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REVIEW ESSAY

Foucault as Philology: On Stuart Elden

Michael C. Behrent

History Department, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC, USA
Email: behrentmc@appstate.edu

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This essay reviews the contribution of Stuart Elden to the scholarship relating to the French philosopher Michel Foucault. In particular, the essay considers Elden's impressive four-volume intellectual history of Foucault's career: *The Early Foucault* (2021), *The Archaeology of Foucault* (2023), *The Birth of Power* (2017), and *Foucault's Last Decade* (2016). While acknowledging the thoroughness of Elden's research, the essay analyzes Elden's reluctance to offer a comprehensive interpretation of Foucault's thought and his failure to say anything about his significance as a thinker. The essay concludes by considering Elden's work as a symptom of "Foucault scholasticism."

The never-ending academic reckoning with Michel Foucault is as peculiar as it is exhausting. Foucault's best-known book opens with a graphic account of a public execution that occurred in 1757 in which the condemned has skin torn from his body and hot sulfur poured into his wounds, before horses tear him into pieces. The first volume of his *History of Sexuality* tells the story of the legal ordeal faced by a peasant simpleton who in 1867 procured the sexual favors of a young girl, playing what they called the game of "curdled milk." Foucault once assembled a document collection on a Norman farmer who in 1835 slaughtered his mother, sister, and brother. He edited a similar collection on a nineteenth-century hermaphrodite who was raised as a woman but lived as a man before committing suicide at the age of twenty-five. Yet despite the violence, morbidity, pathos, and intensity of these recurring motifs, Foucault has an equally persistent reputation for being dense, turgid, and difficult to read. Despite his often dark and unsettling subject matter, he has given rise to a self-conscious in-crowd jargon, distinguished by such neologisms as "discourse," "episteme," "utterances," "archive," "biopower," "subject positions," and "governmentality." Foucault has thus bequeathed a peculiar legacy: he was a thinker whose concerns were uncommonly visceral, yet whose greatest intellectual legacy—which academics alternately admire, mimic, succumb to, and despise—is an opaque and rarefied lingo that amounts, in many ways, to a latter-day form of scholasticism.

Stuart Elden's remarkable study of the French philosopher's career is, in many respects, Foucault scholasticism's crowning achievement. Drawing on troves of recently published manuscripts and lectures, and on considerable archival research, Elden has

written a meticulous four-volume account of Foucault's intellectual activity from his student years in the late 1940s until his death in 1984. It is a work about Foucault that, in its very erudition and scholarly ambition, seems to have Foucault as its model. I doubt that anyone alive knows as many things about Foucault as Elden. This is what makes Elden's conclusions so surprising, even extraordinary. Over the course of some eight hundred pages, he proposes no interpretation of Foucault's thought, no insight into his philosophical motivations, no real assessment of his intellectual personality. Indeed, in its entirety, as well as in its individual volumes, the work barely advances a thesis—unless one considers that truisms about the "sheer breadth of [Foucault's] concerns" or the fact that the philosopher's successive methods are "different yet complementary" rise to the level of argument.[1] In many ways, Elden's volumes are less intellectual history than a kind of concordance: an authoritative reference work, exhaustively detailing every scrap of paper that Foucault marked and the publication history of his books. Elden's history is a paradox: this extraordinarily comprehensive account of Foucault's intellectual production takes a pass on the question of why anyone should care about him.

This paradox merits reflection. But first, it is worth taking a closer look at Elden's project. It is essentially a detailed account of Foucault's career as a scholar and author. It differs from existing biographies of Foucault in that it focuses on the philosopher's intellectual production rather than the story of his life.[2] At times, this distinction is meaningless; at others, significant. While Elden's four volumes provide a continuous account of Foucault's career, Elden did not write the books in chronological order. The first to be published was *Foucault's Last Decade* (2016), which deals with the years 1974 to 1984. The next volume, *The Birth of Power* (2017), returned to the period between 1970 and 1974. Elden then examined Foucault's earliest years, specifically 1949 to 1961, in *The Early Foucault* (2021). The most recent volume, *The Archaeology of Foucault* (2023), covers 1961 to 1970. While Elden's approach evolves slightly over the course of these volumes, they are best assessed by considering them in the chronological order of their subject—that is, Foucault's career.

The Early Foucault (the third book in order of publication) is a study of the initial phase of Foucault's development as a scholar. It examines the period prior to the publication of *Madness and Civilization* in 1961, before Foucault became a major figure. As such, it is arguably the most original and trailblazing volume in the series. While Foucault's biographers have dealt with this period, none have analyzed Foucault's earliest writings with Elden's thoroughness. Elden can do so largely because of the extensive archival material (some published, some not) that has become available in recent years through the manuscripts department at the Bibliothèque nationale de France. Elden leaves aside Foucault's upbringing in Poitiers and begins his account with the young philosopher's arrival in Paris in 1945, and particularly his enrollment at the École normale supérieure (ENS) in 1946. Elden discusses the professors Foucault studied

[1]Stuart Elden, *The Archeology of Foucault* (Cambridge and Malden, MA, 2023), 209; *Foucault: The Birth of Power* (Cambridge and Malden, MA, 2017), 186.

[2]The main Foucault biographies are Didier Eribon, *Michel Foucault (1926–1984)* (Paris, 1991); David Macey, *The Lives of Michel Foucault* (New York, 1993); and James Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (New York, 1993).

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with—Jean Beaufret, Jean-Toussaint Desanti, Jean Wahl, Jean Hyppolite, Georges Canguilhem, and Louis Althusser. He considers Foucault's 1949 memoir on the theme of the transcendental in Hegel's thought—Foucault's first extended piece of writing, which has only recently been published—and his preparation for the *agrégation* exam. He explains how Foucault, in addition to studying philosophy in the late 1940s, also chose to pursue certificates at the Sorbonne in psychology. After Foucault passed the *agrégation*, he taught both at the University of Lille and at the ENS. Elden examines the key manuscripts from this period, many of which have recently been published, including "Knowledge of Man and Transcendental Reflection" (the so-called Lille course),[3] an early manuscript on the Swiss champion of existential analysis Ludwig Binswanger,[4] and another manuscript on "Phenomenology and Psychology."[5]

Elden provides a particularly informative account of the genesis of Foucault's first book, *Maladie mentale et personnalité*, published in 1954, which Foucault, in later years, tried to abjure and expunge from his publication record. Elden provides a similarly meticulous account of the genesis of Foucault's long introduction to "Dream and Existence" by Ludwig Binswanger. Elden draws on Foucault's correspondence with Binswanger and Jacqueline Verdeaux, a close friend of Foucault's, who translated Binswanger's German text into French. He exhaustively describes Foucault's translation of the German psychologist Viktor von Weiszäcker's *Der Gestaltkreis*, a project that Foucault scholars have almost entirely overlooked. Elden also makes a rigorous and persuasive effort to date several essays on psychology that Foucault wrote in the 1950s. In these ways, Elden has written what is perhaps the definitive account of Foucault's writing schedule during these years.

After drawing on Foucault's reading notes to pinpoint Foucault's encounter with the work of Nietzsche and Heidegger during these years, Elden turns to the period between 1955 and 1960, when Foucault lived outside France. We learn a great deal about Foucault's stint at the University of Uppsala in Sweden, where he directed the Maison française as part of the French government's cultural diplomacy program. Elden discusses lectures Foucault gave, talks he organized, and courses he taught, while also presenting books that Foucault intended to write but never completed. Elden covers Foucault's brief stay in Warsaw, which he was forced to leave after a gay liaison was discovered by Polish authorities. He then offers an informative description of Foucault's final foreign posting, at the Institut français of Hamburg.

The material that Elden has found and synthesizes on this period of Foucault life is exhaustive to a fault. The problem is that what Elden says about Foucault's philosophical reflection during this period pales by comparison. The five pages each that he devotes to *Madness and Civilization* and the introduction to Kant's *Anthropology*—the two works that Foucault would defend to qualify for his doctorate and the first major statements of his thought—are perfunctory. Elden concludes his book with the sensible

[3]This text can be found in Michel Foucault, *La question anthropologique. Cours. 1954–1955*, ed. François Ewald and Arianna Sforzini (Paris, 2022).

[4]Michel Foucault, *Binswanger et l'analyse existentielle*, ed. François Ewald and Elisabetta Basso (Paris, 2021).

[5]Michel Foucault, *Phénoménologie et psychologie, 1953–1954*, ed. François Ewald and Philippe Sabot (Paris, 2021).

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but hardly field-altering observation that Foucault's early ideas prefigure his later ones. "It is striking," he writes, "how much of the work that Foucault undertook in the 1960s has its roots back in the 1950s." This insight was achieved by consulting all "available pieces of evidence, from archives in France, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United States."[6]

The Archaeology of Foucault (the final book in order of publication) examines the takeoff stage of Foucault's career—between the notoriety Foucault acquired with the publication of *Madness and Civilization* in 1961 and his election to the prestigious Collège de France in 1970. The book's title is a play, of sorts, on Foucault's signature methodology. But readers would be mistaken to assume that this book provides anything like an archeology of Foucault's own archaeological method—or for that matter, of any other aspect of his thought. What impresses Elden about this phase of Foucault's career is the "sheer breadth of his concerns."[7] While the 1960s is the decade when Foucault began to make a distinctive mark on contemporary philosophy, Elden focuses not on interpreting the course of his thought over these years but on cataloguing the wide range of themes he addressed. Elden discusses Foucault's crucial essays on art and literature, his ongoing reflections on madness and psychology, and his engagement with contemporary debates about linguistics and structuralism. This self-consciously thematic and episodic approach does indeed provide a thorough overview of the range of Foucault's interests during these years and yields some intriguing information.

Of particular interest is Elden's account of Foucault's sojourn in Tunisia between 1966 and 1968. We learn about the apartment Foucault rented in the "former stables of the old royal residence" in the village of Sidi Bou Saïd, overlooking the Gulf of Carthage. According to a friend, Foucault loved to work at dawn, "in front of the large windows of his villa which overlooked the bay."[8] With his trademark meticulousness, Elden has tracked down press reports and other documents relating to Foucault's teaching and public interventions in Tunisia, as well as fascinating details relating to his involvement in local political movements, notably the opposition to President Habib Bourguiba. What makes the chapter on Tunisia so interesting is that Elden sets aside his philological preoccupations and paints a picture of Foucault's life at a moment in time.

This episode notwithstanding, the rest of the book blends interesting detail with a disjointed structure and lack of focus. It was during this period that Foucault published one of his most important works: the mesmerizing yet inscrutable *The Order of Things*. As Elden knows, this work was in many ways the culmination of Foucault's thought up to this point. Yet while Elden has plenty to say about its earlier drafts and its reception, he offers no more than a brief, matter-of-fact account of the book itself. Elden concludes this volume by observing that "there are several moments in the 1960s when a more political Foucault comes to the fore,"[9] paving the way for the shift from Foucault's archaeological method (which guided Foucault's thought in this

[6]Elden, *The Early Foucault* (Cambridge and Medford, MA, 2022), 190, 191.

[7]Elden, *The Archeology of Foucault*, 209.

[8]Ibid., 146.

[9]Ibid., 209.

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period) to what he would call genealogy. This point is not exactly original—the implicit focus on power in Foucault's work from this period was noted by some of his earliest commentators[10]—but Elden unquestionably marshals new and important evidence in support of this point. Still, his claim comes as more of an afterthought—a stand-in for a conclusion—rather than an interpretive claim driving the book as a whole.

The Birth of Power (the second volume in order of publication) examines the decisive shift in the orientation of Foucault's thought that occurred around 1970: his discovery of power as a theoretical, practical, and political problem. Elden asks, "What had happened to Foucault such that the research he had conducted on previous topics—work that had occupied him for so much of the 1960s—was something he wanted to move beyond? What was the nature of this transformation, and how did this transition in his thought and action take place?"[11] To answer these questions, Elden studies Foucault's career between 1970 and late 1974. During this brief period, Foucault published only one full-length book, *Discipline and Punish* (completed in 1974 and published in 1975), but he also delivered numerous lectures in France and internationally, organized and participated in many collaborative projects, and, most importantly, was more politically outspoken than at any other time in his life. Elden offers a fine-grained, almost slow-motion examination of Foucault's output during these years, weaving together Foucault's better-known work—such as *Discipline and Punish* and the Pierre Rivière seminar—with his now-published Collège de France lectures, documents relating to his activism, and considerable archival material. The *Birth of Power* is important, in part, because it makes available some aspects of Foucault's political activism that have received relatively little attention. While Foucault's involvement in efforts to make the conditions in French prisons known to the wider public through the Groupe d'information sur les prisons (Prison Information Group, or GIP) is often discussed, far less attention has been given to similar initiatives in which Foucault participated relating to public health (the Groupe information santé/Health Information Group—GIS) and architecture and public space (through the Centre d'études, de recherche, et de formation institutionnelle/Center for Institutional Studies, Research, and Training—CERFI), both of which Elden describes with characteristic thoroughness.

If *The Birth of Power* has a thesis, it is that although Foucault's newfound emphasis on power and his intense political activism took his career in new directions, Foucault's philosophical outlook remained consistent. Addressing the old question of the relationship between Foucault's archaeological work, focused on questions of knowledge, and his genealogical work, which proposed a critical history of power, Elden maintains that these approaches were "different yet complementary."[12] For instance, Elden examines Foucault's first lecture series at the Collège de France (1970–71) devoted to Greek conceptions of truth alongside lectures on Nietzsche and Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* to show that Foucault's long-standing interest in knowledge and truth also had significant implications for understanding power. Elden's view that genealogy "partnered

[10]See, notably, Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago, 1983).

[11]Elden, *Foucault: The Birth of Power*, 2.

[12]Ibid., 186.

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rather than replaced knowledge and archeology" is evident, for instance, in the way that, in his 1973–4 course on psychiatric power, Foucault sought to "rework" *Madness and Civilization*, making explicit the theme of power that had only been "prefigured" in the earlier book.[13] Elden does a good job showing how *Discipline and Punish*, despite its narrow focus on punishment and prisons, became a synthesis of much of Foucault's thought of this period.

Foucault's Last Decade (the first book in order of publication) examines the period between 26 August 1974, the day Foucault both completed *Discipline and Punish* and began the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*, and 25 June 1984, when the philosopher died. While Elden characteristically refrains from advancing a thesis, his book nevertheless has a clear thematic focus: Foucault's decade-long effort to write a multivolume study of sexuality's history. Elden offers a meticulous account of the twists and turns, the dead ends and resets, that marked Foucault's struggle to present an account of the onset of "sexuality" as a concept and practice in Western societies that was adequate to his evolving theoretical position. Specifically, Elden shows how Foucault's project went through at least three distinct iterations. Shortly after the publication of *The History of Sexuality*'s first volume in late 1976, Foucault publicly announced his attempt to publish five subsequent volumes, which would amount to a genealogy of sexuality from the early modern period through to the nineteenth century. Elden skillfully traces the protracted story of Foucault's gradual abandonment of this initial project, drawing on close readings of Foucault's Collège de France lectures between 1976 and 1984 and other pronouncements to show how, after several false starts, *The History of Sexuality* assumed its final form. Elden makes a persuasive case—and one that is crucial for understanding Foucault's later thought—that the theme of confession played a decisive role in Foucault's ongoing reconceptualization of the project. The second volume—provisionally titled *Le chair et le corps* (Flesh and Body)—was to be about the Christian idea of the flesh, but the deeper he got into the project, the more Foucault backdated the moment he deemed historically significant for Christianity's impact on sexuality. By his 1980 course, Foucault was lecturing on the Church Fathers. Yet it was precisely Foucault's conviction in the centrality of early Christian sexual teachings—specifically, the notion that desire had to be *understood* for sin to be overcome—that led him even further back in time, to classical antiquity, to show how Greek and Hellenistic culture had anticipated many Christian concerns about sexuality, albeit in a completely different register. In March 1983, Elden explains, Foucault was now contemplating a three-volume work, which had completely dispensed with the early modern focus: a second volume, to be called *L'usage de plaisirs* (The Use of Pleasures), would examine ancient Greek and Hellenistic sexual ethics, while the third volume would deal with early Christianity (to be entitled, instead of *Le chair et le corps, Les aveux de la chair* (The Confessions of the Flesh)). Meanwhile, Foucault was planning a stand-alone book on practices of selfhood—a theme that had become important to his reflections on sexuality—to be called *Le souci de soi* (Care for the Self). It was not until shortly before their publication in the spring of 1984 that the project assumed the final form, with the second volume being split into two—the ancient Greek volume keeping the anticipated

[13] Ibid., 112, 111.

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title (*L'usage des plaisirs*), while the one devoted to the Hellenistic world assumed the title reserved for the selfhood book, *Le souci de soi*. The fourth volume, *Les aveux de la chair*, was tantalizingly close to completion at Foucault's death in June 1984—but his estate's ban on posthumous publications meant that the fourth volume did not appear in print until 2018. Thus "Foucault's long-standing interest in the question of confession," as Elden puts it, was a "recurrent and important theme" of his work during this period,[14] and the need to incorporate it into his account—with all that this implied in terms of downplaying power and the early modern period and prioritizing subjectivity and antiquity—was among the main reasons for his repeated need to reconceive his *History*. Though Elden conscientiously discusses Foucault's work from this period that did not relate directly to his study of sexuality, he sees the leitmotif of Foucault's late career as—much as it was for Marx—the story of a thinker's struggle and near inability to finish his masterpiece.

* * *

Elden calls this four-volume study an "intellectual history of Foucault's entire career."[15] This is true, broadly speaking. Elden has written a chronological account of a philosopher and his ideas. Yet what he calls intellectual history has little in common with what passes as such, say, in the pages of this journal. Many intellectual historians are drawn to the field "because of the ideas" (as some undergraduate version of themselves might put it). At some point, however, one learns that intellectual history means *doing something with the ideas*—finding a perspective that explains them, an angle from which they can be viewed in new light, or a novel way of piecing them together. This is precisely what Elden does not do—nor does he feel any obligation to. Chronology is, of course, a venerable historical undertaking.[16] Getting the order of events right is necessary to historical inquiry, but insufficient to constitute it as intellectual history. Readers of this journal will be familiar with the wide range of methods used by intellectual historians, each providing a different approach to the historical explanation of ideas. Perhaps the best-known method is the contextualism of the Cambridge school, which assesses the novelty or lack thereof of intellectual interventions by situating them in relation to conventional vocabularies, such as the idiom of classical republicanism. Others include the Lovejovian history of unit-ideas, the social history of ideas, the history of mentalities, and the political history of intellectuals. Indeed, Foucault's archaeology is itself considered a kind of intellectual history, focusing on the epistemological rigging underlying entire ways of thought in particular historical periods. I am not suggesting that Elden's work requires a specific methodology or that it was necessary for him to situate his work in relation to the field in some elaborate methodological chapter. The problem is that Elden seems completely indifferent to the concern that motivates these methods—the insight that, once it is recognized that ideas exist historically, their nature and emergence require explanation. Though it abounds in useful facts, Elden's work offers precious little in the way of explanation.

[14]Elden, *Foucault's Last Decade* (Cambridge and Malden, MA, 2016), 204.

[15]Elden, *The Archaeology of Foucault*, 1.

[16]On the central role of chronology to historical explanation see Arthur C. Danto, "Mere Chronicle and History Proper," *Journal of Philosophy* 50/6 (1953), 173–82.

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There is, perhaps, one type of intellectual history that Elden's work could be said to resemble: works that aspire to be an exhaustive compendium of the ideas of a period, movement, or individual thinker. Martin Jay, responding to a claim (and arguably a reproach) by Dominick LaCapra, calls this genre "synoptic intellectual history." In this tradition, the history of ideas means providing overviews of important works and arranging them into coherent narratives, emphasizing aspects of texts that can be easily "reduced to a paraphrasable core of meaning," particularly "those straightforward 'ideas' [that are] so often the heroes of their narratives."[17] Jay offers a persuasive defense of the merits and sophistication of "paraphrasitic intellectual history," arguing that it is an effective tool employed even by deconstructive and antiobjectivist scholars, and that it is essential to historical understanding itself, as it is precisely "the capacity of texts to be paraphrased and reparaphrased" that makes possible a meaningful dialogue between the present and the past.[18]

Yet synoptic intellectual history is not really Elden's method. The synoptic intellectual historian sees effective paraphrase as a hermeneutic tool to achieve a fuller understanding of ideas, their significance, and their unspooling over time. Paraphrase is not Elden's priority. Nor is it his strength. Elden is compelled, for instance, to consider the impact on Foucault of the major thinkers with whom he engaged. He discusses, for instance, the central importance of Martin Heidegger to Foucault's early work. Yet readers who are unfamiliar with Heidegger will find little in Elden that suggests why this thinker was so influential to Foucault. For that matter, they will be hard pressed to know what Heidegger even said. In his discussion of Foucault's 1954 introduction to Ludwig Binswanger's "Dream and Existence," Elden attempts to highlight the Heideggerian themes that Foucault found in Binswanger's work, notably a conception of anthropology—in the sense of a theory of human nature—rooted in Heidegger's notion of human existence, which he referred to using the German term *Dasein* (literally, "being-there"). Elden paraphrases as follows: Foucault "clarifies that this second kind of anthropology is based on an 'analytic of existence,' but this is precisely the kind of work Heidegger did in *Being and Time*. While in there the analytic of *Dasein* is a mode of access to the deeper question of being, Binswanger is arguably remaining at the level of *Dasein*."[19]

It is hard to know what Elden is saying here. What qualification is the "but" making in relation to the point about an anthropology based on an "analytic of existence"? Is an analytic of existence not the whole point of *Being and Time*? As a way of referring to Heidegger's book, "in there" is awkward and jarring. The comparison Elden makes in the following sentence is elusive: is he saying that Binswanger is doing something different from Heidegger, or something similar? If Heidegger's "analytic of *Dasein*" provides deeper access to being, how is this different (as the "while" implies) from Binswanger's

[17] Martin Jay, "Two Cheers for Paraphrase: The Confessions of a Synoptic Intellectual Historian," in Jay, *Fin-de-Siécle Socialism and Other Essays* (New York and London, 1988), 52–63, at 52. Jay was responding to LaCapra's claim that Jay's work embraced "synoptic content analysis," in Dominick LaCapra, "Rethinking Intellectual History and Reading Texts," in Dominick LaCapra and Steven L. Kaplan, eds., *Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals and New Perspectives* (Ithaca, 1982), 47–84, at 55.

[18] Jay, "Two Cheers for Paraphrase," 60.

[19] Elden, *The Early Foucault*, 90.

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position, which, according to Elden, remains at the "level of *Dasein*"? And what is the meaning of his "arguably"? In such instances, the problem is not that Elden confines himself to paraphrasing, but that he fails to paraphrase effectively. Synoptic intellectual history should be made of clearer stuff.

The reason why Elden stumbles at a task as rudimentary as summarizing is because of where his interests lie. What fascinates him is less Foucault's thought than his intellectual production—in the narrow sense of the notes, lectures, manuscripts, typescripts, and books (in their multiple editions) that Foucault produced. Elden is less a historian of ideas than a kind of philologist. What sparks Elden's curiosity is not the logic of Foucault's thought process or the motives driving his philosophical reflection, but the mass of paper he blackened. In *The Early Foucault*, Elden trudges dutifully through a summary of *Madness and Civilization*, but his excitement becomes palpable when he gets to compare a second edition of a book to the first. Specifically, he provides a close analysis of *Maladie mentale et psychologie* (Mental Illness and Psychology), the 1962 reedition, with extensive revisions, of Foucault's very first book, 1954's *Maladie mentale et personnalité* (Mental Illness and Personality). Elden carefully details which chapters were deleted, what material was added, and how certain passages were modified. He also examines the complex history of this book's English translation. This careful study of Foucault's publishing history is among Elden's most significant contributions—one that will certainly be useful to students of Foucault's thought. In a similar vein, Elden discusses the 1964 abridgment of *Madness and Civilization*. This philological orientation is also evident in Elden's accounts of Foucault's unpublished manuscripts, which are only just beginning to be published in France and few of which have yet to appear in English. In many ways, Elden's book is an annotated inventory of the Fonds Michel Foucault, the massive collection of papers deposited at the Bibliothèque nationale de France. He discusses, for instance, "Le discours philosophique," a manuscript that Foucault composed in the summer of 1966 (and which has since been published).[20] He notes that "there are some crossings out and replaced words" and that the text was "written with a narrow left margin, without additions or replacement passages." We learn that the pages "run sequentially," with one exception: "there are two pages numbered 158."[21]

Elden also provides meticulous insight into Foucault's work as a translator. He carefully analyzes Foucault's contributions to a 1958 translation of Viktor von Weizsäcker's *Der Gestaltkreis* (translated as *Le cycle de la structure* (The Structure's Cycle)), one of the least known of Foucault's scholarly endeavors, as well as his much better-known 1962 translation of Kant's *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. As noted above, Elden reconstructs Foucault's work on Binswanger's "Dream and Existence" in the early 1950s. While it is usually assumed that his friend Jacqueline Verdeaux translated Binswanger's text from German into French while Foucault wrote the lengthy introduction, Elden finds convincing evidence in their correspondence suggesting that the translation was collaborative. This discovery allows Elden to make some suggestive observations about the early Foucault's engagement with Heidegger (whom

[20]Michel Foucault, *Le discours philosophique*, ed. François Ewald, Orazio Irrera, and Daniele Lorenzini (Paris, 2023).

[21]Elden, *The Archaeology of Foucault*, 143.

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Binswanger sought to apply to psychoanalysis), as evidenced in the decision to render Heidegger's cryptic term *Dasein* as *présence*.[22]

Finally, Elden is most useful in his accounts of several major books that gestated over several years and went through different iterations, some published, some in manuscript form. In the first volume, he tells the story of the development of *Madness and Civilization*, by way of Foucault's early engagement with psychology, Binswanger, and Uppsala. The first two volumes are both concerned, at different moments, with the long and convoluted story of *The Order of Things*, from the 1954 Lille course and the 1962 secondary thesis on Kant through to the (as yet unpublished) São Paulo lecture of 1965. Finally, as discussed above, *Foucault's Last Decade* is a meticulous reconstruction of the long and often restarted process in which Foucault wrote his *History of Sexuality*.

Yet despite the diligence with which Elden pursues his philology of Foucault, the intellectual payoff is unclear. He has amassed an extraordinary amount of documentation and scrutinized it with zeal—only to reach conclusions that are utterly conventional. Despite the erudition he brings to bear on studying the origins of Foucault's major books, Elden proposes no real interpretations of these works, let alone original ones. Elden says that *The Early Foucault* "has its focus on how Foucault's career led to" *Madness and Civilization*,[23] yet he devotes only five pages of a nearly two-hundred-page book to analyzing that work—compared to seventeen to *Maladie mentale et personnalité*, ten to the latter's second edition, and four to *Madness and Civilization*'s 1964 abridgment. This approach would have been perfectly reasonable if this other material was used to provide insight into *Madness and Civilization* or an alternative interpretation of Foucault's early thought (as Elden notes, he seeks to show the "other paths explored but not ultimately taken" by Foucault[24]). Yet his assessment of this celebrated early work is no more than pedestrian. *Madness and Civilization* "is a book that is almost impossible to summarize,"[25] he blandly comments. After an encyclopedia-like précis, Elden observes that there "are many other elements in the book, which repays rereading and consideration in relation to the themes of Foucault's later writing as well as the work that came before."[26] No doubt it does, but it is not a task that Elden intends to pursue, unless it counts as thematic analysis to point out that *Madness and Civilization*, like Foucault's next book, *The Birth of the Clinic*, discusses "hospitals and medicine."[27] Elden concludes that while "traces of that earlier experience" (notably Foucault's firsthand encounters with psychiatric hospitals and patients) can be discerned in the book, the "distance from the work he had done in the early 1950s is profound."[28] There is nothing inherently wrong with this assessment. It is simply remarkable that someone who knows far more *about* Foucault's earlier work and experiences than almost any other scholar could be satisfied with such platitudes.

[22]Elden, *The Early Foucault*, 81–8.
[23]Ibid., 6.
[24]Ibid.
[25]Ibid., 143.
[26]Ibid., 145.
[27]Ibid.
[28]Ibid., 146.

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Similar trivialities pervade Elden's account of *The Order of Things*—also five pages—in *The Archaeology of Foucault*. *The Order of Things*, we learn, is "complicated, dense, and wide-ranging," making "any summary … necessarily schematic."[29] Elden informs us that the book is concerned with the "archaeological level of knowledge, as *savoir*, rather than the epistemological level of *connaissance*," as if this were a straightforward explanation.[30] After diligently walking through the three time periods Foucault addresses (Renaissance, "classical"/early modern, and modern), he discusses the anthropological character of the modern episteme. Despite the extensive evidence in this volume and *The Early Foucault* documenting that Foucault was consumed with the problem of philosophical anthropology during these years, Elden dully concludes, "Foucault is drawing on his work in the previous decade."[31] He addresses Foucault's famous prediction of an imminent "death of man," suggesting—interestingly—that this claim was an attempt to engage with structuralism. But if so, then how does it also relate to his long-standing interest in philosophical anthropology, which clearly pre-dates the structuralist craze? Elden is unfazed by such problems. He has second editions to consider.

The conclusions Elden reaches about phases of Foucault's career are not much more illuminating than his assessments of Foucault's major books. They essentially add up to the idea that there exists a past, a present, and a future, and they all blend together in shaping Foucault's thought. The early Foucault leads us "towards archaeology,"[32] the archaeological Foucault of the 1960s takes us "into the 1970s,"[33] and the Foucault of the 1970s hurtles fatally "towards [his] last decade."[34] (The philologists' frustration at the inevitable interruption of the paper trail due to human finitude is partially offset by the enticing fact that "only … a limited amount of the 37,000 pages of materials" held by the Bibliothèque nationale had, as of 2016, been made available to the public.[35]) In fairness, Elden's consistent point throughout the work is to show the continuities in Foucault's work, *contra* the pervasive view that Foucault's thought consists of a succession of stages (archaeology, genealogy, subjectivity). This point is perfectly valid, but it feels like an add-on. Even Elden's claim about continuity is subordinated to his philological priorities.

What makes Elden's work so frustrating is that it reads like a crime novel in which every possible clue is located, but the detective inexplicably refuses to solve the case. This is especially true with his failure to make sense of Foucault's relentless preoccupation with the question of philosophical anthropology from the early 1950s until at least 1966, which, if studied properly, could shed significant light on our understanding of Foucault. Elden addresses the key texts in which Foucault thought and rethought this question: the 1953–4 course entitled "Knowledge of Man and Transcendental Reflection" (the so-called Lille course); the lecture on phenomenology

[29]Elden, *The Archaeology of Foucault*, 76.
[30]Ibid.
[31]Ibid., 79.
[32]Elden, *The Early Foucault*, 189–92.
[33]Elden, *The Archaeology of Foucault*, 197–212.
[34]Elden, *Foucault: The Birth of Power*, 185–9.
[35]Elden, *Foucault's Last Decade*, 208.

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and psychology, also from 1953–4; the Binswanger manuscript from roughly the same period; Foucault's various writings on psychology and psychiatry from the 1950s; the introduction to Foucault's secondary thesis on Kant's *Anthropology*; some of the literary essays of the 1960s, notably the one on Georges Bataille, "Preface to Transgression"; the São Paulo lectures of 1965; and, of course, *The Order of Things*.[36] These works are evidence of an earlier intellectual project that differs considerably from the one that made Foucault famous—that is, historical investigations into the way human beings are historically constituted through changing regimes of knowledge, power, and subjectivity. Rather, in this earlier phase, Foucault pursues the project of laying bare—in a manner clearly inspired by Heidegger—modern thought's rootedness in the idea of "man." The question of philosophical anthropology was, for Foucault, the key to unlocking the epistemological foundations of modern thought. In making these claims, Foucault advanced a particular reading of Kant's philosophy. The core problem with Kany, he argued, was his failure to respect the distinction between empirical and transcendental knowledge upon which he had founded his *Critique of Pure Reason*. Instead, Kant "anthropologized" his insight by conflating knowledge's transcendental conditions with the knowledge available to an empirical being: "man." This conflation created a range of problems that rendered modern thought incoherent and unstable, which Foucault probed in the work mentioned above. These concerns informed other aspects of his work. Foucault criticized the so-called "human sciences" (starting with psychology) precisely because they sought and failed to establish transcendental knowledge on the basis of an empirical being. Foucault's specific critique of the human sciences recapitulated Heidegger's (and his own earlier) critique of philosophical anthropology. Furthermore, the methodology that Foucault eventually called archaeology, which seeks to identify the "historical a priori" on which the knowledge of a particular epoch is based, was intended as a continuation of Kant's most fruitful insights—those that did not run aground in philosophical anthropology (which, at times, Foucault called "humanism"). While versions of these arguments can be found in Foucault's best-known books from the early 1960s, they are not the theoretical positions with which he is most associated. Foucault's reflections on the nature of "man" are usually seen as a specific instance of Foucault's focus on probing the historical conditions of possibility of knowledge and institutions. While not false, this view ignores the palimpsest-like character of Foucault's early works—the way they incorporate the remnants of an earlier but partially jettisoned project.

To be clear, Elden realizes that philosophical anthropology is a big deal for Foucault. He recognizes that the Lille course is replete with concerns about anthropology and Kant's role in it. He mentions Foucault's reference to Kant's fourth question—"what is man?"—to which Foucault would return on key occasions. He notes that Foucault seems to have read Heidegger's *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*. When discussing Foucault's secondary thesis on Kant, Elden remarks that Foucault's "introduction shares themes with his lectures on philosophical anthropology from the early 1950s."[37] He further observes that in the Kant thesis "there are indications of that future project"

[36]See Michael C. Behrent, "A Case for the Young Foucault," *Critical Review* 34/3–4 (2022), 299–340.

[37]Elden, *The Early Foucault*, 161.

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that was *The Order of Things*.[38] Elden introduces us to the São Paulo course, which Foucault delivered in Brazil in 1965 and which constitutes a draft of *The Order of Things*, observing that Foucault "develops his discussion of Kant, which makes clearer how this analysis develops from the secondary thesis on the *Anthropology*."[39] But, of course, Elden says nothing about how the analysis does what he says.

Elden's failure to make sense of the very evidence he presents is ultimately due to his method. The philologist is interested in texts, not the thought behind them. When Elden analyzes a text, he paraphrases its content (more or less successfully) according to the order in which it is presented. But as any writer knows—Elden more than most, given that he published his four volumes out of chronological order—a published text is only the end point of an intellectual process. Its relationship with the creative process is complex. Elden never considers reading Foucault's published work in a manner that seeks to reconstruct the thought process behind it. One way to do this is to look for recurring themes, and to take them as evidence of *idées-forces*—the concepts and ideas that, vector-like, direct and propel forward an intellectual project. Too often Elden is content to break up Foucault's career into discrete stages and interests, failing to explain and conceptualize the continuities that he clearly sees.

Finally, Elden does not really believe in the explanatory value of context. Of course, he knows that Foucault read prodigiously and was connected to some of the more original minds of his age. But Elden views the relationship between text and context the way one sets a table. He puts everything in the right place. He knows where he has to summarize a book, recapitulate the views of a thinker, and namecheck an event. But there is no real relationship between these elements. He never seriously considers how reading a book like Heidegger's *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*—which prefigures so many distinctive arguments that Foucault would employ in his reflections on anthropology—might have altered the course of Foucault's thought and reshaped what he was able to think. As learned as his volumes are, he never considers material that does not connect to Foucault's trajectory in a clearly linear way. He leaves unexplored, for instance, how Foucault's mentor, Jean Hyppolite, was pursuing an intellectual path that paralleled his student's in the 1950s and 1960s, undertaking a Heidegger-inspired (with more philosophy and less historical erudition) examination of the problematic status of anthropology in modern thought.[40] Yet these more genuinely intellectual-historical concerns never get in a word edgewise as Elden briskly turns from one lesser-known manuscript to another.

Work like Elden's does not, of course, exist in a vacuum. His understandings—and misunderstandings—of Foucault are tied to the framework that shapes how he is now read: what I call "Foucault scholasticism." So central has Foucault become to a particular current of modern academic culture that it seems necessary to gloss his every word, to validate the inner coherence while ensuring that we wind up with the Foucault

[38]Elden, *The Early Foucault*, 164.

[39]Elden, *The Archaeology of Foucault*, 74.

[40]See, notably, Jean Hyppolite's late essay *Logique et existence: Essai sur la logique de Hegel* (Paris, 1961). In this work, he says apropos of Kant, in a statement that Foucault might have said in his own reflections on philosophical anthropology, "Transcendental reflection is … debased to anthropological reflection." Jean Hyppolite, *Logic and Existence*, trans. Leonard Lawler and Amit Sen (Albany, 1997), 83.

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we believe we know: the champion of a secular liberation theology, steeped in anti-foundationalism and a theory of the contingency of truth and knowledge. Hence, while reading Foucault's 1954 book on mental illness, Elden detects traces of the idea of *dispositif*, a concept Foucault coined in the 1970s.[41] When examining Foucault's course on punitive society from the early 1970s, he notes that Foucault is "getting closer and closer to his mature view of power."[42] The issue is not that Elden is teleological. When analyzing the development of a philosopher's thought, it is hard not to find significance in early iterations of later ideas. The problem is that for all Elden's talk of paths not taken, the tale he tells is that of Foucault's gradual convergence with the prevailing orthodox view of him. That there might be something revealing in his career's dead ends and misfires is not a position that Elden seriously considers. His work is a lengthy rationalization of a Foucault that is all too familiar.

Elden seems, moreover, to mimic a Foucauldian conception of scholarship. He admires the sheer volume of Foucault's reading, his extensive note taking, and his attention to historical detail. Too often, though, he assumes that Foucault's thought was forged by his reading, rather than what he read being directed by what he thought. This belief does not usually mar Elden's scrupulous philologizing, but it occasionally causes him problems. When Foucault addresses the question of the role of families in the constitution of abnormality in his 1975 lecture course, Elden is surprised that "Foucault's examples" are almost all "dysfunctional"—families, he observes with mild indignation, in which "the women are prostitutes or hysterical and the children are idiots or always masturbating."[43] *Et tu, Stuart?* When discussing hysterics, he notes that Foucault can be "somewhat demeaning" when he discusses, "for amusement," a case study that Foucault sees as a "kind of bacchanal," a "sexual pantomime."[44] Commenting on Foucault's analysis of Charles Jouy, the nineteenth-century village idiot who paid local girls for sexual favors, Elden scolds the philosopher for his "unpleasant dismissal of how the victims may have felt" and his "weak attempts at humor."[45] All things considered, Elden concludes, the subject matter of the 1975 course *is* rather "gruesome": "Disease, death and torture shadow most lectures; cannibalism, incest, monsters and masturbation haunt its pages. Fascinating though its themes are, it often reads as the accumulation of material, stories, and documents that Foucault is unable to fully comes to grips with."[46]

Yet Elden never entertains the idea that Foucault's demeaning language, weak humor, and gruesome obsessions are not only evidence that the Frenchman was a bit rude, but *clues* to his thought and identity as a thinker. Indeed, these jokes *are* Foucault's thought, the Dionysian mirth that was inseparable from the form of freedom he embraced. This elision of the vital core of Foucault's thought in favor of his scholarship and sophistication as a "theorist" is the essence of the Foucault scholasticism so pervasive in academe. Elden seems to praise Foucault for his scholarly deconstruction

[41] Elden, *The Early Foucault*, 180.

[42] Elden, *Foucault: The Birth of Power*, 102.

[43] Elden, *Foucault's Last Decade*, 16.

[44] Ibid., 17–18.

[45] Ibid., 24.

[46] Ibid., 25–6.

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of dominant paradigms of knowledge, power, normality, and sexuality, while expecting him to abide by the moral platitudes of the kind found, say, in the keynote address of an academic conference.

Few people are as well positioned as Elden to write an important book about Foucault. This is not, however, what he has written. For now, Elden has given us less an intellectual history of Foucault's thought than a concordance of Foucault's *oeuvre*: a rigorous cataloguing of everything Foucault is known to have written, a textual history of Foucault's major works, and a careful consideration of his recurring keywords, themes, and references. While not intellectual history itself, Elden's concordance will no doubt inspire and assist many intellectual historians seeking not simply to analyze Foucault's scholarly production, but to understand what he thought.

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