Transformation

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To get a grip on what is at stake concerning transformation, let us linger a few moments over the specific way in which Foucault recoins this concept in his essay *What is Enlightenment?* (Foucault 1984a). Foucault turns away from quasi-universalistic, global scenarios such as passages from one period of history to another (for example, from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance) or projects that claim to be global or radical (such as the French Revolution), and he focuses on "**work** carried out by ourselves upon ourselves as free beings" (47, bold added), as "a patient labor giving form to our impatience for liberty" (50). It is likely that Foucault did not have one clearly defined practice in mind referring to 'work' and 'labor'; he even suggests rather strongly that it concerns "undefined work" (46). Yet Foucault also explicitly states: "But that does not mean that no work can be done except in disorder and contingency" (47). This ambivalence seems to stand or fall with the fact that Foucault talks about a *split* practice "that simultaneously respects [modern] reality and violates it" (41).

Foucault defines transformative work as a task and an obligation to effectuate something, that is, "a change that he ['man'] himself will bring about in himself" (35). In this respect Foucault gives Immanuel Kant full credit for having invented an "attitude of modernity" (38). Yet after having paid his tribute, Foucault's

text reads like instances of rephrasing this attitude. To be more precise, the afore-mentioned split affirms partly Kant's progressive ethos – and thus Foucault's respect for modern reality – yet he ventures to problematize Kant's claim to universality. With the help of Charles Baudelaire's *oeuvre* the limitations of Enlightenment's ethos should be made discernable, and in particular the Kantian version of it, stipulated in formulations such as "determinations of my identical self" (Kant 2007, A 129).

A clear definition of the praxis of Baudelaire's painter of modern life – that is, Baudelaire's alter ego Constantin Guys – and of course also of the said work carried out upon ourselves, starts at the moment Foucault uses instead of "change" the word "transfiguration":

> … just when the whole world is falling asleep, he begins to work, and he transfigures that world. His *transfiguration* does not entail an annulling of reality, but a difficult interplay between the truth of what is real and the exercise of freedom. (Foucault 1984a, 41, emphasis added)

This is Foucault's first rephrasing of the modern attitude, that is as a "difficult interplay" and an "exercise," which can be understood as the counterpart or double of the Kantian "determinations of my identical self." The Baudelairean notion of freedom is not exercised by "the truth of what is real" nor as an alternative truth (an escape) but as a doubling of "the real" and a confrontation with it – which all in all seems to imply that at least *two* realities are involved, entangled in that difficult interplay. With regard to this transfigurative force (to which Baudelaire also refers as convalescence), the Baudelairean exercise of freedom seems to work *critically on* the Kantian identical self, powered by "a desperate eagerness to imagine" the "indissociable" Kantian self otherwise than it is (41). Baudelaire captured that eagerness in the following formula: "an 'I' with an insatiable appetite for the 'non-I'" (Baudelaire 2001, 10). Presumably this appetite leaves the "I" not unaffected. The provisional conclusion would then be: The

effect of transformation – as conceived by Foucault – is exercised by our Baudelairean work on our Kantian limits.

At this point Foucault is able to rephrase the modern attitude as a "limit-attitude" (Foucault 1984a, 45), and subsequently the act of transforming (a form) into transgressing (a limit). Foucault's voicing of the specific critical **power** that is at stake in his philosophical ethos gradually becomes louder and also more demanding, or even slightly compulsory: "we have to be at the frontiers" (45). Why should we?

Certainly, along with the transfiguration – transvaluation or recoining (*Umwertung*) in the Nietzschean sense – of the modern attitude into a limit-attitude, Foucault proclaims an *adieu* to the Kantian command (which demanded an identical self) and, at the same time – which seems part and parcel of the practice of difference – this limit-attitude enables to reinvent our selves while transgressing frontiers (or the other way around). But what else than transgressing frontiers, boundaries, or indeed limits, did Foucault have in mind?

Foucault did not refer to particular passages of the *Critique of pure Reason*, but he certainly must have had in mind at least this Kantian sentence about "the land of truth": "This domain, however, is an island and enclosed by nature itself within limits that can never be altered" (Kant 2007, 251, B 294). Such "natural" limits Foucault very likely refers to when he calls for the trans-formation of "the critique conducted in the form of necessary limitation" (Foucault 1984a, 45). The power of the limit-attitude does not abolish or erase that limitation, it does not even need to transform limitation's very shape; that attitude just happens to change the rigid modality of its own nature: a desire to transform a historically determined form of respect (for certain limits) into very own possibilities of transgression. Hence the next step to finalize his ethos into "a practical critique that takes the form of a possible transgression" (45). Foucault did not just change the Kantian limit-concept (*Grenzbegriff*; Kant 2007, B 310–311) into a

limit-attitude, he installed an inventive self with a transgressive desire "to imagine it otherwise than it is" (Foucault 1984a, 41), swerving into "work done at the limits of ourselves" (46).

Perhaps Foucault did nothing more and nothing less than folding back Kant's own insight of the third *Critique* into the epistemological and ethical realms of the first and second *Critiques*, not with the aim to destroy the Kantian definition of nature but to set our very own nature (of our self) free from the Kantian, logocentric imperatives. Indeed, Kant underestimated more or less the impact of his own thought that the "imagination (as a productive cognitive faculty) is … very powerful in **creating**, as it were, another nature" (*Critique of the Power of Judgment,* 2000, §49, bold added). This second nature – and, in the Kantian phrasing, the second freedom – as Foucault, and also Deleuze knew, appears to be more important, maybe even more essential than the first: "In the ideal of beginning anew there is something that precedes the beginning itself, that takes it up to deepen it and delay it in the passage of time" (Deleuze 2004, 14).

To recapitulate in a few words Foucault's *tour de force* of envisioning a critical ontology, one can say that the concept of transformation turns out to mark an inventive split practice of *giving form* and *transgressing limits*, alternately or simultaneously. Distancing himself from Kant, Foucault emphasized the importance of historical (genealogical, archeological) inquiries "oriented toward the contemporary limits of the necessary, that is, toward what is not or is no longer indispensable for the constitution of ourselves as autonomous subjects" (Foucault 1984a, 43). Yet those inquiries are not goals in themselves; their purpose and drive ("desperate eagerness") is to invent the critical figures and orientations other than the ones that rule "naturally." Indeed, the Foucauldian imperative is to perform historico-practical tests "of the limits that we may go beyond" (47; *que nous pouvons franchir* [Foucault 1984b, 575]). *Franchir*, here translated as "going beyond," should be understood as transgressing a reality with the emphasis on, and steered by, the determined activity

of "producing" not some meta-physical afterworld as a purely negative realm of redemption but rather different assemblages, in the sense of different styles and **affective** ways of relating to each other (other than hegemonic relations). Practices that allow breaking the dominant everyday systemic veil that controls our "natural" selves.

Thus form changes into a limit, along with the strong suggestion that no limit should be treated as a thing in itself (Kant's *Ding an sich*). Nonetheless, it is likely that *a* limit can be a hidden part of a bigger, encompassing form or frame with a machinic unconscious status, such as the formative entity of the nation-state. We don't know where the borders of the nation-state within ourselves start or end. In everyday life some parts, particular disciplinary practices, of this so-called sovereign power (sovereign in the Hobbesian sense) can just happen to be felt as restrictive. This might be the reason why Foucault also speaks of "partial transformations" (Foucault 1984a, 47). Hence our work should consist at least in investigating the legitimacy of the institutional dominance of *some* limits and rules. Still this work cannot be done without resistance and inventive transgressive practices attired with the critical power to reveal that some rules are the remainders of temporary necessity, and that they can *become* a possibility again, or an arbitrary accessory, and even redundant.

However, Derrida's adage *il n'y a pas de hors-texte* does indeed imply that a simple outside or, for that matter, a sheer inside-the-frame, is not any longer a truth in and for itself, and perhaps has never been, which indeed does also imply that the analysis of resistances and the critique of frames, that is, the very ethos of inventing new conditions and possibilities, and splitting an old frame in two (three, etc.), entails translative acts between frames, emerging from what might be called a life in-between-frames – a singular way of living that has become perhaps even more urgent than ever.

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