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Transgressive Boundaries: A Comparative Study of Transgression in the Works of Foucault, Kierkegaard, and Bataille”

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Abstract

This paper explores the concept of transgression as a critical framework for understanding human behaviors that deviate from cultural norms, with a focus on its revolutionary potential rather than its traditional punitive associations. Historically, religion has defined transgression as sinful, necessitating atonement or punishment to restore social order. However, philosophers like Michel Foucault and Georges Bataille have challenged these normative views, theorizing transgression as a tool for rebellion against dominant cultural attitudes. Both Foucault's writings on transgressive language and Bataille's conception of transgression as a connection to the sacred world underscore the transformative power of such acts. I thus examine the intersections and tensions between their theories, while also incorporating Søren Kierkegaard's work on Christian sacrifice in *Fear and Trembling*. Through an analysis of these thinkers, and a case study of Stanley Kubrick's 1971 transgressive *film A Clockwork Orange*, I argue for a more nuanced understanding of transgressive practices within the divine and sacred worlds of our cultures.

Keywords: philosophy, postmodernism, sexuality, taboo, transgressive cinema, transgression

Introduction

Conceptually, transgression has provided a critical framework for defining human behaviors and desires that deviate from cultural norms. Religion, in its conceptualization of the transgressive act being sinful, has historically been one specific discursive system through which transgression has been defined and enforced. Transgression in common manners of speaking, and certainly in religious discourse, tends to remain charged with a negative valence: a destructive act is committed, a norm is violated, a rule or law is broken; as a result, atonement, correction, contrition, or punishment is required to realign the social order, symbolically and restoratively, after this violation has been perpetrated.

In contrast to the prevailing conceptualizations of transgression, a number of philosophers and critical theorists have challenged the normative and punitive associations with transgression, such as Michel Foucault and Georges Bataille. They instead theorized that there exists a certain revolutionary potential of transgression, with both authors writing specifically on the topics of transgression, taboos, and forms of societal discipline. Such scholars interested in the topic of transgression have written of transgression as a transformational tool in its ability to implicitly create the transgressive act, while asserting that its enactment, or a literary description of experiencing said act, allows for a rebellion against dominant cultural attitudes. Both Bataille and Foucault have extensively hypothesized the role transgression plays in modern Western societies. Foucault theorizes that through transgressive language, an individual can describe their experiences of reaching a societal limit and transcending it, using the example of Bataille's fiction as a contemporary way of conceptualizing transgression and expenditure. He similarly proposes this in his essay, "Preface to Transgression" (1997), "The discovery that the experience of the limit… is realized in language" (32). Furthermore, Bataille viewed the transgressive act as a tool which connects the human individual to the sacred world, in its shattering of societal norms and restrictions, ultimately resulting in personal sovereignty, liberation, and a complete dissolution of boundaries. Scholars have done extensive work in connecting the views of these two writers (Bebergal; Surkis, 1996), with Foucault himself heavily referencing Bataille's transgressive language in his erotic texts. This essay focuses on the multitude of overlapping and conflicting conceptions of transgression within the works of Bataille and Foucault, while also including certain works of Søren Kierkegaard for his discussion of the Christian tradition of sacrifice, as extensively written about in his interpretation of the biblical story of Abraham and his son Isaac in *Fear and Trembling*. As these three writers have contributed significantly to the literature on transgression and taboos, their interpretations and definitions of transgressive acts and stages often overlap, yet they are also contradictory. Finally, Stanley Kubrick's 1971 widely renowned transgressive film *A Clockwork Orange* serves as a cinematic example of how certain strict understandings of transgression can become generatively blurred, offering modern understandings of how transgression and punishment operate that deviate from past scholarly works.

Bataille's Eroticism, Excess, and Eyes

The transgression does not deny the taboo but transcends it and completes it (*Erotism* 63). In Bataille's notion of transgression, the transgressive act is permitted, even prescribed, to

the taboo; instead of there being a strict binary between the two, Bataille posits that taboos are created specifically to be violated (*Erotism* 64). In his chapter "Transgression" in *Erotism,* he proposes that taboos are inherently illogical and contradictory, using the examples of condemned murder in the biblical commandment, "Thou shalt not kill," and periods of condoned murder within the Old Testament. The taboo of murder remains separated from the justifiable killing during warfare, with this distinction allowing for the rational subject to be set apart from the animal. As animals do not have societal taboos, a society's participation in warfare boils down to the collective organization of aggressive urges, something with which Bataille remained fascinated by throughout all of his works – the eternal human return to forms of destruction, and how this is contained and controlled in functional societies.

The sacred and the profane worlds appear repeatedly in Bataille's work, from the general themes of mysticism and eroticism in *Erotism* and *Visions of Excess*, to specific depictions of Christian figures in erotic stories like *Story of the Eye*'s priest. However, the traditional connotations associated with the sacred and the profane are reversed for Bataille, with the sacred becoming something akin to Dyonisian hedonism. The sacred experience is a "prodigious effervescence of life that, for the sake of duration, the order of things holds in check, and that this holding changes into a breaking loose, that is, into violence" (*Theory of Religion* 52). The sacred world, the world of sovereign rulers, excess, celebrations, and God, involves a plethora of transgressive acts, which are explicitly forbidden in the profane world of order. An example of this in Bataille's work is the fate of the *Story of the Ey*e's Simone, imprisoned in a torture camp after years of debauchery – on writing of her death, Bataille states, "It is by no means an erotic joy, it is far more than that. But with no result. Nor is it masochistic, and, profoundly, this exaltation is beyond any imagining; it surpasses everything. However, its basis is solitude and absence" (103). The surpassing of everything, expenditure, excess, and arriving at a limit yet transcending it all appear exhaustively in Bataille's fiction as signals of a character briefly experiencing life in the sacred world. Simone's moment of transfiguration represents a turning away from the profane world, catalyzed by the indescribable horror of life at the brink of death, a profound rupture of the world of order and oppression. Bataille additionally speaks to the role of the sacred in religious worship, in that religious followers are simultaneously terrified yet fascinated by sacred objects: "The taboo gives a negative definition of the sacred object and inspires us with awe on the religious plane" (*Erotism* 68). This moment of awe in the religious plane echoes the language associated with the ecstasy of eroticism and death.

Bataille additionally explored the connection between the activity of hunting and the sacred, with hunting taking on a ritualistic and sacred quality. The religious aura surrounding the animals being hunted essentially corresponds to the sacred nature of transgression. In "Murder, Hunting, and War", he writes, "Might not the secret and religious atmosphere of the caves have corresponded with the religious nature of transgression which indisputably invested the hunt with significance…" (*Erotism* 74). In this quote, Bataille is speaking of cave paintings and other forms of prehistoric art depicting hunters and their sacred prey. He cites these cave paintings as evidence of a timeless movement from the innocent animal to the passive participator in the hunter's expiation. The killing of the animal is "at once inevitable and reprehensible", yet it lays "bare life's mysterious ambiguity" (*Erotism* 74). Hunting can thus be understood as an expiatory ritual, a necessary event that places the transgressor back into the

profane society. Scheduled labor and forms of expiatory rituals thus have both been posited as modes of suppression for transgression, as ways of containing the sacred urges. In ending his section on the importance of the hunting ritual and animal death, Bataille writes succinctly on how taboos operate in expiation:

> Men do not necessarily abstain from the forbidden activity, but take part in it as a conscious infringement of the law. Neither hunting nor sexual activity could be forbidden in practice. The taboo cannot suppress pursuits necessary to life, but it can give them the significance of a religious violation. It imposes limits on them and controls the form that they take. (*Erotism* 75)

Expiatory rituals thus function as ways for individuals involved in killing – the prehistoric hunters and warriors for Bataille's case – to be cleansed and purified before reintegrating into profane society. This emphasis on rituals and purification aligns with the idea that certain activities, when considered transgressions or violations of taboos, require a process of cleansing to restore social order within the profane world.

The profane world, in contrast, can be understood as the structural underpinning of a functioning society, rife with conventional social structures, everyday mundanities, and productive labor. The quotidian profane life is "ordinary time, the time of work and of respect for the taboos" (Bataille, *Erotism* 257). Transgression thus serves as a complementary force to the profane world, as Bataille posits that work is made possible through the taboos and prohibitions defined within the profane world (*Erotism* 68). During the profane period, consumption is minimized to ensure continued production and uninterrupted labor. Sacred days thus become an entire reversal of the prior system's values, though still utilizing and exploiting its taboos – the sacred period is characterized by extravagant expenditure of accumulated energy that was strictly forbidden within the realm of the profane. In Bataille's economic framework, specifically his limited economy, the profane remains rooted in practical, productive, and utilitarian aspects of human existence, with the sole goal being productivity, minimums, sustenance, and impulse control. In contrast, the sacred within the general economy (Bataille, *Visions of Excess* 122) allows for brief perpetration of transgressive acts, of violating the rules set forth in the profane world. This economic perspective similarly is paralleled in Bataille's description of religion, in that the feast days and sacrifices of religions point to a willingness to transgress, to sin. In an interpretation of Bataille's economic frameworks, Alexander Styhre writes, "Against the rationalist outlook of political economy and philosophy, Bataille sought a transcendence of utilitarian production and needs, while celebrating a 'general economy' of consumption, waste, and expenditure as liberatory" (33). This summarizes how Bataille championed a form of "heterogeneity… that subverted and transgressed the instrumental rationality and normalcy of bourgeois culture" (33). The ethics and practices of the profane world's limited economy are transcended once the economic framework shifts to a more general one, allowing for radically distinct modes of thinking and acting.

The brief transgressions committed in the profane world have the capacity to rupture our "discontinuous states", of temporarily evading the isolation of everyday existence. On human existence being inherently discontinuous, Bataille writes, "Each being is distinct from all others. His birth, his death, the events of his life may have an interest for others, but he alone is directly concerned with them. He is born alone. He dies alone. Between one being and another,

there is a gulf, a discontinuity" (*Erotism* 12). Discontinuity specifically is the result of individuation in the early stages of human socialization, in successfully being able to distinguish the self and the Other. How then do we manage to cope with our eternally discontinuous states? Bataille proposes death as the answer in striving for long-lost continuity – death of the ego, of prohibitions in the profane. To be made whole again, to return to the state prior to the damage of individuation, death is used as a sharp disruption to our obsession with the permanence of the discontinuous existence. The death of prohibition is the non-reproductive erotic act, as eroticism for Bataille is the "absence of individuality" (*Theory of Religion* 50). Specifically, the erotic act's role in allowing for continuity revolves around shared violence. He writes of this process in the following quote from his chapter "Sexual Plethora and Death": "Two individuals in the grip of violence brought together by the preordained reflexes of sexual intercourse share in a state of crisis in which both are beside themselves. Both creatures are simultaneously open to continuity" (Bataille, *Erotism* 103). This crisis though is notably temporary, the continuity intoxicating and fleeting.

Bataille's exploration of eroticism, transgression, and the sacred versus the profane thus delineates a complex interplay between the inherent human drive towards expenditure and the societal structures that aim to contain it. Taboos, far from being rigid prohibitions, serve as thresholds that demand transgression to complete their function. This paradoxical relationship highlights how sacred experiences, characterized by forms of excess and violence, are indispensable for disrupting the mundane continuity of the profane world, thereby allowing fleeting moments of profound connection and continuity. Through acts of non-reproductive eroticism, ritualistic hunting, and sacrificial practices, he illustrates that transgression serves as a vital counterbalance to societal order, offering a glimpse into a realm beyond utilitarian existence, where the pursuit of excess and the breaking of prohibitions momentarily dissolve the isolation inherent in human individuation.

Foucault and Transgressive Language

Michel Foucault writes of the eternal interplay between transgression and the limit in his 1977 essay, "Preface to Transgression," found in his book titled *Language, counter-memory, practice.* Instead of transgression being wholly negative or standing in monstrous opposition to something, it "carries the limit right to the limit of its being; transgression forces the limit to face the fact of its imminent disappearance" (Foucault, "Preface to Transgression" 34). The connection between the transgressive act and ethics is shattered, as transgression remains neither in the violence of the ethical world, nor the "victory over limits" (Foucault, "Preface to Transgression" 35) in a dialectical world. Transgression serves the purpose of affirming the limit, of measuring its overabundant distance and somehow always managing to constantly reinvent it. This creeping movement of transgression towards the limit, in its eventual affirmation of the latter, is explored additionally by Bataille, as he writes, "Transgression is complementary to the profane world, exceeding its limits but not destroying it" (*Erotism* 67). As Bataille in his fiction remains obsessed with the seductive powers of the profane and the sacred, and variations of the divine/taboo dichotomy, Foucault expands upon Bataille's interests into something more generalized, related to social repression and limitation. In Foucault's notion of the destabilized subject – a being that remains neither unified, rational, or

stable – the idea of transgression becomes something akin to a spiraling, continual crossing of boundaries; the destabilized subject is constructed and deconstructed through the division of the self and the other. In this self/other dichotomy, individual and collective/cultural subjectivity remains defined by the demarcation of appropriate values assigned to the self, and an exportation of inappropriate, undesirable values onto the other; for sexuality, this dualism can be assigned to normative conceptions of sexuality (procreation) and deviant sexuality (Foucault, "Preface to Transgression" 31). The construction of the self/other dichotomy thus remains tied to Foucault's notion of boundaries and the infinite crossing of them – a movement between the appropriate and inappropriate, reminiscent of the respective values of the profane and sacred worlds. For Foucault, transgression specifically is cited as a way of reinterpreting or revitalizing the traditional, non-Bataille sacred in a secularized world; without the sacred entirely, sexuality becomes the "only source of division now possible in a world emptied of objects, beings and spaces to desecrate" ("Preface to Transgression" 30)
Just as Bataille insists that elements of the sacred manage to seep into the temporal lines of labor and production, Foucault echoes this fluidity, writing:

> Transgression, then, is not related to the limit as black to white, the prohibited to the lawful, the outside to the inside, or as the open area of a building to its enclosed spaces. Rather, their relationship takes the form of a spiral which no simple infraction can exhaust. Perhaps it is like a flash of lightning in the night which, from the beginning of time, gives a dense and black intensity to the night it denies, which lights up the night from the inside. ("Preface to Transgression" 35)

The transgressive act in relation to the societal limit – in the form of violating a social or cultural taboo – dually serves as an affirmative and violational transaction. The behavior prohibited by the taboo is thus understood in these intense, momentary flashes of the general economy.

Foucault's investment in Bataille's fiction, and his belief in its transformative power, stems from what he defines as the issue of seeking "a language for the thought of the limit" ("Preface to Transgression" 40). He argues that the traditional philosophical language of dialectics has been largely insufficient in describing and discussing this experience of arriving at the limit, as "we must find a language for the transgressive which would be what dialectics was, in an earlier time, for contradiction" (40). When Foucault is writing of dialectics in the context of transgression, he is placing it explicitly in the realm of labor power – as man is thought of as both worker and producer, consumption and need are based on the model of hunger. Satiation through production thus posits a system that remains unsolvable and undecipherable through the dialectical approach. The greatest pitfall of using dialectical language to discuss transgression and continuity is its reductive placement into this dialectical sphere. He writes, "....need has an altogether different status, or it responds at the very least to a code whose laws cannot be confined to a dialectic of production" (50). Thus, attempting to discuss the experience of meeting the limit with dialectics is inherently flawed, as it posits a solution to be reached, a middle ground between two sides.

Foucault does acknowledge that writers of the 20th-century began to discover the relationship between excess, limits, and transgression – these "strange and unyielding form[s] of these irrevocable movements which consume and consummate us" ("Preface to Transgression" 49). However, the language of dialectics had been forced onto these discussions

without much generative result. Broadly, Aristotle's approach to dialectics involved an ongoing process of discovery, inquiry, and pedagogy between two individuals with opposing viewpoints, with the outcome being a truth uncovered about reality. When attempting to then find a language for transgression, Foucault then calls for a return to Bataille. This return is a direct result of what Foucault posits as the emergence of sexuality in our culture, developing after the death of God and the ontological void left behind by this death. This void thus serves as an experience of what the limit appears to be. It appears that the death of God is being used within the context of a sacred society transforming into something increasingly secularized, with this shift in values being inherently tied to the transgressive. Foucault writes, "Profanation in a world which no longer recognizes any positive meaning in the sacred-is this not more or less what we may call transgression?" ("Preface to Transgression" 30). What then must we turn to in the face of a Godless world, staring at the limit of his absence – how is Bataille the answer, for Foucault?

In this secular period, the death of God paves the way for an emergent sexuality, an experience of finitude and being – language fails to veil the infinite. In this void of an existence, Foucault writes that this period of darkness is more akin to an era of light for those liberated entirely from dialectical language, both in their thoughts and actions. Just as Bataille himself has seemingly flipped definitions of what the sacred and profane mean within the context of human behaviors and attitudes, Foucault writes of Bataille's unique position within the secularized world. This reversed dichotomy, in the sacred/profane and secular/religious periods, can be seen in the following quote in which Bataille experiences the loss of language in the middle of the night – "What I call night differs from the darkness of thoughts: night possesses the violence of light. Yes, night: the youth and the intoxication of thinking" ("Preface" 51).

Bataille's language, and the writings of de Sade, are referenced heavily in Foucault's essay, as the language within these transgressive texts effectively shatters the philosophical subject (43). When attempting to speak of the limit, Foucault calls for the end of the philosopher as the sovereign, the primary mode of philosophical discourse; how does Bataille's work manage to accomplish this rupture of the philosophical subject? The upturned eye of Bataille's work remains crucial for Foucault in understanding the human experience of finitude and being, of limits and transgressions. An example of Bataille's eye can be found in his 1943 book, *Inner Experience*: "This eye which, to contemplate the sun, face to face in its nudity, opens up to it in all its glory, does not arise from my reason: it is a cry which escapes me" (77). The upturned pineal eyes, the eyes blinded by sudden sunlight, are arrivals at the limit, of experiencing the realm of the sacred while living in the profane. These repetitive images are cited by Foucault as examples of Bataille's language ability to break "down at the center of its space, exposing in his nakedness, in the inertia of ecstasy, a visible and insistent subject who had tried to keep language at arm's length but who now holds himself thrown by it, exhausted, upon the sands of that which he can no longer say" ("Preface to Transgression" 39). Additionally, the concept of the pineal eye – the third eye in lizards – is explored in *Visions of Excess*, as Bataille writes "Existence no longer resembles a neatly defined itinerary from one practical sign to another, but a sickly incandescence, a durable orgasm" (82). In this quote, he describes the specific image of the pineal eye turned upward at the summit of the skull, opening and blinding itself in the face of the sun. The head that houses the burning, upturned

eye is the "image and the disagreeable light of the *notion of expenditure,* beyond the still empty notion as it is elaborated on the basis of methodical analysis" (*Visions of Excess* 82).

Foucault's engagement with Bataille's concepts of transgression and the limit elucidates a reciprocal relationship that transcends mere opposition. This interplay, characterized by lightning flashes of transgression that illuminate and affirm the limits they challenge, reveals the inadequacy of dialectical language in capturing the essence of these experiences. Foucault instead advocates for a language that embraces the instability inherent in transgressive acts, drawing upon Bataille's erotic and violent imagery. By exploring the sacred and profane through this lens, Foucault underscores the profound impact of transgression on understanding human finitude and the desire for continuity in a secularized world, positioning Bataille's work as a pivotal framework for navigating limits and transgressions.

Teleological Suspension of the Ethical: Kierkegaard's Spheres of Existence

Søred Kierkegaard's proposed stages of existence can be regarded as antithetical paradigms to the worlds within Bataille's texts. Kierkegaard's spheres of existence – the aesthetic, ethical, and religious stages – can be mapped quite beautifully both in his literary work and personal life. The earliest, aesthetic stage has the later ones as their telos, or their collective goal. Kierkegaard postulates that remaining in the debaucherous aesthetic or confining ethical stage results in unhappiness or dissatisfaction with one's life. In his earlier work *The Seducer's Diary*, he presents a series of diary entries by Johannes, a fictional character who meticulously documents his pursuit and seduction of Cordelia. Coldly viewing his conquest of Cordelia as a way to experience aesthetic pleasure and emotional stimulation, the narrative serves as a critique of moral abandonment in pursuit of pure pleasure and aestheticism. The aesthetic stage can be generally paralleled to life under Bataille's general economy, in which one lives solely for expenditure and external stimuli. Following this, the ethical stage revolves around a general social integration and adoption of moral frameworks, effectively placing oneself into Bataille's limited economy – pleasures are limited to short periods outside of productive labor, stemming from an overarching abandonment of abject indulgence and selfishness. The final stage – the religious – involves what Kierkegaard defines as a teleological suspension of the ethical (*Fear and Trembling* 263). Human ethics that had been introduced and practiced within the prior stage are thus significantly reduced in how much they structure one's life and their decisions – the religious stage effectively teleologically suspends the ethical stage.

In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard spends the entire book analyzing a single event in the Bible. In Genesis 22, The Binding of Isaac is a story in which God orders Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac on the mountainous region of Moriah. After Abraham leaves his wife Sarah to begin his journey with Isaac, he arrives at the mountain and binds his son at an altar. Being commanded to stop by an Angel, a ram instead appears and is slaughtered in place of Isaac, with both God (and Kierkegaard) commending Abraham's religious obedience.

This event that occurs within the religious stage is thus an example of Kierkegaard's teleological suspension of the ethical; duties within ethical frameworks are abandoned in the face of divine commands. The paradox of faith revolves entirely around this suspension for Kierkegaard, since fulfilling these divine commands results in one transcending normative ethics

and reaching the final sphere of existence – complete obedience in some universal power. More generally, the role of the social can be explicitly seen in the works of Foucault, Bataille, and Kierkegaard, though in dramatically different representations and interpretations. As defined in earlier sections in Bataille's economies, Bataille's opinion of socialization and proper societal frameworks can be understood by his general definitions of the limited economy and the profane world; we become discontinuous beings immediately upon being socialized, resulting in an eternal quest to momentarily become continuous and distract us from the immortality of our own discontinuous states. In "Preface to Transgression", Foucault writes of how the limit, finitude, transgression, and taboos become incredibly important forms of power within the realm of human desire, highlighting how Bataille's language paradoxically solves the space left behind by the failure of dialectics. For Kierkegaard – oddly similar to Bataille – the social is something that must be abandoned; they differ in what the following stage should be. As Bataille remains focused on life in the general economy, on expenditure and continuity through eroticism and death of the ego, Kierkegaard writes of religion as one's telos once leaving the social or ethical. Despite their differing conclusions—Bataille's focus on the erotic and death of the ego versus Kierkegaard's ultimate transcendence through religious faith—both perspectives underscore the crucial role of socialization, limits, and the quest for continuity in human experience. The examples of convergence and divergence between the three writers illuminate the complexities of transgression in everyday ethical, aesthetic, and religious lives.

The Contagious Divine: Alex DeLarge & Ultraviolence

In thinking of Kubrick's film *A Clockwork Orange*, the themes of violence, theatricality, and excessiveness can be seen as reflections of a destructive societal struggle between the sacred and the profane. The protagonist, Alex, and his Droogs engage in extreme acts of sexual and physical violence, as well as other forms of transgression, portraying a form of Bataille's excess that defies the rules of productivity set forth within the profane society. This cinematic excess of violence can be interpreted as a manifestation of a general economy in practice, akin to Bataille's sacred world. Instead of there being a dichotomy of the sacred and the profane, in the momentary transgressions breaking up periods of profane labor, the sacred becomes the sole 'economy'. In this context, the acts of brutality and the disregard for societal rules represent a rebellion against the constraints of the limited, utilitarian economy. For Alex, there are no expiatory rituals as there were for the hunters in the prehistoric cave paintings, no re-entrance into the profane world after a brief transgression. Only violence and expenditure remain. Alex disrupts the ordered structure of society, seeking a release from the mundane and restrictive aspects of the profane world.

The society's institutional response to Alex's violence reflects a desire to enforce a limited economy, to punish the general economy for creating an imbalance between the sacred and profane. The state's attempt to condition Alex's behavior through the Ludovico Technique can be seen as an effort to instill a rigid set of rules and prohibitions, aligning with the principles of the profane. In thinking of how Alex's violence functions with the film, and independently relating Bataille's work to the film, Bataille writes of an experience of the sacred as a cycle akin to a negative feedback loop, the "flame that destroys the wood by consuming it" (*Theory of Religion* 53), entering a world of "dangerous contagion" (*Theory of Religion* 53). This path of

endless destruction and commitment to it can be assigned to Alex's general "ultraviolent" mentality, one which must be cured through religious and medical intervention. Ultraviolence can be defined as "a loss of the social connectedness in which human living and even violence consists… [it] transforms the victim from human to sensible object" (Kupfer 15).

Keeping in mind the tension of the social stage found in the works of Kierkegaard and Bataille, Alex's character is unable to fit into any of Kierkegaard's spheres of existence after the Ludovico treatment. Prior to his incarceration, Alex can be understood as operating entirely within Bataille's general economy. In the general economy, the individual has an excess of energy, in contrast to not being driven by scarcity or rationality as within the limited economy. When Alex then undergoes rigorous rounds of aversion therapy, his eyes being forcibly kept open with metal curved bars in order to watch various transgressive films while being administered Serum 114, the goal is to uproot him from the Bataillean general economy lifestyle he had for so long indulged in, in order to be properly socialized, entering into Kierkegaard's ethical stage. However, the "cured" Alex blurs the otherwise clear distinctions between Kierkegaard's spheres of existence.

Earlier in the film, Alex speaks with the prison's chaplain, in hopes of being chosen for the Ludovico technique and effectively ending his prison term. The themes of religion and free will are clear and oft-discussed lines of inquiry in scholarship on the film. The function of the chaplain character and his passionate protest against Alex's cure on the basis of free will maps onto Kierkegaard's discussion of the religious stage. The religious themes within the film thus can be generalized into two distinct categories – the argument for free will in faith and the narrative, cinematographic insight into Alex's purely aesthetic, desecrative investment in Christianity. Regarding the former, the chaplain replies to Alex's plea for the treatment with "The question is whether or not this technique really makes a man good. Goodness comes from within; goodness is chosen. When a man cannot choose, he ceases to be a man" (1:00:40). Similarly, the chaplain compliments Alex for his "genuine desire to reform" after he sees him reading from the Bible (58:09). The function of the chaplain character as the sole religious figure in the film and his decisive protest against Alex's cure on the basis of free will maps onto Kierkegaard's discussion of the religious stage. Indeed, the move from the ethical to the truly religious stage for Kierkegaard inherently relies upon a clear, conscious movement towards God and a willful abandonment of human ethics in faith. Kierkegaard believed that genuine religious faith required a leap of faith, a personal commitment to something beyond rational understanding. Free will plays a crucial role in religious matters as individuals must *choose* to believe in God and commit themselves to a life of faith. He similarly argued against a purely rational approach to religion, instead advocating for a more personal and passionate engagement with religious truths. In *Fear and Trembling*, when talking about this leap of faith, he writes, "I can make the mighty trampoline leap whereby I cross over into infinity; my back is like a tightrope dancer's, twisted in my childhood, and therefore it is easy for me" (36), the leap being a leap toward truly believing in a higher divine power. Just as the chaplain believes goodness – and extrapolating to faith – must come from within, Kierkegaard believed true entrance into the religious stage involved a voluntary, passionate leap. Therefore, Alex's "cured" state, which effectively places him into the realm of the limited economy, divorces his character from truly entering Kierkegaard's religious stage and the chaplain's idea of Christian faith.

On the secondary interpretation of religion in the film, to begin, Alex can only conceptualize and "practice" religion within the context of transgression prior to the Ludovico treatment. In the confines of his room (18:54), Alex pleasures himself while listening to Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, quickly spliced together with scenes of several enlarged, naked crucifixes hung on his wall. Indeed, during this moment of blasphemous pleasure, Alex's eyes become slightly upturned, akin to the repetitive, upturned eye of Bataille's fiction. This juxtaposition of slightly bloody crucifixes, masturbation, and the sequence of violent images playing within Alex's mind during this process represents the complex interplay between religion and ultraviolence within the film.

Bataille's upturned eye points to a yearning for lost continuity, which can be reached through religious practices, eroticism, sacrificial methods, and other ecstatic experiences. However, as stated before, these are mere temporary modes of transportation away from the awareness of one's discontinuity. The upturned eye is a moment of transcending the limit, representing a gaze towards the divine and transcendent, an episode of momentary continuity. The erotic episode in *Story of the Eye* between two girls is described by the narrator: "And all that remained before us was an empty, glowing window, a rectangular hole piercing the opaque night, showing our aching eyes a world composed of lightning and dawn" (Bataille 29). This imagery of a confrontation with darkness, of temporary continuity within the sacred, is shown in this montage of Alex's upturned eye and the crucifixes, pointing towards Alex's practice of religion being entirely transgressive, but sacred in Bataille's sense.

Similarly, as Alex reads from the Bible while in prison, it seems to the priest and other inmates that he is improving himself through Christianity and devoted biblical study, but transgression is still inherent to how Alex views religion, seen in how he fantasizes about being "dressed in the height of Roman fashion" (56:29) during Jesus' crucifixion. He enthusiastically says, "I read all about the scourging and the crowning with thorns and I could viddy myself helping in and even taking charge of the tolchocking and the nailing in, being dressed in the height of Roman fashion. I didn't so much like the latter part of the book, which is more like all preachy talking than fighting and the old in-out" (56:29).

Bataille writes specifically of religious eroticism, though notably much different than Alex's religious/erotic practices, stating that "...the Christian spirit retains the essential core, finding it in continuity in the first place. Continuity is reached through experience of the divine. The divine is the essence of continuity" (*Erotism* 118). Bataille's definition of religious eroticism revolves around experiencing the divine through religious fervor, whereas Alex's conception of religion revolves solely around sexuality, desecration, and debauchery.

Alex states to the priest, "I want the rest of my life to be one act of goodness" (58:22). Although this pronouncement can be interpreted ironically, as Alex simply telling the chaplain what he thinks he wants to hear, it can also be interpreted through the lens of Bataille's ideas of goodness and the sacred. For Alex, a life of pure goodness is a life of transgression, remaining within the general economy instead of making the movement towards the limited economy. Thus, if we juxtapose Alex's desire for goodness and what we as the audience see, goodness is inverted in a similar manner as the sacred and the profane have been in Bataille's work. The sacredness of Alex's world is the sacredness of Bataille's texts, though the chaplain presumably is unaware of Alex's inverted sense of religion and divine practice.

Conclusion

Bataille thus posited that transgressions temporarily shatter the experience of discontinuity of the subject and the Other brought about through socialization and individuation. Specific examples of these transgressions include non-reproductive eroticism, death (of prohibitions), religious sacrifice, and hunting. Foucault, drawing heavily upon the erotic works of Bataille, focused on the societal need for a language that is able to describe the experience of reaching a limit and transcending it, with the solution being the language of Bataille, with his upturned eyes and sacred acts. Kierkegaard's stepwise modes of existence have been juxtaposed with the different economies and worlds of Bataille, with there being a strict difference between the required movements between them. Kierkegaard called for a necessary movement from the hedonistic expenditure of the aesthetic stage – Bataille's sacred period – to a suspension of the ethical found in the religious stage.

Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* serves as an intriguing cinematic exploration of these transgressive themes. Alex embodies the transgressive subject that Bataille describes, living within the general economy of excess and ultraviolence. His acts of violence and desecration illustrate a relentless pursuit of the sacred in an otherwise profane world, highlighting the interplay between Bataille's concept of the sacred and the profane. The state's intervention through the Ludovico Technique, an attempt to enforce a limited economy, reflects the general societal desire to control and punish transgression, aligning with Kierkegaard's ethical sphere. However, this intervention fails to properly bring Alex into either Kierkegaard's religious or ethical stage, as genuine faith and ethical transformation require voluntary commitment and free will, elements stripped from Alex through his curing process. Thus, the film underscores the tension between the sacred and the profane, and the aesthetic and ethical stages of existence. Kubrick's film ultimately presents a complex commentary on forms of transgression in society and the ways in which they are attempted to be controlled through societal intervention, making it a compelling study through the lenses of Bataille and Kierkegaard. Though pre-Ludovico Alex can be neatly boxed into the definitions associated with Bataille's sacred world, the institutional attempt to introduce him into the profane society ultimately is unsuccessful, seen in his failure to be properly placed into either frameworks offered by Kierkegaard or Bataille, effectively challenging these strict categorizations of transgressive experiences.

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