antae

Cover:

A-Design Lab studio | www.a-designlab.com | Tel: +356 27761005
Mob: +356 99790736 | Email: info@a-designlab.com

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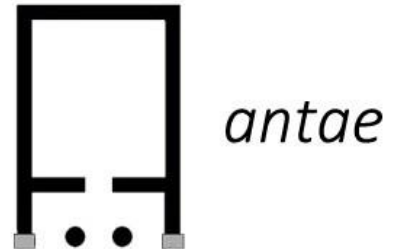
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Christine Caruana

antae, Vol. 3, No. 3. (Dec., 2016), 237-239

Editorial

Christine Caruana

University of Malta

Often (wrongly) cited as the longest word in the English language, the presence of 'antidisestablishmentarianism' in a conversation was once probably owed largely to its linguistic quirkiness. Lately, however, things have started to change. Candidates for the US presidency are criticised for being too close to the Establishment —yet, in the same breath, one of them is elected for being the very image of dissidence and non-conformity. What does this tell us about transgression? To begin with, certainly, that transgression is highly subjective.

Although it may present itself under various guises, it is safe to say that, often, the point of transgression is to produce an impact and to make a statement. Making a statement, quite literally in the form of text, is, however, tricky business. Indeed, the distrust of the written word in Western culture has a long history. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates is famously suspicious of it and he links it to forgetfulness and the higher risk of misinterpretation.[1] In this sense, there is even an element of transgression within text itself. The words that one dares to write, to imbue with an intended meaning—all in the face of these risks—are an instance of defiance.

The organisation of the Transgressive Textualities symposium by the Department of English earlier this year therefore provided an opportune chance to explore these tensions that surround the topic. Although catering for an eclectically diverse interpretation of transgression in the way it was structured, the literature of transgression (and transgression of literature) emerged, unsurprisingly, as the central theme of the event.

Indeed, one of the epigraphs of the Call for Papers highlighted this special power of the literary by quoting Jacques Derrida: 'literature seemed to me, in a confused way, to be the institution which allows one to say everything, in every way'.[2] Unarguably, one writer who successfully sought to exploit this particularity of literature was James Joyce. In this special edition of *antae*, Lara Cortis (*University of Malta*) chooses Joyce's *Ulysses*, that outstanding symbol or manifestation of Modernism, to explore female transgression against gender norms. Drawing on different readings of Molly Bloom's character in the novel, ranging from Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's to Carl Jung's, Cortis presents female transgression in a multi-faceted way while questioning the very possibility of "female" as a defining category. It is Molly's androgyny, therefore, that appears to contribute most to her unconformity. In a manner less overt than Joyce, the medieval poets also display elements of transgression of their own. As Joseph St. John (*University of Malta*) argues in his paper on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a subtle tension between orthodoxy and innovation may be seen at play even here. Rather than

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[1] See Plato, *Dialogues of Plato*, *Phaedrus*, trans. by Benjamin Jowett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1892), pp. 275-277

[2] See 'Transgressive Textualities: Call For Papers'. <https://www.um.edu.mt/events/tt2016/callforpapers> [accessed 11 December, 2016].

tackling any radically novel theme, the Gawain poet may be observed blending the old way of "doing literature" with contemporary ideas. This can be perceived even from the rhythm of the old, alliterative Anglo-Saxon that provides the foundations for the work to flow memorably—but which, in terms of the stanzaic, is organised differently. On the moral stratum too, however, the poem raises interesting questions about right and wrong, as illustrated by the way in which the unconfessed episode of the girdle remains unjudged until the end.

Looking closely at style and the messages of transgression (or otherwise) it can convey, Haythem Bastawy (*Leeds Trinity University*) analyses the work of revolt in the context of the Pre-Raphaelites, studying both the textual and visual productions of John Everett Millais and Dante Gabriel Rossetti on one hand, and Aubrey Beardsley on the other. What Bastawy highlights, then, is the multitudinous modes of transgression, here tied specifically with particular (and in some instances, in concordance with St John's article, Medieval) conceptions of theology and sexuality, and in so doing brings to the fore an understanding of a mid-Victorian to fin de siècle resistance that moves beyond the confines of genre at levels both obvious and subtle.

Pushing us out of the ethos of the Medieval, Victorian, and Modern are two papers that take a scrutinous look at our contemporary era. Carla da Silva (*Goldsmiths University of London*), through a stunning series of photographs, looks to the tensions between notions of "public" and "private", and the transgression of such delineations as in the case of the Stratford Shopping Centre (London) where skaters and dancers become performative actors of a spatial transgression, and which carry a cultural baggage that undeniably transforms the nightly theatre that is the Shopping Centre. In this context, then, transgression seems to lose its negative connotations, and what emerges instead is a positive reworking that reinvigorates the space around us. José M. Blázquez (*University of Nottingham*) then turns to digital space, where story-worlds may operate outside the mainstream through the collaborative production of audiences, and where at stake there are issues of power, marginalisation, appropriation, and the boundaries of fiction and authorial creation. Blázquez looks at both the industrial and productive models underpinning such participation and, additionally, at the transgression that runs throughout such supposedly dichotomous axes, where fan-contributed story-worlds occupy both a space within the culture industry as its extension, and without it, as an alternative space of user-generated content.

This issue traverses time and genre in order to follow, wherever possible, the lines of transgression that refuse to go straight, and opens up with a short interview with Professor Terry Eagleton who expresses his thoughts on the transgression of text into digitality, politics, and the future of literature. In light of this issue, one can think transgression as having never been too far removed from what it transgresses. Indeed, as Foucault notes, transgression signals 'a world exposed by the experience of limits, made and unmade by that excess which transgresses it'.[3] 'Perhaps', as Derrida echoes, 'nothing ever comes to pass except on the line of a transgression'.[4] However, one might hold with John D. Caputo writes back with how

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[3] Michel Foucault, 'A Preface to Transgression', in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice – Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. by Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 29-52, p. 30.
[4] Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. by Thomas Dutoit (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 33.

'[t]ransgression requires something to transgress, a border that prohibits passage, a limit that forbids trespass'.[5] In the lauding of transgression, then, one also praises the non-transgressive, a praise for the conforming, the meek and the crowd-like. In both the papers and the interview, then, what is here explored is not one side of the coin or the other, but the edge on which it lands, always and precariously in danger of falling on one side, whether or not you wanted heads or tails.

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[5] Jacques Derrida and John D. Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, ed. by John D. Caputo (Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 1997), p. 81.