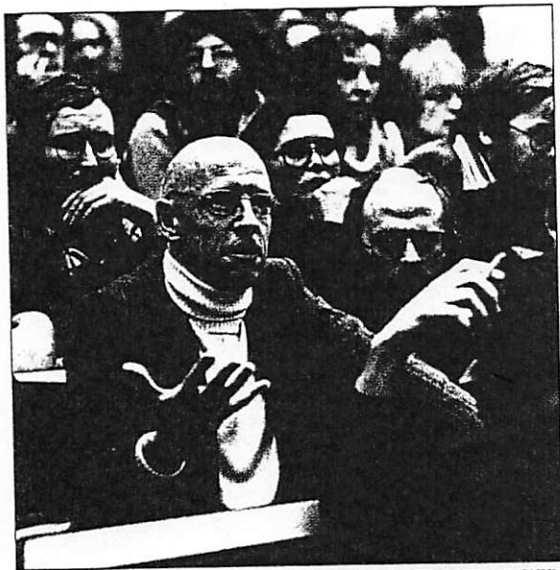


A Philosopher's Death Wish

The Passion of Michel Foucault.
By James Miller. 491 pages.
Simon & Schuster. \$27.50.

In 1983, Michel Foucault was immersed in the life of Saint Anthony, the early Christian desert hermit whose regimen of rigorous self-denial had so moved the youthful Augustine that he gave up his lusting ways and converted to Christianity. At the same time, Foucault, perhaps the most influential thinker of his era, was also luxuriating in the leather scene of San Francisco. Paradoxical? No, postmodernist. Through drugs and sadomasochistic eroticism, Foucault was concluding his Nietzschean quest for self-transcendence



RAYMOND DEPARDON—MAGNUM

A reckless will to power: Foucault in 1978

in a form that mimicked the saint's equally tortured discipline of the flesh. Hence the religious connotation of Miller's title. A year later Foucault died of AIDS at the age of 57. The moral question that drives Miller's bold and brilliant reconstruction of Foucault's life and thought is this: did the philosopher deliberately risk his life—and others—in a terminal demonstration of his own insatiable "will to power"?

Foucault's untimely death shocked his fellow Parisians. In France, and among many American academics, he was widely regarded as the most dazzling mind of his generation. Like Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida and other celebrated thinkers, Foucault exploded the pretensions of Enlightenment humanism and rationality. But where others deconstructed the printed page, Foucault, with seemingly

cool detachment, dissected institutions—hospitals, prisons and sanitariums—arguing that it is society, not individuals, that is sick, mad and guilty. Like other French critics, he insisted that the individual, himself included, had been erased by post-Enlightenment culture. But unlike his intellectual peers, Foucault regarded his philosophic probes into the destructive use of power, moral surveillance and sexual codes as necessary steps in the release of his own body and its Dionysian desires. Not the least of Miller's many important insights is that Foucault's display of impersonal erudition was a pose. As Foucault himself once asserted in a typical gnomic utterance, one writes to "get free of oneself."

Mystical aura: Free of what? As we learn from Miller's doggedly American insistence on interpreting the philosopher's writing in light of his private life, Foucault hated his authoritarian father and resented the Roman Catholic school he was sent to as a youth. Several times as a university student in Paris he attempted suicide. As Miller, director of Liberal Studies at New York's New School for Social Research, notes, a preoccupation with death as the door to true selfhood hovers like a mystical aura around all Foucault's philosophical investigations. In middle age, he privately determined to invent—by hazzarding what he called "limit experiences"—a passionate affirmation of his own embodied "truth" as a homosexual. "To die for the love of boys," he once told a friend. "What could be more beautiful?"

Through sex, Foucault had longed to achieve an epiphany of will, beyond the dichotomies of reason and madness, good and evil, body and mind. His gateway experience was an acid trip during a 1975 overnight excursion to California's Death Valley. There followed the clandestine rounds of the gay baths. In a literally painstaking hermeneutics of S&M techniques, Miller explains how Foucault's fatal flirtation with death during bouts of alternating pain and pleasure offered him the ecstatic experience that had become his Nietzschean holy grail. Miller's argument is persuasive: Foucault scripted his own death as the philosophical conclusion to a life of intellectual and moral risk. That he ignored the risk of infecting others to achieve his own ends calls for stringent re-evaluation of his entire philosophical project. But the French, still loath to admit that their intellectual idol died of AIDS, will probably find this bio-degrading biography difficult to accept.

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