

ARTICLE

Foucault's Queer Virgins: An Unfinished History in Fragments

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ABSTRACT. This essay attends to the place of virginity at the center of the fourth volume of Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality, Confessions of the Flesh*. Reading virginity through a rhetorical lens, the essay argues for an ethics and a politics of counter-conduct in Foucault characterized by chiasmus, a rhetorical structure of inverted parallelism. That chiastic structure frames Foucault's *Confessions*, and all of his work, as a fragmented, self-hollowing speech haunted by death and the dissolution of the subject. The essay reads Foucault as apophatic speech that returns to us, no longer itself, made strange. In that deathly movement of eternal recurrence, Foucault's *Confessions* speak after death from the x'd out place of the queer virgin: on a threshold that separates life from death, in a movement of metanoia or ethical conversion. As an unfinished history in fragments, the essay's form brings attention to incompleteness as a crucial aspect of Foucault's work. The fragmentation that characterizes an unfinished history underscores poetic discontinuity as the hallmark of Foucault's genealogical method and thought.

Keywords: virginity, confession, Christianity, counter-conduct, sexuality, ethopoiesis.

1

A monk stops mid-letter, called to prayer. "His stylus lifts up abruptly and the letter it was shaping remains unfinished," Foucault writes in *Confessions of the Flesh*.¹ I imagine Foucault called away from his writing, his pen lifting, the tail of a q cut off mid-stroke. The *inachevé* is where Foucault's writing dwells, his pen still hovering over the unfinished parchment. Interrupted by death, Foucault is the monk, revenant. This is how Foucault wanted to be heard: without beginning or end, just a "slender gap"² in the path of speech.

Never finishing the last volume of his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault slipped over the threshold of death. That threshold draws near as I read his *Confessions*. The monk called away returns as penitent. That threshold, "ce seuil," is the threshold of *metanoia*, or conversion, "when the soul does a complete turnaround, inverts all its values, and changes

¹ Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality vol. 4: Confessions of the Flesh* (2021), 92.

² Michel Foucault, "The Discourse on Language," in *The Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (1972), 215.

4

At the heart of the X there are virgins. In the middle chapter, "On the Arts of Virginité," virgins empty themselves into God. The virgin's purity is not the result of abstinence: "it comes from on high. It is a gift of God."⁸

For Foucault, early Christian virginity is not about the adoption of a severe, restrictive, and *repressive*⁹ code with regard to sexual acts. It "bypass[es], as it were, the repressive hypothesis"¹⁰ through the elaboration of subjectivity as a form. Virginity exemplifies early Christian forms of *askesis*: ethical practices of an "exercise of oneself upon oneself."¹¹ These practices organize themselves under a different sexual code than the regulatory system for marriage and procreation most often associated with Christianity. That marital-reproductive code, Foucault says, was adopted before, outside of, and to the side of Christianity.¹² Christianity is something new: its sexuality, epitomized by virginity, is a new *dispositif* formed through technologies for "la conduite des individus."¹³

"Understood in this way, virginity is something altogether different than a prohibition."¹⁴ Virginity is not about saying no to sex. Like chiasmus, as *metanoia* its purifying practices are recursive: restoration of "restoration of an original relation"¹⁵ through movements of "retournement"¹⁶ that transform individuals into conduits for God by bringing "light to one's innermost being."¹⁷ Virginity in this sense is "a singular *practice*"¹⁸ that constitutes a new form of experience. The elaboration of that experience is what Foucault calls "flesh." As a new form of experience, virgin "flesh" is new. This new, light-bringing "flesh" forms the ethical fabric of Foucault's confessions.

5

Paul said that marriage was good but virginity was better. "This notion became . . . the cornerstone for patristic discourses on the preferability of virginity" but also "a tool used against those who were thought to pursue their asceticism too rigorously."¹⁹ This too rigorous Christian asceticism can become a heretical counter-conduct. This is the threat of *metanoia*: chiasmus. Virginity forms an X with marriage. Foucault writes:

⁸ *Confessions of the Flesh*, 127.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 36, emphasis added.

¹⁰ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, 13.

¹¹ *Confessions of the Flesh*, 35.

¹² *Ibid.*, 35-36.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 127.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 127.

¹⁶ Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité vol. 4, Les Aveux de la chair* (2018), 167. "the new turn toward Paradise", *Confessions of the Flesh*, 127.

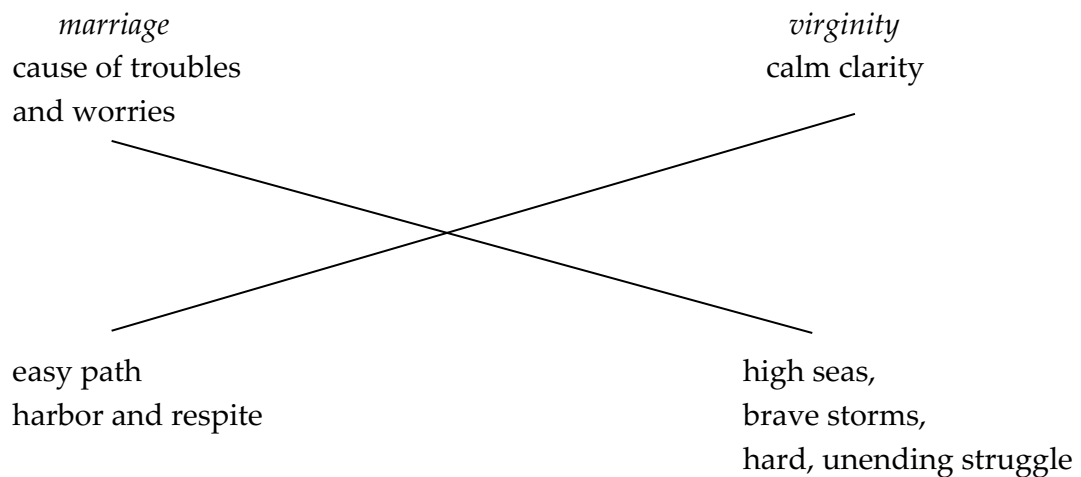
¹⁷ *Confessions of the Flesh*, 35.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 116, original emphasis.

¹⁹ Elizabeth Castelli, "Virginity and Its Meaning for Women's Sexuality in Early Christianity" (1986), 68.

All through Chrysostom's treatise one can find a *chiastic* opposition: marriage is presented a cause of troubles and worries, whereas virginity brings a calm clarity to the soul; but virginity is a hard, unending struggle, while marriage is an easy path – harbor and respite, which the virgin, always on the high seas, braving storms, cannot know.²⁰

The chiasmus can be diagrammed like this:



Metanoia plunges the virgin into a storm on high seas. Her struggle there (with God) will be endless. Marriage, by contrast, turns out to be easy: “an easy path,” “harbor and respite.”²¹ Marriage is easy because it sets an earthly limit on desire and death: it is “juridical” and therefore “metahistorical.”²²

If marriage is metahistorical, that means we recognize ourselves in it. (Metahistorical history finds its “victory”²³ in us.) Virginity, on the other hand, is radically other: “other things and otherwise.”²⁴ Virginity names the strangeness of genealogical returns in which we fail to recognize ourselves: a “disturbing” heterotopia that “dessicate[s] speech.”²⁵ It stages the discontinuity of epistemic breakage: not knowing. “Discontinuity – the fact that within the space of a few years a culture sometimes ceases to think as it had been up till then and begins to think another thing and otherwise.”²⁶ If marriage is rule-bound, virginity suspends the regulatory line that separates the ruly from the unruly. Virginity is transgressive rupture, a “caesura”²⁷ that repeats the great “caesura . . . between reason

²⁰ *Confessions of the Flesh*, 155, translation modified.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, 212-213.

²³ Michel Foucault, *History of Madness* (2006), xxviii.

²⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (1994), 50, translation modified. The original reads “autre chose et autrement.” Michel Foucault, *Les Mots et les choses* (1966), 64.

²⁵ Foucault, *Order of Things*, xviii. On the heterotopian mirror also see Michel Foucault, “Different Spaces” (1998).

²⁶ *Order of Things*, 50, translation modified.

²⁷ *Confessions of the Flesh*, 154.

and non-reason,"²⁸ installing a "hollowed-out void,"²⁹ "a great space of murmurings,"³⁰ "an obscure, equivocal region."³¹ A storm on high seas, the virgin is "an agent of epistemic rupture;"³² her self-emptying practices open onto "an erosion of the outside."³³ This transgressive erosion of the outside marks virgin *metanoia* as Christian counter-conduct: Christian conduct hollowing itself out, turned against itself into an ascetic practice that recodes its rules and thereby suspends its own limits. This suspension is what Foucault calls transgression.

6

Why bother with this strange virgin genealogy? Reading Foucault's *Confessions* can be both tedious and disquieting. The Church fathers are a violent bunch, their writings sometimes dull but also frightening, condemning all things queer.

Why spend time with these traces from a distant past? Foucault's answer, in another book: "Simply because I am interested in the past? No, if one means by that writing a history of the past in terms of the present. Yes, if one means writing the history of the present."³⁴

This is how I read his *Confessions*: as a history of the present.

7

But what does this mean?

The epistemic rupture of not knowing. Virginity is strange: "other things and otherwise."³⁵ It emerges in the gap of an epistemic break, where a sexual code is recoded. Not quite knowing how to approach that void offers a way to read a past that is other to us.

Not knowing is chiasmic: the formation of an empty space where something new can happen.

8

"Taught by Nietzsche, Foucault takes up Christianity as a rhetorical provocation," Mark Jordan writes.³⁶ Chiasmus is one such provocation. But chiasmus is more than a rhetorical

²⁸ Foucault, *History of Madness*, xxviii.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, xxix.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, xxxi

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Judith Revel, *Foucault, Une pensée du discontinu* (2010), 132, translation mine.

³³ *Order of Things*, 50, translation modified. The original reads "une érosion du dehors". Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*, 64. On the "outside" as a catalyst of epistemic rupture, see Judith Revel *Foucault, Une pensée du discontinu* 132. Also see Michel Foucault, "The Thought of the Outside", 147-170. For a book-length exploration of Foucault's thought of the outside see Lynne Huffer, *Foucault's Strange Eros* (2020).

³⁴ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 31.

³⁵ *Order of Things*, 50, translation modified.

³⁶ Mark Jordan, *Convulsing Bodies: Religion and Resistance in Foucault* (2015).

trick. It is self-unsaying, apophatic: a heterotopian mirror that “destroy[s] ‘syntax,’” “stop[s] words in their tracks,” and “contest[s] the very possibility of grammar at its source.”³⁷ Chiasmus is an instance of *mise en abyme* (literally “placed in abyss”), a technical literary and aesthetic term for an interiorizing disposition of self-mirroring elements within a larger frame. André Gide offers *Hamlet’s* play within a play and Velazquez’s *Las Meninas* as examples of *mise en abyme*. Gide illustrates *mise en abyme* through the device of heraldry, where shields are embedded, in miniature, within increasingly larger shields. Chiasmus is lacunary: the segment of a work that mirrors the larger work is put *en abyme* in the act of return that is self-replication. Each repeated form “can only take on the form the previous shield prescribes for it by incorporating a new shield, which, in turn, makes a hole in it.”³⁸

Ontologically, chiasmus exposes the paradox of death as the foundation for life: “the laying of foundations”³⁹ reveals the impossibility of foundations; “a true foundation” is, in Maurice Blanchot’s words, a “foundation of foundation,” a ‘bottomless abyss’ or *mise en abyme*.⁴⁰ In the chiasmus that shapes virginity as apophatic *metanoia*—*ego sum/sum ego*—being dissolves into the abyss at the center of the X, the place of negation, life’s true foundation in self-hollowing death.

9

Chiasmus also structures Foucault’s genealogical method. From *History of Madness* to his last lecture course, *The Courage of Truth*, and here again, in *Confessions of the Flesh*, Foucault describes the crossing of subjectivity by a self-inverting temporal movement that empties the subject into the spiraling play of contingency. In the shift from *History of Madness* to *History of Sexuality Volume One*, for example, chiasmus is the form for what Foucault describes as the temporal shift that transforms “what was for many centuries thought of as madness” into “our [sexual] intelligibility.”⁴¹ In *The Order of Things*, in a reprise of Gide’s example of *mise en abyme* in *Las Meninas*, chiasmus appears in “that strange empirico-transcendental doublet called man,”⁴² who implodes, *en abyme*, into the “vacant space”⁴³ at the site of the X once occupied by the king. Chiasmus appears, again, in *Discipline and Punish*, when the greatest criminal of the nineteenth century reemerges as the chief of police, when the body of the king inverts itself into the “new political anatomy” of panopticism,⁴⁴ or when the Christian body-as-prison-of-the-soul becomes “the soul [as] the prison of the body.”⁴⁵ In the opening pages of *History of Sexuality Volume One*, chiasmus

³⁷ *Order of Things*, xviii.

³⁸ Lucien Dällenbach (1989), *The Mirror in the Text*, 111.

³⁹ Iddo Dickmann, *The Little Crystalline Seed: The Ontological Significance of Mise en Abyme in Post-Heideggerian Thought* (2019), 85.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, 156.

⁴² *Order of Things*, 318.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 312.

⁴⁴ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (1995), 208.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

describes what Foucault calls the "spiral" of modern sexual subjects incited to speak our sexual repression: thus we have come "to affirm that sex is negated."⁴⁶

As an ontological structure, chiasmus describes the phenomenological movement of lived experience: "Your whole life, like a sandglass, will always be reversed, and will ever run out again."⁴⁷ This is the experience of temporal inversion Nietzsche called eternal recurrence, where past, present, and future overtake the ego all at once, where horizontal time—beginning, middle, end—suddenly becomes vertical—the stacked time of the *revenant*.

10

Confessions of the Flesh. Virginité is flesh: "a singular *practice*"⁴⁸ whose elaboration forms "the Christian conception of the flesh."⁴⁹ Virgin flesh marks a moment in Foucault's life-long tracking of a "history of the confession of sexuality"⁵⁰ as "forced and obligatory confession."⁵¹ The first centuries of Christianity offer Foucault a sketch of what will become the West's nonreligious confessional technology of truth. By the 12th century, "the entire confession is structured and controlled by the priest's power,"⁵² and by the 16th century "in-depth Christianization" puts into place "an immense apparatus of discourse and examination, of analysis and control."⁵³ With the solidification of pastoral power, confession becomes generalized with a corresponding "intensification of the power of the confessor."⁵⁴ The result? "An immense discursive journey that is the continual passage of a life before a witness," "a constant discursive filter of life," "the practice of permanent autobiography."⁵⁵ Christianized flesh becomes "the correlate"⁵⁶ of this discursive system.

But this Christianized flesh also resists, "struggling, spitting, adopting negative attitudes, and uttering obscene, irreligious, blasphemous words,"⁵⁷ while "choking, breathlessness, and fainting" indicate the point where "the body is destroyed."⁵⁸ In the 16th and 17th centuries, in Loudon and other sites of collective possession, mysticism took the form of "convulsive flesh."⁵⁹ As in chiasmus, convulsion produces an effect of doubling and inversion. Resistance takes the form of a counter-conductive doubling of the nun's body penetrated by priestly technologies. Thus "the body penetrated by the right of

⁴⁶ *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, 9.

⁴⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Notes on the Eternal Recurrence*.

⁴⁸ *Confessions of the Flesh*, 116.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Michel Foucault, *Abnormal* (2003), 170.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 169.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 175.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 177.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 203.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 213.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

examination and subject to the obligation of exhaustive confession" (body 1) is also "the body that bristles against this right and against this obligation" (body 2).⁶⁰ *Metanoia* transforms the body penetrated by pastoral power into "the body that opposes silence or the scream to the rule of complete discourse."⁶¹ At the height of pastoral power, that doubling of the possessed body produces "convulsive flesh" as both "the ultimate effect and the point of reversal" of Christianization.⁶²

11

The genealogy of convulsing nuns now includes queer virgins. In Foucault's *Confessions*, virgins "speak" as "the limit of speech,"⁶³ as self-doubling Christian flesh, as a too rigorous ascetic practice, as *metanoia* that changes Christianized flesh into "another thing and elsewhere."⁶⁴ That flesh speaks as counter-conduct, as part of a genealogy of mysticism that Foucault aligns with counter-Christian ascetic practices.

So too Foucault "speaks" as a virgin whose practices at the edge of speech produce a counter-conductive flesh; he "speaks" as a monk lifting his pen, as a penitent who returns as other to himself, as the cry of a convulsing nun.⁶⁵ This is Foucault's speech after death.⁶⁶ His confessions of the flesh bristle against a history of sexuality as forced confession, an incitement to speak always doubled, "like a shadow," by torture: "the dark twins."⁶⁷ Foucault's post-humorous speech-as-flesh inverts the generalized "practice of permanent autobiography"⁶⁸ of "a singularly confessing society"⁶⁹ whose obligation to speak is "an internal ruse . . . so deeply ingrained in us, that . . . it seems to us that truth, lodged in our most secret nature, 'demands' only to surface."⁷⁰

Foucault's *Confessions of the Flesh* speak like a virgin after death. That counter-confessional speech queers the present: it empties it out, like a virgin, making it strange. Unfinished, these confessions speak in the space of interruption, the "caesura"⁷¹ of a stuttering speech: a speech called away from itself mid-breath. Virginity queered, again and again, *inachevée*. "a hard, unending struggle."⁷²

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Mark Jordan, *Convulsing Bodies*, 22. Jordan writes that "the limit of speech is linked to convulsion".

⁶⁴ *Order of Things*, 50, translation modified.

⁶⁵ Jordan asks: "What if philosophic writing—or philosophic writing so far as it is resistance—is more like a convulsed cry than voluntary speech?". Jordan, *Convulsing Bodies*, 191.

⁶⁶ "For me," Foucault writes, speech begins after death, once that break has been established. For me, writing is a wandering after death." Michel Foucault, *Speech Begins after Death* (2013), 44.

⁶⁷ *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, 59.

⁶⁸ Foucault, *Abnormal*, 184.

⁶⁹ *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, 59.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 60.

⁷¹ *Confessions of the Flesh*, 154.

⁷² Ibid., 155.

12

Here I anoint Foucault's virgins as queer. As counter-conductive speech that contradicts confessional truth-telling, queer virgins take their place among the deviants Foucault once called, in a rare moment of tenderness, "my little mad ones, my little excluded ones, my little abnormal."73 Virgins struggle endlessly in the movement of *metanoia* that is eternal recurrence: the time of the plunge, the time of unreason.74 As they spin they join Foucault's lunatics, hysterics, witches and prisoners, his delinquents, lepers, and convulsing nuns.

13

In *The Queer God*, the theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid refers to a "movement of emptiness" called kenosis, from the Greek verb κενόω (kenōō) "to empty."75 The verb appears in *Phillipians 2:7*, where Jesus "made himself nothing" by "emptying himself" into the will of God. This queerness is not the claiming of an identity but, rather, its dissolution. "Because of death," Linn Marie Tonstad writes, "all human projects, desires, and hopes are ultimately futile, ending in loss The only orientation of human existence that is not threatened by death is the orientation to . . . God."76 Tonstad goes on to explain that in early Christianity "one way of living out that orientation in daily life was virginity."77 Riffing on Althaus-Reid, Tonstad helps me to take up that virgin orientation in Foucault's *Aveux* as a queer kenosis, a self-emptying "'via rupta' [way of rupture] of previously unrecognized paths of praxis."78 This "queerness is God's," Tonstad writes. "We become queer by grace."79

Death haunts Foucault's *Confessions*. To approach that haunting is to touch a secular present shorn of the spiritual resources for metabolizing death. The 2nd-century monk interrupted mid-letter returns as a modern penitent who has crossed a threshold called the death of God. The conversions of a Christianized world promise rebirth into eternity after death. What does post-Christian eternal recurrence offer us?

I find one answer in a quote from René Char on the back cover of *Les Aveux de la chair*: "L'histoire des hommes est la longue succession des synonymes d'un même vocable. Y contredire est un devoir."80

Virgin kenosis inverts itself into the empty space left open by God's departure. The grace I find there counter-dicts the emptiness of a world without God. I live in that

73 Michel Foucault, "Entretien avec Roger-Pol Droit," 9 cassettes (Paris: IMEC, June 1975), 319, translation mine ("mes petits fous, mes petits exclus, mes petits anormaux").

74 See especially *History of Madness*, 363-364 on unreason as "the untimely within the world" (363), where "the time of unreason" is "an unconditional return" and "an absolute plunge" (364).

75 Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* (2003).

76 Linn Marie Tonstad, *Queer Theology* (2018), 7.

77 Ibid.

78 Althaus-Reid in Tonstad, *The Queer God*, 92.

79 Ibid., original emphasis.

80 For commentary on this quote as discussed by Balibar, which also appears on the *quatrième de page* of *History of Sexuality* Volumes 2 and 3, see Harcourt, "Contre-/Counter-," 75-76.

counter-diction, finding light in secular practices of self-emptying flesh: counter-conductive reading, ethopoietic self-writing that unsays me. These experiments in self-undoing counter-dict the sameness of "l'histoire des hommes."

Sed ego non sum ego.

14

"To become other than what we are requires an ethics and a politics of counter-conduct."⁸¹ Ethics is a question that puts the moral subject into question. That question is virginity as counter-conduct, as *metanoia*, as *askesis*:⁸² an exercise of self on self in close combat with herself. This spiritual combat is the queer virgin's unending "hard struggle,"⁸³ after the death of God.

According to Arnold Davidson, ethical counter-conduct becomes political when Foucault "places conduct in a political field."⁸⁴ To govern is "to act on the possibilities of action of other individuals," as in the pastoral government of souls but also, today, as biopolitical governmentality. Those possibilities of action are structured by "force relations."⁸⁵ Thus "even apparently personal or individual forms of counter-conduct have a political dimension, that is, modify force relations between individuals, acting on the possibilities of action."⁸⁶

This makes ascetic counter-conduct both an ethics and a politics, what Davidson calls "a kind of freedom of conduct."⁸⁷ Virgin counter-conduct becomes something other than "the purely negative act of disobedience,"⁸⁸ something other than "les phénomènes en creux" of pastoral power.⁸⁹ Counter-conduct becomes "productive": "in order to resist one must activate something 'as inventive, as mobile, as productive' as power itself."⁹⁰

Davidson's reading is appealing. It harnesses force relations in the service of a positive freedom: not a freedom from, but a freedom to. But how is this freedom of counter-conduct different than biopolitical truth's disguise as liberation in the incitement to speak that drives confession as an inventive power?

15

Confessions of the Flesh reminds us that chiasmic counter-conduct is not the result of a subject's will but an experience of self-dissolving *metanoia*. The "spiritual" transformation of

⁸¹ Arnold Davidson, "In Praise of Counter-Conduct," *History of the Human Sciences* 24:4 (2011), 37.

⁸² On *metanoia* as Foucauldian *askesis* see especially Edward McGushin, *Foucault's Askesis: An Introduction to the Philosophical Life* (2007), 111.

⁸³ *Confessions of the Flesh*, 155.

⁸⁴ Davidson, "In Praise of Counter-Conduct," 28.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

metanoia allows this virgin "flesh" to speak after death, converted in these *Confessions* by the experience of reading. This *metanoia* of the flesh is a mode of experience: "The 'flesh' should be understood as a mode of experience."⁹¹ This "flesh" is not the flesh of a Christianized world but flesh doubled into another flesh: a flesh that can "speak" after death.

But how exactly does this flesh "speak"? It is not a voice: not the repetition of patristic rules and precepts, not "la longue succession des synonymes d'un même vocable" the poet Char describes on the back cover of Foucault's confessions. In his *Confessions*, virgin flesh speaks as the "play of light"⁹²: the counter-conduction of *un jeu de lumière*.⁹³

16

In his course on Foucault, Gilles Deleuze describes panopticism as "a division of light and shadow."⁹⁴ The panopticon's "condition," like that of painting, is light. Light traverses the panoptical prison: "the cells are traversed by light" so that prisoners are seen without being able to see each other. "Prison," Deleuze says, "is a form of light, . . . a distribution of light and shadow before being a heap of stones."⁹⁵

As a history of the present, virgin flesh counter-conducts this panoptical light, this condition of visibility for modern technologies of surveillance.

17

Foucault's virgin flesh is the play of light as a counter-conductive mode of experience that returns. After death, his "flesh" speaks as self-emptying light that counter-conducts panoptical luminosity.

Virgin counter-conduction is not the same as dissidence. In his 1977-78 lecture course, *Security, Territory, Population*, Foucault dismisses the word "dissidence" in favor of "counter-conduct,"⁹⁶ aligning counter-conduct with the "general field of politics"⁹⁷ and recruiting, as I have, "delinquents, mad people, and patients" into "this immense family of what could be called counter-conducts."⁹⁸ Along with Foucault's virgins in *Confessions of the Flesh*, we find here in *Security, Territory, Population* a link between Foucault's ethics of *askesis* and the field of political action. Following Davidson, Bernard Harcourt and Etienne Balibar have pointed to the significance of counter-conduct as a political concept in Foucault's work. As we've seen, for Davidson individual acts of counter-conduct have a political dimension because they "modify force relations between individuals."⁹⁹ For

⁹¹ *Confessions of the Flesh*, 36.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 107, translation modified.

⁹³ *Les Aveux de la chair*, 142.

⁹⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Course on Foucault* (1985-86), accessed August 31 2020, translation mine.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, translation mine.

⁹⁶ Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population* (2007), 201.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 202.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ "In Praise of Counter-Conduct," 29.

Harcourt, the “*contre*-move” at the heart of counter-conduct is a “conceptual factory” with “generative” and even emancipatory potential.¹⁰⁰ For Balibar, counter-conduct leads to a “counter-politics” as “the central element of truth-telling in Foucault’s work;”¹⁰¹ Balibar links counter-conduct to *parrhesia* as a “form of ‘*contre*-diction’ and ‘*contre*-conduite”” that “has within it the seeds of a counter-democratic principle.”¹⁰² Harcourt emphasizes that the “*contre*-move” in Foucault differs both from the “anti-” move of direct opposition and the transformations of the dialectic. The “counter” move is “internal,” engaging “in a play, a movement, a dance with its object, using the force of the object against itself.”¹⁰³

Nuns and hysterics penetrated by patriarchy choke, convulse, spit, scream, writhe, go silent. Virgins empty themselves “too rigorously” into God. These resistant practices are “revolts of conduct”¹⁰⁴ that “short-circuit”¹⁰⁵ the *dispositifs* of sexualized power. To put it in Balibar’s terms, ascetic practices perform a kind of “parrhesiastic contradiction”¹⁰⁶ that turns patriarchal speech as veridiction into a virgin counter-conduct that counter-dicts this speech. As a practice of counter-conduct, virgin asceticism becomes “a sort of tactical element, an element of reversal”¹⁰⁷ within the historical gridding of power. Foucault highlights virginity’s counter-conductive force as “one of the first major revolts of conduct in the West.”¹⁰⁸ Another name for such revolts is chiasmus.

18

I reenter the text, *inachevé*, through the X of chiasmus: a reminder of incompleteness, the hollowing out of an oeuvre left unfinished with the author’s untimely death. What I find here are brackets.

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¹⁰⁰ Harcourt, “*Contre-/Counter-*,” 74.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 76.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹⁰⁴ Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 194.

¹⁰⁵ Michel Foucault, “Friendship as a Way of Life,” 137.

¹⁰⁶ “*Contre-/Counter-*,” 76.

¹⁰⁷ “In Praise of Counter-Conduct,” 30.

¹⁰⁸ Foucault, in “In Praise of Counter-Conduct,” 31.

The bracket is a familiar editorial tool. The published text of Foucault's *Confessions* is stippled with them. I admire the labor and care they represent. But how do they work as diacritical marks? Do they shore up the scattering of virgin light?

Like chiasmus, the bracket is the mark of dissolution and death. Haunted by death, Foucault's writing is a *via rupta*—a poetic “way of rupture.” I have shown elsewhere how brackets signal Foucault's genealogical method as Sapphic. Brackets mark the Sapphic text as a patterning of absence. Like the Christian monk, interrupted mid-stroke, Sappho dwells in the *inachevé*. “Of the nine books of lyrics that Sappho is said to have composed, one poem has survived complete,” Anne Carson tells us. “All the rest are fragments.”¹⁰⁹

The bracket signals that self-emptying absence, a material trace of queer kenosis. Carson's translations of Sappho use open brackets to show the place where a line breaks off or a letter stops mid-stroke.

]
]
thought barefoot
]110

Foucault is a Sapphic poet of the incomplete. His genealogies perform a poetics of the bracket, signaling places in the archive that cannot speak. His writing is, again, *ethopoietic*, in this specific Sapphic sense; it gestures toward events “at the point of their lacunae,” at “the moment when they did not take place.”¹¹¹

Confessions of the Flesh is one such self-emptying, virgin event. As a published book it speaks through letters, words, and graphic signs organized and printed onto white pages. But if reading is *metanoia*, can we read the book in some other way, as Sapphic?

In Foucault's *Confessions*, virginity “speaks” through the “slender gap”¹¹² of its brackets. Here is an example: on page 42, there is a note which refers to Tertullian's writings on baptism. The reference reads: “19. [Empty note.]”¹¹³ Here is another, in a note which refers to the conduct of souls as *ars artium*, the art of arts: “32. Thus, as examples: [note incomplete].”¹¹⁴

As in Carson's translations of Sappho, these brackets are not the author's own. They are editorial embellishments that orient the reader, a graphic rendering of an attempt to both mark and contain, with open then closed brackets, the rupture that is loss: the monk called away mid-letter.

We could say, somewhat critically, that as an organizing structure with an eye toward publication, marketing, and distribution, the editorial apparatus papers over Foucault's poetry of the incomplete, shoring up genealogical fragmentation by closing off the bracket

¹⁰⁹ Anne Carson, *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho* (2002), ix.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹¹¹ Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” (1998), 369, translation modified.

¹¹² Michel Foucault, “Discourse on Language”, 215.

¹¹³ *Confessions of the Flesh*, 42, 337.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 87, 348.

left open by the monk. Or we could say, as we flip the pages, that the bracket is a death mask. We could adopt the attitude of *metanoia*, allowing those brackets to open again.

21

These post-humous confessions of virgin flesh do not bring a series on the history of sexuality to completion. Rather, the linear sequence of volumes 1, 2, 3, and 4 is inverted by the chiasmic *metanoia* that is reading. The monk *revenant*, the wandering penitent, criss-crosses the reader in a queer, self-unsaying conversion. In that crossing, the line of the series, *en abyme*, doubles back on itself to form an X: undone by the incompleteness of its final volume, the series called *History of Sexuality* becomes a spiral that also undoes me as I read. *Ego sum* undone by reading: *Sed ego non sum ego*.

This essay in fragments, *inachevé*, returns here, interrupted, to Ambrose. The lover returns no longer himself. *Sed ego non sum ego*. Return is the temporal movement of doubling: the leper becomes plague victim, the criminal becomes the chief of police, the sodomite at the stake becomes an openly gay man talking on TV. In their confessions of the flesh, Foucault's queer virgins exemplify counter-conductive practices—instances of “faire vrai” (*do the truth*)¹¹⁵—that traverse an entire life. “Flesh...runs through one's whole life,”¹¹⁶ Foucault writes. This ethical retraversal—a traversal of virgin flesh—“changes in every respect” (*change du tout au tout*).¹¹⁷

My fragments end here, for now. Foucault inhabits the *inachevé*: an empty space, a gap in speech, a pause where new relations can appear. Virginité is that pause, a suspension of limits that converts the values of life and death. Like Diogenes in *The Courage of Truth*, Foucault's queer virgins change the value of the currency of our time: the value of bios, of “life itself.”

But unlike Diogenes, Foucault's queer virgins engage this “conversion” as “collective practice”¹¹⁸: “it did exist, especially among women, in circles.”¹¹⁹ In *Confessions of the Flesh*, virginité happens among circles of women. An individual technology of counter-conduct becomes “other things and otherwise”¹²⁰: a counter-communal relation to others. After God's death, how might we be moved by those virgin circles in their self-emptying circling toward God? This is our question, here, now: how to practice this virginité as what Foucault calls “une mutation actuelle d'existence”: a “revolution.”¹²¹

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¹¹⁵ Ibid., 73.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 36.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 77; *Les Aveux de la chair*, 104.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 123.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 117.

¹²⁰ *Order of Things*, 50, translation modified.

¹²¹ Ibid., 192.

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