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Alexandre Gefen reviews Les Aveux de la chair

Michel Foucault. *Les Aveux de la chair*, vol. 4 of *Histoire de la sexualité*. Edited by Frédéric Gros. Paris: Gallimard, 2018. 448 pp.

Review by [Alexandre Gefen](#). Translated by Haun Saussy.

Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* opened in 1976 with the appearance of its first volume, originally titled *La Volonté de savoir*, which described how bourgeois society succeeded the church in making sexuality a deep truth to be excavated.^[1] Later, as we know, the project took a radically new direction. With *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self*, Foucault proposed a genealogy of the subject through an exploration of arts of existence.^[2] Drafted in 1981–1982 and left in an advanced state of composition at the philosopher's death, *Les Aveux de la chair* (The Avowals of the Flesh) is meant, as the author put it, to cover "the experience of the flesh in the first centuries of Christianity, and the role played therein by the hermeneutics and purifying decipherment of desire."

Foucault's investigation begins with the end of the second century, the moment when the church fathers, Justin Martyr in particular, adopt the measures of management of *aphrodisia* (sexual relations) that had been developed by ancient paganism, especially by the Stoic moralists. How to make the human body a "temple of God" while maintaining the possibility of "the sowing of human seeds"? Long before the pessimistic and austere Christianity of Saint Augustine, a Christian moral teaching takes form that is "Hellenizing, Stoicizing, and inclined to naturalize the ethics of sexual relations," wherein sexuality, "through operations that bring light all the way to the core of selfhood," becomes a space of experience and knowledge, and the banishment of evil is identified with the discovery of truth. This is a historical moment that few have analyzed and that Foucault illuminates with his exceptional learning.

This fourth volume, awaited for thirty-four years, makes two major contributions. First, it outlines the genealogy of a certain number of Western values (virginity, chastity), sins, or prohibitions, some of which are still in force, by observing the transformation of ancient sexuality—conceived as a "paroxystic block" that was to be managed but not understood—into a modern analytic of the subject of desire. When Christianity affirms that "the uncontrolled male member is in the likeness of Adam in relation to God: a rebel," it becomes imperative to secure its governance in law and discourse. Second, and more generally, the book shows a transformation in the modes of "programming" of individuals—from the ancient analysis of the self, which sought to achieve self-knowledge as self-mastery, oriented to the future and free of any idea of guilt, to the Christian "examination as avowal" where inner awareness is attained through a death of the self. This takes the form of a ritual like that of penitence, inspired by both law and medicine, one which brings the individual to the breaking point of *ego non sum ego*. Thus, Foucault's final volume reveals to us, even as the bookstores are packed with self-help manuals, a broader history of "practices of the direction of life."

[1] See Michel Foucault, *An Introduction*, vol. 1 of *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, 1978).

[2] See Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, vol. 2 of *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Hurley (New York, 1985) and *The Care of the Self*, vol. 3 of *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Hurley (New York, 1986).

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Les aveux de la chair

par

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