

## RECENZJE

Matt Foley / Neil McRobert / Aspasia Stephanou (eds.), *Transgression and Its Limits*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle, 2012, 196.

Breakneck as it might seem to set out to interrogate cultural limits of sorts in a period that has not quite ceased mafficking its triumph over essentialism and universal values, such an attempt could not be timelier. Indeed postmodernism has raised the bar high. But should we trust the diagnosis of postmodernist intellectual giants dancing on the grave of the intellectual legacy of western metaphysics? With the obituary featuring such seemingly unassailable essentialist conceptual pillars as centre, presence, history, morality, God, and subject, to enumerate but a few, there may be hardly any limits left to transgress. Since the fat years of theory are a relic of the past, with strong textualists flickering out and postmodernism's and theory's own as yet undefined *post-* already under way, the unsettling liminal position of transgression and its limits does beg contemporised conceptual revision, and the book under the review sets out to do just that.

Conceived as a collection of postgraduate-led conference papers, the publication aims to include works covering a wide range of articulations of transgressive acts, poetics and practices over centuries in media, art, music, philosophy, technology, and literature. This comprehensive roundtable offers insightful, if at times conflicting, diagnoses of the present-day cultural condition. Inspired by the underlying organising principle assuming that "pseudo-countercultural" transgressive acts end up burning their own boats, the themes in question naturally gesture towards transgressions that "organically develop testing of the edges" (Foley et. al: xii). Such an angle helps the editors – painfully committed to never uttering a cliché – veer from most threadbare themes towards those articulations that tacitly demonstrate deep-seated transgressive acts: liminal subjectivity, textual or immanent transgression, transgressive ontology, law and body as transgression.

Appreciating the complexity of defining transgression, the editors venture to furnish the publication not only with the much-debated aspects of sexuality, violence and body but also –proving to be on the trail of most recent cultural transformations – fresh facets of demotic speech, gender issues, as well as anti-humanist music. As a result, new-fangled, cross-transgressive slants complement well-worn household issues: female necrophilia, torture porn, cannibalistic erotics, perverse/gay gothic. Such company might strike as a cavalcade of no-trifle new-age cultural pariahs at their most transgressive. This, however, is to miss the point about their inherent cultural domesticity which some contributors venture to advocate. Rather than pushing it to the margins, Karin Sellberg locates cannibalistic erotics *within* "the limits of the knowable" (121), showing the ways Salvador Dali and Angela Carter seek to stretch those boundaries. Working on an unrelated material, Laura Kremmel argues that although Gothic and perverse facets of Mapplethorpe's photography might in fact transgress the conservative codes, his main business is to situate the artistic Other both "within and beneath the established social norm" (157). Xavier Aldana Reyes, on his part, exposes definitional inaccuracies of the torture porn genre repudiating its imputed pornography. These critical gestures, far from complacently sporting the gaudy transgressiveness of those acts, venture to test the limits of what counts as norm, and negotiate its unsettling outside-inside relation.

The refusal to push transgressive acts to the norm's outside echoes Foucault who in his "A Preface to Transgression" (1977) is adamant that transgression "must be liberated from the scandalous or subversive" (35). This is in a way to play down its economy of difference in favour of embalming hierarchically trained reasoning. If assimilated by the normative, the transgressive falls within limits it can no longer navigate. Catherine Humble anticipates ethical implications of domestication of the Other proposing that textual transgression is "not an excess of the unknown" but "a passing, a form of integration that is not assimilation" (141). Transgression in language refuses to totalise itself, but it "can never transgress itself" either (Clark: 25). This marks but a limited irruption of the Other into the self. Alexander Howard puts forward a somewhat conflicting, if well-argued, proposition that language itself initiates totalising excess that is "parasitical"

and endeavours to “negate alterity”, which gives rise to language as a form of “societal control” (117). Such variety of conceptualisations of the Other means it is still a vibrant cultural business that refuses to exhaust itself.

At the structural level, the logical organisation of papers into the respective categorisations of transgression: history, acts, texts, and media, adds to the overall structural clarity. Such a capacious container as *transgression* has required painstaking attention to the organisational discipline of the publication that could otherwise have fallen into the conceptual helter-skelter that the editors appreciate by admitting that “the discourse of transgression is plagued by a multiplicity of meaning” (xiii). In terms of coherence, every chapter offers lucid, structurally consistent thesis statement signposting to assure readability. On a theoretical level, most authors funnel their ideas to varying degrees through Foucault’s, Lacan’s and Bataille’s concepts as points of departure. As such, the chapters are arranged symbiotically into a sort of academic roundtable, in keeping with a genuine, well-knit scholarly exchange of ideas, rather than out-of-the-hat variations on a theme.

The authors seem to have good reason to engage in a debate on transgression against the backdrop of the relatively exhausted Foucault who posits: “Transgression carries the limit right to the limit of its being; transgression forces the limit to face the fact of its imminent disappearance, to find itself in what it excludes” (1977: 34). If this is a cowardly definition, if it merely waxes rhapsodic about poststructuralist dogma, why does it still ring so true? It may be because “in our day,” Foucault continues, “the instantaneous play of the limit and of transgression [would] be the essential test for a thought which centres on the ‘origin’” (37). Along these lines, it appears that we have come to terms with the idea that the existence of transgression depends upon its limit, with their mutual relation unstable. What we have not quite grasped is how to pin down the limits other than in the affirmative; without the metaphysical toolkit banking on presence and origin at our disposal. How is it possible to think of limits and transgression if they, rather than just present to each other, seem to implode themselves? These shifting sands of definitional indeterminacy lay the ground for *Transgression and Its Limits*, with its religious commitment to probing this unsettling dialectic.

In this context, the publication, marked by its argumentative diversity, begins with some grand statements reiterating that “the limitlessness of the transgressive would destroy itself if it did not return to its limits...” (Clark: 25), or that “transgression without limits ceases to be transgression at all” (Currie: 35), which, however, serve as argumentative strongholds paving the way for other voices to make problematic this critical insight. Fred Botting posits that in our post-simulacrum age, bereft of recognisable limits, absorbed by consumer culture, proliferating homogeneity, “overtaken and extinguished, transgression is now no more” (38). If this verdict holds firm in the postwar reality, it now makes for a fascinating point of departure for the most recent socio-cultural transformations that beg contemporisation. To all intents and purposes, how to account for some of the most recent, conservatively bent criticisms: ethical revival, context-seeking intellectual history, Ecocriticism, nostalgia for the ‘great tradition’, or other theoretical niches that fetishize limits which anticipate transgression? The fact that both the seemingly irreconcilable radical textualist and conservative poles oddly overlap today only makes matters worse. In this respect Botting must be right. Lacking in self-definition, how is the post-postmodern individual to know whether s/he has already begun to transgress a limit, if the latter is simply not there. It appears that even radical relativism at its most abstruse can come across its own limits once it self-reflectively understands itself. Bereft of historical distance and definitional signposts germane to comprehending an age’s condition, we seem to be groping for limits blindfold. If “the transgressive may never truly reach the nothingness at the heart of its correspondence to its own formation without the utter collapse of its constitution” (Clark: 25), it may seem that the nothingness is here for us in our brand-new de-constituted selves.

If the identity construction kept many a 20<sup>th</sup> century theorist and philosopher awake at night, due attention to these aspects in contemporary criticism means it has lost little currency these days. *Transgression and Its Limits* falls within the ambit of the problematic. After all, “identity is not something to be simply toyed with: it is something to be *transgressed*” (Howard: 109). Or is it? Does a transgressive notion of the self depend on prefix-stigmatised, choreographed identities that match the collective metaphysical cleanly-cut stencil of marginalised Others, with the ranks cus-

tomarily populated by transvestites, transsexuals, transgenders, cogenders? Squint the right way and it may turn out that one does not have to go as far as to encyclopaedically compartmentalise possible identities to appreciate the underlying endemic dissolution of the self at its individualised micro level in our time. Such subversive subject construction may necessitate “aesthetic for the dissolved self” (177). At stake here is, however, the way in which such a subversive subject is articulated: transgression materialising in texture as an act rather than a cut-and-dried aesthetic effect or content. This works in tandem with Ian Banks’ positioning of the transgression within the aesthetic. The keynote contributor divulges that it is the inherent hybrid construction of some texts as “genre-testing entities” rather than their content that inaugurate transgressive acts (152). Banks’ timely conceptualisations of transgression, delivered in an interview with Roderick Watson, are debatably the volume’s check-mate: not in the least because publications of this sort need ‘celebrity’ endorsement, but because, placed under an academic hat alone, the complexity of transgression – depending on interdisciplinary engagement for its contemporised repositioning – can be done but partial justice.

With the first domino tile of an interdisciplinary approach (which the contemporary academy still gets evangelical about) toppled, some editors’ picks deserve due attention. No conceptualisations of transgression can eschew its contextual, cultural, and perforce legal implications. Working on the cultural material of virtual child pornography, Kamillea Aghtan offers a ground-breaking claim that the institution of law, by dehumanising and immaterialising the subjects it is employed to defend obliterates the legal limits it has set itself: the legal system now balances on the tightrope of “self-criminalisation” (92). If the law appropriates language to patch up its own blind spots, the educational system, in Meghan McAvoy’s terms, is pliable enough to acculturate transgression – like Leonard’s or Kelman’s profanities in question here. The canon’s absorption of urban demotic means that “the system”, as she posits, “has scored victory” over art that rejects the institutional “value systems” (105).

Following the rule of the thumb, hardly any publication of conference papers can eschew the inevitable sense of thematic fragmentariness or incompleteness resulting from the contributors’ various academic backgrounds. Since interdisciplinary, this publication, however, engaging in cross-academic debate, manages to seal major lacunae left over in the existing debates on transgression. There are, of course, some spots that are always itching as regards landmark transgressors which found no place in the volume: picaroons, super/antiheroes, serial killers, mafiosos, or acts: witchcraft/witch-hunt, religious wars, oath-breaking, etc. But given the impressive range and variety of transgressive acts and exponents covered, to take the editors to task for failing to include this or the other artistic or otherwise taboo breakers would be mere nit-picking. Far from orientated to cataloguing instances of transgression, the editor’s picks rather seek to debate in unison on the paradoxical undertow of transgression and the urge to transgress.

If the *raison d’être* of transgression truly depends upon the limit it is defined by, our late capitalist and simulacrum age has proven admirably reluctant to deliver one. Confronted with the paradox, we are left holding the baby, fumbling for limits. If this realisation is not the key to grasping our post-postmodern condition, it surely makes for a solid stepping-stone towards it. Having assisted in delivering such powerful statements, *Transgression and Its Limits* is a new scholarly milestone that will, granted its incandescent drive towards transgressing platitudes, pave the way for other roundtables prioritising timely recapitulation of the definition of artistic and cultural transgression against the limits of law and ethics.

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