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# MICHEL FOUCAULT ON TRANSGRESSION AND THE THOUGHT OF OUTSIDE

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## Abstract

The paper examines the concepts of transgression and the outside, which appear in some seminal papers and works of Michel Foucault, Georges Bataille, Sade, or Maurice Blanchot. The main aspect of Bataille's experience with transgression, a transgressive movement of thought, is that it co-occurs with the death of God, while Foucault uses the example of Bataille's texts in order to describe his own experience of transgression, stating that in Bataille's case, this experience led to the disruption of the relationship between language and the subject. This experience, however, is already mediated before Bataille, in the works of Sade. Apart from the existence of language Foucault saw transgression as the most interesting of the functions of literature since in certain periods it made it possible for literature to oppose the discourse valid in those times. Transgression cannot be found in any established discourse, it exists independent of the philosophical subject and in regard to the subject this method is on 'the outside'. By outside of thought, Foucault meant the form of thinking which is the opposite of reflection. Whereas reflection perceived the outside world as its counterpart, which enabled it to approach the outside world from the position of the inner subject which is confirmed in the reflection itself, the outside has a transgressive character. The paper concludes that eventually Foucault has turned away from the study of literature since according to him literature has lost the ability of transgression. More importantly, however, Foucault states that even other forms of writing, such as philosophy have lost the power to oppose contemporary social norms. We can say that literary expression no longer lies at the centre of Foucault's interest and its place has been taken over by the analysis of discourse, its functions and circulation in society, as well as the various methods of its regulation.

*Keywords:* death, God, writing, language, subject

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## 1. Introduction

In the book *Death and the Labyrinth: The World of Raymond Roussel*, Foucault shows how the language itself can be thought of as a labyrinth where meanings of words are being formed and multiplied independently of the

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speaking subject. Similarly, in the article *A Preface to Transgression (Préface à la transgression, 1963 [1])* from the same time period, Foucault deals with the relationship between language and a subject. The subject, as Foucault states, has lost the status of being the master of its own speech. The *Preface*, devoted to Georges Bataille, then introduces the concept of transgression which is characterized, in quite a hermetic way, as a process of crossing and at the same time preserving the Limit. In this paper, we will examine Foucault's approach to the concept of transgression, a transgressive movement, as well as to the closely related concept of the outside.

## 2. Devotion and transgression

Transgression occupies Bataille's thinking, in both his literary and theoretical texts, from the very beginning. A somehow paradoxical feature of the transgression is mentioned in the introductory essay to Bataille's first book, *Story of the Eye (Histoire de l'oeil, 1928 [2])*, which is entitled *L'érotisme, soutien de la morale (Erotism, Support for Morality)*, where he writes: "Historians from various religions have discovered a curious coincidence. Forbidden areas coincided with sacred areas and they became one of the governing elements that formed religious and steered the direction of their development." [2, p. 16] This 'coincidence', so to say, means that it was possible not only to break the limit "Thou shalt not kill" by excess, murder, but also by sacrifice, an established holy ritual of sacrificing animals or humans to God. In his essay on Sade, Bataille elaborates the concept of sacrifice, stating "sacrifice is (...) a fear of release expressed through release. It is the process by which the world of lucid activity (the profane world) liberates itself from a violence which might destroy it." [3] And: "Sacrifice would seem to reduce the intrusion of troubled elements. It rests on the contradiction made evident by emphasizing the purity and the nobility of the victims and the places." [3, p. 58] In a way, the possibility of breaking the limit is thus incorporated in the limit itself. The movement of transgression is further described in the book *Erotism: Death & Sensuality (L'érotisme, 1946)*, where Bataille even adds that "the limit is only there to be overreached" [4].

However, the main aspect of Bataille's experience with transgression is that it co-occurs with the death of God. After this event we are denied the experience of the Limitless (in the form of God) and so are thrown back upon the limitless reign of the Limit itself. This means that our world is exposed to the constant play of excess which crosses and recrosses this limit in an endless play of transgression." [5] Thus, transgression does not equal a plain breaking or abolishing all limits in the sense of dialectics, where a new limit arises each time an existing one is negated. To the contrary, a distinctive trait of this process is its ambiguity since limits are not broken by negating them – "Transgression contains nothing negative" [1, p. 74]. Limits are both crossed and completed.

Foucault uses the example of Bataille's texts in order to describe his own experience of transgression, stating that in Bataille's case, this experience led to the disruption of the relationship between language and the subject. Bataille bases his thoughts on the assumption that sanctity and sexuality share a common space: eroticism and morality do not negate one another. The exact opposite is true – morality supports eroticism and eroticism leads to the strengthening of morality. However, as the inactivity of weapons is unimaginable, morality is also a fight against eroticism and eroticism only finds its place in the uncertainty of fighting against morality [6].

This experience is already mediated before Bataille, in the works of Sade. However, Sade's "style and philosophy are completely the product of a certain type of materialism and naturalism, which was typical for the whole 18<sup>th</sup> century" [7]. Bataille, on the contrary, consciously abandons the type of language in which philosophy was expressed since Plato until the times of Nietzsche. He does this, because "undoubtedly, no form of reflection yet developed, no established discourse, can supply its model, its foundation, or even the riches of its vocabulary" [1, p. 77]. It is evident that such language can no longer be part of dialectical discourse – it is the language of a sovereign subject who places himself in the position of God.

### **3. Communication**

In regard to this, Fulka draws our attention to the meaning of the term 'communication', which Bataille uses rather frequently. We should not consider communication in the typical sense since rather than conveying the meaning, it is a wordless proclamation or connection (the word *communication* also has this meaning in French). In mysticism, it denoted the relationship to God in ecstasy, but for Bataille (since God is dead) it denotes "the sovereignty of a being that even in communication only refers to itself" [7, p. 135]. In the movement of transgression, the philosophical subject finds out that experience with transgression cannot be described since he can no longer "manipulate the language he spoke at one time and that has now separated itself from him, now gravitating in a space increasingly silent" [1, p. 79]. This absence of philosophical discourse, which occurs in the experience with transgression, distracts the philosophical subject. However, this does not mean the end of philosophy. It is rather "the end of the philosopher as the sovereign and primary form of philosophical language" [1, p. 79].

We could say that apart from the existence of language Foucault saw transgression as the most interesting of the functions of literature since in certain periods it made it possible for literature to oppose the discourse valid in those times. In this sense, Foucault even considered the writing of such greatly dissimilar authors as Flaubert or Sade transgressive. In the case of Sade, Foucault called him the initiator of modern literature even though his works still belonged to the 18<sup>th</sup> century [8]. Thus, a question arises: why did Foucault give a text dedicated to Bataille the title *A Preface to Transgression*? This was

certainly due to the fact that Foucault had never encountered the experience with transgression captured in a better way than in Bataille's work.

Transgression cannot be found in any established discourse, it exists independent of the philosophical subject and in regard to the subject this method is on 'the outside'. Because of that, we will now turn to the philosophical concept of 'the outside'.

#### **4. Thought of the outside**

In the article *A Thought of the Outside* (*La pensée du dehors*, 1966 [1, p. 147]), which is dedicated to Maurice Blanchot and similarly to the article *A Preface to Transgression* is rather an example of *thinking with literature* than *thinking about literature*, Foucault "radicalizes this approach to a degree where he questions the opinion that speech is the manifestation of a human" [9]. The text begins with the words: "In ancient times, this simple assertion was enough to shake the foundations of Greek truth: 'I lie'. 'I speak,' on the other hand, puts the whole of modern fiction to the test." [1, p. 147] It seems that with 'I speak' there is no conflict that could be compared to Epimenides' well-known liar paradox. Here we encounter a speaking subject who speaks about their own act of speaking. However, we know that this truism is no longer a place where the existence of a subject could arise. Émile Benveniste, whose thoughts Foucault uses covertly in this text, points out that language is not the place for any subject other than the grammatical person. This manifests itself clearly when Foucault talks about "a language spoken by no one: any subject it may have is no more than a grammatical fold" [1, p. 54]. Despite that it would be wrong to think that Foucault considers literature to be secondary in relation to linguistics.

In this context, it is appropriate to mention the French philosopher and writer Maurice Blanchot, one of the most enigmatic thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In addition to philosophy, like Bataille, he also dealt with literature, which also manifests itself in the style of his essays and critical-theoretical books. The main area of Blanchot's interest was literature, to which he sought his own unique and inspirational approach. In the introduction to the book *Lautréamont and Sade* (*Lautréamont et Sade*, 1949 [10]), which, among other things, is also related to the issue of transgression, he asks what an appropriate way of examining a literary work would be. According to Blanchot, a literary critic has no right to determine the value of a work, nor does he have a reason to approach a literary work from the perspectives of the public, institutions or journalism. The only correct approach is using the critic's own experience with writing. Similar to Kantian philosophical criticism, which examined the possibilities of our experience, literary criticism should be connected with the exploration of the possibilities that literary experience brings. Only such criticism is able to open a unique space for us – a space where "the unspoken, indefinite reality of the work is momentarily transformed and circumscribed into words" [10, p. 4].

The old myth of an author and critic, a majestic creator and private servant, was shown to be false when critical texts were created that urged people to read in the same way as literary texts. *Lautréamont and Sade* is an example of such a critical text. From a formal perspective, it leaves the framework of standard scientific text, and in regard to its content, it deals with authors whose texts ignore the rules of standard language use, perhaps most evidently of all texts in literary history.

The first study entitled *Sade's reason (La Raison de Sade)* draws us into the analysis of the monumental works by this controversial thinker. The starting point in Blanchot's interpretation of Sade is the concept of solitude: "Being contained within a body and enjoying himself. Such is the primary meaning of his solitude." [10, p. 22] However, solitude is not the felling or state of being abandoned that we typically associate with this word – it is the joy of plenitude [11]. Being a unique among one's kind is a sign of sovereignty and a basic category which Sade absolutizes. His heroes are aware of their own plenitude; they use their cruelties to negate humanity, God and even nature. Sade was in this context the first to discover the power which lies in negation. However, this power is not governed by a principle hidden in desire or perversity – it is found in the concept of energy. Blanchot points out that in Sade's novels "it is not the amount of virtue or vice that determines whether beings are happy or unhappy, but the energy they expend" [11, p. 35]. The characters in Sade's novels possess a strange type of rationality which manifests itself by apathy, insensitivity and stoicism. This superiority of reason gives human beings the power to control life energy. Paradoxically, this superiority is also the greatest human weakness. A debauchee in a state of dejection can return to morality and God even after many crimes. Blanchot finishes his text with the thought that Sade was a true moralist that the world had turned away from. The purpose of the analysis of Sade's rationality was to show that if we accept our odd tastes and make them into the basis and principle of reason, we provide philosophy with the strongest foundation we could possibly find.

The second study entitled *The Experience of Lautréamont* is somewhat more extensive. Despite the fact that he focuses on works which are much less extensive than the ones that Sade left behind, Lautréamont's *The Songs of Maldoror (Les Chants de Maldoror, 1869)* is much richer from a semantic and literary perspective. At the beginning, Blanchot gets back to the problem of interpretation outlined in the introduction. Lautréamont's voluminous prose poem requires a completely different type of reading than Sade's novels. That is why the centre of attention here is an attempt to outline a certain 'theory' of reading-induced vertigo, which Blanchot identifies as an inseparable part of Lautréamont's work. The commentary does not aim to uncover the 'true' meaning of *The Songs*, nor does Blanchot consider it possible. He is only trying to find how far the reader of this text would be willing to go. Even with Lautréamont, just like in the case of Sade, Blanchot always has to cope with various, often contradictory interpretations of his work. He examines the themes and literary traditions that Lautréamont has adopted and he puts them in contrast

with the author's plenitude. Chapter after chapter, he paints a fantastic picture of one of the greatest and most mysterious writers ever known in literature. The commentary culminates in the discovery of a poet's borderline experience – light-induced vertigo. Finding oneself is like being reborn. It means passing from the darkness into the light and then 'in the light of day looking for one's limits, without which there is no true being' [11, p. 172]. Here, poetic experience meets the requirement of criticism which we talked about at the beginning, all occurring in a strange fashion. Observing a text even beyond its border means reaching the moment of light – the moment when we become one with the light as well as with ourselves.

Blanchot's thoughts about Lautréamont foreshadow the way in which we direct our interpretation of Foucault's thoughts about literature up until the moment of self-writing, which is the main topic of the chapter which deals with autobiographies. So far, it is enough to realize that literature as well as modern linguistics and certain structuralist methods have made it possible for us to get closer to Foucault's *outside of thought*.

By *outside of thought*, Foucault meant the form of thinking, which is the opposite of reflection. While thinking about thought brought us to the innermost core of subjectivity, "through literature, but maybe also in other ways, the language of speech brings us to the outside, where the speaking subject disappears". (The quote is modified using the original text: „La parole de la parole nous mène par la littérature, mais peut-être aussi par d'autres chemins, à ce dehors où disparaît le sujet qui parle. Sans doute est-ce pour cette raison que la réflexion occidentale a si longtemps hésité à penser l'être du langage: comme si elle avait pressenti le danger que ferait courir à l'évidence du 'Je suis' l'expérience nue du langage.“ [7, vol. 1, p. 250]) Reflection perceived the outside world as its counterpart, which enabled it to approach the outside world from the position of the inner subject which is confirmed in the reflection itself. However, the outside has a transgressive character: "The outside does not oppose the subject as some kind of object or a set of objects, nor does it oppose language as something inexpressible. It is rather a movement which develops outside of subjectivity in a space where the disappearance of the subject makes space for the pure existence of language." [8, p. 157] This is why the thought of the outside cannot be captured by the language of reflection: "Reflection tends irresistibly to repatriate it to the side of consciousness and to develop it into a description of living that depicts the 'outside' as the experience of the body, space, the limits of the will, and the ineffaceable presence of the other" [1, p. 152].

If experience with the outside is to be captured by language, it will necessarily need to be the type of language which escapes the control of reflective thinking. While in the previous example Foucault turned to Bataille, who he thought was closest to the language of transgression, this time he turns to Blanchot: "So far has he withdrawn into the manifestation of his work, so completely is he, not hidden by his texts, but absent from their existence and absent by virtue of the marvelous force of their existence, that for us he is that

thought itself – its real, absolutely distant, shimmering, invisible presence” [1, p. 151].

In order for Blanchot to be able to speak the language of the outside, he has to free literature from old myths. We have seen that Foucault chose authors carefully in order to prove that language is not a representation of our world, a tool for ordinary communication or a place where the existence of the subject can take refuge. Roussel, Sade, Bataille, Mallarmé and others have shown us that language is more of a neutral space than anything else: “Mallarmé taught us that the word is the manifest non-existence of what it designates; we now know that the being of language is the visible effacement of the one who speaks” [1, p. 166]. It is no coincidence that in this connection Blanchot entitled one of his books *The Space of Literature* and that through the way he talked about literature in his works, he also marked the borders of this space, which cannot be reduced to any other part of reality. Blanchot turns to the most important authors of world literature in order to show us that their works are outside of us and they exist in the domain of the outside, where they are formed and where we will never be able to interiorize them.

We have mentioned that according to Blanchot the literary critic should not determine the value of a work but rather learn about the possibilities of literary experience. Only such criticism is able to open the unique space of the work for us and transform its reality into words. The language of this indefinite reality is forgetting and waiting at the same time. It is what thought of the outside should be directed at. Blanchot is aware of the fact that by heading towards this emptiness he will vanish “in the noise, in the immediate contradiction of that which he speaks, in the silence, which is not an intimate secret, but the pure outside where words endlessly follow after one another”. (The quote is modified using the original text: „(...) et vers ce vide il doit aller, en acceptant de se dénouer dans la rumeur, dans l’immédiate négation de ce qu’il dit, dans un silence qui n’est pas l’intimité d’un secret, mais le pur dehors où les mots se déroulent indéfiniment.“ [7, vol. 1, p. 523])

The space that Blanchot opened for us is also the limit of literary experience for Foucault. In an interview for the Japanese literary magazine *Bungei*, which was published under the title *Madness, Literature, Society (Folie, littérature, société, 1970)* and is the philosopher’s last big discussion about literature, Foucault states: “I chose literature as an example because until now this form of writing has been best at challenging the established order and is still the most subversive of all. If literature has lost its destructive power, it is quite natural that other forms of writing have lost it as well and much sooner.” [7, p. 126] We can see that Foucault has turned away from the study of literature since according to him literature has lost the ability of transgression. More importantly, however, Foucault states that even other forms of writing, such as philosophy have lost the power to oppose contemporary social norms. It was undoubtedly Blanchot who brought him to this recognition – Blanchot was able to leave the framework of literature and move into its outside, thus proving that the interior of literature was no longer a place of mutual understanding. This

‘place without a place’, which Blanchot referred to as the *literary space*, cannot be reduced to any other part of reality: neither society, nor everyday language, not even the subject of the writing author since in this space literature only talks about itself.

Timothy O’Leary, an expert on Foucault’s aesthetic, points out that Foucault remained with the concept of the outside even after he had moved away from literature. The reason for this was that it was not an absolute outside, but rather an outside “relative to the limits which a particular culture imposes” [5]. We have seen that during the period when Foucault dealt with literature, he considered language without a speaking subject to be the outside. We also come across a form of this outside from his works from the late 1960’s, during which he mostly does not deal with literature. For example, in the introduction to *The Archaeology of Knowledge (L’Archéologie du savoir, 1969)* he states: “I am no doubt not the only one who writes in order to have no face. Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same: leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order. At least spare us their morality when we write.” [12]

## 5. Conclusions

Even though Foucault uses these words to refer to writing as the place where the subject ceases to exist, he also outlines a new conception of the subject – the subject as a result of the practices of society and power [13]. This new conception reveals a new function for the outside as a place of resistance. In the 1970’s during the so-called genealogical period, Foucault dealt with the description of how different forms of this subjectivity arise. However, we need not only perceive the outside as a place for resistance against certain social practices, but as Foucault points out in the lecture *The Order of Discourse (L’Ordre du discours, 1970)*, it can also be a place for the truth: “It is always possible that one might speak the truth in the space of a wild exteriority, but one is ‘in the true’ only by obeying the rules of a discursive ‘policing’ which one has to reactivate in each of one’s discourses” [14].

At the beginning of the 1980’s when Foucault was dealing with sexuality and the issues of ethics, “the outside becomes, in a strange way, the inside of subjectivity itself” [15]. In this last period, Foucault also re-evaluates his relationship to literature and writing. While in the late 1960’s he diverges away from literature and keeps asking what purpose there is to writing, in the early 1980’s he talks about writing from a completely different perspective. For example, in the lecture *Technologies of the Self (1982)* he states: “Taking care of oneself became linked (author’s note: Foucault is referring to the Hellenistic age) to constant writing activity. The self is something to write about, a theme or object (subject) of writing activity. That is not a modern trait born of the Reformation or of romanticism; it is one of the most ancient Western traditions.” [1, vol. 1, p. 232] All these thoughts are opening the question of authentic being of human being [16]. For now, it is important to take into account that in the late



1960's Foucault stops working with literature. Literary expression no longer lies at the centre of his interest and its place has been taken over by the analysis of discourse, its functions and circulation in society, as well as the various methods of its regulation. This is why the conception of an author that Foucault presents does not take place on a literary level, but rather it turns to the author as one of the functions of discourse.

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