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PARTIALLY DESACRALIZED SPACES:
THE RELIGIOUS AVAILABILITY
OF FOUCAULT’S THOUGHT

Thomas R. Flynn

To whom life is an experience to be carried as far as possible....

Georges Bataille

Focusing on transgressive thinking and limit experience, I consider the possibility of formulating religious discourse in (and even on) Foucauldian terms. It is as philosopher of the event, of space, and of experience that Foucault holds most promise for fruitful dialogue with religious thought. After sketching a possible archaeology and genealogy of religious practice, I turn to Foucault’s own experience in the Mohave Desert as an opening to the Other. Appeal to mystical experience on Foucauldian terms must resist the traditional quest for “shelter in which experience can rest.” Rather, any Foucauldian self-transcendence will entail embracing a “non-unitary multiplicity” (Blanchot).

Some avowedly atheistic philosophers cannot leave God alone. Sartre fits into this category. To be sure, he confessed in his autobiography, The Words, that his atheism was a “cruel and long-range affair,” and he reported he finally “collared the Holy Ghost in the cellar and threw him out”—a remark that lends Nietzsche’s “death of God” pronouncement a particularly graphic twist. But, in fact, religious concepts and analogies continued to punctuate Sartre’s writings to the very end. Indeed, his final interview with Benny Lévy scandalized Simone de Beauvoir in part because of its being “soft” on religious themes and theses. Bertrand Russell appears to have been another such philosopher. He felt obliged to explain his atheism more than once, as if the questioner were none other than himself.

Yet there are others who seem to feel no need even to raise the question, much less to answer it in the negative. These may be “anonymous” believers, as some would have it, but they would be surprised by any move to convert them by a definition and would probably insist that the burden of proof rests with those who seek to make the discovery, if not to effect the transformation. Where does Michel Foucault fit into this spectrum of believing nonbelievers and non-believing believers?
Perhaps we should take a hint from the practice of “stipulative conversion” and examine the meaning of “religion.” This looks promising at first blush. Even a naturalist like Dewey held “the religious” in high regard, so long as one kept organized “religion” at bay. The difficulty with seeking an analogous notion in Foucault or any of the so-called “poststructuralists” is that Dewey’s famous “sense of the whole” is precisely what they are intent on combatting. We operate in fragmented and fragmenting world(s), they insist, whose very limits are there to be transgressed. Still, the concept of limit might prove useful. To the extent that it is linked with the other and with the “othering” act of transgression, it may provide a key (but only one among possibly many) for unlocking the topic of religious discourse in Foucault’s thought.

Admittedly, the definition of “religion” like that of “art” is proverbially elusive. But perhaps we can settle on one commonly accepted sense of the term that would serve to distinguish religious from ethical or aesthetic discourse as we search for some equivalent in the work of Foucault. That his thought, especially in its later stages, gave pride of place to aesthetic considerations is by now a commonplace. That his was an “ethics for thought” is likewise well documented. But is there any room for the properly “religious” (on the assumption that we can determine what that is) between Foucault’s “aesthetics of existence” that makes of one’s life a “work of art” in the Nietzschean mode, and his “ethos of the intellectual” in our day, which is to “take distance on oneself” (se déprendre de soi-même)? If “to think” is to “other” in the sense of crossing to the other side of a limit or boundary—the “thought from outside” (pensée du dehors) that so fascinated Foucault—could it be that the space for “religious” discourse is on the other side? That it perhaps is that outside? Two authors whom Foucault highly respects who have written on religion, namely, Georges Bataille and Georges Dumézil, seem to support such a thesis. The “wholly other” (totius alter) of religious philosophers since Rudolf Otto might thereby gain admission or, better, recognition as a possibility worth examining in, and perhaps even on, Foucauldian terms. Besides sketching a few lines toward a possible archaeology and a genealogy of religious discourse, it is chiefly this rather modest proposal that I wish to defend.

The Problematized Other

In an interview concerning his last works, Foucault noted that his thought had come to focus on the “problematizing” of certain issues, specifically that of the moral self. How did it happen, he asked in genealogical fashion, that sexual conduct became “problematized” in the genesis of the moral self in Western thought? His strategy has always been to tell the story of the necessities and the taken-for-granted of our received wisdom to uncover the di-
mension of chance and possibility that characterizes our past and future respectively. So the fact that sexual behavior ranked on a par with or somewhat below diet and exercise in the ethical concerns of Athenian theorists in the fifth century BC opens the possibility that we too can think "otherwise than before" about the determining role that sexual orientation and behavior play in our contemporary view of moral identity and responsibility.

Again and again, Foucault’s project of “thinking otherwise” repeats itself in his works. It appears most regularly in his tendency to inverse the received causal relations in intellectual history. Thus the “great man” theory of historical causality with its “tangled network of influences” is overturned by appeal to epistemic shifts such as the one entailing the dissociation of the sign and resemblance in the early seventeenth century. This “archaeological” shift caused a network of necessities to emerge, namely, probability, analysis, combination, and a universal language system, which in turn “made possible the individuals we term Hobbes, Berkeley, Hume or Condillac.”9 Likewise, it is the emergence of a “disciplinary reason” in the early nineteenth-century, rendering it common-sensical to incarcerate criminals for whatever offense, that fostered the rise of the social sciences, not the inverse, as is commonly believed.10 He reminds us that there is always the “other” of our received opinions, haunting them like the memory of a former resident, dispossessed and exiled in order that we might remain in pacific possession of the “same.” His early “archaeology of the silence” to which the insane have been condemned since the Age of Reason, *Madness and Civilization,* was the first of many studies of the ever-present other.

For in Foucault’s scheme there is always an “other.” It may be the “murmur” of life or being that sounds through the grids of archaeology, the resistances that locate each exercise of power in his genealogies, the spaces of inclusion/exclusion that pervade the “games of truth” in his retrospective reading of his own work. One has a sense of always being in medias res, without well defined beginning or absolute end. Even the epistemic “breaks” that he adopts from Bachelard mark gaps in two continuities. There is always a “before” and an “after,” a “prior” and a “posterior,” a “here” and a “there.” If “religion” is taken to denote a relation (a “tying fast,” *religare*) to the sacred, then Foucault’s relation will not be to a metaphysical “god of the gaps” such as that favored by philosophers in early modernity. For these breaks are descriptive, not explanatory; they delineate formal, explanatory grids, but are themselves simply facts. To question their existence in the mode of traditional arguments from contingency, would presuppose another schema, with its initial gap, separating and uniting a before and an after, and so on. Of course, there is always the archimedean question, the self-referential challenge to which even the slipperiest relativist is liable: *tu quoque,* where do you stand? But that presumes a certain commitment to more than
limited discursive horizons—and it is just such a commitment that Foucault
deployes to make. In other words, it looks as if the standard “approaches to
God” are dead ends on the Foucauldian highway. The bridge is out.

The Event

Foucault is a philosopher of the event. Obviously, his focus on “histories”
suggests a profound interest in the historical event. But the term “event” is
far more complex and all-pervasive than that of a mere public, temporal
happening. And if the so-called “new” historians discount the traditional
historian’s emphasis on individual datable occurrences (what they dismiss as
“battles and treaties”), Foucault’s understanding of the term includes the
probabilistic, the statistical, and the glacial (Braudel’s *la longue durée*). Be-
cause of the centrality of the event to his thought, I wish to pursue it in some
detail in order to consider its possible relevance for religious discourse. A
priori, one expects that whatever “god” might fit into Foucault’s categories
will not be the God of the philosophers (e.g., the first or final principle of a
metaphysical system) but will be more like that of Hebraism: the God of
events, of the unrepeatable, of history. And it may be that corresponding
theological “positivism” will best meet the exigencies of this self-proclaimed
“light-footed positivist.” In other words, we may discover that the most one
can do is wait (like Hölderlin and Heidegger) for a theophany of some kind,
the upsurge or intervention of the “other” in some recognizably religious
sense.

In a poetic musing that recalls both the negative theologians and the mys-
tics, Foucault observes:

> Language, in its every word, is indeed directed at contents that preexist it;
> but in its own being, provided that it holds as close to its being as possible,
> it only unfolds in the pureness of the wait. Waiting is directed at nothing: any
> object that could gratify it would only efface it. Still, it is not confined to
> one place, it is not a resigned immobility; it has the endurance of a movement
> that will never end and would never promise itself the reward of rest; it does
> not wrap itself in interiority; all of it falls irremediably outside. Waiting
cannot wait for itself at the end of its own past, nor rejoice in its own patience,
> nor steel itself once and for all, for it was never lacking in courage. What
takes it up is not memory but forgetting. This forgetting...is extreme atten-
tiveness.11

Our initial suspicion about what we may now call “attentive” waiting seeks
confirmation in further consideration of Foucault’s notion of “event.”

Foucault’s major work is commonly divided into at least two periods, the
archaeological and the genealogical. The former appears more “structural” in
its search for “a method of analysis purged of anthropologism,”12 one that
discourts a set of notions such as origin, tradition, influence, development,
and evolution, dear to event-oriented historians. But his immediate interest
is in the "statement/event," as he calls it, and he questions, not the grammar of the statement, but "how it is that one particular statement appeared rather than another" (AK 27). His reason for speaking of the statement as event is "to restore the specificity of its occurrence, and to show that discontinuity is one of those great accidents that create cracks not only in the geology of history, but also in the simple fact of the statement." In opposition to structural linguistics, Foucault insists that "however badly deciphered we may suppose it to be, a statement is always an event that neither the language (langue) not the meaning can quite exhaust" (AK 28). We can see in this respect for the factual the root of his "positivism" a well as the antidote to whatever "structuralist" proclivities he might have manifested up to that point. In fact, in his most "structuralist" history, The Order of Things, he refers to structuralism as "the awakened and troubled consciousness of modern thought" (OT 208).

Archaeology is not a form of mental geology. Much less is it the search for beginnings (archai). Rather, it is the description of the "archive," the historical a priori of a given period which conditions the practices of exclusion and inclusion that are ingredient in all social exchange: the true and the false, the normal and the deviant, the evident and the unthinkable, and so forth. Obviously, the sacred and the profane could be added to this list. An "archaeology" of religious discourse would describe the actual discursive and nondiscursive religious practices of an epoch in order to lay bare the grids of intelligibility that condition their exercise. Using the modern "episteme" as an example, a Foucauldian analysis might focus on the inability of religious discourse in the nineteenth century to bring into viable unity the dualities of phenomena/noumena, relative/absolute, for-us/in-itself, and the like, bequeathed us by the collapse of the "naming" paradigm in the Classical age. From an archaeological viewpoint, the controversies over form and context (Sitz im Leben), for example, that engaged Biblical critics in that period could be read as self-generating and symbiotic, once the Kantian break with the referent is effected.

Of all the "events" the archaeologist describes, the most important and the rarest are what Foucault calls "transformations" and "ruptures," of which the most radical bear on the general rules of one or several discursive formations (AK 177). The famous epistemological "breaks" analyzed in The Order of Things are instances of such ruptures. But the point is that Foucault refers to these radical breaks as "events" even as he allows that "archaeology distinguishes several possible levels of events within the very density of discourse" (AK 117).5

In the lecture inaugurating his Chair at the Collège de France, 2 December 1970, Foucault distinguishes the critical from the genealogical "ensembles" of analysis that he proposes for his subsequent work. That same year, he
publishes a major essay in which he explains that his "genealogical method" is concerned, not with origin (Ursprung), which he links with Platonic essentialism, but with the course of descent (Herkunft) of a series of events.

Genealogy does not resemble the evolution of a species and does not map the destiny of a people. On the contrary, to follow the complex course of descent is to maintain passing events in their proper dispersion; it is to identify the accidents, the minute deviations—or conversely, the complete reversals—the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us; it is to discover that truth or being do not lie at the root of what we know and what we are, but [in] the exteriority of accidents.16

As a logic of "difference," genealogy is an alternative to dialectic (the logic of the same). "What is found at the historical beginning of things," Foucault insists, "is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity" (NGH, 142, emphasis mine).

Commenting on the work of Giles Deleuze, but expressing his own preference as well, Foucault asks: "What if thought freed itself from common sense and decided to function only in its extreme singularity? ...What if it conceived of difference differentially, instead of searching out the common elements underlying difference?" In response, he concludes: "Then difference would disappear as a general feature that leads to the generality of the concept, and it would become—a different thought, the thought of difference—a pure event."17 These are the words of a historical nominalist, for whom the drive for multiplicity overrides the Hegelian and the Platonizing urge for unity.18

The constellation dispersion-event-chance hovers over Foucault’s nominalistic genealogies just as relations of power pervade their every facet. By now it is well known that "power" denotes not only negative relations of dominance and control but positive ones of creativity and reasoning. Not that Foucault has collapsed "truth" into "power," as Habermas and others have insisted. He explicitly denies this is so.19 But power relations are always present in human exchanges, even in the most detached and cerebral communication. His point is that these events are subject to alternative descriptions along the axes of power or of knowledge. The last phase of his thought, which centers on modes of "subjectivation" and the constitution of the moral self, adds a third possible axis, namely, the line of self-constitution.20 So one can chart the advance of a particular topic along each of these lines.

But along the genealogical axis, the events multiply without end. Describing Nietzsche’s "effective history" (wirkliche Historie) in terms that anticipate his later remarks about "eventization," Foucault argues: "An event consequently is not a decision, a treaty, a reign, or a battle, but the reversal of a relationship of forces, the usurpation of power, the appropriation of a vocabulary turned against those who had once used it, a feeble domination
that poisons itself as it grows lax. The forces operating in history...always appear through the singular randomness of events" (IP 154-55, my emphasis). As I noted elsewhere, this last sentence could well serve as the motto for Foucault's genealogical historiography: to search for the "forces of domination" operating in history by a painstaking and inventive analysis of innumerable heterogeneous events.21

**Genealogy of Religious Practice**

Nietzschean genealogy, the inspiration and model for Foucault's enterprise, has long been applied to religious beliefs and institutions. In its attempt to lay bare the descent (Herkunft) of religious practice, genealogy in Nietzsche's hands continues the tradition of Lucretius et al. in locating the genesis and motor of religion in fear of the unknown. But Nietzsche adds the psychological dimension of ressentiment and the metaphysics of will-to-power to his account. In parity with his other genealogies, a genealogy of religious practices and institutions, were Foucault to have undertaken one, would have revealed the relations of power/resistance that lay behind the lofty principles and doctrines of the world's major religions (genealogy as critique). Perhaps the founders of these religions, some at least, would have ranked with Freud and Marx as "initiators of discursive practices," though Foucault claims that these two were "the first and most important." The distinctive contribution of these authors, Foucault explains, "is that they produced not only their own work, but the possibility and the rules of formation of other texts."22 It is crucial that they actually wrote or said what was attributed to them. In this they differ from originators of literary texts or makers of scientific discoveries. Moreover, whereas the founding act of a scientific program "is on an equal footing with its future transformations, ...the initiator of a discursive practice is heterogeneous to its ulterior transformations." In fact, the initiator of a discursive practice, unlike the founder of a science, overshadows and is necessarily detached from its later developments and transformations" (WA 133-134). Moreover, subsequent practitioners of such discourses must "return to the origin," namely, to a "text in itself." As he explains, "a study of Galileo's works could alter our knowledge of the history, but not the science, of mechanics; whereas, a reexamination of the books of Freud or Marx can transform our understanding of Psychoanalysis or Marxism" (WA 135-36). It seems that something similar could be said of the Bible or the Koran, for example, to the extent that Judaism, Islam and Christianity are religions of the book and that book is attributed to a specific author.

**The Sacred as Heterotopia**

Foucault is also a philosopher of space. In fact, what I have elsewhere called his "spatialization of reason" is both a positive alternative to dialectical
totalization and the mark of his postmodernity. Spatial metaphors abound in his writings. But the concepts of spatial division, exclusion, and inclusion are more than rhetorical devices. They enter into the very fiber of the argument itself. This is true of his tables, triangles and quadrilaterals (in *The Order of Things*, in particular), but comes most strikingly to the fore in his use of Bentham’s Panopticon. There the model is integral to the reasoning process, just as the artifact is essential to an aesthetic “argument” that continually refers to it in its singularity and not as a mere instance. In the case of the Panopticon, one is being led by the strategic lines of physical possibility, in this case, visibility, to understand the architectural embodiment of surveillance and control: carceral reason in three dimensions.

In a conference, “Of Other Spaces,” delivered the year after *The Order of Things* was published, Foucault laments:

> Despite all the techniques for appropriating space, despite the whole network of knowledge (*savoir*) that enables us to delimit or to formalize it, contemporary space is still not completely desacralized (unlike time, no doubt, which was detached from the sacred in the nineteenth century).

He admits that a certain theoretical desacralization has taken place since Galileo, but insists that “we may still not have reached the point of a practical desacralization of space.”

He then distinguishes a category of external spaces or sites “that have the curious property of being in relation with all other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invent the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect.” They are linked with all the other sites by the fact that they *contradict* them. There are two subspecies of such contradictive sites, utopias and heterotopias (no-places and other-places respectively). As we might expect, Foucault proceeds to focus on other-places, suggesting the initial principles of “a sort of systematic description” of these sites, which, in imitation of Bataille, he calls “heterotopology” (OS 24).

Unlike utopias, heterotopias are real places, “something like counter-sites” in the midst of our societies that function “as a sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live” (OS 24). Foucault systematically describes the various forms and functions of these sites, from libraries and museums, barracks and prisons, rest homes and cemeteries, to cinemas and gardens, fairgrounds and ships, the heterotopia *par excellence*. These counter-sites combine the “othering” character of Foucauldian “transgressive thinking” with the spatializing nature of his argument. But since they question “all the other sites,” heterotopias are more “totalizing” than Foucault seems willing to acknowledge. And since they admix the mythic and the real in this contestant function, they are apt locales for the “totally other” to be revealed in the spatial contestation of our received modes of living and dealing with each other. One such “incompletely desacralized” space is the desert.
The Desert Experience

"Going into the desert" has long been synonymous with physical and spiritual removal from the world, its affairs and cares. The desert is the place of theophanies (Moses at Horeb), of spiritual struggle and renewal (Jesus fasting in the desert), of self-discovery and preparation for mission (Paul after his experience on the road to Damascus). The desert, like the mountain, is the paradigmatic "place apart."  

Whatever one might think of James Miller's recent biography of Foucault, there is no doubt that it addresses an important problem in the philosopher's life, namely, the change in style and content that marked the last two volumes of his History of Sexuality after his visits to California in the 1970s and early 1980s. Miller's case for the close union between Foucault's life and work gives new force to the Foucauldian/Nietzschean injunction to "make of your life a work of art." Pivotal to this aesthetico-moral construction was Foucault's own "desert" experience:

Night had fallen on Death Valley. Next to a car parked in the lot at Zabriskie Point, a portable tape recorder was playing a piece of electronic music, Karlheinz Stockhausen's Kontakt. Near the recorder sat Michel Foucault, alongside two young Americans.... As synthetic blips and bleeps filled the cool desert air, the three men stared silently into space. Two hours before, all three had taken LSD.

Foucault was about to enjoy what he would later call the greatest experience of his life—an epiphany that climaxed a series of similarly intense "limit-experiences" in the gay community of San Francisco. As a result of these experiences, Foucault's thought would take a dramatic new turn, transforming, in paradoxic and surprising ways, his continuing effort to illuminate what Nietzsche had called "the riddle which man must solve"—the riddle of his own singular being.

The desert is a place of extremes, of scorching heat and bitter cold, of parched earth and flash flooding, a site without compromise, wrapped in an immense silence and girded by vast, empty horizons—the void of limitless space, now refracted in the broken mirror of an acid-driven mind. If people for millennia have fled to the external spaces of the desert to free themselves from the distractions of society for whatever revelations awaited them, contemporary space travelers have explored inner space by means of mind-altering drugs in the hope of solving the riddle of existence. "Contemporary space is not completely desacralized."

We can only conjecture what Foucault experienced as he gazed into the vast desert sky that May night. Was it akin to what Kant called the "sublime"? In its riveting of his attention for hours, did it in any way resemble that mysterium tremendum atque fascinans, the "wholly other" that Rudolf Otto finds as the core experience of the holy? "Contemporary space is perhaps
still not completely desacralized." It is most unlikely that he saw it only as an experience for its own sake, as mere entertainment, a divertissement to punctuate his visit to Southern California. He seems to have set aside the "light-footed" positivism that, in response to a hand pointing toward the sky, would have looked only at the tip of the finger. As Miller notes, these were limit-experiences that Foucault was after. And, although its immediate inspiration is doubtless Bataille, the term is an echo of Jaspers' famous "limit situations" and carries a distinctly onto-theological connotation. And what of the limit-experience, the one that, as Miller argues, haunted Foucault all his life? What of death? This "cipher," this "footstep of God" (in Jaspers' terminology) was certainly ingredient in Foucault's epiphanies at the sado-masochistic clubs and bathhouses of San Francisco that surrounded this dessert experience. Did he recognize it as such?

He had long acknowledged the close relation between the "death of God" and sexuality. As early as 1963, he wrote: "Undoubtedly it is excess that discovers that sexuality and the death of God are bound to the same experience.... And from this perspective the thought that relates to God and the thought that relates to sexuality are linked in a common form [as in Sade and Bataille]." But the "death of God," once one removes its carapace of mere reportage, is arguably a religious experience, akin to the experience of the "absence of God" as distinct from the "absence of the experience of God." Was not this linkage, sex/death/death-of-God, central to Foucault's limit-experiences in California?

Even to raise these questions, much less to attempt to answer them, runs the risk of "conversion by definition" that we held under suspicion at the outset. And yet this philosopher of the event and of space, was also, especially in his "post-desert" writings, a philosopher of experience. He could scarcely have missed the awesome encounter with his own potential nothingness that intimates the unqualified Other as such. This is not ad hoc reasoning or baseless conjecture. It simply echoes the testimony that captivated Bergson and so many others: the counter-discourse of negative theologians and mystics through the ages.

The Mystical

Foucault was not unaware of the "temptation." In his brilliant essay on Maurice Blanchot, "The Thought from Outside," he raises the issue only to dismiss it. But the point is that he senses it is there to be raised.

Despite several confluences, we are quite far from the experience through which some are wont to lose themselves in order to find themselves. The characteristic movement of mysticism is to attempt to join—even if it means crossing the night—the positivity of an existence by opening a difficult line of communication with it. Even when that existence contests itself, hollows
itself out in the labor of its own negativity, infinitely withdrawing into a lightless day, a shadowless night, a visibility devoid of shape, it is still a shelter in which experience can rest. The shelter is created as much by the law of a Word as by the open expanse of silence. For in the form of the experience, silence is the immeasurable, inaudible, primal breath from which all manifest discourse issues; or, speech is a reign with the power to hold itself in silent suspense.

Turning away from this obviously alluring vision, he adds curtly: “The experience of the outside has nothing to do with that” (FB 53-54).

Does he protest too much? Was not his California pilgrimage motivated in part by the desire to solve the riddle of his singular being? Were not his life-threatening encounters in the city and the initial risk of LSD in the desert precisely ways to “lose oneself in order to find oneself”? No doubt, that “self” was more site than substance or subject. As Blanchot observed, it was a “non-unitary multiplicity,” something like a phrase in serial music.31

James Miller cites the following summary of his book by an unsympathetic critic:

The ultimate question which Foucault’s life poses to Miller is whether various forms of radical politics, radical sex, and other kinds of supposed ‘limit-experience’ actually offer the modern subject a real means of self-transcendence.

To which Miller adds, “Precisely.” His reason for not answering that question, as the critic challenges him to do, was that he “wanted to compose a text that would open the question up—and allow different kinds of readers to respond in different kinds of ways.”32 A typically Foucauldian practice.

Diremption as Redemption: The Divine Absence

Foucault, who once insisted that there has not been an original secular ethics in the West since the Stoics, exhibited something neo-Stoic, even Camusian, in his own courageous mixture of life and work, his writing in the face of imminent death, as if to delay the inevitable by coopting it in the text. His “ethics for thought” resembles a kind of self-transcendence. It is a self-distancting (se déprendre de soi-même) that is simultaneously a self-constitution: the self as other. This ethics resists idolatry of all kinds, even the idolizing of one’s previously published works. The image of Camusian “secular sanctity” (Can one be a saint without God?) comes to mind in this context and suggests an analogous one of secular mysticism (Can one lose oneself in the void in order to find oneself?). But this mysticism neither asks nor receives the consolation and comfort of “a shelter in which experience can rest.” Rather, it embraces the whirlwind of one’s “nonunifying multiplicity,” intensified by natural or artificial means.

The antithesis of “attentive waiting” referred to earlier? On the contrary, it might well be a parody of the via purgativa, little more than a preparing for
the "event" that never occurred. Or did it? Could it be that it was happening unnoticed? Could the seemingly fruitless, even frenzied, repetition be that very multiplicity through which the Other invades and dissolves one's unity to the point of final disappearance (disparition)?

This may strike many as meager rations for souls "athirst for the living God." Could one not have achieved the same effect by wiring into a "virtual reality" mechanism? Perhaps. As the dying cleric assures us at the end of *The Diary of a Country Priest*, "Grace is everywhere."33

NOTES


2. Simone de Beauvoir, *La Cérémonie des adieux*, suivi de *Entretiens avec Jean-Paul Sartre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), especially pp. 139-42 and 150-52. Of course, she attributes this to the deleterious influence of Lévy himself, who was in the process of rediscovering his Jewish heritage.


In Bataille's case, the matter is complicated by his distinction between limited and unlimited acts of transgressing a limit. Only the former gives us the "sacred" in its traditional sense. With the "death of God," there arises the paradoxical situation of transgressive acts seeking their own limits (to transcend), not unlike the man before the door of the Law in Kafka's famous story. But is not this urge toward "self" transcendence a way of "secreting" the sacred (as Sartre might say)? In effect, this is the question I am posing to Foucault.

8. For two other initial ventures into the territory of Foucault and religion/theology, see James Bernauer, "The Prisons of Man: An Introduction to Foucault's Negative Theology," *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 27, 4 (December 1987), pp. 365-80, and John D. Caputo, "On Not Knowing Who We Are: Madness, Hermeneutics and the Night of Truth
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13. Foucault defines “discursive practice” as “a body of anonymous, historical rules, always determined in time and space, that have defined for a given period and for a given social, economic, geographical or linguistic area the conditions of operation of the enunciative function” (AK 117, translation emended).

14. Foucault was already familiar with Georges Dumézil’s “admirably precise study of the Indo-European mythologies by using the sociological model superimposed upon the basic analysis of signifiers and significations” (OT 358, translation emended). In fact, he credits Dumézil with having introduced him to the comparativist method, as distinct from traditional exegesis and linguistic formalism, that he employed in his archaeologies (AK 235).

15. See my “Foucault and the Career of the Historical Event,” in Bernard P. Dauenhauer, ed., *At the Nexus of Philosophy and History* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1987), pp. 178-200, upon which this section of the essay is based.


18. In an interview with professional historians apropos his genealogy of the penal system, *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault stresses the centrality of the event by coining the neologism “eventization” (*l’événementalisation*) to capture his method of multiplying factors of intelligibility with regard to any topic. He wants to inscribe around the singular event analyzed as process a “polyhedron of intelligibility,” the number of whose sides is necessarily without limit. He advises us to proceed “by progressive and necessarily unfinished saturation.” So the analysis of the rise of the prison system, for example, far from focusing on just one item such as Foucault’s own “carceral reason” that emerged as common sense in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, would spin off into a multiplicity of considerations, from the rise of professional armies and a new division of labor to the tactics of response to a particular situation like the disorder provoked by public torture or the application of such theories as utilitarianism to behavior, and so forth (Roundtable discussion of May 20, 1978, in Michelle Perrot, ed., *L’Impossible Prison* [Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1980], p. 45).

19. “Those who say that for me savoir is a mask for pouvoir do not seem to me to have the capacity to understand” (interview with François Ewald, “Le Souci de la vérité,” p. 22).

21. See my ”Michel Foucault and the Career,” p. 191.


Already in the Preface to *The Order of Things*, he introduces the concept of heterotopia, but with a harsher and more combative function:

*Utopias* afford consolation. ... *Heterotopias* are disturbing, probably because they destroy ‘syntax’ in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also the less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to ‘hold together.’ ... Heterotopias (such as those to be found so often in Borges) desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source; they dissolve our myths and sterilize the very lyricism of our sentences” (*OT* xviii).

25. “In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates” (OS 27).


29. Pierre Klossowski (another name in Foucault’s pleiad) notes that whoever says “atheology” (Bataille’s concept) speaks of divine absence (see his “A propos du simulacre dans la communication de Georges Bataille,” *Critique* 195-96 [1963]). This thesis is taken up by Mark C. Taylor in his ground-breaking *Erring: A Postmodern Atheology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

30. I sketch this thesis in my “Truth and Subjectivation in the Later Foucault,” *The Journal of Philosophy*: “Two words dominate the horizon of Foucault’s later work,
problematization' and 'government.' When the latter is specified as 'government of others' and 'of self,' we have the three irreducible poles, the three possible domains or axes of genealogical history which constitute [what I am calling his] triangle. The space circumscribed by this figure is 'experience,' which Foucault characterizes as the correlation between domains of savoir, types of normativity (power), and forms of subjectivity (The Uses of Pleasure, trans. Robert Hurley [New York: Pantheon Books, 1985], p. 4). Although the unwary might be amazed to find Foucault speaking of 'experience,' any throwback to psychological or epistemological categories is presumably excluded both by the nature of the Foucauldian 'self'…and by the other two poles of the relationship. Still, the term is no more precise than the correlates that constitute it" (532-533). I should now add that, after having read James Miller's account of Foucault's California experience, my concluding caveat is somewhat attenuated, though still not uncalled for.


33. While working for the French government in Sweden, Foucault offered a course on "religious experience in French literature from Chateaubriand to Bernanos" (see Jean Piel, "Foucault à Uppsala," Critique 471-72 [August-September 1986], p. 749).