

Autobiography: excess, self-expenditure

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in Written, Oral and Iconographic Form*

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Preamble: In the current global situation due to Covid-19, the themes of excess, moderation, exaggeration, of 'too much', seem to be taking a particularly important place as we are forced to change our lifestyle. The limits imposed upon us may appear extreme to us, and yet even the old customs to which we compulsively adhered can be seen in a different light.

Proposals on this topic will be read with much interest.

The excess

“Although an entire intellectual tradition sees the flight of the soul out of its material bonds to be a positive good, another learned tradition that also goes back to ancient sources appeals to a different sense of the word ‘excess’ to designate that which goes beyond the correct proportions in the material order itself.” (Starobinski J. 2008, p. 75).

Breaking boundaries and excess constitute the prime movers of different narrations in the first person. How are these behaviours delineated in self-narration? In what way do they construct a person’s identity? With which arguments and in which relationship with the idea of Power?

With this call for papers we intend to invite proposals that consider self-expenditure and excess in autobiographical writings. That is, autobiographies by both ordinary people and recognised individuals, which are not supported, legitimated, by ideological plaudit, be it political, religious, etc.

Every culture sets ethical boundaries with which every individual confronts oneself. Crossing boundaries is allowed in certain liberating situations such as bacchanals or carnivals, but these are circumscribed in terms of time and space.

The unlimited and the infinite correspond to conceptions with different nuances: it is possible to go beyond recognised forms or to act in an infinite *motus* while denying the existence of boundaries.

Current parlance translates the idea of boundary using a vocabulary borrowed from geometry: measure, the right way, to be square, to be conclusive (that is, to remain within a circumscribed topic or area of action), etc. *In medio stat virtus* situates virtue in space. It is a locution of medieval scholastic philosophy that appropriated Aristotle's conception.

Nicomachean Ethics, a posthumous publication by Aristotle (who lived from 384 or 383 to 322 BC), places at the centre of its reasoning *endoxa*, the common opinions of both ordinary and learned people. These *endoxa* are the boundaries that derive from society's orientation. Aristotle does not necessarily share current opinions but appropriates them as the basis of social bonding. They appear as a behavioural diktat and have a pragmatic value. In Book II of *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle writes that virtue develops pragmatically: one learns how to build by building, how to play cithara by playing it, etc.

How is ethics conceived of? "this is concerned with emotions and actions, in which one can have excess or deficiency or a due mean. [...] Virtue, therefore is a mean state in the sense that it is able to hit the mean. [...] so this is another reason why excess and deficiency are a mark of vice, and observance of the mean a mark of virtue (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, II, 6).

Different autobiographies embody a willingness to go beyond the recognised and shared boundaries.

It is possible to establish a certain distinction between the behaviour whereby a boundary is recognised and overcome, and the practice of excess as complete rejection of the boundary, such as a way of acting *ad infinitum*.

As Jean Starobinski reminds us (Starobinski J., 2008, p. 76), the term 'excess' in the Bible refers to the exit of life, *excessus vitae*. An excess that does not recognise boundaries is a serious threat to the social system. "The myth of Don Juan came about at a moment in European history when the subject of the inconstancy of the human heart and the related subject of its various drives—feeling, knowing, dominating (*libido sentiendi*, *libido sciendi*, *libido dominandi*)—were intensely debated by the moralists of the day" (*Ibidem*).

The two great myths of modernity, Faust and Don Giovanni, are condemned due to two excesses: *libido sciendi* and *libido sentiendi*. Already the Middle Ages deplored *sapiens mundi*. Ulysses in Dante's *Inferno* is an example of this.

In fact, excess practised *ad libitum* aims at laying claim to an eternalisation of one's own behaviour, a transcendentalism, replacing another power.

The exhibition held at the Musée d'Orsay, Paris, on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of de Sade's death (2014), which was organised on the basis of de Sade's various epistolary evidence, was entitled *Attaquer le soleil*: that is, aspiring to deprive the universe of the vital star, using it to burn the universe itself. (Le Brun A., 2014, p. 19).

Many autobiographical narrations in Romanticism (relating to dandyism, satanism, alcoholism, and others) would make *excess* the centre of their own existential narration.

In "Être comme excès", Rocco Ronchi writes: "what opens to me the immensity in which I lose myself is the being as excess, a being deprived of material reality, throbbing, rhythmical – a being which has in itself an integral transcendence, a being that is uncontainable in the shape of identity and exceeds the space that reveals apophantic judgement. This being is not immobile, its manner of being – its essence in the verbal sense – rightly resides in the fact of transcending, of rotating outside of itself (I am borrowing this sentence from Marc Bloch), of getting lost and challenging oneself" (Ronchi R., 2000, p. 8).

The term 'self-expenditure,' therefore, has a particular role and different significant values. In sport, self-expenditure can be identified with what is at stake, the challenge, the individual risk outside of the great apparatuses.

"The Notion of Expenditure" by Georges Bataille (1933) examines how society imposes productivity in its entire spectrum. Society recognises the right to acquire, conserve or consume rationally, but it excludes the principle of unproductive expenditure (Bataille G., 1985, p.137). It

is the principle of loss, that is, of unconditioned expenditure (*Ibid.*, p.169). Societies in general, and the Western one due to their economic structure, do not want to squander the essence of their own assets and regard the person as an asset, a capital.

Acting in itself must not be in the service of any return or recompense. These are arguments to which Bataille returns in various writings (e.g. *On Nietzsche*, 1945). Concepts such as useful/useless, gratuitous/interested, arbitrary/imposed, are involved.

Is this a form of revolt? According to Camus, revolt embodies the very identity of the individual, his *cogito* (Camus A., 1951). The rebel does not recognise impositions: he is not a revolutionary and does not conceive of systems (revolution meaning strategic and preconceived acting aimed at achieving an ideal that overturns the status quo). The rebel fights against any ideological barrier and cage. Camus evokes the figures of Cain, de Sade, Saint-Just, Lautréamont, Rimbaud, Bakunin, Nietzsche.

The idea of anti-utilitarianism is ennobling. Self-expenditure without concatenations is in many respects a chimera. A grade-zero behaviour, without residues, cannot exist.

Nevertheless, taking shelter in the necessity of being productive (in every sense) may in turn constitute a form of power. Being losers may mean annihilating the power that the Other exerts on ourselves (Lippi 2008, p. 62).

Years ago, in an article published in *Il Tempo* (Pasolini P. P., 1973), Pasolini reviewed the autobiography of a Russian pilgrim, associating him with Lazarillo de Tormes. The pilgrim about whom Pasolini writes (who we understand from the text was 33 years of age in 1859) wanders with the prayer book *Philokalia* (love of the beautiful) and recounts his wanderings to a spiritual father. Pasolini writes that the pilgrim and Lazarillo remain invincible in their resigned nature that annihilates the very idea of power due to *excess of passivity*: “There is nothing that proves power wrong so much as Resignation, which is actually a refusal of power in any form (that is, it makes it what it actually is, namely an illusion)”.

The implications of self-expenditure and the practice of excess are manifold, as you can see.

With this call for papers we intend to investigate the relationship between autobiographical narration as an expression of going beyond, as a pursuit of the *extreme* in relation to the concept of boundary, or as a practice of excess, understanding how, stated or implied, these components constitute the framework of the argument of the writing examined.

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LANGUAGES ADMITTED FOR THE INTERVENTIONS: English, French, Italian, Spanish. Every speaker will speak in their chosen language; **there will be no simultaneous translation. A rough passive understanding would be desirable.**

A) The deadline for the submission of papers is **25 March 2021**. Candidates are asked to present an abstract of up to 250 words, with citation of two reference texts, and a brief curriculum vitae of up to

100 words, with possible mention of two publications, be they articles or books. These must be submitted online on the *conference registration* page of the <http://mediapoliseuropa.com/> Website.

The scientific committee will read and select every proposal that will be sent to the *conference registration* page of the <http://mediapoliseuropa.com/> Website. For any information, please contact

the following: beatrice.barbalato@gmail.com, irenemeliciani@gmail.com,
Notification of the accepted proposals will be given by **30 March 2021**.

B) In regard to enrolment in the colloquium, once the proposal is accepted the fees are the following:

Before 10 April 2021: 110,00€

From 11 April to 10 May 2021:

130,00€ Enrolment cannot be
accepted *in loco*.

Ph.D. students:

Before 10 April 2021: 75,00€

From 11 April to 10 Mai 2021:

90,00€ Enrolment cannot be
accepted *in loco*.

C) For information on registration fees, past symposia, the association's activities, and the organising and scientific teams, please refer to our Website:

<http://mediapoliseuropa.com/>

The association Mediapolis.Europa contributes to the publication of the journal *Mnemosyne, o la costruzione del senso*, Presses universitaires de Louvain, www.i6doc.com,

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