

MICHEL
Foucault

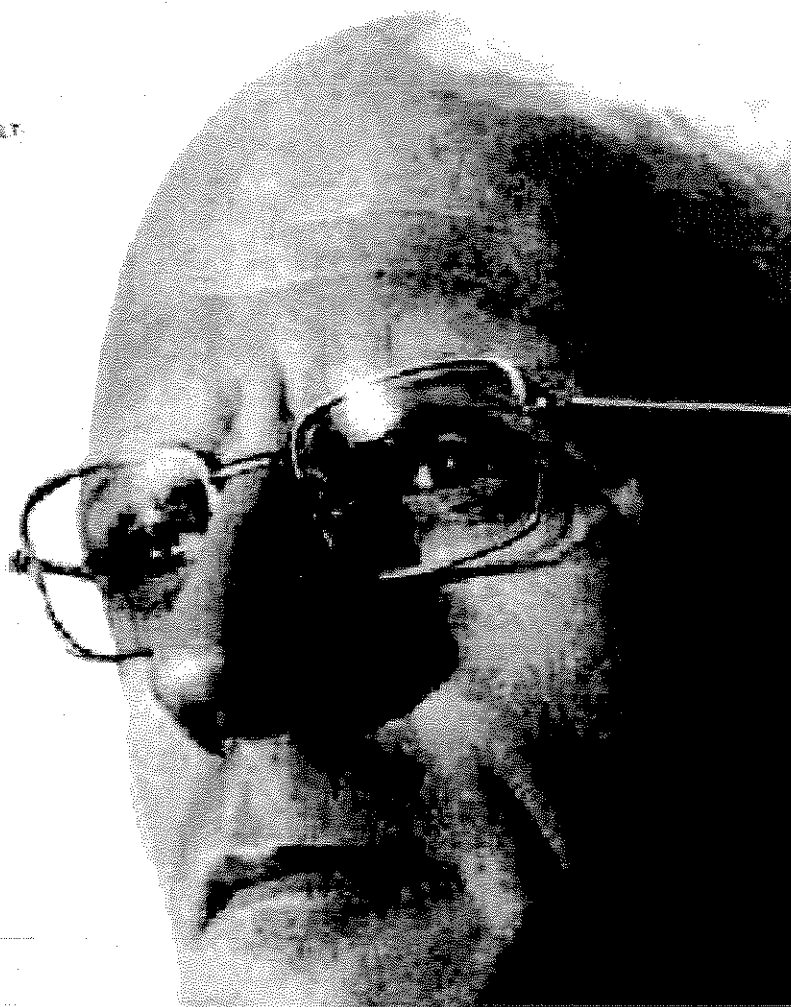
ETHICS
SUBJECTIVITY AND TRUTH

EDITED BY
PAUL RABINOW

THE ESSENTIAL
WORKS OF FOUCAULT
1954-1984

VOLUME

I



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MICHEL FOUCAULT
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PAUL RABINOW
SERIES EDITOR

Ethics,
Edited by Paul Rabinow

MICHEL FOUCAULT

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ROBERT HURLEY AND OTHERS

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VOLUME ONE

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FRIENDSHIP AS A WAY OF LIFE*

Q. You're in your fifties. You're a reader of *Le Gai Pied*, which has been in existence now for two years. Is the kind of discourse you find there something positive for you?

M.F. That the magazine exists is the positive and important thing. In answer to your question, I could say that I don't have to read it to voice the question of my age. What I could ask of your magazine is that I do not, in reading it, have to pose the question of my age. Now, reading it...

Q. Perhaps the problem is the age group of those who contribute to it and read it; the majority are between twenty-five and thirty-five.

M.F. Of course. The more it is written by young people the more it concerns young people. But the problem is not to make room for one age group alongside another but to find out what can be done in relation to the quasi identification between homosexuality and the love among young people.

Another thing to distrust is the tendency to relate the question of homosexuality to the problem of "Who am I?" and "What is the secret of my desire?" Perhaps it would be better to ask oneself, "What relations, through homosexuality, can be established, invented, multiplied, and modulated?" The problem is not to discover in oneself the truth of one's sex, but, rather, to use one's sexuality henceforth to arrive at a multiplicity of relationships. And, no doubt, that's the real reason why

*R. de Ceccaty, J. Danet, and J. Le Bitoux conducted this interview with Foucault for the French magazine *Gai Pied*. It appeared in April 1981. The text that appears here, translated by John Johnston, has been amended.

homosexuality is not a form of desire but something desirable. Therefore, we have to work at becoming homosexuals and not be obstinate in recognizing that we are. The development toward which the problem of homosexuality tends is the one of friendship.

Q. Did you think so at twenty, or have you discovered it over the years?

M.F. As far back as I remember, to want guys [*garçons*] was to want relations with guys. That has always been important for me. Not necessarily in the form of a couple but as a matter of existence: how is it possible for men to be together? To live together, to share their time, their meals, their room, their leisure, their grief, their knowledge, their confidences? What is it to be "naked" among men, outside of institutional relations, family, profession, and obligatory camaraderie? It's a desire, an uneasiness, a desire-in-uneasiness that exists among a lot of people.

Q. Can you say that desire and pleasure, and the relationships one can have, are dependent on one's age?

M.F. Yes, very profoundly. Between a man and a younger woman, the marriage institution makes it easier: she accepts it and makes it work. But two men of noticeably different ages—what code would allow them to communicate? They face each other without terms or convenient words, with nothing to assure them about the meaning of the movement that carries them toward each other. They have to invent, from A to Z, a relationship that is still formless, which is friendship: that is to say, the sum of everything through which they can give each other pleasure.

One of the concessions one makes to others is not to present homosexuality as anything but a kind of immediate pleasure, of two young men meeting in the street, seducing each other with a look, grabbing each other's asses and getting each other off in a quarter of an hour. There you have a kind of neat image of homosexuality without any possibility of generating unease, and for two reasons: it responds to a reassuring canon of beauty, and it cancels everything that can be troubling in affection, tenderness, friendship, fidelity, camaraderie, and companionship, things that our rather sanitized society can't allow a place for without fearing the formation of new alliances and the tying together of unforeseen lines of force. I think that's what makes homosexuality "disturbing": the homosexual mode of life, much more than the sexual act itself. To imagine a sexual act that doesn't conform to law or

nature is not what disturbs people. But that individuals are beginning to love one another—there's the problem. The institution is caught in a contradiction; affective intensities traverse it which at one and the same time keep it going and shake it up. Look at the army, where love between men is ceaselessly provoked [*appelé*] and shamed. Institutional codes can't validate these relations with multiple intensities, variable colors, imperceptible movements and changing forms. These relations short-circuit it and introduce love where there's supposed to be only law, rule, or habit.

Q. You were saying a little while ago: "Rather than crying about faded pleasures, I'm interested in what we ourselves can do." Could you explain that more precisely?

M.F. Asceticism as the renunciation of pleasure has bad connotations. But ascesis is something else: it's the work that one performs on oneself in order to transform oneself or make the self appear which, happily, one never attains. Can that be our problem today? We've rid ourselves of asceticism. Yet it's up to us to advance into a homosexual ascesis that would make us work on ourselves and invent—I do not say discover—a manner of being that is still improbable.

Q. That means that a young homosexual must be very cautious in regard to homosexual imagery; he must work at something else?

M.F. What we must work on, it seems to me, is not so much to liberate our desires but to make ourselves infinitely more susceptible to pleasure [*plaisirs*]. We must escape and help others to escape the two readymade formulas of the pure sexual encounter and the lovers' fusion of identities.

Q. Can one see the first fruits of strong constructive relationships in the United States, in any case in the cities where the problem of sexual misery seems under control?

M.F. To me, it appears certain that in the United States, even if the basis of sexual misery still exists, the interest in friendship has become very important; one doesn't enter a relationship simply in order to be able to consummate it sexually, which happens very easily. But toward friendship, people are very polarized. How can a relational system be reached through sexual practices? Is it possible to create a homosexual mode of life?

This notion of mode of life seems important to me. Will it require the introduction of a diversification different from the ones due to social class, differences in profession and culture, a diversification that would

also be a form of relationship and would be a "way of life"? A way of life can be shared among individuals of different age, status, and social activity. It can yield intense relations not resembling those that are institutionalized. It seems to me that a way of life can yield a culture and an ethics. To be "gay," I think, is not to identify with the psychological traits and the visible masks of the homosexual but to try to define and develop a way of life.

Q. Isn't it a myth to say: Here we are enjoying the first fruits of a socialization between different classes, ages, and countries?

M.F. Yes, like the great myth of saying: There will no longer be any difference between homo- and heterosexuality. Moreover, I think that it's one of the reasons that homosexuality presents a problem today. Many sexual liberation movements project this idea of "liberating yourself from the hideous constraints that weigh upon you." Yet the affirmation that to be a homosexual is for a man to love another man—this search for a way of life runs counter to the ideology of the sexual liberation movements of the sixties. It's in this sense that the mustached "clones" are significant. It's a way of responding: "Have nothing to fear; the more one is liberated, the less one will love women, the less one will founder in this polysexuality where there are no longer any differences between the two." It's not at all the idea of a great community fusion.

Homosexuality is a historic occasion to reopen affective and relational virtualities, not so much through the intrinsic qualities of the homosexual but because the "slantwise" position of the latter, as it were, the diagonal lines he can lay out in the social fabric allow these virtualities to come to light.

Q. Women might object: What do men together have to win compared to the relations between a man and a woman or between two women?

M.F. There is a book that just appeared in the U.S. on the friendships between women.¹ The affection and passion between women is well documented. In the preface, the author states that she began with the idea of unearthing homosexual relationships—but perceived that not only were these relationships not always present but that it was uninteresting whether relationships could be called "homosexual" or not. And by letting the relationship manifest itself as it appeared in words and gestures, other very essential things also appeared: dense, bright, marvelous loves and affections or very dark and sad loves. The

book shows the extent to which woman's body has played a great role, and the importance of physical contact between women: women do each other's hair, help each other with make up, dress each other. Women have had access to the bodies of other women: they put their arms around each other, kiss each other. Man's body has been forbidden to other men in a much more drastic way. If it's true that life between women was tolerated, it's only in certain periods and since the nineteenth century that life between men not only was tolerated but rigorously necessary: very simply, during war.

And equally in prison camps. You had soldiers and young officers who spent months and even years together. During World War I, men lived together completely, one on top of another, and for them it was nothing at all, insofar as death was present and finally the devotion to one another and the services rendered were sanctioned by the play of life and death. And apart from several remarks on camaraderie, the brotherhood of spirit, and some very partial observations, what do we know about these emotional uproars and storms of feeling that took place in those times? One can wonder how, in these absurd and grotesque wars and infernal massacres, the men managed to hold on in spite of everything. Through some emotional fabric, no doubt. I don't mean that it was because they were each other's lovers that they continued to fight; but honor, courage, not losing face, sacrifice, leaving the trench with the captain—all that implied a very intense emotional tie. It's not to say: "Ah, there you have homosexuality!" I detest that kind of reasoning. But no doubt you have there one of the conditions, not the only one, that has permitted this infernal life where for weeks guys floundered in the mud and shit, among corpses, starving for food, and were drunk the morning of the assault.

I would like to say, finally, that something well considered and voluntary like a magazine ought to make possible a homosexual culture, that is to say, the instruments for polymorphic, varied, and individually modulated relationships. But the idea of a program of proposals is dangerous. As soon as a program is presented, it becomes a law, and there's a prohibition against inventing. There ought to be an inventiveness special to a situation like ours and to these feelings, this need that Americans call "coming out," that is, showing oneself. The program must be wide open. We have to dig deeply to show how things have been historically contingent, for such and such reason intelligible but not necessary. We must make the intelligible appear against a back-

ground of emptiness and deny its necessity. We must think that what exists is far from filling all possible spaces. To make a truly unavoidable challenge of the question: What can be played?

NOTE

- 1 Lilian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men* (New York: Morrow, 1980).

SEXUAL CHOICE, SEXUAL ACT*

J.O'H. Let me begin by asking you to respond to John Boswell's recent book on the history of homosexuality from the beginning of the Christian era through the Middle Ages.¹ As an historian yourself, do you find his methodology valid? To what extent do you think the conclusions he draws contribute to a better understanding of what homosexuality is today?

M.F. This is certainly a very important study whose originality is already evident from the way in which it poses the question. Methodologically speaking, the rejection by Boswell of the categorical opposition between homosexual and heterosexual, which plays such a significant role in the way our culture conceives of homosexuality, represents an advance not only in scholarship but in cultural criticism as well. His introduction of the concept of "gay" (in the way he defines it) provides us both with a useful instrument of research and, at the same time, a better comprehension of how people actually conceive of themselves and their sexual behavior. On the level of investigative results, this methodology has led to the discovery that what has been called the "repression" of homosexuality does not date back to Christianity properly speaking but developed within the Christian era at a much later date. In this type of analysis it is important to be aware of the way in which people conceived of their own sexuality. Sexual behavior is not, as is too often assumed, a superimposition of, on the one hand, desires

*This interview was conducted in French and translated by James O'Higgins; it first appeared in the "Homosexuality: Sacrilege, Vision, Politics" special issue of *Salmagundi* 58-59 (Fall 1982-Winter 1983), pp. 10-24.

that derive from natural instincts, and, on the other hand, of permissive or restrictive laws that tell us what we should or shouldn't do. Sexual behavior is more than that. It is also the consciousness one has of what one is doing, what one makes of the experience, and the value one attaches to it. It is in this sense that I think the concept "gay" contributes to a positive (rather than a purely negative) appreciation of the type of consciousness in which affection, love, desire, sexual rapport with people have a positive significance.

J.O'H. I understand that your own recent work has led you to a study of sexuality as it was experienced in ancient Greece.

M.F. Yes, and precisely Boswell's book has provided me with a guide for what to look for in the meaning people attached to their sexual behavior.

J.O'H. Does this focus on cultural context and people's discourse about their sexual behavior reflect a methodological decision to bypass the distinction between innate predisposition to homosexual behavior and social conditioning? Or do you have any conviction one way or the other on this issue?

M.F. On this question I have absolutely nothing to say. "No comment."

J.O'H. Does this mean you think the question is unanswerable, or bogus, or does it simply not interest you?

M.F. No, none of these. I just don't believe in talking about things that go beyond my expertise. It's not my problem, and I don't like talking about things that are not really the object of my work. On this question I have only an opinion; since it is only an opinion, it is without interest.

J.O'H. But opinions can be interesting, don't you agree?

M.F. Sure, I could offer my opinion, but this would only make sense if everybody and anybody's opinions were also being consulted. I don't want to make use of a position of authority while I'm being interviewed to traffic in opinions.

J.O'H. Fair enough. We'll shift direction then. Do you think it is legitimate to speak of a class consciousness in connection with homosexuals? Ought homosexuals to be encouraged to think of themselves as a class in the way that unskilled laborers or black people are encouraged to in some countries? How do you envision the political goals of homosexuals as a group?

M.F. In answer to the first question, I would say that the homosexual consciousness certainly goes beyond one's individual experience and

includes an awareness of being a member of a particular social group. This is an undeniable fact that dates back to ancient times. Of course, this aspect of their collective consciousness changes over time and varies from place to place. It has, for instance, on different occasions taken the form of membership in a kind of secret society, membership in a cursed race, membership in a segment of humanity at once privileged and persecuted—all kinds of different modes of collective consciousness, just as, incidentally, the consciousness of unskilled laborers has undergone numerous transformations. It is true that more recently certain homosexuals have, following the political model, developed or tried to create a certain class consciousness. My impression is that this hasn't really been a success, whatever the political consequences it may have had, because homosexuals do not constitute a social class. This is not to say that one can't imagine a society in which homosexuals would constitute a social class. But in our present economic and social mode of organization, I don't see this coming to pass.

As for the political goals of the homosexual movement, two points can be made. First, there is the question of freedom of sexual choice which must be faced. I say "freedom of sexual *choice*" and not "freedom of sexual *acts*" because there are sexual acts like rape which should not be permitted whether they involve a man and a woman or two men. I don't think we should have as our objective some sort of absolute freedom or total liberty of sexual action. However, where freedom of sexual choice is concerned, one has to be absolutely intransigent. This includes the liberty of expression of that choice. By this I mean the liberty to manifest that choice or not to manifest it. Now, there has been considerable progress in this area on the level of legislation, certainly progress in the direction of tolerance, but there is still a lot of work to be done.

Second, a homosexual movement could adopt the objective of posing the question of the place in a given society which sexual choice, sexual behavior, and the effects of sexual relations between people could have with regard to the individual. These questions are fundamentally obscure. Look, for example, at the confusion and equivocation that surround pornography, or the lack of elucidation which characterizes the question of the legal status that might be attached to the liaison between two people of the same sex. I don't mean that the legalization of marriage among homosexuals should be an objective; rather, that we are dealing here with a whole series of questions concerning

the insertion and recognition—within a legal and social framework—of diverse relations among individuals which must be addressed.

J.O'H. I take it, then, your point is that the homosexual movement should not only give itself the goal of enlarging legal permissiveness but should also be asking broader and deeper questions about the strategic roles played by sexual preferences and how they are perceived. Is it your point that the homosexual movement should not stop at liberalizing laws relating to personal sexual choice but should also be provoking society at large to rethink its own presuppositions regarding sexuality? In other words, it isn't that homosexuals are deviants who should be allowed to practice in peace but, rather, that the whole conceptual scheme that categorizes homosexuals as deviants must be dismantled. This throws an interesting light on the question of homosexual educators. In the debate that arose in California, regarding the right of homosexuals to teach primary and secondary school, for example, those who argued against permitting homosexuals to teach were concerned not only with the likelihood of homosexuals constituting a threat to innocence, in that they may be prone to seducing their students, but also that they might preach the gospel of homosexuality.

M.F. The whole question, you see, has been wrongly formulated. Under no circumstances should the sexual choice of an individual determine the profession he is allowed, or forbidden, to practice. Sexual practices simply fall outside the pertinent factors related to the suitability for a given profession. "Yes," you might say, "but what if the profession is used by homosexuals to encourage others to become homosexual?"

Well, let me ask you this: Do you believe that teachers who for years, for decades, for centuries, explained to children that homosexuality is intolerable; do you believe that the textbooks that purged literature and falsified history in order to exclude various types of sexual behavior, have not caused ravages at least as serious as a homosexual teacher who speaks about homosexuality and who can do no more harm than explain a given reality, a lived experience?

The fact that a teacher is a homosexual can only have electrifying and intense effects on the students to the extent that the rest of society refuses to admit the existence of homosexuality. A homosexual teacher should not present any more of a problem than a bald teacher, a male teacher in an all-female school, a female teacher in an all-male school, or an Arab teacher in a school in the 16th district in Paris.

As for the problem of a homosexual teacher who actively tries to seduce his students, all I can say is that in all pedagogical situations the possibility of this problem is present; one finds instances of this kind of behavior much more rampant among heterosexual teachers—for no other reason than that there are a lot more heterosexual teachers.

J.O'H. There is a growing tendency in American intellectual circles, particularly among radical feminists, to distinguish between male and female homosexuality. The basis of this distinction is twofold. If the term *homosexuality* is taken to denote not merely a tendency toward affectional relations with members of the same sex but an inclination to find members of the same sex erotically attractive and gratifying, then it is worth insisting on the very different physical things that happen in the one encounter and the other. The second basis for the distinction is that lesbians seem in the main to want from other women what one finds in stable heterosexual relationships: support, affection, long-term commitment, and so on. If this is not the case with male homosexuals, then the difference may be said to be striking, if not fundamental. Do you think the distinction here a useful and viable one? Are there discernible reasons for the differences noted so insistently by many prominent radical feminists?

M.F. [*Laughs*] All I can do is explode with laughter.

J.O'H. Is the question funny in a way I don't see, or stupid, or both?

M.F. Well, it is certainly not stupid, but I find it very amusing, perhaps for reasons I couldn't give even if I wanted to. What I will say is that the distinction offered doesn't seem to be convincing, in terms of what I observe in the behavior of lesbian women. Beyond this, one would have to speak about the different pressures experienced by men and women who are coming out or are trying to make a life for themselves as homosexuals. I don't think that radical feminists in other countries are likely to see these questions quite in the way you ascribe to such women in American intellectual circles.

J.O'H. Freud argued in "Psychogenesis of a Case of Hysteria in a Woman" that all homosexuals are liars.² We don't have to take this assertion seriously to ask whether there is not in homosexuality a tendency to dissimulation that might have led Freud to make his statement. If we substitute for the word "lie" such words as *metaphor* or *indirection*, may we not be coming closer to the heart of the homosexual style? Or is there any point in speaking of a homosexual style or sensibility? Richard Sennett, for one, has argued that there is no more

a homosexual style than there is a heterosexual style. Is this your view as well?

M.F. Yes, I don't think it makes much sense to talk about a homosexual style. Even on the level of nature, the term *homosexuality* doesn't have much meaning. I'm reading right now, as a matter of fact, an interesting book that came out recently in the U.S. called *Proust and the Art of Love*.⁵ The author shows us how difficult it is to give meaning to the proposition "Proust was a homosexual." It seems to me that it is finally an inadequate category—inadequate, that is, in that we can't really classify behavior, on the one hand, and the term can't restore a type of experience, on the other. One could perhaps say there is a "gay style," or at least that there is an ongoing attempt to recreate a certain style of existence, a form of existence or art of living, which might be called "gay."

In answer to the question about dissimulation, it is true that, for instance, during the nineteenth century it was, to a certain degree, necessary to hide one's homosexuality. But to call homosexuals liars is equivalent to calling the resisters under a military occupation liars. It's like calling Jews "moneylenders," when it was the only profession they were allowed to practice.

J.O'H. Nevertheless, it does seem evident, at least on a sociological level, that there are certain characteristics one can discern in the gay style, certain generalizations which (your laughter a moment ago notwithstanding) recall such stereotypifications as promiscuity, anonymity between sexual partners, purely physical relationships, and so on.

M.F. Yes, but it's not quite so simple. In a society like ours, where homosexuality is repressed, and severely so, men enjoy a far greater degree of liberty than women. Men are permitted to make love much more often and under less restrictive conditions. Houses of prostitution exist to satisfy their sexual needs. Ironically, this has resulted in a certain permissiveness with regard to sexual practices between men. Sexual desire is considered more intense for men and therefore in greater need of release; so, along with brothels, one saw the emergence of baths where men could meet and have sex with each other. The Roman baths were exactly this, a place for heterosexuals to engage in sexual acts. It wasn't until the sixteenth century, I believe, that these baths were closed as places of unacceptable sexual debauchery. Thus, even homosexuality benefited from a certain tolerance toward sexual practices, as long as it was limited to a simple physical encounter. And

not only did homosexuality benefit from this situation but, by a curious twist—often typical of such strategies—it actually reversed the standards in such a way that homosexuals came to enjoy even more freedom in their physical relations than heterosexuals. The effect has been that homosexuals now have the luxury of knowing that in a certain number of countries—Holland, Denmark, the United States, and even as provincial a country as France—the opportunities for sexual encounters are enormous. There has been, you might say, a great increase in consumption on this level. But this is not necessarily a natural condition of homosexuality, a biological given.

J.O'H. The American sociologist Philip Rieff, in an essay on Oscar Wilde entitled "The Impossible Culture," sees Wilde as a forerunner of modern culture.⁴ The essay begins with an extensive quotation from the transcript of the trial of Oscar Wilde, and goes on to raise questions about the viability of a culture in which there are no prohibitions, and therefore no sense of vital transgression. Consider, if you will, the following:

"A culture survives the assault of sheer possibility against it only so far as the members of a culture learn, through their membership, how to narrow the range of choices otherwise open."

"As culture sinks into the psyche and becomes character, what Wilde prized above all else is constrained: individuality. A culture in crisis favors the growth of individuality; deep down things no longer weigh so heavily to slow the surface play of experience. Hypothetically, if a culture could grow to full crisis, then everything would be expressed and nothing would be true."

"Sociologically, a truth is whatever militates against the human capacity to express everything. Repression is truth."

Is Rieff's response to Wilde and to the idea of culture Wilde embodied at all plausible?

M.F. I'm not sure I understand Professor Rieff's remarks. What does he mean, for instance, by "Repression is truth?"

J.O'H. Actually, I think this idea is similar to claims you make in your own books about truth being the product of a system of exclusions, a network, or *episteme* [*épistémè*], which defines what can and cannot be said.

M.F. Well, the important question here, it seems to me, is not whether a culture without restraints is possible or even desirable but whether the system of constraints in which a society functions leaves individu-

als the liberty to transform the system. Obviously, constraints of any kind are going to be intolerable to certain segments of society. The necrophiliac finds it intolerable that graves are not accessible to him. But a system of constraint becomes truly intolerable when the individuals who are affected by it don't have the means of modifying it. This can happen when such a system becomes intangible as a result of its being considered a moral or religious imperative, or a necessary consequence of medical science. If Rieff means that the restrictions should be clear and well defined, I agree.

J.O'H. Actually, Rieff would argue that a true culture is one in which the essential truths have been sunk so deep in everyone that there would be no need to articulate them. Clearly, in a society of law, one would need to make explicit a great variety of things that were not to be done, but the main credal assumptions would for the most part remain inaccessible to simple articulation. Part of the thrust of Rieff's work is directed against the idea that it is desirable to do away with credal assumptions in the name of a perfect liberty, and also the idea that restrictions are by definition what all must aim to clear away.

M.F. There is no question that a society without restrictions is inconceivable, but I can only repeat myself in saying that these restrictions have to be within the reach of those affected by them so that they at least have the possibility of altering them. As to credal assumptions, I don't think that Rieff and I would agree on their value or on their meaning or on the devices by which they are taught.

J.O'H. You're no doubt right about that. In any case, we can move now from the legal and sociological spheres to the realm of letters. I would like to ask you to comment on the difference between the erotic as it appears in heterosexual literature and the manner in which sex emerges in homosexual literature. Sexual discourse, as it appears in the great heterosexual novels of our culture—I realize that the designation "heterosexual novels" is itself dubious—is characterized by a certain modesty and discretion that seems to add to the charm of the works. When heterosexual writers treat sex too explicitly, it seems to lose some of the mysteriously evocative quality, some of the potency we find in novels like *Anna Karenina*. The point is made with great cogency in a number of essays by George Steiner, as a matter of fact. In contrast to the practice of the major heterosexual novelists, we have the example of various homosexual writers. I'm thinking for example of Cocteau's *The White Paper*, where he succeeds in retaining the poetic enchant-

ment, which heterosexual writers achieve through veiled allusion, while depicting sexual acts in the most graphic terms.⁵ Do you think such a difference does exist between these two types of literature, and if so, how would you account for it?

M.F. That's a very interesting question. As I mentioned earlier, over the past few years I have been reading a lot of Latin and Greek texts that describe sexual practices both between men and between men and women; and I've been struck by the extreme prudishness of these texts (with certain exceptions, of course). Take an author like Lucian. Here we have an ancient writer who talks about homosexuality but in an almost bashful way. At the end of one of his dialogues, for instance, he evokes a scene where a man approaches a boy, puts his hand on the boy's knee, slides his hand under his tunic and caresses the boy's chest; then the hand moves down to the boy's stomach and suddenly the text stops there. Now, I would attribute this prudishness, which generally characterizes homosexual literature in ancient times, to the greater freedom then enjoyed by men in their homosexual practices.

J.O'H. I see. So the more free and open sexual practice is, the more one can afford to be reticent or oblique in talking about it. This would explain why homosexual literature is more explicit in our culture than heterosexual literature. But I'm still wondering how one could use this explanation to account for the fact that the former manages to achieve the same effect in the imagination of the reader as the latter achieves with the exact opposite tools.

M.F. Let me try to answer your question another way. The experience of heterosexuality, at least since the Middle Ages, has always consisted of two axes; on the one hand, the axis of courtship in which the man seduces the woman; and, on the other hand, the axis of sexual act itself. Now, the great heterosexual literature of the West has had to do essentially with the axis of amorous courtship, that is, above all, with that which precedes the sexual act. All the work of intellectual and cultural refinement, all the aesthetic elaboration of the West, were aimed at courtship. This is the reason for the relative poverty of literary, cultural, and aesthetic appreciation of the sexual act as such.

In contrast, the modern homosexual experience has no relation at all to courtship. This was not the case in ancient Greece, however. For the Greeks, courtship between men was more important than between men and women. (Think of Socrates and Alcibiades.) But in Christian culture of the West, homosexuality was banished and therefore had to

concentrate all its energy on the act of sex itself. Homosexuals were not allowed to elaborate a system of courtship because the cultural expression necessary for such an elaboration was denied them. The wink on the street, the split-second decision to get it on, the speed with which homosexual relations are consummated: all these are products of an interdiction. So when a homosexual culture and literature began to develop it was natural for it to focus on the most ardent and heated aspect of homosexual relations.

J.O'H. I'm reminded of Cassanova's famous expression that "the best moment in life is when one is climbing the stairs." One can hardly imagine a homosexual today making such a remark.

M.F. Exactly. Rather, he would say something like: "the best moment of love is when the lover leaves in the taxi."

J.O'H. I can't help thinking that this describes more or less precisely Swann's relations with Odette in the first volume of Proust's great novel.

M.F. Well, yes, that is true. But though we are speaking there of a relationship between a man and a woman, we should have to take into account in describing it the nature of the imagination that conceived it.

J.O'H. And we would also then have to take into account the pathological nature of the relationship as Proust himself conceives it.

M.F. The question of pathology I would as well omit in this context. I prefer simply to return to the observation with which I began this part of our exchange, namely, that for a homosexual, the best moment of love is likely to be when the lover leaves in the taxi. It is when the act is over and the guy [*garçon*] is gone that one begins to dream about the warmth of his body, the quality of his smile, the tone of his voice. It is the recollection rather than the anticipation of the act that assumes a primary importance in homosexual relations. This is why the great homosexual writers of our culture (Cocteau, Genet, Burroughs) can write so elegantly about the sexual act itself, because the homosexual imagination is for the most part concerned with reminiscing about the act rather than anticipating it. And, as I said earlier, this is all due to very concrete and practical considerations and says nothing about the intrinsic nature of homosexuality.

J.O'H. Do you think this has any bearing on the so-called proliferation of perversions one sees today? I am speaking of phenomena like the S&M scene, golden showers, scatological amusements, and the like.

We know these practices have existed for some time but they seem much more openly practiced these days.

M.F. I would say they are much more widely practiced also.

J.O'H. Do you think this general phenomenon and the fact that homosexuality is "coming out of the closet," making public its form of expression, have anything to do with each other?

M.F. I would advance the following hypothesis: In a civilization that for centuries considered the essence of the relation between two people to reside in the knowledge of whether one of the two parties was going to surrender to the other, all the interest and curiosity, the cunning and manipulation of people was aimed at getting the other to give in, to go to bed with them. Now, when sexual encounters become extremely easy and numerous, as is the case with homosexuality nowadays, complications are introduced only after the fact. In this type of casual encounter, it is only after making love that one becomes curious about the other person. Once the sexual act has been consummated, you find yourself asking your partner, "By the way, what was your name?"

What you have, then, is a situation where all the energy and imagination, which in the heterosexual relationship were channeled into courtship, now become devoted to intensifying the act of sex itself. A whole new art of sexual practice develops which tries to explore all the internal possibilities of sexual conduct. You find emerging in places like San Francisco and New York what might be called laboratories of sexual experimentation. You might look upon this as the counterpart of the medieval courts where strict rules of proprietary courtship were defined.

It is because the sexual act has become so easy and available to homosexuals that it runs the risk of quickly becoming boring, so that every effort has to be made to innovate and create variations that will enhance the pleasure of the act.

J.O'H. Yes, but why have these innovations taken the specific form they have? Why the fascination with excretory functions, for instance?

M.F. I find the S&M phenomenon in general to be more surprising than that. That is to say, sexual relations are elaborated and developed by and through mythical relations. S&M is not a relationship between he (or she) who suffers and he (or she) who inflicts suffering, but between the master and the one on whom he exercises his mastery. What interests the practitioners of S&M is that the relationship is at the same time regulated and open. It resembles a chess game in the sense that one can win and the other lose. The master can lose in the S&M game

if he finds he is unable to respond to the needs and trials of his victim. Conversely, the servant can lose if he fails to meet or can't stand meeting the challenge thrown at him by the master. This mixture of rules and openness has the effect of intensifying sexual relations by introducing a perpetual novelty, a perpetual tension and a perpetual uncertainty, which the simple consummation of the act lacks. The idea is also to make use of every part of the body as a sexual instrument.

Actually this is related to the famous phrase *animal triste post coitum*. Since in homosexuality coitus is given immediately, the problem becomes "what can be done to guard against the onset of sadness?"

J.O'H. Would you venture an explanation for the fact that bisexuality among women today seems to be much more readily accepted by men than bisexuality among men?

M.F. This probably has to do with the role women play in the imagination of heterosexual men. Women have always been seen by them as their exclusive property. To preserve this image, a man had to prevent his woman from having too much contact with other men, so women were restricted to social contact with other women and more tolerance was exercised with regard to the physical rapport between women. By the same token, heterosexual men felt that if they practiced homosexuality with other men this would destroy what they think is their image in the eyes of their women. They think of themselves as existing in the minds of women as master. They think that the idea of their submitting to another man, of being under another man in the act of love, would destroy their image in the eyes of women. Men think that women can only experience pleasure in recognizing men as masters. Even the Greeks had a problem with being the passive partner in a love relationship. For a Greek nobleman to make love to a passive male slave was natural, since the slave was by nature an inferior; but when two Greek men of the same social class made love it was a real problem because neither felt he should humble himself before the other.

Today homosexuals still have this problem. Most homosexuals feel that the passive role is in some way demeaning. S&M has actually helped alleviate this problem somewhat.

J.O'H. Is it your impression that the cultural forms growing up in the gay community are directed very largely to young people in that community?

M.F. I think that is largely the case, though I'm not sure there is much to make of it. Certainly, as a fifty-year-old man, when I read

certain publications produced by and for gays, I find that I am not being taken into account at all, that I somehow don't belong. This is not something on the basis of which I would criticize such publications, which after all do what their writers and readers are interested in. But I can't help observing that there is a tendency among articulate gays to think of the major issues and questions of lifestyle as involving people in their twenties typically.

J.O'H. I don't see why this might not constitute the basis of a criticism—not only of particular publications but of gay life generally.

M.F. I didn't say that one *might* not find grounds for criticism, only that I don't choose to or think it useful.

J.O'H. Why not consider in this context the worship of the youthful male body as the very center of the standard homosexual fantasy, and go on to speak of the denial of ordinary life processes entailed in this, particularly aging and the decline of desire?

M.F. Look, these are not new ideas you're raising, and you know that. As to the worship of youthful bodies, I'm not convinced that it is peculiar at all to gays or in any way to be regarded as a pathology. And if that is the intention of your question, then I reject it. But I would also remind you that gays are not only involved in life processes, necessarily, but very much aware of them in most cases. Gay publications may not devote as much space as I would like to questions of gay friendship and to the meaning of relationship when there are no established codes or guidelines. But more and more gay people are having to face these questions for themselves. And, you know, I think that what most bothers those who are not gay about gayness is the gay lifestyle, not sex acts themselves.

J.O'H. Are you referring to such things as gays fondling or caressing one another in public, or their wearing flashy clothing, or adopting clone outfits?

M.F. These things are bound to disturb some people. But I was talking about the common fear that gays will develop relationships that are intense and satisfying even though they do not at all conform to the ideas of relationship held by others. It is the prospect that gays will create as yet unforeseen kinds of relationships that many people cannot tolerate.

J.O'H. You are referring to relationships that don't involve possessiveness or fidelity—to name only two of the common factors that might be denied?

M.F. If the relationships to be created are as yet unforeseeable, then we can't really say this feature or that feature will be denied. But you can see how, in the military for example, love between men can develop and assert itself in circumstances where only dead habits and rules were supposed to prevail. And it is possible that changes in established routines will occur on a much broader scale as gays learn to express their feelings for one another in more various ways and develop new lifestyles not resembling those which have been institutionalized.

J.O'H. Do you see it as your role to address the gay community especially on matters of general importance such as you have been raising?

M.F. I am, of course, regularly involved in exchanges with other members of the gay community. We talk, we try to find ways of opening ourselves to one another. But I am wary of imposing my own views, or of setting down a plan, or program. I don't want to discourage invention, don't want gay people to stop feeling that it is up to them to adjust their own relationships by discovering what is appropriate in their situations.

J.O'H. You don't think there is some special advice, or a special perspective, that a historian or archaeologist of culture like yourself can offer?

M.F. It is always useful to understand the historical contingency of things, to see how and why things got to be as they are. But I am not the only person equipped to show these things, and I want to avoid suggesting that certain developments were necessary or unavoidable. Gays have to work out some of these matters themselves. Of course, there are useful things I can contribute, but again, I want to avoid imposing my own scheme or plan.

J.O'H. Do you think that, in general, intellectuals are more tolerant toward, or receptive to, different modes of sexual behavior than other people? If so, is this due to a better understanding of human sexuality? If not, how do you think that you and other intellectuals can improve this situation? In what way can the rational discourse on sex best be reoriented?

M.F. I think that where tolerance is concerned we allow ourselves a lot of illusions. Take incest, for example. Incest was a popular practice, and I mean by this, widely practiced among the populace, for a very long time. It was toward the end of the nineteenth century that various social pressures were directed against it. And it is clear that the great interdiction of incest is an invention of the intellectuals.

J.O'H. Are you referring to figures like Freud and Lévi-Strauss, or to the class of intellectuals as a whole?

M.F. No, I'm not aiming at anyone in particular. I'm simply pointing out that if you look for studies by sociologists or anthropologists of the nineteenth century on incest you won't find any. Sure, there were some scattered medical reports and the like, but the practice of incest didn't really seem to pose a problem at the time.

It is perhaps true that in intellectual circles these things are talked about more openly, but that is not necessarily a sign of greater tolerance. Sometimes it means the reverse. I remember ten or fifteen years ago, when I used to socialize within the bourgeois milieu, that it was rare indeed for an evening to go by without some discussion of homosexuality and pederasty—usually even before dessert. But these same people who spoke so openly about these matters were not likely to tolerate their sons being pederasts.

As for prescribing the direction rational discourse on sex should take, I prefer not to legislate such matters. For one thing, the expression "intellectual discourse on sex" is too vague. There are very stupid things said by sociologists, sexologists, psychiatrists, doctors, and moralists, and there are very intelligent things said by members of those same professions. I don't think it's a question of intellectual discourse on sex but a question of asinine discourse and intelligent discourse.

J.O'H. And I take it that you have lately found a number of works that are moving in the right direction?

M.F. More, certainly, than I had any reason to expect I would some years ago. But the situation on the whole is still less than encouraging.

NOTES

- 1 John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). According to Boswell the urban culture of Roman society did not distinguish homosexuals from others. The literature of the early Christian Church also did not oppose gay behavior. But hostility to the sexuality of gay people became more evident at the time of the dissolution of the Roman state and its urban centers. The eleventh century brought a renaissance of urban life and with it the reappearance of a more visible gay culture, which was only to be threatened a century later by theological and legal prejudices. The intolerance of the late Middle Ages continued to have an effect on European culture for centuries to come. To understand the nature of gay relationships, Boswell insists that they must be studied within temporal boundaries according to the customs of their day.
- 2 See *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), vol. 2.

- 3 J. C. Rivers, *Proust and the Art of Love: The Aesthetics of Sexuality in the Life, Times, and Art of Marcel Proust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).
- 4 Philip Rieff, "The Impossible Culture," *Salmagundi* 58-59 (Fall 1982-Winter 1983), 406-26.
- 5 Jean Cocteau, *Le Livre Blanc* (Paris: Quatre-Chemins, 1928) [*The White Paper*, pref. and ills. by Jean Cocteau (New York: Macaulay, 1958)].