

Foucault's Queer Critique

David M. Halperin

Critique has fallen out of favor lately among exponents of queer theory as well as among participants in the recent debates in literary studies over reading methods. Critique often finds itself displaced, or replaced, in such contexts by one or another version of something called “postcritique.” And so it happens that a tradition of intellectual and political contestation dating back to the European Renaissance and Reformation, which came to be identified with enlightened resistance to modern forms of knowledge and power, now meets with routine expressions of contempt from those who style themselves as adherents of insurgent intellectual or academic movements that aspire to function as cutting-edge vehicles of opposition to contemporary practices of rule.

In order to buck that trend, and to rehabilitate critique as a specifically queer enterprise, I appeal to a little-known but dominant theme in the late thought of Michel Foucault. Foucault is often considered one of the founders, or at least one of the intellectual sources, of queer theory. But that is not because of his thinking about critique, or “the critical attitude” (as he liked to call it), much less because of his elaborate genealogies of critique, an activity which he traced back to the ancient Greek world and to the practice and ethos of *parrhēsia*: a somewhat enigmatic term that signifies unguarded, risky, courageous speech—speech that forthrightly, even defiantly, conveys the speaker’s sincere beliefs and articulates an unsafe truth. Both critique and *parrhēsia*, as Foucault understood them, are procedures employed by those who seek to contest the power of authority, and who do so specifically by playing games of truth. As such, they bear obvious affinities to queer praxis and queer theory. And yet, the foundational texts of queer theory betray no awareness of Foucault’s detailed scholarly explorations of those topics. Nor does current queer theory appear to be moved, let alone chastened, by Foucault’s ultimate identification of his own life’s work with the work of critique.¹

That is for the simple reason that Foucault elaborated his thinking about critique and *parrhēsia* not in the form of books or articles but in the form of oral presentations. He devoted a number of the lectures that he delivered in the last years of his life to those two concepts. He took up *parrhēsia* in a series of seminars as well. Only one of his lectures on critique, and none of his lectures on *parrhēsia*, was published during his lifetime. Moreover, hardly anything he said about either

For helpful critiques of various drafts of this essay, I wish to thank Scott De Orio, Roger Mathew Grant, Adriano José Habed, Randeep Hothi, Daniele Lorenzini, Alex Ramsey, and, especially, Melissa Sanchez.

¹ See Michel Foucault, “Un cours inédit,” *Magazine littéraire*, 207 (May 1984), 35-39, reprinted under the title, “Qu’est-ce que les Lumières ?” in Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits, 1954-1988*, ed. Daniel Defert and François Ewald (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), IV, 679-688, esp. 687-688.

critique or *parrhēsia* appeared in print, let alone in English translation, until well after the emergence of queer theory in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Because Foucault did not complete and publish most of this material, the bulk of it was omitted from the definitive compilation of his interviews and papers, the four-volume *Dits et écrits*, that Daniel Defert and François Ewald brought out in 1994, ten years after his death. The texts of his lectures on *parrhēsia* did not appear until 2008 and 2009; they took even longer to be translated into English. As a result, the contents of Foucault's lectures and seminars on these themes long remained unknown to the general public, except for a number of recordings that circulated privately, a few published reports by people who had attended his presentations, and some unauthorized, imperfect transcripts—notably, *Fearless Speech* (2001), based on a recording of Foucault's 1983 seminar on *parrhēsia* at the University of California in Berkeley: a critical edition of that seminar did not see the light of day until 2019.² It is in that seminar that Foucault most explicitly connects his work on *parrhēsia* with his continuing reflections on critique and the critical attitude. The publication of the definitive edition of the Berkeley seminar makes it possible, for the first time, to measure the exact correspondences between critique and *parrhēsia* in Foucault's late thought and to appreciate in particular the *critical* function of *parrhēsia*, as Foucault understood it.

In what follows, then, I will be discussing important aspects of Foucault's thinking that do not figure in his published work and that have been made available to us only through the posthumous transcribing, editing, and printing of his lectures and seminars. It is the public dissemination of this material that has finally put us in possession of central features of Foucault's late thought that would have remained completely unknown to most of us without this mass of posthumous publications. Their appearance during the past two and a half decades, and especially during the last ten years, has significantly altered our picture of Foucault and has enabled us to make new connections among different elements of his thinking—revealing both unsuspected dimensions and novel applications. So, at least, I hope to demonstrate.

*

² See, for example, Thomas Flynn, "Foucault as Parrhesiast: His Last Course at the Collège de France (1984)," *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 12.2-3 (1987), 213–229. For the seminar on *parrhēsia*, see Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, ed. Joseph Pearson (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001); Michel Foucault, *Discourse and Truth, and Parrhēsia*, ed. Henri-Paul Fruchaud and Daniele Lorenzini (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019); all further page references to the latter publication will be incorporated in my text. A critical edition of the Berkeley seminar appeared three years earlier in a French version (Foucault originally conducted the seminar in English): Michel Foucault, *Discours et vérité. Précédé de La parrhēsia*, ed. Henri-Paul Fruchaud and Daniele Lorenzini (Paris: Vrin, 2016). Additional seminars on *parrhēsia* continue to trickle out: see Michel Foucault, *Speaking the Truth about Oneself: Lectures at Victoria University, Toronto, 1982*, ed. Henri-Paul Fruchaud, Daniele Lorenzini, and Daniel Louis Wyche (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021).

The specifically critical function of *parrhēsia*, according to Foucault's final understanding of it, explains why *parrhēsia*, like critique, qualifies in his eyes as a vehicle of freedom and resistance. Such a benign, even sympathetic portrait of *parrhēsia* may seem out of character for Foucault, who is famous for his scathing commentaries on the politics of truth-telling. In book after book, throughout his career, Foucault created what he once called political histories of the production of truth (*l'histoire politique d'une production de vérité*³)—detailed explorations of the relations among power, discourse, and subjectivity—that portrayed truth as a strategic element integral to modern methods of social domination. Foucault described, among other things, how human beings have been induced to tell the truth about themselves to those endowed with the authority to judge them. He also observed that modern subjects have been seduced into speaking the truth by the promise of liberation; what they typically fail to realize is that by locating the secret of their identity in some inward truth, by searching it out, by confessing it, and by accepting it as the law of their being, they assist the modern liberal state in its governing of individuals. It is from those studies that Foucault acquired his dark reputation as a theorist of power and as an apostle of political despair, relentlessly dedicated to exposing the ever-deceptive lure of emancipation.

Foucault's sudden interest in *parrhēsia*, at the start of 1982, may seem like an abrupt swerve from those earlier analyses; it may appear to be at odds in particular with his previous work on confession as a technique of subjection to disciplinary power.⁴ And yet, Foucault's interest in *parrhēsia* emerged directly from his studies of confession: it was in the course of his research into the history of spiritual guidance, reaching back to the pre-Christian societies of the ancient Mediterranean world, and specifically to the pagan philosophical schools of the Roman empire, that Foucault first came across *parrhēsia* as both a term and a concept. Nonetheless, *parrhēsia*, as Foucault came to understand it, did not originally consist in the forcible extraction from the subject of a truth which the subject then had to recognize as the truth of the self. And so it did not necessarily fulfill the malign function of normalizing individuals that confessional practices gradually came to acquire in the Christian West, according to Foucault.

³ Bernard-Henri Lévy, "Foucault: Non au sexe roi," *Le Nouvel observateur* (March 12, 1977), 92-93, 95, 98, 100, 105, 113, 124, 130 (quotation on p. 93).

⁴ Foucault pronounced the word *parrhēsia* in public for the first time in a lecture at the Collège de France on January 27, 1982: Michel Foucault, *L'herméneutique du sujet. Cours au Collège de France, 1981-1982*, ed. Frédéric Gros (Paris: Seuil-Gallimard, 2001), 132; *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981-1982*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 137. For this information and for some additional context, see the annotations by Fruchaud and Lorenzini in Foucault, *Discourse and Truth*, esp. 230, n. 9. For a systematic account of the contrast—as well as the ultimate compatibility or complementarity—in Foucault's thought of truth-telling as "a target of critique" (in the case of confession) and truth-telling as "one of critique's methods" (in the case of *parrhēsia*), see Daniele Lorenzini and Tuomo Tiisala, "The Architectonic of Foucault's Critique," *European Journal of Philosophy* (forthcoming).

Though it may bear an apparent resemblance to confession, *parrhēsia* more closely approximates to *profession*. At least as the Greeks of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. originally employed it, the word refers to the act of speaking one's entire mind in a particular situation, saying to someone what one really believes to be true without holding anything back, without regard for the possible risks or consequences of one's utterance, and without requiring one's addressee to validate the truth one proclaims. In the political culture of classical Athens, *parrhēsia* was a democratic value of the first order: it represented a privilege to which each citizen was entitled, regardless of wealth or rank; as such, it endowed all Athenians—all free, native-born, adult, male citizens, if not others—with the freedom to say what they pleased.⁵ *Parrhēsia* could thus be celebrated as the guarantor of an egalitarian society. (The Athenian Popular Assembly actually voted to name a ship of the state *The Parrhēsia*.⁶) Like confession, *parrhēsia* involves the declaration of one's true convictions but, instead of answering to authority, *parrhēsia* is a self-affirming act of speech that often ignores or even defies authority; it may in fact create the conditions for the emergence of a contestatory counter-authority (as one scholar puts it, "*parrhēsia* was always a kind of bold speech, carrying a certain connotation of defiance. . . . a suggestion of boldness or even insubordination was always attached to the term").⁷ Foucault's account of *parrhēsia* demonstrates that speaking one's mind and saying what one truly believes can function not only as a means of subjection (as it does in the case of confession), but also, depending on the social context (for example, in the Athens of Socrates), as a means of desubjection—as a practice of freedom and a non-disciplinary technique of self-fashioning, of caring for oneself.

The seeming discontinuity between Foucault's analyses of confession and his studies of *parrhēsia* disappears as soon as his work on *parrhēsia* can be brought into relation with his earlier reflections on critique. Foucault came to see *parrhēsia* as integral to the tradition of critique, as an ancestor—or, even, as an early instance—of the critical attitude.⁸ And from the outset of his thinking about critique, Foucault

⁵ See Arnaldo Momigliano, "Freedom of Speech in Antiquity," in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas: Studies of Selected Pivotal Ideas*, ed. Philip P. Wiener (New York: Scribner's, 1973), II, 252-263, along with the rejoinder by David Konstan, "The Two Faces of *Parrhēsia*: Free Speech and Self-Expression in Ancient Greece," *Antichthon*, 46 (2012), 1-13.

⁶ Arlene W. Saxonhouse, *Free Speech and Democracy in Ancient Athens* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008 [2006]), 90; the evidence is from an ancient Greek inscription: *IG II² 1624.81*.

⁷ Konstan, "The Two Faces of *Parrhēsia*," 10, who adds, "it might always be interpreted to imply licence rather than freedom."

⁸ See Daniele Lorenzini, "From Counter-Conduct to Critical Attitude: Michel Foucault and the Art of Not Being Governed Quite So Much," *Foucault Studies*, 21 (June 2016), 7-21, who points out that "Foucault's analysis of *parrhēsia* in Greco-Roman antiquity is indeed one piece of such a genealogy [of the critical attitude]" (p. 20); also, Andreas Folkers, "Daring the Truth: Foucault, Parrhesia and the Genealogy of Critique," *Theory, Culture & Society*, 33.1 (2016), 3-28.

understood the purpose of critique to be desubjection. Thus, Foucault's original definition of critique already anticipates his later interpretation of *parrhēsia* as a practice of political and personal autonomy. In short, there is a clear line of development in Foucault's thinking that leads directly from critique to *parrhēsia*—and from *parrhēsia* back to critique.⁹

What enabled Foucault to find in *parrhēsia*—despite its being an early stage in the evolution of confessional practices—a potential source of political defiance, and even an expression of queer resistance to societal norms, is precisely its critical dimension. The most radical enactments of *parrhēsia*, which Foucault discovered in ancient Greek philosophy, especially among the Cynics (Diogenes of Sinope and his followers), amounted to a kind of critique-in-action. They represented a daring experiment in antinormative living, a practice of philosophy not as a discipline of truth but as an emancipatory ethos and as an austere, oppositional, flamboyantly perverse way of life. In that sense, *parrhēsia*, at least in some of its instances, inaugurated for Foucault the long and venerable practice of critique as an instrument of political contestation and a method for challenging the legitimacy of both accepted truths and conventional exercises of power. Furthermore, Foucault considered critique and *parrhēsia* alike to be vehicles of self-transformation.¹⁰

*

Such a model of critique is strikingly at odds with the portrait of critique that emerges from recent developments in queer theory and queer literary studies. According to proponents of various schools of so-called “postcritique,” critique is no longer a means of emancipation or an exercise in queer becoming but a conformist, self-important, suspicious, judgmental, and punitive analytic procedure, which aims to aggrandize its own practitioners as clear-eyed, undeceived, and knowing authorities, even as it exposes, discredits, devalues, and condemns its objects.¹¹

⁹ For a detailed and convincing demonstration of this point, see Adriano José Habed, “Queer Critique and Its Discontents” (Ph.D. diss. Utrecht, 2022), esp. 67-74, 81-83, 94. See also, Arnold I. Davidson, “In Praise of Counter-Conduct,” *History of the Human Sciences*, 24.4 (2011), 25-41; Lorenzini, “From Counter-Conduct to Critical Attitude”; and Lorenzini and Tiisala, “The Architectonic of Foucault's Critique.” See, further, note 26 (below).

¹⁰ Lorenzini and Tiisala, “The Architectonic of Foucault's Critique,” also emphasize this point, as do Daniele Lorenzini and Martina Tazzioli, “Critique Without Ontology: Genealogy, Collective Subjects and the Deadlocks of Evidence,” *Radical Philosophy*, 2.07 (Spring 2020), 27-39, in the case of critique.

¹¹ Cf. David Kurnick, “A Few Lies: Queer Theory and Our Method Melodramas,” *ELH*, 87.2 (Summer 2020), 349-374, esp. 353, commenting on Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015): “The book repeatedly describes the critical reader as a certain kind of person: small-minded, dogmatic, uptight, and yet also grandiose.” Kurnick offers an eloquent and powerful defense of “the seriousness of queer theoretical critique,” with specific reference to Foucault's work on *parrhēsia*. See, further, Folkers, “Daring the Truth,” as well as Lorenzini and Tazzioli, “Critique Without Ontology,” who appeal to Foucault's model of critique in order to contest the postcritical critique of critique.

Such a hostile, reductive understanding of critique removes it very far from the practice of free expression and the ethic of frank and open speech that the ancient Greeks termed *parrhēsia*; it contrasts as well with their model of political and intellectual risk-taking, which showcases and implicitly valorizes the courage necessary to assert a contested truth.

But so what? Times change. Critique may no longer be what it once was.

Even so—even allowing for this altered context—it may be pertinent and useful to bring Foucault’s late thinking to bear on recent queer theorists’ dismissive caricature of critique as a practice of pathological suspiciousness as well as on their treatment of Foucault’s sustained attention to the operations of disciplinary power as a symptom of paranoia.¹² Foucault’s late work on critique and *parrhēsia* has at least the potential to unsettle and to challenge some of the most common and persistent postcritical assumptions in contemporary queer theory and queer literary studies. For Foucault’s final reflections on *parrhēsia* disclose a radically queer model of refusal, defiance, and social transgression that is entirely free from paranoia but that constitutes nonetheless an expression of the critical attitude. Foucault’s thinking can therefore serve as a possible corrective to some aspects of queer theory’s recent critique of critique. It can also serve as a warning against queer theory’s overhasty embrace of postcritique’s accommodationist agenda.

¹² Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction is About You,” in *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, ed. Sedgwick (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 1-37; reprinted, with alterations, under the title, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You,” as Chapter 4 of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 123-151. Sedgwick’s essay inspired new methods of literary reading, such as “reparative reading,” “surface reading,” “thin description,” and “postcritical reading”; it also gave new impetus to affect theory and to the formulation of an anti-antinormative queer theory. See, for example, the special issue of *Representations*, 108 (Fall 2009), esp. Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, “Surface Reading: An Introduction,” 1-21; Heather Love, “Close but not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn,” *New Literary History*, 41 (2010), 371-391; Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski, eds., *Critique and Postcritique* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017); and the special issue of *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 26.1 (May 2015), entitled, *Queer Theory without Antinormativity*, esp. Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth A. Wilson, “Introduction: Antinormativity’s Queer Conventions,” 1-25. For some responses to these developments, mostly favorable but often qualified, see Heather Love, “Truth and Consequences: On Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading,” *Criticism*, 52.2 (Spring 2010), 235-241; Lauren Berlant, “Two Girls, Fat and Thin,” *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 121-160; Robyn Wiegman, “The Times We’re In: Queer Feminist Criticism and the Reparative ‘Turn,’” *Feminist Theory*, 15.1 (2014), 4-25; Elizabeth Weed, “Gender and the Lure of the Postcritical,” *differences*, 27.2 (September 2016), 153-177; Kurnick, “A Few Lies”; Tim Dean, “Genre Blindness in the New Descriptivism,” *Modern Language Quarterly*, 81.4 (December 1, 2020), 527-552; Patricia Stuelke, *The Ruse of Repair: US Neoliberal Empire and the Turn from Critique* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021); Corey McEleney, “The Resistance to Overanalysis,” *differences*, 32.2 (September 2021), 1-38.

Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 140, is at least cognizant of Foucault’s account of critique, but her own treatment of critique seems unaffected by it.

*

Let us begin by examining Foucault's conceptualization of critique, with particular reference to an untitled lecture of 1978.¹³ It is in this talk (now known as "What Is Critique?") that Foucault's lays out most unambiguously his political interpretation of critique as a practice of desubjection. Critique, according to Foucault, should not be reduced to a philosophical exercise: it is an expression or manifestation of a larger phenomenon, which he calls "the critical attitude," distinctive to western European culture since the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. So far, that view of critique is quite conventional, well in line with the traditional understanding of critique in both German idealism and the Frankfurt School as a distinctive development in European culture associated with the rise of modernity, secularism, the bourgeoisie, and the Enlightenment. The novelty in Foucault's conception of critique emerges when he comes to define it in relation to another historical development in Europe, to which it allegedly responds. He designates that development by the term "governmentality," a neologism of his own devising.

Foucault's coinage, introduced a few months earlier in his 1978 course at the Collège de France on *Security, Territory, Population*, refers to the great expansion, multiplication, and proliferation of techniques and rationales for the combined, integrated control of populations and individuals, both as a mass and one at a time—a phenomenon that occurred at the dawn of modernity in Europe and made possible the rise of the modern state.¹⁴ Starting in the fifteenth century (even before the Reformation), according to Foucault, the question of how to govern others and oneself became fundamental to European societies. It produced new theories and

¹³ Originally delivered at the Sorbonne on May 27, 1978, to the Société française de philosophie: an uncorrected transcript was published as Michel Foucault, "Qu'est-ce que la critique? [Critique et Aufklärung]," *Compte rendu de la séance du 27 mai 1978, Bulletin de la Société française de Philosophie*, 84 (1990), 35-63; for the circumstances surrounding the production and publication of Foucault's text, see the prefatory *Avertissement*. It is this original version that served as the basis for the two, now-established English translations: Michel Foucault, "What Is Critique?" trans. Kevin Paul Geiman, in *What Is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*, ed. James Schmidt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 382-398, and Michel Foucault, "What Is Critique?" trans. Lysa Hochroth, in Michel Foucault, *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 1997, 2007), 41-81. A critical edition of the lecture, complete with notes and commentary, is now available: Michel Foucault, *Qu'est-ce que la critique? suivi de La culture de soi*, ed. H.-P. Fruchaud and D. Lorenzini (Paris: Vrin, 2015); all quotations and page citations in my text refer to this publication, and all translations are my own.

¹⁴ See, especially, Michel Foucault, "Governmentality" (1978), in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, ed. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 87-104; Michel Foucault, "Politics and Reason" (a version of "Omnes et Singulatim: Towards a Criticism of Political Reason," Foucault's Tanner Lectures on Human Values, delivered at Stanford University in October 1979), in Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-1984*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman (New York: Routledge, 1988), 57-85. See, also, the very helpful commentary by Colin Gordon, "Governmental Rationality: An Introduction," in *The Foucault Effect*, 1-51, esp. 1-3.

practices of “the conduct of conduct”¹⁵—that is, new arts of governing individuals—which were pioneered initially by the Catholic Church but which gradually freed themselves from the context of Christian pastoral care, migrated beyond the borders of religious practice, underwent secularization, and expanded into a variety of new domains (paedagogical, political, economic) pertaining to the government of children, of the poor, of beggars, families, households, armies, different groups within the population, cities, states, one’s own body, and one’s own mind (36). All these new arts of governing were not just techniques of control but also instruments of rationality: they were methods for producing the kinds of knowledge about individuals as well as populations that could assist rulers in governing them.

Critique, in its most general form, is to be understood as resistance to this long and cumulative process of “governmentalization” (36), which was a process that involved not just the growth of formal institutions but also increasingly sophisticated apparatuses of power and knowledge. Critique, arising under these conditions, necessarily features opposition both to power and to knowledge. Just as the art of governing is at once a technique of social control and a form of rationality—a method of producing knowledge about subjects and about the means of ruling them—so critique combines a resistance to rule and a disqualification of knowledge. In the historical context of governmentalization, in which critique arose, those two oppositional impulses could not be dissociated.¹⁶ Their unique combination is what determines the particular character and features of critique.

In a lecture he delivered in the same course on *Security, Territory, Population* at the Collège de France on March 1, 1978, not quite three months before he gave his untitled lecture on critique, Foucault discussed some “specific revolts” that broke out in Europe in response to the rise of governmentality. He identifies those revolts, those expressions of both political and ethical resistance, as instances of “counter-conduct.” By counter-conduct, he refers more precisely to a “struggle against the procedures implemented [by various authorities] for conducting others.”¹⁷ So defined, “counter-conduct” clearly represents a precursor to “critique” in Foucault’s thinking. Although Foucault came to abandon “counter-conduct” in favor of “the critical attitude,” his original formulation of counter-conduct already reveals the oppositional character that would define for him the essence of critique.¹⁸

¹⁵ *conduire des conduites*: Michel Foucault, “Le sujet et le pouvoir,” *Dits et écrits*, II, 1041–62 (citation on p. 1056). See Davidson, “In Praise of Counter-Conduct,” 28.

¹⁶ For a welcome insistence on the indissociable combination of those two oppositional impulses in Foucault’s conception of critique, see now Lorenzini and Tiisala, “The Architectonic of Foucault’s Critique.”

¹⁷ Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-1978*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2007), 201; quoted by Davidson, “In Praise of Counter-Conduct,” 28, whose interpretation I follow here.

¹⁸ As Lorenzini, “From Counter-Conduct to Critical Attitude,” 19, puts it, “The ‘passage’ from counter-conduct to critical attitude is thus only the first step Foucault takes into a far wider project which

Like counter-conduct (and, eventually, like feminism and gay liberation, according to Foucault),¹⁹ critique is a counter-movement, a positive form of willful resistance. If the process of governmentalization foregrounded the question of how to govern others and oneself, the resistance to it that went by the name of critique featured another question, Foucault contends: not the question of how to govern, but the question of how *not* to be governed. Foucault does not claim that the forces of governmentalization somehow encountered their historical opposite in the form of a principled refusal to be governed or a popular rebellion against being governed at all. Rather, he observes that throughout all the discussions in the early modern period about how to govern there arose, in different contexts and from different sources, a perpetual question about “how not to be governed *like that*, by this or that agency, in the name of this or that principle, to this or that end, by this or that proceeding—like that, for that, by them” (37). The critical counter-movements that sprang up in opposition to the new arts of governing, in other words, were not the manifestation of some deep “fundamental anarchism” or the expression of a stubborn and ineradicable human freedom (65); they were, rather, unsystematic and dispersed: varied, scattered, local, and necessarily strategic.²⁰

It is here that Foucault discovers the historical genealogy of what he calls “the critical attitude.” The critical attitude is at once the partner and the adversary of the multiplying arts of government: it expresses a tendency to be wary of them, to reject them, restrict them, set proper limits to them, transform them, try to escape from them, or displace them, yet all the while—by virtue of this very degree of constructive engagement with them—it collaborates with them and extends the line of their development. Critique is complicit in that sense with the very powers it resists. It is this dialectical interaction, or at least this immanent relation,²¹ between

consists in rethinking resistance as an ethico-political task essentially centered on the effort by the individual to practice and experiment with different modes of subjectivation”; further, “Foucault introduces . . . the concept of critical attitude as a—or better *the*—form that counter-conduct takes in modern societies, realizing at the same time the necessity to raise the question of the *will* (to be or not to be governed *like that*) in order to rethink resistance within the framework of governmental strategies. . . . the notion of critical attitude . . . allows him to highlight the *voluntary* aspect of resistance to governmental power relations” (p. 8). Also, Davidson, “In Praise of Counter-Conduct,” 37.

¹⁹ Folkers, “Daring the Truth,” 3-4, observes that, as early as 1976, Foucault was already treating the “dispersed and discontinuous offensives” of the post-1968 feminist, lesbian, and gay movements (aka “the attacks that have been made on, say, morality and the traditional sexual hierarchy”) as effectuating the “criticizability of things, institutions, practices, and discourses” and thus as contributing to the expansion of critique (the quoted material derives from Michel Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*”: *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*, trans. David Macey [New York: Picador, 2003], 5-6).

²⁰ See Daniele Lorenzini and Arnold I. Davidson, “Introduction,” in Foucault, *Qu’est-ce que la critique ?* (p. 17).

²¹ “Immanent relation” is Davidson’s formulation (“In Praise of Counter-Conduct,” 27).

governmentality and the resistance it provokes that ultimately produces in Europe at the dawn of the modern era a new phenomenon, according to Foucault, “a sort of general cultural form, both a moral and political attitude and a manner of thinking, etc., which I would simply call the art of not being governed, or rather the art of not being governed like that and at that cost.” And he offers as a first, admittedly imprecise definition of critique, the following “general characterization: the art of not being governed quite so much” (37).

Foucault goes on to elaborate on that preliminary definition as follows: if “governmentalization really is this movement which had to do, in the very reality of a social practice, with subjecting individuals by mechanisms of power that lay claim to a truth, well then,” he continues, “I would say that critique is the movement by which the subject gives itself the right to question truth about its effects of power and to question power about its discourses of truth.” And he adds, in a climactic phrase of characteristically untranslatable eloquence, “critique will be the art of deliberate insubordination, of considered indocility” (*l’art de l’inservitude volontaire, celui de l’indocilité réfléchie*) (39).

Foucault’s phrase, *l’inservitude volontaire*, literally “willful inservitude,” which I have translated blandly as “deliberate insubordination,” is a clever reversal of the title of a daring, anonymous treatise, “Discourse on Voluntary Servitude,” clandestinely published in 1577 by a group of French Protestants, posthumously attributed by Montaigne to his bosom friend Étienne de la Boétie, and supposedly composed by the latter in his early youth. The treatise argues that rulers prevail only because their subjects voluntarily, foolishly, willingly surrender their freedom. Critique, by contrast, would consist in the deliberate, willful refusal of such subordination, the determined rejection of such servitude.²² Foucault concludes that “the purpose of critique would basically be desubjection [*désassujettissement*], in a game of what one might call, in a word, the politics of truth” (39).

*

By “critique,” then, Foucault refers very broadly to a modern pre-Kantian tradition of oppositional thought and action—less a philosophy or a formalized knowledge-practice than an attitude, a defiant urge, an impulse of contestation, an interrogation of both the power-effects of truth and the truth-claims of power. Foucault goes on to identify that critical attitude quite closely with “the Enlightenment,” as Kant defines it in his famous 1784 newspaper article, “An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?” There Kant inquires into the nature of our present and undertakes what Foucault would later call a critical

²² Lorenzini, “From Counter-Conduct to Critical Attitude,” esp. 17-18, highlights the role of the will in Foucault’s model of critique.

“ontology of ourselves.”²³ Kant argues that the Enlightenment consists in humankind’s emergence (*Ausgang*) from a state of culpable immaturity in which people were too cowardly to trust in their own powers of reasoning; instead, they allowed their thinking to be guided uncritically by various authorities. Now, in a state of Enlightenment, humanity will make free use of its own understanding. For Kant, then, Enlightenment consists in a courageous revolt of reason against the long reign of the absolute power of unquestioned authority. On Foucault’s reading, Kant describes the Enlightenment as a practical attitude of resistance to the power of government to guide its subjects, an attitude expressed in the form of a challenge to the relations among subjectivity, power, and truth; in other words, Kant’s definition of the Enlightenment prefigures Foucault’s definition of critique.²⁴

Foucault sets off this understanding of the Enlightenment as the triumph of critique from the more formal philosophical exercise that since Kant, and because of Kant, has gone by the name of *Critique*, that has subsequently become identified with the Enlightenment itself, and that consists in defining the scope and proper limits of knowledge—establishing its legitimacy, refining its techniques, and specifying the conditions under which it can grasp the truth. Just as the Enlightenment, on Kant’s view, is a process of making the world safe for reason, so *Critique* becomes a procedure for making reason safe for itself. As a result of Kant’s invention of critical philosophy, according to Foucault, a gap emerged between the pre-Kantian project of critique and the subsequent disciplinary version of the Enlightenment, one in which reason lays down the law to itself and gives itself rules—as in a constitutional monarchy (another invention of the Enlightenment). Like the king under that new régime, reason attains sovereignty in Kant’s enlightened system on the condition of submitting to rational constraints. Reason thereby forestalls any illegitimate uses of itself that might conduce to dogmatism or illusion; at the same time and by the same means, it conveniently dispenses the state from the need to regulate it. Reason thus secures its freedom and autonomy, but only at the cost of assuming the task of policing itself. If Kant’s 1784 article identifies the Enlightenment with what Foucault understood as a longstanding critical impulse, Kant’s transformation of critique into analytic philosophy opens an unfortunate gap, in Foucault’s eyes, between the Enlightenment and critique.

Although Foucault went on to revise the terms of his argument in 1983 and 1984, his later accounts of the genealogy of critique retain the essence of his earlier distinction, which consists in differentiating between critique and *Critique*, between the overlapping but contrasting projects of criticism and analysis: “an ontology of the present” versus “an analytics of truth,”²⁵ critique as resistance and critique as

²³ Michel Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at the Collège de France 1982-1983*, ed. Frédéric Gros, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2011), 21.

²⁴ I reproduce here the conclusion of Lorenzini and Davidson, “Introduction,” in Foucault, *Qu’est-ce que la critique ?* (p. 18).

²⁵ Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*, 20-21.

discipline, philosophy as an oppositional mode of thought and philosophy as a positive science. And he even went so far as to suggest that “modern European philosophy” from Descartes’ *Meditations* to Kant’s “What Is Enlightenment?” might itself be interpreted, because of its critical ethos, “as a parrhesiastic enterprise.”²⁶

Foucault’s ultimate aim is to challenge a post-Kantian trend in the history of modern thought according to which the meanings of “critique” and “critical philosophy” have been overtaken and narrowly redefined by the analytic exercise that Kant founded and to which he gave the name of *Critique*—a trend that has had the effect of reducing the grand critical project of the Enlightenment to the formal practice of critique. Foucault is not unsympathetic to Kant’s impulse to set limits to reason (after all, later excesses of bureaucratic and scientific rationality gave even Kant’s restrained, reduced version of critique lots of urgent work to do), but in “What Is Critique?” he seeks to reverse this historical process and to heal the breach between critique and *Critique* that Kant opened up. Foucault strives to recover and to distinguish a properly “critical [i.e., oppositional] attitude” from the formal practice of so-called “critical [i.e., analytic] philosophy” and he reinterprets the meaning of the Enlightenment in such a way that its intellectual and political traditions, which remain fundamental to modern liberal societies, may continue to serve—or may once again be made to serve—as effective vehicles for combining critical reflection and political resistance, thereby providing a new impetus for what he memorably calls, in the final version of his lecture on Kant and the Enlightenment, “the limitless work of freedom” (*le travail indéfini de la liberté*).²⁷

Like “Enlightenment” in Kant’s original formulation of it, “critique,” according to Foucault’s definition of the pre-Kantian attitude, represents a reaction against an excess of authoritarian rule, specifically against that art of government which consists in one person guiding another’s thinking and conducting their conduct. Both the pre-Kantian critical attitude and the formal Kantian practice of critical philosophy contributed to the evolution of the styles of reading and literary analysis

²⁶ Ibid., 349. Cf. 350: “Kant’s text on the *Aufklärung* [Enlightenment] is a certain way for philosophy [...] to become aware of problems which were traditionally problems of *parrēsia* in antiquity” (quoted by Lorenzini, “From Counter-Conduct to Critical Attitude,” 20); on the art of not being governed as a recuperation of the “core ethos” of *parrhēsia*, according to Foucault, see Folkers, “Daring the Truth,” 10. Lorenzini and Davidson (note 20, above), 25, point out the correspondences between Foucault’s remarks about “the courage of the *Aufklärung*” in 1978 and his characterization of *parrhēsia* as “the courage of truth” in 1984; they go on to note another example of Foucault’s linking of Kant’s “What Is Enlightenment?” with his own inquiries into the historical ontology of ourselves through the study of Graeco-Roman antiquity: namely, Foucault’s lecture at the University of California in Berkeley on “The Culture of the Self,” delivered on April 12, 1983, and published in French translation with critical commentary in Foucault, *Qu’est-ce que la critique?* (pp. 81-98).

²⁷ Michel Foucault, “Qu’est-ce que les Lumières ?” *Dits et écrits*, IV, 562-578 (quotation on p. 574); I have reluctantly amended the beautiful and familiar but imprecise translation by Catherine Porter (“the undefined work of freedom”): see Michel Foucault, “What Is Enlightenment?” *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 32-50 (quotation on p. 46).

that postcritical theorists identify with critique. In the first case, the determination to resist ecclesiastical authority gave rise to scholarly techniques of textual criticism, including hermeneutics, which empowered readers to analyze the workings of a text and to probe its meanings; in the second case, critique encouraged the elaboration of formal methodologies which served to underwrite the legitimate authority of properly trained readers to establish a sound understanding of a text and to disqualify naïve or uncritical interpretations. In neither case, however, is critique born of suspicion. Rather, it confronts and contests forms of authority—whether expert or lay—that constrain human autonomy. Critique is the manifestation of an inextinguishable will to power—or, at least, of an inextinguishable will not to be overpowered, not to be controlled and ruled. It is the expression of a counter-will.²⁸ It is a practice of freedom.

Foucault himself channels the indocility of critique when, in the course of championing its cause, he goes out of his way to defy the conventional wisdom that exhorts us not to criticize unless we have something positive to say—unless we are willing to propose something positive to take the place of whatever it is that we are criticizing. Foucault refuses indignantly to subordinate critique to the demand to be “constructive”: he repudiates any disciplinary constraint that might blunt the militant thrust of critique. His most uncompromising statement of that outlook can be found in the remarks he made at a roundtable discussion with a group of historians that transpired on May 20, 1978, exactly one week before he delivered his untitled lecture on critique:

The necessity of reform must absolutely not be used as a kind of blackmail in order to limit, to reduce, and to halt the exercise of critique. Under no circumstances should you listen to those who tell you, “Don’t criticize if you’re not capable of carrying out a reform.” That’s ministerial cabinet talk. Critique doesn’t have to be the premise of an argument whose outcome is: here then is what is left for you to do. It should be an instrument for those who fight, who resist, and who want no further part of that which is. Critique should be utilized in the actual conduct of conflicts, of confrontations, of essays in refusal. It doesn’t have to lay down the law to the law. . . . It is a challenge directed to that which is.²⁹

Critique, defined in these terms, is a weapon to be used in concrete, specific, evolving struggles. Unlike paranoia, critique in Foucault’s conception does not

²⁸ Lorenzini, “From Counter-Conduct to Critical Attitude,” 19.

²⁹ I quote Foucault’s remarks from the “Table ronde du 20 mai 1978,” in *L’Impossible Prison. Recherches sur le système pénitentiaire au XIX^e siècle*, ed. Michelle Perrot (Paris: Seuil, 1980), 40-56 (quotation on pp. 53-54); *Dits et écrits*, IV, 20-34 (quotation on p. 32), adapting the translation by Colin Gordon, “Questions of Method,” in *The Foucault Effect*, 73-86 (quotation on p. 84).

involve endless shadow-boxing with imaginary, projected enemies.³⁰ On the contrary, it is reactive, dependent, and secondary “in relation to philosophy, science, politics, morality, law, literature, etc., as positively constituted” (34). It intervenes in an already existing situation into which it aspires to introduce a change.

*

These reflections bring us to Foucault’s remarks about the Cynics, an ancient Greek school of philosophy founded, or inspired, by Diogenes of Sinope in the fourth century B.C., during the decades immediately following the death of Socrates in 399. Foucault devotes the second half of his final lecture series on *The Courage of Truth* at the Collège de France in 1984 entirely to the Cynics. They are far from being his only examples of *parrhēsia*—he discusses Socrates at length, along with passages from the Greek tragedians and orators, the Roman moralists, and the early Christians—but he pays special and close attention to the Cynics and to the relation of Cynicism to later traditions in European philosophy.

I focus on the Cynics here because they are by far the queerest of all the ancient philosophical schools. They were the subject of much vilification and ridicule in antiquity. Moreover, they produced very little in the way of theory or doctrine, and what they did write has mostly not survived. They were generally given less to writing treatises—an omission which has made their thought tantalizingly inaccessible to later generations of students and historians, as Foucault acknowledges—than to embodying their ideas in a spectacularly scandalous and often offensive style of life. Cynic philosophy, as we possess it, consists largely of dicta by major representatives of the school, of anecdotes about Diogenes and other Cynic leaders, and of reflections on the Cynic way of life by Epictetus and assorted late antique commentators.

The correspondences between critique, as Foucault characterizes it in his various oral presentations in the spring of 1978, and the ancient Greek notion and practice of *parrhēsia* emerge with striking clarity from Foucault’s discussion of the Cynics. The word *parrhēsia*, to be sure, was not exactly a byword of Cynicism, but it crops up with some regularity in the ancient literature on them. Most notably, a late antique biographer recounts that when Diogenes was once asked “what in human beings was most beautiful,” he replied, “*Parrhēsia*.”³¹ Foucault further justifies his decision to treat the Cynics as exemplars of *parrhēsia* by noting that “the Cynic is constantly characterized as the man of *parrhēsia*” in the writings of much later

³⁰ Cf. Kurnick, “A Few Lies,” 367: “The paranoiac invents structures where none exist; the world he sees is a dark diagram of his projective fantasies.”

³¹ Diogenes Laertius, 6.69, quoted by Michel Foucault, *The Courage of Truth (The Government of Self and Others II): Lectures at the Collège de France 1983-1984*, ed. Frédéric Gros, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2012), 166; all further page references to this publication will be incorporated in my text.

ancient philosophers, biographers, and satirists (166). Foucault expands on the connection between Cynicism and *parrhēsia* as follows: “It seems to me that in Cynicism, in Cynic practice, the requirement of an extremely distinctive form of life—with very characteristic, well defined rules, conditions, or modes—is strongly connected to the principle of truth-telling, of truth-telling without shame or fear, of unrestricted and courageous truth-telling, of truth-telling which pushes its courage and boldness to the point that it becomes intolerable insolence” (165).

Diogenes was one of many figures in the generation or two after Socrates who followed Socrates’ example by leading a philosophical life in accordance with the dictates of reason, giving a higher priority to the requirements of virtue than to the force of social convention. But he took those principles to more radical extremes than anyone else did. Plato, his contemporary, is supposed to have said that Diogenes was “Socrates gone mad.”³² For the Cynics, in fact, the philosophical life was an exercise in non-stop outrageousness. Their practice of *parrhēsia* disclosed a vehement counter-will. It required exceptional courage and intrepidity.

Like many Greek philosophers, Diogenes believed that the good life entailed living according to nature, but he understood that injunction in a highly idiosyncratic, uncompromising fashion and he acted out that ethic in flamboyantly anti-social ways. Having received a command from the oracle of Apollo at Delphi to “debase (or deface) the currency,” he set out to invert the standard values of Greek life, to flaunt accepted cultural forms, and by those means to bring about a massive alteration of the social world. He based his model of “living according to nature” on the animals: “cynic” derives from the Greek word for “dog,” a creature much reviled by the ancient Greeks for its shamelessness. Accordingly, Diogenes did not hesitate to masturbate and to defecate in public. He tried to eat raw meat (263). When not clothed in a rough and filthy cloak, he wore a barrel. He avoided marriage and domesticity, preferring to live destitute in the streets, begging for food. Even though his “only dish was a small bowl from which he drank water,” he felt reproved when he “saw a small boy at a fountain who drank from his hands cupped like a bowl,” so he threw away his bowl, “saying that it was pointless wealth” (258). He persuaded his disciple Crates, who came from a rich family, to cast his money into the sea—not to give it to the poor (according to one account), but simply to jettison it, as if it were intrinsically foul (240). When someone struck him on the head, he did not defend himself, saying only, “Next time I will wear a helmet” (261). Despite that refusal to fight, Diogenes was considered by his followers to have led a life of heroic struggle. He even claimed to be kinglier than Alexander the Great, who is said to have visited him and to have marveled at him: Diogenes maintained that his own freedom and autonomy, unlike Alexander’s, did not depend on the cooperation or the assistance of anyone else, which made his sovereignty far greater (276). By such behavior, and by the provocative dicta with which he justified it, Diogenes strove to display to his onlookers what emancipation looks like.

³² Diogenes Laertius, 6.54: “*Sōkratēs mainomenos.*”

*

Foucault doesn't exactly recommend that we all live like the Cynics, but he is clearly taken with the model they offer of radical, militant, uncompromising, and courageous social defiance in the service of truth. It is as if he found in the Cynics his star example of critique in action—critique as considered indocility and willful inservitude. Although he does not speak of Cynicism in quite those terms, one can discern in his final lectures some indication that he considers Cynic *parrhēsia* to be related to critique, as he had earlier defined it.

For example, Foucault introduces a distinction between an aesthetics of existence and a metaphysics of the soul, between philosophy as a way of life and philosophy as a metaphysics of truth, between philosophy as the quest for a different life—as an effort to transform the world—and metaphysics as the search for another world, for a world beyond this world.³³ He traces the divergence between these two modes of philosophy to Plato, where he finds

the starting point for two great lines of development of philosophical reflection and practice: on the one hand, philosophy as that which, by prompting and encouraging men to take care of themselves, leads them to the metaphysical reality of the soul, and, on the other, philosophy as a test of life, a test of existence, and the elaboration of a particular kind of form and modality of life. Of course, there is no incompatibility between these two themes of philosophy as test of life and philosophy as knowledge of the soul. However, although there is no incompatibility, and although in Plato, in particular, the two things are profoundly linked, I think nevertheless that we have here the starting point of two aspects, two profiles, as it were, of philosophical activity, of philosophical practice in the West (127).

When, in the second part of *The Courage of Truth*, Foucault comes to discuss the Cynics, he reprises his account of these “two great lines of development of philosophical reflection and practice,” elaborating it with a renewed emphasis and eloquence. He highlights in particular the Cynics' invention of a new experimental art of existence, their identification of true life with a life of truth, their pursuit of philosophy as a way of life, their practice of *parrhēsia* as a method of living the truth, and their efforts to lead a different life in order to bring into being a different world (*une vie autre pour un monde autre*)—not an other world (*un autre monde*), that is a world beyond this one (287).³⁴ For the Cynics, truth-telling is linked to a particular

³³ Habed, “Queer Critique and Its Discontents,” 71, plausibly argues that this distinction between two modes of philosophy “mirrors” the distinction Foucault draws, with reference to critique, between “an ontology of ourselves” and “an analytics of truth” in the writings of Kant.

³⁴ For the French citations, see Michel Foucault, *Le courage de la vérité. Le gouvernement de soi et des autres II. Cours au Collège de France, 1983–1984*, ed. Frédéric Gros (Paris: Seuil-Gallimard, 2009), 264.

form of life, to a daring and courageous life of truth. That true life is a radically different life: *la vraie vie est la vie autre* (244).³⁵ Cynicism represents philosophy as a historico-critical experience of life (315),³⁶ not as a metaphysical experience of transcendental reality.

Cynicism, like critique, offers a model of transgression that does not turn transgression into a new discipline—into a job description for an academic position in queer theory or queer literary studies. The Cynic test of existence, its historico-critical experience of life, entails a sharp departure, an *Ausgang* (to invoke Kant's characterization of the Enlightenment), from all conventional forms of existence. It issues in a shameless and scandalous and perilous practice of undefended self-exposure to social hostility and condemnation (231-234).³⁷ This is queerness not as reparativity or repair, not as accommodation to the world as it is—and certainly not as disdain for antinormativity or for moral contestation as a technique of self-fashioning—but as a way of life that is other, that is radically different from *any* known or existing form of life.

*

Although Foucault does not connect Cynic *parrhēsia* explicitly with critique in *The Courage of Truth*, as we might have expected,³⁸ he does make the connection explicit in his 1983 seminar on *parrhēsia* at the University of California in Berkeley, where he speaks at length about the Cynics and spells out the relation of *parrhēsia* to critique.

In the first session on October 24, 1983, when Foucault defines the ancient concept of *parrhēsia*, he observes that *parrhēsia* “has always the function of criticism. Criticism of oneself, the speaker himself, or criticism of the interlocutor. . . . In *parrhēsia*, the danger comes always from the fact that the truth you say is able to hurt or anger the interlocutor” (43). Foucault expands on this last point as follows:

³⁵ Foucault, *Le courage de la vérité*, 226.

³⁶ Foucault elsewhere credits Kant's “What Is Enlightenment?” with “open[ing] philosophy up to a whole historico-critical dimension,” thereby linking his account of Cynic truth-telling in *The Courage of Truth* to his earlier reflections on critique: see Michel Foucault, “Introduction,” in Georges Canguilhem, *The Normal and the Pathological*, trans. Carolyn R. Fawcett in collaboration with Robert S. Cohen (New York: Zone Books, 1989), 10; for this reference, I am indebted to Lorenzini and Davidson, “Introduction,” in Foucault, *Qu'est-ce que la critique ?* (p. 14).

³⁷ Cf. Christian Wildberg, “Cynicism: or, Philosophy as a Way of Strife,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 57 (2019), 341-368; Maxime Chapuis, *Figures de la marginalité dans la pensée grecque. Autour de la tradition cynique* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2021 [2022]).

³⁸ Davidson, “In Praise of Counter-Conduct,” 38, calls Cynic *parrhēsia* “the apex of philosophical counter-conduct.” Habed, “Queer Critique and Its Discontents,” characterizes “the Cynic life” as “perhaps the ultimate example of parrhesia for Foucault” (71) and highlights its significance “for a queer critique” (82).

It is this position of criticism which is the specific characteristic of *parrēsia*. *Parrēsia* is a criticism, it is a criticism, a self-criticism or a criticism oriented towards the others, but always in situations where the speaker is in a position of inferiority to the interlocutor. *Parrēsia* comes from “below” and is oriented towards those “above.” The parrhesiast is less powerful than his interlocutor. He is weaker than the one to whom he speaks and to whom he addresses his critiques. That is the reason why the Greeks wouldn’t say that a teacher or that a father, when he criticizes a child, uses *parrēsia*. . . . But when a philosopher criticizes the prince, when a citizen criticizes the majority, when the pupil criticizes the teacher, then he uses *parrēsia*. So, you see, *parrēsia* implies sincerity, *parrēsia* implies a relation to truth, a coincidence between belief and truth, *parrēsia* implies a risk, *parrēsia* implies a criticism, a game of critique, in those situations where the speaker is in a position of inferiority towards the other (44).

Here, at last, Foucault explicitly identifies *parrhēsia* with “critique” and, specifically, with the critical resistance to people in power. Obviously, the critical function displayed by *parrhēsia* as it operated in the societies of the ancient Mediterranean world is not exactly the same critical function as that performed by critique at the dawn of governmentality in the early modern European world, but the two do correspond insofar as they both involve an attempt to engage their interlocutors in a game of truth with the aim of altering power relations in a concrete situation.

For that reason, it is not surprising to discover the existence, in Foucault’s thinking, of a direct genealogical relation between *parrhēsia* and critique: “In analyzing this notion of *parrēsia*, I would like also to outline the genealogy of what we could call the critical attitude in our society” (63). *Parrhēsia*, it turns out, did not vanish with the ancient world. It is alive and well today. Nowadays it takes the form of critique.

I think that in our society, even if we don’t have the word *parrēsia*, the parrhesiastic role, what we could call the “critical role,” is something which is very important. There is at least a very sharp, very fierce competition in our society for this function of telling the truth in the parrhesiastic way; there is competition between religious movements, political parties, the university, and the press (the newspapers and the media). Those four kinds of institutions—religious movements, political parties, university, and the press or media—are institutions that pretend to do their own job and to also play the parrhesiastic game. The contest between those four institutions is fierce and sharp.

As you see, the second reason why I am interested in *parrēsia* is this one. I would like in studying this parrhesiastic role both to study the way the culture of the self has been developed in ancient societies through this specific truth game which is the parrhesiastic game, and second point, I would like to analyze through this history of *parrēsia* in ancient culture the

beginning, the genealogy of what in our society we call the critical attitude. Since I think that in our society the critical role, the critical attitude—either from the philosophical point of view or the political one, or the religious one—this critical attitude derives from this parrhesiastic role that the Greek philosophy has discovered, invented. At the point of juncture for the genealogy of subjectivity and the genealogy of the critical attitude, the analysis of *parrēsia* is a part of what I could call the historical ontology of ourselves, since we are, as human beings, beings who are able to tell the truth and to transform ourselves, our habits, our *ethos*, our society, to transform ourselves by telling the truth. So that's the general framework of this seminar about *parrēsia* (67-68).

At the conclusion of the Berkeley seminar, towards the end of the final session on November 30, 1983, Foucault ties together the various threads of his thinking, no longer locating the origins of critique in early modern Europe but now discovering them unambiguously in the ancient Greek world.

I would say that the great problematization of truth, which characterizes the end of pre-Socratic philosophy and the beginning of a kind of new philosophy which is still ours, this problematization of truth has two sides, two major aspects. One is concerned with the question of how to make sure that a statement is true, that its reasoning is correct, and that we are able to get access to truth. And the other is concerned with the question of the importance for individuals, for the community, for the city, for society, of telling the truth and of having people telling the truth and of recognizing which people are able to tell the truth. On one side, the question of how to make sure that a statement is true, I think that you find the foundation, the roots of a great tradition in Western philosophy, and I would call it the tradition of the analytics of truth. On the other [side], [you find] the tradition of the question: what is the importance of telling the truth, who is able to tell the truth, and why should we tell the truth, know the truth, and recognize who is able to tell the truth? I think that is at the root, at the foundation of what we could call the critical tradition of philosophy in our society. From this point of view, you recognize one of my aims since the beginning of this seminar: to fashion a kind of genealogy of the critical attitude in philosophy (223-224).

Here again, one last time, we recognize the familiar distinction between an analytics of truth and the critical attitude, between a methodology designed to secure knowledge and to legitimate the procedures for arriving at it, on the one hand, and a practice of contestation that takes the form of the politics of truth, on the other.

Foucault's understanding of critique and *parrhēsia* bears little resemblance to the portrayal of critique by postcritical theorists as a perverse expression of suspicion or as an effort to unmask hidden enemies. Rather, it centers on truth as a site of contestation and on the courage that may be necessary to achieve emancipation, whether intellectual or political. It places emphasis on the goals of changing the world and of transforming or reinventing the self. As such, Foucault's model of critique and *parrhēsia* aligns with his promotion of the gay movement as a queer insurgency not unlike ancient Cynicism—as a resistance, that is, both to intellectual traditions (of homophobia, in this case) and to specific, oppressive social arrangements. The lesbian and gay movement, as Foucault saw it, was a new historic opportunity that could afford everyone—queers and straights alike—the possibility of transforming ourselves through a daring life experiment. He specifically called on queer radicals to discard the science of sexuality in favor of a new aesthetics of existence. It was through such a historico-critical experience of life that gay men, in particular, might be able, at long last, to “become homosexual.”³⁹

It is not my contention that Foucault offers us the last word on the subject of critique. I do not claim that anything he says is right. I am not intent on extracting from Foucault a new and normative definition of critique, let alone to impose it on all those who are or who aspire to be queer. I merely observe that Foucault's final reflections provide a different model of critique from the one familiar to us from the recent debates in literary studies over reading methods. Foucault's model of critique is also, as I have tried to show, a radically queer one, far queerer than most of what passes for queer praxis in current literary studies. As such, it could, I believe, provide queer theorists with an impetus, an incentive, or at least an inspiration to reconsider our recent disenchantment with antinormativity along with some of our current, punitive assumptions about the paranoid nature of critique and about the necessity of abandoning critique in favor of postcritique and other contemporary fashions.

³⁹ See David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 56-106.