

## Foucault as Inverted Neo-Platonist in “A Preface to Transgression”

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Michel Foucault paid homage to his friend Georges Bataille in the 1963 essay, “A Preface to Transgression.”<sup>1</sup> In the essay’s opening lines, Foucault states the hope of expressing “in the clear light of language” something about sexuality which had been hidden. It will be argued that for the fullest understanding of Foucault’s pellucid language, “A Preface to Transgression” should be read in relation to the vocabulary and themes of Neo-Platonism. To that end, passages from “A Preface” will be compared with passages from characteristic enneads of Plotinus. Such a comparison is justifiable because it is known that Foucault spent the summer of 1950 reading the works of Plotinus.<sup>2</sup> The claim here is not that Foucault made use of any given ennead, rather that he appropriated characteristic Neo-Platonic vocabulary and themes which he then refigured in his own writing. After establishing a general outline to “A Preface to Transgression,” it will be explained what is meant by “inverted Neo-Platonism.” Thereafter, some Neo-Platonic vocabulary and themes will be indicated in the text. “A Preface” will then be compared to a work by Bataille to which Foucault refers, thereby establishing the originality of Foucault’s use of Neo-Platonic vocabulary and themes. Last, the paper will situate Foucault’s thought as expressed in “A Preface” in relation to Neo-Platonism.

There are three stages to Foucault’s discussion of sexuality in “A Preface”: the Christian mystical account, the modern account “from Sade to Freud,” and his own account in post-modernity. Foucault begins the essay by asserting a common belief—without saying that it is his

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, “A Preface to Transgression,” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. with an introduction by Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 29, n.3.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Defert et al., “Chronologie” in *Dits et écrits* (Paris : Gallimard, 2001), 18.

own—“that sexuality has regained, in contemporary experience, its full truth as a process of nature.” He then presents a counterfactual to that common belief:

Yet, never did sexuality enjoy a more immediately natural understanding and never did it know a greater “felicity of expression” than in the Christian world of fallen bodies and of sin. The proof is its whole tradition of mysticism and spirituality which was incapable of dividing the continuous forms of desire, of rapture, of penetration, of ecstasy, of that outpouring which leaves us spent: all of these experiences seemed to lead, without interruption or limit, right to the heart of a divine love of which they were both the outpouring and the source returning upon itself.<sup>3</sup>

Foucault then contrasts the happy account of sexuality in Christian mysticism with the second stage, namely the modern denaturing of sexuality, a modality established in the period “from Sade to Freud” and from which, in the third stage, sexuality now needs to be liberated.<sup>4</sup> He writes:

What characterizes modern sexuality from Sade to Freud is not its having found the language of its logic or of its natural process, but rather, through the violence done by such languages, its having been “denatured”—cast into an empty zone where it achieves whatever meager form is bestowed upon it by the establishment of its limits. . . . We have not in the least liberated sexuality, though we have, to be exact, carried it to its limits: the limit of consciousness. . . . Sexuality is a fissure—not one which surrounds us as the basis of our isolation or individuality, but one which marks the limit within us and designates us as a limit.<sup>5</sup>

The “Sade to Freud” state of affairs from which liberation is needed is a divided, discontinuous, and de-natured sexuality which constitutes the human as limit. Foucault writes, “A rigorous language, as it arises from sexuality, will not reveal the secret of man’s being, nor will it express the serenity of anthropological truths, but rather, it will say that he exists without God.”<sup>6</sup> The

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<sup>3</sup> Foucault, “Preface,” 29.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 29-30.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 29-30.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 30.

liberating engagement is transgressive eroticism which is the means of transcending the human as limit and, further, is aimed at the void where God was.

In order to understand Foucault's move in relation to Christian mysticism—as is explicit in “A Preface”—and the implicit moves he makes with respect to Neo-Platonism—it is imperative to see that Foucault's reception is neither positive nor negative, rather inverted. He makes quite a point about transgression that it “contains nothing negative . . . nothing positive.”<sup>7</sup> A page later, he writes of “solar inversion.”<sup>8</sup> Although this term has an oracular cast to it, I infer its ultimate antecedent to be the Copernican Revolution in which the relationship of Earth and sun are inverted. It is in that sense that I employ “inversion” in relation to Foucault. My argument is that Foucault inverts Neo-Platonic metaphysics for deployment in his own nominalist narrative against metaphysics.

Even when two passages from Plotinus and Foucault show very strong correspondence, Foucault neither agrees nor disagrees with Neo-Platonism, rather he inverts the Neo-Platonic text. One can distinguish then, at least, three kinds of reception. There is positive reception, for example the reception of Aristotle by St. Thomas Aquinas. There is negative reception, for example the reception of Homer by Socrates of the *Republic*. Then there is inverted reception, exemplified by Foucault's reception of Neo-Platonism. Because Foucault does not explicitly quote or cite Plotinus, in order to make the case of Foucault's inverted reception of Neo-

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 35-36.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 37. When I denominate a phenomenon in Foucault's writing “inverted reception” I am pointing to the same methodological move which Father Flynn calls “reversal,” e.g., Thomas R. Flynn, *A Poststructuralist Mapping of History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 42, 91, 98, 108, 239. He writes, for example, “He [Foucault] turns (often reverses) the kaleidoscope of our received views to produce new, frequently liberating perspectives. The emergent reconfigurations, including the ‘fit’ of one episteme into the spaces of the prior one, yields an altered vision of Western cultural history.” Ibid., 97. Again, he writes, “What I have been describing as Foucauldian ‘reversals’ reflect a heterotopic vision. They guide our attention in the opposite direction of our accustomed narrative path: effects are seen to be causes, justifications become question-begging, and the narrative landscape is inverted—*die verkehrte Welt* of Hegel and Tieck in the service of social critique.” Ibid., 98.

Platonism, it is necessary to compare passages in which themes and vocabulary are similar. Those points of similarity will be treated as mappable Foucauldian events. As Father Thomas Flynn observes, “The series will establish the intelligible contours, a certain regularity without continuity.”<sup>9</sup> The cartographical approach, to which Father Flynn calls attention,<sup>10</sup> allows the identification of a particular route while at the same time recognizing that the same events might be re-mapped for some other route. The road up and the road down may be one, but that does not preclude the possibility of making a new road. In the spirit of Foucault, this paper maps a series of events, called “inverted Neo-Platonism,” but without precluding some other mapping of the same events.

In the passage already quoted above in which Foucault begins “A Preface” by praising the “‘felicity of expression’ . . . in the Christian world of fallen bodies and of sin,” the reader may well feel startled. Why is it that Foucault begins his essay in remembrance of his friend, Bataille, with this affirmation of Christian mysticism? He begins his essay with his brief, positive assessment of sexuality in the Christian mystical tradition because he is announcing the theme which he will invert throughout the balance of “A Preface.” In the literature of Christian mysticism, he found that “which was incapable of dividing the continuous forms of desire, of rapture, of penetration, of ecstasy . . . which seemed to lead . . . right to the heart of a divine love of which they were both the outpouring and the source returning upon itself.”<sup>11</sup> Here Foucault analyzes the Christian mystical tradition in Neo-Platonic terms of indivisibility, penetration, ecstasy, and procession and return. He has not announced those concepts in order to support them, rather to appropriate and to refigure them as inversions. The inverted character of his Neo-

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<sup>9</sup> Flynn, *Mapping*, 57.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>11</sup> Foucault, “Preface,” 29.

Platonism becomes clear later in the essay when he affirms that “on the day sexuality began to speak and to be spoken, language no longer served as a veil for the infinite,” rather “in its dark domain, we now encounter the absence of God, our death, limits, and their transgression.”<sup>12</sup> As the sexuality of Christian mystics was aimed at God’s presence, so the transgressive sexuality of post-moderns is aimed at the God’s absence. Foucault’s method of inverted reception, as applied in “A Preface,” is to announce Neo-Platonic themes, then to appropriate and refigure them as he deploys Neo-Platonic metaphysics against itself.

The startlement which the reader experiences when reading Foucault’s encomium of Christian mystical literature only increases when coming to Foucault’s essay fresh from reading Bataille’s *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*.<sup>13</sup> In his chapter, “Mysticism and sensuality,”<sup>14</sup> Bataille sets forth in a very fair-minded fashion the view of Christian mysticism as expressed by mystics themselves. He quotes a passage by St. Theresa of Avila and the analysis of it by Marie Bonaparte, also known as Princess George of Greece and Denmark, in which the Freudian psychoanalyst explains that in the mystical union experienced by St. Theresa, the “descent of God into her had been a violent venereal orgasm.”<sup>15</sup> Bataille further quotes Father Eugène Tesson that “two forces attract us towards God: one, sexuality, is ‘written into our nature’; the other one, mysticism ‘comes from Christ,’ and further that “superficial disagreements may temporarily disrupt but cannot destroy the profound harmony between the two.”<sup>16</sup> The view of

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>13</sup> Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Light Books, 1986). This work was first published in English as *Death and Sensuality: a study of Eroticism and the Taboo*.

<sup>14</sup> Bataille, *Erotism*, 221-51.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 225.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 227, quoting Eugène Tesson, *Sexualité, Morale, et Mystique*, 359-80.

Father Tesson, however, is not that of Bataille. In fact, Bataille spends the rest of the chapter refuting the claim of harmony. He writes, “I do not see how we can discuss the relationship of these two forms with any clarity if we do not take them when they are most strongly opposed, and also are markedly alike. Their ‘deep-seated harmony’? It may exist, but are we going to find it by attenuating the conflicting characteristics if they are at the same time precisely the ones that make them alike?”<sup>17</sup> Further, in the final two paragraphs of the chapter, he concludes:

The calculations of a tempted religious must be stressed, for they confer a miserliness, a poverty, a dismal discipline on the ascetic life of no matter what religion or sect. . . . Even if the most far-reaching experiences are still possible for all that in the orderly and regulated life of the monk, I cannot forget, as I strive to grasp the significance of the flights of mysticism that constraint in the face of temptation is the key.<sup>18</sup>

There is not a trace of Bataille’s refutation in Foucault’s “A Preface.” Upon comparing the two texts, one arrives at an astonishing conclusion. In the essay written as homage to his friend and teacher, in regard to the relationship between the language of mysticism and sexuality, Foucault adopts the view not of Bataille, rather the views of St. Theresa, Princess George, and Father Tesson. Bataille warns that we must not “spiritualise the domain of sexuality to exalt it to the level of ethereal experiences,”<sup>19</sup> and yet that is precisely what the language of Foucault does when he writes, “the language of sexuality has lifted us into the night where God is absent.”<sup>20</sup> It may be that Foucault is telling his reader that even (or perhaps especially?) his reception of Bataille is inverted when he writes, “We can only hope, now that his [Bataille’s] death has sent us to the pure transgression of his texts, that they will protect those who seek a language for the thought of the limit, that they will serve as a dwelling place for what may already be a ruined

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 233.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 251.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 245.

<sup>20</sup> Foucault, “Preface,” 31.

project.”<sup>21</sup> A second conclusion has to do with the methods of Bataille and Foucault respectively. Bataille presents a very straight-forward argument: first, here are the views of persons A, B, and C, and, second, here is my refutation of their views and the explanation of why my views are correct. Foucault’s method is subtler and much more subversive. He adopts the position of those with whom Bataille disagrees, gets inside their view, then turns and deploys their view to his own end. That is inverted reception. A third conclusion is that Foucault’s Neo-Platonic analysis does not depend upon Bataille or Bataille’s sources. There is nothing of Neo-Platonism to be found in Bataille’s text. To the degree that there is a relationship between the various authors quoted by Bataille and Neo-Platonism, it is slight and merely an implicit commonality which must be discovered by the reader. It is Foucault himself who brings the Neo-Platonic vocabulary and themes to the discussion of transgressive eroticism.<sup>22</sup>

Having discovered differences between Foucault and Bataille in their treatment of the relationship between sexuality and Christian mysticism, it will be all the more interesting to note a series of common events in the texts of Foucault and Plotinus. In “*A Preface*,” Foucault writes:

Transgression opens onto a scintillating and constantly affirmed world, a world without shadow or twilight. . . . It was originally linked to the divine, or rather,

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 40. In the notes to “A Preface to Transgression,” the editors point out Foucault’s references to Bataille’s *Erotism*, e.g., 30, n. 1, 33-33, n. 6-9, but they do not point out that Foucault’s stance differs from that of Bataille. First, it should be noted that notes 6-9 refer to the Foucault’s discussion of material from Bataille’s discussion of Pierre Angélique’s *Madame Edwarda*, “the most incongruous book of all” a characterization which Foucault quotes without stating what the book is to which Bataille refers. For example, Foucault proposes “a precise definition of eroticism” as “an experience of sexuality which links, for its own ends, an overcoming of limits to the death of God.” Foucault then quotes Bataille, “Eroticism can say what mysticism never could (its strength failed when it tried): God is nothing if not the surpassing of God in every sense of vulgar being, in that horror or impurity; and ultimately in the sense of nothing.” Foucault, “Preface,” 33. It is Foucault, however, and not Bataille who sets up the analogy as Christian mysticism to the presence of God, so transgressive eroticism is to the absence of God. That line of thought is completely absent from Bataille’s text. Further, Bataille reduces all religious mysticism to one “significance,” “The trances, the states of rapture and the theopathic states prolifically described by mystics of every religious discipline . . . all have the same significance.” Bataille, *Erotism*, 246. Foucault, by contrast, singles out Christian mysticism and makes no mention of any other. Foucault, “Preface,” 29.

<sup>22</sup> Much more could be said about Foucault’s use of Bataille’s text. The primary purpose here is to show that what is called here “Foucault’s inverted Neo-Platonism” is Foucault’s own reception of Neo-Platonism and not something which he takes from Bataille.

from this limit marked by the sacred it opens the space where the divine functions. The discovery of such a category by a philosophy which questions itself upon the existence of the limit is evidently one of the countless signs that our path is circular and that, with each day, we are becoming more Greek. Yet, this motion should not be understood as the promised return to a homeland or the recovery of an original soul which produced and which will naturally resolve every opposition.<sup>23</sup>

Plotinus writes in *Ennead V.9 (5)*, “On Intellect, Forms, and Being”:

But there is a third kind of godlike men who by their greater power and the sharpness of their eyes as if by a special keen-sightedness see the glory above and are raised to it as if above the clouds and the mist of this lower world and remain there, overlooking all things here below and delighting in the true region which is their own, like a man who has come home after long wandering to his own well-ordered country.<sup>24</sup>

In both passages, there is, first, the image of a brilliant light (F: “a scintillating and constantly affirmed world,” P: “the glory above”) in contrast to some kind of half-light (F: “a world without shadow or twilight,” P: “above the clouds and the mist of this lower world”). Foucault is speaking of one and the same world, kataphatically as what it is, and then apophatically as what it is not, while Plotinus contrasts two different realms. Second, both employ the image of homecoming (F: “Yet, this motion should not be understood as the promised return to a homeland or the recovery of an original soul which produced and which will naturally resolve every opposition,” P: “like a man who has come home after long wandering to his own well-ordered country”). This is a nice example of inversion since Foucault says that such a homecoming is precisely what he is not talking about. In fact, what Foucault says the “discovery” is not, is very like what Plotinus in his *ennead on “The One,” VI.9 (9)*, says the “seeing” is. Plotinus writes, “For that One is not absent from any, and absent from all, so that in its presence it is not present except to those who are able and prepared to receive it, so as to be in accord with it and as if

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<sup>23</sup> Foucault, “Preface,” 37.

<sup>24</sup> Plotinus, *Ennead V*, trans. A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), V.9 (5), 1.16-



grasp it and touch in their likeness.”<sup>25</sup> The inversion is clear. For Plotinus, the end is the embrace of likeness. For Foucault, the end of transgression is to “designate the existence of difference.”<sup>26</sup>

In the already quoted passage from *Ennead V.9 (5)*, “On Intellect, Forms, and Being,” Plotinus describes the organ of contemplative seeing, “the sharpness of their eyes” characterized “as if by a special keen-sightedness.” Foucault, for his part, dedicates the final third of “A Preface” to a discussion of the “Eye.”<sup>27</sup> He examines Bataille’s use of the “insistent eye” in a variety of contexts. Foucault compares Bataille’s use of the eye to Descartes’ use of *acies mentis* in the “Third Meditation.”<sup>28</sup> He then immediately moves to find a greater likeness between Bataille’s use of the eye to that of mystics. he writes that it is “somewhat like the interior, diaphanous, and illuminated eye of mystics and spiritualists that marks the point at which the secret language of prayer is embedded and choked by a marvelous communication which silences it.”<sup>29</sup> Compare Foucault’s description to that of Plotinus in the *Ennead I.6 (1)*, “On Beauty”: “You have already ascended and need no one to show you; concentrate your gaze and see. This alone is the eye that sees the great beauty.”<sup>30</sup> Not only is Foucault’s description of the eye very like that of Plotinus, but he also uses the analogy of contradiction which is so characteristic in Neo-Platonism.

Analogy of contradiction is a form of one-to-another analogy. There is straight-forward one-to-another analogy: the hat is to the head as the glove is to the hand. There is negative

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<sup>25</sup> Plotinus, *Ennead VI.6-9*, trans. A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), VI.9 (9), 4.24-28.

<sup>26</sup> Foucault, “Preface,” 36.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 44-52.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 48, n.34.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>30</sup> Plotinus, *Porphyry on Plotinus and Ennead I*, trans. A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), I.6 (1), 9.23-25.

analogy in which one of the four terms of one-to-another analogy is negated, such as Aristotle's Golden Mean: as the arithmetical mean is to arithmetic, so the ethical mean is NOT to ethics.<sup>31</sup>

Analogy of contradiction is a third kind of one-to-another analogy in which A and not-A have analogously the same relationship to B: thus, as A is to B, so not-A is to B.

Applying this logical schema to Foucault's observation yields this result: "the secret language of prayer" is to speech as "the secret language of prayer" is to not-speech, i.e., silence. In the passage already quoted from *Ennead VI.9 (9)*, one sees the use of the analogy of contradiction as made by Plotinus, "That One is not absent from any, and absent from all."<sup>32</sup> The analogy of contradiction is standard in Plotinian and, overall, in Neo-Platonic thought, but only as it is necessary to speak of the super-intelligible realm. For Neo-Platonists, the Principle of Non-Contradiction obtains in the material and intelligible realms. Here is a clear inversion of Neo-Platonic vocabulary and concepts: what Plotinus employs with respect to the realm beyond knowledge and discursive language, Foucault employs with respect to quotidian normativity. It may be that the general contempt for the principle of non-contradiction expressed by post-modern thinkers arises from this inverted reception of a Neo-Platonic category.<sup>33</sup>

Mention has already been made of Father Flynn's mapping a series of events. He suggests that in trying to understand Foucault's "discontinuous systemization (one might

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<sup>31</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics*, 2.1106a26-1106b29.

<sup>32</sup> Plotinus, *Ennead VI.6-9*, VI.9 (9), 4.24-25.

<sup>33</sup> As an example of this post-modernist contempt for the Principle of Non-Contradiction, Roland Barthes writes, "Imagine someone (a kind of Monsieur Teste in reverse) who abolishes within himself all barriers, all classes, all exclusions, not by syncretism but by simple discard of that old specter: *logical contradiction*; who mixes every language, even those said to be incompatible; who silently accepts every charge of illogicality, of incongruity; who remains passive in the face of Socratic irony (leading the interlocutor to the supreme disgrace: *self-contradiction*) and legal terrorism (how much the penal evidence is based on a psychology of consistency!) Such a man would be the mockery of our society: court, school, asylum, polite conversation would cast him out: who endures contradiction without shame? Now this anti-hero exists; he is the reader of the text at the moment he takes his pleasure." Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 3.

consider the image of dot matrix printing!).”<sup>34</sup> The suggestion of dot matrix printing is apt, but I should like to suggest a simpler technology of dots, namely the connect-the-dots books of early childhood. Those books consist of pages on which dots are printed. As the child connects the dots on a given page, a picture emerges. The moderate post-modern nominalist objects—in a view that is surely traceable to Hume’s objections to “necessary connexion”—that there are only dots and that the connecting of them is the mere imposition of the mind’s wishful thinking, its longing for coherence and meaning, upon the dots. The radical post-modernist, not unlike Cratylus as Aristotle presents him in the *Metaphysics*,<sup>35</sup> asks, “What dots?” Although Foucault’s nominalism requires him to adopt the moderate post-modernist position, nevertheless, he is willing—recalling Hume’s constant conjunction—that life might be just one damn thing after another, but “after” does signify something. Foucault proposes, therefore, his nominalist series of events. What I suggest is that by mapping events, one can notice where events as dots are and where they are not. If one maps the events described in “A Preface to Transgression,” one can see where those events congregate and where they do not. By tracing the outline of where events congregate, one can see the outline of the void where God once was (or perhaps never was), but—on Foucault’s account—where God no longer is. There is a void, but it is a void about which one can make affirmations. Thereby, through Foucault’s descriptive account of the void, one can map a series of events which delimit the space no longer (or never) occupied by the limitless God.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>35</sup> Aristotle *Metaphysics* 4.1010a10-14.

<sup>36</sup> “But what does it mean to kill God if he does not exist, to kill God *who has never existed*? Perhaps it means to kill God both because he does not exist and to guarantee he will not exist—certainly a cause for laughter: to kill God to liberate life from this existence that limits it, but also to bring it back to those limits that are annulled by limitless existence—as a sacrifice.” Foucault, “Preface,” 32.

Is there a basis in Foucault's own account for my reading of "A Preface to Transgression" as mapping an affirmation of absence? The answer is that there is such a basis, and it is explicit. After setting forth the modern relationship to sexuality in which the human is established as limit, Foucault writes that the modern truth of sexuality as natural act has eliminated "any positive meaning in the sacred." He continues in a passage that has already been partially quoted:

In that zone . . . transgression prescribes not only the sole manner of discovering the sacred in its unmediated substance, but also a way of recomposing its empty form, its absence, through which it becomes all the more scintillating. A rigorous language, as it arises from sexuality, will not reveal the secret of man's natural being, nor will it express the serenity of anthropological truths, but rather, it will say that he exists without God; the speech given to sexuality is contemporaneous, both in time and in structure, with that through which we announced to ourselves that God is dead. From the moment that Sade delivered its first words and marked out, in a single discourse, the boundaries of what suddenly became its kingdom, the language of sexuality has lifted us into the night where God is absent, and where all of our actions are addressed to this absence in a profanation which at once identifies it, dissipates it, exhausts itself in it, and restores it to the empty purity of its transgression.<sup>37</sup>

Foucault writes of the scintillating re-composition of the empty form which is God's absence.

Just a page later, he writes, "The death of God is not merely an 'event' that gave shape to contemporary experience as we now know it: it continues tracing its great skeletal outline."<sup>38</sup>

There is "no positive meaning to the sacred," but there is, presumably, also no negative meaning to the sacred either since transgression, as Foucault says, "contains nothing negative . . . nothing positive."<sup>39</sup> There may still be an inverted "meaning to the sacred" since the Sade-to-Freud state-of-affairs establishes the human as limit in relation to the absence of God. He writes that in the "dark domain" of sexuality, "We now encounter the absence of God, our death, limits, and their

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 30-31.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 35-36.

transgression.”<sup>40</sup> Transgressive eroticism is the means of transcending the human limit in reaching for the void where God once was. As Foucault says of transgression in the last paragraph of “A Preface,” “*The act which crosses the limit touches absence itself.*”<sup>41</sup> Recalling again what Plotinus says about “The One” in *Ennead VI.9 (9)*, Foucault’s inverted reception can be clearly seen. Plotinus writes that the One “in its presence it is not present except to those who are able and prepared to receive it, so as to be in accord with it and as if grasp it and touch in their likeness.”<sup>42</sup> For Plotinus, the end is to touch the *presence* of the One in likeness; for Foucault, the end is to touch the *absence* of God in difference.

By adopting Foucault’s own method upon Foucault (i.e., by deploying his own narrative in order to invert it), metaphysical truth reappears. By mapping every transgressive act, the outline of God’s absence becomes clear. Based upon that mapping, nothing can be said about God’s presence, rather only about God’s absence. Mapping Foucault’s nominalist series of transgressive events establishes, to use Father Flynn’s phrase again, “the intelligible contours” of divine ontology through the affirmation of absence. A hint that Foucault did himself think along these lines—that is, that he saw the Neo-Platonic enterprise as antecedent to his own—is found in his 1966 essay, “The Thought of the Outside.”<sup>43</sup> He defines “the thought of the outside” when “the being of language only appears for itself with the disappearance of the subject”<sup>44</sup> “in relation to the interiority of our philosophical reflection and the positivity of our knowledge”

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>42</sup> Plotinus, *Ennead VI.6-9*, trans. A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), VI.9 (9), 4.24-28.

<sup>43</sup> Foucault, *Dits et écrits*, 546-67.

<sup>44</sup> Translation from Flynn, *Mapping*, 187, quoting Foucault, *Essential Writings*, 2.149.

which is to say, “thought outside subjectivity.”<sup>45</sup> He seeks the origin of this “thought of the outside.” He writes, “One can well suppose that it was born of that mystical thought which, since the texts of Pseudo-Dionysius, has prowled within the confines of Christianity. Perhaps it continued, for a millennium or almost, under the forms of a negative theology.”<sup>46</sup> That is to say, it is only with the advent of modernity that this sort of “thought of the outside” dissipated and, therefore, that a circumstance arose in which it needed to be renewed. Thus Foucault situates his own thought in relation to Neo-Platonism and the Christian *via negativa*. If one completes the Foucauldian inversion on Foucault’s inverted Neo-Platonism, that is, if one inverts light and shadow on the stage of Foucault’s text, then the absence of God becomes presence. Considered this way, “A Preface to Transgression” can be read as a preface of another kind, namely as a preface to a radically apophatic vision of God.

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<sup>45</sup> Translation from Flynn, *Mapping*, 187, quoting Foucault, *Essential Writings*, 2.150.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 549. My translation. Father Bernauer discusses Foucault’s “negative theology” in a way consistent with the argument of this paper, “Foucault’s negative theology is a critique not of the conceptualizations employed for God but of that modern figure of finite man whose identity was put forward as capturing the essence of human being. Nevertheless, Foucault’s critical thinking is best described as a negative theology, rather than a negative anthropology, for its flight from man is an escape from yet another conceptualization of the Absolute. The project of modernity was an absolutization of man, the passion to be, as Sartre saw, the ‘*Ens causa sui*, which religions call God.’” James Bernauer, “Foucault’s Ecstatic Thinking,” in *The Final Foucault*, ed. James Branauer and David Rasmussen (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1994), 68, quoting Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966), 784.