1. *A Letter prefacing a Text.*

Dear Onyx,

Thank you for your invitation to think about ecstasy with you. It makes more sense for me to write you a letter where I spell out some of my thoughts, followed by a short text I once wrote about a state that I entered during a sadomasochistic session.[[1]](#footnote-1) I am still coming to terms with how these practices have changed me, so the opportunity you have afforded me to think about these things with you is very welcome.

There are some questions that have been coming up since you first invited me to participate in your project:

*Is an ecstatic state reached by pushing beyond a limit?*

*Does the recovery from an ecstatic state bring about change because of the necessary reconstruction of the self, putting oneself back together having reached this heightened experience, unable to ever be the same again?*

*What are the stages along the path to ecstasy? Do different paths to ecstasy have different stages?*

I have explored these questions in various ways, usually blindly because I did not think I was exploring the state of ecstasy as much as what I thought were the limits of my experiences, the limits of my life. But on reflection I can see that searching for these intense states is also a search for ecstasy. Maybe the intensity is the ecstasy? I am lucky to have a partner who is completely involved in this search with me.

In this offering for your project, I am trying to pull together a few things that have helped me understand some of my practices, as well as a description of these practices for you to respond to. My thoughts are half-baked, woolly and imprecise, but I hope provocative. They come from two very distinct places:–

1. my reading of a tradition of historical epistemology (Gaston Bachelard, Georges Canguilhem, Michel Foucault, Ian Hacking) that I studied for so long to explain how knowledge changes within specific fields (by overcoming *limits*);

2. my experiences as a masochist, which I have occasionally written about in order to try to understand what I get from brutal sexualised games that leave me both destroyed and more in love.[[2]](#footnote-2)

One is about knowing in the western, intellectual tradition – what can be more about knowing to the academic western mindset than a variety of epistemology? The other is about knowing with my body; trusting experience over rationality; letting my body guide me into new states of being, rather than trying to think my way there. While centuries of western philosophical work has been done to keep these two realms separate – to create a hierarchy between the mind and the body, between rationality and passion – the more I learned from the things I did with my body (BDSM and other extreme sexual practices such as fisting, as well as activities like clubbing, yoga), the more I realised that corporeal experience was essential to understanding my self. It was no longer enough for me to know about things in the abstract; I needed to experience them and see what I could learn. So in part this is a story about how I came to leave the library and step out into a world of passion and intensity, trusting my body to teach me new things, a journey undertaken with my partner that has made me feel more alive than books ever did, while remembering that it is all of the intellectual preparation that has allowed me to conceptualise what I am doing – to understand the various spaces and predicaments in which I allow myself to be caught up. It is also an early attempt to map out how these two realms – the intellectual and the corporeal – can inform each other, although I don’t do any of that conceptual work explicitly here.

So what I am giving you to play with is a quick overview of how I think about one of Michel Foucault’s key under-explored concepts, the *limit experience*, and a text I wrote about one of my early intense sadomasochistic sessions, where we played on the coastline of Angelsey in Wales in 2011. I did not think about what I was doing in Wales at the time as a limit experience; it was just a SM scene. But thinking about it later reminded me of parts of Foucault’s thought in ways that might also be useful for you to explore further? It is one of many possible angles on ecstatic states.

At first these two realms might seem absurdly incompatible – one deriving from the social theory that I used to teach at Edinburgh University, which formed the basis of more than twenty years’ research into the history of psychiatry (including, before I had ever practised it,[[3]](#footnote-3) a genealogy of the psychiatric construction of sadomasochism[[4]](#footnote-4)); the other a poetic account of an intense experience somewhere beautiful which remains one of the defining moments of my life, and which opened the door to many other such explorations.

*Foucault and limit experiences.*

In 1993, I had my interest in BDSM reawakened by *The Passion of Michel Foucault*, James Miller’s problematic but fascinating biography of Foucault that made explicit his BDSM experiences, which were framed as the search for limits and the embodiment of Nietzschean philosophical ideals.[[5]](#footnote-5) Around the same time I was reading Foucault and got a lot out of a book by Gary Gutting, situating Foucault in relation to his mentors Gaston Bachelard and Georges Canguilhem, who formed a school of historical epistemology.[[6]](#footnote-6)

In short, for Bachelard, significant new developments in scientific thought required an “epistemological rupture” that meant the breaking of the limitations of a previous scientific framework and adopting a new way of thinking (the example he uses in his *The New Scientific Spirit* (1934) is between Euclidean and Non-Euclidean geometry).[[7]](#footnote-7) This discontinuous model of scientific development was elucidated by Canguilhem in his numerous studies in this history of biology and medicine, for example his 1955 study of the history of the concept of the reflex. Both historical epistemologists were interested in the limits that particular models of thought impose which prevent alternative thinking. Knowledge developed by breaking these limits.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Enter Foucault. Foucault’s archaeological phase (from *Birth of the Clinic* (1963) to *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1968) involved *longue durée* studies of numerous fields (*epistèmes*) including pathological anatomy, linguistics, economics, biology, and his methodological reflections thereon. He was interested in the question of how knowledge changed within these fields – what mechanisms were necessary to change thought. From Bachelard he refined the concept of the epistemological rupture to frame his model of epistemic change.[[9]](#footnote-9) Later Foucault – in the genealogical phase of his work that studied penaology and sexuality – focused on how power operated to produce and maintain the subjects of knowledge – the criminal, sexuality.[[10]](#footnote-10) He famously said “Wherever there is power there is resistance.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Successfully resisting power meant pushing through the limits it imposed. Change meant rupturing from the past – whether in conceptual terms within a field of knowledge production, in terms of personal growth, or in terms of social change.

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There are many different ways of knowing, depending on different truth regimes. What it means to know something is context-dependent. The methods for acquiring different knowledges are also very different. But I think that this model of overcoming limits (for growth, for acquiring new knowledge, for emerging as a new being) can explain change. Can there be a corporeal epistemology as well as a rational? What would be its method? (Yoga? Dancing? Sex? Masochism? Different corporeal methods for different knowledges, obviously.)

Ecstasy involves stepping outside the self, or dismantling of the self. When the self is put back together, the subject changes in the light of the new experience. Every limit broken involves a reconstruction of the self, even if only on a micro level, and in only one facet of life. Ecstasy marks the pushing through of a significant limit.

*Foucault on Limit Experiences.*

Although limit experiences are an integral part of Foucault’s philosophy, he did not elaborate on them very often. Here are some unprocessed quotations that you might want to think about – taken from his remarkable conversations with Italian Marxist, Duccio Trombadori.[[12]](#footnote-12) Here he frames his ideas much more around the work of Nietzsche, Georges Bataille and Maurice Blanchot, although in numerous other works he talks about his epistemology in relation to Bachelard and Canguilhem.

“Nietzsche, Bataille, and Blanchot, on the contrary, try through experience to reach that point of life which lies as close as possible to the impossibility of living, which lies at the limit or extreme. They attempt to gather the maximum amount of intensity and impossibility at the same time… On the contrary, experience according to Nietzsche, Blanchot, and Bataille has rather the task of "tearing" the subject from itself in such a way that it is no longer the subject as such, or that it is completely "other" than itself so that it may arrive at its annihilation, its dissociation.” (*Remarks on Marx,* 31)

What Foucault got from Bataille, Blanchot and Nietzsche: “to call the subject into question had to mean to live it in an experience that might be its real destruction or dissociation, its explosion or upheaval into something radically "other."” (*Remarks on Marx*, 46)

“What did one find instead in Nietzsche? The idea of discontinuity, the announcement of a "Superman" who would surpass "man." And then in Bataille, the theme of the "limit-experiences" in which the subject reaches decomposition, leaves itself, at the limits of its own impossibility.” (*Remarks on Marx*, 48)

\* \* \*

I hope that leaves you with a sense of the kind of framework that helps me make sense of some of the occasions where I have pushed through limits. You have seen me do this often (on the dance floor, on film); you know that this way of living is what means the most to me, and you know how intimately tied into this process Amanda is. I really look forward to seeing your response.

– Ivan

**DETRUIS MOI**

Llandudno, 2011 (2018 edit).

All life-forms gather at the edge of the sea – creatures that swim, that fly, that crawl, that cling to the rocks among the seaweed. New life was born in the rock pool, scraping its way up the hard surface towards the green hills and then to the grey cities of light. To return to these littoral zones is to revisit the beginnings of life. To survive here is to master binaries: the land and the sea; movement and permanence; love and pain. She keeps alive by breathing underwater; I remain by throwing myself into the sea to be returned by waves (of love, of pleasure, of desire, of pain). Each time I survive I am stronger and know more. I see her move and I follow. The edges expand, and the void created is filled with new life. Time is kept by the rhythm of the sea - those pulsing movements that start deep below the surface, held inside the dark water until they swell up and burst in waves that grip tight round our wrists, hold our breath, squeeze the life out of us in cries, leave us gasping and amazed that we are still here. It seems that nothing has changed, but each wave is unique. We do not remain the same when one washes over us.

\* \* \*

You opened my horizons by plunging me into new depths next to the sea. Not by drowning me, by hurting me; by using that pain to push me deep into my body, deep into myself, holding my head under until I am contracting and expanding and do not know which way is up, and can only work it out by moving away from the direction my tears are flowing. You open me by breaking me. I am ready to be destroyed.

You took me among the boulders near the shore. I had cut two canes - two sapling branches, one thicker, both flexible. I knew that you would hurt me with these in ways that I would have to grow to cope with. You put the gag in my mouth, taking away dignified lines of communication; I could now only grunt and moan until you release me. You tie my hands - rough jute around my wrists and elbows cutting into my skin. My veins pump slightly. The way that I am lying I cannot move my hands to protect myself. I cannot cover my eyes, or wipe the spit or tears or snot from my face. All you will see is my back and my arms, as I hang my head. I lie against the rock, rough enough for me to cling to when I needed support, smooth enough to comfort me when I press myself into it to escape the pain you inflict, still slightly warm from the sun.

I always feel nervous before we start – like it is a game that I am not going to win unless I roll a six. I wonder what my body will be like; I wonder if you will like it. I wonder if I want this as much as I think I do. Then I remember that I always do and I feel warm, like that electric moment just before I touch a body that I have wanted for a long time, and finally that idea is about to become real. My resolution dissolves, as it so often does. I feel my breath change and my body opens for you. I’m caught out again, as I stretch myself before you. I know that you are going to destroy me, again.

How do I hold my body so that you want me, but not too much? If it is too much, you will tear me apart. You look at me at those times like you want to eat me. I need you to pity me, not to damage me. Instead of hitting me to take me out of my self-consciousness, you draw my attention to it and make it worse. You make me reflect on my self, on how I hold my body, imagining what you see when you look at me vulnerable in front of you. I cannot melt away to nothingness to avoid you; I will become nothing only after you start. I close my eyes. I cannot bear to be in a place of such beauty and be made to think of myself.

You start, punching me like I was punched at school. You are hard with me and I am surprised. What I had imagined was not what I was getting; I already have to cope much more than I was anticipating - when I only thought of the profits, and not of the losses accrued along the way. I have no choice but to let this pain sink into me until I can bear it, until I can feel myself give myself away to you with each blow, stripping me away, but always keeping me present with a rhythm that runs counter to the regular waves lapping the shore. The more you hurt me, the harder it is to bear. But I know that when you stop - when you take up a branch - I will be wishing for the return of the heavy thud of your fist hard against my ribs. I concentrate, but you break this by hitting me harder. My body is always adapting as it twists under your blows. Not the fluid movements of fucking or dancing, but the spasmic writhing of my body in pain. The moments between these blows start to stretch out, I feel myself reacting more and more, even muscle making its threshold known. I move to protect myself. I move to distract you. I move because I like to play with the sensations in my body. I move because I want you to find me hot. I move because you make me do it. Sometimes, it is true, I do not flinch. Today, my body moves to cope with how hard you have started.

The thin cane cuts me. The bumpy nodes of remnant branches break my red skin and tiny rivulets of blood trickle down my back. You know I am in an agony that intensifies with each blow, stretching my body back until I can lower myself for your cane again. You know that I am trying with everything I have to stay still for you. You know that I want to give this all to you, to have you take the flesh from my carcass. We both know that I cannot do this, so we have to find out how far I can go. To find out exactly how free of this life you will make me when you reduce me to my body. It is now that the tears are flowing. It is now that I start to sob. It is now – as your blows cut up my skin and I pull myself tight to push this pain put of my body, only to be hurt more by your next swing. I get through this. I think of the look on your face, the silent look with which you are regarding me. You are not negotiating new territory with my body - you know well how to read me, and how to push me just further. You do not need me to talk, you only watch. Each hard cut of your cane pushes me deeper under the surfaces of my body into the teeming life that has been trying to evolve out of the darkness. With each lash you reduce me to only what is taking place in this moment. I am disintegrating.

\* \* \*

When you stop, I think of myself. My tears. My face streaming with saliva that the gag won’t let me swallow. I wonder how you can look. You tell me that I am not scared. You tell me that I am in pain, but that I am not fearful of you. You tell me you want to see my fear. You do not really know how close it is to the surface, or that I am not sure which part of me is keeping it from crashing on me. You reassure me, you make me take my breath, you tell me what you think of me. You start to hit me again.

\* \* \*

This bigger cane bends with each blow. It is heavy, wet, flexible, yet thick enough to bruise. It does not cut open my skin like the thinner one - but the pain is so much more intense. I do not know how many cuts to expect - at no point do you tell me what you will do. All I know is that this is the point when I started to break. I remember being completely unable to look at the landscape - that its beauty hurt my eyes as much as you hurt my back and that I needed to hide in an ugly darkness in order to escape from pain you were inflicting on me. You stopped and made me look at a point of lichen on the rock. I knew I was breaking and you were holding me there by keeping me in a meditative consciousness. The pain became increasingly unbearable. Crying was not enough to help me. And then, after you had moved position to sit above me on the rock and could hit directly into the uncut parts of my ribs, something strange happened. A tiny bit of warmth from your body seeped into me. On a single point this sensation of utter pain sublimated into an intense sexual pleasure - I was more aroused than I ever thought possible in a state like this, like a blast of poppers through my system I blossomed and writhed as I was giving you my body. I responded to your blows like they were passionate kisses, my body clenched and spasmed like you were fucking me to my core. And as I passed through this stage of intense, fulfilled desire that accompanied your frenzied blows, my mind opened. You stopped. I stopped. Everything stopped. I had never been so high in my life. This was a pure, intense lucidity, an inkling that my place in the world made sense – because I was in it, not out of it. I collapsed back in on myself. I told you I could not take any more. I wanted to give you more, but I had nothing left that I could willingly give.

\* \* \*

The minutes that followed are indescribable. Everything was too intense and too perfect. The golden-pink light cut under the clouds and shone off the water. I was warm. I was in ecstasy. You watched me as I could only look at the clouds, or out to sea, or over the hills, my back throbbing, my hands regaining their blood. I was incoherent. I crazily searched for signs for where I had been - a shell I had laid my eyes upon, the piece of lichen that looked back at me like a candy skull. As I sat down, as tears exploded from my eyes and I cried and I laughed and as I came back to earth in your arms, I started to shake. Then it would stop. Then I would reassure you that I felt better than ever. And so I grew to fill these spaces where the edges of my existence had been stretched. This is how you make me every time.

I did not think I could take any more pain than this, but I could. After you had hit me, you cut me. Not a delicate pattern or a long line, but the words *detruis moi*. You had destroyed me, taken me out of myself. You broke me down and watched what emerged. Through this pleasure, this pain, this overload of sensations, this exploration the realm of the senses, you entered me directly through my body. All bearings had been lost as I was thrown around in the waves of your desires, lost in the deep water, not knowing what would wash up on the shores.  What emerged was a new life at the edge of the sea.

2. *Question*

*Can achieving ecstasy be thought of as a limit experience* (in the sense outlined above)?

3. *Task*

For me, the key to moving into the ecstatic space is repetition. Repetition of movement, when I dance through to the end of a Berghain closing; repetition of breath, when I practice yoga with intent. And repetition of intense painful stimulation – BDSM, but also long tattooing sessions. The blows that fall on me over and over take me into this space – one painful blow would not take me there any more than one good track or one good asana. I suspect that ecstasy comes when a limit is broken, and that it is necessary to build towards that state. Anything less than what I have been used to will not take me there, will not change me. I need it to be more intense to take me to this higher plane.

*The task I set is for you to map the steps along the way to reaching an ecstatic state, identifying the stages experienced when moving towards the limit which will be pushed through to achieve the ecstatic state.*

How you get to this ecstatic state is up to you, although the writing I have provided shows how I have used BDSM in this way. Feel free to have other people help you reach this state.

4. *Blurb*

Ivan Crozier

I was an Associate Professor and Australian Research Council Future Fellow at the History Department of Sydney University (2012-2017), prior to which I was a senior lecturer in the Science Studies Unit of the Science, Technology, Innovation and Development subject group at the University of Edinburgh, UK (2003-2012), where I taught history of the human sciences and Sociology of Scientific Knowledge. Previously I was a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow in the Wellcome Trust Centre for the History of Medicine at University College, London (2000-2003), before which I lectured in the Unit for the History and Philosophy of Science, Sydney University (1999-2000). I have also been: Senior Visiting Research Fellow, Tembusu College and the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore (2012), Visiting Professor, Department of Psychiatry, Universidad de Antioquia, Medellin, Colombia (2009), Parsons Visiting Fellow, University of Sydney Law School (2009), Visiting Fellow, Centre for the History of European Discourses, University of Queensland (2009), Gästforskare [visiting researcher], Department of Historical Studies, Umeå University, Sweden (2006), Visiting Researcher, Royal Society of Edinburgh/Polish Academy of Sciences Academic Exchange Programme 2005), Visiting Research Fellow, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Unit, University of Texas, Austin (2002) and Visiting Research Fellow, Medical Humanities Institute, University of Texas Medical Branch, Galveston (2001). My work has been published in many academic journals, including *History of Psychiatry*, *Journal for the History of Sexuality, Medical History, History of Science*, and the *Times Literary Supplement*. Some of my work can be found here: https://independent.academia.edu/IvanCrozier

In October 2017, I left academia for personal and political reasons, and am now a cook in a queer café in Sydney, but I am keen to draw on my extensive knowledge of the history of sexuality, psychiatry and the body to collaborate with others who are involved in non-academic research in my areas of interest (I want to reach out of the privileged position that I occupied for so long, and to engage with people – collaborating with artists is one such way). In time I came to learn that there are many ways to know about the world – academia was one that served me well, but now I am looking for something else. My particular interests are: sadomasochism, history of sexology (particularly the construction of sexual perversions, the subject of my PhD), history of transcultural psychiatry, Michel Foucault, Berlin techno, queer sex parties, yoga, cities, cooking and gardening.

I am currently working on an art book about queer BDSM with print maker Eric Avery ([www.docart.com](http://www.docart.com)) and am an advisor on Joanna Bourke’s Wellcome-funded project, Sexual Violence, Medicine and Psychiatry (Birkbeck College, London, 2018-2023).

1. I retrospectively think of this state as ecstatic: a state in which I moved outside myself and grew accordingly to accommodate my new self. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. You have already engaged with our film MIEN, which you showed in the Marinadrome (http://lovehardthefilm.com/mien/ The words are here <http://ligne-noire.tumblr.com/post/101051433165/mien-a-note-on-a-scene>). But the piece in which I most explore the ecstatic is DETRUIS MOI (2011), which I am including here <http://ligne-noire.tumblr.com/post/155476445090/detruis-moi-llandudno-2010-all-life-forms> (there is a photo of the scene on the on the page; I can supply it and others if you would like?) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Unless we include the thrill I would feel before I was caned on numerous occasions in NSW public schools throughout the 1980s. I got something out of it every time, Mr Cartwright, Mr Hogan, Mr Baker, Mr Langford, Mr Rush(?), and probably a few others. I promise not to write on any more desks. I am much better at being caned now, but even then I didn’t usually flinch. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ivan Crozier, “Philosophy in the English Boudoir : Havelock Ellis, Love and Pain, and Sexological Discourses on Algophilia,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 13.3 (2004) 275-305 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Foucault wrote little about BDSM, but made some comments on it in an interview. See Michel Foucault, “An Interview : Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity,” B. Gallagher and A. Wilson, Toronto, juin 1982, *The Advocate*, no 400, 7, 1984, pp. 26-30 and 58. He relies on Gayle Rubin’s work on the San Francisco leather scene. Rubin’s work on SM remains the most interesting, from her brilliant 1984 essay “Thinking Sex” to her fascinating work the on a San Franciscan fisting club, The Catacombs: A Temple of the Butthole, both in *Deviations*, 2012. Andrea Beckmann’s use of Foucault in her study of BDSM is excellent: *Social Construction of Sexuality and Perversion*, (Palgrave 2009). David Halperin’s masterful *Saint Foucault* (1995) corrects Miller’s view of Foucault, as well as providing a great analysis of Foucault’s politics and political potential, and places him in the gay subcultures in which he moved.

There are some interesting observations in this interview (after the Dutch commentary on his flat) where Foucault discusses limit experiences, drugs, as well as his epistemology. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qzoOhhh4aJg>

The only other descriptions of BDSM I had previously encountered in that pre-internet age were in the Jehovah’s Witness’ magazine *Watchtower* which described in graphic detail the Spanner Trial, in an attempt to horrify the readers about gay sadomasochism, which I instead found arousing, and where I first learned about Prince Albert piercings. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Gary Gutting, *Michel Foucault’s Archaeology of Scientific Reason*, 1989. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Epistemic ruptures exist between systems of knowledge (epistèmes; paradigms) in the same field, they exist between different fields, and they exist between scientific and non-scientific fields, for Bachelard. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Clearly it is much more complex than I am sketching here. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans Alan Sheridan, 1972. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The fourth volume of Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* was finally published in France last week [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, vol I. *The WiIl To Knowledge* p.95. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Remarks on Marx: Conversations with Duccio Trombadori. Trans. R. James Goldstein and James Cascaito. New York: Semiotext(e), 1991 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)