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Michel Foucault, Jean Le Bitoux, and the Gay Science Lost and Found: An Introduction

David M. Halperin

About fifteen years ago I arranged to meet Jean Le Bitoux in Paris. My intent was to secure the translation rights to his legendary interview with Michel Foucault, “Le Gai Savoir” (“the gay science”). The interview had been conducted on 10 July 1978. Jean Le Bitoux was already by that date a gay activist of some renown. Born in Bordeaux in 1948, he eventually moved to Nice where in 1970 he founded the local branch of the FHAR (Front Homosexuel d’Action Révolutionnaire or “Homosexual Front of Revolutionary Action”), a radical group that incarnated a 1960s style of Gay Liberation. In the parliamentary elections of March 1978, Le Bitoux, like Guy Hocquenghem, ran (unsuccessfully) as a “homosexual candidate.” He had recently begun a career as a journalist, and he decided to create a monthly gay magazine. This became *Le Gai Pied*, the first mass-market gay publication to be sold at newsstands in France. By 1982, according to Le Bitoux, it had a monthly circulation of 30,000.

Le Gai Pied was already in the planning stages in the summer of 1978. Le Bitoux knew there was a good chance that the French authorities would find an excuse to ban it, and he was looking for ways to head off that possibility by making its suppression politically costly or embarrassing to them. It had been Foucault, one evening in his kitchen with Daniel Defert, Jean Le Bitoux, and Thierry Voeltzel, who had come up with the name *Le Gai Pied* to begin with;¹ he offered to help out Le Bitoux and support the

1. See Daniel Defert, “‘Jean Le Bitoux, militant de la mémoire gay’: Interview—Disparition: Daniel Defert, à l’origine d’Aides, revient sur les combats du fondateur de ‘Gai Pied,’” interview by Eric Favereau, *Libération*, 30 Apr. 2010, bit.ly/coyofo

magazine by publishing a contribution in its first issue, lending *Le Gai Pied* his celebrated name and thereby affording it a measure of protection. *Le Bitoux* accordingly interviewed Foucault about volume 1 of *The History of Sexuality*, which had appeared two years earlier, as well as about Foucault's views on gay politics, the gay movement, gay male gender styles, and gay male sexual practices. The interview—surprisingly intimate, detailed, complicit and explicit—was never published in *Le Gai Pied*, and it never appeared in French during Foucault's lifetime. It has been difficult to access ever since, which is one reason it is legendary.

As *Le Bitoux* relates in a 1996 preface to the interview, which is translated into English here for the first time, Foucault called him at the last moment and asked him to withdraw the interview from publication and to substitute for it a short text of Foucault's about homosexuals and suicide, called "Un Plaisir si simple" ("Such a Simple Pleasure"). The latter duly appeared in the first issue of *Le Gai Pied* under Foucault's name.² Two years later Foucault gave a different interview to *Le Gai Pied* that, this time, was actually published; called "Friendship as a Way of Life: Interview with a Reader in His Fifties," it represents a classic statement of the late Foucault's ethical preoccupations with love, friendship, and gay subjectivity, and it announces his belief that homosexuality is "a historic opportunity to open up new relational and affective potentialities" (*virtualités*).³ But it was

2. See Michel Foucault, "Un Plaisir si simple," *Le Gai Pied* 1 (Apr. 1979): 1, 10; rpt. Foucault, *Dits et écrits 1954–1988*, ed. Daniel Defert and François Ewald, 4 vols. (Paris, 1994), 3:777–79; trans. Mike Riegle and Gilles Barbedette under the title "The Simplest of Pleasures," *Fag Rag* 29 (1979): 3; rpt. Foucault, *Foucault Live (Interviews 1966–84)*, trans. Lysa Hochroth et al., ed. Sylvère Lotringer (New York, 1989), pp. 295–97.

3. Foucault, "De l'amitié comme mode de vie: Un Entretien avec un lecteur quinquagénaire," interview by Jean Le Bitoux, R. de Ceccaty, and J. Danet, *Le Gai Pied* 25 (Apr. 1981): 38–39; rpt. Foucault, *Dits et écrits 1954–1988*, 4:163–67; trans. pub. under the title

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not presented as an interview with Foucault; the reader discovered the identity of the fifty-something interlocutor only upon getting to the very end of the text, which concluded with the bombshell, "Merci, Michel Foucault." Nonetheless, the interview quickly became known, and it attracted the attention it deserved.

The interview Le Bitoux recorded in 1978 had an altogether different fate, and a more obscure one. Le Bitoux did not make a complete transcript of it. Rather, as he recounts here, he took it home, listened to the tape recording, and redacted the conversation, editing it and moving bits of it around in order to create a more unified and coherent text. He sent a copy to Foucault, who apparently did not approve of it but who retained the typescript, which was found among his papers after his death in 1984 and was preserved in the earliest gathering of his archives at the now-defunct Centre Michel Foucault. There it was consulted by Foucault's French biographer, Didier Eribon, who quoted from it in his 1994 volume, *Michel Foucault et ses contemporains*.

In the meantime, Le Bitoux had shared the typescript with certain collaborators of his in the Netherlands. Acting without his permission or even his knowledge, they published a version of it in Dutch, altering the text by incorporating supplements from other sources.⁴ Le Bitoux reports that Foucault eventually got wind of it but reconciled himself to its publication. Perhaps that encouraged Le Bitoux to bring out the entire French typescript, four years after Foucault's death, in what proved to be a rather ephemeral gay magazine called *Mec* ("Dude"), which printed it in two installments ten years after the original interview had taken place.⁵ Michael West, an American professor of French, translated into English the version that appeared in *Mec*, to which he added a brief introduction and commentary, but he did not publish the result; he did however share it with me, and he generously provided me with a photocopy of the original pages from *Mec Magazine* (which by then had become impossible to find). That was the version I quoted in my 1995 book *Saint Foucault*. A couple of years later an English text, based on the composite Dutch version, and translated

"Friendship as a Lifestyle: An Interview with Michel Foucault," *Gay Information* 7 (Spring 1981): 4–6; trans. John Johnston under the title "Friendship as a Way of Life," *Foucault Live*, pp. 308–12; rpt., with alterations, Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, trans. Robert Hurley et al., ed. Paul Rabinow, vol. 1 of *The Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984* (New York, 1997), pp. 135–40.

4. This expanded version appeared as Foucault, "Vijftien vragen van homoseksuele zijde aan Michel Foucault," *Interviews met Michel Foucault*, ed. M. Duyves and T. Massen (Utrecht, 1982), pp. 13–23.

5. See Foucault, "Le Gai Savoir," interview by Le Bitoux, *Mec* 5 (June 1988): 32–36 and *Mec* 6–7 (July–August 1988): 30–33.

by West, was included by Mark Blasius and Shane Phelan in their superb collection of rare documents, *We Are Everywhere*.⁶

Meanwhile, in the summer of 1995, Jean Le Bitoux was reorganizing his papers. In the process, he stumbled upon the original 1978 tape recording that he had thought was lost. This time he made a faithful transcription of the entire conversation (albeit with a few typographical errors) and published it in another obscure and short-lived gay magazine.⁷ (He reprinted it a decade later, still with the same errors, in a somewhat more enduring and accessible venue—namely, a collection of his various interviews with gay writers and activists, *Entretiens sur la question gay*.)⁸ It was this text that I wanted permission to translate into English and that provided the occasion for my one and only meeting with Jean Le Bitoux.

We spent the larger part of an afternoon together, talking about many things: Foucault, of course; gay activism; and AIDS activism. Le Bitoux was openly HIV-positive; he had been involved with AIDES, the AIDS service organization, since 1985—sometimes in conflict with ACT UP Paris—and he had been editor-in-chief of the *Journal du Sida*. Le Bitoux's recollections of Foucault were marked by expressions of fondness and loyalty. He acknowledged that some of his friends at the time considered Foucault *une honteuse*, “a closet queen.” Le Bitoux did not share that assessment, even though he had often tried in vain to persuade Foucault to accompany him to gay clubs in Paris. He attributed Foucault's hesitation to other factors. His 1996 preface makes it clear that he resented James Miller's account of Foucault's decision to withhold the 1978 interview from publication in *Le Gai Pied*; Miller had put it down to Foucault's “reticence” and his “ambivalence about the value of openly discussing such matters” as sadomasochism.⁹ Foucault was of course highly sensitive to the power relations that the disclosure and circulation of knowledge about oneself put into play; he had just described them, after all, in the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*. He was not wrong to consider the possible blowback from the publication of his reflections on bathhouses and fist fucking or the use to which his declarations might be put by others. We should also bear in mind that Le Bitoux had produced a redacted version of their conversation that did not

6. See Foucault, “Questions for Michel Foucault,” interview by Le Bitoux and Mattias Duyves, trans. Michael West, in *We Are Everywhere: A Historical Sourcebook of Gay and Lesbian Politics*, ed. Mark Blasius and Shane Phelan (New York, 1997), pp. 454–59.

7. See Foucault, “Le Gai Savoir,” interview by Le Bitoux, *La Revue H*, no. 2 (Autumn 1996): 42–54.

8. See Foucault, “Le Gai Savoir,” *Entretiens sur la question gai*, ed. Le Bitoux (Béziers, 2005), pp. 45–72.

9. James Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (1993; New York, 1994), p. 262; see also pp. 257–59.

reflect Foucault's final intentions; Foucault himself did not have, or did not take, the opportunity to edit the text himself.

Foucault in fact took great care with the texts that appeared under his name. He did not authorize interviewers to publish transcripts of recorded conversations with him; he insisted on going over the texts of interviews he gave before he allowed them to appear; and he typically made extensive revisions and corrections, so as to be sure the final versions reflected his intended meaning and considered views. He was vehemently opposed to the posthumous publication of his unfinished or unrevised writings. The transcript of his conversation with Jean Le Bitoux indicates why. In it, Foucault allows himself to try out different ideas with varying degrees of seriousness or thoughtfulness; he is frank and often speculative, giving voice to tentative notions to which he is not committed and has not yet thought out. He makes a number of mischievous jokes. He would surely have cut, revised, reconsidered, and reformulated his remarks before allowing this interview to be published, and it was therefore altogether reasonable for Daniel Defert and François Ewald, the editors of the four-volume definitive collection of Foucault's papers, *Dits et écrits 1954–1988*, to omit the interview when they published that massive compilation in 1994.

Its publication here is nonetheless very welcome. First of all because, to misappropriate Auden, Foucault belongs to us now: he has become too important to retain proprietary ownership over himself. Next, because—according to the same principle—his heirs and executors have now authorized the publication of his unpublished work, most notably the transcripts of his lectures at the Collège de France, which were starting to circulate in bootleg versions, like tapes of Grateful Dead concerts, and which do indeed offer valuable perspectives on the evolution of his thought. A number of other unpublished texts of his have appeared in recent years. And, finally, because in the interview with Jean Le Bitoux, Foucault makes a number of fascinating and brilliant observations: he explains why his critique of sexual liberation in volume 1 of *The History of Sexuality* does not imply any opposition on his part to gay activism or to the gay movement (a topic that continues to puzzle some of his readers); he has striking things to say about the possible affinities between gay male leather culture and feminism; he specifies what he sees of value in the multiple anonymous sexual encounters that gay male sexual institutions, such as bathhouses and sex clubs, make possible; he argues for lowering the age of consent for sex; he clarifies his understanding of the relation between various gay sexual practices (including S/M and fisting) and what he calls the degenitalization of pleasure; he explains why gay sex has been easier

for straight society to tolerate than gay love, let alone gay happiness; and in general he describes what he considers new, innovative, and politically, ethically, socially, or personally promising in gay male sexual culture.

Foucault also elaborates in the interview a crucial distinction between pleasure and desire that was fundamental to his late thought—and that constituted a point of disagreement with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari as well as with Guy Hocquenghem.¹⁰ The distinction underlies his effort, in volume 1 of *The History of Sexuality*, to differentiate an *ars erotica* from a *scientia sexualis*, and it contributes to his lifelong struggle to resist the social and institutional power of modern psychology. As Arnold Davidson explains,

while *ars erotica* is organized around the framework of body-pleasure-intensification, *scientia sexualis* is organized around the axis of subject-desire-truth. It is as if one could say that the imposition of true discourses on the subject of sexuality leads to the centrality of a theory of sexual desire, while the discourse of pleasure and the search for its intensification is exterior to a science of sexual desire. Just as Foucault wanted to divorce the psychoanalytic theory of the unconscious from the theory of sexuality, so he wants to detach the experience of pleasure from a psychological theory of sexual desire, of sexual subjectivity. The modification of the subject aimed at by the true discourse of the science of sexuality uses the conceptual structure of *desire* to excavate the real identity of the subject, and so to delimit the domain of psychological intervention. Desire has psychological *depth*; desire can be latent or manifest, apparent or hidden; desire can be repressed or sublimated; it calls for decipherment, for interpretation. True desire expresses what one really wants, who one really is, while false desire hides or masks identity, one's true subjectivity. No doubt this is a main part of the reason Foucault could not bear the word *desire*.

Although we have no difficulty talking about and understanding the distinction between true and false desires, the idea of true and false pleasures . . . is conceptually misplaced. Pleasure is, as it were, exhausted by its surface; it can be intensified, increased, its qualities modified, but it does not have the psychological depth of desire. It is, so to speak, related to itself and not to something else that it expresses, either truly or falsely. There is no coherent conceptual space for the science of sexuality to attach itself to pleasure, and no primacy

10. Compare Gilles Deleuze, "Desire and Pleasure," trans. Daniel W. Smith, in *Foucault and His Interlocutors*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson (Chicago, 1997), pp. 183–92.

of the psychological subject in the experience of pleasure. Structures of desire lead to forms of sexual orientation, kinds of subjectivity; different pleasures do not imply orientation at all, require no theory of subjectivity or identity formation. The circumscription of true desire is a procedure of individualization; the production of pleasure is not.¹¹

In a recent interview, the Parisian writer and journalist Mathieu Lindon recalls that he spoke often with Foucault, toward the end of the latter's life, about the difference between pleasure and desire and that the two of them shared a decided preference for the notion of pleasure at a moment when desire was all the rage in politics and culture.¹² Foucault's 1978 interview with Jean Le Bitoux contains perhaps the fullest and most explicit explanation he ever gave for his personal, political, and conceptual investment in the category of pleasure.

The interview also contains some of Foucault's earliest recorded thoughts about gay politics and gay sexuality, sounding a number of themes that appear in later interviews that were published during his lifetime and that, for that reason, have long been better known. It does not represent the first time Foucault touched on homosexuality. He wrote briefly about the history and politics of homosexuality in his first major book, *Madness and Unreason*, though the chapter on "Le Monde correctionnel" ("The House of Correction, Its World and People") in which his remarks appear was omitted from the later, abridged edition that served as the basis for the once-standard English translation by Richard Howard, published in 1965 under the title *Madness and Civilization*; the missing chapter is now available in *History of Madness*, the complete 2006 English translation by Jonathan Murphy and Jean Khalifa of Foucault's original 1961 text. Foucault also touched on the history and politics of homosexuality in two brief but celebrated passages in volume 1 of *The History of Sexuality*. But his most expansive and freewheeling observations about contemporary gay politics, gay sex, and the gay scene were made in more informal contexts: in interviews with the gay press, chiefly in the United States but also in France; in book reviews or brief columns in French newspapers such as *Libération*; and in speeches and personal conversations. An example of the latter can be found in Foucault's exchanges with

11. Davidson, "Foucault, Psychoanalysis, and Pleasure," in *Homosexuality and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Tim Dean and Christopher Lane (Chicago, 2001), pp. 45–46. I have also commented on Foucault's distinction between pleasure and desire in *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (New York, 1995), pp. 85–97.

12. Mathieu Lindon, "L'Amour de mon père père, l'amitié de Michel Foucault pas du tout," interview by Les Inrockuptibles, *Les Inrocks*, 9 Jan. 2011, bit.ly/dRiiko

Thierry Voeltzel, a young gay hitchhiker whom Foucault happened to pick up and whom he interviewed on tape in the summer of 1976 just as he was completing volume 1 of *The History of Sexuality*; a transcript was published, under Voeltzel's name and with no mention of Foucault's, as *Vingt Ans et après* in 1978—about the same time that Foucault allowed himself to be interviewed about the relation between his work and gay politics by Jean Le Bitoux.

Le Bitoux's interview therefore represents the first public pronouncements on the topic of contemporary gay politics, gay sex, and gay culture that Foucault intended to voice in print in his own person, implicitly acknowledging his own homosexuality. Foucault willingly takes up a number of perennial preoccupations in gay political discourse: how should we interpret the shift in recent times from an effeminate or transgendered style of gay male self-presentation to the macho style characteristic of gay "clones" or gay leathermen? What should we make of the emergence of a gay commercial scene? For example, does anonymous sex with multiple partners in saunas and sex clubs represent the triumph of capitalism, of a consumerism that has now overtaken gay male erotic life, or should it be interpreted in different terms? Here we see Foucault addressing many issues that have come up more recently in discussions within queer politics and theory of the relations among neoliberalism, gay rights, and white gay male privilege. For all of these reasons, Foucault's 1978 interview with Jean Le Bitoux remains of particular, even pressing interest.

During our meeting in Paris, Le Bitoux willingly gave me permission to produce an English translation of the recently published transcript of his famous interview with Foucault. But the projected collection on *The Queer Theory of Michel Foucault* that I was planning at the time, and in which I wanted to include "The Gay Science," has languished since. So I can only be grateful to Nicolae Morar and Daniel W. Smith for taking the initiative to prepare a complete translation and edition of the text, including Le Bitoux's original preface to the 1996 publication in *La Revue H* and his later annotations to the text in his volume of interviews. It is high time English-speaking readers had access to the complete, unedited transcript of the original interview that Le Bitoux recorded in 1978.

Jean Le Bitoux died on 21 April 2010, at the age of sixty-one. On Saturday, 29 May 2010, a memorial service was held for him in the Salle des Mariages at the Mairie, the city hall, of the eleventh *arrondissement* in Paris. The ceremony was not without its queer elements: the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence offered a prayer, though a fairly earnest one; a gay male choral group called Les Caramels Fous sang "Les Voix qui se sont tues" ("The Voices That Have Fallen Silent"), a beautiful, sad tribute to the comrades

we have lost; and the closing musical medley included a male cover of “Over the Rainbow.” Also played, in the same spirit, was Barbara’s signature anthem, “Ma Plus Belle Histoire d’amour, c’est vous.” And there was some American popular music.

But the ceremony also seemed surprisingly like a state funeral, perhaps appropriate for someone who not only had come from a military family but the last decades of whose life had been devoted to the Mémorial de la Déportation Homosexuelle, the organization honoring the memory of all those who had been imprisoned, deported, and/or killed during the Nazi Occupation of France because of their homosexuality. Jean Le Bitoux had founded that organization in 1989. He published in 1994 the memoirs of a gay French Alsatian survivor of the concentration camp at Schirmeck, Pierre Seel, and in 2002 he brought out a book about the forgotten gay victims of the Holocaust, *Les Oubliés de la mémoire*, which led the French president Jacques Chirac in 2005 to make the first official acknowledgment, during a state ceremony in memory of the deportations, of the persecution of homosexuals in France during the Occupation.¹³ Le Bitoux remained head of the Mémorial until his death; his successor, Hussein Bourgi, presided at the memorial service and edited a glossy collection of tributes to him.¹⁴

The service opened with a stirring formal address, as if for a fallen hero, by the Socialist deputy mayor of the eleventh *arrondissement*, Patrick Bloche, and continued with readings of texts by Genet, speeches by Christian De Leusse, by the North American historians Michael Sibalis and Gerard Koskovich, a musical tribute by Ladri Ibrahima Diarra, a former lover of Le Bitoux’s, and quotations from the exchange of letters between the adolescent Le Bitoux, just coming out, and Simone de Beauvoir, who had written a sympathetic reply to the confused young man, concluding, “je vous comprends.” In short, the service was serious, solemn, eminently respectable, drenched in the official culture of the militant French Left and ornamented by glorious association with some of its most illustrious representatives, whom Le Bitoux had known: Sartre, Hocquenghem, Foucault.

Pierre Hadot was hardly a leftist, let alone an illustrious one. Professor Emeritus at the Collège de France and an eminent authority on ancient philosophy and late antique spirituality, he also died in April 2010, on the night of the 24th, shortly after Jean Le Bitoux, at the age of eighty-eight.

13. See Pierre Seel, *Moi, Pierre Seel, déporté homosexuel* (Paris, 1994), trans. Joachim Neugroschel under the title *I, Pierre Seel, Deported Homosexual: A Memoir of Nazi Terror* (New York, 1995); and Le Bitoux, *Les Oubliés de la mémoire* (Paris, 2002).

14. See *Jean Le Bitoux passeur de mémoire, 1948–2010*, ed. Hussein Bourgi (Paris, 2010).

Hadot, along with Paul Veyne, had had a decisive impact on Foucault's late thinking about the use of pleasure in Greek and Roman sexual ethics. Hadot interpreted ancient philosophy as a way of being, as a profound personal conversion, as a transformative mode of existence requiring an *ascesis*—rigorous training and constant work on oneself; the individual's conversion to philosophy was expressed in the form of a unique art or style of life. Foucault was inspired by Hadot to see ancient sexual ethics, similarly, as a stylistics of the self. Hadot eventually objected to Foucault's aestheticization of the care of the self, and he surely would have been shocked if he had known that Foucault, in his 1981 interview with Jean Le Bitoux in the pages of *Le Gai Pied*, blithely applied the category of "spiritual exercise" to the gay movement as a whole: "It's up to us," Foucault told Le Bitoux, "to advance into a homosexual *ascesis* that would make us work on ourselves and invent (I don't say discover) a manner of being that is still improbable."¹⁵ There was a gentle irony, then, when on Wednesday, 28 April 2010, *Le Monde* published extensive obituaries of Jean Le Bitoux, "Militant du mouvement homosexuel," and Pierre Hadot, "Historien de la philosophie antique," on the very same page, without of course making any connection between them as the persons jointly responsible, in their different ways, for Michel Foucault's final reflections on homosexuality as *ascesis*.

The publication here of Jean Le Bitoux's long-inaccessible 1978 interview with Foucault finally allows the English-speaking reader to return to a moment in time before those three paths had branched out and parted, once and for all.

15. See Davidson, "Spiritual Exercises and Ancient Philosophy: An Introduction to Pierre Hadot," *Critical Inquiry* 16 (Spring 1990): 475–82 and "Ethics as Ascetics: Foucault, the History of Ethics, and Ancient Thought," in *Foucault and the Writing of History*, ed. Jan Goldstein (Oxford, 1994), pp. 63–80, 266–71.