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On Taboos

Forbidden Fruit a flavor has
That lawful Orchards mocks –
How luscious lies within the Pod
The Pea that Duty locks –

Emily Dickinson, c. 1876

By common understanding, taboos demarcate the forbidden, the impure, or the sacred, drawing a line between what is allowed and what is not. However, despite their apparent universality across cultures, time periods, and belief systems, taboos in fact prove far more elusive and contradictory than they first appear, resisting any fixed definition. The boundaries they establish, though ostensibly absolute, are rarely as stable as they seem and more often than not become charged sites of tension where the prohibition they enforce invites its own violation. Freud captured this paradox effectively when he observed that

the power of taboo lies precisely in its "capacity for arousing temptation" (1913 [1950], 41). In this sense, taboos function less as rigid barriers and more as thresholds, that is, unstable, liminal spaces where what is excluded inevitably re-emerges (perhaps unconsciously, as Freud would argue), not to be rejected but as an object of fascination and desire, unsettling and reconfiguring the meaning of what it once was.

This ambivalence is clearly apparent in some key narratives that have shaped Western culture. In the biblical story of the forbidden fruit, for instance, God's command – "Thou shalt not eat" – far from imposing a static prohibition, highlights the tension between divine authority, which forbids eating from the Tree of Knowledge, and human desire to disrupt the established order. The serpent's temptation reframes the boundary as an invitation instead of a restriction, and disobedience becomes a moment of radical identity transformation. The boundary thus turns into a space of transition, where Adam and Eve's transgression leads not only to loss, but to a new order of knowledge. Yet, whereas Eden portrays transgression as a path to knowledge, Emily Dickinson, in her poem above, shifts the focus to a different form of pleasure. More specifically, desire is driven not by the knowledge that comes from crossing the limit, but by the prohibition itself. Indeed, Dickinson suggests, the fruit's forbidden nature triggers a longing that "lawful Orchards" cannot satisfy. As her image of the "Pea that Duty locks" reveals, the true source of desire does lie in the charged tension between "duty" and its potential breach.

Once recognised, this pattern – the boundary which sustains desire – takes on various forms in myths where punishment is presented as perpetual or inevitable. In the story of Tantalus, famously, the gods impose not a final, definitive boundary, but one that endures: food and water remain visible yet forever out of reach. In this case, prohibition warps desire into a constant state of frustration, making punishment an ongoing condition rather than a one-off event. Similarly, the myth of Pandora's jar adds another dimension to this tension. The seal does not merely forbid the opening of the jar; it makes the act seem inevitable, as though the boundary itself compelled its violation. In much the same way, in the story of the Tower of Babel, divine prohibition does not

erase the unity of language but fractures it, multiplying meanings in the process. Viewed in this way, the boundary proves anything but absolute, creating a space in which limits are both enforced and surpassed. The examples above focus on an essential point: taboo is not a passive act of exclusion but an active force in cultural production. As Georges Bataille claims, transgression does not obliterate the limit but rather strengthens and completes it (Bataille 1987, 10). Prohibition and transgression, then, exist in a dialectical relationship that engenders new configurations of meaning. As such, taboo functions as a dynamic force connected to anything that challenges conventional categories – whether the sacred, the abject, or ideas which refuse to conform to established norms.

The complex dynamic between prohibition and desire becomes particularly evident if we turn to the colonial encounter between Western rationality and non-Western concepts of the sacred. When the Polynesian concept of *tapu* entered Western discourse through James Cook's 18th-century voyages, it triggered a significant epistemological short-circuit. In Polynesian cultures, *tapu* functioned as a relational system that managed sacred power, intertwining protection and danger, the permissible and the impossible in an inseparable knot. However, within the Enlightenment framework – shaped by ideals of reason, order, and universal rationality – this multifaceted concept was reduced to a static idea of prohibition. *Tapu*, once dynamic and relational, was semantically flattened and reinterpreted as rigid and dualistic, thus reflecting the colonial violence embedded in Western epistemology: where indigenous cultures recognised ambiguity as productive, Western systems sought to erase it, imposing clear binary distinctions between the sacred and profane, the rational and irrational.

By the 20th century, new theoretical approaches began to reframe taboo beyond the Victorian evolutionary perspective, which had culturally dismissed it as a feature of so-called 'primitive' societies. A key shift came with the French sociological school, particularly Durkheim's work (1895), which identified taboo as a social fact emerging from collective life. For Durkheim, the categories of pure and impure were two varieties of the sacred with the normative function of organising social relationships, though his distinction between religious

prohibitions – viewed as 'categorical imperatives' – and magical ones, relegated to utilitarian norms, remained problematic. Psychoanalytic approaches – from Freud's *Totem und Tabu* (1913) to Lacan's focus on prohibition within the symbolic order – interpreted taboo through structures of guilt, repression, and the law; in parallel, Durkheim's followers (Hertz 1909) foregrounded how purity and impurity emerged from social life and actively structured it. A second major development came with structuralist and symbolic approaches (Douglas 1966, Valeri 1985; 1999), which complicated the boundaries of the symbolic by showing how the categories of purity and impurity actively construct social order. In such a framework, taboo is no longer a static element within a cultural system, but a destabilising force that continually redraws the limits of meaning. This approach, further enriched by processual and dynamic approaches (Van Gennep 1909, Turner 1969; 1986), placed the tabooed object – be it the corpse, menstrual blood, or the sacred name – in a liminal space: expelled from the system yet central to its meaning. Particularly significant was Valeri's critique of purely taxonomic approaches, as he emphasised that classifications reflect normative impulses emerging from concrete social evaluations rather than abstract cognitive functions. On this view, taboo is context-dependent, as maintained by Allan (2018, 10): not an inert category, but a process driven by the interplay between cultural classification, social order, and normative practice.

This paradox – taboo as both stabilising and destabilising – underscores its enduring role in the production of cultural meaning. Far from being a relic of 'primitive' societies, taboo continues to govern boundaries, identities, and desires. In fact, contemporary societies still regulate the body, sexuality, food, and death through mechanisms of prohibition, albeit in less visible forms. The repression of death in industrialised cultures particularly exemplifies this shift. Death has been pushed to the margins – confined to hospitals, sanitised through funerary practices, and made almost invisible in daily life. Yet, this repression paradoxically intensifies the cultural significance of death as evidenced by its hyper-visibility in media: forensic dramas, horror films, and sensationalised depictions of violence all reveal how death persists as a site of collective fascination. The taboo, then, has not been abolished but displaced, re-emerging in forms that reflect contemporary anxieties and desires. Whether

in myth, colonial encounters, or contemporary art, taboo remains a dynamic mechanism that tests the limits of the thinkable and the permissible. In its ambivalence it exposes the fragility of the systems that attempt to contain it – and the transformative potential of transgressing them. This points to what might be seen as the self-perpetuating nature of taboos, where prohibitions do not silence but instead give rise to their own – and new – forms of expression.

The essays in this volume approach taboo as a shifting threshold, continually redefined, negotiated, and contested. While grounded in its own theoretical framework, each paper focuses on those spaces where prohibition meets transgression, where limits become sites of transformation.

A recurring theme across the collection is the tension between external restrictions and internalised prohibitions, particularly when negotiating political, religious, and sexual taboos. Rossana Sebellin explores how taboos around royal authority shape early modern depictions of Richard II in *Jack Straw*, *Thomas of Woodstock*, and Shakespeare's *Richard II*. While *Jack Straw* offers a loyalist portrayal of the king, and *Woodstock* bears the marks of censorship in its fragmented narrative, Shakespeare's *Richard II* navigates these constraints with greater subtlety. Drawing on Freud's notion of taboo as both sacred and dangerous, Sebellin highlights silence – whether in Mowbray's measured speech or Gaunt's appeals to divine justice – as a strategy for political criticism. Daniela Guardamagna extends this discussion by considering the impact of the 1606 Act to Restrain Abuses of Players. This legal prohibition, which served as both a restriction and a source of creative engagement, forced playwrights – including Shakespeare, in Guardamagna's case – to reinvent the boundaries of dramatic language. Through a close analysis of textual changes between the Quarto and Folio editions of *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *Romeo and Juliet*, Guardamagna demonstrates how the removal or replacement of oaths reflects Shakespeare's response to the pressures of censorship. In the same vein, Salvatore Ciancitto addresses the intricate dynamics of translating John Cleland's *Fanny Hill* into Italian, engaging with the interplay between taboo, censorship, and cultural adaptation. By focusing on three key translations of 1921, 1964, and 2010, Ciancitto's article investigates the threshold where the erotic language of the source text meets the cultural norms and ideological constraints of the target society. This threshold is both a boundary that imposes linguistic and moral

restrictions and a site of negotiation, where translation reimagines and reshapes the text's erotic charge.

Two essays explore silence as a means of both repression and resistance. Elena Cotta Ramusino examines the fraught dynamics of taboo, prohibition, and silence in Hugo Hamilton's *The Speckled People*, with a particular focus on the linguistic constraints imposed by the protagonist's father. The article explores how the taboo against speaking English in Ireland functions as both a literal and a symbolic threshold, dividing the family and alienating Hanno from his community while paradoxically drawing him into an obsessive engagement with language. This prohibition, framed by the father's nationalist vision, transforms language from a medium of connection into a site of control and fracturing of identity. Giovanna Tallone, by contrast, examines the pervasive silence surrounding the Disappeared during the Troubles in Northern Ireland through Mary O'Donnell's novel *Where They Lie*. Her essay problematises the taboo of forced disappearances as a threshold between erasure and haunting – a site where social silences obscure and perpetuate the trauma of loss. O'Donnell's novel, as Tallone argues, navigates this threshold, using its narrative to challenge the denial and misinformation that envelop the Disappeared and their families.

Taboo's role as a site of resistance and reconfiguration is further explored through transgressive identities. Anna Fattori delves into the unsettling exploration of taboos in Robert Walser's late microscripts, focusing on themes of violence, gender, and social norms. By analysing *With Anger about her Anger She Was Green* and *Cruel Rites, Customs, Habits*, Fattori's essay sheds light on Walser's transgressive engagement with topics like phallophagy, cruelty, and gender fluidity. These microscripts, written in Walser's distinctive miniature handwriting, juxtapose playful, fairy-tale-like language with the disturbing nature of their content, creating a provocative tension that challenges the reader's moral and aesthetic sensibilities. In dialogue with Fattori, Noemi Fregara takes this discussion further in her study of Olga Tokarczuk's hybrid and monstrous figures – Saint Kummernis and the Ugliest Woman in the World. Drawing on Freud's and Cohen's theories of taboo and monstrosity, Fregara's analysis situates these figures as an embodiment of cultural anxieties about the other, whether it be gendered, animal, or otherwise. These characters,

at once abject and fascinating, reflect a broader critique of systems that marginalise what cannot be easily classified. Tokarczuk's exploration of these liminal identities transcends mere representation, urging readers to engage with their discomfort with boundary-crossing figures and to question social assumptions about normality, purity, and power.

Two essays turn to the question of belonging and identity, particularly in contexts of exclusion and cultural negotiation. Sara Villa explores haunting as a strategy in contemporary Spanish cinema, where migrant identities are portrayed as spectral – visible yet erased – reflecting Spain's unresolved postcolonial history. Films like *Poniente* and *Retorno a Hansala* insistently confront these realities, challenging the silence around immigration. In a different yet parallel case, Angela Sileo explores deafness as a cultural and educational taboo. Deaf individuals, Sileo argues, have often been pressured to conform to hearing norms, erasing their linguistic and cultural identities. By proposing Accessible Didactic Audiovisual Translation (ADAT) and Deaf-Inclusive Subtitling (DIDS), she envisions classrooms in which Deaf learners are given the chance to 'speak' with their own voice. Like the migrants who reject invisibility in Villa's work, Deaf learners deserve visibility, asserting their place in systems that would otherwise exclude them.

The final theme addressed is moral excess as the ultimate expression of taboo – moments when boundaries collapse and order gives way to chaos. Tommaso Continisio discusses *The Bloody Banquet*, a revenge play in which tyranny, sexual transgression, and cannibalism push the Jacobean social and political order to its limits. These acts of excess, Continisio suggests, reflect a breakdown of moderation and a descent into abjection. Pushing the boundaries even further, Francesco Sani closes the volume by confronting the ultimate taboo, euthanasia, not merely as an ethical or legislative dilemma, but as an area of tension where social prohibitions and the call for autonomy collide. For Sani, the taboo of assisted dying reveals deeper anxieties about the limits of agency, the sanctity of life, and the regulation of suffering. Situating these questions within a broader historical and cultural continuum, he considers how debates over assisted dying highlight the limits of existing frameworks while pointing towards new ways of imagining death as a space of dignity and choice.

In both cases, the refusal to allow for autonomy – over death in Sani's essay, over desire and identity in Continisio's – results in rupture and destabilisation.

Taken together, the essays in this collection expose the limits and – most importantly – the potential of taboos, insofar as prohibition and transgression drive cultural, political, and artistic transformation.

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