PART II

Forms of Paganism

3

Foucault's Modernism: Language, Poetry, and the Experience of Freedom

> More than simply an event that affected our emotions that gave rise to the fear of nothingness, the death of God profoundly influenced our language; at the source of language it placed a silence that no work, unless it be pure chatter, can mask. Language thus assumes a sovereign position; it comes to us from elsewhere, from a place of which no one can speak, but it can be transformed into a work only if, in ascending to its proper discourse, it directs its speech toward this absence. In this sense, every work is an attempt to exhaust language; eschatology has become of late a structure of literary experience, and literary experience, by right of birth, is now of paramount importance.
>
> **—Michel Foucault, "Le 'non' du père"**

Modernism Once More. Fredric Jameson has usefully proposed that we think of modernism not as a period concept but, more loosely, as a "narrative category" in which topics like nineteenth-century realism, self-reflexive language, and the impersonality of the artist get articulated and rearticulated in multifarious ways.[1] It is certainly the case that modernism is often defined more clearly by examples than by theories—serial music, cubism, nonlinear or fragmentary texts like Stein's *Tender Buttons* (or Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*), as well as avant-garde groups like the Surrealists whose aim was often less to produce works of art than to develop new forms of experience and new dimensions of human subjectivity.[2] In English the term "high modernism" is reserved for overshadowing monuments like Joyce's

Ulysses and Pound's *Cantos*. I'm not sure there is a corresponding term among the French, who are apt to take their guidance less from Proust's *Grand Œuvre* than from the theater visionary Antonin Artaud, who thought that the task of the artist is not to produce masterpieces but to set in motion processes that dislocate rational, integrated, or otherwise settled forms of consciousness.[3] On a certain view modernism is made of events, not of works. A *museum* of modern art might arguably count as a defeat of modernism.[4]

In what follows I would like to examine some of the ways in which Michel Foucault's early writings provide resources for addressing the question of modernism. Of course, this is as much as to ask whether there is a concept of modernism that has a substantive place in Foucault's thinking. "Modernism," after all, is not really a term in his vocabulary, and when he does address the topic explicitly (as in one of his appreciations of Pierre Boulez), he refers only very generally to "the work of the formal," where the idea is to approach music, past or present, as Boulez does: "make it so that nothing remains fixed"—in other words, "make it new" (Ezra Pound's motto, the watchword of modernists both early and late) (DE.4:221/AME.232). However, Foucault's early texts on Hölderlin, Raymond Roussel, Georges Bataille, and Maurice Blanchot address in interesting ways one of the fundamental problems of modernist poetics, namely the relationship between literary or poetic language and the limits of experience, or more exactly between the *materiality* of language (its resistance to signification) and the transformations of subjectivity that this materiality puts into play (or perhaps exhibits) in the form of noncognitive experiences—experiences that Foucault characterizes variously in terms of death, absence, exteriority, and (interestingly) freedom. What Foucault means by these or any of his terms of art is never self-evident; his rule of language is to "make it so that nothing remains fixed" ("I am an experimenter," he said, "and in this sense I write in order to change myself and in order not to think the same thing as before") (DE.4:42/P.240). Roughly his idea is that the experience of language is a very different thing from the use of it. Experience is neither empirical nor intentional; it is an exposure of the subject to what it cannot grasp and in the face of which it cannot keep itself intact.[5] This notion (or region) of experience appears to be where Foucault's interest in literature begins, namely with the mythological identity of poetry and madness, which Foucault interprets as a certain experience of the alterity of language and in turn as a kind of writing that is no longer productive of works in the Aris-

totelian sense of logically integrated and translucent structures (that is, beautiful objects of art). Madness is, in Foucault's famous phrase, the "absence of the work."[6] As we shall see, this absence is not nugatory; it defines a theory of the *incompletion* or fragmentariness of the work of art that Blanchot summarizes with the word *désœuvrement* (worklessness).[7] It also leads to an interesting question of what the relationship might be between Foucault's early inquiries into the modernist themes of impersonality and fragmentation, and his later research into what he calls an "ethics of the self," where the idea is to constitute oneself, in a strong modernist sense, as a "work of art." By a "strong modernist sense" I mean that for Foucault "work" is an interminable project (more verb than noun, as in "daily work"). It is not something to be finished but something to be experienced in the way that Foucault regards each of his books as an experience rather than as a constituent of an *œuvre*: "however erudite my books may be, I've always conceived of them as direct experiences aimed at pulling myself free of myself, at preventing me from being the same" (DE.1:43/P.241–42).

Two Genealogies. Within a French context we might find some useful orientation by distinguishing between two early forms of modernism—Baudelaire's and Mallarmé's, where the one has to do with a certain antithetical but nevertheless intimate or proximate way of inhabiting the modern urbanized, rationalized world, while the other is defined by a certain antithetical relationship with language, where language is no longer a system for framing representations but has its own autonomy—its own modality of being that is irreducible to the functions that logic, linguistics, or philosophy of language attribute to it.

It was Baudelaire who gave the term "modernism" (or *modernité*) its first formal articulation. Here modernism concerns what one might call the relocation of the artist from his classical (or neoclassical) position as a mediator of universals to that of the close observer of the local and ephemeral—of what is *modern* in the sense of recent, short-lived, and superficial as against what is natural, essential, permanent, and true. "Modernity," says Baudelaire in "Le Peintre de la vie moderne" (1863), "is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is one half of art, the other being the eternal and immovable."[8] Baudelaire's modernist occupies the point of view of the street, that is, the point of view of the *flâneur*, or idler, who registers, with a detective's eye, the random and seemingly trivial details of his environ-

ment. Here the romantic theory of genius is turned on its head: whereas the genius is a transcendental agent of worldmaking, the modernist is a figure of nonidentity, a sensibility on whom nothing of the passing show is lost but who is himself transient, anonymous, and ironic, someone who makes himself blend imperceptibly into the scene that he traverses (Œ.2:686–87/SWA.393–94). Baudelaire's model of the modernist is Constantin Guys (1805–92), whose chief forms of composition are the illustration and the sketch, and whose mode of existence is that of the "man of the crowd" (Œ.2:687/SWA.395). M.C.G., as Baudelaire refers to him, aspires to invisibility. Baudelaire explains that "when [Guys] heard that I was proposing to make an assessment of his mind and talent, he begged me . . . to suppress his name, and to discuss his works only as though they were the works of some anonymous person" (Œ.2:688/SWA.395). Likewise M.C.G. "does not like to be called an artist" (Œ.2:689/SWA.397). An artist is a stock figure of the studio, the tavern, or the bedroom, any of which he might seldom leave, whereas Guys is driven by a child-like curiosity to wander the streets and arcades and to remember in detail whatever catches his eye—dandies, fashionable women, soldiers, prostitutes, carriages, horses, beggars, trifles in the shopwindow. Like the dandy, the modernist possesses "a subtle understanding of all the moral mechanisms of the world," but where the dandy is detached and *blasé*, the modernist "is dominated . . . by an insatiable passion, that of seeing and feeling" (Œ.2:691/SWA.399). His "excessive love of visible, tangible things, in their most plastic form, inspires him with a certain dislike of those things that go to make up the intangible kingdom of the metaphysician" (Œ.2:691/SWA.399). The temporality of modernism, its *donnée*, is the here and now, and of course this is never the same.[9]

There are two points here. First, in Baudelaire's modernism the unfinished and even disposable artwork replaces the museum piece (the oil painting, for example), even though the museum and the artbook will later find places for such things as caricatures, drawings, and studies. The idea is that the modernist artwork shares in the impermanence of what attracts it. Second, Baudelaire characterizes modernism not just formally in terms of a certain kind of work but ethically and, indeed, aesthetically in terms of a certain kind of displaced subjectivity—a kind of pagan subject: impersonal and refractory, a subject turned inside out the better to experience the sheer physicality of things. The Baudelairean subject exists outside itself in a condition of fascination:

> The crowd is his domain, just as the air is the bird's, and water that of the fish. His passion and his profession is to merge with the crowd. For the perfect *flâneur*, for the passionate observer it becomes an immense source of enjoyment to establish his dwelling in the throng, in the ebb and flow, the bustle, the fleeting and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel at home anywhere; to see the world, to be at the very centre of the world, and yet to be unseen of the world, such are some of the minor pleasures of those independent, intense, and impartial spirits, who do not lend themselves easily to linguistic definitions. The observer is a prince enjoying his incognito wherever he goes. . . . It is an ego athirst for the non-ego, and reflecting it at every moment in energies more vivid than life itself, always constant and fleeting. (Œ.2:691–92/SWA.399–400)

In contrast to the carnivorous spirit that one associates with the philosophical subject (Hegel's, for example), the modernist subject allows itself to be absorbed by its world, even at the cost of its own continuity, integrity, or substantive identity. In "Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire," Walter Benjamin (citing Baudelaire in order to describe him) writes: "Empathy is the nature of the intoxicant to which the *flâneur* abandons himself in the crowd. 'The poet enjoys the incomparable privilege of being himself and someone else as he sees fit. Like a roving soul in search of a body, he enters another person whenever he wishes. For him alone, all is open; if certain places seem closed to him, it is because in his view they are not worth inspecting.'"[10] As Benjamin says, Baudelaire was, strictly speaking, never himself; he was a repertoire of Parisian types: "*Flâneur*, apache, dandy and ragpicker were so many roles to him. . . . Behind the masks which he used up, the poet in Baudelaire preserved his incognito. He was as circumspect in his work as he was capable of seeming provocative in his personal associations. The incognito was the law of his poetry. His prosody is comparable to the map of a big city in which it is possible to move about inconspicuously, shielded by blocks of houses, gateways, courtyards" (GS.600/SWB.4:60–61).

The genealogy of the Baudelairean modernist can be traced back to Keats's concept of the poet's "negative capability" ("the poet has no character"; he creates by transforming himself into whatever is not himself), and to the romantic ironists of Jena (Friedrich Schlegel in particular), whom Kierkegaard accused of "transcendental buffoonery." The ironist, says Kierkegaard, has no *an sich*; he merely

"lives poetically," reinventing himself as he goes (if "himself" is the word).[11] More important, this genealogy can be traced forward to the later Foucault, whose project is not the Kierkegaardian ethic of self-transparency but the Baudelairean aesthetic of self-creation. Citing Baudelaire in "What is Enlightenment?" (1984), Foucault writes: "Modern man, for Baudelaire, is not the man who goes off to discover himself, his secrets and his hidden truth; he is the man who tries to invent himself. This modernity does not 'liberate man in his own being'; it compels him to face the task of producing himself [*la tâche de s'élaborer lui-même*]" (DE.4:571/EST.312). But this production is not a form of objectification. Foucault retains from Baudelaire the ironic themes of alterity and anonymity: as Foucault says in a late interview, the subject of self-creation is "not a substance. It is a form, and this form is not primarily or always identical to itself" (DE.4:718/EST.290). Rimbaud's great line, "Je est une autre," is also Foucault's.[12]

The displacement of the subject is also a key to Mallarmé's poetics, but his terms are different. At the level of experience, Mallarmé describes this event very dramatically in the language of negative theology—once as a struggle with God whose defeat or disappearance the poet experiences as a kind of ecstasy, but also (what perhaps amounts to the same thing) as a mystical encounter with *le Néant*, a quasi-Hegelian concept of absolute purity that enraptures the poet and, paradoxically, annihilates him as an experiencing subject: "My thought has thought itself through and reached a pure idea," Mallarmé writes in a famous letter. "What the rest of me has suffered during that long agony is indescribable. But, fortunately, I am quite dead now."[13] One might think of this as a phenomenological death (as against empirical, et cetera) because for Mallarmé poetry begins at the limit of phenomenological experience. Poetry as a work of lyric expression that gives intentional form to experience now gives way to a conception of poetry as the work of language, where the words of language are no longer to be construed as signs but have become, mysteriously, agents of their own activity. This is the upshot of a passage from Mallarmé's "Crise du vers" (1896): "L'œuvre pure implique la disparition éloqutoire du poëte, qui cède l'initiative aux mots, par le heurt de leur inégalité mobilisés; ils s'allument de reflets réciproques comme une virtuelle traînée de feux sur des pierreries, replaçant la respiration perceptible en l'ancien souffle lyrique ou la direction personnelle enthousiaste de la phrase" ("The pure work implies the elocutionary disappearance of the poet, who yields his initia-

tive to words, which are mobilized by the shock of their inequality; they light up with reciprocal reflections like a virtual stream of fireworks over precious stones, replacing the perceptible respiration of the old lyric breath, or the enthusiastic personal control of the sentence.").[14] How is it possible for language to become its own agent? Mallarmé does not provide a systematic answer to this question, but he does come to think of the poem as a material construction of words, a work of writing (*écriture*) in which the letters of the alphabet form the crucial matrix, since they are capable of endless combinations and so (like the Kabbalist's scriptures) potentially contain all of creation—hence Mallarmé's idea that the world was meant to exist in a splendid book (ŒM.378). In his last years Mallarmé tried to describe the material properties of this *Grand Œuvre*, in which not only the written words but the white space of the page and the fold in the middle of the book would be essential to the aesthetic of the whole. (The book of course could not be written, but Mallarmé gave us a fragment of it in *Un coup de dés*.)[15]

Literature as Such. It is this Mallarméan aesthetic that Foucault invokes near the end of *Les mots et les choses* (1966) when he speaks of the emergence of "literature as such," which is a complex event in the history of language. (Foucault confidently locates it at the end of the eighteenth or early in the nineteenth century, but it is also an event whose terminus has never been fixed.) Whereas for the Renaissance language was a rich, cornucopian environment of words and things, modernity thematizes language as an object of knowledge for logic, linguistics, philology, and eventually for various philosophies of language (including, finally, structuralism). The project of modernity is to make language (like everything else) conceptually transparent and convertible to use. Foucault's idea is that "literature as such" (one could just as well call it "literary modernism") is something like the rebellion of language against this attempt to reduce it: "Literature is the contestation of philology . . . : it leads language back from grammar to the naked power of speech, and there it encounters the untamed, imperious being of words." We'll see in a moment what "the untamed, imperious being of words" entails. At the least it means that literature is refractory to models, categories, criteria, and rules of every sort. It is no longer a genre distinction but is more event than work:

> [Literature] breaks with the whole definition of *genres* as forms adapted to an order of representations, and becomes merely a

> manifestation of a language which has no other law than that of affirming—in opposition to all other forms of discourse—its own precipitous existence; and so there is nothing for it to do but to curve back in a perpetual return upon itself, as if its discourse could have no other content than the expression of its own form; it addresses itself to itself as a writing subjectivity, or it seeks to re-apprehend the essence of all literature in the movement that brought it into being; and thus all its threads converge upon the finest of points—singular, instantaneous, and yet absolutely universal—upon the simple act of writing. At the moment when language, as spoken and scattered words, becomes an object of knowledge, we see it reappearing in a strictly opposite modality: a silent, cautious disposition of the word upon the whiteness of a piece of paper, where it can possess neither sound nor interlocutor, where it has nothing to say but itself, nothing to do but shine in the brightness of its being. (MeC.313/OT.300)

This is an uncompromising description of the autonomy (or, more exactly, heteronomy) of literature, but it needs careful reading. Sometimes this passage is brought under the sign of a formalist or structuralist conception of literature as a self-operating system of rules and relations capable of generating from within itself an infinity of possible utterances. Certainly this construction captures something, particularly in view of the essential formalism of European poetics (and linguistics) after Mallarmé and Saussure: the Russian formalists, the Prague structuralists, Emile Benveniste, and so on down through the Tel Quel group. But this is not exactly Foucault's idea. In a number of contexts (and this is a thesis that he never modifies) he says that in modernity literature "ceased to belong to the order of discourse and became the manifestation of language in its thickness [*épaisseur*]." Literature is no longer an expression of the subject, but neither is it a function of "the pure formalism of language" (DE.1:502/EW.2:265). Literature just *is* the "thickness" of language: it is the disclosure of "the being of language," a phrase that Foucault summons repeatedly, but almost always as a way of marking a conceptual limit: the "being of language" is precisely what cannot be objectified or thematized. It can only be *experienced* in its materiality, alterity, or exteriority—terms that Foucault often gathers together under the figure of *écriture*, as when language "addresses itself to itself as a writing subjectivity," where a *writing* subjectivity is different from one composed of intentions.

The "being of language" is not an easy idea. Early in *Les mots et les choses* the term is introduced by way of an astonishing assertion that "language . . . exists in its raw and primitive being [*être brut et primitif*], in the simple, material form of writing, a stigma upon things, a mark imprinted across the world which is part of its most ineffaceable forms" (MeC.57/OT.42). Raw language? The idea seems like a joke at structuralism's expense, but Foucault means what he says. In modernity, literature "separated itself from all other language with a deep scission . . . by forming a sort of 'counter-discourse,' and by finding its way back from the representative and signifying function of language to this raw being that had been forgotten since the sixteenth century" (MeC.59/OT.44). "Raw being" is just what is uncontainable within any system, but which at the same time the system cannot exclude.[16] In his essay on Blanchot, "La pensée du dehors" (1966), Foucault says that "the event of literature" is "no longer discourse and the communication of meaning, but a spreading forth of language in its raw state, an unfolding of pure exteriority" (DE.1:519/AME.148).

Pure exteriority means: an outside not correlated with an inside, not the object of a subject, but instead an outside that cannot be objectified, fixed, or determined and so held in place or at bay. Imagine the boundary between outside and inside as porous or floating—a boundary defined by invisible infiltration and exodus rather than by lines and checkpoints. Kantian theory (in most of its versions) pictures art and literature as occupants of a differentiated ream of the aesthetic—a region sealed off from the world of cognition and action, if not from the supervision of philosophy. Adorno's aesthetic theory pictures the work of art as a formal construction irreducible to the materials of which it is made and therefore external to the realm of commodities in which it may nevertheless be made to circulate, but of which it remains essentially critical.[17] Foucault's thinking is closer to the (late) modernist poetics of the North American "language poets" for whom the materiality of language—which includes the social and historical as well as the nonsemantic dimensions of language—is a region to be explored through often extravagant and theatrical forms of experimental writing, but also, at the limit of poetic experience, in *sound poetry*, in which vocal and buccal noises are no longer in the service of grammatical forms.[18] As it happens, much of modernism is made of noise.[19] Think of noise as an instance of exteriority.

Noise. *Writing* is a "raw and naked act" (DE.1:556/AME.173). Its rawness means (roughly) that it takes place outside the subject, outside the order of things, outside the order of discourse, but perhaps in the way the uncooked is "outside" the definition (but not the experience) of the human. Exteriority is not another world, not a totally differentiated state against which sameness or identity could be measured. On the contrary, it is a dimension of anarchic experience (experience on the hither side of principle and rule) to which the subject and, indeed, the order of discourse or of things are constantly exposed. The difficulty of the outside is keeping it there.

The basic argument of *L'ordre du discours* is not difficult to follow, but perhaps it is not always followed out to the end. The order in question refers of course to various complex forms of cultural organization—taboos, analytic systems of exclusion (as between reason and madness, truth and falsity), disciplines of learning motivated by a "will to truth," fellowships of discourse that determine who has the right to speak about what, and assorted myths (the founding subject, the originating experience, the authority of universals): in short, a vast system of procedures and constraints whose task is to control discourse, "to avert its powers and its dangers, to cope with chance events, to evade its ponderous, awesome materiality" (OD.11/AK.216). Naturally the question is: What does this last line mean? What is discourse, exactly, and in what does its "ponderous, awesome materiality" consist? The question is complex because, on the one hand, discourse is not another word for language or speech. By the time of *L'Archéologie du savoir* (1969) the concept of language has been folded into that of discourse, so there is no more talk of "the raw being of language." Discourse is made of institutions, rules, practices, objects, events (as well as gaps and voids), but it is nothing in itself: "The existence of systems of rarefaction does not imply that, over and beyond them, lie great vistas of limitless discourse, continuous and silent, repressed and driven back by them, making it our task to abolish them and at last restore it to speech. Whether talking in terms of speaking or thinking, we must not imagine some unsaid thing, or an unthought, floating about the world, interlacing with all its forms and events" (OD.54/AK.229). On the other hand, however, discourse is still *something*—not, to be sure, an entity, ideal or otherwise: not, for example, a Heideggerian *Sage*, but *something* that remains (like language) external to the social forces that try regulate it:

> What civilization, in appearance, has shown more respect towards discourse than our own? Where has it been more and

> better honoured? Where have men depended more radically, apparently, upon its constraints and its universal character? But, it seems to me, a certain fear hides behind this apparent veneration of discourse, this apparent logophilia. It is as though these taboos, these barriers, thresholds and limits were deliberately disposed in order, at least partly, to master and control the great proliferation of discourse, in such a way as to relieve its richness of its most dangerous elements; to organize its disorder so as to skate round its most uncontrollable aspects. It is as though people had wanted to efface all trace of its irruption into the activity of our thought and language. There is undoubtedly in our society, and I would not be surprised to see it in others, though taking different forms and modes, a profound logophobia, a sort of dumb fear of these events, of this mass of spoken things, of everything that could possibly be violent, discontinuous, querulous, disordered even and perilous in it, of the incessant, disorderly buzzing of discourse. (OD.51–53/AK.228–29; transl. amended)

Discourse is not transcendent, that is, it is not outside the order of things, but neither is it altogether containable within it. Discourse is never fully digestible. Imagine *logophobia* (initially) as a fear of the sheer *excess* of discourse, its hypertrophic existence not in some far-off wilderness but as a kind of anarchy that threatens from within every effort of speaking or the will to truth. As if discourse had about it a kind of rawness, thickness, or alterity after all. Discourse does not exist outside of the systems that try to reduce it, but it must be thinned out or "rarefied" in order for these systems to be productive. Discourse is made possible by being parsimonious ("*everything* is never said" [AS.141/AK.118]); but evidently not everything about it can be eliminated—for example, what to make of that "incessant, disorderly buzzing"?

One of Foucault's favorite stories is Kafka's "The Burrow," in which an unidentified creature constructs an immense underground labyrinth (a *Burgplatz*) to protect itself against its enemies, but one day its domain is invaded (or pervaded) by an indeterminate, irregular, "almost inaudible" noise, a sort of whistling or murmuring that comes from nowhere, is uniformly everywhere, and cannot be got rid of. In "Le langage à infini" (1963), Foucault associates this noise with death as a kind of omnipresent absence that concentrates our attention—*and* enlists our response (and note, for the record, what

kind of response): It is a "disquieting sound that announces from the depths of language the source against which we seek refuge and toward which we address ourselves. Like Kafka's beast, language now listens from the bottom of its burrow to this inevitable and growing noise. To defend itself it must follow its movements, become its loyal enemy, and allow nothing to stand between them except the contradictory thinness of a transparent and unbreakable partition. We must ceaselessly speak, for as long and as loudly as this indefinite and deafening noise—long and more loudly so that in mixing our voices with it we might succeed—if not in silencing and mastering it—in modulating its futility [*inutilité*] into the endless murmuring we call literature" (DE.1:255/AME.94–95). What, again, to make of this "incessant, disorderly buzzing"? Foucault's idea is that we make *literature* out of it, as if literature were the effect of a dialogue, collaboration, or complicity between language and—what?—a "pure exteriority": death, absence, infinity (whatever it is, it is untheorizable in the nature of the case). Anyhow something terrifying lies outside our grasp as cognitive subjects but not outside our experience—specifically a *literary* experience, or more exactly an experience of ceaseless, interminable speech. (We'll come back to this experience.)

Foucault discourages the psychoanalytic diagnosis that, in poetry, we suffer from a "return of the repressed."[20] But discourse has the structure of a fold in which the excluded remains internal to the game. This figure (the internal alien) seems basic to Foucault's thought from beginning to end (it is his self-image). The logophobia of discourse, for example, echoes the "grande peur" that Foucault discusses in *Folie et déraison*, specifically the *obsessive* awareness of madness that is one of the consequences or even functions of reason, and which expresses itself (irrepressibly, or against all reason) in the form of fantastic or grotesque images memorialized by Goya and Sade—and, later, in different ways, by Hölderlin, Nerval, Nietzsche, Roussel, and Artaud (HF.451–55/MC.206–11). We can confine the mad and institute rules to exclude folly from the discourse of reason, but the language of madness—"violent, discontinuous, querulous, disordered"—nevertheless articulates itself within discourse itself, if only as a disruption or deformation of the processes of signification, or as "the endless murmuring we call literature," causing, as one might expect, a redoubling of efforts to render discourse transparent, efficient, productive, and correct. Here thoughts fly to Habermas's antimodernist theory of "communicative reason"—"a noncoercively unifying, consensus-building force of a discourse in which the parti-

cipants overcome their at first subjectively biased views in favor of a rationally motivated agreement."[21] Foucault, mistrustful of the very idea of rational consensus as a reductive program of normalization, sides with the outsiders. In *L'ordre du discourse* he makes it a public announcement: "All those who, at one moment or another in our history, have attempted to remould this will to truth and to turn it against truth at that very point where truth undertakes to justify the taboo, and to define madness; all those, from Nietzsche to Artaud and Bataille, must now stand as (probably haughty) signposts for all our future work" (OD.22–23/AK.220).

The future work in question is, of course, *Surveiller et punir* (1975) and the first volume of the *Histoire de la sexualité* (1976). But perhaps more important for an understanding of Foucault's modernism would be his editorial projects in which outsiders (a "deranged" murderer, a hermaphrodite) are allowed to speak in their own voice—*Moi, Pierre Rivière* (1975) and *Herculine Barbin* (1978). Foucault situates these texts, after all, not in the history of madness (or of the prison, clinic, or *scientia sexualis*), but in a history of literature whose Homer is the Marquis de Sade, and whose theme is the imagination or exploration of extreme experiences (DE.1:255–57/AME.95–96).

Experience. In philosophy, experience is arguably the most impoverished and useless of concepts. The *cogito*, for example, is incapable of experience for the simple reason that nothing is allowed to approach it. The *cogito* is precisely that to which nothing can happen except what originates within itself. Doubt inoculates it against the outside. Nothing is certain except that nothing questions its existence. Everything is preformed at the expense of what is singular and irreducible. Experience from this standpoint reduces at best to observation (which works nevertheless as a mode of reflection). Thus in the age of reason the experience of madness is not an experience of being mad but an experience of reason affirming itself in the face of unreason—an experience that, strictly speaking, remains entirely abstract until acted upon.[22] Hegel is the first to think of experience as "the subject's subjectness."[23] Experience (*Erfahrung*) is a movement—a reversal, a destitution, even a violence—that consciousness must undergo to purify itself of whatever is not itself.[24] But like art *Erfahrung* is meant to become a thing of the past. Experience means: the subject overcoming its subjectness.

Foucault's interest, by his own account, is in *subjectness*—an interest that it might not be possible to reward with a theory, since the

point of this interest (as Foucault says) is to break with theory, namely the philosophies of the subject, derived from Hegel, that dominated French intellectual culture during his school days. Not that a phenomenology of *subjectness* is out of the question or even undesirable—this is, after all, what Sartre tries for in his account of the look, and it is what Emmanuel Levinas accomplishes with his early descriptions of fatigue, insomnia, and the experiences of poetry, Cubism, and the *il y a* (the ontological archetype of exteriority).[25] But the early Foucault (or, for all of that, the middle and the late) was not a theorist. The genre of his early essays is that of the arcane review that reworks the ideas of others in a baroque prose of paradox and indirection (thus emulating, and often exceeding, the "extreme forms of language in which Bataille, Maurice Blanchot, and Pierre Klossowski have made their home" [DE.1:240/AME.76]). These early essays are (whatever else they are) experiments in "nondiscursive" language.[26] Perhaps they have not had many admirers, but I think one can argue that these experiments are satirical rather than, say, merely decadent: they are aimed against the institutional figure of the philosopher and the propositional style of his discourse, where the idea is that transparency is a good in itself. In his essay on Bataille, Foucault writes: "The breakdown of philosophical subjectivity and its dispersion in a language that dispossesses it while multiplying it within the space created by its absence is probably one of the fundamental structures of contemporary thought. This is not the end of philosophy but, rather, the end of the philosopher as the sovereign and primary form of philosophical language" ("*L'effondrement de la subjectivité philosophique, sa dispersion à la intérieure d'un langage qui la dépossède, mais la multiplie dans l'espace de sa lacune, est probablement une des structures fondamentales de la pensée contemporaine. Il ne s'agit pas d'une fin de la philosophie. Plutôt de la fin du philosophe comme forme souveraine et première du langage philosophique*") (DE.1:242/AME.79). The point would be to think of Foucault's early occluded style as a practice of desubjectivation; the form of his language, whatever one's reaction to it, is an application of his argument against reductive (phenomenological) consciousness. In his essay on Blanchot, Foucault says that, grammatical appearances aside, "I speak" does not have the structure of the *cogito*, because the one entails an experience of language that the other, in its angelic purity, escapes: "'I think' led to the indubitable certainty of the 'I' and its existence; 'I speak,' on the other hand, distances, disperses, effaces that existence and lets only its empty emplacement appear. Thought about thought . . . has taught

us that thought leads us to the deepest interiority. Speech about speech leads us, by way of literature as well as perhaps by other paths, to the outside in which the speaking subject disappears" (DE.1:520/AWE.149). To which Foucault adds: "No doubt, that is why Western thought took so long to think the being of language: as if it had a premonition of the danger that the naked experience of language poses for the self-evidence of the 'I think'" (DE.1:520/AWE.149). What kind of experience is "the naked experience of language"? (We have already had an inkling: not, evidently, an aesthetic experience but an experience of—or *with*—noise.)

The guiding figure in Foucault's early work is Georges Bataille, who had, for example, cross-dressed Heidegger as a surrealist in an early essay (1933) on *le moi* as the subject of sacrifice—"The *me* accedes to its specificity and to its integral transcendence only in the form of the 'me' that dies." The *moi* is not just Dasein heroically acknowledging its fate; the *moi* is "avid" for death: it embraces the cross, not in the form of Christian piety or asceticism, but as an erotic experience "that must and can be lived as the death of the *me*, not as respectful adoration but with the avidity of sadistic ecstasy, the surge of a *blind* madness that alone accedes to the *passion* of the pure imperative."[27] This ecstasy before death is a premier example of what Bataille will later call the *inner experience*, that is, an experience of rapture in which the interior is simply taken away or evacuated by what it experiences; it is, in Bataille's formulation, experience "at the extreme limit of the possible."[28] This is the form of experience that Foucault appropriates as a way of breaking with phenomenology: "Experience that tries to reach a certain point in life that is as close as possible to the 'unlivable,' to that which can't be lived through. What is required is the maximum of intensity and the maximum of impossibility at the same time" (DE.4:43/P.241). This experience, Foucault adds, "has the function of wrenching the subject from itself, of seeing to it that the subject is no longer itself, or that it is brought to its annihilation or its dissolution. This is a project of desubjectivation" (DE.4:43/P.241).

Here one should recall Mallarmé's experience of *le Néant*, which is a prototype of the limit-experience: it is (1) an experience of the death or disappearance of God, (2) an experience of death of the subject, and (3) an experience of the heteronomy of language as that which fills the space of the evacuated poet. Foucault engages these themes for the first time in "Le 'non' du père" (1962), a review of Jean LaPlanche's *Hölderlin et la question du père* in which Foucault's

main purpose is to recover the preanalytic kinship of poetry and madness. The "extreme limit of the possible" that Hölderlin experiences in the father's absence and in the disappearance of the gods is, to be sure, an experience of psychosis, but (as part of the "project of desubjectivation") Foucault reconfigures this event as an experience of language:

> The Father's absence, manifested in the headlong rush of psychosis, is not registered by perceptions or images, but relates to the order of the signifier. The "no" through which this gap is created does not imply the absence of a real individual who bears the father's name; rather, it implies that the father has never assumed the role of nomination and that the position of the signifier, through which the father names himself and, according to the Law, through which he is able to name, has remained vacant. It is toward this "no" that the unwavering line of psychosis is infallibly directed; as it is precipitated inside the abyss of its meaning, it invokes the devastating absence of the father through the forms of delirium and phantasms and through the catastrophe of the signifier. (DE.1:200/AME.16)

The father's *non* is at once an echo and an erasure of the father's *nom*: it is an event (a "catastrophe of the signifier") that can only be registered materially in writing. In Lacanian terms, *langue* (*nom ∂u père*) has turned into *lalangue* (*non ∂u père*): "a zone is created where language loses itself in its extreme limits, in a region where language is most unlike itself and where signs no longer communicate, that region of an endurance without anguish: *'Ein Zeichen ɔin∂ wir, ∂eutungɔ-loɔ'* ('A sign we are, meaningless')." Hölderlin himself is no longer the lyric subject who gives form to a work of expression; his work is now, paradoxically, the interruption or disruption of lyric form: "The expansion of this final lyric expression is also the disclosure of madness. The trajectory that outlines the flight of the gods . . . is indistinguishable from this cruel line that leads Hölderlin to the absence of the father, that directs his language to the fundamental gap in the signifier, that transforms his lyricism into delirium, his work into the absence of a work" (DE.1:201/AME.17).

The difficulty is how to understand *"le lien entre l'œuvre et l'absence ∂'œuvre"* (DE.1:203/AME.19). Foucault has never addressed this relation except in tortuous paradoxes, but there are two contexts to which it alludes.[29] The first is Bataille's concept of *∂épenɔe*, that is, the principle of loss or expenditure without return that defines an econ-

omy that is heterogeneous and subversive with respect to capitalism or the market economy of exchange and accumulation. *Dépense* means free or unconditional expenditure, as in the wearing of jewels, sacrificial cults, gambling, kinky sex, gifts, works of art—and, notably, modern poetry:

> The term poetry, applied to the least degraded and least intellectualized forms of the expression of a state of loss, can be considered with expenditure [*dépense*]; it in fact signifies, in the most precise way, creation by means of loss. Its meaning is therefore close to that of *sacrifice*. . . . [For] the rare human beings who have this element at their disposal, poetic expenditure ceases to be symbolic in its consequences; thus, to a certain extent, the function of representation engages the very life of the one who assumes it. It condemns him to the most disappointing forms of activity, to misery, to despair, to the pursuit of inconsistent shadows that provide nothing but vertigo or rage. The poet frequently can use words only for his own loss; he is often forced to choose between the destiny of a reprobate, who is as profoundly separated from society as dejecta are from apparent life, and a renunciation whose price is a mediocre activity, subordinate to vulgar and superficial needs.[30]

Poetry as "creation by means of loss" means that poetry is a "nonproductive expenditure" of language. Poetry is language that "ceases to be symbolic in its consequences." This is what is meant when it is said that poetry is the *materialization* of language—poetry is what is figured in the etymology of *Dichtung*: the word *poetry* means thickness, density, impermeability. But notice that under this description poetry also constitutes for the poet a heterogeneous existence with respect to the order of things, namely that of the "reprobate," outsider, or misfit: Sade, Baudelaire, Kafka.

In the late 1940s Maurice Blanchot had already characterized poetry as an interruption or deferral of the movement of signification that produces meanings, concepts, statements, and works.[31] Poetry belongs to a different temporality from that of dialectical, propositional, or narrative language. These logical forms of language are messianic: they are movements toward a future, a completion, or *pleroma*, in which everything will coincide with itself without excess or deficiency (s is p). Poetry is heterochronic: it belongs to the *entretemps*—the between-time or *meanwhile* (the interval, the caesura, the pause, break, or parentheses).[32] But it is not just that in poetry time

breaks off; rather a breach opens between *archē* and *telos*: imagine the past receding from what was never present while the future, like the messiah, never arrives. This temporality is (in Blanchot's words) "interminable, incessant," as in a vigil or illness; it is not that of a project, development, and product (EL.20/SL.26). Poetry in this event ceases to be *poiesis*, or the making of works; it is "foreign to the category of completion" (EI.229/IC.153). In his essay on Blanchot, Foucault describes this temporality in characteristically arabesque terms: "For a long time it was thought that language had mastery over time, that it acted both as the future bond of the promise and as memory and narrative; it was thought to be prophecy and history; it was also thought that in its sovereignty it could bring to light the eternal and visible body of truth; it was thought that its essence resided in the form of words or in the breath that made them vibrate. In fact, it is only a formless rumbling, a streaming; its power resides in dissimulation. That is why it is one with the erosion of time; it is depthless forgetting and the transparent emptiness of waiting" (DE.1:538/AME.167).

Forgetting, waiting, attention, affliction, suffering, exhaustion, fascination, abandonment, dying, madness—and poetry: one could add to this list, especially if one recalls Emmanuel Levinas's ethical theory ("passivity more passive than all passivity"), but these are the canonical forms of experience explored by Bataille and Blanchot. In some of his most interesting pages Foucault singles out Bataille's obsessive image of the eye upturned in ecstasy, and the corresponding transformation of language that this condition makes possible:

> It indicates the moment when language, arriving at its confines, overleaps itself [*fait irruption hors de lui-même*], explodes and radically challenges itself in laughter, tears, the eyes rolled back in ecstasy, the mute and exorbitated horror of sacrifice, and where it remains fixed in this way at the limit of its void, speaking of itself in a second language in which the absence of a sovereign subject outlines its essential emptiness and incessantly fractures the unity of its discourse. The enucleated or rolled-back eye marks the zone of Bataille's philosophical language, the void into which it pours and loses itself, but in which it never stops talking—somewhat like the interior, diaphanous, and illuminated eye of mystics and spiritualists that marks the point at which the secret language of prayer is embedded and choked by a marvelous communication that silences it. Similarly, but in

> an inverted manner, the eye in Bataille delineates the zone shared by language and death, the place where language discovers its being in the crossing of its limits—the nondialectical form of philosophical language. (DE.1:247/AME.83–84)

The "nondialectical form of philosophical language" is the language of an anarchic temporality in which there is neither an end (*telos*) nor origin (*archē*), unless it is a beginning that begins endlessly again and again. It is a language that "never stops talking"—one thinks at once of Beckett's *Unnamable* or of Blanchot's "infinite conversation." The paradoxical relation between the work and the absence of the work is not a relation that ends in silence; it is a relation of interminability, like the "incessant, disorderly buzzing" of language that, as Foucault has it, we "modulate" into literature. The writer who cannot stop writing (Sade, Balzac, Kafka—or, for that matter, Sartre and Derrida) is no longer a sovereign subject or philosopher; he has been folded into *littérature comme telle* as into a heteronomous event of writing.

As Blanchot argues throughout much of his work, but particularly in *L'espace littérature* (1955), "The writer's mastery is not in the hand that writes, the 'sick' hand that never lets the pencil go—that can't let it go because what it holds it doesn't really hold. . . . Mastery always characterizes the other hand, the one that doesn't write and is capable of intervening at the right moment and putting the pencil aside. Thus mastery consists in the power to stop writing" (EL.19/SL.25). This was Rimbaud's achievement. But *l'écriture* is a mode of *subjectness* with respect to "the interminable, the incessant" (EL.20/SL.26): "To write is to enter into the affirmation of the solitude in which fascination threatens. It is to surrender to the risk of time's absence, where the eternal starting over reigns. It is to pass from *Je* to *Il*, so that what happens to me happens to no one, is anonymous insofar as it concerns me, repeats itself in an infinite dispersal. To write is to let fascination rule language" (EL.31/SL.33).

This means that the experience of language is not a first-person experience; it is an experience of obsession—of being besieged or gripped by language as by something that cannot be got rid of, like the imminence of death. Here would be the place to give close attention to one of Foucault's most recondite essays, "Le langage à infini," with its enigmatic reflections on the sources of poetry and writing in an "essential affinity" between language and death: "Headed toward death, language turns back upon itself [*Le langage, sur la ligne de la*

mort, se réflechit]; it encounters something like a mirror; and to stop this death which would stop it, it possesses but a single power—that of giving birth to its own image in a play of mirrors that has no limits" (DE.1:251/AME.90). Hence the garrulousness of the mad and the interminability of writing, the repetitious structure of poetry and the gratuitous proliferation of literature, which is simply a mirror-play in which language duplicates itself to infinity: "The possibility of a work of language finds its original fold in this duplication. In this sense, death is undoubtedly the most essential of the accidents of language (its limit and its center): from the day that men began to speak toward death and against it, in order to grasp and imprison it, something was born, a murmuring that repeats, recounts, and redoubles itself endlessly, has undergone an uncanny process of amplification and thickening, in which our language is today lodged and hidden" (DE.1:252/AME.91).

Freedom. There is no doubt that from a philosophical standpoint the desire to break with the sovereignty of the philosophical subject—to *disappear* as a subject by way of various forms of subjectness or limit-experiences—is completely incoherent. One might as well desire to be mad, or dead. Yet the point is surely that the intention here is not to be a lunatic; one doesn't take Artaud as a "signpost" in order to be incarcerated and subjected to shock treatments. The idea is rather to conceptualize subjectivity in a new way—to frame the subject without recourse to the canonical concepts of cognition, self-identity, autonomy, and rational control.

Let me conclude by briefly distinguishing between two conceptions of freedom in Foucault's later writings. One is fairly traditional; it has to do with the possibility of autonomy and agency within the mechanisms of normalization or the "games of truth" by which individuals are socially formed. The other might be called a "postsubjectivist" concept of freedom.

In a late interview, "L'éthique du souci de soi comme pratique de la liberté" (1984), Foucault makes the somewhat surprising statement that "the mad subject is not an unfree subject" (DE.4:719/EST.291). To be sure, the mad person is constituted as such by the system in which he finds himself, if "himself" is the word. Even when I judge myself to be mad, I do so within disciplinary frameworks in which, as Ian Hacking puts it, my madness or abnormality is one of "the ways for people to be."[33] So I am what I am under a description that fits, never mind what it leaves out. However, we know that Fou-

cault came to rethink the nature of these frameworks in a self-critical way. In this late interview, for example, Foucault's idea is that the mad person is constituted as such not within a *fixed* system of brute coercion but within a system of "power relations" that are porous and flexible: "these power relations are mobile, they can be modified, they are not fixed once and for all." That is, these relations are not only alterable but unstable and, indeed, anarchic. In particular this means that "power relations are possible only insofar as the subjects are free. If one of them were completely at the other's disposal and became his thing, an object on which he could wreak boundless and limitless violence, there wouldn't be any relations of power. Thus, in order for power relations to come into play, there must be a certain degree of freedom on both sides" (DE.4:720/EST.292). A condition of relations of power, Foucault says, is the possibility of resistance. "The idea that power is a system of domination that controls everything and leaves no room for freedom cannot be attributed to me" (DE.4:721/EST.293).

Well and good. But Foucault the modernist is different from Foucault the liberal. In this same interview from 1984 Foucault distinguishes between freedom and liberation, where the one is understood as an ethical relation of the self to itself, whereas the other means something like the breaking of "repressive deadlocks" that alienate the self from itself (DE.4:710/EST.282). Foucault says he is suspicious of the notion of liberation to the extent that it implies the emancipation of a human nature that exists beneath or apart from the social forms of subjectivation that constitute the individual, or alternatively that it implies an ideal of authenticity that one would try to reach like a goal or affirm under the existentialist motto that "man makes himself." The relation of the self to itself cannot be understood on the model of grasping, achieving, or making something. It is not a relationship with one thing but an open-ended "play" among "different forms of the subject": "You do not have the same type of relation to yourself when you constitute yourself as a political subject who goes to vote or speaks at a meeting and when you are seeking to fulfill your desires in a sexual relationship. Undoubtedly there are relationships and interferences between these different forms of the subject; but we are not dealing with the same type of subject. In each case, one plays, one establishes a different type of relationship to oneself. And it is precisely the historical constitution of these various forms of the subject in relation to games of truth that interests me" (DE.4:718–19/EST.290–91). So it would be a fact that one's relation

to oneself is irreducible to a principle of identity. More interesting still, the practice of self-formation is, to borrow Blanchot's words, "foreign to the category of completion." This is because the practice of self-formation is always historically situated, not governed by norms but by what is possible in the situation in which we find ourselves—rather as in the history of art, where anything is possible, but not everything is possible at every moment. The task of self-creation, Foucault says, is not "a search for formal structures with universal value" but requires "a historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subject of what we are doing, thinking, saying." The point of this investigation, however, is not self-recognition, self-knowledge, or self-identity; it is to "separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do or think" (DE.4:574/EST.315–16). In other words, "make it so that nothing remains fixed." As Foucault says: "we are always in the position of beginning again" (DE.4:575/EST.317).

The relation of the self to itself is thus a relation of freedom, not of truth. In this context, however, freedom is not autonomy but heteronomy, not self-possession but self-escape. Foucault's conception here is comparable to what Emmanuel Levinas calls "finite freedom." In "Substitution," Levinas writes: "In the irreplaceable subject, unique and chosen as a responsibility and a substitution [of one for the other], a mode of freedom, ontologically impossible, breaks the unrendable essence. Substitution frees the subject from ennui, that is, from the enchainment to itself, where the ego suffocates in itself due to the tautological way of identity."[34] It would be an interesting project to explore the symmetries between Foucault's ethical subject and Levinas's. It appears that they have the same formal structure of "the other in the same." Of course, Levinas's subject is Jewish, whereas Foucault's is, genealogically and by choice, a pagan Greek. Where the one is a movement toward the stranger, the widow, and the orphan, the other is a movement toward the self. But neither one is a recursive movement. "Je est une autre," says "the masked philosopher."