because he was also homosexual an ideal target for the fashionable disease. As though Foucault had to die shamefully.^[4]

What disturbed people about this letter was not the voice given to the rumors about what is now widely believed, but still not known, to be the cause of Foucault's death. It was,

rather, the association of AIDS with shame, especially in a paper Foucault had helped to found and whose personal columns Foucault once described as "an erotic stage on which anyone can inscribe themselves and wander around, even if they are not looking for anything, even if they expect nothing."^[5] There could be no shame associated with homosexuality in Foucault's case. What the sentiment in the letter nonetheless faithfully records is the anxiety and the uncertainty about the exact cause of Foucault's death.

That anxiety was only heightened, well after the fact and rather indirectly, in Daniel Defert's endorsement of an interview given by one of his associates, Jean le Bitoux, with a gay American weekly in early 1986 confirming that Foucault had died of AIDS. Le Bitoux had collaborated with Defert, Foucault's lover and companion, at Association AIDES which was founded in Foucault's memory "to confront this disease, which he had caught."^[6] Nothing was presented to support le Bitoux's statement but Defert's supposed endorsement. In what sense, then, can it be counted as the truth? How do the claims of this statement stand up against the truth of the statement by the Salpêtrière? And how are we supposed to negotiate these facts, truths representing the discursive regimes of competing institutions -- the hospital, the gay press -- and their claims on the life of Michel Foucault? Is it possible to discover the objective facts in this case and use them to identify the fiction constructed to protect the family, in the one instance, or canonize a gay saint, in the other?

2. Language and Facts in the Death of Foucault

The question is not trivial. It implicates the general philosophy of language in Foucault that is in the background of the finer distinctions between fact and fiction, suicide and death explored in what follows here. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault distinguishes statements from the grammatical formation of sentences, the logical formation of propositions and the performative formation of speech acts.^[7] Unlike these other linguistic units, a statement is a function isolatable only "in its actual practice, its conditions, the rules that govern it, and the field in which it operates."^[8] There are statements where there are none of the grammatical structures that form a sentence, however loosely defined. Classificatory tables, a genealogical tree, an accounts book, the calculations of a trade balance, all contain statements but no sentences. The letters A Z E R T in a French typewriting manual function as a statement but do not form a sentence. Likewise, different arrangements of words that constitute the same proposition ("No one heard" and "It is true that no one heard") do not form the same statement because, by virtue of being linked with different discursive fields (the first in the voice of the author or a character in the text the second as part of an interior monologue or in a group of questions and answers), they function differently and are governed by different rules.

Finally, a single speech act, an oath, for example, may be composed of several statements. The decree, "I now pronounce you husband and wife," is indistinguishable as a speech act from the decree, "I now pronounce you man and wife," but these are two different and distinct statements,

functioning to unite two people in marriage on different terms and confirming that more than one statement is functioning in those decrees. The issue introduced above and followed through in the discussion that continues below is to what discursive regime — medical reports, news stories, gossip, biography, commentary philosophy, fiction — do the statements about Foucault's life and death belong and what do the actual practices, conditions and rules that govern these fields (what Foucault calls, collectively, the "enunciative modalities" of the statement) lend to the truth claimed in these statements. What are we to think if the enunciative modalities of science, journalism and biography prove inadequate to a task better served by philosophical speculation, hearsay and fiction?

Didier Eribon, Foucault's French biographer, reports that in the winter before his death Foucault had phoned Georges Dumézil and said, "I think I have AIDS."^[9] Eribon concludes from this that Foucault knew but did not want to know, that he knew but did not want to burden his friends with what he did not want to know, that this confidence shared with the eighty-six-year-old man who had been his "director of conscience" for so many years says as much.^[10] He goes on to publish the remarks of Paul Veynes, a friend and colleague, about a conversation with Foucault in February 1984. Foucault had been suffering with a fever and a dry cough he could not shake. Veynes said to him, jokingly, "Your doctors are bound to think you have AIDS." "That is exactly what they think," Foucault replied. "I realized it from the questions they asked me." After recommending that his friend get some rest by taking a break from all the Greek and Latin he had been reading, Veynes asked Foucault, incidentally, whether he thought AIDS was real or just a legend with a moral. "Well," Foucault told him, "I've studied the matter closely, I've read a lot about it. Yes, it exists. It isn't a legend." And Veynes says he went on to give precise pathogenic details of the illness.^[11] Veynes suspected, then, only that an historian of medicine had been keeping up with the news from American sources. "In retrospect," he says, "his cool headedness over my stupid question takes my breath away."^[12]

Beyond this anecdotal evidence, David Macey, Foucault's British biographer, recommends the following inferences.^[13]

In retrospect, one can only wonder at the rumors, now that the references in obituaries to Arare brain infection and Aneurological disorders are as obviously transparent metaphors for AIDS-related conditions as Aa long illness bravely borne is for cancer. The symptoms displayed by Foucault in the eighteen months or so before his death now seem to be particularly clear: flu-like symptoms, headaches, severe loss of weight, recurrent bouts of fever and a persistent dry cough.

Presented together, today, these indications would be clear signs of HIV infection. At the time of Foucault's death, however, these symptoms did not so obviously add up; and there was no test for AIDS then, no medical means for extracting from these signs the facts that could lead to a

definite diagnosis. It is still, today, not clear whether or what Foucault or his doctors knew about the illness that killed him. There remains just the official statement, approved by the family and reported by the doctors -- septicemia and suppuration, infection and discharge in the brain -- and the unofficial statement, approved by Daniel Defert and reported in a paper edited for a gay audience -- AIDS. The biographies by Eribon and Macey give us grounds for questioning the hospital report but not enough evidence for confirming the report in the *Advocate*. To make a stronger case for Defert's indirect confession, we have to turn to the work of Foucault's American biographer, James Miller.

3. Fact and Fiction in the Life of Foucault

Miller adds nothing to the facts known about Foucault's death. Miller's contribution is distinctive, rather, for the way it attempts to integrate Foucault's philosophy into a story that interprets what is known about Foucault's life into a fantastic narrative about his death. Drawing from Foucault's commentary on Bataille, Miller describes death as a "limit-experience" in Foucault's life and death by AIDS as a distinctive feature of Foucault's experience of that particular limit. In support of this morbid diagnosis, Miller paints a lurid picture of a man obsessed by death and drugs, suicide and sadomasochistic sex which Foucault is described as seeking right up until his death in the bath houses in New York and San Francisco. He quotes from an interview Foucault gave for the inaugural issue of *Gai Pied* in 1979, and from another interview given in 1983 (and published that year in *Sécurité social: l'enjeu*) extolling the virtues and pleasures of suicide. According to Miller, Foucault insisted that "dying is sensuous (just as Sade, for one, had said)" and, in those interviews, Foucault described death as the "formless form of an absolutely simple pleasure," a limitless pleasure whose patient preparation, with neither rest nor predetermination, will illuminate the entirety of your life."[\[14\]](#) In the absence of any hard evidence about the circumstances leading to Foucault's death, Miller tells a story that leads his readers to conclude that Foucault knew he had AIDS, knew it was potentially fatal and knowingly returned to those sites where the illness was spreading.

Miller's story is compelling and disturbing, in part, because it has compelled some otherwise careful readers to endorse it.[\[15\]](#) What those readers are ready to endorse is precisely the story Miller tells that connects facts about Foucault's life with features of Foucault's thought. This story is, alternatively, thought to be the imposition of a unifying principle on the life of a man who argued vigorously against the demands of personal identity. "Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same," Foucault famously wrote: "leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order."[\[16\]](#) In comparison with the detail of Eribon and Macey, Miller's fashioning of an identity for Foucault out of his preoccupations with death seems a welcome departure from bureaucracy and the police. On the other hand, the salacious casting of these preoccupations in the context of Foucault's homosexual encounters will seem to some to be introduced to promote the author's book rather than an unflinching look at a dark side of things the subject of the book was fond of

exposing in his genealogies. At what point does Miller's account depart from the facts for the purposes of telling a good fiction? Even if Foucault might endorse this kind of fiction, how much can it help us to understand the facts about Foucault's death?

We ordinarily distinguish fact from fiction by the correspondence or lack of a correspondence between what is stated and a reference in the world. Factual statements give evidence in support of a claim about this referent that can be tested by third parties. Fictional statements make claims as the basis for further fictional statements that can be tested only in the context of those same claims. In the case fashioned in these pages, the official certificate of death, the report in the *Advocate*, and the biographies by Eribon and Macey all make claims about Foucault's life and death based on evidence presented or implied in their various statements. Miller's biography, it is supposed, slouches toward fiction because of the misleading evidence it presents and because the "truth" of its claims about the life and death of Foucault depends primarily on the coherence and reflexivity of those same claims. Apart from confirming what so many suspect to be the facts about Foucault's death, is there any reason for taking Miller's account seriously? Well, there is, if we consider what Foucault himself had to say about the relation between facts and fiction.

4. Semiotics; Hermeneutics; Commentary

In *Les mots et les choses*, the book that made him famous in France,^[17] Foucault argues, in part, that the problem of reference is not a contemporary philosophical abstraction or a paradox contained in language but one result of a long process in the course of which words have become steadily separated from things. Until the end of the 16th century, Foucault says, words were intimately interwoven with things and language was not an abstraction but a thing in the world found written in the signatures that linked one thing with another in an indefinite network of resemblances. Thus, for the Renaissance mind, wounds to the pericranium were thought to be cured by the thick green rind covering the fruit of the walnut, while internal head ailments were treated with the fruit itself "which is exactly like the brain in appearance."^[18]

In this period, then, the semiology that locates and specifies signs and their relation to one another and the hermeneutics that interprets these signs and discovers their meaning seamlessly overlap -- to infinity. For the signature on the walnut that indicates its resemblance to the pericranium also resembles the covering on other nuts, by virtue of which we identify the general class of fruits to which the walnut belongs, and these are called fruits by virtue of containing something nourishing within a protective covering, from which similitude the fetus is called "fruit of the womb" and the semen is thought to be a seed. And in the other direction, the skull and the brain, for which the rind and fruit of the walnut were thought to provide a remedy, by its position atop the body, were known to be the superior part of a human being just as the sun which is highest in the sky is superior to all the forms of life that it nourishes. A sign of the superiority of that brain is the light its eyes shine on these similitudes which resembles

the light of the sun, and so on. Since so much is signed in what is written on the surfaces of things, interpretation was charged with divining the relevant or salient secret of that thing and, thus, a certain divination and magic came to inform knowledge.

And the same is to be said, following this archaeology of the Renaissance, about the semiology and hermeneutics of all the texts of Scripture and of the sages handed down and preserved for us from antiquity. The pages of these ancient texts are so many seas of sign, and the task in reading them is the same: to make the signs speak. But there is an added wrinkle, a folding of the signs marking those pages, as words, onto the natural world of things those words reflect, and a folding of these words onto the signs marking the pages of other texts. The first fold resulted in complex "legends," such as the Renaissance naturalist Aldrovandi's catalogue of serpents according to their equivocations (the various meanings of the word 'serpent'), synonyms and etymologies, differences, form and description, anatomy, nature and habits, temperament, coitus and generation, voice, movements, places, diet, etc.

The second fold results in a different kind of encyclopedia. The *Materia Medica*, for example, collects certain divinations of the secrets of flora identified as herbs. To read it, we must learn its language by identifying its signs and the relations linking those signs to others similar to them. To understand it, we must understand its resemblances to other texts of the same or analogous or sympathetic or convenient sorts (other books on herbs or on humors of the body or on homeopathic remedies that incorporate herbs or books sharing the same shelf). Reading a book and reading nature are species of the same thing and, in the Renaissance, Foucault says, both are coeval with the institution of God.[\[19\]](#)

Of course, it's ever more complicated than that. Leaving aside the difficulties posed by the many different natural languages that translate the language written on the surface of nature, there is the emergence at the end of the 16th century of special species of commentary, the iteration and indefinite proliferation of a language devoted to making texts speak. Where the texts of the ancient sages reflected on the resemblances in nature and the resemblances mirrored in the signs written on the pages of a text, commentary as it emerged at the end of the Renaissance (and that persists to this day) sought to represent the truth of the written text by interpreting the meaning hidden in it once and for all. From the density of resemblances inscribed on every page of a text, commentary sought to isolate and interpret the most salient similitudes of that text. As a standard for evaluating salience, commentary invented a sovereign text hidden in the text that is its foundation and justification, its ideal limit and, yet, at the same time, its ceaselessly animating force. The sovereign text is the secret of commentary: without it, commentary has no point, with it commentary breaks its reference to the world of things. With commentary, the epistemic conditions of resemblance have been supplanted by representation and, as Montaigne observed, "there is more work in interpreting interpretations than in interpreting things: and more books on books than on any other subject; we do nothing but write

glosses on one another."^[20] Foucault sums up the situation as follows.

The profound kinship of language with the world was thus dissolved. The primacy of the written word went into abeyance. And that uniform layer, in which the seen and the read, the visible and the expressible, were endlessly interwoven, vanished too. Things and words were to be separated from one another. Discourse was still to have the task of speaking that which is, but it [what is] was no longer to be anything more than what is said.^[21]

The only thing, Foucault says, that still today recalls the richness of that indefinite network of similitudes, a world characterized by the attractions of signs to other signs, and not a world constructed to support significations that can only be represented in another order of signs, the only place where we find a memory of the Renaissance *episteme*, is in literature.

Where commentary announced the becoming discourse of language, Foucault says, literature preserved the "living being of language," an "autonomous existence of language," a "counter-discourse."^[22] But while language in the Renaissance was limited by its intimacy with things, language in literature, born with modernity in the 17th century, "was to grow with no point of departure, no end, and no promise."^[23] Where commentary supposed a hidden text as the foundation and justification of its discourse, literature offered no excuses and no justifications for the worlds invented in its fictions. And this, finally, is the point of this digression. Foucault's biographers, Miller and Halperin included,^[24] suppose there is a secret that animates their accounts and animates the life they attribute to their subject. Their facts and fictions are ordered, more in the case of Eribon, Macey, and Halperin, less in the case of Miller, by the discursive regularities of biographies, to give Foucault a life like any other, a life that barely touches, if it touches at all, on the life he lived, a life that represents Foucault as a great man, as a hero, as passionate, as a saint.

5. Fact and Fiction; Biography and *Roman à Clef*

On this reading, the argument could be made that Miller's literary license moves the story about Foucault's life and death in the right direction. Miller reveals the secret behind his portrait of Foucault -- a death drive preoccupation with suicide, drugs and sado-masochistic pleasure -- and breathes life into his subject. Others had anticipated his example. Maurice Blanchot wrote *Michel Foucault as I Imagine Him*, a commentary of Foucault's work in light of a life Blanchot imagined through that work.^[25] And then there's the story Hervé Guibert wrote, *To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life*,^[26] a *roman à clef* Daniel Defert dismissed as a "vicious fantasy,"^[27] but which Miller, Macey, Eribon and Halperin all say is likely based on Guibert's close personal relationship with Foucault.^[28] The novella is, in the main, a memoir of the author's own infection with HIV and inevitable death from AIDS in 2001. The friend of the title is, alternatively, the book Guibert is writing and Bill, the manager of a large pharmaceutical laboratory that manufactures vaccines. But the

friend in the novella that interests us is Muzil, a thinly veiled portrait of Foucault.[29] Early in the book, in an early episode described as taking place sometime in 1981, Muzil is described as falling off the sofa with hysterical laughter at the prospect of AIDS that the aforementioned Bill had reported to Guibert. "A cancer that would hit only homosexuals," Muzil howls, "no, that's too good to be true. I could just die laughing!"[30] "As it happened," the author observes, "Muzil was already infected with the retrovirus, since its latency period, as Stéphane told me the other day, is now known to be about six years, although this is being kept quiet to avoid spreading panic among the thousands who are seropositive." [31] Stéphane is Guibert's portrait of Foucault's long-time companion Daniel Defert.

Guibert goes on to comment on Muzil's apparent depression in the months following this laughing fit in response to the report about the "homosexuals' cancer," clearly implying, to Guibert, that Muzil suspected something, something secretly contained in the admission "that he confided in no one but me."

Stéphane is sick with love of me. I finally understand that I am Stéphane's sickness and that I'll remain so all his life, no matter what I do, unless I disappear; the only way to save him from his illness, I'm sure of this, would be to do away with myself." [32]

No wonder Defert despised this fiction. But how much of it was true? And what was to be inferred from this "admission?" That Foucault was already sick, or at least infected in 1981? Based on what we know, now, about HIV and AIDS, it seems possible. Did Foucault suspect as much? Based on what Guibert has written, it seems probable. Can he have known or known the implications of his illness: that his continued sexual promiscuity, if he was infected, was a risk for his sexual partners? Between 1981 and 1983, it seems unlikely. In the first place, little was known, at that time, about the illness and its pathogenesis. More importantly, the heterosexual imagination that reduces male homosexual intimacy to sodomy and fellatio and that inflates the frequency of homosexual encounters to fill the paucity of heterosexual sexual experience cannot imagine perverse pleasures that would not include the exchange of bodily fluids. But as David Halperin's portrait of Foucault and the S/M scenes he frequented makes abundantly clear, straight fantasies of homosexual acts had not begun to fathom the desexualization of the male sex organ, the devaluation of orgasm or the remapping of the body into zones of heretofore unexplored sensations that was the staple of Foucault's and others' *gaya scienza*, their gay science of pleasure.[33]

Guibert's fictional Stéphane discovers in Muzil's apartment, after Muzil's death, "a huge bag filled with whips, leather goods, leashes, bridles, and handcuffs." [34] According to Guibert, Stéphane was repulsed by the discovery of this paraphernalia which he claimed he did not know about. Yet Guibert describes Muzil, and D.A. Miller describes Foucault, as an enthusiastic participant in the San Francisco baths and the hard-core scene there. Could Stéphane not have known about the practices and sciences of pleasure in those baths and

Muzil's fondness for them?[35] Is Guibert inventing an intimacy formed around his own fascination with the S/M scene? In late autumn 1983, just after my missed tea with Foucault, Guibert suggests to Muzil that the baths must be empty because of the threat of AIDS. He has Muzil respond:

. . .it's just the opposite: the baths have never been so popular, and now they're fantastic. This danger lurking everywhere has created new complicities, new tenderness, new solidarities. Before, no one ever said a word; now we talk to one another. We all know exactly why we are there.[36]

If Guibert is to be believed, then, as early as 1981 and certainly by 1983 Foucault was aware of the illness and of the dangers represented by scenes of anonymous sexual encounters, and he threw himself into these scenes anyway. If he was not knowingly endangering the lives of others, was he not at least endangering his own life? Was this a form a suicide, a death he chose rather than a death that chose him?

This is the line, of course, running throughout James Miller's controversial biography. It is what has infuriated so many critics about the life he attributes to Foucault, leading some to describe it as the worst sort of fiction, a tabloid account of Foucault's homosexual experience to satisfy the heterosexual imagination.[37] And, yet, we find some support for this suggestion in a portrait of Foucault drawn by Gilles Deleuze, for a long time one of Foucault's closest collaborators.[38] In it, Deleuze discusses the direction of the research Foucault followed in his last works, a direction that took him beyond knowledge and power and the composites power/knowledge formed. Deleuze describes this research as including considerations of the Outside, taking the term from Blanchot who uses it to mean "something more distant than any external world" which is also "closer than any inner world." [39] Thinking, Deleuze says, comes from this Outside, and he refers, as a way of clarifying this metaphor of the line, to Foucault's fascination, in *The Birth of the Clinic*, with Bichat's conception of death.[40]

Bichat put forward what's probably the first general modern conception of death, presenting it as violent, plural, and coextensive with life. Instead of taking it, like the classical thinkers, as a point, he takes it as a line that we're constantly confronting, and cross in either direction only at the points where it ends.[41]

Passionate men cross the line, and "there's something of that in Foucault's death," according to Deleuze. Beyond power/knowledge there is, on this view, a third element for Foucault, a new line represented in the research he conducted in the last years of his life, "an acceleration," Deleuze calls it, "that makes it impossible to distinguish death and suicide." [42]

From this we might ascribe to Foucault not a morbid drive to kill himself by becoming infected in the San Francisco baths but rather a willingness to meet his death there, to cross the line there, to invent his death in the company of the men and

boys with whom he had explored "the decentralization, the regionalization of all pleasures."[\[43\]](#) That would preserve the verisimilitude of the "fiction" in which Guibert tells the story about meeting Muzil's secretary on a bus a few days after the funeral. Asked whether Muzil knew what was killing him, the assistant assures Guibert that Muzil knew that his illness would prove fatal. Muzil had been attending meetings of the French Doctors Without Borders at a dermatology clinic where the first cases of AIDS (which manifests symptoms of Kaposi's sarcoma, reddish-violet blotches that spread all over the body) were being treated. His persistent cough caught the attention of the head of the clinic, and Muzil reluctantly agreed to tests. "The head of the clinic was soon able to determine the nature of Muzil's illness from the results of these tests," Guibert writes,

but to safeguard the reputation of his patient and colleague, he took steps to keep the truth from leaking out by monitoring the medical records and lab results linking that famous name to this new disease, by falsifying and censoring this paper trail so that Muzil could retain a free hand with his work until his death, unencumbered by troublesome rumors.[\[44\]](#)

Guibert goes on to say this unnamed head of dermatology kept the information from Stéphane but not from this secretary with whom he spoke after attempting to discuss the test results with Muzil himself. According to the doctor, Muzil had no patience for the details of the tests or the prognosis. Instead, he "put an end to the discussion with an abrupt wave of his hand, 'How long?' he'd asked."[\[45\]](#)

Is this story to be believed? Is this otherwise fictional account of the last days of Foucault's life more or less credible than the discursive details that write the facts of his death certificate? According to the biographies, Foucault suspected he had AIDS but never knew, did not want to know and did not want to burden his friends with what he may or may not have known. The suspicions, never confirmed, that his death was caused by complications following from HIV infection led to the formation of Association AIDES, the first organized body in France to promote awareness about AIDS and to support research about the illness: noble and generous ends suitably associated with, by these accounts, a noble and generous man. In *To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life*, Stéphane tells Guibert at lunch the day after Muzil dies that he learned for the first time in the hospital registrar's office that the cause of death was AIDS. Muzil's sister, who was with him,

demanded that they cross this out completely, or scratch it out if they had to, or even better, tear out the page and redo it, for while these records are of course confidential, still, you never know, perhaps in ten or twenty years some muckraking biographer would come and Xerox the entry, or X-ray the impression still faintly legible on the next page.[\[46\]](#)

Do we read this fiction, now, as fact, because it confirms what we otherwise suspect? Can we explain why Defert had called a "vicious fantasy" the only source that could confirm the "truth"

he leaked to *The Advocate*? What facts and what fiction help us to distinguish between brain hemorrhage and AIDS, suicide and death in the life of Michel Foucault? Do we have any reason to be disappointed by the apparent reliability of fiction over the facts in this case?

Foucault, of course, had a special relation to fiction. "Foucault liked to say that all his works were 'fictions'," Macey tells us, "which did not necessarily mean," he goes on to explain, "that they were untrue."^[47] Foucault admitted to Claude Mauriac that he had made fictional use of materials he assembled in his books and made fictional constructions from authentic elements.^[48] And he told Raymond Bellour that *Les mots et les choses* was "a 'fiction' pure and simple; it's a novel," Foucault said to him, "but I didn't make it up."^[49] Macey traces this notion of fiction back to Nietzsche and a passage from *Daybreak*.^[50]

Facta! Yes, facta ficat! A historian has to do, not with what actually happened, but only with events supposed to have happened. All historians speak of things which have never existed except in imagination.^[51]

Macey uses this reference to endorse Guibert's novel which he speculates Foucault would have preferred to the biography he has written. It abbreviates, in Nietzsche's inimitable way, the detailed argument for the preference, not to say the privilege, of fiction over fact presented in *Les mots et les choses*. In literature, Foucault says, words, otherwise burdened with representing the truth, bring a world back to life. In fiction, according to Nietzsche, we find facts that make our own lives worth living. In the best case, no doubt, a story like the one I've just told complicates the facts about Foucault's death and, quite provisionally, to be sure, brings Foucault back to life again. As the story finally ends, I can only hope that whatever fiction it contains will have made our own lives worth living.

Endnotes

^[1] Pearson completed a typescript of the seminar annotated with footnotes to the texts referenced by Foucault, including texts from the Greek and Latin sources Foucault had drawn on in his lectures cited in their original language and in English translation. The subject of the seminar, given in English, was "frankness in speaking the truth," especially as practiced in the truth-telling games of the Hellenistic philosophers. The typescript circulated privately for several years under the title "Discourse and Truth: The Problematization of Parrhesia. It has been published recently as *Fearless Speech*, ed. Joseph Pearson (New York: Semiotex(e), 2001).

^[2] The daily edition of the *New York Times* was still being mailed to the west coast at that time and arrived a day late.

^[3] See Simon Watney, *Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS, and the Media*, 3e, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

^[4] Cited by David Macey, *The Lives of Michel Foucault* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), pp. 474-5. See also Didier Eribon, *Michel Foucault*, trans. Betsy Wing (Cambridge, MA:

Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 327; and James Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (New York: Simon Schuster, 1993), p. 21.

[5] Cited by F.M. Samuelson, *Il était une fois "Libération"* (Paris: Seuil, 1979), 19, cited by Macey, p. 475.

[6] Miller, p. 24.

[7] *L'Archéologie du savoir* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1969). English translation *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972). See especially pp. 79-134.

[8] *The Archaeology of Knowledge* p. 87.

[9] Eribon, p. 325.

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] Eribon, p. 326.

[12] *Ibid.*

[13] Macey, p. 475.

[14] See "Un plaisir si simple," *Gai Pied* 1 (April 1979), 1, 10; and "Un système fini face à une demande infinie," in *Sécurité social: l'enjeu* (Paris, 1983), 63; both cited in Miller, p. 55 and n. 52, p. 402.

[15] The dust-jacket for the hard-bound book collects quotations from Richard Rorty, Edward Said, and Roger Shattuck on the back cover as "advanced praise" for Miller's book and prints Alexander Nehamas' endorsement in red ink on the front, inside flap. According to Nehamas, "Miller's brilliant book illuminates Michel Foucault's life as well as his thought by illustrating both at the same time."

[16] *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, p. 17.

[17] Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses: une archéologie des sciences humaines* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1966), English translation *The Order of Things* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970).

[18] *The Order of Things*, p. 27. Foucault cites and quotes here from O. Crollius' *Traité des signatures*, published in French translation in Lyon, 1624.

[19] *The Order of Things*, p. 34. On the one side, God is the author of nature, and it is God's signature we see inscribed on the surfaces of things as their secret given away in the resemblances of these signatures with one another. On the other side, God is the author and subject of scripture, and it is God's immortality that guarantees the order and stable meaning of signs in texts.

[20] Michel Eyquem Montaigne, *Essais*, III, 13 (1580-8), cited by Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p. 40.

[21] *The Order of Things*, p. 43.

[22] *The Order of Things*, pp. 43-4.

[23] *The Order of Things*, p. 44.

[24] David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Toward a Gay Hagiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

[25] Maurice Blanchot, *Michel Foucault tel que je l'imagine* (Paris: Editions Fata Morgana, 1986) published in English, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman, with Michel Foucault, *Maurice Blanchot: The Thought from Outside*, trans. Brian Massumi, in *Foucault/Blanchot* (New York: Zone Books, 1990). Compare Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1986) published in English, trans. and ed. Sean Hand (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

[26] English translation of *A l=ami qui ne m=a pas sauvé la vie* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1990) by Linda Coverdale (New York: Atheneum, 1991).

[27] Miller, p. 29.

[28] See Miller, pp. 354-7, Macey, pp. 478-80, Eribon, pp. 321-2, Halperin, pp. 78, 140.

[29] Guibert does not explain his choice of this pseudonym, but it is tempting to associate Muzil — recalling Foucault's admission in the introduction to *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (17) that "I am no doubt not the only one who writes in order to have no face" — with Robert Musil, author of *Der Man ohne Eigenschaften: Roman* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1965, c 1952) now available in two volumes and a new translation by Sophie Wilkins as *The Man without Qualities Volume 1: A Sort of Introduction and Pseudo Reality Prevails* and *The Man without Qualities Volume 2: Into the Millennium, from the Posthumous Paper*, both (New York: Vintage, 1996). But why not Ulrich, the "hero" of Musil's narrative rather than Muzil? I thank Arnold Berleant for suggesting this association.

[30] Guibert, p. 13.

[31] *Ibid.* Guibert makes this observation sometime between 1988 and 1990. It is now believed that there is no specific latency period and that the threat from the HIV that causes AIDS is increased by repeated contact with the virus and by conditions in the patient that allow the replication of the virus and the infection of those leukocytes (CD4+ T cells) that normally coordinate the body's immune response to infection. HIV was discovered and identified as the agent for AIDS in 1984 by Luc Montagnier in France and Robert Gall in the U.S.

[32] Guibert p. XX.

[33] See Halperin on Foucault's exhortation of fisting as an importantly desexualizing 20th century sexual invention, pp. 88-99, 103-4.

[34] Guibert, 21.

[35] In an interview with Miller, Defert says that when Foucault went to San Francisco for the last time Ahe took it as a limit experience (29). The interview was conducted in 1990. See Miller 396-8, ns. 43, and 47-49.

[36] According to Miller, the biographer, Miller the Berkeley colleague and friend reports that Foucault was disappointed

that, in the fall of 1983, the baths were sometimes deserted and that his favorite, The Hothouse, had gone out of business (397, n. 48).

[37] For an extended criticism of Miller's account see Halperin, 162-82.

[38] See Gilles Deleuze, "A Portrait of Foucault," a conversation with Claire Parnet from 1986, in *Negotiations: 1972-1990*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 102-18. Foucault, of course, famously wrote in his "Preface" to Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, "One day, perhaps, this century will be known as Deleuzean."

[39] Deleuze, p. 110.

[40] See the chapter "Open Up a Few Corpses" in Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), pp. 124-48, where Foucault observes, "Death is now no more than the vertical, absolutely thin line that joins, in dividing them, the series of symptoms and the series of lesions" (p. 141).

[41] Deleuze, p. 111.

[42] *Ibid.*

[43] See the interview with Madelaine Chapsal, "Michel Foucault: A bas la dictature du sexe," *L'Express* (24 January 1977), 56-7, cited by Halperin, p. 90, cited by Macey, p. 364.

[44] Guibert, p. 24.

[45] *Ibid.*

[46] Guibert, p. 97.

[47] Macey, p. 480.

[48] Claude Mauriac, *Les temps immobile 9. Mauriac et fils* (Paris: Gassert, 1986), p. 244, cited in Macey, p. 480.

[49] "Deuxième Entretien: sur les fa on d'ecrire l'histoire," *Les letters français*, 15 June 1967, 6-9, cited in Macey, p. 480.

[50] Macey, p. 307.

[51] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

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