Abstract

This essay sets out to situate Maurice Blanchot’s originary “limit experience” - conceived as “thought from the outside” - in relation to Michel Foucault’s transgressive ethics of resistance and “aesthetics of existence.” Specifically, the spirit of Blanchot’s notion of the récit, it is argued, is a possible lens through which we might situate Foucault’s own, later conceptualization of ethics-as-aesthetics. This essay seeks to place Foucault’s later turn to ethics – understood as extra-discursive resistance; i.e., that which lies outside of formal legal and scientific structures - within the context of Blanchot’s lifelong fascination with language and death, further understood as the “impossible” limit experience.

Introduction

Foucault’s longtime devotion to Maurice Blanchot is multifaceted. On the one hand Foucault, as a devoted reader of Blanchot, embraces on many levels Blanchot’s discourse of externality. This discourse is inextricably wed to Blanchot’s “philosophy of the outside,” the notion of a “limit experience,” and the philosophical meaning behind “the event.” When Blanchot speaks of the “exteriorization” of the subject, he is challenging the (then) prevailing Hegelian influence in phenomenology and existentialism which, according to Foucault, centered on the theme of the “unhappy consciousness” coming out of Hegel’s philosophy of the subject. Challenging this philosophy of “unbroken intelligibility” were the Nietzschean themes of discontinuity and eternal recurrence; from Nietzsche, French thinkers such as Blanchot, Georges Bataille and later, Foucault and

1 The author is deeply indebted to Gerald Bruns, Hent de Vries, Foucault, and Terry Clark, among others, for their incisive insights into Blanchot’s life and works. This essay is not intended as a systematic comparison between Blanchot and Foucault, but is limited to a specific philosophical problematic in relation to the notion of the récit. The sources from which I draw my arguments in relation to Foucault’s late turn to ethics are primarily his later essays and interviews.

2 The phrase “unhappy consciousness” is arguably borrowed from Blanchot’s essay “Literature and the Right to Death.” In Blanchot’s view, writers fall into one of three categories: that of stoicism, skepticism and the “unhappy consciousness”; in the case of the latter, the writer is said to be “a writer only by virtue of his fragmented consciousness” Blanchot, Maurice. 1981a. "Literature and the Right to Death," Pp. 21-62 in The Gaze of Orpheus, edited by P. Adams Sitney. New York: Station Hill Press.
Jacques Derrida, thematized the problems of this philosophy of discontinuity wherein the subject is said to be capable of “escaping from itself.”

It is also the suggestion of this essay that, on the other hand, if we look past the prima facie skepticism regarding the anthropological humanism and universalist history that consistently informs Foucault’s works, we can - in spite of his later stress on the limits of language - discern in his ethical writings a philosophy of freedom of thought and practice that parallels the philosophical impulse behind Blanchot’s usage of the literary notion, the récit.

The first section sketches Foucault’s later philosophical impulse in relation to two major, interrelated Blanchotian themes: language and death. Blanchot’s récit, it is argued, is but one of the ways by which we can understand Foucault’s approach to ethical self-formation in late modernity. As a non-discursive form of literary practice, the récit, displacing itself from any representational reading, is its own interlocutor, turning itself away from representational language. In the second section, I sketch the outlines of Foucault’s non-cognitive, non-representational ethics and suggest how he understands ethical self-invention as that which must - if we are to refuse our given (i.e., Kantian universal) subject positions - interrupt received orders of humanist representation. We need to undertake, says Foucault, a permanent critique of ourselves, one that is not limited to the development of the “knowing” subject. This undertaking on Foucault’s own part, it is argued, lends itself to a spiritual kinship with Blanchot’s notion of the récit.

Language and Death: Récit and the Limit Experience in Blanchot’s Critical Oeuvre

Exit Left: The Exteriority of Poetics

From Blanchot, Foucault borrows - as does he from Nietzsche and Bataille - the idea of a “limit-experience,” an approach derived in part from a rejection of phenomenology’s reflection on the everyday “lived experience” of the subject from which, Jean Paul Sartre reminds us, there is no exit: “The idea of a limit-experience that wretches the subject from itself is what was important to me in my reading of Nietzsche, Bataille, and Blanchot” (Foucault 2000:241). In an essay first published in 1966, “The Thought of the Outside” (Foucault 1998: 147-169), Foucault explains that Blanchot does not engage in “negative dialectics” to underscore the limit experience, for to engage in negative dialecticity is to bring “what one negates into the troubled interiority of the mind” (Foucault 1998: 152). Rather, Blanchot negates entirely the discourse of modernity, a

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3 Foucault recalls that this “escape,” at least on his part, was tied to the “utterly different reality we thought was embodied by communism” Foucault, Michel. 2000. Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume 3: Power. New York: New Press.

4 The récit, a distinctly French cultural term, is (loosely) translated as “tale” or “narrative.”

5 “Interview with Michel Foucault.”

move that serves to free thought in order that it may have a new beginning or a “pure origin.” It is to leave it where it lies, Foucault pronounces,

because its only principles are itself and the void, but that is also a rebeginning because what freed that void was the language of the past in the act of hollowing itself out. Not reflection, but forgetting; not contradiction, but a contestation that effaces, not reconciliation, but droning on and on, not mind in laborious conquest of its unity, but the endless erosion of the outside; not truth finally shedding its light on itself, but the streaming and distress of a language that has always already begun (Foucault 1998: 152).

Thus, phenomenology is rejected owing to its expectation that the “lived experience” of the subject can supply the “originary meaning of every act of knowledge,” an assumption that issues, to Foucault’s way of thinking, in a move to undermine those meanings of acts of knowledge in the living itself (Foucault 2000: 475). The affirmation of a constituting subject that phenomenology set as its goal resulted, says Foucault, in a reorientation of the “event” with respect to meaning, either placing the event before, or to the side, of meaning (Foucault 1998:351).

“Writing so as not to die… or perhaps even speaking so as not to die, is a task undoubtedly as old as the word” (Foucault 1998: 89). Blanchot’s “fictions,” according to Foucault, are not fictions at all. Rather, the distinction between “novels, narratives, and criticisms” is progressively weakened “until language alone is allowed to speak … [it] is neither fiction nor reflection, neither already said nor never yet said” (Foucault 1998: 154). As Timothy Clark points out, writing, for Blanchot, eschews any humanist endeavor, for to “represent” the human condition through writing is to remain within the confines of its genesis (Clark 1992: 64-9). It is, in other words, to acculturate and cognitize writing, to harness writing to an inner, representational dialecticity from which no pure beginning can emerge. Thus, literature, in any of its memetic aspects, holds no promise for Blanchot, though the space between mimetologism (the notion that a literary work represents something) and literarity (the notion that the work presents itself as a verbal artifact) is arguably the space in which Blanchot seeks to situate literature (Clark 1992: 76).

The “récit” Blanchot speaks of perhaps best exemplifies this extra-discursive, non-humanist, self-sustaining dialecticity in which writing and literature each strive to emerge as its own, ultimate reference. The récit can be understood by reference to its philosophical apposite: the novel. In “The Song of the Sirens,” Blanchot tells of Ulysses’ encounter with the Sirens, a tale which must be seen, he says, not as the narration of an event, “but that event itself … [one which] … does not seem to have any prior existence”

7 Ibid.  
10 From “The Thought of the Outside.”
but which also derives its power from its very genesis (Blanchot 1981b:109). The récit, or narrative, is paradoxically both its own genesis and its own result; it is one single episode, “an exceptional event, one that eludes the forms of everyday time and the world of the usual sort of truth, perhaps any truth” (Blanchot 1981b:109). The novel, by contrast, unfolds as in “a game of human time,” representing everything that is humanist. It does not function - as in the case of the récit - as its own narrative, but as being bound up with human passions, seemingly directionless (though is, in fact, subject to a certain linearity: “a happy sort of distraction”) and replete with representational imagery. The récit, as one commentator suggests, may be seen as having its origins as a literary practice in Blanchot’s critical debates with two of his contemporaries, Martin Heidegger and Levinas (Clark 1992: 90-5). In any event, what is important for an understanding of Blanchot’s conceptualization of literature – in particular, that of the récit - is that it seeks not to reside in the deep interiority of subjectivity, as an ideal force that represents or signifies, but rather “hides itself away, playing its own game without man.” Hence, its distrust of words (Blanchot 1981a:47-49).

As exemplified by the récit, Blanchot’s notion of negativity suggests that a “work” is its own source, its own identity and not that of others, and thus, cannot be separated from art. It opens, says Foucault, a “neutral space in which no existence can take root” (Foucault 1998: 166). Such an anonymity leads to a “boundlessness” in Blanchot, which in turn frees language from the false sovereignty bestowed on it by modernity in the name of arriving at the constants of “truth.” This power of “dissimulation,” as Foucault calls it, “effaces every determinate meaning and even the existence of the speaker, in the gray neutrality that constitutes the essential hiding place of all being … neither eternity nor man” (Foucault 1998: 167-8).

In one of his more important treatments of literary theory - The Space of Literature (L’espace littéraire) - (Blanchot 1982) Blanchot conceptualizes the “original experience” as an analogical relation involving three case histories: Kafka, Mallarmé, and Rilke. In the case of Kafka, writing is an exigency, leaving one “deprived of the world.” Here, the writer disappears altogether except within the space of this exigency (Bruns 1997:62). With Mallarmé, the loss of subjectivity on the part of the writer is analogous to death. In the experience of Mallarmé’s Igitur, death is not a subjective experience (as suicide), but takes place in the unfolding caesuras of the exterior: an event outside all relations (Ibid: 70-1). As Gerald Bruns explains, through Mallarmé, we can trace the foundational influences of Blanchot’s thought in that Mallarmé was perhaps the first “limit figure” who conceived of poetry as parenthetically outside of discourse, leaving behind all forms of representation-through-language, fashioning itself rather as an event (écriture) unconnected to anything resembling semantic space (Bruns 1997:6-9). Blanchot, as has been noted, leans to Mallarmé to realize the negation inherent in language (Fynsk

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11 On Clark’s account, the literary impulse behind the récit can be - at least implicitly – traced to Heidegger’s Dichtung, described by Heidegger as a dialogic “step back” from representationalist language, though, according to both Blanchot and Levinas, such a move on Heidegger’s part only foreshadows a dialogic practice of heteronomy.

12 From “The Thought of the Outside.”

13 Ibid.
1996:70-1). Thus language, for Blanchot, is “deferred assassination.” The moment I say “this woman,” she is detached from herself, removed from her existence and her presence.” I alone am responsible for this destruction, this “ideal negation” and therefore, it is accurate to say: “death speaks in me” (Blanchot 1981a:42-3). Strictly speaking, Foucault’s ethics also lie parenthetically outside discourse. The practices of freedom and self-mastery that act as resistance limit-experiences, we will see, are said to be constituted outside existing discursive institutions: i.e., the law and power relations. So conceived, resistance is a process of breaking out of discursive practices.

**The Unbearable Lightness of Death and the Loss of Ontological Privilege**

“Whoever sees God dies.” Not everyone, however, dies well. And, if that were not enough, death, in its infinite and singular gaze, awaits but never comes. The voice of the narrator in Blanchot’s *The Instant of My Death* (Blanchot 2000 [1994]) #779] reflects upon this impossibility of death in relation to the protagonist, a young French man facing, but ultimately escaping, death at the hands of the Nazis during World War II:

[When] the shooting was no longer but to come, the feeling of lightness…freed from life? the infinite opening up? As if the death outside of him could only henceforth collide with the death in him. I am alive. No, you are dead [Ibid:7-8].

In Blanchot’s philosophical landscape, death is neither happy nor unhappy, for death is a singular event that does and yet, does not, happen. “My death” is not mine for it has not become an experience, and yet, the instant of my death marks the summit of *all* experiences. It is nothing and yet it is all (de Vries 1998). The “instant” of my death thus marks an ontological rupture, for the impossibility of saying “I am dead” is revealed in that space where death must *necessarily* be experienced as the death of the Other. Yet, death, as in the case of the young man in *The Instant of My Death*, is always looming. This is, as noted by De Vries and others, instanced in Blanchot’s narrative usage of the third person *il*, as opposed to the first person *je* (de Vries 1998) (Derrida 2000 [1998]) #780].¹⁴ I cannot experience death because – on de Vries’ reading of Blanchot – I am either too *young* or too *old* to die. Thus, death, as a singular limit experience, is not an experience at all. Or if it is, it is a *living* experience as seen through the eyes of the Other. The instant of my death as radically other means that death comes not only once, but represents a series of ultimate limit experiences *in life*. “I remember a young man … prevented from dying by death itself.” As Derrida notes, one could spend years on such a sentence alone (Derrida 2000 [1998]) #780]:54]. Foucault would, no doubt, concur.

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¹⁴ As Terry Clark explains, the “I,” after Hegel, cannot refer to any sort of subjective, intuitive existence; yet neither, after Bataille, can it refer to a universal “I.” This is why, in Blanchot’s writings, the “I” is spoken in the third person *il*, referring to *he* or *it* Clark, Timothy. 1992. *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. See also a “Blancotian-inspired reading of Levinas’ “il y a”; here, Simon Critchley argues that both Blanchot and Levinas are attempting to yield an approach which calls into question Heidegger’s optimistic view that *Dasein*, through death, is synonymous with the “possibility of impossibility” Critchley, Simon. 1996. "Il y a - Holding Levinas' Hand to Blanchot's Fire." Pp. 108-122 in *Maurice Blanchot: The Demand of Writing*, edited by Carolyn Bailey Gill. London and New York: Routledge..
As with writing, death is that which escapes dialectical negation. This nondialectical negativity marks the ultimate irony; death has no antithetical opposite, for if no separation is possible, death cannot reach the consciousness of being. Death is the master; it shows us all. It is, and can only be, its own opposite. As Leslie Hill notes, it is this “unmasterable interruption,” along with its role as “unexceptional shared experience” that constitutes the double treatment of death in Blanchot’s works (Hill 2001: 182). Death’s impossibility is tied to its very humanness; because it necessarily exceeds all that is human, it can only exist in its own dialecticity and can be the limit only of itself, as with the case of the récit. The “limit experience” of death is necessarily the death of the Other, and it is in this (arguably) pluralist, counter-temporal space that a transformation of the self beyond humanist conceptions of the individual becomes possible (Clark 1992:140).

The move to de-inscribe death and language and release each into its own non-discursive, non-instrumental exteriority borrows on Heidegger’s Dichtung, although this appropriation is not without limitations. Dichtung is the word Heidegger uses for an originary event which acts not – as in the case of Mallarmé – as a disappearance, but rather as a clearing, or opening, to being. In Sein and Zeit, this clearing comes when death is revealed as a self-relation. Heidegger’s ‘Being-towards-death’ – my relation to the death of others can only be in each case my relation to death – permits authentic selfhood (Dasein), further revealing that death is both possible and grasppable. Blanchot radically departs from the latter part of Heidegger’s formulation in his conviction that death is both impossible and ungraspable; it is beyond the will. As in Heidegger, an opening is established, but it is, as one commentator notes, an opening to a “metaphenomenological” alterity that undermines Heidegger’s heroism of Being-towards-death (Critchley 1996:109-10).

It is generally agreed that Blanchot more closely associates his ‘philosophy of death’ with Levinas’ “presence in the depth of absence” according to which Heidegger’s ontological relation (possibility/impossibility) is reversed (Clark 1992) (Critchley 1996) (de Vries 1998). In “Literature and the Right to Death” (“La Littérature et le droit à la mort”) (Blanchot 1981a), Blanchot says that

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16 “Dichtung” is often translated as “fiction” or “poetry.” It is Derrida’s view, however, that both are mistranslations: “Dichtung is neither fiction nor poetry”; rather it is more like “testimony” Derrida, Jacques. 2000 [1998]. DEMEURE: Fiction and Testimony. Stanford: Stanford University Press. #780]:15-16;52.


18 See also endnote #11.
[this] is why we can say that there is being because there is nothingness: death is man’s possibility. [E]xistence frightens him, not because of death which could put an end to it, but because it excludes death. And there is no question that we are preoccupied by dying. But why? It is because when we die, we leave behind not only the world but also death. Death works with us in the world; it is a power that humanizes nature … man only knows death because he is a man, and he is only man because he is death in the process of becoming. [When] I die… I am no longer capable of dying, and my impending death horrifies me because I see it as it is: no longer death, but the impossibility of dying (Blanchot 1981a:55).

Thus, it is the very impossibility of dying that makes death possible. Life-affirming when one considers that to forget death is actually to remember it. So asks the protagonist in Blanchot’s Awaiting Oblivion (L’Attente l’oubli) (Blanchot 1997 [1962]) #766 #766 #766:46]. In Blanchot’s philosophy, death, like words, is the “impossible forgetting,” for every time we forget, we unfailingly recall in the forgetting. In The Instant of My Death, death is nothing but its own ever-impending shadow. It is a singular historical experience, but, in its singularity, constitutes an event that is at the same time not an event. Death’s positivity is therefore instanced in its very impossibility.

Blanchot as He Imagines Him: Récit-ivity and the Limit Experience in Foucault’s Ethics

Thought as Event: Refusing Who We Are

The “limit experience” in Blanchot’s writings, we have seen, is one in which consciousness and language can be said to produce themselves as objects, far removed from any humanist endeavor wherein, according to Foucault, representation “folds back on itself.” According to the Foucault of The Order of Things, from the beginning of the nineteenth century, representation can no longer be seen as the locus of being or the “primitive seat of truth,” (as in the Classical episteme), but acts rather as an “exteriorization,” something outside “man,” an “irreducible anteriory” that makes it impossible to access the human being as human other than through this new epistemological role as “a living being, an instrument of production … [and as] … a vehicle for words which exist before him” (Foucault 1970: 312-13). In light of the proliferation of the human sciences, we no longer speak for ourselves because signs speak for and through us, and this presents itself as a fundamental contradiction. In “The Thought of the Outside” Foucault echoes Blanchot’s praise for Nietzsche, Mallamaré, Artaud, Bataille and Klossowski; toward the latter half of the nineteenth century, these thinkers of the “outside” sought to wretch language from the “troubled interiority of the mind.” But to this list, indeed, at its very top, Foucault adds Blanchot whom, he says, is so absent from the existence of his texts, that “he is that thought itself, its real, absolute

19 L’attente l’oubli has also been more accurately translated as Waiting, Forgetting.
20 With Mallamaré, says Foucault, we see language – beginning with Igatur - appearing as a “leave-taking from that which it names,” but, more significantly, as the movement of the speaker’s disappearance.
distant, shimmering invisible presence, its necessary destiny, its inevitable law, its calm, infinite, measured strength” (Foucault 1998:151).

How precisely, then, might Foucault’s ethics of self-transformation sit within a Blanchotian conception of the “limit experience”? While Foucault does straightforwardly not substitute literary fiction for philosophical discourse, there can nonetheless be discerned certain analogical parallels in his work in relation to Blanchot’s “politics of refusal.”

Toward the end of his life, Foucault abruptly turned to the problem of how – if the self is not given to us in some predetermined form – we fashion ourselves as ethical subjects. His study of ancient Greek and Hellenist “practices of the self” is framed around what he calls an “aesthetics of existence.” His principal claim is that the ancients conceptualized ethics as a form of the “care of the self” in which one’s life was considered an on-going work in progress. He links this to our current existence as moderns by posing the questions: Why should a painter work if he is not transformed by his own painting? Why shouldn’t everyone’s life become a work of art? The transformation of one’s self by one’s own knowledge is, he says, “something rather close to the aesthetic experience” (Foucault 1997: 131). By working his way through history, through the Christian interrogation of desire to the origins of the self in classical Greece, Foucault conceives ethics as “the concern for self as a practice of freedom,” further conceived as an “aesthetics of existence.”

Foucault’s return to ancient ethical practices leads him to understand that the critical work to be done in late modern times is to reflect on the contingent nature of “limits” in all of their historicity while simultaneously making one’s life a work of art, though the parallels stop there. In his later work, both of the above mentioned imperatives speak to the capacities of individuals for non-transcendental (i.e., non-Kantian) self-legislation. Life is an “ethos” to be cultivated, an ethical relation of the self to the self and to others; its very desirability lends itself to the transformation of one’s self by one’s own knowledge. The starting point for a Foucaultian ethics, then, is the refusal of ‘who we are’ in relation to those dominant forms of ethical subjectivity that have been imposed on us by modernity in the name of “humanism.” The basis for freedom, says Foucault, is the relationship of the self to itself and the relationship to others” (Foucault 1997:300). And, such a freedom can only be achieved by orienting a “permanent critique of ourselves” toward the “contemporary limits of the necessary,” toward, that is, “what is no longer indispensable for the constitution of ourselves as autonomous subjects” (Foucault 1997:313).

One way to approach the possible ways in which Foucault’s refusal of the self parallels Blanchot’s récit is by reference to what each thinker means by the “event”: more precisely, how the event is inexorably connected to thought itself. On Blanchot’s terms the event (exemplified by the récit), we have seen, is a singular (i.e., non-

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22 From “Michel Foucault: An Interview by Stephen Riggins” conducted for *Ethos*, June 22 1982.

representational) effect unto itself; this movement, says Blanchot, witnesses the “ode [turning] into an episode” (Blanchot 1981b:107). Foucault’s methodological strategy of “eventalization” has analogical import here. Eventalization will reveal the seemingly “necessary” limits of our historical existence to be in fact fragile, singular, and contingent. Eventalization makes visible those singularities through the dispersion of historical constants or “laws,” and through the rediscovery of the complex and multiple forces that have subsequently (and, mistakenly) counted as self-evident, universal, and necessary (Foucault 2000:226-7). When, in other words, discourse is so tightly bound to itself, it is our ethical obligation to effect a “crossing-over.” It is precisely this crossing-over, this permanent critique of ourselves that arguably has analogical parallels with Blanchot’s récit. Ethical self-transformation begins at a point where given, modern forms of subjectivity do not go; like the récit, ethical practices of the self are exceptional events that work to undermine, in fact elude, established historical narratives. Blanchot refers to this in relation to the récit as its own “secret law” (Blanchot 1981b:109) as, one might add, singular event.

As with Blanchot’s récit, Foucault’s conception of the relation of the self to the self begins at a point at which the self is both the starting point and its own end; self-transformative practices are like the tales of single episodes, much like that in which Ulysses encounters the enticing song of the sirens in Blanchot’s The Song of the Sirens. The practices of the self are the very crossings-over themselves: not the occurrence of encounters, but the encounters themselves. As Blanchot would remind us, the event, as a crossing-over, is rather the “overture of the infinite moment which is the encounter itself … always still to come, always in the past already, always present… unfurling itself like the eternal return and renewal.” (Blanchot 1981b:112). Such sentiments are foreshadowed by Foucault in an earlier essay in which he speaks of the event, not as a “grammar of the first person” or where “signification only exists for consciousness” (as in phenomenology). An event, says the later Foucault, is not a “state of things”; it is not action, but effect. An event lacks all corporeality (as Deleuze has attempted to show); it is the “anonymous flow of discourse” as in death, “the best example” (Foucault 1998:349-51). The ethical transformation of the self would consist not, then, on Blanchot’s terms, in the narration of an event, but is rather the event itself, as effect.

We can better understand this theme of the event in relation to another recurrent theme in Foucault: the “thought of the outside.” Such a theme stands, one might say, as a leitmotif from his archaeological investigations into knowledge formation to his last works on the possibility of a non-discursive, ethic of resistance. In The Order of Things (Foucault

24 Such historical constants – “immediate anthropological traits” – are ordered around (for example, in relation to the prison) a “polymorphic” set of methodological concerns in which the elements brought into the relation (for example, pedagogical relations), the relations described (for example, the disorder brought on by public tortures and executions), and the domains of reference (for example, emplacement of new techniques of power in a capitalist economy) serve to “de-eventalize” history in the interests of producing the order of “truth” and “falsity” Foucault, Michel. 2000. Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume 3: Power. New York: New Press.. From “Questions of Method,” originally titled “Round Table of May 20, 1978.”

25 From “Theatrum Philosophicum.”
Foucault seeks to re-situate knowledge and epistemology outside the existing modern episteme. In his later, ethical writings, the goal of extra-discursive self-transformation is the beginning, middle point, and end point of ethical activity, though ethical self-invention is never to be “completed” as such. It is the event itself. The emphasis changes from viewing knowledge and anonymous power as working their way through subjectivity to the idea that subjects construct their own truth through continual self-creation and transgression of given limits. It is the boundaries of “objective” humanist discourse that must be transgressed in order that we may fashion ourselves as ethical subjects.

“Thought,” for Foucault, is equated not only with experience, but also with action. In relation to our status as ethical subjects it is a matter of the constitution of forms of experience through diverse practices. The goal of critique turns not on the transcendental, but on the ethical imperative to construct the widest notion of freedom possible, one which affirms the desirability of struggle against limits (Cutfello 1994: 26). In this light, ethics – or doing philosophy - becomes instrumental in opening up the space for practices of freedom:

[For] what is ethics, if not the practice of freedom, the conscious [réfléchie] practice of freedom. Freedom is the ontological condition of ethics. But ethics is the considered form that freedom takes when it is informed by reflection (Foucault 1997:284).

The point is to free ourselves from such limits by acting ethically, by respecting oneself and acting in concert with others so as to maximize freedom. Limit experiences are necessary for the reinvention of language, as it were, one that leaves behind modern forms of representation. Why should we tolerate present conditions and limits? Can we not invent new “games of truth” outside of those imposed on us by the various episodes of anthropological humanism? Were we not, in fact, in the process of doing so? How, finally, can the growth of our capacities be separated from the intensification of power relations? These questions are, for Foucault, the crucial questions of enlightenmentality. Such questions are directed at the heart of philosophy; thought itself should be experimental rather than secure, transgressive rather than representational, and ethical rather than juridical. Above all else, thought should eschew all forms of finitude placed on it in the name of truth. As both thought and practice, ethical self-transformation, following Blanchot, should displace the “I” to a point where the “I” does not recognize itself, a movement, Blanchot says, that involves “infinite degrees” (Blanchot 1981c:88). Such transformations, Foucault believes, must be understood as “transformable singularities,” even if they result in the harboring of universal structures. Thus, the singularity of thought is in the movement of thought itself; such movements he calls the “events of thought” (Foucault 1997:201). 26 It is in this sense that we can perhaps understand Foucault’s ethics of self-transformation as a form of récivité.

26 “Preface to The History of Sexuality, Volume Two.”
As with Blanchot, freedom, for Foucault, is a limit-concept. The fact that we do not conceptualize freedom in any formal or universal sense simply confirms freedom as a singular event. As Gerald Bruns explains, in Blanchot’s oeuvre, the task of thinking is the “recognition of the freedom of being in its singularity. [Blanchot’s is a] poetics of nonidentity, of singularity and irreducibility, that remains on the hither side of theory” (Bruns 1997:94). In prefacing his conceptualization of ethics, “thought,” on Foucault’s account, is not simply theoretical formulations taking place in the mind; thought is that which is the basis for accepting or rejecting rules; it is what constitutes the human being “as ethical subject.” On this account, there is no experience that is not a way of thinking, hence the “irreducibility” of thought (Foucault 1997:200-1).

“Events of thought” are bound up with our experiences, leading to a sort of anonymity of ethical practices “liberated and opened to their own boundlessness.” If these words sound familiar, it is because they are the very words used by Foucault to describe Blanchot’s experiences of the outside: “What they find in that murmuring space is less an endpoint than the site without geography of their possible beginning” (Foucault 1998:166). To “make one’s life a work of art,” as Foucault urges, requires such an anonymity from established ethical narratives. This anonymous, critical ontology of ourselves must be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them” [de leur franchissement possible] (Foucault 1997:319).

Thus there is, as in Blanchot, an affirmation present in the crossing-over, a crossing-over about which it is better to speak in terms of temporal events, rather than reality which deals in substances: something, Foucault says, the self is not. The self is not a substance, but is rather a form to be variously constituted, for to be a substance means that the self is identical to itself; it means that there is no work left to be done (Foucault 1997:290-1).

In his essay, “What is Enlightenment?” (Foucault 1997:303-19), Foucault supplies an account of what our current “philosophical ethos” should strive toward. This ethos, he says, may be characterized as a limit-attitude. We have to move beyond the outside-inside alternative; we have to be at the frontiers. Criticism indeed consists of analyzing and reflecting upon limits. The point, in brief, is to transform the critique conducted in the form of a necessary limitation into a practical critique that takes the form of a possible crossing-over [franchissement]. I shall thus characterize the philosophical ethos appropriate to the critical ontology of ourselves as a historico-practical test of the limits we may go beyond, and thus as work carried out by ourselves upon ourselves as free

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27 Ibid.
beings. We are always in the position of beginning again. (Foucault 1997:315-17).

In Blanchot’s critical imaginary, the récit - as limit-experience - takes consciousness and language to the limits of their possibility so that they can no longer be articulated by language, and thus remain heterogeneous to the narratives which the limit experience brings about (Clark 1992:85). In Foucault’s own imaginary, extra-discursive ethical practices must also be conceived as remaining heterogeneous, for to exist unilaterally is to create boundaries which can only result in the constraining of freedom. In other words, limit experiences, for Foucault, are necessary for the re-invention of language and as a medium for ethical reflection. On this account ethical practice is said to be singular and concrete; as relation, and not as abstract, representational concept.

Concluding Remarks: Foucault’s Impossible Limit Experience

Freedom as a limit-concept. In the case of Blanchot (and, as argued here, Foucault) the idea that there is no theory or vocabulary for such singular events is not, as Bruns points out, a deficiency, but is “part of the decorum of freedom itself” (Bruns 1997:94). With the last two volumes of The History of Sexuality, along with a series of essays and interviews, Foucault delineates the parameters for an alternative to modernist ethics and conceptions of humanism. “Ethics as aesthetics” is a way for subjects to practice their freedom extra-discursively: that is, over against the powers of normalization. And, by practicing our freedom, we are instrumental in the production and formation of our own ethical identities. What changes with Foucault’s forays into the ethical status of the subject is a transition from the “causally inert” subject of The Order of Things and the “subject as conduit” of Discipline and Punish to a subject capable of creating an alternative – through the struggle against limits - to both nihilism and a Cartesian stable identity. As Paul Thiele notes, Foucault’s Nietzscheanism is most clearly demonstrated in his view that the “aestheticization of life rather than its moralization would allow for individual autonomy without sacrificing creativity to norms” (Thiele 1990).

As with Blanchot’s poetics, Foucault attempts to articulate an ethics of irreducibility wherein freedom is the ontological condition. Ethics is freedom, but resistance is never straightforward. Ethical practices are - borrowing on Blanchot’s term - exigencies, ones that place subjects under an obligation to interrupt or intervene in the institutional, discursive scheme of things. This enlightenmentality consists of a “critical presentism” that necessitates reflecting upon the analysis of power and the struggle against limits as inexorably conjoined exigencies. Through ethical self-formation, subjects vest in themselves a form of power that will work to enable transgression of the delimitating effects of humanist political rationality. In Foucault’s critical imaginary, then, the task that we as late modern ethical subjects face requires work on our limits; it requires that thought, that critical practice “bear the lightning of possible storms” in order to illuminate our capacities as subjects. We might say, along with Blanchot, that by affirming this night, Foucault’s récit-ivity of ethical self-invention “finds the night as the impossibility
of night.” And this, it would appear, is the impossible moment that Foucault would have us live for.

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