

HOW TO SPEAK OF NON-MEANING? FOUCAULT, DERRIDA, AND THE ATTEMPT TO ESCAPE HEGEL THROUGH BATAILLE'S LAUGHTER

COMO FALAR DO NÃO-SENTIDO? FOUCAULT, DERRIDA E A TENTATIVA DE ESCAPAR DE HEGEL PELO RISO DE BATAILLE

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RESUMO: A despeito de todas as profundas mudanças pelas quais o trabalho de Foucault passou durante a década de 1960, há um ponto de crítica continuamente repetido por Derrida: Foucault se manteria dentro de um referencial hegeliano. Para Derrida, Foucault, em sua antecipação do pensamento transgressor de Georges Bataille, pode ter encontrado o caminho certo para escapar da dialética, contudo, ao tentar sintetizar transgressão e estruturalismo em *As palavras e as coisas*, essa possibilidade ameaça se fechar novamente. Derrida, por sua vez, transforma a transgressão de Bataille de tal forma que permite realizar uma crítica fundamental do conceito de conhecimento. Sob a perspectiva dessa crítica, não só se abre uma saída para a identificação dialética do Outro, mas também se pode constatar como muitos esforços filosóficos que se imaginam além de Hegel continuam à sua sombra.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Transgressão; Estruturalismo; Loucura; Linguagem; Riso

ABSTRACT: Despite all the profound changes that Foucault's work underwent during the 1960s, there is one point of criticism that Derrida continually repeats: Foucault would remain in a Hegelian framework. According to Derrida, in his anticipation of Georges Bataille's transgressive thinking, Foucault may have found the right way to escape dialectics, but in his attempt to synthesize transgression with structuralism in *The Order of Things*, this possibility threatens to be closed off again. Derrida, for his part, turns Bataille's transgression in a way that allows for a fundamental critique of the concept of knowledge. From the perspective of this critique, not only does a way out of the dialectical identification of the Other open up, but it can also be seen how many philosophical endeavors that imagine themselves to be beyond Hegel continue to stand in his shadow.

KEYWORDS: Transgression; Structuralism; Madness; Language; Laughter

1. Introduction

Work, though, and freedom and chance are just earthly viewpoints. The universe is FREE: it doesn't have anything to do. How could there be chance or laughter in it? Philosophy – extending chance beyond it self – is situated in a difference between the universe and the 'worker' (humankind). Against Hegel: since Hegel tried to develop the identity of the subject/worker with his universe, his object.

Hegel, by elaborating a philosophy of work (I mean the *Knecht* or emancipated slave or worker who, in the *Phenomenology*, becomes God), cancelled out chance – and laughter.

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(Laughing in my own way – and convulsed with laughter – I felt pain, a struggle to the death. It was dreadful and enticing. It was *healthy*.)¹

The debate between Foucault and Derrida has often been presented as a short and hostile confrontation in which Derrida attacks his teacher's first major work, *Madness and Civilization*, whereupon the latter rumbles in silence, until a polemical response nine years later that puts an end to an exchange that never really unfolded. Since the publication of Benoît Peeter's biography of Derrida, we know that this representation of the debate bears little resemblance to the actual events. Rather than being upset, Foucault confirmed in an enthusiastic letter that Derrida's remarks went to the heart of what he wanted to do and beyond.² Their friendship would last until 1967, when disagreements on the editorial board of the journal *Critique*, of which both were members, led to a falling out.³

The omissions and misunderstandings regarding Derrida's and Foucault's personal relationship mean that for a long time many textual references between the two weren't given the attention they deserve. What has further complicated the reception of the debate, is the limited number of explicit textual references. But there were also "signals in the night"⁴ sent to each other.

Despite all the changes in Foucault's conceptions and methods in the course of the debate, there is one subject that Derrida brings up repeatedly when he refers to the former: the philosophy of Hegel. Foucault would not succeed in escaping Hegel – neither in *Madness and Civilization* (1961), nor in *The Order of Things* (1966). This is not a problem brought to Foucault's thinking from the outside, as apparent through a famous passage in his inaugural lecture at Collège de France from 1970, in which he says:

But truly to escape Hegel involves an exact appreciation of the price we have to pay to detach ourselves from him. It assumes that we are aware of the extent

¹ BATAILLE, G. The Divinity of Laughter. In: BATAILLE, G. **Guilty**. Trans. B. Boone. Venice, Calif.: The Lapis Press, 1988, p. 96f.

² FOUCAULT, M. Letter from Michel Foucault to Derrida, 11 March 1963. In: PEETERS, B. **Derrida. A Biography**. Trans. A. Brown. Cambridge, Mass.; Malden, Mass.: Polity Press, 2013, p. 132.

³ DERRIDA, J. Corona vitae (fragments). In: NANCY, J.-L.; RIGAL, E. (Eds.). **Gérard Granel: l'éclat, le combat, l'ouvert**, Paris: Berlin, 2001, pp. 137-188.

⁴ "When it had any, that period's diplomacy (war by other means) was that of avoidance: silence, one doesn't cite or name, everyone's distinguishes himself and everything forms a sort of archipelago of discourse without earthly communication, without visible passageway. Today the sea between these archipelagos should be reconstituted. In appearance, no one communicated. No one was translated. From time to time, there were, from afar, signals in the night: Althusser hailing Lacan or hailing Foucault who had hailed Lacan who hailed Lévi-Strauss." DERRIDA, J. Politics and Friendship. An Interview with Jacques Derrida. Trans. R. Harvey. In: ANN KAPLAN, E.; SPRINKER, M. (Eds.). **The Althusserian Legacy**, London; New York: Verso, 1993, p. 194.

to which Hegel, insidiously perhaps, is close to us; it implies a knowledge, in that which permits us to think against Hegel, of that which remains Hegelian. We have to determine the extent to which our anti-Hegelianism is possibly one of his tricks directed against us, at the end of which he stands, motionless, waiting for us.⁵

How is it possible to escape Hegel? Indeed, a large part of the debate between Foucault and Derrida can be understood as the exploration of this question and a search for its answer. In order to elaborate this, I will first go back to the beginning of the debate, namely to some of Foucault's conceptual settings in the preface of *Madness and Civilization* which concern the relation between language and a non-linguistic madness as well as to Derrida's critique of them. Second, I will turn to Foucault's attempted solutions to the problems Derrida identifies, which can be found in *A Preface to Transgression* (1963). Foucault sees two exits from dialectics as well as from his earlier conceptual difficulties emerging here: a structuralist meta-discourse and a thinking of transgression. In a third step, I will try to show in which way Foucault tries to connect these two approaches in *The Order of Things*. Fourth, I will show why, according to Derrida, Foucault's new attempts to leave Hegel's dialectic behind are still doomed to failure and what the proper way out of Hegel's net would be. Finally, I would like to suggest a few consequences that go beyond the framework of the debate between Foucault and Derrida, concerning the scope of dialectics and the general difficulty of opposing it.

2. *The silent language of madness*

Without the preface to the 1961 edition, *Madness and Civilization* appears to be a history of the social and theoretical discrimination of madness with special regards to the continuous relevance of the practices of internment and of the scientific trimming in the formation of modern psychiatry. The preface, however, shows that one of Foucault's essential intentions is not subsumed in the historical dimension of his book: Madness here is not understood as a discursive element, but primarily as a preconscious murmur that would form the immobile underbelly of reason, language, and thus, history. "From its originary formulation, historical time imposes silence on a thing that we can no longer apprehend, other than by addressing it as void, vanity, nothingness."⁶ Since madness itself occurs as a historically determinable phenomenon, it is consequently always already a matter of madness subjugated by reason. What Foucault is trying

⁵ FOUCAULT, M. The Discourse on Language. In: FOUCAULT, M. **The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language**. Trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith. New York: Pantheon, 1972, p. 235.

⁶ FOUCAULT, M. **History of Madness**. Trans. J. Murphy; J. Khalfa. Abingdon: Routledge, 2006, p. XXXI.

to release, then, is the experience of a madness that is neither linguistic nor historical, a madness beyond the order of language and history.

But how can this be achieved, especially by means of historical textual work? In this objection consists one of Derrida's essential criticisms in his lecture *Cogito and the History of Madness* (1963), according to which the proclaimed dichotomy of language and madness forms the central problem of Foucault's conception. This dichotomy condemns all attempts to solve the difficulties, for example by using an appropriately neutral language, to failure from the outset. In addition to this fundamental difficulty, Foucault's approach at this time is still full of philosophical residues that, despite their rational-critical intentions, cannot deny their Hegelian heritage: for example, the hypostasis of a common origin of reason and madness, or the conception of a grand narrative in which two opposing tendencies – reason and its other – confront each other. This was also seen by the examiner of Foucault's thesis, Georges Canguilhem, who wrote in his report: "While putting its considerable documentation into play, the thought of Mr. Foucault maintained from beginning to end a dialectical vigor that comes in part from his sympathy with the Hegelian vision of history and from his familiarity with the *Phenomenology of Mind*."⁷ In contrast to Canguilhem's positive account of Foucault's reference to Hegel, Derrida recognizes the problems of Hegel's aftermath in Foucault's thought with regard to his claim to liberate madness from the conditioning by reason. Thus, he seems to have hit Foucault's intention better than his examiner, at least Foucault will take a decidedly anti-Hegelian position in the texts of the following years.⁸

⁷ CANGUILHEM, G. Report from Mr. Canguilhem on the Manuscript Filed by Mr. Michel Foucault, Director of the Institut Français of Hamburg, in Order to Obtain Permission to Print His Principal Thesis for the Doctor of Letters. Trans. A. Hobart. *Critical Inquiry*, n. 21.2, 1995, p. 280.

⁸ In the context of modern French philosophy, Maurice Merleau-Ponty first claimed that language is not external to thought, but that thought always unfolds linguistically (MERLEAU-PONTY, M. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Trans. C Smith. London / New York: Routledge, 2002, pp. 202-232). Apparently following on from this, it was Hyppolite who understood Hegel's logos as language and the Begriffslogik as the logic of sense. Language understood in this way therefore no longer concerns only a certain realm of being, but as the totality of sense the horizon of meaningfulness per se (HYPPOLITE, J. *Logic and Existence*. Trans. L. Lawlor / A. Sen. Albany (NY): SUNY Press, 1997). This peculiar identification of language and reason in parts of French philosophy at the beginning of the 1960s can be confusing both for the reader coming from the philosophy of language and for the reader trained in classical Hegel exegesis: Neither questions that would concern the definition of a sentence or a possible interrelation between grammatical structure, vocabulary and comprehension play a role here, nor is the concept of reason, which is labelled here as Hegelian, linked to Hegel's work in its concrete realisation, which may well turn out to be obsolete in certain respects, without the movement of totalisation described by Hegel coming to an end as well. Despite its comprehensive claim to totality, the concept of reason as the mediation of sense is so devoid of any specific content and context that it does not come into conflict with the modern sciences and all possible future forms of knowledge. But if thinking is bound to linguistic sense, how is a non-sense to be thought and articulated without thereby giving it sense again and thus allowing totality to triumph once more? This is the difficulty that Foucault faces here.

3. *After the death of god: Dialectics or transgression?*

By the time Derrida delivered the *Cogito* lecture in 1963, Foucault had already recognized the problems with his earlier approach and had started to address them. Derrida's critique hence fell on receptive ears. In his first letter to Derrida after the lecture, Foucault admits:

This relationship between the *Cogito* and madness is something that, without the least doubt, I treated too cavalierly in my thesis: via Bataille and Nietzsche, I came back to it slowly and by way of many detours. You have magisterially showed the right road to take: and you can understand why I owe you a profound debt of gratitude.⁹

The central text for Foucault's examination of Bataille in this period is *A Preface to Transgression* from 1963. Its guiding theme is the question of the limits of reason and the possibilities of transgressing them, thus echoing precisely the core problem of *Madness and Civilization*. To discuss this, Foucault returns to the beginning of the modern thought, namely to Kant. Kant's thematization of the limits of knowledge in the context of metaphysics have famously demonstrated the untenability of classical metaphysics and limited the realm in which understanding can legitimately apply, thus excluding speculations on god, the soul or the thing-in-itself. Although Kant admits the possibility of reason to think beyond this limit – otherwise it would not be possible to speak of a limit – the domain beyond the limit appears as pure emptiness. The impossibility to think the truth of being beyond subjective preformed appearances other than as absence has led Hegel to speak in relation to Kant of “the feeling that ‘God himself is dead’”¹⁰ and Foucault also uses this formula, albeit in reference to Nietzsche. But unlike Hegel, who then moves on to reduce the “death of God” to a moment in the history of the dialectical self-knowledge of the spirit and sublates it in absolute knowledge, Foucault recognizes in the fundamental emptiness of a being that eludes recognizability the basic trait of modern thought.¹¹

Up to this point, it might seem that Foucault is simply clinging to a Kantian position. In fact, however, Foucault does not want to respect Kant's self-imposed limit of the use of understanding, but to present the possibility of transgressing it. From a Kantian perspective, this pro-

⁹ FOUCAULT. Letter, p. 132.

¹⁰ HEGEL, G. W. F. **Faith and Knowledge**. Trans. W. Cerf; H. S. Harris. New York: SUNY Press, 1977, p. 190.

¹¹ Hegel and his successors (Foucault has Sartre in particular in mind here) would thus, by the way they go beyond the Kantian limit, obscure rather than fully unfold the conditions of thinking in modernity.

ject does not seem very promising; after all, according to Kant, every experience is made possible by the categories of transcendental subjectivity, and an experience that goes beyond what constitutes experience is not conceivable. Thus, as long as the constitutive structures of consciousness are thought as preceding all events, as long as the stage of this drama is solely the mind, transgression appears to be impossible.

But Foucault makes the observation that in a whole series of structuralist human-scientific investigations, the constitutive limit of transcendental philosophy has been replaced by a quite differently situated one: that of the sexual prohibition. For Freud and, following his tradition, for Lacan, the Oedipal complex plays a fundamental role in the shaping of the psyche; at the same time, the deciphering of the unconscious is possible only along the lines of sexuality. In Lévi-Strauss' structural anthropology, the incest taboo, as both a universal and conventional prohibition, occupies a hinge position between nature and culture, thus constituting human sociability. If these theories are correct, the constitution of the order of consciousness as well as of society, its morals and laws, is not bound to transcendental subjectivity, but to a demarcation of limits that occurred within the process of genre history and has been reproduced from then on.

This is what makes the transgression potentially conceivable, and this is where Bataille comes into play. For him, as for structural anthropology, the moment of the original humanization of communities is inseparable from the enactment of sexual prohibitions. Only the prohibition of debauched, ecstatic sexual practices, he argues, guaranteed the stability needed by a society based on regulated work and purposeful projects. The same applies to the treatment of the dead, which, according to Bataille, was subject to certain prohibitions in the earliest societies already. The excessive transgression in sexuality and in the encounter with the dead, which temporarily and tendentially can lead to the decomposition of consciousness and social rules, smolders as a potential danger for the order of society.

However, if the constitutive limits of consciousness itself are transgressed in the transgression, what becomes experiential in it? Basically nothing. What becomes experiential is rather the absence of a transcendental ground or a higher being. The figure of thought of transgression allows Foucault to think of a relation between language and being that would neither remain in the immanence of a discourse that would identify being with thinking, nor respect the limit in a Kantian way, nor take refuge in an otherworldly transcendence that would arise beyond the border. It is important to Foucault to not understand the transgression in dialectical

terms: it is neither the liberation of a previously excluded realm, nor a subversive or revolutionary gesture.

Thus, although transgression is not meant to be subversive, it does not remain inconsequential for philosophical discourse. For Foucault, the insight into the emptiness beyond constituted orders is connected to the end of the idea of a unified ground of intelligibility. The philosopher discovers that his own language is not at his disposal like a god. He finds that this very place, once proclaimed as the place of the united subject, is where different speaking subjects meet, connect or repel each other.

The breakdown of philosophical subjectivity and its dispersion in a language that dispossesses it while multiplying it with the space created by its absence is probably one of the fundamental structures of contemporary thought. Again, this is not the end of philosophy, but rather, the end of the philosopher as the sovereign and primary form of philosophical language.¹²

According to Foucault, this opens up the “possibility of the mad philosopher”¹³ who experiences within himself the polyphony of languages that are not entirely under his control, and at the same time opens himself up in the dynamic of finitude and transgression to a world that exceeds his discourse. Here, then, we can see how Foucault attempts to solve the problems that arose in *Madness and Civilization* from the dichotomous conception of language and madness: the transgression promises a way out of the spell of language without, however, appropriating what the transgression takes place upon to language again. At the same time, the transgression has an effect on language itself, which no longer confronts its Other abruptly, but understands itself as fragmented and open towards an unavailable Being. Like Hegel, transgressive thinking thus connects to Kantian transcendental philosophy in order to critically exceed it. Unlike Hegel, however, transgressive thinking does not arrive at a subsuming identification of the Other in a unifying system, but, on the contrary, at a radical questioning of the domain of the subject and the spirit. “Perhaps one day it will seem as decisive for our culture, as much a part of its soil, as the experience of contradiction was at an earlier time for dialectical thought.”¹⁴

But once again: How should philosophical language be constituted so that it expresses the reference to the non-discursive and the non-discursible without, however, once again con-

¹² FOUCAULT, M. A Preface to Transgression. In: FOUCAULT, M. **Language, Counter-Memory, Practice. Selected Essays and Interviews**. Trans. Bouchard, D. F.; Simon, S. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977, p. 42.

¹³ FOUCAULT. A Preface to Transgression, p. 44.

¹⁴ FOUCAULT. A Preface to Transgression, p. 33.

signing it to the work of identification? While Foucault has arrived here at a formal determination of what a non-dialectical language must accomplish, it remains to be seen how it can in fact function without reproducing dialectics under the table. Foucault is undecided between two possibilities: on the one hand “a purified metalanguage”¹⁵, on the other hand “the thickness of words enclosed by their darkness, by their blind truth.”¹⁶ Here, where language almost fails, it would have to be almost entirely reborn.

4. *The Order of Things as an attempted synthesis of structuralism and transgression*

What is meant by a “purified metalanguage”, and what are those “words enclosed by their darkness, by their blind truth”? A hint of this can be found in an interview from 1967:

For a long time, there was a sort of unresolved conflict in me between a passion for Blanchot and Bataille, and on the other hand the interest I nurtured for certain positive studies, like those of Dumézil and Lévi-Strauss for example. [...] As for Bataille and Blanchot, I believe that the former's experience of eroticism and the latter's of language, understood as experiences of dissolution, disappearance, denial of the subject (of the speaking subject and of the erotic subject), suggested to me, simplifying things a bit, the theme I transposed in the reflection on structural or 'functional' analyses like those of Dumézil or Lévi-Strauss. In other words, I consider the structure, the very possibility of a rigorous discourse on structure, leads to a negative discourse on the subject, in short, to a discourse similar to Bataille's or Blanchot's.¹⁷

The two possible languages that promise to do justice to the experience of transgression are thus embodied in those theoretical approaches that Foucault had already resorted to in *A Preface to Transgression*: In structuralism, or, more precisely, in structuralist anthropology and psychoanalysis, which represent the purified metalanguage here (and with which, for Foucault, the possibility of a constitutive limit of experience no longer conceived in neither transcendental nor dialectical terms was linked), as well as in the transgressive writings of Blanchot and Bataille.

In *A Preface to Transgression*, the two linguistic possibilities seem incompatible to Foucault,¹⁸ but in *The Order of Things* he ventures a rapprochement of them. The reader encounters

¹⁵ FOUCAULT. *A Preface to Transgression*, p. 41.

¹⁶ FOUCAULT. *A Preface to Transgression*, p. 41.

¹⁷ FOUCAULT, M. Who are you, Professor Foucault? In: FOUCAULT, M. **Religion and Culture**. Trans. J. R. Carrette. New York: Routledge, 1999, p. 98.

¹⁸ “The prodigious distance that separates these alternatives and that manifests our philosophical dispersion marks, more than a disarray, a profound coherence. This separation and real incompatibility is the actual distance from whose depths philosophy addresses us. It is here that we must focus our attention.” FOUCAULT. *A Preface to Transgression*, p. 41.

the transgressive dimension directly in the first sentence of the preface, in which Foucault reports on the birthplace of the work.

This book has its birthplace in a passage of Borges. In the laughter that shattered, as I read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of my thought – *our* thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography – breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things, and continuing long afterwards to disturb and threaten with collapse our age-old distinction between the Same and the Other.¹⁹

This overture is much more than an anecdote about the actual emergence of the book, for it is precisely such an order-disrupting, abysmal laughter that Bataille describes as a figure of transgression that would lead to the same abyss as sexual ecstasy.²⁰ Foucault's laughter reaches deeper than the order of the *épistémè* and even deeper than the age-old mastery of the Same and the Other, shattering them momentarily without, however, leading to a more primary or higher order – at least that is what his description professes. But in what ways might laughter actually lead us out of the closure of knowledge? Is this notion of laughter not perhaps merely the glorification of a common affective impulse? The work that follows this laughter is indeed a well-ordered historical analysis that, while gaining the principles of its order independently of subjective acts of endowment, proclaims an anonymous as well as irreducible structuring of empirical knowledge in the particular epoch under study. But what relation can the movement of transgression have to an irreducible order of knowledge – a movement that strives to indicate precisely the questioning of the closure of order *par excellence*? For Foucault's treatment of the positive material of his investigation, for the terms of order and knowledge, the laughing opening seems to have few consequences. This leads so far that Foucault occasionally tends to historicize Bataille and transgressive thought and thus to subordinate them completely to a historical order of knowledge.

It is within the very tight-knit, very coherent outlines of the modern episteme that this contemporary experience found its possibility; it is even that episteme which, by its logic, gave rise to such an experience, constituted it through and through, and made it impossible for it not to exist.²¹

¹⁹ FOUCAULT, M. **The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences**. London; New York: Routledge, 2002, p. XVI, translation modified by me.

²⁰ BATAILLE. *The Divinity of Laughter*, p. 102.

²¹ FOUCAULT. **The Order of Things**, p. 419.

At the threshold of the modern *épistémè*, on which Foucault locates his present, there, where the disappearance of man as a central ordering principle and the reappearance of language announce themselves, Foucault nevertheless dreams of a synthesis or symbiosis of structuralism and transgression. Structuralism, as a kind of meta-human science, could describe the constitution of any discourse about man and history in a way in which the condition of the possibility of such a discourse would not be found in man himself, but outside of him, namely in the symbol-constitutive structures. The transgressive experience, on the other hand, would bring to mind the fundamental finitude of any discourse.²² This indicates the connection between the two possibilities of philosophical language, which still seemed irreconcilable in the *Preface to Transgression*: a science that could both describe with almost mathematical precision the symbolic constitution of human orders and at the same time preserve the excessive reference to the indeterminate.

Foucault is admittedly unsure whether the “return of language” – on which his vision of a new meta-human science depends – actually heralds a new order of empirical knowledge about the human, or is not rather a belated effect of that epochal shift that ushered in the modern *épistémè* at the beginning of the 19th century. But however this may be, two things can be said with regard to Foucault's statements: First, it seems possible to him that the thinking of transgression can be an element in a discourse about historical formations of knowledge, which would make it subordinate to knowledge. Second, Foucault seems to suggest that there is no compelling contradiction between a meta-human science grounded in structuralism and transgressive thinking – or laughter. In any case, Foucault seems certain here to have escaped Hegel and dialectics.

5. What to laugh about – Derrida's critique via Bataille

It is this relationship, which is ambiguous in Foucault, between transgression, historical discourse, and structuralism, that seems to form the background for Derrida's *From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve* (1967). The text begins with Derrida's astonishment that Bataille's best readers would be too quick to believe that they were done with

²² “But if the question of formal languages gives prominence to the possibility or impossibility of structuring positive contents, a literature dedicated to language gives prominence, in all their empirical vivacity, to the fundamental forms of finitude.” FOUCAULT. *The Order of Things*, p. 418.

Hegel, even though Bataille warned against taking Hegel too lightly. Now it was precisely Foucault who sought to overcome Hegel with the help of Bataille's thought, which for the first time hints towards the addressee of Derrida's text. Later on, Derrida will increasingly point out that the confidence in the description of an *épistémè* falls short of Bataille's insights, and here, at the latest, there can no longer be any doubt that it is Foucault to whom the text is addressed. Moreover, there is a mention of a certain laughter that would actually offer a way out of hegelianism – provided that one knew exactly what one was laughing at.

Since more than a century of ruptures, of “surpassings” with or without “overturnings,” rarely has a relation to Hegel been so little definable: a complicity without reserve accompanies Hegelian discourse, “takes it seriously” up to the end, without an objection in philosophical form, while, however, a certain burst of laughter exceeds it and destroys its sense, or signals, in any event, the extreme point of ‘experience’ which makes Hegelian discourse dislocate *itself*; and this can be done only through close scrutiny and full knowledge of what one is laughing at.²³

Unlike Foucault, Derrida does not choose the path via Bataille's thematization of sexuality, but directly via the latter's discussion of Hegel, namely the dialectic of master and servant. Bataille first follows Hegel in the outline of this dialectical constellation and affirms the necessity that both opponents put their lives at risk in their desire to negate their own animal aliveness and to reach beyond their own finiteness.²⁴ Here, where the concrete, creaturely life is in danger, Hegel momentarily acknowledges the possibility of an absolute expenditure; however, according to Bataille, he uses a play to immediately withdraw this possibility. By the servant submitting to the master, not only do both remain alive, it also results that in this way the master negates his animal life and preserves and maintains it in self-consciousness. But in this Bataille sees a comedy! Under the hand, a concept of life has been exchanged for another one that makes it possible to sublimate death and, instead of facing the possibility of total disintegration, is putting life at the service of the work of meaning. By reinscribing death into the progress of self-knowledge of the consciousness, the absolute risk is degraded to a calculation that seeks to amortize its investment. We see, then, that the dialectic of master and servant negotiates for Bataille nothing other than the possibility of what he calls transgression: the stepping out of

²³ DERRIDA, J. From Restricted to General Economy. A Hegelianism without Reserve. In: DERRIDA, J. **Writing and Difference**. Trans. A. Bass. London: Routledge, 2001, p. 319.

²⁴ It is noteworthy that Bataille's interpretation of the dialectic of master and servant does not follow the anthropological interpretation of his “teacher” Kojève, but conceives it as a conflict between self-consciousness as desire (*Begierde*) and the self-sufficiency of life, thus staying considerably closer to the text of *The Phenomenology of Spirit* than the latter.

one's own finitude and the confrontation with what at first appears to be withdrawn and what Hegel calls life. But contrary to what the Phenomenology of Spirit wants, the sublation of life, for which it would be necessary to sublimate actual death, fails. The life of the spirit is another life, into whose service the withdrawn life is never truly able to enter.

The decay of the excess in the confrontation with death is, however, inevitable, as it is impossible to experience one's own death. The access to the state of being as it would be beyond its intelligible deformation of a finite being remains barred. Regarding Foucault, this means that transgression as an experience of emptiness – whether in sexual excess or otherwise – is impossible. How should one be able to have an experience beyond consciousness and, what is more, bear witness to pure emptiness? And yet, it does not follow from this impossibility that the reintegration of death into discourse is legitimate and consequent (and to have faked this is, according to Bataille, the failure of Hegel); rather, this impossibility overrides any means of language or thought to come to grips with it. This impossibility is not without effect; but once again the question arises as to how one can do justice to an impossibility that imposes itself in a possible discourse. According to Derrida, Bataille's sovereignty consists not in having actually crossed the border, but in his laughter at the tragicomic circumstance that man is tasked to think this impossibility. But just as one's own death can never appear to the one who is affected by it, laughter, insofar as it escapes the movement of mediation, can never manifest itself.

Laughter alone exceeds dialectics and the dialectician: it bursts out only on the basis of an absolute renunciation of meaning, an absolute risking of death, what Hegel calls abstract negativity. A negativity that never takes place, that never *presents* itself, because in doing so it would start to work again. A laughter that literally never *appears*, because it exceeds phenomenality in general, the absolute possibility of meaning. And the word “laughter” itself must be read in a burst, as its nucleus of meaning bursts in the direction of the *system* of the sovereign operation.²⁵

From the impossibility of experiencing or properly expressing the transgression, Derrida concludes that a counter-discourse to that of Hegel is impossible. “There is only one discourse, it is significative, and here one cannot get around Hegel.”²⁶ It might be possible to revise various

²⁵ DERRIDA. From Restricted to General Economy, p. 323.

²⁶ DERRIDA. From Restricted to General Economy, p. 330.

assumptions and theoretical operations of Hegel, but at the basal level of a continuity of meaning, one remains inescapably speaking and writing in the milieu of meaningfulness.²⁷ With this, however, Foucault's hope of reaching beyond Hegel with a purified metalanguage seems futile.

But inversely, one must not submit contextual attentiveness and differences of signification to a *system of meaning* permitting or promising an absolute formal mastery. This would amount to erasing the excess of nonmeaning and to falling back into the closure of knowledge: would amount, once more, to not reading Bataille.²⁸

What is needed, according to Derrida, is a different strategy of writing (*écriture*) that changes the *functional nexus of writing*. The old words would have to be made to slide in order to preserve their relation to an irreducible and preceding non-sense, for which Bataille gives the example of the word “silence”: by expressing itself, it conceals what it announces and thus lets it appear as withdrawn. It would be necessary to find words that make us glide in this way, without again inscribing the transgression itself to language.

An absolutely *unique relation*: of a language to a sovereign silence which *tolerates no relations*, tolerates no symmetry with that which tilts itself and slides in order to be related to it. A relation, however, which must rigorously, *scientifically*, place into a common syntax both the subordinated significations and the operation which is nonrelation, which has no signification and freely keeps itself outside syntax. Relations must scientifically be related to nonrelations, knowledge to unknowledge.²⁹

The central difficulty of the relation of Bataille's sovereignty to science, according to Derrida, is the fact that sovereignty is not an *archē* or principle that can serve to guide science. The moment it fulfills a guiding function, establishes a hierarchy of the essential and the derivative, and calls for the collection of knowledge, it loses its sovereignty and assimilates itself to lordship. Bataille scorns the *écriture* “that *projects* the trace, and through which, as the writing of lordship, the will seeks to maintain itself within the trace, seeks to be recognized within it

²⁷ It is precisely this idea of an irreducible linguistic mediation that strives for totalisation in which Hyppolite, one year before his death, still sees Hegel's topicality even if one has to drop the belief in totality; see HYPPOLITE, Jean. *Structure du langage philosophique d'après la préface de la 'Phénoménologie de l'esprit'*. In: HYPPOLITE, J. **Figures de la pensée philosophique. Écrits de Jean Hyppolite (1931-1968). Vol. I.** Paris: PUF, 1971, p. 345. When Derrida reproaches Foucault here for not escaping Hegel, he is presumably thinking of Hyppolite's Hegel, even if Bataille's arguments against dialectics are primarily derived from Kojève's interpretation of Hegel. And Foucault's admission of how difficult it is to escape Hegel is certainly not accidentally articulated in the context of a bow to his teacher and predecessor at Collège de France, Hyppolite. In any case, Hyppolite's work is the answer to the question of why the idea of an ineluctable linguistic nature is not primarily associated here with structuralism or Heidegger, but with Hegel. On the subject of language and Hyppolite's significance in this regard, see also footnote 8.

²⁸ DERRIDA. *From Restricted to General Economy*, p. 345.

²⁹ DERRIDA. *From Restricted to General Economy*, p. 334.

and to reconstitute the presence of itself. This is servile writing as well [...].”³⁰ In contrast, sovereignty indicates a different writing: “the one that produces the trace as trace. This latter is a trace only if presence is irremediably eluded in it, from its initial promise, and only if it constitutes itself as the possibility of absolute erasure. An unerasable trace is not a trace.” To produce a trace as trace, then, is to relate knowledge initially to the “nonbasis”³¹ of not-knowing. Instead of describing the unknowledge – which is not possible – it describes the effects of the unknowledge, with which the order of science experiences a decisive inversion. Whereas the sciences, according to their usual order, relate the unknown to the already known or recognizable and integrate the former into knowledge in this way, in Bataille's “general writing”³² the known and recognizable are, on the contrary, related to the unknowledge and the sense to the non-sense.³³

The inscription of such a relation will be “scientific,” but the word “science” submits to a radical alteration: without losing any of its proper norms, it is made to tremble, simply by being placed in relation to an absolute unknowledge. One can call it science only within the transgressed closure, but to do so one will have to answer to all the requirements of this denomination. The unknowledge exceeding science itself, the unknowledge that *will know* where and how to exceed science *itself*, will not have scientific qualification (“Who will ever know what it is to know nothing?” *Le petit*). It will not be a determined unknowledge, circumscribed by the history of knowledge as a figure taken from (or leading toward) dialectics, but will be the absolute excess of every *épistémè*, of every philosophy and every science. Only a double position can account for this unique relation, which belongs neither to “scientism” nor “mysticism.”³⁴

Derrida's remarks on the relationship between unknowledge and knowledge show that knowledge – and thus dialectics – is not simply annulled by Bataille's transgression, but finds itself situated in an unlimited field of unknowledge. “Far from interrupting dialectics, history, and the movement of meaning, sovereignty provides the economy of reason with its element, its milieu, its unlimiting boundaries of non-sense. Far from suppressing the dialectical synthesis, it inscribes this synthesis and makes it function within the sacrifice of meaning.”³⁵

³⁰ DERRIDA. From *Restricted to General Economy*, p. 335.

³¹ DERRIDA. From *Restricted to General Economy*, p. 339.

³² DERRIDA. From *Restricted to General Economy*, p. 343.

³³ Regarding the conventional understanding of science, Derrida could be paraphrasing Lévi-Strauss here: “It must be kept in mind that in the above highly tentative experiment, the anthropologist proceeds from what is known to what is unknown to him [...]” LÉVI-STRAUSS, C. *Language and Social Laws*. **American Anthropologist**, n. 53.2, 1951, p. 163.

³⁴ DERRIDA. From *Restricted to General Economy*, p. 340, translation modified.

³⁵ DERRIDA. From *Restricted to General Economy*, p. 329f.

6. Closure – The net of Hegel

Thus, according to Derrida, it is not possible to confront dialectics with a counter-discourse that would organize the appearing knowledge in a new figure as long as the status of knowledge itself had not become questionable. And even then, if one had complied, dialectics would not simply become an object of merely historical interest as an obsolete movement of thought, but would retain its validity *within* a changed functional nexus of writing – a nexus of writing in which there “is” exhaustion, irretrievable and unremembered loss, radical alterity and no longer any prospect of the identity of a closed system or of totality. As long as Foucault is unable to do justice to what can’t take the form of knowledge but still must be thought, he remains caught in Hegel's net, weaving it tighter with every movement that is supposed to lead him out of it.

The difficulty of escaping Hegel is, of course, not unique to Foucault's philosophy, nor is it a purely theoretical matter. In a later revised passage of *Cogito and the History of Madness*, for example, Derrida draws explicit references to the anti-colonial struggle in Algeria, namely to Frantz Fanon.

[...] the revolution against reason can only take place within it, according to a hegelian dimension to which, for my part, I was very sensitive in Foucault's book, despite the absence of any substantial reference to Hegel. Since it can only operate within reason as soon as it is uttered, the revolution against reason always has the limited scope of what is called, precisely in the language of the Ministry of the Interior, agitation. Just as the anti-colonial revolution can only free itself from the empirical Europe or West in the name of transcendental Europe, i.e. reason, and by first allowing itself to be won over by its values, its language, its sciences, its techniques and its weapons; an irreducible contamination or incoherence that no cry – I am thinking of Fanon's – can exorcise, however pure and uncompromising it may be.³⁶

Moreover, the theme of a too casual dismissal of Hegel forms one of the recurring themes in Derrida's discussion of Levinas' ethics in *Violence and Metaphysics* (1964). And when he critically addresses Hegelian philosophy in *Outwork, prefacing* (1972) of *Dissemination*, he does not do so without warning against the mistakes of anti-Hegelianism.

Every time that, in order to hook writing precipitously up with some reassuring outside or in order to make a hasty break with idealism [...], one would

³⁶ DERRIDA, J. Cogito et histoire de la folie. *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, n. 68.4, 1963, p. 466, translated by me.

all the more surely regress into idealism, with all of what, as we have just pointed out, cannot but link up with it, singularly in the figures of empiricism and formalism.³⁷

Insofar as one follows Derrida, Hegel occupies all possible positions within philosophy and ostensible anti-philosophy, he is already waiting behind every supposed exit and shows that it only leads to another room of the same building. Behind every exit – with the exception of the one that breaks open in the sudden burst of laughter in the face of an absolute renunciation of meaning. By making the philosophical notions of origin and closure, of the proper and the foreign, slide, by trying to account for an impossibility, this laughter opens up the possibility of a thinking in which the very Other appears in its absence, which is thus no longer wholly dialectical. “*Rire de la philosophie (du hegelianisme) — telle est en effet la forme du réveil [...]*.”³⁸

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³⁷ DERRIDA, J. Outwork, prefacing. In: Derrida, J. **Dissemination**. Trans. B. Johnson. London: Athlone, 1981, pp. 43-44.

³⁸ DERRIDA, J. De l'économie restreinte à l'économie générale. Un hegelianisme sans réserve. In: Derrida, J. **L'écriture et la différence**. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1967, p. 370.

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