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Eroticism as Transgressive Sexuality: Some Reflections on Body, Death and Sex

... the flesh and blood of dead men are commonly eaten and drunk to inspire... qualities for which men themselves were remarkable...

... to lessen the dangers which are supposed to attend the operation... (t)he chief of Namosi in Fiji always ate a man by way of precaution when he had his hair cut.

J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*^{*}

An act of cannibalism performed by primitive man opposes the reductionist view of the body as defined through its physical tangibility. Man's flesh and blood appear as mediating spiritual values or function as agents in spell-breaking procedures.

When viewed as a sum total of its parts, organs, tissues and cells, and as such subject to thorough scientific investigations, the body appears to be fully mastered. The knowledge of it is predominantly of the encyclopaedic type, i.e. as a collection of facts instead of thought-provoking observations. However, despite its delusory concreteness, body still provokes reflections upon itself as "a continuous creation... energy system... never a complete structure... perpetual inner self-construction and self-destruction".¹ Body appears, then, as a sum of energy, open through its inner dynamics to constant change.

When viewed as an energy system, the body may be qualified through two conflicting tendencies: a tendency towards conservation of energy, and as such it remains a sort of "close-circuit system", with a vicious circle as a possible metaphor for it; and a tendency towards transgression, when the body persists due to continuous expansion. (The conservative and expansive tendencies can be roughly linked to the mentioned motives for cannibalism, i.e. precaution, and hope for

^{*} James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (London: Papermac, 1992).

¹ Norman Brown, from "Love's Body", in *The Naked I* (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1971), p. 346.

spiritual enrichment respectively.) These two modes of the body's being can be extended into a more comprehensive pattern. We find it possible to view *sexuality* and *death* as displaying, in a similar way, the potential both for regression and transcendence. Openness and closure, transcendence and regression, get realised in an open human being, thought and experience, or in a form sterile in its completeness.

Any controlled flow of energy displays certain morbid quality. When D. H. Lawrence, in his article "Pornography and Obscenity", opposes the practice of masturbation to sexual intercourse, he recognises a corpse-like quality induced in the body through the repeated acts of self-abuse: "there is no change, only deadening. There is what we call dead loss."² Death as progressive deadening, exhaustion of energy, may touch not only the body, but the mind as well. Certain mode of sensibility deviates into excessive egocentrism; self-analysis turns finally into self-abuse: "there is no real object, there is only subject. The author never escapes from himself, he pads along the vicious circle of the self. It is self absorption made public. . . . Enclosed within the vicious circle of the self, with no vital contacts outside, the self becomes emptier and emptier, till its 'almost a nullus, a nothingness'."³

The concept of "the total universe", introduced by Susan Sontag in her essay "Pornographic Imagination", may be viewed as a variation of "a close-circuit system". A total universe has "the power to ingest and metamorphose and translate all concerns that are fed into it, reducing everything into the one negotiable currency . . .".⁴ The functioning of a total universe consists in a mere interchangeability of its elements, apparently endless passing from one form into another, limited, however, to strictly defined area of transformation. Susan Sontag calls the way the total universe operates – cannibalistic. That would agree, however, only with one of the forms of cannibalism Frazer mentions, i.e. an act performed out of precaution, and as such, oriented towards the maintenance of an existing state of matter/s.

Following Susan Sontag's claim that "(t)he religious imagination survives for most people as not just the primary, but virtually the only credible instance of an imagination working in a total way",⁵ a set of religious beliefs may be viewed as a model realisation of the idea of the total universe. The total vision of the Universe advanced through religious interpretation aims at providing all observable phenom-

² D. H. Lawrence, "Pornography and Obscenity", in *Oxford Anthology of English Literature*, ed. Frank Kermode and John Hollander (London, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 455.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 456. (Lawrence advances one more image of man's mental and/or physical closure, taking into account the way man pictures himself in the universe. As he envisages mankind – "we cannot bear connections". Man shuns all forms of the union with living, incarnate – cosmos; defines himself as a detached "fragment", not an organic "part"; consequently, standing above the whole network of relations, remains sterile in his disconnectedness.) (cf. D. H. Lawrence, "Apocalypse", in *Oxford Anthology*. . . ., p. 461.)

⁴ Susan Sontag, "Pornographic Imagination", in *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1969), p. 66.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

ena with lucid eschatological significance. All stories of the world carry the potential for being re-translated into the biblical concepts, and then incorporated into the history of Redemption.⁶

A similar pattern of effective translatability structures pornographic imagination, yet it develops there on a level different from the level of ideas. In pornographic literature "all action is conceived as a set of sexual exchanges",⁷ it tends "to make one person interchangeable with another, and all people interchangeable with things".⁸ The programmatic de-humanisation of characters is the condition for smooth transformative procedures. As all elements are in fact interchangeable, what really matters is the rhythm of their replacement. It may appear, then, that what is vile about pornography, the most intense evil it entails, does not consist in overt obscenity inherent to it, but in the dead-end progression.

Death may be, however, conceived also in another dimension; progressive deadening out of *lack* can be contrasted with the abrupt end which comes out of *excess*. Bataille claims that "human beings live only through excess".⁹ It seems, however that, more specifically, while the *vision* of excess conditions *l i f e*, the *experience* of excess spells *d e a t h*. Hence, the progressive deadening, the process of dying extended over the whole life, let us call it "death-in-life", can be opposed to "life-towards-death", i.e. life motivated through the vision of excess, which ultimately brings the lethal experience of it.

Eroticism may be viewed as a sphere of life touched most extensively with death. As Nick Land observes following Bataille's thought: "(e)rotic love is unrestrained violence against every thing which stands against communion . . . God, cosmos, one's fellows and one's self".¹⁰ Modern psychology

⁶ In *Biblia tysiąclecia*, in the preface to *The Song of Solomon*, one can read: "Jest to jedyna w całym Piśmie Świętym księga, w której nie ma mowy ani o Bogu, ani o zbawieniu, ani o narodzie wybranym, i która nie zawiera żadnej myśli religijnej. Rozumiana w znaczeniu dosłownym jest ona po prostu poematem lirycznym o tematyce miłosnej. . . . Dziś, dzięki rozwojowi nauk biblijnych, coraz bardziej jasnym się staje, że Pnp, mimo pewnego podobieństwa do utworów pozabiblijnych, korzeniami tkwi w Biblii, i jest dojrzałym owocem myśli teologicznej proroków Ozeasza, Jeremiasza, Ezechiela, oraz Deutero-Izajasza (rozdz. 40–66) o oblubieńczym stosunku Boga do narodu wybranego, a także o nawróceniu i powrocie narodu-oblubienicy po wielu niewiernościach do łaski. Powrót ten, dzięki bezgranicznemu miłosierdziu Obrażonego, ma w sobie całą świeżość pierwszej miłości. . . i całą radość zaślubin" (p. 745). Consequently, the passage: "for, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone; The flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land" (*The Song of Solomon*: 2, 11–12) we are called to interpret as a symbol of a new life in the regained Palestine; the words: "(i)t was but a little that I passed from them, but I found him, whom my soul loveth: I held him, and would not let him go, until I had brought him into my mother's house, and into the chamber of her that conceived me" (*The Song of Solomon*: 3, 4) are to evoke the image of the soul turning, fervently, to God again. (cf. *Biblia tysiąclecia*, p. 749).

⁷ Susan Sontag, "Pornographic. . .", p. 66.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁹ After Susan Sontag, "Pornographic. . .", p. 61.

¹⁰ Nick Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 193.

recognizes sex and death as two biological aspects of *misterium tremendum*.¹¹ The veil is rent for an instant, and the mystery of being approaches fulfillment through the moments of sexual ecstasy as well as death spasms. An act of erotic communion, the moment the body transcends its boundaries, (the transcendence parallel to the mental transcendence of the self), marks “the unity of death, or of the consciousness of death and eroticism”.¹²

Eroticism can be linked to death also as a form of communication; communication implies self-exposure to the impact of the unpredictable, the rupture of the vicious circle of the self, openness to the unknown. Therefore, “communication is opened by death alone”.¹³ In the erotic act, body opens itself, abandons all protection, lets the integrity of its functioning be endangered. Hence, “to love is to bleed”.¹⁴ The close-circuit of the blood flow opens, the rupture of the blood vascular system results in excessive bleeding.¹⁵

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It seems that pornography and eroticism may be conceived as two aspects of sexuality, the realisations of the potential sexuality carries both for regression and transcendence.

In pornography, even if “transcendence of personality as the highest good”¹⁶ can be observed that transcendence is oriented towards “the perfection of becoming a thing”.¹⁷ Human beings undergo progressive reduction to the purely instrumental treatment. The body as a static container of sexual organs remains an instrument in “sexual exchanges”. As psychology means “psychology of lust”,¹⁸ the flow of energy is not hindered by any extra-corporeal complexities.

Eroticism, in turn, emerges as a sphere shaped by the *transgressive* aspects of the body and death. The body’s energy to transcend its limits points to an inner dynamics, which at the peak level constantly approaches death; death as the consummation of life-processes.

¹¹ Cf. Rollo May, *Miłość i wola* (Poznań: Dom Wydawniczy Rebis, 1993), p. 113.

¹² Georges Bataille, *Oeuvres Complètes*, Vol. X, p. 585, after Nick Land, *The Thirst for...*, p. 191.

¹³ Nick Land, *The Thirst for...*, p. 192.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

¹⁵ Foucault puts sexuality and death into yet another relation. Death appears for him as an element in what he calls “the Faustian pact” of our century. Foucault finds modern society eager to “exchange life for sex itself”; as it is “through sex... that each individual has to pass in order to get access to his own intelligibility... to the whole of his body... to his identity”; sex is worth dying for. In this sense, exclusively “sex is imbued with death-instinct. Nowadays, it is sex, not love, that claims the equivalence of death” (cf. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. An Introduction* (Middlesex, New York: Penguin Books, 1978), pp. 155–156.) While various values supplant one another, death as a constant indicates the intensity of desire these values induce. Hence, even if death is not an object of desire, it accompanies it almost to the point of merging.

¹⁶ Susan Sontag, “The Pornographic...”, p. 60.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 40.

Marta Zając

**Erotyzm jako seksualność transgresywna:
uwagi o ciele, śmierci i płci**

Streszczenie

Artykuł stanowi próbę odejścia od statycznego modelu ciała, które staje się „systemem energii”, „strukturą otwartą”. Model statyczny i dynamiczny – lub inaczej zachowawczy i ekspansywny – można także przenieść na rozważania nad seksualnością i śmiercią. W świetle tego modelu pornografia, jako kontrolowany, niekreatywny przepływ energii, stanowi zaprzeczenie estetyki i erotyki, która – w ujęciu Bataille’a – jest „komunikacją, otwarciem poprzez śmierć”.

Marta Zając

**Erotisme comme sexualité transgressive:
remarques sur le corps, la mort et le sex**

Résumé

L'article est une tentative d'abandonner le modèle statique du corps, celui-ci devenant un „système d'énergie”, une „structure ouverte”. Le modèle statique et dynamique – ou, autrement dit: conservateur et expansif – peut être également appliqué aux considérations sur la sexualité et la mort. A la lumière de ce modèle, la pornographie en tant que courant (passage) d'énergie non contrôlé et non créatif constitue le contraire de esthétique et de l'érotique qui, selon Bataille, est „communication, ouverture par la mort”.

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