The discourse of (Michel Foucault’s) life:  
A review essay

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What is the point of striving after knowledge [savoir] if it ensures only the acquisition of knowledges [connaissances] and not, in a certain way and to the greatest extent possible, the disorientation of he who knows? ... What is philosophy today – I mean philosophical activity – if not the critical work of thought upon thought, if it does not, rather than legitimising what one already knows, consist of an attempt to know how and to what extent it is possible to think differently?

These words of Michel Foucault, from the “Introduction” to one of his last books, *L’Usage des plaisirs* (1984: 14–15; ET 1985: 8–9; Macey 1993: 471), were read by Gilles Deleuze to the crowd that had gathered in the courtyard behind the La Pitié-Salpêtrière hospital in Paris, Friday, 29 June 1984, to express their grief at Foucault’s untimely death, four days earlier, at age 57. Ten years later, Foucault has decisively transcended the cult status often ascribed him in life,¹ to become recognized as one of the most influential, if controversial, thinkers of the twentieth century. Although Foucault in 1970 had proposed (Bouchard 1977: 156) that some day “this century will be known as Deleusean”, it was Deleuze who suggested sixteen years later that the century would be remembered rather as Foucauldian (Deleuze 1988; Eribon 1991: 3–4).

I first met Michel Foucault at a conference on “Knowledge, Power, History” held at the University of Southern California in October 1981. Foucault

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¹. E.g., “France’s Philosopher of Power. Elusive and exasperating, Michel Foucault has a growing cult”, *Time* 16 November 1981: 147–148.
had written that he was willing to meet there to discuss details of his invitation to The University of Vermont the following Fall, an invitation he had accepted only en principe. He arrived in Los Angeles late the evening before his scheduled talk on the final day of the conference. Having learned that the number in attendance exceeded the promised maximum of fifty by tenfold, and that its character, which ostensibly focused on interdisciplinary approaches to his works, had become, according to one charitable description, “a forum for the display of academic and personal rivalries, [and] for conspicuous displays of knowledge” (Macey 1993: 438), Foucault had threatened not to attend at all. On another occasion, he did abruptly return to Paris following his initial appearance at a well-known eastern American university. “Poof”, he explained later, “they weren’t interested in anything I had to say; only in displaying their own knowledge. So I left!” It was with some trepidation, therefore, that we welcomed the Professor of the History and Systems of Thought from the prestigious Collège de France to the Vermont campus in September 1982. We need not have worried: “Call me Michel”, he beamed as he sat for a family dinner early during his visit. He revealed to his New England hosts, thereby, not only his legendary charm but a familiarity that was to characterize his relations to colleagues and students, spouses and children alike.

A decade after his death, three biographies of this enigmatic thinker have now appeared. All three are intellectual biographies in the sense that they treat their subject’s “thought chronologically, developmentally, [and] in correlation with other events in [his] life”, as this genre has been characterized by Gregory Alles in a recent article for this journal (1994: 251). Citing Foucault’s own doubts (Foucault 1973: xiii) concerning the value of intellectual biography, Alles raises the question about the point of writing, or reading, intellectual biography at all “beyond simple, personal amusement” (1994: 251) – an issue which, of course, does not escape Foucault’s biographers (Eribon 1991: ix–xiii; Miller 1993: 6–7; Macey 1993: xiii–xxiii). Employing the now famous passage about the “disappearance of man” with which Foucault concludes The Order of Things, Alles concludes (1994: 250) that Foucault represents an anti-humanism “that approaches, if it does not actually attain, a limit where the value of intellectual biography is zero”, a point of view Foucault seemingly reaffirmed in his essay “What is an author?” (Bouchard 1977: 113–138). However, Foucault is not advocating an anti-humanist position with his image of “man’s disappearance”; even as the Renaissance humanities once usurped the Medieval theologies, he envisions, rather, a new epistemic configuration in which “man” remains no longer the central, organizing principle of knowledge. Closer to the approach of mentalité historians, in which the condition of thought is seen to reside neither