The Body Transgressed in Chuck Palahniuk's *Choke* (2001)

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This paper tackles the issue of limits in Chuck Palahniuk's *Choke* (2001). The narrative is at the image of this controversial American writer and mirrors his work as a whole. The paper aims at exploring the trespassing and even the annihilation of boundaries both at the thematic and linguistic levels. The cornerstone notion of transgression opens the path to a rewriting of the paradigm between signifiers and signified and unveils the problematics of the body linked to the redefined vision of choking and to a deviant sexuality. The body itself is remolded into a land of conquest. The reader is left to wonder where Palahniuk's quest for transgression will lead him, if the crossing of limits is precisely limitless and if the body is an enduring cornucopia of possible experiences.

Keywords: transgression, choking, sexuality, the body, signifiers

Introduction

Best known for *Fight Club* (1996), the American writer Chuck Palahniuk explores, throughout his fiction, characters who constantly transgress social norms and expectations and who defy any classifications. "Transgression means going beyond limits, defying the law, or a code, or a rule, doing something which is forbidden" (Louvel, 2009, p. 21). It refers to the rupture of a norm, to the trespassing of a limit beyond which an act, an event, is considered as morally unacceptable, incomprehensible. It also inherently rimes with excess, immoderateness. In the novel *Fight Club*, the nameless narrator creates an underground boxing network. The gratuitous brutality that shows through the narrative is expressed during the fights that take on a cathartic undertone and are even tainted with a transcendental hue when considering the pushing away of physical limit. In *Lullaby* (2002), the dead body is perceived as a source of beauty and necrophilia is viewed just as another type of sexual act. In *Damned* (2011), the 13-year-old protagonist Madison wanders through a parodic version of inferno replete with dismembered bodies and turns into a megalomaniac figure.

Choke (2001) leads us to consider the notion of transgression in relation to the themes of motherhood, old age, sexuality, and the body. *Choke* narrates Victor Mancini's life and offers recurrent flashbacks on his childhood. Moved from one foster home to another, his mother, Ida, would kidnap him when not in jail or in a mental institution; however, they would be caught every time. Victor is, in the present setting of the book, depicted as a sex-addict. Ida appears to be suffering from Alzheimer's and is institutionalized in Saint Anthony's care center. The novel's preoccupation with fraud is pregnant: Paige Marshall, a patient at the care center pretends to be a doctor there; Victor is led to believe that he is the reincarnation of Jesus Christ and he eventually finds out that Ida is not his birth mother. Originally blaming the latter for every problem he faces in his life, Victor learns forgiveness and understanding; he needs Ida to give him closure on his father, the absent figure in the novel.

The Problematics of Choking

Victor pays for Ida's nursing home by pretending to choke on his food at restaurants, an experience for which he is compensated for financially. Indeed, people who save his life feel responsible for him and his fictional bills. In Palahniuk's narrative, choking ironically becomes a means of subsistence for the protagonist. Food, necessary to ensure people's lives, is here represented as an auxiliary of death. At the same time, death is for Victor faked and summoning it each night at a restaurant is a way to pay for the bills and food and thus to go on living; death becomes an auxiliary of life in a way that highlights the complicated connection between the body and the notion of limit in Palahniuk's work. Victor transforms his body into a vehicle of both death and rebirth.

Victor is on a quest for recognition, a need certainly ensuing from the lack of maternal love during his early years. Through this quest, his body is used and abused: "You had to risk your life to get love. You had to get right to the edge of death to ever be saved" (Palahniuk, 2001, p. 3). The term "edge" emphasizes this play on limits which again leads to the paradox of the intricate relation between life and death. Victor craves for the attention his foster families have been unable to give him due to the fact that he was repeatedly taken away from them by his thought-to-be mother, Ida Mancini. As far as she is concerned, proving her love to Victor means sadistically leaving him half-naked in the snow to draw the outline of his shivering body with a spray paint.

Thus, the theme of the body is a red thread in *Choke* and its significance is manifold. It is first linked to a deviant sexuality; then it is objectified. The search for limitlessness is also at stake as well as a reworking of the relation between signifiers and signified. The transgression of the body follows different paths and leads to a questioning of the terms "transgression" and "body" themselves. Transgressing the common image of the body and its limits parallels Victor's quest for his identity and underlines Palahniuk's search for transcendence in his novels.

The Problematics of Sexuality

The sexual dimension is a leitmotif and is associated with unexpected elements, for example, myth. Palahniuk (2001) sexualized the notion of myth against its more sacred and spiritual meanings. In *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, Eliade (1960) discussed the creation of myth in terms of: "A *sacred history*; that is, a transhuman revelation which took place at the dawn of the Great Time, in the holy time of the beginnings (in illo tempore)" (p. 23). It is linked to the Sacred, referring to the world of the divine, opposed to profane life. In contrast, Palahniuk associates myth with daily life and sexuality, akin to an urban legend.

The contemporary legend is a narration, a collective tale, taken up and transmitted by the group within which it works. The content of this tale is situated, replete with truthful effects, appeals to authorities serving as a point of reference. This tale is given as a true one; it is an object of belief but also of discussion, for the process of legendary diffusion opposes scepticals and believers¹.

An urban legend is commonly related to supernatural occurrences. In Palahniuk's case, there seems to be an overstatement when he applied the expression "urban legend" to an act of fellation which may be considered as a trivial act and has no connection with the supernatural. Palahniuk also gave the example of a razor-sharp

¹ Campion-Vincent, Veronique. *Légendes Urbaines: Rumeurs d'aujourd'hui* (1998), p. 10. One example of an urban legend is the ghostly hitchhiker.

blade added to a vacuum cleaner in the 1950s and which led many men to race to the hospital with their sexual organ mutilated, "at least that's the myth" (Palahniuk, 2001, p. 10). The sexual focus and the use of a trivial object debase, desacralize an Eliadian-type analysis of myth. A vacuum cleaner holds no sacred dimension even if we may go as far as considering the loss of the male phallic organ as a castrative rite and the vacuum cleaner as a parodic god or a symbol of post-war consumer society.

Continuing in a transgressive vein, Palahniuk sexualizes the understanding of heroism². While conventional heroes such as Theseus or Hercules were endowed with this title after killing legendary monstrous creatures like a minotaur or a hydra, it is sex that gives a heroic status to ordinary people in Palahniuk's world. The author chooses to present as legendary a woman who performs oral-genital acts on men during which they are castrated. In one example, fellatio in a car results in a penile dismemberment. The process of castration is not done symbolically, but is physically executed. The theme of the vagina dentata is revisited here: The lethal perception of the female sexual organ is transposed to the oral orifice, as if there had been a regression to the Freudian oral state characterized by the non-differentiation between the sexual act and the ingestion of food. In this modern urban legend, the woman's mouth has a carnivorous dimension and deprives men of their absolute virility and power.

Palahniuk reveals various transgressive sexual behaviors related to death and, consequently, gives an unexpected perception of the human body. A girl, Mandy, obtains sexual satisfaction by using the stick shift of a Ford Pinto. This sexual act also has a sacrificial dimension³, since it almost causes her death. Another girl, Paula, experiments autoerotic asphyxiation in her shower. It is not so much the exploration of the body as its abuse and negation that engender orgasm. Victor has to think about dead animals or about the dissection of human bodies to be sexually aroused. The closeness with death is a source of pleasure for the character. Sexuality is not only linked to addiction but also to degenerated, fragmented, and rotting bodies. The possibility the latter have to arouse pleasure and bliss, not only echoes the obsession with death characterizing the movement of the decadent Romanticism at the end of the 18th century in England, but also highlights the transgressive treatment of the body suffusing the text.

The Problematics of the Body

Victor is a sex addict who only goes to therapy sessions in order to embark on carnal relationships with female sex addicts. The body is objectified and becomes a substance to be consumed; it is just like heroin for drug addicts. It is also fragmented, described through limbs and not as a total entity. For example, Ida's body is perceived as dismembered and monstrous: "There's not just enough of her yellow skin left to fit a real person inside. Her chin puppet arms hover around on the blankets" (Palahniuk, 2001, p. 21), "her neck looks as small around as my wrist, the yellow skin sunk into deep hollows between her cords and throat. Her face doesn't hide

² To understand why we apply the term "transgression" as regards the treatment of heroes by Palahniuk, we have to remind the reader that the term "hero" is originally perceived in the sense of half-god and the term "legendary" rimes with what is universally known.

³ We may look upon the gear shift as a phallic object. As Freud (1999) stated in *The Interpretation of Dreams*: "all elongated objects [...] all sharp and elongated weapons, knives, daggers, and pikes, represent the male member" (p. 115). The act gives the woman a legendary status as if she offered herself as a sacrifice; the term "sacrifice" implies making something or someone sacred, "that is separated from the one who offers, whether it is a personal possession or one's own life; also separated from anyone who remained profane; separated from one's own self and given to God" (the author's translation). Chevalier and Gheerbrant's *Dictionnaire des symboles: Mythes, rêves, coutumes, gestes, formes, figures, couleurs, nombres* (1982), p. 839. Sacrifices aim at the purification of the soul but in Palahniuk's case, even if the woman gets close to death, she is only concerned with personal enjoyment and her action is not linked to a sacred dimension.

the skull inside" (Palahniuk, 2001, p. 113). Her body shrinks down to nothingness. The motherly body is perceived as other, as repulsive. Yet, at the same time, Victor craves for Ida's recognition of his presence when he visits her. The mother is perceived as a Kristevian abject figure. Victor abjects the maternal body, a necessary step in the construction of his identity, so as to reach the Symbolic stage, when language gives meaning to things. Victor's perception of Ida's body vehicles a plural significance: a distrust of the feminine which leads him to only entertain carnal relations with women; a need to gain closure to be able to trust people in general and a deviant vision of the female body as an object to possess.

Throughout the novel, Victor tries to conquer the female body. Nevertheless, even the rape attempt on a character, Gwen, is staged and he is not in control of the situation as she is the one who gives orders. Traditional gender roles do not apply in this sado-masochistic relationship as the stronger sex turns into the weaker one. Our attention is drawn to the artificiality of what we consider "natural" behavior with Palahniuk disrupting the limits of normal sexual behaviors. Violence, danger, and threats are in a deviant way necessary for Gwen to reach sexual arousal. She requires Victor to hit her and to hold a freezing knife to her throat. The knife replaces the phallic organ since Victor is not allowed to practice the act of penetration. Palahniuk undermines male customary dominance by providing women with a contingent form of carnal pleasure. Besides, the connection made between rape and a religious ceremony is undoubtedly transgressive: "'A good rapist will plan his crime meticulously. He ritualizes every little detail. This should be almost like a religious ceremony.' 'What happens here,' Gwen says, 'is sacred'" (Palahniuk, 2001, p. 174). The transgression appears to be double: Religious rituals are desacralized and rape is sacralized.

Thus, Victor is in a conquest of the human body. The latter is presented as the last frontier to trespass: "It's the last frontier to conquer, other people, strangers, the jungle of their arms and legs, hair and skin, the smells and moans that is everybody you haven't done. The great unknowns. The last forest to devastate" (Palahniuk, 2001, p. 251). In a spatial metaphor, the human body is to be explored and owned and this exploration seems fairly limitless considering the earth's human population. This vision of the human body as a territory to possess like the American West, its fragmented description, contributes to the transgressive aspect of Palahniuk's narration. The use of the verb "devastate" even stresses a will to destroy the human body to reach a very absence of limits. The objectified body blurs gender, abolishes the separation between masculinity and femininity as women become the stronger sex. The body is subject to redefinition.

On his quest for the abolition of limits, the author plays with the body of the text itself; he makes use of unexpected words as the blurring of limits also concerns language. Depicting the photograph of a monkey and a man, Victor praises the confidence of that man and his "up-front-ness" (Palahniuk, 2001, p. 37). The reader understands that it designates the man's ability to confront the world fiercely despite the shocking aspect of the action perpetrated in the photograph. Seeing Page Marshall naked for the first time in the chapel at Saint Anthony's, Victor reflects that she is "very doable" (Palahniuk, 2001, p. 89). Palahniuk assembles two elements that are not commonly used together. In chapter 15, Ina Mancini tries to teach Victor what really matters in life and tells him they live in an era of "*Dis-Enlightenment*" (Palahniuk, 2001, p. 98). The prefix "dis" is from the Latin and expresses "separation, distance, going in opposite directions and, afterwards, negation, opposition" (Rey, Tomi, Hordé, & Tanet, 1992, p. 609). The noun "enlightenment" refers to the 18th century which advocated the principles of rationalism and moderation, "faith in the unity and the immutability of reason" (Cassirer, 1970, p. 41). The term "*Dis-Enlightenment*" seems to indicate that our society is characterized by the lack of fixed rules, clear landmarks; instability lays in the signifiers themselves.

Palahniuk revisits the traditional codes of language as though the disruption of the signifier-signified connection magnified the notion of transgression. Instability characterizes Palahniuk's narrative. Disruption is created at the level of the logos, accounting for the impossibility of constructive communication between the characters in the text. Here are some examples of Palahniuk's reworking of codes: For Nico, one of Victor's partners, twirling a finger next to one's ear does not mean being crazy but being a loser. In a hospital, "Nurse Flamingo means a fire. Dr. Blaze means a fire. Dr. Green means a suicide. Dr. Blue means somebody stopped breathing" (Palahniuk, 2001, pp. 92-93). The Saussurian connection between the signifier and the signified⁴ does not apply here for the readers do not understand the relation between the chosen colors and their meaning.

Let us consider the author's use of the color blue. It is "the most immaterial color: nature generally presents it as only made of transparency, that is accumulated emptiness" (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1982, p. 129). This dimension of void may explain its association in *Choke* with death and the skin hue of people when they stop breathing. The connection of the color green with suicide is more problematic. Indeed, it is first and foremost a "reassuring, refreshing, humane color" (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1982, p. 1002). It is set in relation with life and regeneration. However, it is also an ambivalent color: "Green has a malevolent, nocturnal power, like any female symbol" (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1982, p. 1005). Palahniuk seems to have chosen this ambiguous aspect of the green color, but the link with depression and suicide is a complete reworking of the original signified. The author associates colors with unexpected codes and this contributes to the disruption of the constituents of the text itself: words. Here are other examples: Mr. Cash is used to call for an armed security guard; the code "Sheila to the front" is used to signal shoplifting in a store. Palahniuk deviates from the ordinary meaning of cash as money. The association with an armed security guard may come from the fact that security officers keep a close eye on cashiers when they move with the receipts. The connection between the first name Sheila and shoplifting is disconcerting. The pushing away of limits is henceforth visible in the very use of words.

Conclusions

Therefore, Palahniuk explores the theme of transgression and, by doing so, he follows different paths: He reworks the articulation between signifiers and signified, that is the body of the text itself as well as the individuals' bodies. One may wonder whether, in our post-postmodern era, the transgression of limits in literature is precisely limitless and which body remains to be transgressed. The bodies of the son (Victor) and of the mother (Ida) are submitted to fragmentation and negation, but the father's body constantly remains ungraspable by Victor and unsaid by Ida. The father figure remains in the Lacanian Real. Nevertheless, it is the incapacity to know that gives Victor the strength to go on living: "and maybe knowing isn't the point. Where we're standing right now, in the ruins in the dark, what we build could be anything" (Palahniuk, 2001, p. 293). The very impossibility of reaching closure and the very possibility of multiple interpretations give life its excitement. The aim is to go for the unknown, even beyond the very idea of the unknown and materialize it into something concrete, almost materialize the Lacanian Real. We are led to rethink the significance of the body in

⁴ Ferdinand de Saussure, through his analysis of language, establishes the link between the signifier, the acoustic image, and the signified, the concept. The relation between the signified and the signifier does not seem to work in Palahniuk's work. The obvious meaning of words does not necessarily apply to those words. Jacques Derrida exposed in *Of Grammatology* the notion of deconstruction showing that there is not a unique and universal truth since speech is, just like writing, submitted to instability and shifts in meaning. One word has various meanings, hence the plurality of interpretations of the texts. There is an active "difference" which works on the meaning of each word.

itself and consider the fact that transgression questions the commonly known. The body becomes a source for the uncanny and transgression transforms the familiar (the body) into a new and undecipherable entity that refuses closure, henceforth the plurality of interpretations stemming from the narrative. Transgression rimes with instability, which may account for the impossible closure running through the veins of Palahniuk's text; the absence of absolute knowledge marks artistic creation along with its interpretation with infinitude.

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