



HAL
open science

The Mystical Quality of Foucault's Confessions of the Flesh: An inquiry from within

Loriane Lafont

► **To cite this version:**

Loriane Lafont. The Mystical Quality of Foucault's Confessions of the Flesh: An inquiry from within. Journal of Religion, In press. <hal-04497768>

HAL Id: hal-04497768

<https://hal.science/hal-04497768v1>

Submitted on 10 Mar 2024

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



HAL Authorization

The Mystical Quality of Foucault’s *Confessions of the Flesh*: An inquiry from within

Loriane Lafont-Grave
(UChicago-École Pratique des Hautes Études/LEM-umr8584)

Abstract

This essay offers an investigation of Foucault’s *Confessions of the Flesh*—published in 2018, thirty-four years after the death of the author—through a literary approach. It argues that “The Laborious Baptism”, the second section of the first chapter of the book, “The formation of a new experience”, has an immersive quality of writing that signals a way of writing “from within” to take up an expression coined by Emerson. By putting Foucault in conversation with James Bernauer, Willemien Otten, Philippe Büttgen and Pierre Macherey, among others, this essay aims at showing that Foucault’s *Confessions of the Flesh* may best be seen, in a final analysis, as a *confessio fidei* in the flesh. It owns, at some point, a mystical quality so that the book truly offers a peculiar experience to its readership. In the first part of the article, we make some meta-literary comments about the potential pitfalls of dealing with a posthumous book, helped by T.S Eliot and Nietzsche. In the second part, we delve into “The Laborious Baptism” by making a close reading of it. In concluding remarks, we reflect upon how *Confessions of the Flesh* may display a form of Christian parrhesia under the sign of risk-taking in keeping with Foucault’s *ultima verba* as a professor in his very last lecture at the Collège de France.

“Mystique,” as a noun, occurs a few times in *Confessions of the Flesh* in relationship to virginity: the phrase “the virginity mystique”¹ may be located seven times in the second part (“Being Virgin”) of *Confessions of the Flesh*.² Yet let us say straight away that this frozen syntagm did not draw our attention as much as other passages of the book where the noun is not present. Per definition the mystique hides itself, as Foucault himself recognized by saying that: “In mysticism the soul sees itself. It sees itself in God and it sees God in itself. To that extent mysticism fundamentally, essentially escapes examination.”³ From that standpoint, the

A version of this essay was given as a communication within the panel “From Mystique to Politique: Scholarship, Mysticism and Politics in the 20th c.” at the 2023 MLA Conference, San Francisco (5th–8th January 2023). May Willemien Otten, Philippe Büttgen, and Niki Kasumi Clements be assured of my gratitude for their careful remarks and suggestions.

¹ In the French original, “*La mystique de la Virginité*”. Foucault, *Les aveux de la chair* (Paris: Gallimard, 2018).

² *Confessions of the Flesh*, Vintage Books edition, translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, Penguin, 2022). See 117 (though the translator has translated the French “mystique chrétienne de la virginité” as “Christian doctrine of virginity”, 150, 153, 154 (twice), 155 and 188.

³ Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population, Lectures at the Collège de France (1977–78)*, edited by Senellart, Ewald, Fontana (English Series editor: Arnold I. Davidson), translated by Graham Burchell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 212.

presence within the text of the very word is not necessarily a sign of the presence of “mysticism” within the work itself.

In what way then am I invoking this category? Needless to say, it should be used with caution. Foucault is notoriously no Hildegard von Bingen or Meister Eckhart, although, as Daniel J. Schultz puts it, he certainly has “an alternative way of reading religion.”⁴ This alternative way is perceptible right from the very title of the book, *Confessions of the Flesh*, which seems to call for an inquiry into such mystical territory precisely since confessions or avowals require a certain quality of silence to be formulated or to be heard.⁵ The assumption of this essay is that the title of the book is not simply an objective indication about the book’s content but provides us also with an interesting cue about what may be at stake within its pages. Indeed, in a seminal article entitled “Foucault’s Concept of Confession,” Philippe Büttgen makes unambiguously clear that the notion of confession within *Confessions of the Flesh* is not a homogeneous one, meaning that we are unable to derive the unity of the book from it.⁶ If the flesh ceases to confess at some point in *Confessions of the Flesh*, one could venture to ask what the book is about. What constitutes its “unity”⁷ or its “singularity” if we adopt a more literary approach? These are unsettling questions that are worth posing with regard to a book that offers the reader a particular *experience*, a very foucauldian concept.⁸

But what kind of experience does it offer? It is not the will to be anonymized as in the opening of the *Order of the Discourse*, it is not a sharp and burning revolt against confession as in *The Will of Knowledge*, and it is also not an incursion into the grey and frightening territory of madness: it’s *something else* altogether. But it shares a key element with Foucault’s precedent works: it is philosophy, but a philosophy tinged with the influence of history, of course, but also literature which has been a *leitmotiv* interest in the work of Foucault.⁹ It appears

⁴ Daniel J. Schultz, “Elephants, Dreams, and Sex: Reading Religion in Foucault’s Ethics,” *The Journal of Religion* 99, no. 2 (2019): 173–93.

⁵ As Philippe Büttgen puts it: “The translator of *Les aveux de la chair* is confronted with a number of challenges, the most puzzling of which lies in the very notion of ‘aveu’. [...] The distinction between the notions of ‘avowal,’ ‘admission’ and ‘confession’ in English is not exactly parallel to the French, the English ‘confession’ being much more widely used than ‘avowal,’” in: “Foucault’s Concept of Confession,” *Foucault Studies* no. 29, (April 2021) 6–21, 6.

⁶ Büttgen, “Foucault’s Concept of Confession,” 11.

⁷ Yet as a philosopher of religion, Büttgen affirms in the same article that “Foucault’s book indeed has a unity [...]” even though he stops short of defining what it actually is that gives unity to the posthumous work of Foucault. Büttgen makes the above remark only in passing since his article deals primarily with the evolution of the notion of confession throughout Foucault’s work, especially insofar as it relates to philosophy of language.

⁸ For an in-depth analysis of the notion of experience in Foucault’s philosophy, see Luca Paltrinieri, *L’expérience du concept Michel Foucault entre épistémologie et histoire* (Paris: Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2012).

⁹ On can think, among many others, of his text *La pensée du dehors* translated by “Maurice Blanchot: the Thought from Outside” in *Foucault/Blanchot* (New York: Zone Books, 1987), pp.. On this theme, Mark D. Jordan notes in *Convulsing Bodies: Religion & Resistance in Foucault* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), that Foucault: “[...] explores the border supposed to divide literature from philosophy.” “Hunter of the Sacred,” 14. Mark D.

Confessions of the Flesh resonates not only as a philosophical book but as an attempt to encounter in personal fashion a corpus of texts that is usually reserved for a specific public.¹⁰ From this transgression, that is, the democratization of material that is usually considered esoteric, the book partly derives its subversive power. Moreover, the way it deals with early Christianity is also not neutral, which further explains the feeling of peculiarity and strangeness one is left with after having finished the book—even when going back to it.

In keeping with the hybrid nature of *Confessions of the Flesh* as a philosophical commentary—close to *exegesis* as we will see—that bears the mark of what it has encountered, this essay consists of a thought experiment to read the book tentatively through a literary lens, that is, to give the greatest attention to its precise wording. I argue that the book confesses an attraction towards Christianity tinged with a “from within” quality—to borrow a phrase coined by Emerson in his essay *The over-soul*—agreeing thereby with James Bernauer’s claim that Foucault practiced in the last stage a Christian form of parrhesia.¹¹ At first, I shall make a series of meta-textual observations about the text and the way in which critique usually deals with it in order to apprehend it afresh. From there, I shall examine in which way *Confessions of the Flesh* can be said to be *on the verge* of “mysticism,” which is most visible in the chapter on “The Laborious Baptism” focused on Tertullian’s vision of baptism and conversion. If it is the case that the book does not have a *unity*, it might yet have centers, one of them close to what has been called from quite an early time, “mysticism.”¹² In my concluding remarks, I shall reflect upon the nature of the silence that has rendered *Confessions of the Flesh* possible, trying thereby to address the problem of unity by means of the hypothesis that the book may ultimately

Jordan recalls that Foucault had a special bond with Blanchot, Klossowski, and Bataille. “His relationship to the three is ambivalent in the way a creative debt must be. Through them lies what Foucault accounts a greater debt, to Nietzsche,” in: Mark D. Jordan, *Convulsing Bodies: Religion & Resistance in Foucault*, 14.

¹⁰ In a recent article, James Bernauer recalls his memories of Foucault starting to mention Cassien at the Collège de France: “The third memory is from his 1980 lectures at the Collège de France, *Du Gouvernement des vivants* (*On the government of the living*), which I attended and where at one point he introduced the writings of the fourth-century monk John Cassian: the lecture hall soon filled with bewilderment and the murmur of a common question, ‘Cassian, qui est-ce?’ ‘Qui est-ce?’ ‘Cassian, who is that?’” James Bernauer, “Fascinating Flesh: Revealing the Catholic Foucault”, *Foucault Studies* no. 29 (April 2021): 38-47: 39.

¹¹ Bernauer writes that “Foucault’s own intellectual practice at this final stage is closer to the specific style of early Christianity of the self than it is to the pagan. The ambition of his practice was not to strengthen the soul or confirm it in its truth but rather to renounce it, to transgress its borders, to reinvent one’s relationship to it.” James Bernauer, “Cry of Spirit” in *Religion and Culture Michel Foucault*, ed. Jeremy Carrette (Routledge: New York, 1999), XIV. See also *infra* footnote 85.

¹² According to Bernard McGinn’s definition: “Although the word mysticism is fairly recent, created in the seventeenth century, and not popular until the nineteenth century, the adjective *mystical* (“hidden” in Greek) has been widely used among Christians since at least the second century CE. Christians used *mystical* to refer to the secret realities of their beliefs, rituals, and practices, especially to the ‘mystical meaning’ of the Bible, that is, the inner message about attaining God that may be found beneath the literal sense of the scriptural texts and stories. They also spoke about a ‘mystical contemplation’ and, from about five hundred CE on, of ‘mystical theology,’ that is, the knowledge of God gained not by human rational effort but by the soul’s direct reception of a divine gift.” *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism* (New York: The Modern Library, 2006), Introduction, 14.

be read as a *confessio fidei*, more precisely, a confession of faith in the Christian notion of flesh relying heavily for the effectiveness of its confession on a form of parrhesia — not altogether unlike Foucault's *ultima verba* as professor in his very last lecture at the Collège de France.

I. A series of meta-literary remarks about reading *Confessions of the Flesh*

The delicate matter of dealing with posthumous works

In the opening of an essay entitled “The Imperfect Critics,” part of the critical work *The Sacred Wood, Essay on Poetry and Criticism*, T.S. Eliot makes a subtle remark that would also seem to apply to *Confessions of the Flesh*:

It is impossible to overlook the merits of scholarship and criticism exhibited by Georges Wyndham's posthumous book and it is impossible to deal with the book purely on its merits of scholarship and criticism. To attempt to do so would in the first place be unfair as the book is a posthumous work, and posthumous books demand some personal attention to their writers.¹³

What can we draw from Eliot's remarks with respect to Foucault's posthumous book? First, that before being scholars tackling an academic work the book puts us in a position of *critique*—which is slightly different. The book, in a certain manner, leaves us bare of any titles since it is heavily loaded with non-ordinary circumstances. So loaded, we could say, that all commentators start more or less right away by sensibly recalling the circumstances of its production: the illness of Foucault, his untimely death, his thirty-four years of shadowy existence in Gallimard's compartments etc. These circumstances, no matter how much we are aware of them, can have strong consequences for our very way of dealing with the book. We would tentatively like to name two of those potential consequences to more clearly define our own, uneasy, circumstances as a reader opening this posthumous *opus*:

- 1) First, we are confronted with what we might bitterly call “the death of the author” syndrome.¹⁴ This syndrome consists in facing a work whose coefficient of reality is

¹³ T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land and Other Writings, Imperfect Critics* “A Romantic Aristocrat” (New York: The Modern Library, 2002), 82.

¹⁴ Roland Barthes published in 1968 a famous article entitled “La mort de l'auteur,” which was then taken up in *Le plaisir du texte* and Foucault elaborates on this thematic in his 1969 conference “What is an Author?” reflecting upon what he calls “the function-author,” which poses problems. On this topic see the article by Dominique Samson. “Le spectre de la mort de l'auteur,” *L'Homme & la Société* 147, no. 1 (2003) : 115–132.

affected in unprecedented ways: because of Foucault's sudden death, the "presence-absence of the author" effect, inherent to any work, is intensified on the "absence side." Consequently, one may try to overcome this feeling by a strong desire to defend it in the face of questions.¹⁵ Neutrality and objectivity are potentially more difficult to achieve before *Confessions of the Flesh* than before other, more "straightforward" materials.

- 2) We tend to relate this book to what Foucault has said elsewhere, not only because it may be helpful, but because it grounds this posthumous work in another, seemingly more secure foundation. It is certainly a typical feature of the Foucauldian archipelago of texts to function as a strongly connected network, but for *this* text in particular, recourse to other texts potentially also gains additional meaning, namely that of trying to tie the book in with less precarious materials.¹⁶ In this way *Confessions of the Flesh* may draw its reader *volens nolens* to "what it is not," that is, toward other texts where the presence of the author is stronger. We may, as it were, be "looking for Foucault."

In short, the readership may be somewhat unsettled toward a work that is "rescued" and that has crossed, in a spectacular manner, time and editing difficulties so that any kind of critical assumption is *per se* delicate or intimidating.¹⁷ If it is true that the very circumstances of production of the book are conditions we cannot escape while reading, they may also trick us into receiving the book in a certain way. These conditions are perhaps not stronger than the book itself but they can singularly overdetermine the mode of its reception: We face death not *as* Foucault faced it but we are faced with the vibrant and lingering echo of his death—which is hardly a detail.

Thus a certain tension between scholarship and critique, which are strictly speaking not equivalent, can emerge — or, better, should emerge—when reading *Confessions of the Flesh*. The book is *precarious* just as we find ourselves to be precarious—provided that we acknowledge it—when we deal with it. As is well known, *precarious* is etymologically related

¹⁵ Stuart Elden in his book review also stressed this: "Not having Foucault to discuss *Les aveux de la chair* is, of course, a significant loss." We would even argue that this loss may put us in the position of "survivors" or the "living ones," which is peculiar. [Schultz, « Elephants, Dreams, and Sex: Reading Religion in Foucault's Ethics ».](#)

¹⁶ As Stuart Elden puts it: "Foucault, to a degree uncommon at that time and rarely matched since, made interviews an integral part of his practice, and they have become a central part of his work." *Ibid.*

¹⁷ See Frédéric Gros's "Warning" at the beginning of the edition of *Confessions of the Flesh*.

to “prayer,” projecting a connotation of fragility. If the book is, to some extent, fragile, this may inspire us as readers to want to strengthen it— but how? And at what cost? Conversely, it may also *make* us fragile, or more vulnerable—so that we try to forget it. In sum, there are pitfalls everywhere. This essay is an attempt to stress (1) that we are likely to be as precarious before the book as the book itself is and (2) that facing and acknowledging this precarity is a necessary precondition for commenting on it, not in the sense that we will be “objective,” but simply more lucid. All this does not mean that the book or we as readers cannot be solid in some other respects; it merely means that this precarity is an integral component of the book’s reception and that we, as readers, cannot escape its effect.

The necessity of being Nietzschean to apprehend Confessions of the Flesh

In a footnote of his article “Foucault’s Keystone: *Confessions of the Flesh*, How the Fourth Volume of the *History of Sexuality* Completes Foucault’s Critique of Western Societies,” Bernard E. Harcourt interestingly notes that: “[...] Nietzsche is more absent in Volume 4 than he is in earlier work [...]”.¹⁸

This remark calls for a few comments. If Nietzsche is without any apparent reasons less present in *Confessions of the Flesh*, it could mean two things:

- 1 He is present at *another level*, one less visible or immediately perceptible, unless one assumes Foucault’s Nietzscheism has vanished, which we have no reason to suppose. Instead, it may have changed or been transformed.
- 2 Nietzsche is somewhat contradicted by Foucault. But then we are referred back to the first remark in the sense that “contradiction” and the use of different, even contradictory, points of view is itself profoundly Nietzschean. Foucault engages in contradiction with himself and that is no problem from a Nietzschean perspective because truth is no monolith but requests a plurality of points of view to emerge.

Both above remarks may actually obtain.

First, as Daniele Lorenzini quoted by Harcourt saw it: “Foucault’s history of the subject of desire” he [Lorenzini] writes, “questions Friedrich Nietzsche’s claim that ‘it was Christianity with its fundamental resentment against life that first made sexuality into something

¹⁸ “Foucault’s Keystone: *Confessions of the Flesh*,” How the Fourth Volume of the *History of Sexuality* completes Foucault’s Critique of Modern Societies.” *Foucault Studies*, No. 29 (April 2021): 48–70.

unclean.’”¹⁹ Not only does Foucault qualify Nietzsche’s claim, but in *Confessions of the Flesh* he also clearly differentiates between various early Christian thinkers, which is not the least of the book’s merits.

It is not quite exact to state that Foucault treats all early Christian thinkers the same and that he does not have preferences or sympathies for some of them—we will come back to this important point in the second part of this essay. As has been noted, Foucault does not use a polemical tone in *Confessions of the Flesh*, and he is not as burning as, for instance, in *The Will to Knowledge*.²⁰ It is quite another Foucault who comments on early Christian texts here with, let’s say, a great deal of respect or at least “adequate distance.” This quasi-neutral tone makes it on the one hand more difficult to comment on the text of *Confessions of the Flesh*, while on the other it impresses on us the need to wonder about the kind of relationship the book evokes vis-à-vis the texts it deals with. This is especially so since these early Christian texts were not considered “classical philosophical texts” in Foucault’s time and still are not so today.

We should pose the question of the necessity to be Nietzschean for at least two reasons: 1) because Foucault’s Nietzscheism is well known, it is coherent “genealogically” speaking to read him through one of the main sources of his philosophy;²¹ 2) because the very title of the book makes it imperative to do so. For, the fact that the title includes the critical—and Augustinian— word “confessions,” which is thus the very first word the reader encounters, makes it an intimidating and paradoxically all the more difficult and closed text to deal with.²²

From that standpoint, it might be helpful to quote the Nietzsche of *Beyond Good and Evil*, more precisely the part entitled “On the Prejudices of Philosophers,” simply to dare to tackle the book through its confessing dimension:

It has gradually become clear to me what every great philosophy has hitherto been: a confession on the part of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir; moreover, that the moral (or immoral) intentions in every philosophy have every time constituted the real germ of life out of which the entire plant has grown.²³

¹⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, “Twilight of the Idols, or How to Philosophize with a Hammer,” in “The Anti-Christ,” “Ecce Homo,” “Twilight of the Idols,” and Other Writings, trans. Judith Norman, ed. Aaron Ridley and Norman (New York, 2005), 228.

²⁰ *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1: An Introduction [= *The Will to Knowledge*] [1976] (1979), 59. See notably the pages on the “confessing animal.”

²¹ See especially his text “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” in John Richardson & Brian Leiter (eds.), *Nietzsche* (Oxford University Press, 1978), 139–164.

²² The word “confessions” thanks or because of Augustine is also a literary genre, which further complicates our way of apprehending it. Yet the concept of “confessions” does not apply to Augustine in *Confessions of the Flesh*.

²³ *Ibid.*, 17.

Confronting *Confessions of the Flesh* with such a statement may trigger strong reactions since it is unusual and provocative. But why should Foucault's last book be excepted from this rule? It should not. Because of what we have formerly called "the delicate matter of dealing with posthumous work," it may seem we do not want to be indelicate. And yet we ought to be, or rather we have to think that being Nietzschean in that way is not rude or out of place; on the contrary, such an attitude vis-a-vis a work that needs to find its way to the world thanks to *critiques* can only be desirable. "No poet, no artist of any art has his complete meaning alone," says Eliot. Nietzschean claims, though intimidating, may help facilitate the essential partnership between the work and its critiques.

There are no proper reasons why any philosopher, including non-living ones, should escape such a treatment: Nietzsche does it with Kant, with Hegel, Schopenhauer, as well as with some of his contemporaries. In fact, Nietzsche taught us that their work is in many ways very similar to *any other* literary production no matter how much more "ideas" are purportedly involved. It is important, then, with Nietzsche, not to forget that "most of a philosopher's conscious thinking is secretly directed and compelled into definite channels by his instincts."²⁴ One sees how daunting it is to apply such a Nietzschean phrase to *Confessions of the Flesh* though perhaps also how necessary it might be to bring back the work to what it is made of: words—vivid and sensitive material, therefore very hybrid too, inasmuch as it does not only convey ideas but also feelings, or better, ideas entangled with feelings and feelings intertwined with ideas. This is always a valuable warning before entering any kind of literary work including philosophical works, although some philosophers may sometimes be reluctant to acknowledge that they are in many respects writers in a very practical sense.

Nietzsche helpfully reminds us that there is no such thing as a pure spiritual or intellectual work. But because *Confessions of the Flesh* is a posthumous piece it is somehow shrouded in a sacred atmosphere that we precisely have to overcome to get access to the work which is somehow in tension with its precarious aspect above mentioned. Not to be sacrilegious on purpose, but because we owe it to Foucault whose work deserves to be read fairly, i.e., to be desacralized since death is a powerful mummifying force. In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche states that: "Posthumous humans—like me, for instance—are understood less well than timely ones but are *heard* better. More strictly: we are never understood—and hence our authority...."²⁵ There are great challenges regarding the reception of Foucault's work and that of Nietzsche's, sometimes at the cost of awful misunderstandings in the case of the latter. While

²⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §3, Penguin edition, 35.

²⁵ *Twilight of the Idols*, 'Sayings and arrows,' 15, 47.

it is not our goal to press the parallels between both philosophers, it is notable that their paths, *mutatis mutandis*, have some striking similar features.²⁶

Let's now have a look at how Foucauldian scholarship tackles the book.

The book's layout, the critique and "the centrifuges tropism"

Scholars have had a notable preference for commenting on the last part of the book, that is, its last third, because in keeping with Foucault's previous works it is seen as "the missing piece" (Harcourt) of Foucault's critique of the modern Western subject.²⁷ While this is more than a fair approach, I'd like to point out a discrepancy between the author's organization of the book and the critique's heavy emphasis on its latest chunk. Two-thirds of the book are devoted to penance, baptism, and virginity, parts that the critique has tended to set aside, if not to neglect—as we will see, there are literary reasons for that. The last third is devoted to Augustine's notion of concupiscence, the subpart called "the libidinization of sex," and the one that seems the most political, to which the now quite abundant bibliography on *Confessions of the Flesh* testifies.²⁸ As Harcourt puts it in his article:

In those final pages, dedicated to Augustine's writings on marital sexual relations, Foucault reveals the heretofore missing link that now binds his four-volume history of sexuality to his critique of Western forms of governing. Foucault discovers in Augustine the birth of the modern legal actor and legalization of social relations.²⁹

It is around the question of desire and its legal domestication that many critiques have focused. Lorenzini comments in the same vein, putting the emphasis likewise on the last part of *Confessions of the Flesh*:

How and when did we become subjects of (but also subject to) desire? The last part of *Les aveux de la chair* seems to provide an unequivocal answer: it is in Augustine's writings on virginity and marriage that a subject of desire is eventually constituted (see AC, p. 288).³⁰

²⁶ In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault wrote significantly on Nietzsche's final madness not excluding it from the analysis of his work. The way Foucault tackles Nietzsche's dementia may be taken as a cue for how to tackle Foucault's last written book.

²⁷ Harcourt, "Foucault's Keystone Confessions of the Flesh," 49.

²⁸ Daniele Lorenzini and Bernard E. Harcourt lean heavily on the last third and set aside the first 2/3 of the work.

²⁹ Harcourt, "Foucault's Keystone Confessions of the Flesh," 48.

³⁰ Daniele Lorenzini, "The Emergence of Desire: Notes toward a Political History of the Will," *Critical Inquiry* 45 (Winter 2019): 452.

This last part has already drawn very important critical attention for reasons pertaining to Foucault's general project and because the links with his other works are more obvious than for the first two-thirds of *Confessions of the Flesh*. Here we should pause to make a specific meta-critical comment. There is what we might call a "centrifugal tropism" operative in the interpretation of Foucault at work, namely that while quoting one work one is always called to quote another located in a conference or in an article or in a lecture.

There is a strategy of dispersion, one might say, or dissemination that lends Foucauldian speech an ubiquitous and allusive quality—Foucault's relationship to "discourse" is a complex one, it is a concept about which he had mixed feelings if not misgivings.³¹ There is such a dispersal of Foucauldian speech that one may run the risk of getting lost in its labyrinthine turns. The archipelago of texts he left us has a double-edged rebellious quality that makes them not impenetrable but sometimes difficult to access. This mode of existence of Foucault's discourse has consequences for the scholarship about him, which deploys a high level of erudition and talent for, let's say, geolocation.

Aware of the potential difficulties posed by what we have called, on Foucault's part, a "dissemination phenomenon" and, on the part of Foucault scholarship, a "centrifugal tropism," Bernard E. Harcourt has noted in an incidental clause that: "[...] it is of the utmost importance to distinguish his published monographs, all ten of them now, from his other productions, whether lectures, conferences, essays, or interviews [...]"³² While we fully agree with Bernard E. Harcourt's remark, one should also note what is done in practice: all his works are generally quoted at the same level in the majority of the papers dealing with Foucauldian material—and this essay will be no exception, even though it wants to question at the same time the a priori nonhierarchical Foucauldian archipelago of texts.

But because Foucault continues to be published posthumously, there is an inevitable appetite for quoting what is "new" either to corroborate our view or to complete the puzzle that is Foucault's work, which we all find ourselves somehow chasing. This is a peculiar hermeneutical and editorial situation, which needs to be underscored: it is not trivial, and it has

³¹ See the famous opening words of his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, *The Order of Discourse*: "I wish I could have slipped surreptitiously into this discourse which I must present today, and into the ones I shall have to give here, perhaps for many years to come. I should have preferred to be enveloped by speech, and carried away well beyond all possible beginnings, rather than to have to begin it myself. I should have preferred to become aware that a nameless voice was already speaking long before me, so that I should only have needed to join in, to continue the sentence it had started and lodge myself, without really being noticed, in its interstices, as if it had signaled to me by pausing, for an instant, in suspense. Thus there would be no beginning, and instead of being the one from whom discourse proceeded, I should be at the mercy of its chance unfolding, a slender gap, the point of its possible disappearance." *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, edited by Robert Young (Routledge & Kegan Paul, first edition 1981), 51.

³² Harcourt, 49.

consequences regarding the way one may relate to his work. As Stuart Elden noted in the conclusive part of his review: “With the publication of *Les Aveux de la chair* we are entering a new period of Foucault’s posthumous reception.” This posthumous reception is not easy and raises a number of challenges and *caveats* we have tried to name. Thus, adopting a literary Nietzschean perspective while also taking note of Eliot—the two approaches being actually convergent since they primarily attempt not to lose track of a *work*, either poetical or philosophical, as a hybrid compendium—we next wish to delve into the book by undertaking a close-reading of one of its introductory sections, “The Laborious Baptism,” to consider in greater degree detail what is happening within it.

II. The “Laborious Baptism” section: an “immersion” into baptism

A look at the enunciative system and the choice of the commentary

After a scrupulous perusal of *Confessions of the Flesh*, we found that the enunciative system is not—except in one or two precise cases that I will discuss further—a decisive criterion with which to examine whether or not Foucault is partial to a specific early Christian writer or text.

The enunciation varies quite a lot throughout the book: one finds “I” several times in several different places, but we also find the first-person plural “we” and the impersonal mode “one” —perhaps more ambiguous in the French “on”—and a large and overwhelming prevalence of sentences starting with “It...” followed by verbs of perception, or casual remark making. To give a few instances of the “I,” the pronoun that we might suspect to be the most partial of them all: it is found in many different locations, in the three chapters and in various other sections.³³

The first person is present, albeit discreetly and one might say that on the whole it is quite scarce and we cannot rigorously identify a specific pattern regarding its use. Why is it used here specifically—and not there? That is impossible to answer because one can see no particular reasons for it. At the risk of making some very fragile assumptions, we have to conclude that Foucault’s use of pronouns is similar to what he did in volumes 2 and 3 of *The History of Sexuality*, volume one using “we” a lot and displaying overall a very different tone.³⁴

³³ See *COF* pp.38, 57, 59, 60 (twice), 152, 153, 197 (4 times), 198.

³⁴ As Elizabeth A. Clark puts it in “Foucault, the Fathers and Sex”: “The difference in tone between volumes one and two is evident to even the casual reader: the sweeping generalizations and scanty documentation of volume one have been superseded by a respectful approach of texts. Indeed, so carefully does Foucault tiptoe from text to

If markers of subjectivity are not to be found in the enunciative system, where then? *Confessions of the Flesh* can be described as an extensive commentary on early Christian texts. Given the lack of apparent preferences in the enunciative system, we see a commentator who is very careful with the material he is dealing with. In the “I” sentences as well as in others we see a subject who displays himself as highly conscious of what he is doing through the use of restrictive adverbs, or sometimes using epanorthosis, a very interesting literary device in the case of Foucault.³⁵

While the genre of the commentary is quite impersonal, Foucault’s epistemological choice here is nonetheless not entirely neutral if we think back of what he wrote in the *The Order of Things*. In the introduction to her book *Mysticism as Revolt, Foucault, Deleuze and Theology Beyond Representation*, Petra Carlsson Redell recalls this interesting element for us:

Now, in *The Order of Things* Foucault argues that there are two trajectories for thought that reach back to the early modern period and that ever since then have been in opposition: the *commentary* tradition and the tradition of *criticism*. The commentary tradition, he says, stems from biblical exegesis, while the tradition of critique emerges with the desacralization of language, which makes it possible to question and critique inherited texts and truth claims. The commentary does not aim to judge or criticize the text commented on, but rather to lay bare its inherent truth and wisdom.³⁶

Such a distinction may assist us in analyzing *Confessions of the Flesh*. For, the choice for a commentary puts Foucault close to the *exegesis* that Foucault had already started practicing on non-Christian texts in volumes two and three. It is all the more blatant in *Confessions of the Flesh*, where it is not, strictly speaking, biblical exegesis that takes place but where we are closer than ever to his particular genre, which may be qualified as atemporal.

In keeping with the enunciative system of *Confessions of the Flesh*, this *exegesis* is not prevented from being used in a personal or a tailored fashion, meaning that the commentator may quote the text with more or less distance. By “distance” we do not simply mean “accuracy”

text in the subsequent volumes that admirers of his previous work may find his style plodding,” in *Michel Foucault and Theology: The Politics of Religious Experience*, eds. James Bernauer and Jeremy Carrette (New York: Routledge, 2016), 39. Likewise, Stuart Elden mentions, “In style it is much closer to Volumes II and III than Foucault’s other works.” <https://www.theoryculturesociety.org/blog/review-michel-foucault-confessions-of-the-flesh>.

³⁵ An epanorthosis consists in rectifying oneself while in the process of writing. For an example see pages of *COF* mention in footnote 37. Another example of epanorthosis related to our topic worth mentioning in passing would be this passage of an interview given by Foucault: “In the Christian book— I mean the book about Christianity! — I try to show that all this ethics has changed.” *Michel Foucault Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 242. I think one can say without exaggerating that epanorthosis is a literary device applicable to the all work of Foucault who spent time correcting misunderstandings, rectifying what he meant from his very first book to the “modifications” taking place in *The Use of Pleasures*.

³⁶ Petra Carlsson Redell, *Mysticism as Revolt Foucault, Deleuze and Theology Beyond Representation* (Aurora, Colorado: The Davies Group Publishers, 2008), 18.

or how *directly* the text being read is quoted, though *Confessions of the Flesh* may be called a direct commentary—in the two senses of the adjective, namely “frank” and “close”—since Foucault quotes his primary sources most of the time directly.

Instead, we would like to show that in the course of this *exegesis* there is a peculiar literary moment that takes place in *Confessions of the Flesh*, where Foucault literally surrounds himself with the text he is commenting on. This moment occurs once in the whole book to a high degree of—textual—proximity. It takes place in the second section, “The Laborious Baptism,” in the first chapter “The Formation of a New Experience,” where the presence of the very word “experience” is not anodyne.

A break from the first section of Confessions of the Flesh

It appears that in the first chapter entitled “Creation, Procreation” dealing with Clement of Alexandria’s *Stromata* and *Paedagogus* Foucault can afford to make funny comments and puns around the “annual anus” of the hare,³⁷ triggering at least a smile on the reader’s face. This comic passage upon a certain animal’s “bad reputation” lasts a few pages (19–23) and if not representative of the overall tone of the section, it shows us that Foucault adjusts the sound of his comment to resonate with the text he is actually observing. The rest of the section is much more solemn but the presence of such a humorous moment is telling: Foucault apparently took pleasure at commenting on Clement’s *Paedagogus*. At the beginning of the section as well as at its end, Foucault underscores the philosophical continuity between Clement and the pagan writers: “One finds the same regime, essentially unmodified, in the doctrine of the second-century Fathers;”³⁸ “so the *Paedagogus*, as it’s very often been said, shows a great continuity with the texts of pagan philosophy and morality of the same epoch, or the period immediately preceding it.”³⁹ This very first section is hence in the vein of volumes two and three of the *History of Sexuality* where Foucault already insisted on the permanency rather than on the brutal break entailed by Christianity regarding the ethics of sex; it is almost a *leitmotiv* of the two

³⁷ “Clement moves on from the fable of the hare with the annual anus, replacing it with the idea of superfetation,” *COF*, 21. Let’s applaud the translator’s attention for having kept the French “anus annuel” and not translated “annual” to “yearly.”

³⁸ *COF*, 3

³⁹ *COF*, 33.

previous volumes.⁴⁰ Thus, without the presence of the definition of the “flesh” as a “mode of experience” the reader could have been reading *The Care of the Self* or *The Use of Pleasures*.

Most importantly, the overall way in which Foucault comments upon Clement’s texts is indistinguishable from the moments where he quotes, for instance, Artemidorus, Seneca, or Xenophon. While Foucault cites Clement’s text abundantly, he is not surrounded by it, as we said earlier. In “The Laborious Baptism” section, though, *Confessions of the Flesh* begins in a new and unprecedented way that needs our full attention and calls for remarks.

An immersion into baptismal writings: equivocation and illumination

To fully engage with the singularity of this section let’s start with a close reading of its first few lines:

Let each one of you be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins.⁴¹
Until the second century, baptism was the “only ecclesiastical act that could ensure the remission of sins.

The authors of the second century generally associate this remission with the four effects produced by the very act of baptism. It cleanses, erases, purifies: immersion carries the stains away.⁴²

The section begins with a direct and powerful quote from the *Acts of the Apostles* which gives us three emblematic Christian notions— baptism, forgiveness, and sins— condensed in a very short sentence. Such an opening *in medias res*⁴³ —if we may borrow a phrase usually applied to fiction—is quite an abrupt transition for the reader who has just left Clement’s texts behind, where there was no mention of baptism as such. Mention is next made of “penance and the exercises of the ascetic life,” of “forms of subjectivity,” in the context of which the following *periphrasis* is used:

[...] the liberation or purification of oneself and salvation by means of operations that carry light to one’s innermost being, and drive one’s deepest secrets up to the light of redemptive

⁴⁰ See for instance *The Use of Pleasure*, “Enkrateia,” 63; the conclusive remarks of *The Use of Pleasures*, 249; in *The Care of the Self*, Chapter II, “The Cultivation of the Self”, 39.

⁴¹ *COF*, 37 In French: “Que chacun de vous soit baptisé pour obtenir le pardon.” *Les Aveux de la Chair*, 52.

⁴² *COF*, 37. The selection of this passage is a personal choice, though the layout respects that of the actual book.

⁴³ As Thomas R. Flynn puts it: “One has a sense of always being *in medias res*, without a well-defined beginning or absolute end;” “Partially Desacralized Spaces: the Religious Availability of Foucault’s Thought” in *Michel Foucault and Theology*, 145.

exposure. It is a form of experience—understood both as a mode of presence to oneself and a program for self-transformation—that was developed in that period.⁴⁴

One truly wonders if Foucault was not looking for a “surprise effect” to unsettle his reader and if he considered “baptism” instead as a sacred term, which would be in keeping with the way he introduced the word through the *Acts of the Apostles*. Regardless, the fact that Foucault does *not name* the ritual before he really “steps into it” is highly significant.

Indeed, “The Laborious Baptism” is the only section in the book that starts with a direct quote⁴⁵—and what a quote, being both an invitation and an intimation at the same time from a highly “Pentecostal” text—thereby creating the effect of diving into the matter of baptism. It is fair to describe the way Foucault kicks off this section as a “plunge.” Because water pervades this second subpart of “The Formation of a New Experience,” this is much more than an easy and facile metaphor.⁴⁶ Water is the key element of baptism as a sacrament, despite the polemics it triggered and to which the North African Christian writer Tertullian (ca. 160-221 CE) devoted his *De Baptismo*. The latter is not coincidentally also the key text of “The Laborious Baptism:”

De Baptismo is explicitly directed against a sect of Cainites who refused to accept that “a little water could wash away death.” Tertullian replies to them with a “eulogy of water” in which he recalls its spiritual values, manifested in the Scripture: water that was the seat of the Spirit before the Creation; water that God used to mix the clay to fashion man in his image; water that purified the earth in the Flood, freed the Hebrews from their Egyptian pursuers, slaked the thirst of the chosen people, healed the sick ones in the pool of Bethsaida.⁴⁷

Two things are notable in this excerpt: the mention of the literary genre “eulogy,” which is how Foucault defines Tertullian’s text, and the anaphora of “water,” which gives a rhapsodic quality to the passage so that water is actually praised twice: by Tertullian and by Foucault who repeats Tertullian’s defense of baptism by rephrasing his apology in his own words.

Overall, it seems that Foucault was quite sensitive to the baptismal ceremony to the point that his own style becomes contaminated by the ritual itself; his way of writing can adequately be characterized with the adjective “immersive.” What do I mean by “immersive”? I suggest that the model of Foucault’s quotation works in a different way here than previous quotations in that rather than putting himself in the overhanging position of a commentator,

⁴⁴ *COF*, 35–36.

⁴⁵ In the “Second penance” section, Foucault also quotes at some length a passage from *The Shepherd of Hermas* but precedes it with a sentence of introduction.

⁴⁶ Moreover, while Tertullian also figures in Part II of *COF*, his role there won’t be treated here because what matters to us is how Foucault introduces Tertullian to his readers.

⁴⁷ *COF*, 42.

necessarily separated from the text he is reading, he embeds himself within the text he is quoting—which is a totally different ethical position. Moreover, the words “remission” and “immersion” appear right at the beginning of the section, so that one might say they set the tone and epitomize the whole section. “The Laborious Baptism” is thus under the sign of these two complementary notions.

The sentence “It cleanses, erases, purifies: immersion carries the stains away” has a density that translates the power of baptism. Through the ternary rhythm of simple verbs of action, Foucault describes at a slow pace the steps of the ritual whose result is developed in a second clause that works as the realization of what baptism actually does—the semicolon as punctuation signals the break between the two operations without really detaching the first operation from its resulting one. Foucault’s style subtly seizes the sacred quality of baptism by analyzing the process in its raw and bare phases, allying physical and spiritual components, or rather, being spiritual through the very physical action one is offered to perform. Simplicity and beauty are conveyed in this one remarkable sentence—Foucault’s prose is that of a goldsmith.

Other textual evidence to sustain the claim of the “immersive” quality of Foucault’s writing in this section is the intertwining of quotations and comments: both are indeed interwoven in a fashion that gives the impression that Foucault is willing to mingle his own stream of words with the one on which he is actually commenting, making it harder to distinguish who is talking. There is not, strictly speaking, “confusion,” but there is, at some point, *fusion*. Another example of that trend is the following passage, which counts among the few mentioned earlier in which the enunciation is remarkable:

After the first birth—which according to Justin, occurred out of “necessity” and in “ignorance,” starting from a “moist semen,” in the “coupling of our parents”—baptism “rejuvenates” us by causing us to be born again, but this time by “free choice” and in “knowledge:” in this way we become the children of a Father who is the ‘Father and Lord of all things.’ In a similar vein, Saint Irenaeus spoke of the “new generation” that God grants us and that, through faith, causes us to be born from the Virgin.⁴⁸

Two elements here need to be underscored: the strong presence of “we” and “us,” and the intensity of the quotes or art of quotes, syntagms, which Foucault incorporates into his own comments. The combination of those two elements yields the impression that different voices are fused or at least perfectly integrated in a single flow of thought. The primary sources are more than simply included or being commented on: they are integrated into Foucault’s own

⁴⁸ *COF*, 37

speech. This produces the impression that Foucault's reading of these early Christian authors has been careful but also *intense* as his own words are thrown in with theirs.

In a different vein, Foucault also seems to follow the path of a candidate for baptism by giving an account of his personal and intimate journey toward the obtention of the sacrament:

As for pride, for the sinner who requests baptism, it consists in trusting in himself. He doesn't realize that he could always fall or fall back—before baptism or after. He who goes toward the light doesn't follow a straight and easy path. He's like a newborn animal, nearly blind, constantly stumbling and crawling on the ground.⁴⁹

This striking and sudden shift to the third person allows identification with the candidate for baptism whom Foucault, sensitive as he is to the candidate's struggles, portrays in a moving manner. This micro-account of what the sinner goes through works as the telling of an experience: Foucault gives the reader a chance to become immersed him/herself in those pure though daunting waters.

That's why we can only say that he is *on the verge* of being "mystical" because his writing shows he is not exterior to what he is talking about. He takes up part of the experience itself, which requires courage, a sense of abandonment, a personal relationship with the writings of someone, in this case Tertullian, who is not an authoritative Father of the Church but nevertheless a seminal figure in the history of Christianity. But why not simply call Foucault's text "mystical"? It seems exaggerated to say that *Confessions of the Flesh* belongs to the same genre as the works of Catherine of Siena, Nicholas of Cusa, or Father Surin—though Michel de Certeau interestingly made a link between the latter and Foucault!⁵⁰ But it would also not be accurate to omit pointing out that Foucault is caught by what he is commenting on, that there is an attraction toward Christian ethics.⁵¹ To talk about Foucault's style, we want to borrow a word from Emerson, saying that Foucault speaks *from within*, meaning "from experience."⁵²

⁴⁹ *COF*, 43.

⁵⁰ Dominique Julia and Claude Rabant note : « Par suite, au discours mystique se substitue la *fable* mystique, intégrant à l'énonciation elle-même ("la scène de l'énonciation") ce rire où Michel de Certeau voyait s'unir Surin et Foucault : "à la fois le mouvement de la perte et celui de l'amour". » Encyclopædia Universalis, s.v. « Certeau Michel De (1925-1986) », Consulté le 09 novembre 2022, <https://www.universalis.fr/encyclopedie/michel-de-certeau/>.

⁵¹ I fully agree with James Bernauer when he writes: "I would argue that Foucault's own intellectual practice at this final stage is closer to the specific style of early Christianity of the self than it is to the pagan." Bernauer, "Cry of Sprit", XIV.

⁵² "The great distinction between teachers sacred or literary— between poets like Herbert and poets like Pope,— between philosophers like Spinoza, Kant and Coleridge, and philosophers like Locke, Paley, Mackintosh and Stewart — between men of the world who are reckoned accomplished talkers, and here and there a fervent mystic, prophesying half insane under the infinitude of this thought—is that one class speaks *from within*, or from experience, as parties and possessors of the fact; and another class *from without*, as spectators merely, or perhaps as acquainted with the fact on the evidence of third persons." Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Selected Essays*, "The Over-Soul," (New York: Penguin Classics, 1985), 218.

Such a distinction seems to give an adequate account of “what’s happening” in the book and may unsettle or move us. One cannot help but think of the following passage of a lecture—previously quoted—Foucault gave on March 1, 1977:

Better still, mysticism develops on the basis of, and in the form of, absolutely ambiguous experiences, in a sort of equivocation, since the secret of the night is that it is an illumination. The secret, the force of illumination, is precisely that it blinds.⁵³

That “The Laborious Baptism” is ambiguous seems very much the case: regarding the way the commentary is organized as well as the way that it entails equivocation—that is, putting voices at an equal distance—, which blinds the reader by making Tertullian’s words shine. As Mark Jordan has noted in a parenthetical sentence about Foucault: “He is an author who can do several things at once.”⁵⁴ It is as if Foucault disappears into the foldings of the text, to say it with Deleuze, while we might think at the same time of Jordan’s comments about Foucault’s longing for anonymity in Nietzschean fashion.⁵⁵

To put things another way, Foucault could have chosen to tell things very differently, that is far more theoretically and abstractly—*from without*. Instead, he has chosen to comment on those texts by putting himself in the shoes of a candidate for baptism. Something is thereby said as well as shown about baptism, its difficulty and its beauty. It is a hardship—a *labor*, says Foucault after Tertullian, from whom he has derived the name of this section. Tertullian’s reframing of baptism has indeed received great attention from Foucault, who is interested in the emphasis placed on the preparatory part of the ritual: “[...] one understands Tertullian’s construal, new in part, of the preparation for baptism. He couples the catechesis, and the teaching of truths and rules, with a labor of moral purification.”⁵⁶

Catharsis and catechesis are pivotal concepts in Tertullian which Foucault highlights because they lead to *metanoia* (conversion)—whose Latin translation, *paenitentia*, seems not to convey the dimension of the soul turning upon itself⁵⁷— as its real value, since conversion does not happen by the sole power of the sacrament. The *metus*, i.e., the fear of oneself before God, is a critical element that Foucault also foregrounds.

⁵³ *Security, Territory, Population*, 212.

⁵⁴ Jordan, 14.

⁵⁵ See Deleuze, *Foucault*, translated and edited by Seán Hand (London: The Athlone Press, 1988). “Foldings, or the Inside of Thought (Subjectivation)”, 95. See also Mark Jordan, *Convulsing Bodies, Religion & Resistance in Foucault*; “Embodied Reading, or the Masked Philosopher” (Stanford: Stanford University, 2015), 5.

⁵⁶ *COF*, 45.

⁵⁷ For a history of the concept of *metanoia* see the article of Pierre Hadot “Epistrophe et metanoia dans l’histoire de la philosophie” in *Proceedings of the XIth International Congress of Philosophy*, volume 12 (1953), 31–36. <https://doi.org/10.5840/wcp11195312374>

Significantly, Foucault quotes Tertullian's *De paenitentia* in Latin: *Elaborandum est*.⁵⁸ The title of "The Laborious Baptism" is thus named directly after Tertullian's own words, which carries symbolic weight. We may venture to say that there is more at stake than mere borrowing, as there is also a conceptual "*mise en abyme*" of *labor* within this section. Aiming to give a fair account of Tertullian's prose, Foucault delivers it. Not only does he embrace Tertullian's language but he also performs an "act of truth," to borrow Foucault's own terminology, as commenting on a text necessitates in every case the bringing about of certain moral qualities such as honesty and even, we should add, charity—such as we should also practice ourselves toward *Confessions of the Flesh*, as Niki Kasumi Clements urges us to do.⁵⁹ Such an ethos certainly requires labor, preliminary work to which Foucault's previous courses at the Collège de France testify inasmuch as they helped to prepare the way for this special encounter with Tertullian in *Confessions of the Flesh*.⁶⁰

Foucault and Tertullian: a special relationship

From that standpoint, one may indeed be tempted to talk about an elective affinity between the two thinkers. We should not forget that Foucault said himself in a conversation with psychoanalysts that: "Le bonhomme fundamental, c'est Tertullien,"⁶¹ which seems much more than a throwaway joke.⁶² With respect to his writing in "The Laborious Baptism," this term actually resonates as a real confession—one might say a moment of parrhesia before a very specific public—that we can hear reverberate in two different ways. First in the historical context of Christianity, Tertullian is the one who has been decisive in conceptualizing Christian thought, although he has never been granted canonical status as a Father of the Church. Second,

⁵⁸ COF, 45.

⁵⁹ "I urge us readers to both charitably appreciate and critically engage Foucault's view of Christianity and forms of subjectivity for their insights and potentialities." Niki Kasumi Clements, "Discussing the Discipline of Foucault's Christianities" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* Vol.89 no. 1(March 2021): 32.

⁶⁰ See notably *Security, Territory, Population* and *On the Government of the Living*. A more precise account of Foucault's relationship with Tertullian and Christianity overall is given by Philippe Chevallier in his book *Michel Foucault et le christianisme* (Lyon: ENS editions, 2011).

⁶¹ In English "The Fundamental Fellow, It's Tertullian," first published in *Ornicar? Bulletin périodique de champ freudien*, 10 (juillet, 1977), 62–93 (Later reproduced as « Le jeu de Michel Foucault » in *Dits et écrits* v.II, (Paris Quarto Gallimard:2001) 206, 298–329.

⁶² Indeed, Foucault later corrected himself—making an epanorthosis at the level of his whole speech...—by replying to Jacques-Alain Miller what he supposedly meant: "This is to laugh...[...]. I say that in a fictional manner, to laugh, to make a fable." Philippe Chevallier undermines this epanorthosis by saying these remarks "are of a mere intuitive kind in a conversation that was somewhat unbridled" (my translation). Yet I think the insistence placed upon this statement supposedly being a "fable" or made "to laugh" allows us to be suspicious given what is happening within *Confessions of the Flesh*. Without the latter, there would be nothing to bounce back on. But in light of "The Laborious Baptism," we may indeed choose to consider things with another look. Aren't we in the presence of a confession followed by a *retractatio*? This is, at least, a very strange moment.

Tertullian has been crucial for Foucault on a personal level. Both modes of reverberation or reception are not mutually exclusive, and it is indeed tempting to hear that sentence in two ways: not only since *Confessions of the Flesh* actually permits these two readings but also because it marks a crystallization point of what is a thorough and vivid encounter in “The Laborious Baptism.”

Indeed, Tertullian is neither an enemy of the flesh nor an easy cliché of Christianity’s “icy notions.”⁶³ His path as a thinker is remarkable and, *mutatis mutandis*, might interestingly enough echo that of Foucault.⁶⁴ Beyond any potential echoes and parallels in their biographies, it is worth underlining Tertullian’s positive conception of the flesh by quoting the below passage from Willemien Otten’s article on “Tertullian’s Rhetoric of Redemption:”

In a thorough analysis of Tertullian’s anthropology entitled *Une chair pour la gloire. L’anthropologie réaliste et mystique de Tertullien*, Jérôme Alexandre has called much deserved attention to the positive valuation of the flesh by laying stress on its prospective glory as the sister of the redeemed soul. [...] Yet in my view, what has been insufficiently emphasized is that flesh has not just an important meaning for revelation in Tertullian as a preparatory conduit but that in line with the motto *caro cardo salutis est* its redemptive value is immediate. Or, as Tertullian goes on to say in the sentence following this passage about the unity of body and soul: “There is no possibility of these [*i.e.*, flesh and soul], which the work associates, being divided in the wages.” This is a far cry from a Platonic recompense for the labors of the body, as if it needs to be rewarded for a lifetime of toiling for the soul, but indicates instead the full acceptance of the human body and all its toils.⁶⁵

Otten stresses the distance Tertullian takes from a Platonic view of the body, so that, even if Foucault did not quote the *De resurrectione mortuorum*—as noted by Paul Mattéi who blames him for not having a comprehensive knowledge of Tertullian’s work⁶⁶—Foucault has a good in-depth understanding of Tertullian—no matter his occasional philological shortcomings.⁶⁷

⁶³ The expression was coined by Peter Brown and is picked up by Bernauer in his article “Revealing the Catholic Foucault,” *Foucault Studies*, no. 29 (April 2021), 38–47, 45.

⁶⁴ Otten, “There is little doubt that the second-century North African author Tertullian of Carthage qualifies as one of the most volatile intellects of the early Christianity period. Aside from whether we deem his views orthodox or heterodox, it is evident that his rhetoric borders at times on the outrageous.” “Volatile,” “outrageous” are adjectives that could rightly be applied to Foucault,” Tertullian’s Rhetoric of Redemption: Flesh and Redemption in *De carne Christi* and *De resurrectione mortuorum*,” *Studia Patristica* (vol. LXV: Oxford, volume 13: “The First Two Centuries Apocrypha Tertullian and Rhetoric from Tertullian to Tyconius” (Peeters, 2013), 331.

⁶⁵ Otten, 346–347.

⁶⁶ In particular the *De resurrectione mortuorum*. See Mattéi, “Le Tertullien de Foucault,” 112–113.

⁶⁷ Mattéi notes this in his article: “The philological fragility, not at all anecdotic, of certain terminological considerations, more or less ruinous as it pertains to the interpretation of Tertullian himself, fragilizes, by a rippling effect, the totality of the Foucauldian discourse on patristic Christianity — if it’s true that Tertullian constitutes with Hermas one of the first piles of a bridge whose structure, one element being on the hedge, finds itself completely compromised” (my translation), 119.

Let us cite again Otten's article, which deals with redemption—which was not Foucault's focus in *Confessions of the Flesh*—but which underscores the consistency of Tertullian's thought on the flesh, from his framing of baptism to that of redemption:

That anchor for Tertullian is the flesh, not just the flesh of Christ's incarnation but the flesh that even before that was the stuff of Adam's creation. It is that flesh that he calls the *res dei*, and that flesh that will rise after death over and over again, until resurrection itself will have become the new reality.⁶⁸

This conception of flesh is not the one that has prevailed in conventional accounts of the history of Christianity—that would be the view of Augustine—but is Augustine's view also the one that Foucault has personally valued the most or felt the closest to? What this essay wants to assert with considerable certainty is that the way Foucault writes about Augustine in “The Libidization of Sex” is not the way he writes about Tertullian: the former is one whom he writes *about*, while the latter is the one whom he allows himself to write *with*. An immersion, indeed, up to, in the most intense moments, the blending of their two voices—equivocation.

III. Concluding remarks: the confession of an attraction and the role of silence

At the end of this essay, we'd like to address the issue of the “unity” of *Confessions of the Flesh* in two ways. First, the Tertullian pole and the Augustine one would seem to be the two outer ends between which Foucault's relationship with early Christian thinkers ought to be situated. The political center of analysis draws mainly on Augustine, while the mystical center is mostly found in “The Laborious Baptism” followed by “The Second Penance” section. Those two poles or centers strongly urge us to define *Confessions of the Flesh* as a complex whole.⁶⁹ One could describe Foucault's relationship to Augustine through concupiscence as his approach “from without”—leaving commentary or exegesis behind in a shift back to a style much closer to criticism—while his relationship to Tertullian puts him on the verge of being mystical, that is, of an approach “from within.” On the heels of this distinction, former texts of Foucault may now also be seen differently. For instance, we'd like to reference the end of a text entitled

⁶⁸ Otten, “Tertullian's Rhetoric of Redemption,” 347.

⁶⁹ It should also be noted that a third pole exists where Cassian has a prominent place in relation to exagoreusis, truth-telling veridiction in ways that are essential to Foucault's argument about the formation of disciplinary subjectivity. See on this especially Niki Kasumi Clements, “The telos of Asceticism: Michel Foucault and John Cassian.” in *Reaching for Perfection: Studies on the Means and Goals of Ascetical Practices*, edited by Joseph Verheyden, Geert Roskam, Ann Heirman, Johan Leemans (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2022), 143-165.

“*L’eau et la folie*,” (“Water and Madness”) from an article dated 1963 and available in the *Dits et Écrits*: “De nos jours, la folie n’est plus aquatique. L’eau requiert parfois d’autres aveux.”⁷⁰

It’s quite striking to read such a statement with *Confessions of the Flesh* in mind. What kind of avowals or confessions may water require? Was Foucault already thinking of baptism? This question won’t have an answer, but we wish to put the spotlight on it here to indicate that Foucault’s work can be read differently under the light of the “Laborious Baptism” as new aspects may emerge from reading the Foucauldian archipelago of works.

Altogether, it is an inspired commentary that we are reading from Foucault, and perhaps a bit more: the confession of an attraction. An attraction towards baptism conceptualized in a new light by a prolific and eccentric intellectual figure, Tertullian, for whom he may indeed have had a deep sympathy. And thanks to a vivid, intimate, and immersive style, Foucault allows us to share in this sympathy—which is on the verge of representing a kind of “counter-conduct” inasmuch as it was not expected of him by his audience.⁷¹

Are we not thereby retrieving Foucault’s concept of parrhesia in *Confessions of the Flesh*, this time not being analyzed but rather being *practiced*? Indeed, the concept is not only a Greek one and but also has a Christian version that Foucault explored, as has been explained by James Bernauer.⁷² Making reference to the famous “*se déprendre de soi-même*”⁷³ in the *Use of Pleasures*, Bernauer goes so far as to ask:

Getting free of oneself. As ascetics and religious mystics have recognized through the ages, this getting free of oneself, of leaving the prison of one’s soul need not guarantee passage to tranquil seas. If many choose a spirituality which despises the world and provides a shelter from it, Foucault was among those others who seek a spiritual existence which will expose them to the contingent mysteries of themselves and others. Such a spirituality might be thought of as that of the parrhesiast. Is not Foucault’s delineation of the parrhesiast in his very last courses the

⁷⁰ Foucault, *Dits et écrits* I (1954–1975), ed D. Defert, F. Ewald, Paris Quarto Gallimard (2001) “L’eau et la folie” n°16, 300. “Nowadays, madness is not aquatic. Water sometimes requires other confessions” (my translation). This quotation ends this article and stands out typographically from the rest of it. Its broader context of inscription is that of water-torture and truth-telling in Dr. Leuret that links to Foucault’s 1981 Louvain lectures where Cassian and truth-confessing are at the heart of disciplinary subjectivity.

⁷¹ See above note 10. For Foucault and counter-conduct see also Daniele Lorenzini, “From Counter-conduct to critical attitude: Michel Foucault and the Art of not Being Governed Quite So Much,” *Foucault Studies* no. 21 (June 2016): 7–21.

⁷² “Although his treatment of the practice of *parrhesia* was worked out in relation to Greek culture, a careful textual review of his sources shows a definite dependence on the Christian understanding of *parrhesia* as well. While the frank speaking of confessional practice is the most evident of these sources, Foucault certainly knew how *parrhesia* took on a unique dimension in Christianity: not the political and moral virtues of the ancient world but the special power of courageous openness to the experiences of mystery.” “Cry of Spirit,” XVI.

⁷³ Which is not well rendered by the English “getting free of oneself” since “*se déprendre*” entails an—interesting though subversive—erotic connotation in French.

description of a truth-teller dealing with spiritual discernments rather than the experience of truth attached to the roles of prophet, sage, or teacher?⁷⁴

From this point of view, Foucault's last course *The Courage of Truth* and his last book *Confessions of the Flesh* share a lot in common since in our opinion his posthumous work is also very courageous regarding the way he tackles Christianity. Therein lies the unity of the book, i.e., in Foucault's ability to be truthful to himself, and therein lies also, in our view, the reason for the striking absence, noticed by Philippe Büttgen, of any reference to *confessio fidei*, one of the critical types of "confession."⁷⁵ Indeed, Büttgen notes "Foucault's relative failure to bring together the various dimensions of confession as confessions of sins and confessions of faith in early Christianity."⁷⁶ Why? Is it an oversight or a lack of care? Büttgen's answer is that Foucault was primarily interested in *confessio peccatorum*, setting aside *confessio fidei*, so that his overall theory of confession is strangely distributed, out of Christianity and on the side of parrhesia as show his last two courses at the Collège de France, *The Government of Self and Others* of 1982-1983 and *The Courage of Truth* of 1983-1984.

On our side, we would like to formulate a hypothesis on this issue based on what has been previously said in the course of this essay, in particular regarding Foucault's immersive way of writing: what if *Confessions of the Flesh* did not deal with "confessions of faith" because the book was, itself, a *confessio fidei*, namely, a confession of faith in the flesh? If so, there would be no "failure" but instead what I might call a significant and meaningful silence regarding that particular type of *confessio*, which could be set aside because of the proximity, if not overlap, between Foucault and the material he tackled. To flesh out this hypothesis, so to speak, it is relevant to put Pierre Macherey, twelve years his junior, in direct conversation with Foucault by quoting his *A Theory of Literary Production*. First published in 1966, this Nietzschean-Marxist study draws attention to the importance of the "unspoken," especially when Macherey states that: "The speech of the book comes from a certain silence, a matter which it endows with form, a ground on which it traces a figure."⁷⁷

What if, in *Confessions of the Flesh*, Foucault actually made the theoretical choice not to address or elaborate his *confessio fidei* in the flesh analytically but rather show it to us directly insofar as he himself performs it? The book, in that case, would not speak to us about what he

⁷⁴ Bernauer, XV.

⁷⁵ There are three types of confessions: *Confessio Peccatorum*, *Confessio Laudei*, and *Confessio Fidei*. It is the latter, or more accurately, its blatant absence that has retained Büttgen's attention.

⁷⁶ Büttgen, 8.

⁷⁷ Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, "The Spoken and the Unspoken," 95.

eventually *does*. Far less than a book about “confession” in itself, as Büttgen also argued, this posthumous work could be seen as a book essentially displaying a form of trust in the flesh. What we have in *Confessions of the Flesh* is much more a matter of showing texts in all their power rather than theorizing about them.⁷⁸ As Pierre Macherey crucially puts it:

Thus the silence of the book is not a lack to be remedied, an inadequacy to be made up for. It is not a temporary silence that could finally be abolished. We must distinguish the necessity of this silence. For example, it can be shown that it is the juxtaposition and conflict of several meanings which produces the radical otherness which shapes the work: this conflict is not resolved or absorbed, but simply *displayed*.⁷⁹

From that perspective, we could venture to say that the absence of the *confessio fidei* is not a lack because it is an integrative part of the book’s core foundation. By the way, one could ask whether, without “having faith” in those patristic texts on the flesh or in Tertullian’s voice, without in some way liking them, one could really write about them in a trustworthy manner. At this point, we are clearly reaching the limits of what we can prove. Yet the inquiry from within the book that we have attempted would incline us to answer such a question in the negative. From a literary theory perspective, leaning on Macherey’s conceptualization of “a literary production” we could say that:

What is important in the work is what it does not say. This is not the same as the careless notation “what it refuses to say,” although that would in itself be interesting: a method might be built on it, with the task of *measuring silences*, whether acknowledged or unacknowledged. But rather than this, what the work *cannot say* is important, because there the elaboration of the utterance is acted out, in a sort of journey to silence.⁸⁰

As such, talking of *Confessions of the Flesh* as constituting a parrhesiastic *exegesis* of religious texts would in effect seem to be equal to talking about a *confessio fidei* in the flesh, making of Foucault a philosopher of the flesh in a different manner than in the materialism of *Discipline and Punish*.⁸¹ Some silences of *Confessions of the Flesh* are definitely meaningful,

⁷⁸ And from that perspective *COF* is indeed, as Philippe Büttgen says, “Foucault’s great phenomenological book,” 11. 115-116.

⁷⁹ Macherey, “Implicit and Explicit,” 93.

⁸⁰ Macherey, “The Spoken and the Unspoken,” 97.

⁸¹ Foucault defines the flesh in those terms: “The flesh should be understood as a mode of experience, that is, as a mode of knowledge and transformation of oneself by oneself, depending on a certain relationship between a nullification of evil and the manifestation of truth.” *COF*, 36. This definition is large and ambiguous enough to hypothesize that Foucault may have embraced the notion of the flesh, especially that designed by Tertullian in the ritual of baptism, as we’ve seen.

which is indeed an interpretation authorized by Foucault who, talking about mysticism, clearly said: “There is also communication through silence.”⁸²

As a concluding remark, we also would like to offer a hypothesis regarding another deafening silence in *Confessions of the Flesh* pointed out by Büttgen:

And is the striking absence of any reference to Augustine’s *Confessions* in Foucault’s manuscript to be explained by the fact that this work carefully calibrates the three dimensions of confession in a way that is not compatible with Foucault’s construction?⁸³

The reason for this absence would be twofold. First, Augustine has created the genre of *confessions* which is a very peculiar one: if Foucault thought of Rousseau’s *Confessions*, for instance, they have the reputation of not being a model regarding honesty and sincerity. From that respect, one may assume that Rousseau’s *Confessions* worked in Foucault’s mind as what Roland Barthes, a colleague of Foucault at the Collège de France, has called in 1974 an “intertexte.”⁸⁴ If we follow the literary logic implied by Barthes, Foucault may have considered Augustine’s *Confessions* fundamentally biased — or at least, doubtful— regarding the way Augustine narrates his own self to the world. Consequently, it would not be in Augustine’s *Confessions* that he would look for Augustine’s potential “confessions” but in books that do not bear such an obvious title—the genre is sort of trapped, so to speak. Second, Augustine famously composed his *Retractationes*. And precisely, within *The History of Sexuality* in the second volume, *The Use of Pleasure*, do we not find, through the “*déprise de soi*” (“getting free of oneself”), that a *retractatio* also happened in Foucault’s project? Again, we come back to the idea of the epanorthosis as a meaningful way to read Foucault at both a macro- and a micro-level.

⁸² *Security, Territory, Population, Lectures at the Collège de France 1977–78*, 213. One will notice that, about to speak about mysticism in this lecture, one finds an * reporting Foucault’s speech: he is interestingly enough reluctant and embarrassed to speak about it.

⁸³ Büttgen, 9.

⁸⁴ « [...] tout texte est un *intertexte* ; d’autres textes sont présents en lui, à des niveaux variables, sous des formes plus ou moins reconnaissables : les textes de la culture antérieure et ceux de la culture environnante ; tout texte est un tissu nouveau de citations révolues. Passent dans le texte, redistribués en lui, des morceaux de codes, des formules, des modèles rythmiques, des fragments de langages sociaux, etc., car il y a toujours du langage avant le texte et autour de lui. » “All text is an intertext; other texts are present within it, at various levels, in more or less recognizable forms: texts pertaining to the anterior culture and those of the neighboring culture; all text is a new fabric made of bygone quotations. Passing through the text and reorganized within it are pieces of codes, formulas, rhythmical patterns, fragments of social languages, etc, for there is always language before the text and around it.” (My translation). Roland Barthes, *Encyclopaedia Universalis*, s.v. « Texte théorie du », consulté le 16 décembre 2022, <https://www.universalis.fr/encyclopedie/theorie-du-texte/>. The concept of intertextuality was first coined by the notorious group *Tel Quel* in the 1960s, in particular by Julia Kristeva.

Les aveux de la chair are no confessions of the Augustinian kind. They are confessions of another sort, a retractation in the form of an inquiry from within without the self—or through the self as mediated through texts. It seems that for Foucault, in a literary vein, all phrasing of a truth about oneself must be put in an *oblique* manner to be taken seriously. This obliquity is not a strict synonym of mysticism but it clearly indicates a way of philosophizing at the crossroads of philosophy and literature where mystics can be found, or poets whose words are meant to be uttered to reach their full power.⁸⁵ At the back of the French cover of *Confessions of the Flesh* one finds a quote from the poet René Char, which should not be neglected nor undermined.⁸⁶ In one of Char’s reflections on poetry, one finds this significant fragment:

Que le risque soit ta clarté.⁸⁷

This is possibly the best answer to Foucault’s concern in the second volume of the *History of Sexuality* when he anxiously asks: “Was I right to take these risks?”⁸⁸ As readers,

⁸⁵ The value of spoken speech is evident in the entire work of Foucault. I think it is important, therefore, not to separate *Confessions of the Flesh* from Foucault’s last words in his last lecture at the Collège de France whose last hour was significantly devoted to Christian truth-telling.

⁸⁶ « L’histoire des hommes est la longue succession des synonymes d’un même vocable. Y contredire est un devoir. » in *L’âge cassant* (Paris : José Corti, 1965). “The history of mankind is the long succession of the synonyms of a single term. To engage in contradiction with those terms is a duty.” (My translation).

⁸⁷ René Char, *Recherche de la base et du sommet* (Paris : Gallimard, 1965), 22. It should be mentioned that Char was a blatant and notorious “rimbaldien,” one of the most “philosophical” French poets and often linked to Nietzsche. See especially Frédéric Martel’s foreword in Jean-Jacques Lefrère’s biography, *Arthur Rimbaud*, (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2020; first edition Arthème Fayard, 2001). His poetry is set under the sign of rebellion, honesty with oneself and a form of parrhesia in as much as he never feared to utter some bitter truths, at a political, ethical and personal level. It is not far-fetched to see in the words “risqué” and “clarté” a direct Rimbaldian echo or intertext. Also, a catholic reading of Rimbaud coexists with communist ones, surrealist ones, queer ones, gay ones, feminist ones and so on which is not at odds with Foucault’s own reception. Finally, Paul Claudel famously said of Rimbaud that ‘he was a wild mystic’ (“un mystique à l’état sauvage”) in his foreword to Rimbaud’s edition (See <https://www.biblisem.net/etudes/claudirim.htm>)

⁸⁸ *The Use of Pleasure*, « Modifications », (New York: Vintage, 1990), 9. Let us not forget that *Confessions of the Flesh* (v.4) was actually written before the second volume of *The History of Sexuality*. About the important chronological composition of *Confessions of the Flesh* and its effects on its contents, see Niki Kasumi Clements, “The Decade of Foucault’s “Christian book” in (2022): Book review Symposium *Confessions of the Flesh: The History of Sexuality*, volume 4, by Michel Foucault; edited by Frederic Gros, translated by Robert Hurley; New York, NY, Pantheon Books, Theology & Sexuality; Arianna Sforzini, “Brève généalogie des *Aveux de la chair*” in *Foucault les pères le Sexe : autour des Aveux de la Chair*, (Paris : Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2021), 19-36; Philippe Chevallier ‘The Birth of *Confessions of the Flesh* : A journey through the Archives’, translated by Charles A. Piecyk, *Maynooth Philosophical papers* 11, (2022): 55-73. Chevallier notes that “*Confessions of the Flesh* is the book on which the philosopher spent the largest amount of time among all his works; indeed, the first thing which the archive reveals is that, from the publication of *The Will to Knowledge* until his death, Foucault never stopped working on and reworking the ‘Christian’ volume,” *art. cit.*, 56. This particular care as well as the length of this project pleads to consider *COF* as the result of years of work since 1975 and thus not as a by-product or a minor publication of Foucault, for “we were in possession of a nearly completed version, even though sickness has prevented Foucault from revising part of the type-script,” *art. cit.*, 55. It is tempting to say that the ultimate risk taken by Foucault lies precisely in the amount of care and dedication put in the book which placed it on the verge of never being published. This is certainly not meaningless and tells us something about Foucault’s relationship to his own work in his last decade. The unstable and/or uncomfortable relationship to his work cannot but impact our own way of reading him despite and beyond his death, which rather than erasing this aspect only made it more

this may encourage us to re-read Foucault's entire work from the standpoint of *Confessions of the Flesh*, to immerse ourselves in another way, under another light, into a highly complex literary, philosophical and, spiritual work — at the risk of ourselves, that of letting such a text, which reached us beyond death, being our baptism into Foucauldian waters. Whether one decides or not to embrace this reading suggestion, this posthumous opus bears the seal of an experience of Christianity certainly made “from within”.

visible. Insofar as his sudden death reveals something of Foucault's way of writing *Confessions of the Flesh*, it makes the book all the more precious by shedding light on both its strength and fragility. If *COF* will not be the last editorial word of Foucault, it seems fair to consider it his ultimate contribution given the work and personal commitment he invested in it. If, chronologically speaking, regarding the timeline of the writing of *The History of Sexuality* it is not Foucault last word, the publication timeline of *Confessions of the Flesh* makes it symbolically its last one. This is in keeping with his *ultima verba* as a professor in the lesson of 28th of March 1984 (especially the second hour) where parrhesia is described in a surprisingly “mystical” way: “This other *parrhesia* we see emerging is defined as a sort of full and positive modality of the relation to God. It involves something like openness of heart, the transparency of the soul before God occurs, there is a kind of ascending impulse of this pure soul which lifts it up to the Almighty. So *parrhêsia* will ne longer be situated, if you like, on the [horizontal] axis of the individual's relations to others, of the person with courage vis-à-vis those who are mistaken. It is now situated on the vertical axis of a relation to God in which the soul is, on the one hand, transparent and opens itself to God and, on the other, rises up to Him. [...]” Michel Foucault, *The courage of Truth*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 326-327.