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**TRANSGRESSION, DIFFERENCE, AND THE NON-SENSE OF THE OUTSIDE**  
by **BEN OVERLAET**

# Transgression, difference and the non-sense of the outside

*Un récit?*

*Non, pas de récit, plus jamais.*

*différance* and transgression

The question raises itself: what has this 'term' of Derrida's to do with transgression? How can *différance*, involving postponement, difference etc., be related to transgression?

Is not the latter a priori dissolved by the former?

Does not postponement imply the very impossibility of transgression?

Could postponement per se possibly constitute a

transgressive move? And if so, could we consider anything to be an act of transgression?

What would be the limit? Not that this question is without relevance, for if there was no limit, i.e. a delimitation of what is allowed and what is not, there would be no occasion for transgression.

Even this textual fragmentation, this marginal writing, this para-citing rupturing conventional formats, can only exist because of the text.

The *différance* points to the aporetic moment, showing the non-notional outside, the duplicating and transforming process brought about by the differentiating approach. Thinking will take a different course, or rather, come upon new limits that make it question itself again and again.

A philosopher like Kant had no place for the *Ekelhafte* (the disgusting) amidst the fine arts. Genet, however, puts it in the forefront. His ideal of beauty was a subversion of the traditional ideal. Whereas to Kant and the modernists, beauty equaled harmony and efficiency, more recent thinkers focus on the very substance rejected by the rational mind: the object.

They give full attention to the unfinishable, to displacement and difference. But then the question arises: is it not this very view that makes transgression impossible by constantly suspending any identifiable concepts? Does not this sustained postponement precisely complicate any attempts at thinking in terms of presence?

## Transgression and transcendence

“What urges me to write, I think, is the fear of going mad” (Bataille).

When we look at both these concepts together, the names of writers like Genet and Bataille spring to mind. Bataille thought of transcendence as an act of leaving behind the virtues and calculations of self-preservation (Safranski). He explored the borderline of ethics, violence and physicality – pushing it as far as he could and, in doing so, assuming the excruciating confrontation with the blind spot left behind by an absent God (Bousset). Sartre depicted him as an inconsolable widower of God trying to make up for the loss through the cult of laughter. It is true: Bataille did write about an *absent* God, often in nostalgic overtones. That is why the question of whether he is to be regarded as a novelist or a philosopher relevant to literary critics even today. In my view, this question is, a priori, incompatible with Bataille's historical and intellectual environment, viz. the pluralism of the so-called post-modernists. It is precisely this dichotomy, this split, which is important, in that it can lay bare our incapacity to give an accurate and unambiguous account of anything, be it orally or in writing. According to Bataille, the urge to describe all and everything is what makes philosophy philosophy – as is the urge to cover everything with thought (a classic example is Hegel). It is an attitude that incorporates everything into a well-wrought system supposed eventually to offer an all-encompassing view.

Thinking in terms of differences characterizes the mind that is open to what is outside, including the nonsensical, to the object of previous attempts at *inclusion*. This way of thinking preserves the outside – and the *other* – as it is, and it also welcomes the *non-lieu* (Foucault). This 'non-place' questions all rational considerations and can be described as that which deletes everything over and over again. Difference-thinking unsettles existing metaphysical oppositions.

A radical interpretation (*radix* = root) produces an artificial space in which the interpreter is made to disappear, stifled and transfigured into the very artificiality that is a permanent feature of rational thinking.

However, the *différance* does not only raise questions about metaphysical thinking as we know it. It may also indicate that transgression – if taken to mean an act of 'crossing a limit' – is less transgressive than is commonly assumed, to the extent that it is *employed*, that it serves a kind of utilitarian, immediate purpose. It is thus that it readily becomes a figure of speech (as is the unfortunate lot of irony.)

However, at this point, philosophy hits its own limits, itself revealing the impossibility of its project.

Philosophy itself brings on an *anti*-philosophy, deconstructs itself, assuming its system had left nothing out while failing to account for that which is *outside*. The observer invariably looks from *the outside* to what can be encompassed and comprehended. Invariably, thinking is incomplete and uncompleted. And the same can be said of visual works, forever bound to the status of a *promise*. (It is the self-deconstruction of the generally established idea of transgression that I hope to put forward here.)

Any borderline offers two perspectives that are mutually exclusive in time. The illusion of omniscience sooner or later hits a new enigma, exposing the impotence of an unambiguous, delineated and demarcated system. The 'other' (Levinas, Derrida) always plays a role and will always retain its unique otherness.

'Reality' is characterized by artificiality. It exists by the grace of what is left out, by the 'other', which does not correspond and cannot be reduced to the 'same' (cf. Levinas' idea of the tyranny of the same.)

“Transgression is an act concerning the limit;  
it crosses this thin dividing line in a flash,  
but perhaps this is, at once, its entire course and even its *origin*”  
(Michel Foucault, *italics added*).

Defined as 'going beyond a standard', transgression suggests its close relationship with acts of 'taboo'. Through their regulating nature, taboos delimit and hence confine identity, while identity – a doubtful term in its own right – can exist only by the grace of what is excluded.

The object of the taboo, however, is alluring and even linked to the idea of *power*. The power enshrined in violating tabooed objects is a recurrent theme in mythologies and urban legends. Indeed, violating a taboo can be regarded as an act that *determines identity*. The violation is associated with symbiotic feelings of fear and power. This is what makes transgression alluring, while the emptiness that follows in the wake of the transgressive move nourishes desire. In other words, through its identificatory move, transgression brings on a paradox in that it helps to create identity.

### **The paradox of transgression**

Transgression is conceived of as the act of cracking dichotomies and dualisms. Once crossed, the line of division must necessarily cease to exist, vanishing as it is left behind. The object of taboo loses its sense of marginality and comes to form a part of the general consensus of the *sens commun*.

For a dividing line to be crossed, there must first be a presence of something corresponding to the idea of immediacy. *Does not transgression presuppose identity?* Does it not require a well-defined entity, one that is deemed to be subject to transformation, deformation and transmutation? If we bear this in mind and recall the outcome of the *différance*, it would seem as if a transgressive move belongs to the sphere of metaphysical thinking, as if we can only believe in it by approaching it from a viewpoint that is dualistic or at least oppositional. It does indeed bring on a hierarchical opposition – however controversial it may think it is. It is precisely these elements of opposition and discursion that are made issues by the process of differentiation, displacement etc. Perhaps reasonableness and rational consideration make a larger contribution to the prevalence of transgression than we might be inclined to think. Genet, amongst others, made the abject into a sublime cause, a 'new beauty', sacralized by a kind of transcending move. The supreme and the sacred together constitute the sublimity of transgression. This is how Genet achieved a degree of *sacrality of transgression*. The same can be said of Bataille.

Eventually, this destruction might result in the self-destruction of transgression. Not only would transgression enter the reality of those that already consider it a proper subject of debate, it would also fit in snugly with the *sens commun*. It could well be that every transgressive move confirms the Law.

In our escape attempts, we always try to find an *idiom* different from the language we choose to deny. This necessarily results in a new demarcation and delimitation of our own discovery. According to Derrida, even Artaud fell victim to this. All languages center on conventions and are eventually included in the 'general order of things'.

(Bataille was not blind to this, and Derrida wrote about it as well.)

The question arises whether there are any limits left for transgression to retain its *raison d'être* and relevance. Could it be that, over time, transgression will bring about its own dissolution?

Maybe we can take an alternative view of transgression by looking at it from the perspective of the philosophy of difference. In doing so, we bring on deconstruction.

### **Transgression and deconstruction**

The transgressive move is not very different from deconstruction if we assume that transgression *inhabits* the differentiating move and, just like the latter's inherent acts of suspending, displacing, separating etc., also reveals the impossibility of a univocal identity and a centered premise. However, if we were to intend to 'employ' transgression as some sort of *means*, accommodating it under a teleological heading, we would be facing the problem that any transgressive move is invariably followed by regression. Since such an approach starts from oppositional thinking, it must necessarily lead back to some kind of opposition. The transgressive act, as a figure of speech, aims to break through the line of opposition, so that it always starts *from* an opposition. In other words, not only does it bring about the destruction of the rule – as referred to above – and hence that of itself as well (as an opposition to the rule; it makes itself superfluous, as it were). It also takes a dualistic approach, existing, as a figure of speech, within a dualistic worldview.

It should have become clear by now that the transgressive move represents an instance of self-transgression – much like the deconstructive move is a kind of self-deconstruction – and that it should not be used or employed. Any 'use' would by definition involve a point of departure that is denied a priori by the transgression. The transgressive move and the transgression as a figure of speech are incommensurable. (The same problem emerges in theories on deconstruction.)

The transgressive can only be a vestige, a rest, i.e. the non-present of presence. It is always on the line of division, on the verge of slipping away at any moment, which in fact it does all the time.

Detachment is a *permanent* process. The transgressive move has been active from the very start. Whoever wants to ascribe to it a sacred or useful quality, degrades it to a figure of speech. This is a widespread phenomenon: many deny the aspects of transfiguration and transgression, the displacement and detachment, etc. because they believe in an unambiguous meaning and a clear immediacy, and subsequently project onto these a transgressive move.

However, *différance* and deconstruction – always at work *within* the work– result in transgression, detachment, derationalization and *non-sens*.

So, first to believe in an identity and then to subject it to transgression is not so very different from metaphysics and is characterized by a utilitarian way of thinking: the transgressive act is *employed*. While, as we have seen, it is certainly worthwhile to consider transgression in the context of difference-thinking.

Deconstruction makes clear that it is impossible to use univocal terms and meanings. Transgression does more or less the same thing. Both of them act on this text. Nothing is saved. Not even this.

Transgression shows us the limit by showing it its origin. It is only through its rupturing move that transgression gives clear form to the limit. In this sense, the limit does not exist outside the instant it deletes everything as well as itself. *The moment the limit is given form, coincides with the moment of its disappearance*. As said, the same applies to transgression. Their 'relationship' is not merely dualistic; it is not a matter of inside and outside or black and white. Transgression – just like deconstruction – comes from *within*.

In his *Kritik der Praktische Vernunft*, Kant upholds that a moral law can only be a law if it can be violated. A moral duty presupposes freedom. This points to the relationship between limit and transgression: the limit is capable of being visualized through transgression while transgression finds its *raison d'être* through the *invitation* it is tendered by the limit.

Transgression cannot exist but in the presence of a limit. For a limit to exist, it must admit transgression

Ben Overlaet, 2010

This leads us to assert that the  
opposition – 'constructed' by  
transgression time and again  
– is deconstructed by the  
transgressive move itself,  
because this move is already  
at work (just like the  
deconstruction) within the  
discourse, the visual work of  
art, the piece of music, the  
communication, the text ...

**Jan Van Woensel (founder, curator & editor-in-chief) Ruba Katrib (editor & curator)**  
<http://www.ny-magazine.org> [editor@ny-magazine.org](mailto:editor@ny-magazine.org)