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book review

## Jim Miller's Passions

James Miller  
*The Passion of Michel Foucault.*  
 Simon and Schuster  
 1995

*INTRODUCTORY NOTE:* In fall 1992, I arranged with the *Nation's* literary editor to review James Miller's forthcoming book on Foucault. I knew something of the book's argument since Miller had previewed it the year before at an academic panel on which I was a discussant. And I knew something of the staged controversy through which the book was being marketed because, pursuant to this panel, Miller had given my name to the *Chronicle of Higher Education* for a story featuring the book as this year's Paul de Man affair. Indeed, according to the Simon and Schuster press release accompanying advance copies of the book:

*James Miller's exploration . . . has generated a firestorm of controversy in literary and academic circles even before publication. For the first time, Miller reveals the full extent of Foucault's involvement in San Francisco's sadomasochistic underground . . . gives a detailed account of Foucault's death from AIDS . . . and examines the rumor that Foucault knowingly attempted to give AIDS to others. . . . Miller also investigates Foucault's growing fascination in the 1970s with drug use and with California's free-wheeling gay culture. . . . In frank detail, Miller relates how Foucault sought both to find and to transcend himself through his experiences with sex and drugs.*

Evidently, Miller was going to make a bundle out of tabloid journalism passing as scholarship. Although a good case could be made for ignoring rather than

dignifying such hucksterism with a response, I thought Miller's project sinister enough to warrant at least limited political engagement. His linking of poststructuralism with Nazism, philosophical anti-foundationalism with AIDS, gay sadomasochistic sex with love of political cruelty, and the "death of the subject" with indifference to life – all were ripe for exposé as the metonymic workings of Miller's psyche rather than what he cast as the lamentable truth about Foucault, gay male culture, or poststructuralism.

According to agreement, I faxed my review to the *Nation* early in January 1995. While I knew from previous experience with reviewing for the *Nation* that turn-around time was quick, two months passed marked only by my unreturned phone calls to the literary editor. When, mid-March, I finally reached her, she told me what silence had rendered redundant: "I'm afraid we can't use the review." Pressed to explain, she informed me that "they" considered the review unfair, especially in its contention that the book was "salacious" and "homophobic." This surprised me, since neither term appeared in my review, but I was more interested in redeeming my labor than quibbling. "Look," I said, "I have no desire to be unfair or inaccurate in print. If you show me where the problems are, I will happily revise the piece, including removing any unsubstantiated suggestions that Miller is anxious about homosexuality or writes about leather bars the way Andrea Dworkin writes about porn." The literary editor's palpable shock at this offer confirmed my suspicion that I had been figured as nothing less than a terrorist by the editorial staff, albeit a terrorist of the queer poststructuralist variety. Faced now, however, with a terrorist's willingness to negotiate and compromise, the liberal state risked revealing its own illiberal core if it did not do the same: our conversation concluded with the editor's cheerful promise to mark up and return the review by the end of the week – "it shouldn't take much work to get it in shape," she assured me. I hung up the phone knowing I would never hear from her again. I never heard from her again.

Soon thereafter, Miller began stumping the book around the north-eastern United States, and I began receiving reports of his gleeful announcement in the corridors of these events that "Andy Kopkind [associate editor of the *Nation*] had spiked the Wendy Brown review." What did it mean that Miller had information about an unpublished review that its author lacked? And how was something that I had only hinted at in the review – the clubby resentment of an intellectually and politically displaced white male left – beginning to ooze from this process and explain the astounding lack of professionalism in it as that endemic to cronyism? And to what extent did it explain why the *Nation* eagerly published my arguably "unfair" review of Catharine

MacKinnon's comparatively serious book on feminism a few years back, while it balked at an exposé of Miller trashing around in both philosophical and sexual practices he knew little about? Just how misplaced had been my faith in the *Nation's* capacity to expand its political and intellectual horizons to include in its pages of progressive "free expression" the kinds of feminist, gay, and poststructuralist angles of vision that might challenge its own? Indeed, how delusional had been my imagination of an intellectual space where a Left revised by recent critiques of Enlightenment premises mingled with postMarxist theory focused by political commitments – a space where, for example, socialist analysis, critical race theory, and feminist or queer critiques of compulsory heterosexuality regarded each other as mutually provocative rather than mutually endangering?

For years, friends have been chiding me about my lingering attachments to forums such as the *Nation*. As irony would have it, not Christopher Hitchen's renowned sexism, not Jon Wiener's fatuous critiques of 'post-modernism' or displaced harping about *corporate* media censorship, not John Leonard's hyperbolic raving against sex, Nietzsche, and Foucault in the name of Reason, Humanism, and Sartre, not even the *Nation's* irritating habit of casting "feminists" as either interest-group liberals or enemies of the First Amendment, but rather, its protectiveness toward James Miller and his project finally cured me of such attachments. But the *Nation's* own failings have not cured my desire for a richly *reconstructed* Left intellectual and journalistic domain – one which incites critical generosity toward new or rough-hewn intellectual and political developments, one that does not hide political agendas or cronyism behind the language of "fairness," and above all, one that affirms rather than decries the complex character of thinking required to apprehend the complexity of our times.

What follows is the review the *Nation* didn't publish and forgot to reject. W. B.

*Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same: leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order. At least spare us their morality when we write. (Foucault, Archaeology 17)*

**J**ames Miller's new book belongs on the shelf next to *Mommy Dearest* and the really real, truly true story of Charles and Di. Overwritten, overlong, structured by narrative strategies which rival those of Dan Rather in Mogadishu, it is neither serious biography, trustworthy exposition of Foucault's philosophy, nor a profound inquiry into how the life might relate to the thought. Animated by Miller's desire to discredit poststructuralist critiques of Western humanism and perhaps by his resentment toward a figure who represents the partial displacement of white heterosexual leftists as big men on campus in the 1980s, *The Passion of Michel Foucault* aims to key every word Foucault wrote or spoke to his "unrelenting, deeply ambiguous and profoundly problematic preoccupation with death, which he explored not only in the exoteric form of his writing but . . . in the esoteric form of sado-masochistic eroticism" (7). As a consequence of Miller's singular obsession, one concludes this lengthy tome having acquired little knowledge of Foucault's daily life, habits, friendships, approach to archival research, or intellectual development, little sense of the depth and reach of Foucault's philosophy, nor any sense of why this philosophy has had such an impact upon a vast range of scholarly inquiry in the late twentieth century. Rather, one departs the experience having been subjected to a voyeuristic and iconographic tour of gay male leather bars, a sensationalist account of the activities and utterances of the Gauche Proletarienne in the 1960s, and a reading of Foucault's works so impoverished by a determination to find macabre sexuality in them all that a newcomer to the writing would be hard pressed to explain what differentiates Foucault from the Marquis de Sade or, for that matter, Jeffery Dahmer.

By his own account, what started Miller on this project was neither Foucault's philosophy nor his politics but a rumor that "knowing he was dying of AIDS, Michel Foucault in 1985 had gone to gay bathhouses in America, and deliberately tried to infect other people with the disease" (575). Now believing the rumor "to be essentially [?] false," Miller nonetheless permits its force to structure the thesis of his book. In Miller's allegation, Michel Foucault's ostensible erotic passion – pleasures taken or imagined in suicide, violence, and torture – has as its political cognates fascism, terrorism, Auschwitz, and

Islamic fundamentalism, and as its philosophical ones critiques of Enlightenment notions of truth, power, reason, history, and the sovereign subject. In such a narrative, the inevitable late twentieth century apotheosis of these pleasures is death by AIDS, contracted in spectacular theaters of orgiastic ecstasy, such that suicide and homicide appear as coterminous with the excesses of unbridled desire, as well as with Nietzschean critiques of morality. Indeed, with this book, the force of "family values" in bracing Western culture, Rationality, and Liberal humanism is secure.

But there are problems with this effort to reduce one of the century's most anti-reductive and self-revising thinkers to a single truth: there is, to begin with, Foucault's own searing critique of such a project, embodied in the diverse registers in which he lived his life (mornings in the archives, afternoons in the lecture hall, evenings in a gay bar or on the political barricades – which is the "true" Foucault?), in his exposure of the distinctly modern conceit of identifying sexuality as the hidden, deep truth of human beings, and in his argument against the notion that any "inner truth" governs the life of a subject. But it is also the case that the book's two climactic moments, described by Miller as "limit experiences" and, in good pornographic literary style, anticipated for hundreds of pages, do not deliver the goods. The first, Foucault's ostensible epiphany with "drugs in California" and heralded thus – "once more, in quest of himself he was obliterating himself – disorganizing his mind, surrendering his body, opening himself to the otherwise unthinkable. . . ." – turns out to be an almost accidental LSD-trip in the California desert during which Foucault may have made one or two remarks about sexuality, truth, and the grooviness of the night sky (246). It is, in short, a (non) event recognizable to anyone familiar with the drug: perhaps profound for the person ingesting it but banal, bordering on ridiculous, to sober witnesses. It is also telling, given the dust jacket reference to Foucault's "life-long preoccupation with drugs and death," that Miller offers this as Foucault's sole experience with a hallucinogen. The book's other and even more carefully escalated pornographic promise to reveal Foucault's forays into the gay male culture of sexual sado-masochism in San Francisco in the 1970s also fails in the delivery: lacking material on Foucault's own experiences or sexual desires, Miller (ever the good journalist) switches to "file tapes" on sado-masochism in order to give the reader an extraordinarily detailed account of practices, equipment, and definitions related to gay male S/M. As absurd as depicting an exemplary experience of heterosexual intercourse by describing the placement of body parts, this account, coupled with images drawn from Sade, Deleuze and Guattari, and Artaud (more file tapes).

is unmistakably intended to shock and horrify, notwithstanding Miller's careful acknowledgement that S/M fantasies are probably "implicitly at play in all human relationships" and that S/M aficionados "are as nonviolent and well-adjusted as any other segment of the population[!]" (265). Also spliced into the account but unable to contest the moral force of Miller's narrative are a few of Foucault's ruminations on "desexualization of pleasure" through diffusing bodily pleasures, "desubjugation of the self" through escape from identity in sexuality, and the "stupidity" of the notion that S/M has anything to do with discovering or liberating a "deep violence" within (275, 279).

Despite Miller's endlessly repeated lament that he is compelled to tell the truth even though many will wish to shoot the messenger, *The Passion of Michel Foucault* is as disingenuous as it is sensationalist. Pretending to a posture of "studied ignorance . . . deliberately withholding judgement and taking nothing for granted" (6), the book is a monument of corrupt narrative strategies and passive aggressive narrative styles. These include selective use of quotations from Foucault to vindicate Miller's project; carefully contrived associations – for example between Foucault's putative sexuality, his interest in Heidegger, and Nazi death camps – which incriminate what they pretend only to describe; claims about political practices and implications "suggested" by Foucault's work which are then effectively attributed to him; conversion of Foucault's interest *in* certain subjects – for example, parricide – into identification *with* those subjects; and the subtle elision of bits of fiction, quotations from Nietzsche, and Miller's own speculations about Foucault's "suffering" into quasi-factual premises which are then deployed as building blocks for the narrative. These strategies, in addition to revealing extreme deliberateness of purpose where Miller feigns journalistic "objectivity," expose this as a book profoundly hostile to its subject, indeed as a book which seeks to take revenge on a thinker who "wrote in order to have no face" (*Archaeology* 17) by painting a disturbed and conniving one, and to take revenge on a man who celebrated the anonymity of a certain contemporary urban gay male sex scene by installing this scene *as* his identity.

The hostility of Miller to his subject is apparent as he derides Foucault's extensive political involvements ("not what they seem," too protean to be trusted, or solely in the service of his Dionysian delights [171, 178]); his modesty (false); his ambition ("vaulting" and fueled by life-long competition with Sartre [92, 157, 179]); his appearance ("faintly sadistic, like a bullying field marshal" [179]); his critique of the humanist subject ("incoherent" and a veil for his own "despised self" [7, 258, 326]); his scholarship (always found wanting by "professional historians" [97, 104-06, 210, 235]); his students

(cultists and punks [320]); his desire for anonymity (covering a “dark secret,” “hypocritical,” “comic,” or hiding a “singular truth locked in the dark interior of this tortured language of disavowal” [162-63, 357]); his political and scholarly interest in prisons, discipline, punishment and madness (extensions of his own erotic preoccupations); and even Foucault’s professional appointments. During his two years at the University of Tunisia in the mid-60s, where Foucault conceived and executed the dense and difficult *Archaeology of Knowledge*, Miller is quick to remind us that he “also revelled in Tunisia’s abundance of sunny beaches and good cheap hashish, indulging his appetite for pleasure and enjoying the company of [his lover] Daniel Defert” (169). The wantonness of “north Africa” anticipates Foucault’s fall into “California” twenty years later, where the intellectual substance of Foucault’s visiting appointment at Berkeley is overshadowed by Miller’s obsession with Foucault’s interest in drugs and the gay male leather scene.

In a similar vein, the erudite, abstract, formal, and decidedly unsexy characteristics of most of Foucault’s oeuvre are described as alibis, covering “the malicious glee” Foucault took “in hiding his artistry behind a barrage of methodological pronouncements that endowed his work with a dazzling and deceptive air of scholarly authority” (107). Since Miller can only read Foucault’s sometimes difficult prose and complex philosophical formulations as a “cunning disguise,” his descriptions of Foucault’s texts will simply astound anyone familiar with the work (96). Giving short shrift – in some cases a single line – to works such as *The Birth of the Clinic* and *The Order of Things*, Miller dwells at length on Foucault’s studies of madness and especially on his genealogy of punishment in *Discipline and Punish*. Describing the latter, unaccountably, as “condemning humanism, implicitly justifying popular violence, forcing the reader to come to terms with hate and aggression in modern society” (209), he also characterizes the demands of this “fiendishly clever philosophical fun house” (213) as potentially obscuring the “troubling substantive issues to which the text keeps circling back . . . for example . . . Foucault’s apparent fascination with death-by-torture” (213). While Foucault’s capacity to reflect upon torture in political and historical rather than purely moral terms certainly enabled aspects of this study, the complex genealogy of what Foucault termed “disciplinary society” is utterly eclipsed in a description of the book as obsessed with violence. (Foucault’s account traces the historical emergence of discipline, which works through surveillance, individuation, precise measurement and above all, the establishment of a *norm* in terms of which all deviations are deemed *abnormal*, as that which *replaces* overt state violence in modernity, and as that which *suffuses*



modern social institutions such that “prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons” [*Discipline* 228]).

On the other hand, from the number of times he recalls and vividly recounts it, Miller himself appears utterly riveted by the gruesome scene of eighteenth-century punishment to which Foucault devotes the first three pages of *Discipline and Punish*. Miller’s obsessions would also appear to be at play in his gratuitous presentation of scenes of graphic sexual sadism from Sade’s *Justine* and *Juliette* and Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus*, scenes which appear *nowhere* in Foucault’s own work but which, Miller insists, illustrate its precepts. What thus might be regarded as Miller’s own pornographic sensibility, displaced onto Foucault, is also evident in Miller’s prose habits. For example, a description of a 1972 demonstration outside a Renault plant concludes, “at the height of the battle, witnesses glimpsed the gleaming skull of the great professor at the Collège de France absorbing blow after blow from the truncheon of a police officer” (206). In sharp contrast, Foucault’s prose, even on the rare occasions when it is concerned with sex or violence, is generally formal, tentative, and lacking in hyperbole. Notwithstanding Miller’s characterization of students mesmerized by “the bald savant as a kind of postmodernist sphinx . . . Bodies! Pleasures! Torture! Had philosophy ever sounded so sexy?” (321), I have yet to meet anyone who claimed to be either sexually aroused or politically incited to riot by Foucault’s writing.

Miller’s insistence that he is “simply trying to tell the truth” (7) about Foucault is not only his most disingenuous claim but that which controverts Miller’s insistence that he has understood and learned from Foucault. At odds with Foucault’s own relentless exposure of “the author” and “the subject” as romantic and regulatory fictions, it is also irreconcilable with what is arguably Foucault’s most lasting contribution to philosophy: his insistence on “truth” as the effect of a system of exclusions, as the product of a discourse that defines what can and cannot be said, a *regimé* governed by norms whose regulatory force is masked by the dissimulating reputation of truth as independent of power and history. Indeed, it is telling that nowhere in either the text or the index of Miller’s book does one find a reference to “discourse,” that rich and vexing term which enables Foucault to convey how power works *as* knowledge, how language which pretends only to describe us actually constructs and positions us in terms of a panoply of social norms and perversions. It is telling because Miller’s book is a case study in what Foucault identified as the power of discursive normalization. While Miller seeks to extract the core “truth”, the “visible secret” of Foucault’s life, Miller’s own positioning remains safely uninterrogated, despite its relentless imbrication

with the power to judge, condemn, expose, moralize, police, and regulate. Miller's apparent sexual voyeurism is never thematized as the *daimon* driving the narrative while the object of that gaze – culturally marked as perverse – is delivered up as the disturbing “truth” of Michel Foucault. Miller's ostensible commitment to “objectivity” and “telling the truth” are presented as divorced from power, indeed as important counters to the “mythmongering of Hitler's Germany and the Soviet Union from 1917 until 1989” (393 n5), while Foucault's deployment of Nietzsche's critique of objectivity and truth as complex strategies of power is cast as flirtation with political nihilism and fascism. Miller is the sane, sexually normal journalist “who lives with his wife and three sons in West Roxbury, Massachusetts” and who inhabits the world of light, reason, life, and heterosexuality – none of which comprise his hidden truth because they simply *are* the truth, *are* the norms through which Foucault's “nocturnal forays” (154) into the underworld of darkness, madness, death, and homosexuality are both constructed and judged. Miller is thus the unselfconscious vehicle of the regulatory power of the normalizing discourses of health, sanity, and sexuality which Foucault devoted a substantial portion of his scholarly life to mapping and theorizing.

It was precisely Foucault's appreciation of the way in which normalizing discourses police and subjugate which led him to a profound critique of *identity*, of naming oneself *as* one's sexuality, a critique which Miller eschews as he uses this very modality of domination to cast Foucault's research interests, philosophy, and political investments as unified by and in the character of his “shocking” impulses and obsessions. In this, Miller taps the deepest terror of every socially marked human being – colored, female, queer: that no matter what we write, think about or say, no matter how we fashion ourselves and our work, we will be incessantly returned and reduced to this single marking, that it will be produced again and again as “the truth” of our being, our thinking, our worldly endeavors, as Miller's self-described life with his “wife and three sons in West Roxbury” simply never will.

A postscript: One wonders how Miller might analyze Foucault's confessed love of American food as among the “perverse” pleasures driving his philosophical work. “A good club sandwich with a coke. That's my pleasure. It's true. With ice cream. That's true. Actually, I think I have real difficulty in experiencing pleasure. I think that pleasure is a very difficult behavior” (*Politics* 12).

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