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# The Care of the Self: Two Brief Essays, 2. From Foucault to Leites

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## FROM FOUCAULT TO LEITES

PAOLO FABBRI

As if by an effect of perspective, much of what stands out in Edmund Leites' paper on Seneca lies in its background: the third volume of Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality, The Care of Self*. It seems that in order to improve what is unspoken in Leites' short paper, we should take into consideration some points about Foucault that Leites has already brought out in his recent book, *The Puritan Conscience and Modern Sexuality*.

Foucault's book represents a definitive contribution to the knowledge of and to the scepticism of the golden age of self-culture, the second and third centuries of late antiquity. Let us reconsider some of the problems it brings to light. In *The Care of Self*, Foucault focuses on the regimes of austerity that characterised the Hellenistic discursive formations of Seneca, Epictetus, Plutarch, Xenophon, and Artemidorus. Even though they were part of that long summer of Hellenism, so disapproved of by Christianity for its dissolute promiscuity, they were, in fact, severe towards pleasure (and its signs), towards that *aphrodisia* that we have never considered austere. Foucault (like Veyne and Hadot) does not consider their texts as a code of prohibitions but rather as a set of maxims, of rules for living, of various forms of *savoir-vivre* of lifestyles—all the various means and effects of a very intense relationship with oneself. These moral programs were techniques of subjectification that the cultivated man of the time used to question himself, not as a member of society but as a universally rational being. Foucault explored meticulously the forms that make the subject a field of action and passion as well as an agent of knowledge. Even if the art of making precepts about austerity and moderation 'migrated' from the language of motives in the classical tradition, it reappears in the Hellenistic texts in a new and fresh light. These manners and procedures have become a fine art of living that formed, if not an ethics, then an etiquette understood as a form of self-culture.

Amongst the prolific writings of Seneca, we find in the theory-

fiction of the 'Sicilian' letters to Lucilius, an entire battery of instructions for use, indeed a whole posology about the *epimeleia*, self-study. If not quite an *anachoresis* then it represents at least a clinic of the soul with a full agenda of training courses in moderation and examinations of conscience. These had the aim of modifying moral and physical dispositions and moulding the passions of the body and the mind (the pathos) in order to activate pleasure without desire or worry. The letters of Seneca propose a type of 'temperance league' pursuing moderation, capable of living ethically and esthetically in the name of the universal principles of human nature.

Abstinence, continence and other ascetic practices have theoretical implications. They introduce a diacritics of representation and test the value of personal signs (memory) and collective signs (the display of social differences) in order to return to the self and to go beyond it. Foucault considers that this process of self-transformation marks the shift from the Graeco-Roman juridical tradition of mastery to a condition of reflexive enjoyment; from a *voluptas* inspired by a sense of lack to a *gaudium*, a lasting and accomplished capacity for self-enjoyment.

It is not, as is often these days suggested, a question of a regression to individualism. Rather, it seems that the cheerfulness of the moral subject is affirmed in the intimacy of the couple (that *new idea that there was both a master and a mistress of a house*. P. Veyne) that is to say in a renewed role for relationships of emotional reciprocity and dependence. The new managerial aristocracy of the Roman Empire gave up the ethics and esthetics of a life based on status in order to master the signs of both superiority and interiorisation. It was not just a simple opposition between apathy and commitment, but a problematisation of a moral actor's political activity in terms of his personal destiny.

Both physical and emotional self-control and the regulation of feelings and biological habits led towards a *logos* (and not a law), towards an identical rationality for the good government of self and of others. Seneca seems to have put this moral critique of the political economy of the sign into practice without any reservation. Its ideal-type is Marcus Aurelius, in his refusal of the Caesarian model, his detachment from ostensible signs of power and above all because of his meticulous regulation (guided by the principles of consistency and moderation) of the decision-making

and evaluation process. The stoic Emperor had to gain control of his own excesses and oscillations of mood as well as those of public destiny.

Leites has reexamined Foucault critically in his book by taking up the notion of *constancy* that set the rhythm of both action and passion for the English Puritans. As distinct from the vernacular of Weberians, Leites considers these moral and ceremonial practices of subjectification as community goals. In a period of crisis of confidence in the great foundation myths (whether ecclesiastical or monarchical) the Puritans smoothed over their emotional ups and downs and the irregularities of the curve of their actions, in order to become capable of predicting their own conduct and thus offering a reciprocal contract of reliability. But how can the intrinsic variety of emotions and effects of sense be regulated without losing their singularity? How can repeated and continual endurance be made compatible with the sudden and intense variations of regimes of subjectivity? Is it not obvious that we are alive, if and only if, rather frequently we do not accomplish what we have planned and also that our interior fluctuations are the only real indicators of the space within us? There is much which can wither those flowers we place in our button-holes, the banal parts of morality.

In other words, what tactics (both in sexual conduct and in the administration of the *respublica*) can a community employ to resolve the problems created by the Puritan project of popularising the process of subject formation that Seneca had proposed for only a small elite? Leites finds a response in the very style of Seneca, a calm flowing surface that the various moods dart in and out of; the instances of enunciation breaking-up the overused language of *topoi*. This is not some literary sleight of hand. Leites' work is rather an example of the rigorous practice of the Foucauldian method, treating discursive formations under the maxims of continuous variation (i.e. matrices of transformation), and of tactical polyvalency (i.e. totality or parts can be used for different strategies). It exposes the textual tension of various passages of Seneca's writing, which he used to discipline himself, proto-modern philosopher that he was, but also to accept himself for what he was, felt and did.

These analyses extend a point which Foucault only gestured towards in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. The Foucault of latter

years no longer maintained his earlier notion of epistemological discontinuity (cuts, openings, fissures) in the style of Bachelard or Canghulhem. Coming into contact with a new object of study, in the *History of Sexuality*, his attention moves towards the gradual and continuous rather than the discontinuous, emphasising intensifications and stresses, rather than ruptures. This change did not represent a renunciation of the structural method which is not in fact oriented towards change but committed to study discourses' matrices of transformation as well as their forms. 'Fracture' is precisely the term given to describe a transformation of a regime of discursive formations. 'Fractures' do not stand on their own but rather represent a limit, a border glimpsed and gestured towards from a distance. The edge of discontinuity has to be understood as a space full of viscosity and *decalages*. If we accept this 'dispersed discontinuity' then the task remains to break it up into more irreducible differences. Continuity and discontinuity hence can be put together so as to, in the words of Foucault *multiply the differences, cross the lines of communication and make the transitions more difficult*. It is precisely in this sense then that the tension that Leites points out in Seneca should be understood, not as referring to the creativity of the author but to the activities of multiplying, dispersing, stressing and intensifying.

Death snipped the thread of Michel Foucault's research but it only prevented him from embroidering those finishing touches to it which, after all, are the first to wear out. The solidity of his theoretical edifice would only be negated by mere admiration. Rather we can measure its significance by the capacity of its epistemological web to entangle ever more texts and metaphors. The posthumous light of *The Care of Self* could better be used to make other objects shine rather than simply as a means of assembling false memories. Leites' book is not only an invitation but also an indication of how to proceed. "No sensible man would insist that these things are as I have described them, but I think it is fitting for a man to risk the belief—for the risk is a noble one—and a man should repeat it to himself as if it were an incantation." (Plato, *Phaedo*, 114d)

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