We like to believe that sexuality has regained, in contemporary experience, its full truth as a process of nature, a truth which has long been lingering in the shadows and hiding under various disguises—until now, that is, when our positive awareness allows us to decipher it so that it may at last emerge in the clear light of language. Yet, never did sexuality enjoy a more immediately natural understanding and never did it know a greater “felicity of expression” than in the Christian world of fallen bodies and of sin. The proof is its whole tradition of mysticism and spirituality which was incapable of dividing the continuous forms of desire, of rapture, of penetration, of ecstasy, of that outpouring which leaves us spent: all of these experiences seemed to lead, without interruption or limit, right to the heart of a divine love of which they were both the outpouring and the source returning upon itself. What characterizes modern sexuality from Sade to Freud is not its having found the language of its logic or of its natural process, but rather, through the violence done by such languages, its having been “denatured”—cast into

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an empty zone where it achieves whatever meager form is bestowed upon it by the establishment of its limits. Sexuality points to nothing beyond itself, no prolongation, except in a frenzy which disrupts it. We have not in the least liberated sexuality, though we have, to be exact, carried it to its limits: the limit of consciousness, because it ultimately dictates the only possible reading of our unconscious; the limit of the law, since it seems the sole substance of universal taboos; the limit of language, since it traces that line of foam showing just how far speech may advance upon the sands of silence. Thus, it is not through sexuality that we communicate with the orderly and pleasingly profane world of animals; rather, sexuality is a fissure—not one which surrounds us as the basis of our isolation or individuality, but one which marks the limit within us and designates us as a limit.

Perhaps we could say that it has become the only division possible in a world now emptied of objects, beings, and spaces to desecrate. Not that it proffers any new content for our age-old acts; rather, it permits a profanation without object, a profanation that is empty and turned inward upon itself and whose instruments are brought to bear on nothing but each other. Profanation in a world which no longer recognizes any positive meaning in the sacred—is this not more or less what we may call transgression? In that zone which our culture affords for our gestures and speech, transgression prescribes not only the sole manner of discovering the sacred in its unmediated substance, but also a way of recomposing its empty form, its absence, through which it becomes all the more scintillating. A rigorous language, as it arises from sexuality, will not reveal the secret of man's natural being, nor will it express the serenity of anthropological truths, but rather, it will say that he exists without God; the speech given to sexuality is contemporaneous, both in time and in structure, with that through which we announced to ourselves that God is dead. From the moment that Sade delivered its first words and marked out, in a single discourse, the boundaries of what suddenly became its kingdom, the language of sexuality has lifted us into the night where God is absent, and where all of our actions are addressed to this absence in a profanation which at once identifies it, dissipates it, exhausts itself in it, and restores it to the empty purity of its transgression.

There indeed exists a modern form of sexuality: it is that which offers itself in the superficial discourse of a solid and natural animality, while obscurely addressing itself to Absence, to this high region where Bataille placed, in a night not soon to be ended, the characters of *Eponine*:

In this strained stillness, through the haze of my intoxication, I seemed to sense that the wind was dying down; a long silence flowed from the immensity of the sky. The priest knelt down softly. He began to sing in a despondent key, slowly as if at someone's death: *Miserere mei Deus, secondum misericordiam magnam tuam*. The way he moaned this sensuous melody was highly suspicious. He was strangely confessing his anguish before the delights of the flesh. A priest should conquer us by his denials but his efforts to humble himself only made him stand out more insistently; the loveliness of his chant, set against the silent sky, enveloped him in a solitude of morose pleasures. My reverie was shattered by a felicitous acclamation, an infinite acclamation already on the edge of oblivion. Seeing the priest as she emerged from the dream which still visibly dazed her senses, Eponine began to laugh and with such intensity that she was completely shaken; she turned her body and, leaning against the railing, trembled like a child. She was laughing with her head in her hands and the priest, barely stifling a clucking noise, raised his head, his arms uplifted, only to see a naked behind: the wind had lifted her coat and, made defenseless by the laughter, she had been unable to close it.

Perhaps the importance of sexuality in our culture, the fact that since Sade it has persistently been linked to the most profound decisions of our language, derives from nothing else than this correspondence which connects it to the death of God. Not that this death should be understood as the end of his historical

2. See below in this essay, p. 50, for a discussion of the non-representational nature of the language of sexuality.
3. See *The Order of Things*, p. 314.
reign or as the finally delivered judgment of his nonexistence, but as the now constant space of our experience. By denying us the limit of the Limitless, the death of God leads to an experience in which nothing may again announce the exteriority of being, and consequently to an experience which is \textit{interior} and \textit{sovereign}. But such an experience, for which the death of God is an explosive reality, discloses as its own secret and clarification, its intrinsic finitude, the limitless reign of the Limit, and the emptiness of those excesses in which it spends itself and where it is found wanting. In this sense, the inner experience is throughout an experience of the \textit{impossible} (the impossible being both that which we experience and that which constitutes the experience). The death of God is not merely an "event" that gave shape to contemporary experience as we now know it: it continues tracing indefinitely its great skeletal outline.

Bataille was perfectly conscious of the possibilities of thought that could be released by this death, and of the impossibilities in which it entangled thought. What, indeed, is the meaning of the death of God, if not a strange solidarity between the stunning realization of his nonexistence and the act that kills him? But what does it mean to kill God if he does not exist, to kill God \textit{who has never existed}? Perhaps it means to kill God both because he does not exist and to guarantee he will not exist—certainly a cause for laughter: to kill God to liberate life from this existence that limits it, but also to bring it back to those limits that are annulled by this limitless existence—as a sacrifice; to kill God to return him to this nothingness he is and to manifest his existence at the center of a light that blazes like a presence—for the ecstasy; to kill God in order to lose language in a deafening night and because this wound must make him bleed until there springs forth "an immense alleluia lost in the interminable silence"—and this is communication. The death of God does not restore us to a limited and positivistic world, but to a world exposed by the experience of its limits, made and unmade by that excess which transgresses it.


Undoubtedly it is excess that discovers that sexuality and the death of God are bound to the same experience; or that again shows us, as if in "the most incongruous book of all," that "God is a whore." And from this perspective the thought that relates to God and the thought that relates to sexuality are linked in a common form, since Sade to be sure, but never in our day with as much insistence and difficulty as in Bataille. And if it were necessary to give, in opposition to sexuality, a precise definition of eroticism, it would have to be the following: an experience of sexuality which links, for its own ends, an overcoming of limits to the death of God. "Eroticism can say what mysticism never could (its strength failed when it tried): God is nothing if not the surpassing of God in every sense of vulgar being, in that of horror or impurity; and ultimately in the sense of nothing." 8

Thus, at the root of sexuality, of the movement that nothing can ever limit (because it is, from its birth and in its totality, constantly involved with the limit), and at the root of this discourse on God which Western culture has maintained for so long—without any sense of the impropriety of "thoughtlessly adding to language a word which surpasses all words" or any clear sense that it places us at the limits of all possible languages—a singular experience is shaped: that of transgression. Perhaps one day it will seem as decisive for our culture, as much a part of its soil, as the experience of contradiction was at an earlier time for dialectical thought. But in spite of so many scattered signs, the language in which transgression will find its space and the illumination of its being lies almost entirely in the future.

It is surely possible, however, to find in Bataille its calcinated roots, its promising ashes.

\[\text{Transgression is an action which involves the limit, that narrow zone of a line where it displays the flash of its passage, but}\]

7. Ibid., p. 269; and on excess, pp. 168–173.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
perhaps also its entire trajectory, even its origin; it is likely that transgression has its entire space in the line it crosses. The play of limits and transgression seems to be regulated by a simple obstinacy: transgression incessantly crosses and recrosses a line which closes up behind it in a wave of extremely short duration, and thus it is made to return once more right to the horizon of the uncrossable. But this relationship is considerably more complex: these elements are situated in an uncertain context, in certainties which are immediately upset so that thought is ineffectual as soon as it attempts to seize them.

The limit and transgression depend on each other for whatever density of being they possess: a limit could not exist if it were absolutely uncrossable and, reciprocally, transgression would be pointless if it merely crossed a limit composed of illusions and shadows. But can the limit have a life of its own outside of the act that gloriously passes through it and negates it? What becomes of it after this act and what might it have been before? For its part, does transgression not exhaust its nature when it crosses the limit, knowing no other life beyond this point in time? And this point, this curious intersection of beings that have no other life beyond this moment where they totally exchange their beings, is it not also everything which overflows from it on all sides? It serves as a glorification of the nature it excludes: the limit opens violently onto the limitless, finds itself suddenly carried away by the content it had rejected and fulfilled by this alien plenitude which invades it to the core of its being. Transgression forces the limit to face the fact of its imminent disappearance, to find itself in what it excludes (perhaps, to be more exact, to recognize itself for the first time), to experience its positive truth in its downward fall?¹⁰

And yet, toward what is transgression unleashed in its movement of pure violence, if not that which imprisons it, toward the limit and those elements it contains? What bears the brunt of its aggression and to what void does it owe the unrestrained fullness of its being, if not that which it crosses in its violent act and which, as its destiny, it crosses out in the line it effaces?

Transgression, then, is not related to the limit as black to white, the prohibited to the lawful, the outside to the inside, or as the open area of a building to its enclosed spaces. Rather, their relationship takes the form of a spiral which no simple infraction can exhaust. Perhaps it is like a flash of lightning in the night which, from the beginning of time, gives a dense and black intensity to the night it denies, which lights up the night from the inside, from top to bottom, and yet owes to the dark the stark clarity of its manifestation, its harrowing and poised singularity; the flash loses itself in this space it marks with its sovereignty and becomes silent now that it has given a name to obscurity.

Since this existence is both so pure and so complicated, it must be detached from its questionable association to ethics if we want to understand it and to begin thinking from it and in the space it denotes; it must be liberated from the scandalous or subversive, that is, from anything aroused by negative associations.¹¹ Transgression does not seek to oppose one thing to another, nor does it achieve its purpose through mockery or by upsetting the solidity of foundations; it does not transform the other side of the mirror, beyond an invisible and uncrossable line, into a glittering expanse. Transgression is neither violence in a divided world (in an ethical world) nor a victory over limits (in a dialectical or revolutionary world); and exactly for this reason, its role is to measure the excessive distance that it opens at the heart of the limit and to trace the flashing line that causes the limit to arise. Transgression contains nothing negative, but affirms limited being—affirms the limitlessness into which it leaps as it opens this zone to existence for the first time. But

¹⁰. This can serve as a description of Foucault’s technique in *Madness and Civilization* and also as the basis, in *The Order of Things*, of his statement that “modern thought is advancing towards that region where man’s Other must become the same as himself” (p. 328).

correspondingly, this affirmation contains nothing positive: no content can bind it, since, by definition, no limit can possibly restrict it. Perhaps it is simply an affirmation of division; but only insofar as division is not understood to mean a cutting gesture, or the establishment of a separation or the measuring of a distance, only retaining that in it which may designate the existence of difference.

Perhaps when contemporary philosophy discovered the possibility of nonpositive affirmation, it began a process of reorientation whose only equivalent is the shift instituted by Kant when he distinguished the nihil negativum and the nihil privatum—a distinction known to have opened the way for the advance of critical thought. This philosophy of nonpositive affirmation is, I believe, what Blanchot was defining through his principle of “contestation.” Contestation does not imply a generalized negation, but an affirmation that affirms nothing, a radical break of transitivity. Rather than being a process of thought for denying existences or values, contestation is the act which carries them all to their limits and, from there, to the Limit where an ontological decision achieves its end; to contest is to proceed until one reaches the empty core where being achieves its limit and where the limit defines being. There, at the transgressed limit, the “yes” of contestation reverberates, leaving without echo the hee-haw of Nietzsche’s braying ass.

Thus, contestation shapes an experience that Bataille wanted to circumscribe through every detour and repetition of his work,


13. For a discussion of this term, see Bataille’s L’Expérience intérieure, in Oeuvres, V, 24, 143, 221; and Foucault’s study of Blanchot, “La Pensée du dehors,” Critique, No. 229 (1966): “We must transform reflexive language. It should not point to an inner confirmation, a central certainty where it is impossible to dislodge it, but to the extreme where it is always contested” (p. 528).


an experience that has the power “to implicate (and to question) everything without possible respite” and to indicate, in the place where it occurs and in its most essential form, “the immanency of being.” Nothing is more alien to this experience than the demonic character who, true to his nature, “denies everything.” Transgression opens onto a scintillating and constantly affirmed world, a world without shadow or twilight, without that serpentine “no” that bites into fruits and lodges their contradictions at their core. It is the solar inversion of satanic denial. It was originally linked to the divine, or rather, from this limit marked by the sacred it opens the space where the divine functions. The discovery of such a category by a philosophy which questions itself upon the existence of the limit is evidently one of the countless signs that our path is circular and that, with each day, we are becoming more Greek. Yet, this motion should not be understood as the promised return to a homeland or the recovery of an original soil which produced and which will naturally resolve every opposition. In reintroducing the experience of the divine at the center of thought, philosophy has been well aware since Nietzsche (or it should undoubtedly know by now) that it questions an origin without positivity and an opening indifferent to the patience of the negative. No form of dialectical movement, no analysis of constitutions and of their transcendent ground can serve as support for thinking about such an experience or even as access to this experience. In our day, would not the instantaneous play of the limit and of transgression be the essential test for a thought which centers on the “origin,” for that

15. L’Expérience intérieure, in Oeuvres, V, 16, and also 347.

16. Ibid., p. 60: “A project is not only a mode of existence implied by action, necessary to action; it is rather existence within a paradoxical form of time—the postponement of life to a later of time. The inner experience denounces this intermission; it is being without delay.”


18. For an extended discussion of the “origin,” see below “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History”; and on contradiction, see The Archaeology of Knowledge, pp. 151–155.
form of thought to which Nietzsche dedicated us from the beginning of his works and one which would be, absolutely and in the same motion, a Critique and an Ontology, an understanding that comprehends both finitude and being?

What possibilities generated this thought from which everything, up until our time, has seemingly diverted us, but as if to lead us to the point of its returning? From what impossibilities does it derive its hold on us? Undoubtedly, it can be said that it comes to us through that opening made by Kant in Western philosophy when he articulated, in a manner which is still enigmatic, metaphysical discourse and his reflection on the limits of reason. However, Kant ended by closing this opening when he ultimately relegated all critical investigations to an anthropological question; and undoubtedly, we have subsequently interpreted Kant’s action as the granting of an indefinite respite to metaphysics, because dialectics substituted for the questioning of being and limits the play of contradiction and totality.19 To awaken us from the confused sleep of dialectics and of anthropology, we required the Nietzschean figures of tragedy, of Dionysus, of the death of God, of the philosopher’s hammer, of the Superman approaching with the steps of a dove, of the Return. But why, in our day, is discursive language so ineffectual when asked to maintain the presence of these figures and to maintain itself through them? Why is it so nearly silent before them, as if it were forced to yield its voice so that they may continue to find their words, to yield to these extreme forms of language in which Bataille, Blanchot, and Klossowski have made their home, which they have made the summits of thought?20

The sovereignty of these experiences must surely be recognized


20. In connection with this passage, see “La Pensée du dehors,” p. 524; and also Foucault’s essay on Klossowski: “La Prose d’Actéon,” Nouvelle Revue Française, No. 135 (1964).

some day, and we must try to assimilate them: not to reveal their truth—a ridiculous pretension with respect to words that form our limits—but to serve as the basis for finally liberating our language. But our task for today is to direct our attention to this nondiscursive language, this language which, for almost two centuries, has stubbornly maintained its disruptive existence in our culture; it will be enough to examine its nature, to explore the source of this language that is neither complete nor fully in control of itself, even though it is sovereign for us and hangs above us, this language that is sometimes immobilized in scenes we customarily call “erotic” and suddenly volatized in a philosophical turbulence, when it seems to lose its very basis.

The parcelling out of philosophical discourse and descriptive scenes in Sade’s books is undoubtedly the product of complex architectural laws. It is quite probable that the simple rules of alternation, of continuity, or of thematic contrast are inadequate for defining a linguistic space where descriptions and demonstrations are articulated, where a rational order is linked to an order of pleasures, and where, especially, subjects are located both in the movement of various discourses and in a constellation of bodies. Let us simply say that this space is completely covered by a language that is discursive (even when it involves a narrative), explicit (even when it denotes nothing), and continuous (especially at the moment that the thread passes from one character to another); a language that nevertheless does not have an absolute subject, that never discovers the one who ultimately speaks and incessantly maintains its hold on speech from the announcement of the “triumph of philosophy” in Justine’s first adventure to Juliette’s corpseless disappearance into eternity.21 Bataille’s language, on the other hand, continually breaks down at the center of its space, exposing in his nakedness, in the inertia of ecstasy, a visible and insistent subject who had tried to keep language at arms length, but who now finds himself thrown by it, exhausted, upon the sands of that which he can no longer say.

21. See Eroticism, pp. 185–196.
How is it possible to discover, under all these different figures, that form of thought we carelessly call "the philosophy of eroticism," but in which it is important to recognize (a less ambitious goal, but also more central to our understanding) an essential experience for our culture since Kant and Sade—the experience of finitude and being, of the limit and transgression? What natural space can this form of thought possess and what language can it adopt? Undoubtedly, no form of reflection yet developed, no established discourse, can supply its model, its foundation, or even the riches of its vocabulary. Would it be of help, in any case, to argue by analogy that we must find a language for the transgressive which would be what dialectics was, in an earlier time, for contradiction? Our efforts are undoubtedly better spent in trying to speak of this experience and in making it speak from the depths where its language fails, from precisely the place where words escape it, where the subject who speaks has just vanished, where the spectacle topples over before an upturned eye—from where Bataille’s death has recently placed his language. We can only hope, now that his death has sent us to the pure transgression of his texts, that they will protect those who seek a language for the thought of the limit, that they will serve as a dwelling place for what may already be a ruined project.

In effect, do we not grasp the possibility of such thought in a language which necessarily strips it of any semblance of thought and leads it to the very impossibility of language? Right to this limit where the existence of language becomes problematic? The reason is that philosophical language is linked beyond all memory (or nearly so) to dialectics; and the dialectic was able to become the form and interior movement of philosophy from the time of Kant only through a redoubling of the millenary space from which philosophy had always spoken. We know full well that reference to Kant has invariably addressed us to the most forma-

tive elements of Greek thought: not to recapture a lost experience, but to bring us closer to the possibility of a nondialectical language. This age of commentary in which we live, this historical redoubling from which there seems no escape, does not indicate the velocity of our language in a field now devoid of new philosophical objects, which must be constantly recrossed in a forgetful and always rejuvenated glance. But far more to the point, it indicates the inadequacy, the profound silence, of a philosophical language that has been chased from its natural element, from its original dialectics, by the novelties found in its domain. If philosophy is now experienced as a multiple desert, it is not because it has lost its proper object or the freshness of its experience, but because it has been suddenly divested of that language which is historically "natural" to it. We do not experience the end of philosophy, but a philosophy which regains its speech and finds itself again only in the marginal region which borders its limits: that is, which finds itself either in a purified metalanguage or in the thickness of words enclosed by their darkness, by their blind truth. The prodigious distance that separates these alternatives and that manifests our philosophical dispersion marks, more than a disarray, a profound coherence. This separation and real incompatibility is the actual distance from whose depths philosophy addresses us. It is here that we must focus our attention.

But what language can arise from such an absence? And above all, who is the philosopher who will now begin to speak? “What of us when, having become sobered, we learn what we are? Lost among idlers in the night, where we can only hate the semblance of light coming from their small talk.”22 In a language stripped of dialectics, at the heart of what it says but also at the root of its possibilities, the philosopher is aware that “we are not everything,” he learns as well that even the philosopher does not inhabit the whole of his language like a secret and perfectly fluent

22. This passage is taken from the Preface to L’Expérience intérieure, in Œuvres, V, 10.
god. Next to himself, he discovers the existence of another language that also speaks and that he is unable to dominate, one that strives, fails, and falls silent and that he cannot manipulate, the language he spoke at one time and that has now separated itself from him, now gravitating in a space increasingly silent. Most of all, he discovers that he is not always lodged in his language in the same fashion and that in the location from which a subject had traditionally spoken in philosophy—one whose obvious and garrulous identity has remained unexamined from Plato to Nietzsche—a void has been hollowed out in which a multiplicity of speaking subjects are joined and severed, combined and excluded. From the lessons on Homer to the cries of a madman in the streets of Turin, who can be said to have spoken this continuous language, so obstinately the same? Was it the Wanderer or his shadow? The philosopher or the first of the nonphilosophers? Zarathustra, his monkey, or already the Superman? Dionysus, Christ, their reconciled figures, or finally this man right here? The breakdown of philosophical subjectivity and its dispersion in a language that dispossesses it while multiplying it within the space created by its absence is probably one of the fundamental structures of contemporary thought. Again, this is not the end of philosophy, but rather, the end of the philosopher as the sovereign and primary form of philosophical language. And perhaps to all those who strive above all to maintain the unity of the philosopher's grammatical function—at the price of the coherence, even of the existence of philosophical language—we could oppose Bataille's exemplary enterprise: his desperate and relentless attack on the preeminence of the philosophical subject as it confronted him in his own work, in his experience and his language which became his private torment, in the first reflected torture of that which speaks in philosophical language—in the dispersion of stars that encircle

24. The reference is, of course, to the beginning of Nietzsche's madness in Turin in the late fall of 1888.

It is not only the juxtaposition of reflective texts and novels in the language of thought that makes us aware of the shattering of the philosophical subject. The works of Bataille define the situation in far greater detail: in the constant movement to different levels of speech and a systematic disengagement from the "I" who has begun to speak and is already on the verge of deploying his language and installing himself in it: temporal disengagements ("I was writing this," or similarly "in retrospect, if I return to this matter"), shifts in the distance separating a speaker from his words (in a diary, notebooks, poems, stories, meditations, or discourses intended for demonstration), an inner detachment from the assumed sovereignty of thought or writing (through books, anonymous texts, prefaces to his books, footnotes). And it is at the center of the subject's disappearance that philosophical language proceeds as if through a labyrinth, not to recapture him, but to test (and through language itself) the extremity of its loss. That is, it proceeds to the limit and to this opening where its being surges forth, but where it is already completely lost, completely overflowing itself, emptied of itself to the point where it becomes an absolute void—an opening which is communication: "at this point there is no need to elaborate; as my rapture escapes me, I immediately reenter the night of a lost child, anguished in his desire to prolong his ravishment, with no other end than exhaustion, no way of stopping short of fainting. It is such excruciating bliss."26

This experience forms the exact reversal of the movement which has sustained the wisdom of the West at least since the time of Socrates, that is, the wisdom to which philosophical language promised the serene unity of a subjectivity which would

26. Ibid., p. 68.
triumph in it, having been fully constituted by it and through it. But if the language of philosophy is one in which the philosopher’s torments are tirelessly repeated and his subjectivity is discarded, then not only is wisdom meaningless as the philosopher’s form of composition and reward, but in the expiration of philosophical language a possibility inevitably arises (that upon which it falls—the face of the die; and the place into which it falls—the void into which the die is cast): the possibility of the mad philosopher. In short, the experience of the philosopher who finds, not outside his language (the result of an external accident or imaginary excercise), but at the inner core of its possibilities, the transgression of his philosophical being; and thus, the non-dialectical language of the limit which only arises in transgressing the one who speaks. This play of transgression and being is fundamental for the constitution of philosophical language, which reproduces and undoubtedly produces it.

Essentially the product of fissures, abrupt descents, and broken contours, this misshapen and craglike language describes a circle; it refers to itself and is folded back on a questioning of its limits—as if it were nothing more than a small night lamp that flashes with a strange light, signalling the void from which it arises and to which it addresses everything it illuminates and touches. Perhaps, it is this curious configuration which explains why Bataille attributed such obstinate prestige to the Eye. Throughout his career (from his first novel to Larmes d’Eros), the eye was to keep its value as a figure of inner experience: “When at the height of anguish, I gently solicit a strange absurdity, an eye opens at the summit, in the middle of my skull.” This is because the eye, a small white globe that encloses its darkness, traces a limiting circle that only sight can cross. And the darkness within, the somber core of the eye, pours out into the world like a fountain which sees, that is, which lights up the world; but the eye also gathers up all the light of the world in the iris, that small black spot, where it is transformed into the bright night of an image. The eye is mirror and lamp: it discharges its light into the world around it, while in a movement that is not necessarily contradictory, it precipitates this same light into the transparency of its well. Its globe has the expansive quality of a marvellous seed—like an egg imploding towards the center of night and extreme light, which it is and which it has just ceased to be. It is the figure of being in the act of transgressing its own limit.

The eye, in a philosophy of reflection, derives from its capacity to observe the power of becoming always more interior to itself. Lying behind each eye that sees, there exists a more tenuous one, an eye so discreet and yet so agile that its all-powerful glance can be said to eat away at the flesh of its white globe; behind this particular eye, there exists another and, then, still others, each progressively more subtle until we arrive at an eye whose entire substance is nothing but the transparency of its vision. This inner movement is finally resolved in a nonmaterial center where the intangible forms of truth are created and combined, in this heart of things which is the sovereign subject. Bataille reverses this entire direction: sight, crossing the globular limit of the eye, constitutes the eye in its instantaneous being; sight carries it away in this luminous stream (an outpouring fountain, streaming tears and, shortly, blood), hurls the eye outside of itself, conducts it to the limit where it bursts out in the immediately extinguished flash of its being. Only a small white ball, veined with blood, is left behind, only an exorbitated eye to which all sight is now denied. And in the place from which sight had once passed, only a cranial cavity remains, only this black globe which the uprooted eye has made to close upon its sphere, depriving it of vision, but offering to this absence the spectacle of that in-

destructible core which now imprisons the dead glance. In the distance created by this violence and uprooting, the eye is seen absolutely, but denied any possibility of sight: the philosophizing subject has been dispossessed and pursued to its limit; and the sovereignty of philosophical language can now be heard from the distance, in the measureless void left behind by the exorbidated subject.

But perhaps the eye accomplishes the most essential aspect of its play when, forced from its ordinary position, it is made to turn upwards in a movement that leads it back to the nocturnal and starred interior of the skull and it is made to show us its usually concealed surface, white and unseeing: it shuts out the day in a movement that manifests its own whiteness (whiteness being undoubtedly the image of clarity, its surface reflection, but for this very reason, it cannot communicate with it, nor communicate it); and the circular night of the iris is made to address the central absence which it illuminates with a flash, revealing it as night. The upturned orb suggests both the most open and the most impenetrable eye: causing its sphere to pivot, while remaining exactly the same and in the same place, it overturns day and night, crosses their limit, but only to find it again on the same line and from the other side; and the white hemisphere that appears momentarily at the place where the pupil once opened is like the being of the eye as it crosses the limit of its vision—when it transgresses this opening to the light of day which defined the transgression of every sight. "If man did not imperiously close his eyes, he would finally be unable to see the things worth seeing."30

But what we need to see does not involve any interior secret or the discovery of a more nocturnal world. Torn from its ordinary position and made to turn inwards in its orbit, the eye now only pours its light into a bony cavern. This turning up of its globe may seem a betrayal of "la petite mort,"31 but more exactly, it simply indicates the death that it experiences in its natural location, in this springing up in place which causes the eye to rotate. Death, for the eye, is not the always elevated line of the horizon, but the limit it ceaselessly transgresses in its natural location, in the hollow where every vision originates, and where this limit is elevated into an absolute limit by an ecstatic movement which allows the eye to spring up from the other side. The upturned eye discovers the bond that links language and death at the moment that it acts out this relationship of the limit and being; and it is perhaps from this that it derives its prestige, in permitting the possibility of a language for this play. Thus, the great scenes that interrupt Bataille's stories invariably concern the spectacle of erotic deaths, where upturned eyes display their white limits and rotate inwards in gigantic and empty orbits. Bleu du ciel gives a singularly precise outline of this movement: early in November, when the earth of a German cemetery is alive with the twinkling light of candles and candle stubs, the narrator is lying with Dorothy among the tombstones; making love among the dead, the earth around him appears like the sky on a bright night. And the sky above forms a great hollow orbit, a death mask, in which he recognizes his inevitable end at the moment that pleasure overturns the four globes of flesh, causing the revolution of his sight. "The earth under Dorothy's body was open like a tomb, her belly opened itself to me like a fresh grave. We were struck with stupor, making love on a starred cemetery. Each light marked a skeleton in a grave and formed a wavering sky as perturbed as our mingled bodies. I unfastened Dorothy's dress, I dirtied her clothes and her breast with the fresh earth which was stuck to my fingers. Our bodies trembled like two rows of clattering teeth."32

30. An aphorism (from René Char) used at the beginning of Méthode de méditation, in Œuvres, V, 192.
31. Eroticism, p. 170: "Pleasure is so close to ruinous waste that we refer to the moment of climax as a 'little death.'"
32. Œuvres, III, 481.
But what might this mean at the heart of a system of thought? What significance has this insistent eye which appears to encompass what Bataille successively designated the inner experience, the extreme possibility, the comic process, or simply meditation? It is certainly no more metaphoric than Descartes' phrasing of the "clear perception of sight" or this sharp point of the mind which he called acies mentis. In point of fact, the upturned eye has no meaning in Bataille's language, can have no meaning since it marks its limit. It indicates the moment when language, arriving at its confines, overleaps itself, explodes and radically challenges itself in laughter, tears, the overturned eyes of ecstasy, the mute and exorbitated horror of sacrifice, and where it remains fixed in this way at the limit of its void, speaking of itself in a second language in which the absence of a sovereign subject outlines its essential emptiness and incessantly fractures the unity of its discourse. The enucleated or upturned eye marks the zone of Bataille's philosophical language, the void into which it pours and loses itself, but in which it never stops talking—somewhat like the interior, diaphanous, and illuminated eye of mystics and spiritualists that marks the point at which the secret language of prayer is embedded and choked by a marvelous communication which silences it. Similarly, but in an inverted manner, the eye in Bataille delineates the zone shared by language and death, the place where language discovers its being in the crossing of its limits: the nondialectical form of philosophical language.

This eye, as the fundamental figure of the place from which Bataille speaks and in which his broken language finds its uninterrupted domain, establishes the connection, prior to any form of discourse, that exists between the death of God (a sun that rotates and the great eyelid that closes upon the world), the experience of finitude (springing up in death, twisting the light which is extinguished as it discovers that the interior is an empty skull, a central absence), and the turning back of language upon itself at the moment that it fails—a conjunction which undoubtedly has no other equivalent than the association, well known in other philosophies, of sight to truth or of contemplation to the absolute. Revealed to this eye, which in its pivoting conceals itself for all time, is the being of the limit: "I will never forget the violent and marvellous experience that comes from the will to open one's eyes, facing what exists, what happens."

Perhaps in the movement which carries it to a total night, the experience of transgression brings to light this relationship of finitude to being, this moment of the limit which anthropological thought, since Kant, could only designate from the distance and from the exterior through the language of dialectics.

The twentieth century will undoubtedly have discovered the related categories of exhaustion, excess, the limit, and transgression—the strange and unyielding form of these irrevocable movements which consume and consummate us. In a form of thought that considers man as worker and producer—that of European culture since the end of the eighteenth century—consumption was based entirely on need, and need based itself exclusively on the model of hunger. When this element was introduced into an investigation of profit (the appetite of those who have satisfied their hunger), it inserted man into a dialectic of production which had a simple anthropological meaning: if man was alienated from his real nature and immediate needs through his labor and the production of objects with his hands, it was nevertheless through its agency that he recaptured his essence and achieved the indefinite gratification of his needs. But it would undoubtedly be misguided to conceive of hunger as

33. These concepts are opposed to Hegel's philosophy of work and encourage "non-discursive existence, laughter, ecstasy" (Oeuvres, V, 96).
34. With respect to this reference to Descartes' "Third Meditation," see Oeuvres, V, 123–126.
that irreducible anthropological factor in the definition of work, production, and profit; and similarly, need has an altogether different status, or it responds at the very least to a code whose laws cannot be confined to a dialectic of production. The discovery of sexuality—the discovery of that firmament of indefinite unreality where Sade placed it from the beginning, the discovery of those systematic forms of prohibition which we now know imprison it, the discovery of the universal nature of transgression in which it is both object and instrument—indicates in a sufficiently forceful way the impossibility of attributing the millenary language of dialectics to the major experience that sexuality forms for us.

Perhaps the emergence of sexuality in our culture is an "event" of multiple values: it is tied to the death of God and to the ontological void which his death fixed at the limit of our thought; it is also tied to the still silent and groping apparition of a form of thought in which the interrogation of the limit replaces the search for totality and the act of transgression replaces the movement of contradictions. Finally, it involves the questioning of language by language in a circularity which the "scandalous" violence of erotic literature, far from ending, displays from its first use of words. Sexuality is only decisive for our culture as spoken, and to the degree it is spoken: not that it is our language which has been eroticized now for nearly two centuries. Rather, since Sade and the death of God, the universe of language has absorbed our sexuality, denatured it, placed it in a void where it establishes its sovereignty and where it incessantly sets up as the Law the limits it transgresses. In this sense, the appearance of sexuality as a fundamental problem marks the transformation of a philosophy of man as worker to a philosophy based on a being who speaks; and insofar as philosophy has traditionally maintained a secondary role to knowledge and work, it must be admitted, not as a sign of crisis but of essential structure, that it is now secondary to language. Not that philosophy is now fated to a role of repetition or commentary, but that it experiences itself and its limits in language and in this transgression of language which carries it, as it did Bataille, to the faltering of the speaking subject. On the day that sexuality began to speak and to be spoken, language no longer served as a veil for the infinite; and in the thickness it acquired on that day, we now experience finitude and being. In its dark domain, we now encounter the absence of God, our death, limits, and their transgression. But perhaps it is also a source of light for those who have liberated their thought from all forms of dialectical language, as it became for Bataille, on more than one occasion, when he experienced the loss of his language in the dead of night. "What I call night differs from the darkness of thoughts; night possesses the violence of light. Yes, night: the youth and the intoxication of thinking."

Perhaps this "difficulty with words" that now hampers philosophy, a condition fully explored by Bataille, should not be identified with the loss of language that the closure of dialectics seemed to indicate. Rather, it follows from the actual penetration of philosophical experience in language and the discovery that the experience of the limit, and the manner in which philosophy must now understand it, is realized in language and in the movement where it says what cannot be said.

Perhaps this "difficulty with words" also defines the space given over to an experience in which the speaking subject, instead of expressing himself, is exposed, goes to encounter his finitude and, under each of his words, is brought back to the reality of his own death: that zone, in short, which transforms every work into the sort of "tauromachy" suggested by Leiris, who was thinking of his own action as a writer, but undoubtedly also of Bataille. In any event, it is on the white beach of an arena (a gigantic eye) where Bataille experienced the fact—crucial


38. See M. Leiris, Manhood, trans. Richard Howard (London: Jonathan Cape, 1968): "The bull’s keen horn ... gives the toreo’s art a human reality, prevents it from becoming no more than the vain grace of a ballerina."
for his thought and characteristic of all his language—that death *communicated with communication* and that the uprooted eye, a white and silent sphere, could become a violent seed in the night of the body, that it could give substance to this absence of which sexuality has never stopped speaking and from which it is made to speak incessantly. When the horn of the bull (a glittering knife that carries the threat of night, and an exact reversal of the image of light that emerges from the night of the eye) penetrates the eyeball of the toreador, who is blinded and killed, Simone performs an act we have come to expect: she swallows a pale and skinless seed and returns to its original night the luminous virility which has just committed murder. The eye is returned back to its night, the globe of the arena turns upwards and rotates; but it is the moment when being necessarily appears in its immediacy and where *the act which crosses the limit touches absence itself:* "Two globes of the same color and consistency were simultaneously activated in opposite directions. A bull’s white testicle had penetrated Simone's black and pink flesh; an eye had emerged from the head of the young man. This coincidence, linked until death to a sort of urinary liquefaction of the sky, gave me Marcelle for a moment. I seemed, in this ungraspable instant, to touch her."\(^{39}\)

We investigated the following areas:

— the practice of oaths in judicial disputes and its evolution from the oath-defiance of litigants who exposed themselves to the vengeance of the gods to the assertive oath of a witness who attests to the truth of an event in which he was involved or which he observed;

— the search for an equitable measure (not only in commercial exchanges but in the social relationships within a city) through the institution of money;

— the search for a "nomos," for a just law of distribution to guarantee order within the city, in establishing an order that is the order of the world;

— the purification rites after a murder.

Throughout this period, the distribution of justice served as an arena for important political struggles. These struggles ultimately created a form of justice linked to a form of knowledge which presupposes that truth is visible, ascertainable, and measurable, that it responds to laws similar to those which register the order of the world, and that to discover it is also to possess its value for purification. This type of affirmation of truth becomes fundamental in the history of Western knowledge.

The seminar during this past year set as its general framework the study of the penal system in France during the nineteenth century. It concerned itself with the early developments of prison psychiatry during the Restoration; a large part of its primary material derived from the medical and legal reports produced by the contemporaries and disciples of Esquirol.

(Papers were read by J.-P. Peter, R. Castel, and Fontana.)
never one of resemblance. Moreover, from the moment a theory moves into its proper domain, it begins to encounter obstacles, walls, and blockages which require its relay by another type of discourse (it is through this other discourse that it eventually passes to a different domain). Practice is a set of relays from one theoretical point to another, and theory is a relay from one practice to another. No theory can develop without eventually encountering a wall, and practice is necessary for piercing this wall. For example, your work began in the theoretical analysis of the context of confinement, specifically with respect to the psychiatric asylum within a capitalist society in the nineteenth century. Then you became aware of the necessity for confined individuals to speak for themselves, to create a relay (it's possible, on the contrary, that your function was already that of a relay in relation to them); and this group is found in prisons—these individuals are imprisoned. It was on this basis that you organized the information group for prisons (G.I.P.),

1. “Groupe d’information de prisons”: Foucault’s two most recent publications (I, Pierre Rivière and Surveiller et punir) result from this association.


action—theoretical action and practical action which serve as relays and form networks.

FOUCAULT: It seems to me that the political involvement of the intellectual was traditionally the product of two different aspects of his activity: his position as an intellectual in bourgeois society, in the system of capitalist production and within the ideology it produces or imposes (his exploitation, poverty, rejection, persecution, the accusations of subversive activity, immorality, etc); and his proper discourse to the extent that it revealed a particular truth, that it disclosed political relationships where they were unsuspected. These two forms of politicization did not exclude each other, but, being of a different order, neither did they coincide. Some were classed as “outcasts” and others as “socialists.” During moments of violent reaction on the part of the authorities, these two positions were readily fused: after 1848, after the Commune, after 1940. The intellectual was rejected and persecuted at the precise moment when the facts became incontrovertible, when it was forbidden to say that the emperor had no clothes. The intellectual spoke the truth to those who had yet to see it, in the name of those who were forbidden to speak the truth: he was conscience, consciousness, and eloquence.

In the most recent upheaval,³ the intellectual discovered that the masses no longer need him to gain knowledge: they know perfectly well, without illusion; they know far better than he and they are certainly capable of expressing themselves. But there exists a system of power which blocks, prohibits, and invalidates this discourse and this knowledge, a power not only found in the manifest authority of censorship, but one that profoundly and subtly penetrates an entire societal network. Intellectuals are themselves agents of this system of power—the idea of their responsibility for “consciousness” and discourse forms part of the system. The intellectual’s role is no longer to place himself “somewhat ahead and to the side” in order to express the stifled

3. May 1968, popularly known as the “events of May.”
truth of the collectivity; rather, it is to struggle against the forms of power that transform him into its object and instrument in the sphere of “knowledge,” “truth,” “consciousness,” and “discourse.”

In this sense theory does not express, translate, or serve to apply practice: it is practice. But it is local and regional, as you said, and not totalizing. This is a struggle against power, a struggle aimed at revealing and undermining power where it is most invisible and insidious. It is not to “awaken consciousness” that we struggle (the masses have been aware for some time that consciousness is a form of knowledge; and consciousness as the basis of subjectivity is a prerogative of the bourgeoisie), but to sap power, to take power; it is an activity conducted alongside those who struggle for power, and not their illumination from a safe distance. A “theory” is the regional system of this struggle.

DELEUZE: Precisely. A theory is exactly like a box of tools. It has nothing to do with the signifier. It must be useful. It must function. And not for itself. If no one uses it, beginning with the theoretician himself (who then ceases to be a theoretician), then the theory is worthless or the moment is inappropriate. We don’t revise a theory, but construct new ones; we have no choice but to make others. It is strange that it was Proust, an author thought to be a pure intellectual, who said it so clearly: treat my book as a pair of glasses directed to the outside; if they don’t suit you, find another pair; I leave it to you to find your own instrument, which is necessarily an instrument for combat. A theory does not totalize; it is an instrument for multiplication and it also multiplies itself. It is in the nature of power to totalize and it is your position, and one I fully agree with, that theory is by nature opposed to power. As soon as a theory is enmeshed in a particular point, we realize that it will never possess the slightest practical importance unless it can erupt in a totally different area. This is why the notion of reform is so stupid and hypocritical. Either reforms are designed by people who claim to be representative, who make a profession of speaking for others, and they lead to a division of power, to a distribution of this new power which is consequently increased by a double repression; or they arise from the complaints and demands of those concerned. This latter instance is no longer a reform but revolutionary action that questions (expressing the full force of its partiality) the totality of power and the hierarchy that maintains it. This is surely evident in prisons: the smallest and most insignificant of the prisoners’ demands can puncture Pleven’s pseudoreform. If the protests of children were heard in kindergarten, if their questions were attended to, it would be enough to explode the entire educational system. There is no denying that our social system is totally without tolerance; this accounts for its extreme fragility in all its aspects and also its need for a global form of repression. In my opinion, you were the first—in your books and in the practical sphere—to teach us something absolutely fundamental: the indignity of speaking for others. We ridiculed representation and said it was finished, but we failed to draw the consequences of this “theoretical” conversion—to appreciate the theoretical fact that only those directly concerned can speak in a practical way on their own behalf.

FOUCAULT: And when the prisoners began to speak, they possessed an individual theory of prisons, the penal system, and justice. It is this form of discourse which ultimately matters, a discourse against power, the counter-discourse of prisoners and those we call delinquents—and not a theory about delinquency.

The problem of prisons is local and marginal: not more than 100,000 people pass through prisons in a year. In France at present, between 300,000 and 400,000 have been to prison. Yet this marginal problem seems to disturb everyone. I was surprised that so many who had not been to prison could become interested in its problems, surprised that all those who had never heard the discourse of inmates could so easily understand them. How do we explain this? Isn’t it because, in a general way, the penal


5. René Pleven was the prime minister of France in the early 1950s.
system is the form in which power is most obviously seen as power? To place someone in prison, to confine him there, to deprive him of food and heat, to prevent him from leaving, from making love, etc.—this is certainly the most frenzied manifestation of power imaginable. The other day I was speaking to a woman who had been in prison and she was saying: “Imagine, that at the age of forty, I was punished one day with a meal of dry bread.” What is striking about this story is not the childishness of the exercise of power but the cynicism with which power is exercised as power, in the most archaic, puerile, infantile manner. As children we learn what it means to be reduced to bread and water. Prison is the only place where power is manifested in its naked state, in its most excessive form, and where it is justified as moral force. “I am within my rights to punish you because you know that it is criminal to rob and kill. . . .” What is fascinating about prisons is that, for once, power doesn’t hide or mask itself; it reveals itself as tyranny pursued into the tiniest details; it is cynical and at the same time pure and entirely “justified,” because its practice can be totally formulated within the framework of morality. Its brutal tyranny consequently appears as the serene domination of Good over Evil, of order over disorder.

DELEUZE: Yes, and the reverse is equally true. Not only are prisoners treated like children, but children are treated like prisoners. Children are submitted to an infantilization which is alien to them. On this basis, it is undeniable that schools resemble prisons and that factories are its closest approximation. Look at the entrance to a Renault plant, or anywhere else for that matter: three tickets to get into the washroom during the day. You found an eighteenth-century text by Jeremy Bentham proposing prison reforms; in the name of this exalted reform, he establishes a circular system where the renovated prison serves as a model and where the individual passes imperceptibly from school to the factory, from the factory to prison and vice versa. This is the essence of the reforming impulse, of reformed representation. On the contrary, when people begin to speak and act on their own behalf, they do not oppose their representation (even as its reversal) to another; they do not oppose a new representativity to the false representativity of power. For example, I remember your saying that there is no popular justice against justice; the reckoning takes place at another level.

FOUCAULT: I think that it is not simply the idea of better and more equitable forms of justice that underlies the people’s hatred of the judicial system, of judges, courts, and prisons, but—aside from this and before anything else—the singular perception that power is always exercised at the expense of the people. The antijudicial struggle is a struggle against power and I don’t think that it is a struggle against injustice, against the injustice of the judicial system, or a struggle for improving the efficiency of its institutions. It is particularly striking that in outbreaks of rioting and revolt or in seditious movements the judicial system has been as compelling a target as the financial structure, the army, and other forms of power. My hypothesis—but it is merely an hypothesis—is that popular courts, such as those found in the Revolution, were a means for the lower middle class, who were allied with the masses, to salvage and recapture the initiative in the struggle against the judicial system. To achieve this, they proposed a court system based on the possibility of equitable justice, where a judge might render a just verdict. The identifiable form of the court of law belongs to the bourgeois ideology of justice.

DELEUZE: On the basis of our actual situation, power emphatically develops a total or global vision. That is, all the current forms of repression (the racist repression of immigrant workers, repression in the factories, the educational system, and the general repression of youth) are easily totalized from the point of view of power. We should not only seek the unity of these forms in the reaction to May ’68, but more appropriately, in the concerted preparation and organization of the near future. French capitalism now relies on a “margin” of unemployment
and has abandoned the liberal and paternal mask that promised full employment. In this perspective, we begin to see the unity of the forms of repression: restrictions on immigration, once it is acknowledged that the most difficult and thankless jobs go to immigrant workers—repression in the factories, because the French must reacquire the “taste” for increasingly harder work; the struggle against youth and the repression of the educational system, because police repression is more active when there is less need for young people in the work force. A wide range of professionals (teachers, psychiatrists, educators of all kinds, etc.) will be called upon to exercise functions that have traditionally belonged to the police. This is something you predicted long ago, and it was thought impossible at the time: the reinforcement of all the structures of confinement. Against this global policy of power, we initiate localized counter-responses, skirmishes, active and occasionally preventive defenses. We have no need to totalize that which is invariably totalized on the side of power; if we were to move in this direction, it would mean restoring the representative forms of centralism and a hierarchical structure. We must set up lateral affiliations and an entire system of networks and popular bases; and this is especially difficult. In any case, we no longer define reality as a continuation of politics in the traditional sense of competition and the distribution of power, through the so-called representative agencies of the Communist Party or the General Workers Union. Reality is what actually happens in factories, in schools, in barracks, in prisons, in police stations. And this action carries a type of information which is altogether different from that found in newspapers (this explains the kind of information carried by the Agence de Press Libération).

FOUCAULT: Isn’t this difficulty of finding adequate forms of struggle a result of the fact that we continue to ignore the problem of power? After all, we had to wait until the nineteenth century before we began to understand the nature of exploitation, and to this day, we have yet to fully comprehend the nature of power. It may be that Marx and Freud cannot satisfy our desire for understanding this enigmatic thing which we call power, which is at once visible and invisible, present and hidden, ubiquitous. Theories of government and the traditional analyses of their mechanisms certainly don’t exhaust the field where power is exercised and where it functions. The question of power remains a total enigma. Who exercises power? And in what sphere? We now know with reasonable certainty who exploits others, who receives the profits, which people are involved, and we know how these funds are reinvested. But as for power . . . We know that it is not in the hands of those who govern. But, of course, the idea of the “ruling class” has never received an adequate formulation, and neither have other terms, such as “to dominate,” “to rule,” “to govern,” etc. These notions are far too fluid and require analysis. We should also investigate the limits imposed on the exercise of power—the relays through which it operates and the extent of its influence on the often insignificant aspects of the hierarchy and the forms of control, surveillance, prohibition, and constraint. Everywhere that power exists, it is being exercised. No one, strictly speaking, has an official right to power; and yet it is always exerted in a particular direction, with some people on one side and some on the other. It is often difficult to say who holds power in a precise sense, but it is easy to see who lacks power. If the reading of your books (from Nietzsche to what I anticipate in Capitalism and Schizophrenia) has been essential for me, it is because they seem to go very far in exploring this problem: under the ancient theme of meaning, of the signifier and the signified, etc., you have developed the question of power, of the inequality of powers and their strugg-

6. “Confédération Générale de Travailleurs.”
7. Liberation News Agency.

gles. Each struggle develops around a particular source of power (any of the countless, tiny sources—a small-time boss, the manager of “H.L.M.”, a prison warden, a judge, a union representative, the editor-in-chief of a newspaper). And if pointing out these sources—denouncing and speaking out—is to be a part of the struggle, it is not because they were previously unknown. Rather, it is because to speak on this subject, to force the institutionalized networks of information to listen, to produce names, to point the finger of accusation, to find targets, is the first step in the reversal of power and the initiation of new struggles against existing forms of power. If the discourse of inmates or prison doctors constitutes a form of struggle, it is because they confiscate, at least temporarily, the power to speak on prison conditions—at present, the exclusive property of prison administrators and their cronies in reform groups. The discourse of struggle is not opposed to the unconscious, but to the secretive. It may not seem like much; but what if it turned out to be more than we expected? A whole series of misunderstandings relates to things that are “hidden,” “repressed,” and “unsaid”; and they permit the cheap “psychoanalysis” of the proper objects of struggle. It is perhaps more difficult to unearth a secret than the unconscious. The two themes frequently encountered in the recent past, that “writing gives rise to repressed elements” and that “writing is necessarily a subversive activity,” seem to betray a number of operations that deserve to be severely denounced.

DELEUZE: With respect to the problem you posed: it is clear who exploits, who profits, and who governs, but power nevertheless remains something more diffuse. I would venture the following hypothesis: the thrust of Marxism was to define the problem essentially in terms of interests (power is held by a ruling class defined by its interests). The question immediately arises: how is it that people whose interests are not being served can strictly support the existing power structure by demanding a piece of the action? Perhaps, this is because in terms of investments, whether economic or unconscious, interest is not the final answer; there are investments of desire that function in a more profound and diffuse manner than our interests dictate. But of course, we never desire against our interests, because interest always follows and finds itself where desire has placed it. We cannot shut out the scream of Reich: the masses were not deceived; at a particular time, they actually wanted a fascist regime! There are investments of desire that mold and distribute power, that make it the property of the policeman as much as of the prime minister; in this context, there is no qualitative difference between the power wielded by the policeman and the prime minister. The nature of these investments of desire in a social group explains why political parties or unions, which might have or should have revolutionary investments in the name of class interests, are so often reform oriented or absolutely reactionary on the level of desire.

FOUCAULT: As you say, the relationship between desire, power, and interest are more complex than we ordinarily think, and it is not necessarily those who exercise power who have an interest in its execution; nor is it always possible for those with vested interests to exercise power. Moreover, the desire for power establishes a singular relationship between power and interest. It may happen that the masses, during fascist periods, desire that certain people assume power, people with whom they are unable to identify since these individuals exert power against the masses and at their expense, to the extreme of their death, their sacrifice, their massacre. Nevertheless, they desire this particular power; they want it to be exercised. This play of desire, power, and interest has received very little attention. It was a long time before we began to understand exploitation; and desire has had and continues to have a long history. It is possible that the struggles now taking place and the local, regional, and discontinuous theories that derive from these struggles and that are indissociable from them stand at the threshold of our discovery of the manner in which power is exercised.

DELEUZE: In this context, I must return to the question: the
present revolutionary movement has created multiple centers, and not as the result of weakness or insufficiency, since a certain kind of totalization pertains to power and the forces of reaction. (Vietnam, for instance, is an impressive example of localized counter-tactics). But how are we to define the networks, the transversal links between these active and discontinuous points, from one country to another or within a single country?

FOUCAULT: The question of geographical discontinuity which you raise might mean the following: as soon as we struggle against exploitation, the proletariat not only leads the struggle but also defines its targets, its methods, and the places and instruments for confrontation; and to ally oneself with the proletariat is to accept its positions, its ideology, and its motives for combat. This means total identification. But if the fight is directed against power, then all those on whom power is exercised to their detriment, all who find it intolerable, can begin the struggle on their own terrain and on the basis of their proper activity (or passivity). In engaging in a struggle that concerns their own interests, whose objectives they clearly understand and whose methods only they can determine, they enter into a revolutionary process. They naturally enter as allies of the proletariat, because power is exercised the way it is in order to maintain capitalist exploitation. They genuinely serve the cause of the proletariat by fighting in those places where they find themselves oppressed. Women, prisoners, conscripted soldiers, hospital patients, and homosexuals have now begun a specific struggle against the particularized power, the constraints and controls, that are exerted over them. Such struggles are actually involved in the revolutionary movement to the degree that they are radical, uncompromising and nonreformist, and refuse any attempt at arriving at a new disposition of the same power with, at best, a change of masters. And these movements are linked to the revolutionary movement of the proletariat to the extent that they fight against the controls and constraints which serve the same system of power.

In this sense, the overall picture presented by the struggle is certainly not that of the totalization you mentioned earlier, this theoretical totalization under the guise of “truth.” The generality of the struggle specifically derives from the system of power itself, from all the forms in which power is exercised and applied.

DELEUZE: And which we are unable to approach in any of its applications without revealing its diffuse character, so that we are necessarily led—on the basis of the most insignificant demand—to the desire to blow it up completely. Every revolutionary attack or defense, however partial, is linked in this way to the workers’ struggle.
Jean-Pierre: In most cases, our classes are not immediately experienced as repressive, even if they are.

Foucault: You’re right, of course, since the communication of knowledge is always positive. Yet, as the events of May showed convincingly, it functions as a double repression: in terms of those it excludes from the process and in terms of the model and the standard (the bars) it imposes on those receiving this knowledge.

Philippe: It’s your belief, then, that our educational system is not meant to convey real knowledge, that its main objective is to separate the good from the bad, and that it does this according to the standards of social conformity?

Foucault: Knowledge initially implies a certain political conformity in its presentation. In a history course, you are asked to learn certain things and to ignore others: thus, certain things form the content of knowledge and its norms. To give two examples: official knowledge has always represented political power as arising from conflicts within a social class (the dynastic disagreements within the aristocracy or parliamentary conflicts in the middle class) or, perhaps, as a conflict generated between the aristocracy and the middle class. Popular movements, on the other hand, are said to arise from famines, taxes, or unemployment; and they never appear as the result of a struggle for power, as if the masses could dream of a full stomach but never of exercising power. The history of this struggle for power and the manner in which power is exercised and maintained remain totally obscured. Knowledge keeps its distance: this should not be known! To take another example: the workers, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, carried out detailed investigations into their material conditions. This work served Marx for the bulk of his documentation; it led, in large part, to the political and trade-union practices of the proletariat throughout the nineteenth century; it maintains and develops itself through

1. A repetition of the theme of exclusion found in L’Ordre du discours, pp. 10–23.
continuing struggles. Yet this knowledge has never been allowed
to function within official knowledge. It is not specific processes
that have been excluded from knowledge, but a certain kind of
knowledge. And if we become aware of it today, it is in a
secondary sense: through the study of Marx and those elements
in his texts that are most easily assimilated into official knowledge.

JEAN-FRANÇOIS: For the sake of argument, Alain, would you
say that most students in your school are from working class
families?

ALAIN: A little under fifty percent.

JEAN-FRANÇOIS: Were trade unions discussed in your history
courses?

ALAIN: Not in those I attended.

SERGE: Nor in mine. Look at the way our studies are organized:
only past history is discussed in the lower grades. You’re sixteen
or seventeen before you arrive at modern ideas or movements—
the only ones that can be slightly subversive. Yet even in the
third year of a lycée, teachers of French absolutely refuse to
discuss contemporary authors; and of course, there is never a
word about the actual problems of life. When we do touch on
them in the last two years, it’s probably too late, given the con-
ditioning of our past education.

FOUCAULT: As a way of approaching texts—as a matter of
choice and exclusion—this presentation affects everything that
is said and done in the present. The system is telling you in
effect: “If you wish to understand and perceive events in the
present, you can only do so through the past, through an under-
standing—carefully derived from the past—which was specifically
developed to clarify the present.” We have employed a wide
range of categories—truth, man, culture, writing, etc.—to dispel
the shock of daily occurrences, to dissolve the event. The obvious
intention of those famous historical continuities is to explain; the
eternal “return” to Freud, Marx, and others is obviously to lay a
foundation. But both function to exclude the radical break in-
troduced by events. In the broadest sense, both the nature of

2. Ibid., p. 59.

events and the fact of power are invariably excluded from knowl-
edge as presently constituted in our culture. This is to be ex-
pected since the power of a certain class (which determines this
knowledge) must appear inaccessible to events; and the event, in
its dangerous aspect, must be dominated and dissolved in the
continuity of power maintained by this class, by a class power
which is never defined. On the other hand, the proletariat de-
velops a form of knowledge which concerns the struggle for
power, the manner in which they can give rise to an event, re-
spond to its urgency, avoid it, etc.; this is a knowledge absolutely
alien to the first kind because of its preoccupation with power
and events. For this reason, we should not be fooled by the
modernized educational program, its openness to the real world:
it continues to maintain its traditional grounding in “humanism”
while emphasizing the quick and efficient mastery of a certain
number of techniques, which were neglected in the past. Hu-
manism reinforces social organization and these techniques allow
society to progress, but along its own lines.

JEAN-FRANÇOIS: What criticism do you direct against human-
ism; and what values, in another system for transmitting knowl-
edge, can replace it?

FOUCAULT: By humanism I mean the totality of discourse
through which Western man is told: “Even though you don’t
exercise power, you can still be a ruler. Better yet, the more you
deny yourself the exercise of power, the more you submit to
those in power, then the more this increases your sovereignty.”
Humanism invented a whole series of subjected sovereignties:
the soul (ruling the body, but subjected to God), consciousness
(sovereign in a context of judgment, but subjected to the neces-
sities of truth), the individual (a titular control of personal rights
subjected to the laws of nature and society), basic freedom
(sovereign within, but accepting the demands of an outside
world and “aligned with destiny”). In short, humanism is every-
thing in Western civilization that restricts the desire for power:
it prohibits the desire for power and excludes the possibility
of power being seized. The theory of the subject (in the double sense of the word) is at the heart of humanism and this is why our culture has tenaciously rejected anything that could weaken its hold upon us. But it can be attacked in two ways: either by a “desubjectification” of the will to power (that is, through political struggle in the context of class warfare) or by the destruction of the subject as a pseudosovereign (that is, through an attack on “culture”: the suppression of taboos and the limitations and divisions imposed upon the sexes; the setting up of communes; the loosening of inhibitions with regard to drugs; the breaking of all the prohibitions that form and guide the development of a normal individual). I am referring to all those experiences which have been rejected by our civilization or which it accepts only within literature.3

JEAN-FRANÇOIS: Since the Renaissance?

FOUCAULT: From the beginning of Roman law—the armature of our civilization that exists as a definition of individuality as subjected sovereignty. The system of private property implies this conception: the proprietor is fully in control of his goods; he can use or abuse them, but he must nevertheless submit to the laws that support his claim to property. The Roman system structured the government and established the basis of property. It controlled the will to power by fixing the “sovereign right of property” as the exclusive possession of those in power. Through this elegant exchange, humanism was institutionalized.

JEAN-PIERRE: Society forms an organized whole. It is repressive by nature because it seeks to reproduce itself and perpetuate its existence. How is struggle possible: are we dealing with a global and indissociable organism which responds to a general law of conservation and evolution, or is it a more differentiated entity where one class tries to maintain its interest against another, where one class profits by maintaining order and another is set on its destruction? The answer is far from obvious: I don’t subscribe to the first hypothesis, but the second seems too simplistic. There is, in fact, interdependence within the social organism which perpetuates itself.

FOUCAULT: The movement of May suggests an initial response: the individuals who were subjected to the educational system, to the most constraining forms of conservatism and repetition, fought a revolutionary battle. In this sense, the intellectual crisis created by the events of May goes very deep. Society has been placed in an extremely perplexing and embarrassing position from which it has yet to extricate itself.

JEAN-PIERRE: But teaching is far from being the only instrument of humanism, the only tool for social repression—there are more essential mechanisms that operate before we enter school or outside of school.

FOUCAULT: It has always been a problem for someone like me, someone who has been teaching for a long time, to decide if I should act outside or inside the university. Should we decide that the question was settled in May, that the university has broken down, and that we can now move on to other concerns? (This is plainly the direction of some of the groups with whom I am working in the struggle against repression, in the penal system, in psychiatric hospitals, and in the police or judicial systems.) Or is this merely a way of evading a fact that continues to embarrass me: namely, that the university structure remains intact and that we must continue to fight in this arena?

JEAN-FRANÇOIS: Personally, I don’t believe that the university was actually demolished. I think that the Maoists were wrong to dismiss the university—which might have served as a solid base—to cultivate the factory where their task was especially difficult and their position relatively artificial. The university was in the process of cracking: we should have widened the fissure; we should have created an irreparable rupture in the system that transmits knowledge. The school and the university remain

decisive. Life doesn't end at the age of five, even if one does have an alcoholic father and a mother who does her ironing in the bedroom.

Jean-Pierre: The revolt in the universities immediately confronted a problem—always the same one: the revolutionaries, or those who had nothing practical to gain from their education, were blocked by the students who wanted to work and to learn a trade. What were we to do? Search for new methods? New content?

Jean-François: In the last analysis, this would only improve the present structure and train more students for the system.

Philippe: That isn't so. We can learn different things and be exposed, in a different way, to a different knowledge without falling back into the system. If the university is abandoned after it's been shaken a bit, it will continue to function and to reproduce itself through inertia—unless we can propose concrete alternatives and gain the support of its victims.

Foucault: The university stands for the institutional apparatus through which society ensures its uneventful reproduction, at the least cost to itself. The disorder within institutions of higher learning, their imminent demise (whether real or apparent), does not extend to the society's will for conservation, identity, and repetition. You are asking what can be done to disrupt the system's cycle of social reproduction; and it isn't enough to suppress or overturn the university. Other forms of repression must also be attacked.

Jean-Pierre: Unlike Philippe, I don't hold with this idea of a "different" education. What would interest me, on the other hand, would be the reversal of the university's functions under revolutionary pressure: undoing earlier conditioning and destroying established values and knowledge. An increasing number of teachers are prepared to attempt this.

Frédéric: Experiences of this sort carried to their logical conclusion are very rare. Only Sénèque comes to mind, a professor of philosophy at Bergson in 1969: he was actually able to demolish the status of the teacher and of knowledge in general. Of course, he was quickly isolated and excluded. Academic institutions still possess active mechanisms to defend themselves. They are still capable of integrating a great many things and of eliminating those foreign objects they cannot assimilate.

You speak as if French universities, before May 1968, were adapted to our industrial society. In my opinion, they were not particularly profitable or functional, but especially archaic. The events of May effectively fractured the old institutional framework of higher education. But did the ruling class suffer? It reconstructed the system and it is now far more functional. It preserved the best schools, those whose primary function was the selection of technocrats. It created a center like Dauphine, the first American-style business school in France. And finally, for the last three years, official opposition has been confined to Vincennes and to certain departments at Nanterre—university pockets that are irrelevant to the system, nets in which the small fish of the left have been trapped. The university eliminates its archaic structure and it effectively adapts itself to the needs of neocapitalism; it is now that we should return to the field of struggle.

Foucault: I'm afraid I was referring to the "death of the university" in the most superficial way. The events of May effectively ended the form of higher education that began in the nineteenth century—the curious set of institutions that transformed a small proportion of the young into a social elite. This nevertheless leaves the full range of hidden mechanisms through which a society conveys its knowledge and ensures its survival under the mask of knowledge: newspapers, television, technical schools, and the lycée (even more than the university).

Serge: Repression in the lycée continues unchecked. The educational system is sick, but only a minority are aware of this and dare to oppose it.

Alain: And the politicized minority of two or three years ago has disappeared from our school.
Jean-François: Does the fact of long hair continue to mean something?

Alain: Not anymore. Fashionable students now let their hair grow.

Jean-François: And drugs?

Serge: Drug use has no meaning in itself. It largely means that a student has abandoned the idea of a career. The politicized students continue their studies; those who take drugs leave school altogether.

Foucault: The campaign against drugs is a pretext for the reinforcement of social repression; not only through police raids, but also through the indirect exaltation of the normal, rational, conscientious, and well-adjusted individual. This prominent image can be found at every level. Read today's headlines in "France-Soir": fifty-three percent of the French population favors the death penalty, while only thirty-eight percent were supporting it a month ago.

Jean-François: Does this stem from the revolt at Clairvaux prison?

Foucault: Evidently. We emphasize the fear of criminals: we brandish the threat of the monstrous so as to reinforce the ideology of good and evil, of the things that are permitted and prohibited—precisely those notions which teachers are now somewhat embarrassed to communicate. What the professor of philosophy no longer dares to say in his convoluted language, the journalist can now say in the most direct fashion. You might think that this has always been the case, that journalists and professors always existed to say the same things. But journalists are now expected, if not forced, to say these things in a loud and persistent voice, and at precisely the moment when professors no longer can. There is an interesting story in this: because of Clairvaux, a week of revenge was inflicted on the prisons. Inmates were indiscriminately beaten by the guards, especially at Fleury-Mérogis, the prison for juveniles. The mother of an inmate came to see us, and I went with her to R.T.L.4 to find coverage for her report. A journalist agreed to see us and said: “You know, I'm not surprised by this; the guards are nearly as degenerate as the prisoners.” A professor who spoke this way in a lycée would create a small riot and would have his ears boxed.

Philippe: That’s true; a teacher would never speak this way. Is it that he no longer can or that he would say it differently, in keeping with his role? In your opinion, how can we fight this ideology and its mechanisms of repression, apart from petitions and other actions of reform?

Foucault: Local actions which are well-timed can be quite effective. Consider the actions of the G.I.P. (Information Group on Prisons) during the past year. The ultimate goal of its interventions was not to extend the visiting rights of prisoners to thirty minutes or to procure flush toilets for the cells, but to question the social and moral distinction between the innocent and the guilty. And if this goal was to be more than a philosophical statement or a humanist desire, it had to be pursued at the level of gestures, practical actions, and in relation to specific situations. Confronted by this penal system, the humanist would say: “The guilty are guilty and the innocent are innocent. Nevertheless, the convict is a man like any other and society must respect what is human in him: consequently, flush toilets!” Our action, on the contrary, isn’t concerned with the soul or the man behind the convict, but it seeks to obliterate the deep division that lies between innocence and guilt. This was Genet’s emphasis with relation to the judge at the Soledad trial or the plane hijacked by the Palestinians in Jordan; the newspapers decried the fate of the judge and the poor tourists being held in the middle of the desert for no apparent reason. Genet, for his part, was saying: “But is the judge innocent and what of an American lady who can afford to be a tourist in this way?”

Philippe: Does this mean that your primary objective is to

4. Radio Luxembourg.
raise consciousness and that you can neglect, for the moment, the struggle against political and economic institutions?

FOUCAULT: You have badly misunderstood me. If it were a question of raising consciousness, we could simply publish newspapers and books, or attempt to win over a radio or television producer. We wish to attack an institution at the point where it culminates and reveals itself in a simple and basic ideology, in the notions of good and evil, innocence and guilt. We wish to change this ideology which is experienced through those dense institutional layers where it has been invested, crystallized, and reproduced. More simply, humanism is based on the desire to change the ideological system without altering institutions; and reformers wish to change the institution without touching the ideological system. Revolutionary action, on the contrary, is defined as the simultaneous agitation of consciousness and institutions; this implies that we attack the relationships of power through the notions and institutions that function as their instruments, armature, and armor. Do you think that the teaching of philosophy—and its moral code—would remain unchanged if the penal system collapsed?

JEAN-PIERRE: We can also reverse the question. Could we imprison people in the present way if we changed the educational system? Most of all, we should not restrict our actions to a single sector where the movement bogs down in individual reforms. We should move from the educational system to the prisons, from the prisons to the asylum. Isn’t this your basic intention?

FOUCAULT: We have already started interventions in the asylum, using methods similar to those employed in the prisons: a kind of aggressive enquiry formulated, at least in part, by those who are being investigated. The repressive role of the asylum is well known: people are locked up and subjected to treatment—chemical or psychological—over which they have no control; or they are subjected to the nontreatment of a straitjacket. But the influence of psychiatry extends beyond this to the activity of social workers, professional guidance counsellors, school psychologists, and doctors who dispense psychiatric advice to their patients—all the psychiatric components of everyday life which form something like a third order of repression and policing. This infiltration is spreading throughout society, and this is not counting those psychiatrists who publish advice in the newspapers. The psychopathology of everyday life may reveal the unconscious facets of desire; the “psychiatrization” of everyday life, if it were closely examined, might reveal the invisible hand of power.

JEAN-FRANÇOIS: On what level do you plan to act? Can you address yourself to social workers?

FOUCAULT: No. We would like to work with students in the lycée, those whose education has been supervised, anyone who has been subjected to psychological or psychiatric repression in their choice of studies, in their relationships to their family, in their response to sexuality or drugs. We wish to know how they were divided, distributed, selected, and excluded in the name of psychiatry and of the normal individual, that is, in the name of humanism.

JEAN-FRANÇOIS: Aren’t you interested in antipsychiatry, in working with psychiatrists in the asylum?

FOUCAULT: This is a task for psychiatrists, since entry into an asylum is restricted. We should, nevertheless, be careful that this movement directed against psychiatry, which opposes the idea of the asylum, does not ultimately serve to introduce psychiatry into the outside world by multiplying its interventions upon daily life.

FRÉDÉRIC: The situation in prisons is apparently worse, because the only relationships they sanction center on the conflict between the victims and the agents of repression: no “progressive” brutes will enlist in the movement. In the asylum, on the other hand, the struggle is being led by psychiatrists and not the victims: the agents of repression are fighting repression. Is this really an advantage?

FOUCAULT: I’m not sure. Unlike prison revolts, it is only with
great difficulty that a patient’s rejection of the psychiatric hospital can become a collective and political action. The problem is to know whether patients subjected to the segregation of the asylum can stand against the institution and finally denounce the very division that designates and excludes them as mentally ill. Basaglia, the psychiatrist, attempted some experiments of this kind in Italy: he brought together the patients, the doctors, and the hospital personnel, but not to stage a sociodrama where each could expose his fantasies and re-enact the primal scene. Rather, he posed this question: could the victims of the asylum initiate a political struggle against the social structure that designates them as mad? These experiments were savagely prohibited.

Frédéric: The distinction between the normal and the pathological is even stronger than that between innocence and guilt.

Foucault: They reinforce each other. When a judgment cannot be framed in terms of good and evil, it is stated in terms of normal and abnormal. And when it is necessary to justify this last distinction, it is done in terms of what is good or bad for the individual. These are expressions that signal the fundamental duality of Western consciousness.

In more general terms, this also means that we can’t defeat the system through isolated actions; we must engage it on all fronts—the university, the prisons, and the domain of psychiatry—one after another since our forces are not strong enough for a simultaneous attack. We strike and knock against the most solid obstacles; the system cracks at another point; we persist. It seems that we’re winning, but then the institution is rebuilt; we must start again. It is a long struggle; it is repetitive and seemingly incoherent. But the system it opposes, as well as the power exercised through the system, supplies its unity.

Alain: This is a tiresome question, but it must be faced eventually: what replaces the system?

Foucault: I think that to imagine another system is to extend our participation in the present system. This is perhaps what happened in the history of the Soviet Union: apparently, new institutions were in fact based on elements taken from an earlier system—the Red Army reconstituted on the model of the Czarist army, the return to realism in art, and the emphasis on traditional family morality. The Soviet Union returned to the standards of bourgeois society in the nineteenth century, and perhaps, more as a result of Utopian tendencies than a concern for realities.

Frédéric: I don’t accept that. Marxism defined itself as scientific socialism as opposed to Utopian socialism. It refused to declare itself on the possible forms of future society. Soviet society was besieged by concrete problems, by the problems generated by the civil war. The war must be won and the factories must operate: consequently, its recourse to the only available and immediately effective models—the military hierarchy and the Taylor system. If the Soviet Union has progressively assimilated the standards of bourgeois society, it is probably because they were the only ones available. It is not utopianism, but its absence, that is in question. Utopianism might have a key role to play.

Jean-François: The present movement may require a utopian model and a theoretical elaboration that goes beyond the sphere of partial and repressed experiences.

Foucault: Why not the opposite? Reject theory and all forms of general discourse. This need for theory is still part of the system we reject.

Jean-François: You feel that the simple fact of employing a theory still relates to the dynamic of bourgeois knowledge?

Foucault: Maybe so. I would rather oppose actual experiences than the possibility of a utopia. It is possible that the rough outline of a future society is supplied by the recent experiences with drugs, sex, communes, other forms of consciousness, and other forms of individuality. If scientific socialism emerged from the Utopias of the nineteenth century, it is possible that a real socialization will emerge, in the twentieth century, from experiences.

5. Frederick W. Taylor, The Principles of Scientific Management (1911). Lenin, in a speech in 1919, advised the adoption of Taylor’s time and study techniques.
JEAN-FRANÇOIS: The events of May were, of course, the experience of a certain power. But this experience essentially implied utopian discourse: May was a discourse occupying a space.

PHILIPPE: A discourse that was inadequate. The older ideas of the Left had only a marginal relationship to the aspirations liberated in May. The movement could have gone much further if it had been supported by an adequate theory, a thought capable of providing it with new perspectives.

FOUCAULT: I'm not convinced of this. But Jean-François has reason to speak of the experience of power. It is of the utmost importance that thousands of people exercised a power which did not assume the form of a hierarchical organization. Unfortunately, since power is by definition that which the ruling class abandons least readily and recaptures on the first occasion, it was impossible to maintain the experience for longer than a few weeks.

PHILIPPE: If I understand you correctly, you think that it’s also useless or premature to create parallel circuits like the free universities in the United States that duplicate the institutions being attacked.

FOUCAULT: If you wish to replace an official institution by another institution that fulfills the same function—better and differently—then you are already being reabsorbed by the dominant structure.

JEAN-FRANÇOIS: I can’t believe that the movement must remain at its present state, as this vague, unsubstantial, underground ideology that refuses to endorse any form of social work or community service, any action that requires going beyond the immediate group. It’s unable to assume the responsibility for the whole of society, or it may be that it’s incapable of conceiving of society as a whole.

FOUCAULT: You wonder if a global society could function without a general discourse on the basis of such divergent and dispersed experiences. I believe, on the contrary, that this particular idea of the “whole of society” derives from a utopian context.

This idea arose in the Western world, within this highly individualized historical development that culminates in capitalism. To speak of the “whole of society” apart from the only form it has ever taken is to transform our past into a dream. We readily believe that the least we can expect of experiences, actions, and strategies is that they take into account the “whole of society.” This seems absolutely essential for their existence. But I believe that this is asking a great deal, that it means imposing impossible conditions on our actions because this notion functions in a manner that prohibits the actualization, success, and perpetuation of these projects. “The whole of society” is precisely that which should not be considered except as something to be destroyed. And then, we can only hope that it will never exist again.

FRÉDÉRIC: The social forms of Western culture were universalized as a “social whole” that is embodied by the state, and not necessarily because it stood as the best model, but because it has material power and superior efficiency. Our problem is that all successful revolts against the system succeeded by reinforcing similar kinds of organization—under partisan or state control—forms which exactly correspond to the dominant structure and which pose the essential question of power. This includes Leninism, but also the Maoist revolt: a popular organization and army against a bourgeois organization and army, dictatorship and the proletarian state. These instruments, initially conceived for taking power, must disappear after the transition stage. Of course, this is never the case as shown by the Bolshevik experience; and the cultural revolution in China was unable fully to eliminate them. As a condition for victory, they maintain their own dynamic which is quickly directed against the spontaneities they helped to liberate. Plainly a contradiction, and it may be the fundamental contradiction of revolutionary action.

FOUCAULT: What strikes me in your argument is that it takes the form of “until now.” However, a revolutionary undertaking is directed not only against the present but against the rule of “until now.”