Postmodern Spiritual Practices

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Chapter 3

Historicizing Transcendence

Antigone, the Good, and the Ethics of Psychoanalysis

If Aristotelian philosophy is difficult for us to conceive, it is because it has to be thought in a manner that never omits that matter is eternal, and that nothing is produced from nothing. On account of this, it remains stuck in an image of the world that has never permitted even an Aristotle—it is however difficult to imagine a more powerful mind in the entire history of human thought—to escape the enclosure that the celestial surface presented to his eyes, and not to consider the world—even the world of human relations, the world of language—as included in eternal nature, which is by definition limited. (Lacan 1986: 146)

Lacan rejects Anouilh's portrayal of Antigone as a “little fascist” hellbent on annihilating everything in her path. What he opposed is not the thesis that her deed destroys, but that it is conducted out of a pure will to destruction, for such a characterization overlooks the affirmation and the satisfaction from which her act derives its unstoppable force. (Copjec 2002: 41)

Jacques Lacan is chronologically the first of the thinkers labeled poststructuralist. His seminars, begun in the 1950s, drew up to eight hundred people and influenced all the major thinkers of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s in France. One could agree or disagree with him, accept or reject his teaching, but one could not ignore his provocative rereadings of both the classics of western culture in terms of psychoanalysis and of Freud in terms of the history of literature, philosophy, and art. Indeed, Lacan revolutionized the practice of psychoanalysis in France by reading Freud’s corpus not as a manual of interpretation that provided potted answers to pre-existing questions but as a grammar

2. Such an apriori style of interpretation is the problem with the psychoanalytic investigations examined by Lloyd-Jones (1985+) in his dismissive account of psychoanalysis’s relation to classical studies. Lloyd-Jones is unaware of Lacan’s work. Vernant and Vidal-Naquet’s claim that psychoanalysis has made no contribution to the understanding of ancient tragedy (1981: 63–86), likewise fails to engage Lacan’s reading
that made it possible to begin decoding the rhetoric of desire. Lacan was the first to apply the findings of linguistics to the study of psychoanalysis, and there was from the beginning a strong affinity between his work and philology. As Jean-Michel Rabaté observes, “Lacan not only stood out among his immediate contemporaries and colleagues in psychiatry as a philosopher who could read Greek and German fluently and who put to good use his knowledge of the classics, but also as someone who had the nerve and ambition to ‘re-found’ a whole field” (2003a: 12). For Lacan the study of the classics was never a mere

of the Antigone, though neither writer could have been unaware of the seminar, although it had not been published at the time. Again, they are reacting to an article published by Didier Anzieu in Sartre’s Les temps modernes (1966) that pursued a more traditional typological interpretation. For a fascinating discussion of the political motivations behind this assault, see Leonard on Vernant, Lacan, and Irigaray (2003). She also has important remarks to make on Lacan’s disturbing suggestion that the incestuous desires voiced in the play can all be traced to Jocasta.

3. Lacan was also fluent in Latin, but this was common for anyone of his generation who had received a traditional education. He speaks knowledgeably of Ovid and does not hesitate to assign Cicero’s De natura deorum to his auditors. He also shows clear knowledge and a lively appreciation of Wilamowitz (Lacan 1986: 183; 1991: 76, 191; Rabaté 2003b: xix).

There remain, nonetheless, disputes about just how good Lacan’s Greek was. These often involve polemics with Lacan’s literary executor and son-in-law, Jacques Alain Miller, who has vigorously prosecuted anyone who has sought to bring out alternative versions of the Seminars. It is thus often difficult to tell where the blame lies for mistakes in the Greek, with Lacan or his editor, since the original stenographic transcriptions of the seminars are unavailable for consultation and transcriptions of unauthorized recordings and personal notes are seized and destroyed as soon as they are published. Nonetheless, in their zeal justly to admonish Miller for his highhandedness, critics sometimes overstate the seriousness of the difficulties. See Roudinesco (1997: 423–24):

When Miller published Seminar VII (The Ethics of Psychoanalysis) in the autumn of 1986, no one attacked him. His adversaries, stunned by the legal defeat of [an unauthorized seminar] preferred to remain silent for the moment. But this seminar was more defective than the preceding ones. Miller had probably foreseen the danger, for he had sought assistance from several people: Judith Miller had helped with the Greek references; he had turned to Franz Kaltenbeck for the German quotations. Three academics had done some research, and several friends had corrected the proofs. . . . He sent a copy of the book to Pierre Vidal-Naquet, with a dedication reading “To Monseur Pierre Vidal-Naquet, who may wish to read the three lectures on ‘Antigone,’ this book, which would certainly have been sent to him by Jacques Lacan.” Vidal-Naquet at once began to read the magnificent chapter on Antigone, and was taken aback to find at least two mistakes on every page. Not a single Greek term was correct, several quotations were wrong, there were many misprints, and none of Lacan’s own serious mistakes had been spotted.

It is true that one can find numerous errors in the Greek, but it is certainly an exaggeration to say that not a single term is correct. While Miller clearly did not do Lacan a service by not having the Greek checked by a better-trained philologist (and one who
ornament, nor even a rhetorical field in which he hoped to find the master tropes of his discourse, but always, and very precisely, the genealogical ground on which he sought to refound psychoanalysis. The return to Freud (1966c) sought not to found a series of timeless truths, but the historical ground on which the present was constructed and by which it could thereby be deconstructed. It sought to “re-found” the subject in relation to the discrete forms of meaning that structured its desire. It is paradigmatic of Lacan’s profound engagement with Greco-Roman antiquity, therefore, that in 1959, when searching for a model of pure desire for his seventh seminar, on The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, he chose as his model Sophocles’ Antigone.

Lacan’s reading of the tragedy represents the climax of a three-year engagement with the genre that had begun the year before with a reading of Hamlet, and would draw to a close the following year with an examination of Claudel’s Coïffontaine trilogy (Leonard 2005: 109). Throughout this period there are also abundant references to the Oedipus Tyrannos and the Oedipus at Colonus. Nonetheless, it is the reading of Antigone as one who does not cede on her desire that is justly considered a masterpiece in psychoanalytic circles (Leonard 2005: 112; Loraux 2002: vii–xiv; Zupancic 2000: 174).

Antigone presents herself as autonomos, the pure and simple relationship of a human being to that which it miraculously finds itself carrying, that is the rupture of signification, that which grants a person the insuperable power of being—in spite of and against was not intimidated by Miller’s ruthless manner of dealing with dissent), most of the errors are minor and involve issues such as misplaced accents or clear typographical errors (see 1986: 366). These problems can be annoying but seldom affect the basic value of Lacan’s insights.

As for Lacan’s “serious” mistakes, unfortunately Roudinesco does not provide a list. While not systematically seeking to catalog them, I have observed the following errata. Lacan’s paraphrase of Poetics chapter 6 (1449b), δι’ εὐθείαν καὶ φοβοῦντα περαιρέουσα τὴν τοιούτου παθήματος καθαρσίν (“accomplishing through pity and fear the purgation of such emotions”) as “par l’intermédiaire de la pitié et de la crainte, nous sommes purgés, purifiés de tout ce qui est de cet ordre-là,” is perhaps tendentious (1986: 290). Lacan claims até occurs twenty times in Antigone, when in fact it appears a mere fourteen times (1986: 305). He translates ekhtéra (94) “inimité,” rather than ennemi (1986: 306). More seriously, he attributes the chorus’s description of Eros as enargês blepharón himeros eulektrou nymphas (“radiant desire from the eyelids of the well-bedded bride”) (795–96) to Antigone, who enters only after the third stasimon is finished (1986: 327). It is true that Antigone will later be described as the bride of Hades, but in the current context the chorus’s words constitute more an ironic juxtaposition than a direct description. None of these flaws, however, detract from the baseline value of Lacan’s interpretation and can for the most part be easily accounted for by the routine imprecisions that occur in the course of oral teaching. It is important to remember that Lacan himself never prepared this seminar for publication.
everything—what he [sic] is. . . . Antigone all but fulfills what can be called pure desire, the pure and simple desire of death as such [i.e., of that which is beyond the pleasure principle]. She incarnates this desire. (1986: 328–29)

Lacan’s commentary on the Antigone, unfortunately, is not well known to English-speaking classicists. His allusive and convoluted style has proven a significant barrier to the dissemination of his work in the classics community, while his close readings of canonical texts have failed to appeal to many of his less learned, postmodern successors.

The following year, Lacan’s seminar focused on Plato’s Symposium. Socrates, like Antigone, represents for Lacan a kind of purity that exceeds the bounds of communally acknowledged goods. His atopia, as Alcibiades terms it (215a2), places him beyond the bounds of the order defined by the Athenian polis, and that singularity in turn is the basis of his purity (Lacan 1991: 18–19, 126–27; 1973: 287). Thus, in the wake of his encounter with the Antigone, Lacan turned to Socrates and the Symposium to find a model for elaborating a theory of love as a response to the fundamental lack in our being that Freudian theory sees as the root of human desire.

The two seminars are widely acknowledged to form a pair (Leonard 2005: 167), and both Lacan’s ethics and his reading of the Symposium became touchstones in later postmodernist debates. More often than not, these texts are uncited, but Derrida, Kristeva, Irigaray, and Foucault all respond to these seminal readings. The seminar on transference, as we shall see, grows directly out of the concerns broached in the ethics. Where the seminar on the ethics asks most fundamentally: What do we owe our desire? that on transference asks: What do we owe the other as both the cause and the object of that desire? The next two chapters, thus, constitute a continuous argument and were originally conceived as one. They have been divided for purposes of clarity and to simplify the exposition. Nonetheless, it is our contention that it is the Antigone that leads Lacan to Plato, and it is through Plato and the problem of ethics that Derrida and Foucault will respond to Lacan.

4. See also Moi (2002: 101): “If we accept that the end of desire is the logical consequence of satisfaction (if we are satisfied, we are in a position where we desire no more), we can see why Freud in Beyond the Pleasure Principle, posits death as the ultimate object of desire—as Nirvana or the recapturing of the lost unity, the final healing of the split subject.”

The fact is that neither Lacan’s work nor his subsequent influence can be fully appreciated without a sustained encounter with the works of antiquity that formed for him a constant point of reference. His concept of desire finds its roots in the Platonic corpus. His work on both love and transference, as Micaela Janan indicates, draws heavily on the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus* (1994: 7–21, 144), and the Platonic concept of love as the effort to return to a lost—but somehow dimly remembered—unity figures prominently in much of his later work. In fact, Lacan’s conception of psychoanalysis is inseparable from his profound engagement with the language, history, and interpretation of the founding texts of western thought (Lacan 1986: 21). His much-vaunted return to Freud is also a return to the roots of Freudian thought. “Psychoanalytic theory, in order to be truly responsible for its concepts must account for its own historical emergence as it seeks to articulate its place in relation to the philosophical tradition which it inevitably inherits” (Shepherdson 2003: 117). In short, antiquity in Lacan’s texts, unlike in the dramas of the great modernists, functions not as an allegory of, but as a critique and challenge, to the present. It demands that we account for the history of both our science and our selves.

Lacan’s reading of Sophocles’ *Antigone*, therefore, although on one level clearly a response to Anouilh’s, never directly engages it. Rather, Lacan, with no small irony, observes that if, as Erwin Rhode claims, tragedians must pick a mythic subject yet portray it in a fashion consonant with the conflicts and prejudices of the present day, then Anouilh was correct to give us “his little fascist Antigone” (1986: 293).

There are, unsurprisingly, resemblances between Anouilh’s Antigone and that of Lacan. Both reject bourgeois “happiness” and oppose to it a concept of purity and anarchic transformative desire. Both show the influence of Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy*, with Antigone associated with Dionysian transgression and Creon with Apollonian order. For Lacan, Antigone’s choice, her desire, is pure precisely to the degree that it rejects all claims of the Other to dictate its objects or form. For Anouilh, that same alien otherness represents the mediocrity and alienation of the contemporary world.

So far, Lacan’s Antigone is little different from her predecessor. But desire in Lacan can never be separate from the signifying chain of which it is both a part and a deviation (1991: 201–2; 1986: 143, 340). Antigone’s desire can only be pure in relation to a historically specifiable
set of circumstances. It is embedded in the discursive possibilities of the moment. Tragic beauty for Lacan does not reflect but transcends the present. Antigone’s negation is not made in the name of abstract purity or empty self-assertion, as in the case of Anouilh, but in the name of specific and determined claims of flesh and blood that are rooted in the grammatical and ideological structures of fifth-century Athens. The affirmation of her desire cannot be separated from the tragic fate of the Labdacids. She is the bride of Hades who will lie with her brother.

Anouilh’s Antigone, however, defies Creon in the end “pour personne, pour moi.” Hers is an egoistic desire that seeks personal transcendence of bourgeois morality, where Lacan’s reading of Sophocles’ Antigone detects an antihumanism that ultimately demands a transcendence of the structures of the ego per se (Lacan 1986: 319–22). For Lacan, Antigone represents an ethical model, a model of ideal subject formation, precisely to the degree that she is presented as one who rejects the good as understood by the dominant mode of the Symbolic embodied in Creon’s decrees, i.e., by the law of the present. Her negation only makes sense in relation to Creon’s concrete positivity, not some abstract principle of transcendence.

In the end, Antigone needs to be studied, Lacan claims, precisely because of what the play is: one of the central points in the western tradition of ethical and moral discourse. We cannot think about the choice of the good without thinking about Antigone and her choice of death, her “non,” whether we know it or not (Lacan 1986: 285, 330; Žižek 1992: 77). In the same manner, we cannot understand the nature of our desire and the desire it provokes in others, without undertaking a reading of the Symposium. The transcendence, the dépassement, of our present impasse that psychoanalysis proposes is always anchored within the signifying chain out of which our collective discourse is fashioned.

1. Ethics, Beauty, and Transformation

It is clear, I think, to all that what I am showing you here this year is able to be situated between Freudian ethics and aesthetics. (Lacan 1986: 190)

There is no history without an internal limit within history itself, without an irreducible element, a negation that forbids the emergence of an outside of history. Again, this negation is able to be designated by its Lacanian name: the real. There is no arguing with the real, no negating it, since history depends on it. It is precisely because it cannot be negated that we
say it eternally returns or repeats [...] Referring to the real as empty, Lacan underscores this fact that what returns is nothing but the negation that prohibits any exception to history (Copjec 2002: 96).

Lacan’s choice of Antigone as his model for elaborating an ethics of pure desire is in fact variously motivated. First, there is the wish to respond to Anouilh. Second, there is the obvious interest of all facets of the Oedipus myth for psychoanalysis. Third, there is the centrality of Antigone to post-Hegelian reflection on the nature and foundation of our ethical substance. Fourth, there is the fundamental relationship that Lacan observes between the Freudian concept of catharsis and its Aristotelian precursor in the Poetics. Tragedy in general, therefore, and the Antigone in particular, Lacan argues, must occupy a central place in any satisfying psychoanalytic account of culture and ethics.

Accordingly, Lacan begins his commentary on the Antigone with an explication of catharsis as defined by the Stagirite.7 The purgation of pity and fear, he notes, does not merely posit the representation of such emotions. Indeed, as he observes, Antigone herself exhibits neither. But rather the phenomenon of catharsis evokes the existence of a position that transcends both pity and fear, “a beyond of” conventional categories of emotion, which he in turn links with Antigone’s unconditional pursuit of an object of desire that in itself is beyond the bounds of a normative or utilitarian reason (Lacan 1986: 285–90, 300, 372; Julien 1990: 112; Armstrong 2005: 270–71).8

Lacan, moreover, frames the whole of his investigation of the ethics of psychoanalysis and of the Antigone with a series of trenchant comments on the Nicomachean Ethics, which he admonishes his audience to read from end to end (1986: 30). The next year he would qualify this same work as a decisive step in the development of western ethical thought (1991: 14). One should not overinterpret these remarks, however. Lacan is anything but a strict Aristotelian. Aristotle’s ethics, he contends, represent a practice of the self based on the reasoned pursuit of communally acknowledged goods in conformity with the reality principle. It seeks happiness in the context of what Lacan, and later Foucault, would label an ethos of mastery that was inextricably bound

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8. In Rhetoric 2.8, 1386a Aristotle indicates that pity and fear are mutually exclusive emotions. Tragedy thus creates a virtual space in which the impossible can be evoked and purged.
to the subject position of members of the Greek ruling class. For Lacan, Aristotelian ethics were concerned with the problematics of knowledge (epistêmê) and right discourse (orthos logos), not desire (erôs, episthuma) (1986: 13–14, 30–39, 338–39, 363; Buci-Glucksmann 1992: 365–67; compare Vlastos 1991: 205–6). As such, they were ultimately ill suited to provide an ethics of psychoanalysis, which is predicated on the ineradicably individual desire of each analyst’s and analysand’s encounter with the collective structures of language, kinship, and law. It is in this context that, after examining the alternative models of Kant and Sade, Lacan will offer Antigone as his paradigm for an ethics of self-transformation that transcends the historically and politically ordered realm of the pleasure principle, an ethics that thereby reveals the limits of any socially constituted notion of the good (Lacan 1986: 281; Julien 1990: 109). He will follow this the next year with a direct examination of the role the desire of the analyst plays in the analytic situation when he reads Plato’s Symposium at the beginning of the seminar on transference, Le transfert. Thus in response to what he sees as an Aristotelian ethics of recognized goods, Lacan responds with an ethics of desire and self-transformation grounded in a reading of Sophocles and Plato in a psychoanalytic context.

For Lacan ethics is not a matter of virtue, self-improvement, or the pursuit of happiness, as found in the most common reading of Aristotle’s ethics of eudaimonia. 9 For Aristotle, as Julia Annas notes, the end of every intentional act is the good and the final good is happiness, which, though it does not imply a rejection of necessary sacrifice or pain, does require an overall positive evaluation of one’s life and material situation (Annas 1993: 30, 35–36, 38, 46, 367–68). To see happiness as Antigone’s goal, even when most broadly construed, would be to strain normal usage to the breaking point. This is a view that is very difficult to square with Antigone’s choice of deliberate death, whether in Sophocles’ text or Anouilh’s. 10 Ismene’s combination of principled

9. For a more open-ended and dialectical approach, although certainly not a Lacanian one, see Frank (2005).
10. There is one interesting exception. Aristotle’s discussion of the great-souled man or megalopsychos allows for someone who would not make pragmatic concessions, even at the risk of his own life, but would consider honor the supreme good:

If, then, he deserves and claims great things, and above all the greatest things, he will be concerned with one thing in particular. Desert is relative to external goods; and the greatest of these, we should say, is that which we render to the gods, and which people of position most aim at, and which is the prize appointed for the noblest deeds; and this is honour; that surely is the greatest of external goods. Honours and dishonours, therefore, are the
resistance and pragmatic calculation seems much closer to the mark (Annas 1993: 96; Frank 2006; Goldhill 2006).

Of course, even from a Lacanian perspective, happiness, virtue, and self-improvement are not evils. But, unlike conventional psychotherapy, they are not the goal of analysis. They do not entail the fundamental self-transcendence and conversion that lie at the heart of the psychoanalytic cure (Copjec 2002: 44). The end of analysis is not to produce the “normalized,” “well-adjusted” individual of late capitalist society, nor to overcome the analysand’s resistances to the analyst’s interpretations (Schneiderman 1983: 94). These are merely instances of countertransference and the imposition of the analyst’s desire as a sovereign good with which the patient must identify (Lacan 1973: 176–77). Rather the end of analysis is just the opposite. It is to reveal the factitious nature of our Imaginary identifications, to disclose our subordination to, and acceptance of, relations of domination through our identification with certain images of existence, which are projected by the ruling instances of power in our personal and social lives, and with the illusory promises of satisfaction they offer. Analysis does not reveal the truth of a traumatic past (primal scenes, bad mothering, absent fathers) but the nature of our finitude. The realization of our desire, which analysis seeks to offer, is, therefore, a traversing of our fantasy constructions of a stable identity that itself would represent and reflect the desire of the Other (“if only I would just do X, then I would be loved by my spouse, my parents, my country, my god, etc.”). As a consequence, this realization of desire represents a confrontation with our mortality and the Lacanian Real, the internal limit that guarantees the historicity and hence ultimately fictitious or “made” nature of all forms of Imaginary or Symbolic (i.e., coded, linguistic, socially constructed) identity (Lacan 1986: 351; Freiberger 2000: 225–26, 237–38; Luepnitz 2003: 232).

objects with respect to which the [megalopsychos] is as he should be. And even apart from argument it is with honour that [megalopsychoi] appear to be concerned; for it is honour that they chiefly claim, but in accordance with their deserts. (Nicomachean Ethics 1123b 15–24; Ross: 2001: 991–92)

The prime examples of great-souled men are precisely the heroes of epic to whom Antigone compares herself, but as the examples of Ajax and Achilles demonstrate their single-minded devotion to public virtue and honor can be a double-edged sword (Annas 1993: 116–17).

11. Every formation of the Symbolic is unique, as is every point of insertion in it, and thus every relationship to its beyond (Ragland-Sullivan 1986: 230–31, 299–305; Clément 1975: 16). The Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real are not reified things, but a set of logical relations presumed by the existence of the speaking subject (Julien 1990: 213–14). The speaking subject only exists to the extent that it exists in language—defined as the total set of codes and syntagmatic relations that make articulated meaning possible—that
It is for this reason that Antigone comes to function as the ethical model. As Joan Copjec observes:

Antigone’s *Haftbarkeit*, her perseverence to the end or to the momentous conclusion of an act that will necessarily overturn her, is contrasted to the *Fixierarbeit* of Creon as conversion, or self-rupture to modern progress. This contrast lets us observe the difference between “acting in conformity with the real of desire” and acting in a self-interested way to preserve one’s own continuity with oneself. The principle of *Fixierarbeit* is articulated by Lacan as: “Carry on working. Work must go on. . . . As far as desires are concerned come back later. Make them wait” (S VII: 315). *Work* here signifies something different, something opposed to the act insofar as work never concludes, it keeps going—or rather waiting. (2002: 45)

The ethical imperative, then, is to insist on desire even beyond the realm of goods, of *biens*, inscribed within the pleasure principle defined by bourgeois reality (Zupancic 2003: 179): for the realm of goods is not that of use, but exchange value. Freedom for it is defined by the ability to dispose of one’s goods as one wishes and this includes the good that is the self. The realm of goods is the realm of the commodified self of social exchange. It is for this reason that Lacan says, “Le domaine du bien est la naissance du pouvoir” (“The domain of the good is the birth of power”), punning on the notion of the good as an ethical substance and as a commodity in social-symbolic exchange relations. The ethics of psychoanalysis, as modeled by Antigone, are beyond “the good” and hence also beyond evil every bit as much as they were for Sartre’s Orestes and Camus’s Caligula (Lacan 1986: 269–70; Žižek 1992: 77–78; Zupancic 2003: 175–76).

Ethical action, therefore, does not simply reproduce society’s founding assumptions and our imaginary identification with those assumptions (Althusser 1971; Žižek 1992:12; Dowling 1984: 82–83). True ethical and moral action is creative. It introduces something fundamen-
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Itally new into the Real. It creates a space for our existence. The role of analysis is to make this act possible, not to make us comfortable with what already exists (Lacan 1986: 30). On this level, it is Oedipus himself in his self-inflicted blindness that can serve as our model:

He does not know that in attaining happiness [*le bonheur*], conjugal happiness and that of his profession as king, as the guide of a happy city, he is sleeping with his mother. The question can be asked: what does this treatment that he inflicts upon himself signify? What treatment? He renounces that which held him captive. In truth, he was conned, duped, by his very access to happiness. Beyond the providing of goods and services [*service des biens*], beyond even his complete success in providing these, he enters the zone in which he searches for his desire. (Lacan 1986: 352)

And it is here that we find Lacan’s ultimate objection to Aristotle: for Lacan the realization of desire can only be attained as an act of creation *ex nihilo*. It represents a fundamental transcendence of (and through) the given, which, as Lacan understands it, is a logical impossibility from an Aristotelian perspective.

If Aristotelian philosophy is difficult for us to conceive, it is because it has to be thought in a manner that never omits that matter is eternal, and that nothing is produced from nothing. On account of this, it remains stuck in an image of the world that has never permitted even an Aristotle [ . . . ] to escape the enclosure that the celestial surface presented to his eyes, and not to consider the world [ . . . ] as included in eternal nature, which is by definition limited. (Lacan 1986: 146)

It is for this reason that Lacan will ultimately turn to Plato instead (Lacan 1991: 13; Zupancic 2003: 184): for, as we shall see when we examine Lacan’s reading of the *Symposium* in chapter 4, the Platonic pursuit of the lost object, the Socratic *agalma*, is precisely a pursuit of what is not there. Hence, as Alcibiades learns to his discomfort, the dialectic of desire leads ultimately to a confrontation with the lack, the nothingness, at the heart of our being (*manque à l’être*), from which the object of that desire is created.12

12. Sartre had contended that it is this lack at the heart of being which propels us forward in the project of our existence (1943: 624–25). Such a vocabulary is central to post-Freudian analysis as well, as is exemplified in Lacan’s deliberate echoing of Sartre’s
This created object of desire or agalma that structures our existence is termed the sublime object and as such is the ground for the rapprochement between ethics and aesthetics cited by Lacan in the headnote to this section (Silverman 2000: 45). The sublime object, to which, according to the seminar on the Antigone, the phenomenon of beauty is intrinsically related, is that which is raised to the level of the Thing (Lacan 1986: 133). The Thing, here, refers to a concept first outlined by Lacan in this same seminar, das Ding. It is the ground of our being that is beyond Symbolic determinations and Imaginary identifications (Lacan 1986: 67). Das Ding is, then, the pre-object and, according to Lacan, it is the true object of Antigone’s desire. It is that piece of the Real that is both in us and beyond us and therefore is the ground of our desire (Silverman 2000: 16; Žižek 1989: 208–9; 1991: 169). The Beautiful and the Sublime, then, become two aspects of the same Thing: the first representing the beyond of representation and the second representing the impossibility of that representation:

13. Interestingly, this is one of the areas of similarity between Aristotle’s and Lacan’s ethics. Aristotle describes virtuous action as being done for its own sake, because it is kalon or “fine, noble.” One common translation of to kalon, however, especially in Plato, is “the beautiful” (Nicomachean Ethics 1115b11–24, 1116a 11, 1120a: 23–24; Annas 1993: 123, 370). Lacan’s and Foucault’s visions of ethics as a species of the aesthetics of existence, thus, has deep ancient roots.

14. Lacan thus collapses Kant’s categories of the beautiful and the sublime, but as Sussman (1993: 36) points out, beauty in Kant is a “way-station between pure reason and the sublime.” It presents the antinomies of pure reason: demanding the particular be apprehended within the universal, while maintaining its particularity. See also Sussman (1993: 28–29)
Although the suprasensible Idea/Thing cannot be represented in a direct, immediate way, one can represent the Idea “symbolically,” in the guise of beauty (in other words, the beautiful is a way to represent to ourselves “analogically” the good in the phenomenal world); what the chaotic shapelessness of the sublime phenomena renders visible, on the contrary, is the very impossibility of representing the suprasensible Idea/Thing. (Žižek 1992: 164)

The sublime object is not that which is caught up in the endless substitutions of Symbolically regulated exchange, but that which occupies a place beyond the quotidian satisfactions of the pleasure and reality principles (Lacan 1986: 131). This is also, as we shall see in the case of *Antigone*, the place of death.

Freud defines the pleasure principle in his *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1961a) as one of the self-preservative or ego instincts. The reality principle is its reflex and represents our socially constructed picture of the world that places limits on our pursuit of pleasure so as to avoid unpleasure. The reality principle is, then, not beyond the pleasure principle but a direct outgrowth of it. It is a set of norms, codes, representations, and rules of conduct that are an immediate product of the Symbolic, Lacan’s term for the world of regulated signifying practices (Lacan 1986: 42–43). Yet, the pleasure and reality principles are not all. Their attempt to constitute a closed totality always produces an inassimilable remainder. Freud’s argument is founded on concrete observations of the repetition compulsions of traumatized World War I veterans and other examples taken from his case histories. Here he detected the existence of a drive for a kind of satisfaction that cannot be accounted for by our daily seeking of immediate pleasures or by the fact of our settling for the kind of substitute satisfactions the reality principle offers in their stead. This drive represents the search for an absolute, pure satisfaction that transcends the very bounds of our identity and threatens it with destruction (Eagleton 2003: 213; Žižek 1992: 48). Freud would eventually label it the death drive or Thanatos, as opposed to the pleasure principle or Eros.15

The sublime object is thus not that which is searched for within the existing protocols of knowledge (i.e., the reality principle), but that which is “found” or “created” while nonetheless inhering in the

15. It is Lacan’s acceptance of the death drive that most decisively separates him from American psychoanalysis (Schneiderman 1983: 52–53).
Symbolic as a necessary moment of its own self-betrayal. It is worth quoting from the *Seminar* at some length on this difficult point:

We come once again upon a fundamental structure, which allows us to articulate the fact that the Thing in question is, by virtue of its structure, open to being represented by what I called earlier . . . the Other thing.

And that is the second characteristic of the Thing as veiled; it is by nature in the finding of the object, represented by something else.

You cannot fail to see that in the celebrated expression of Picasso, “I do not seek, I find,” that it is the finding [*trouver*], the *trobar* of the Provençal troubadours and the *trouvères*, and of all the schools of rhetoric, that takes precedence over the seeking.

Obviously, what is found is sought, but sought in the paths of the signifier. Now the search is in a way an antipsychic search that by its place and function is beyond the pleasure principle. For according to the laws of the pleasure principle, the signifier projects into this beyond equalization, homeostasis, and the tendency to the uniform investment of the system of the self as such; it provokes its failure. The function of the pleasure principle is, in effect, to lead the subject from signifier to signifier, by generating as many signifiers as are required to maintain at as low a level as possible the tension that regulates the whole functioning of the psychic apparatus. (Lacan 1986: 143)

The repetitive structure of most TV series offers a great example of what Lacan means by “searching” within the pleasure principle. They do not present the found object that breaks the frame of representation, but seek to lead the viewer through an endless chain of substitutions, while assuring us that nothing has really changed. Matt Dillon always gets the bad guy. Lucy never gets to perform with Ricky. The *Friends* are always friends. Antigone, however, like Oedipus, becomes a paradigm of beauty and ethical insight when she enters the zone where death encroaches on life and, as a willing victim, goes beyond the pleasure principle (Lacan 1986: 290; Julien 1990: 114–15; Žižek 1992: 21). Her model cannot be understood by the dominant reading of an Aristotelian ethics of happiness, *le bonheur*, nor would she be subject to the Sartrean charge of bad faith.


The authentic act of self-realization is equivalent to ‘die sittliche Substanz’—the ‘ethical substance’ or ‘morality as substantive performance.’

To enquire of the justification or compass of this ethical substance, to challenge its enactment in the name of external criteria, is vanity. Enter Creon. (Steiner 1984: 29; emphasis in original):

καλόν μοι τούτο ποιούση θανεῖν.
φίλη μετ’ αυτού κέισομαι, φίλου μέτα,
όσια πανουργήσας

Antigone: for me, it is a beautiful thing to die doing this. Dear to him I will lie with this dear one, having committed holy crimes. (lines 72–75)

Lacan notes that the Antigone itself has long played a central role in western ethical thought.17 Indeed, he argues that the play forms part of our implicit morality whether we realize it or not (1986: 330), “I did not by some decree make Antigone a central point in the matter that concerns us, ethics. For a very long time this has been known, and even those who have not acknowledged its presence know that it plays a part in the discussions of the learned” (1986: 285). In the context of this evocation of the tradition of erudite, philosophically informed readings of the play, Lacan takes particular note of the famed interpretations offered by Hegel and Goethe. He remarks that Hegel is mistaken in his reduction of the conflict between Creon and Antigone to a mere allegory of the contradiction between the discourses of the polis and the oikos (1986: 276; Žižek 2004: 54).18 In this objection, Patricia Johnson’s psychoanalytic reading of the character of Antigone throughout the Sophoclean corpus echoes Lacan. Johnson notes that

17. See also Steiner (1984: 125, 138) and Oudemans and Lardinois (1987: 204).

18. In doing so, Lacan gives short shrift to how much his own interpretation owes to the history of Hegelian interpretations of this tragedy and considerably simplifies Hegel’s view. See Copjec (2002: 31), “Historically situated at the very ‘threshold of biological modernity,’ as a contemporary of Bichat and the rest, Hegel considered Antigone’s act from the point of death. Her deed, he argued, concerns not the living but the dead, ‘the individual who, after a long succession of separate disconnected experiences, concentrates himself into a single completed shape, and has raised himself out of the unrest of the accidents of life into the calm of simple universality’ (para. 452 [Phenomenology of the Spirit]).” For a complete account of Hegel’s various readings of the play, their significance, and later impact, see Steiner (1984: 28–42) as well as Oudemans and Lardinois (1987: 116). Peter Burian has recently argued that all oppositional readings of the Antigone can be ultimately traced to Hegel (2004, reported to me by Don Lavigne). On Hegel as the first to see the Greeks and Greek philosophy as the origin of modernity, see Leonard (2005: 148).
Antigone cannot be conceived of as the representative of the oikos tout court since her allegiance is exclusively to the male members of the household. Thus she rejects her sister even when Ismene offers to share Antigone’s punishment although she did not share the crime (Johnson 1997: 369–72).¹⁹

Lacan also objects to Hegel’s positing of a final reconciliation between the two competing discursive modes at the play’s end (1986: 292). Antigone’s splendid isolation in her choice of death presents her as a figure whose ethical act can never be recuperated by the civic discourse, of which Creon perceives himself as the sole legitimate representative (Lacan 1986: 300–1; Žižek 1989: 117; Copjec 2002: 15; Leonard 2005: 113–14). To that extent, Lacan’s reading is closer to Goethe’s which posits—not an opposition between two abstract principles—but a conflict between a representative of the state who oversteps his bounds and tries to force even the dead to conform to the norms of civic life, and the victim, or rather the agent, of an all-consuming passion (Lacan 1986: 297).²⁰

Indeed, as Lacan notes, Antigone’s decision to defy Creon and bury Polynices is an act that consciously seeks death. She makes no effort to defend Polynices’ actions nor denies Creon’s argument that Eteocles and Polynices should not be accorded the same honors (Lacan 1986: 290, 323–25; Guyomard 1992: 106; Benardete 1999: 6).²¹ Her choice takes her beyond the realm of rational calculation and the collective norms of satisfaction it implies, beyond the Freudian pleasure and reality principles, beyond an Aristotelian concept of the good (Lacan 1986: 78, 281; Žižek 1991: 25; Julien 1990: 109). Hers is a stance that transcends the comfortable binary oppositions that structure our daily social and moral lives.

Because her choice of death cannot be understood according to strictly rational calculations, and she makes no attempt to justify it within those norms,²² Antigone cannot be read as representing a simple

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¹⁹. For another recent psychoanalytic account of tragedy that makes mention of Lacan, though not of his commentary on the Antigone, see Caldwell (1994).


²¹. See Johnson (1997: 374) on “the excessive, or at least self-destructive, nature of her attachment to Polynices in Antigone, observed by every reader of the play.”

²². As David Wray observes to me, in ancient thought, and particularly among the later Stoics, suicide was not per se an irrational choice, depending upon one’s situation. He also observes that Antigone’s learning of her incestuous parentage might well have been considered so great a dishonor that suicide, as Jocasta’s case shows, was not unthinkable. Nonetheless, the text offers no such justification and dramatically the Antigone takes place several years after the original revelation, thus she has been living with this knowledge for quite some time. Moreover, the chorus itself at line 220 declares anyone who desires death
antithesis of freedom to tyranny, or of the individual to the state (Lacan 1986: 281; Žižek 1989: 116–17; 1992: 77–78). In fact, as she acknowledges, she had chosen death before Creon’s decree against the burial of Polynices had been promulgated, and she defines herself to Ismene as one already belonging to the realm of the dead: σὺ μὲν ζῆσ, ἦ δ’ ἐμὴ ψυχὴ πάλαι / τέθυκεν, ὡστε τοῖς θανῶσιν ὀφελέσαι (“You live on! My soul has long since died so that it might serve the dead”) (ll. 559–60; see Lacan 1986: 315, 326; Guyomard 1992: 106). Admittedly, Kamerbeek and Jebb refer these lines back to 69 through 77 and accordingly date Antigone’s symbolic death to her decision to violate Creon’s edict. Such an interpretation is designed to smooth out the most disturbing aspects of Antigone’s declaration: death was not her desire; she simply enacts a pious wish to see her brother buried.23

But there are problems with this strategy of containment, which consistently asks us to resolve moments of psychological tension or textual indeterminacy in favor of a normative model based on the utilitarian calculus of the pleasure principle.24 First, it ignores the literal content of the line. Palai, “long since” (Griffith 1999: ad loc.), would not in most

to be mòros, “a fool.” It would be interesting to speculate, however, on what a Lacanian reading of the Younger Cato’s suicide might look like and how much it might resemble his analysis of the Antigone.

23. Burial of the dead was a complex and controverted issue in fifth-century Athens. The practice of collective burial of the war dead in democratic Athens, as testified to by Pericles’ funeral oration in Thucydides and Plato’s Menexenus, represented a transfer of responsibility from the family, where mourning rituals were primarily the responsibility of the women of the house, to the state, which was a masculine arena. An unburied corpse was thought to pollute the household as a whole and members of the family were under an affirmative obligation to address the matter. The house or oikos was also the traditional aristocratic seat of power as opposed to the democratic polis. One purpose of the burial legislation was to take the power and glory traditionally associated with aristocratic warfare (kleos) and to transfer them to the démos as a whole. In addition, the bodies of felons were normally left unburied in Athens. Finally, there is a version of the Seven against Thebes myth told by Euripides in the Phoenecian Women in which the Thebans leave the bodies of the seven unburied, and Theseus, the great Athenian culture hero, personally sees to their proper burial. The issue of burial, then, crystallizes a number of the structuring ideological oppositions around which the play is built: oikos versus polis (as Hegel saw); male versus female (as Creon repeatedly asserts); democratic versus aristocratic rule; Athenian versus Theban; and the law versus transgression. See Knox (1982: 39–41); Oudemans and Lardinois (1987: 98–101, 113, 162); and Tyrell and Bennett (1998: 27, 47–48, 62, 139–40).

24. Or what Oudemans and Lardinois term the categories of “separative thinking” (1987: 43, 233 and passim). On the “plasticity” and “open syntax” of Sophocles’ text, which allows for multiple readings, see Tyrrell and Bennett (1998: 67–68). It is not so much that the “commonsense” reading of lines 559–60 is necessarily wrong, as that it should not be privileged and allowed to suppress other textually founded interpretations in the name of a normative (and hence inherently anachronistic) notion of what Sophocles “must have meant.”
cases mean “earlier that same morning”—as it must if it refers back to the passage cited by Kamerbeek and Jebb—but “long ago” as David Grene translates (1992: 183). Second, this more soothing interpretation of 559–60 advocated by Kamerbeek is in seeming contradiction with the express content of lines 460–62 where Antigone says that she knew she would die, even if Creon had not issued his edict, and that if she died before her time, so much the better:

\[
\thetaανουμένη γὰρ ἔξηδη, τί δ’ οὐ;
κεὶ μή σο προύκηρυξος: εἰ δὲ τοῦ χρόνου
πρόσθεν θανοῦμαι, κέρδος αὐτ’ ἔγοι λέγω.
\]

For I knew very well that I would die—why not—Even if you had not made your pronouncements; but if before my time I will die, I will count it as a gain. Antigone seeks death not because of Creon’s decree, but almost in spite of it. Thus Jebb glosses line 461, “Even if thou hadst not proclaimed death as the penalty of infringing the edict” (1900: ad loc.). Antigone has, in fact, “long since” been dead. That is her nature, as indicated by her very name: “she who is against, or in place of, generation,” i.e., the reproductive force of life (Benardete 1999: 18, 199). Thus, in death, she is portrayed as the bride of Hades, the culmination of her *erōs* (654, 806–16; Griffith 1999: 52). Likewise Haemon’s final embrace of her expires in an ejaculation of blood.

\[
\epsilon\varsigma \delta’ ύγρόν
\άγκων’ \ετ’ \ἐμφρων παρθένῳ προσπτύσθεται.
\]

25. Kamerbeek (1978: ad loc.) cites Jebb’s commentary for arguing that *palai* here must have the less common meaning of “not long ago,” where Jebb writes, “i.e., ever since she resolved to break the edict.” Nonetheless, in Jebb’s actual translation we find “my life hath long been given to death” (1900: ad loc.; emphasis mine). See also: Fagles (1982: 88), “I gave myself to death long ago”; and Watling (1947: 141), “My heart was long since dead.” It seems clear that Kamerbeek and Jebb both are struggling in their commentaries against what they see to be the normal reading of the line. It is the implication they find intolerable, not the Greek. Woodruff is perhaps best, allowing the possible ambiguity of *palai* to show through (2001: 24), “Already my soul is dead.”

26. “In contrast to Creon’s crass mercantilism (221–22, 1035–39nn.), Ant. uses the term to mean ‘a true benefit’” (Griffith 1999: ad loc.).

27. As Loraux notes (1987a: 37–38), virgins led to their death in tragedy are routinely referred to as “brides for Hades. In the shared understandings of social life, death is a natural metaphor of marriage because, in the course of the wedding procession, the young girl renounces herself.” In tragedy in general and in the Antigone in particular, however, this metaphor becomes literalized. See also Ormand (1999: 93).
Still conscious he enfolds the maid into his soft embrace
And panting shoots forth a sharp stream
Of drizzling crimson on her white cheek.28
Corpse lies with corpse, wretchedly receiving
Its marriage rites in the house of Hades. (1236–41)

Antigone dies a virgin whose marriage (like Haemon’s) is consummated in death (Oudemans and Lardinois 1987: 144, 183–84; Segal 1995: 128). Creon’s edict provides but the moment in which her desire is realized (Benardete 1999: 72–73). She is in fact the inconceivable monster whose existence the chorus had denied in response to Creon’s initial threat: she is the one who desires (erâi) death, who is beyond the pleasure principle (line 220; Oudemans and Lardinois 1987: 168).29

“Her desire for that which lies beyond the pleasure principle is precisely what Lacan helps us see when he famously refers to Antigone as one caught between the two deaths: the Symbolic and the Real. Antigone has “long since” died the first death. Since she accompanied her father into exile, she has in effect been the servant of the dead, shut off from communal Symbolic life and immured within the closed world of her family (Butler 2000: 60):

Oh tomb, oh bridal chamber, oh hollowed out
Ever-wakeful home, where I journey
To those who are mine. (891–93)
The first death is that to meaning, the second to being. It represents an annihilation beyond punishment and beyond redemption: in Lacan’s Heideggerian terms, it is a loss of one’s individual being (“the ontic”) and a rejoining of Being per se. One may, in fact, always die one death without the other (Lacan 1986: 291, 341, 353–54; 1991: 120; Žižek 1992: 43; Butler 2000: 48–49). Thus, as Žižek notes, Napoleon on Elba did not know he was already dead (1991: 44), and, as I have argued elsewhere, Ovid in Tomis did and hoped for resurrection (Miller 2004a: chapter 8). Antigone, however, both knows she is dead and desires death (the second) nonetheless.

It is in fact her exclusion from the Symbolic community, her Symbolic death that “imbues her character with sublime beauty” and raises her to the level of the Thing, according to Lacan (Žižek 1989: 135; Žižek 2004: 54; see also Lacan 1986: 327; 1991: 154). In her embrace of the Real, she traverses the very atê, the sinister daimonic force, that marks the impassable barrier between the Symbolic and the Real, the human and the divine, intelligence and folly, the law and its transgression. Lacan here joins Butler and casts an interesting light on the views of some of Sophocles’ most distinguished classical readers. Atê is variously translated as “devastation,” “disaster,” “curse,” “ruin,” and “madness” (D. Allen 2000: 88; Oudemans and Lardinois 1987: 135). It appears fourteen times within the play, making it one of the tragedy’s most important recurring themes. Moreover, as the chorus in the second stasimon makes clear, atê is that which defines the curse of the house of the Labdacids (line 593; Lacan 1986: 306–7; Tyrrell and Bennett 1998: 81). It finds its representation in the combination of superhuman power and hubris that defines an Oedipus who insists upon his desire for insight to the point of blindness, exile, and ultimately death (Knox 1988: 6–16; Segal 1988: 140; Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1981: 81–119). It is also the blind rage of Polynices and the attack of the Seven against Thebes. It is Antigone’s sublime choice of death before the decrees of Creon. As the chorus sings, “There is nothing outstanding in the life of mortals outside atê” (lines 613–14).

Finite beings can only exist by permanently using their finite power against the dangers of destruction, which is nevertheless inevitable.

This is precisely the position of Antigone and Creon at the end of

30. In Empedocles’ Purifications, the soul is pictured as a daimôn wandering in the field of Atê. See Vernant (1965: 1.120).
the play. . . . In the Antigone the cosmic order is revealed in its duality. It is part of this order that finite beings transgress their limits and are destroyed. Divine order is also disorder. (Oudemans and Lardinois 1987: 203)32

Atê marks this border or limit, which is also that between the two deaths, the realm designated by the sublime object as that of das Ding, of which all true ethical action must partake if it is not to be a simple reproduction of the existing relations of domination (Lacan 1986: 347; Žižek 1991: 25; Copjec 2002: 43).

As Judith Butler puts the case (and it is worth quoting her at some length):

For Lacan, to seek recourse to the gods is precisely to seek recourse beyond human life, to seek recourse to death and to instate that death within life; this recourse to what is beyond or before the symbolic leads to a self-destruction that literalizes the importation of death into life. It is as if the very invocation of that elsewhere precipitates desire in the direction of death, a second death, one that signifies the foreclosure of any further transformation. Antigone, in particular, “violates the limits of Atê through her desire” (277). If this is a limit that humans can cross only briefly or, more aptly, cannot cross for long . . . She has crossed the line, defying public law, citing a law from elsewhere, but this elsewhere is a death that is solicited by that very citation. She acts, but acts according to a command of death. . . . (Butler 2000: 51)

In fact, Butler and Lacan are merely glossing what the chorus itself tells us at 622–25, “the bad sometimes seems to be the good to that man whose mind a god turns toward atê, but one may live only the slightest time beyond atê” (see Lacan 1986: 315, 322–23). Antigone, therefore, by insisting upon her desire beyond the second death, traverses the veil of atê and achieves a sublime beauty that is unable to be accounted for by any strictly rational calculation of costs and benefits nor assimilated to a universal Symbolic, and hence normative, maxim of ethical conduct (Butler 2000: 53). Her authenticity cannot be separated from her transgressive desire.

Finally, although Kamerbeek and Jebb wish to see in Antigone’s declaration that she is long since dead a reference to her resolution to bury

32. See also Goold (1988: 158).
Polynices, not to a more disturbing sense that she is already dead and that Creon’s edicts therefore are but the occasion for realizing the desire that forms the core of her being, the passage they point to is every bit as disturbing as the implications they seek to avoid:

Antigone: καλόν μοι τούτο ποιούσῃ θανεῖν·
φίλη μετ’ αὐτοῦ κέισομαι, φίλου μέτα,
"οσία πανουργήσασ’ (lines 72–75)

Antigone: for me, it is a beautiful thing to die doing this. Dear to him I will lie with this dear one, having committed holy crimes.

The incestuous overtones of these lines, though widely denied, are too self-evident to require extensive elucidation (Bernadete 1999: 13; Butler 2000: 17; Wohl forthcoming: 12). As Griffith judiciously notes, “The unusual double repetition in 73 (for the simple polyptoton, φίλη μετὰ φίλου) emphasizes the bond of φίλία (cf. 81 φιλήτατωι...) and the physical closeness of the two bodies (cf. 1240 [Haemon’s last embrace])” (1999: ad loc.). The embrace of the dead Labdacid brother can no more be free of sexual overtones than can Haemon’s spurting blood on Antigone’s cheek. Thus, Vernant and Vidal-Naquet’s claim that when Antigone “scatters dust over the corpse of Polynices, [she] is not prompted by an incestuous affection for the brother she is forbidden to bury: she is proclaiming that she has an equal religious duty to all her dead brothers” represents an extraordinary moment of textual insensitivity by two of the twentieth century’s most gifted interpreters of Greek culture (1981: 77–78). Antigone is a maid who refuses to leave her family and join that of her husband. She consistently ignores or rejects the demands of exogamy and conflates the categories of kinship and love. To say in a fit of literal mindedness that the scattering of dust on Polynices’ corpse does not signify a desire to have intercourse

33. But see also Kamerbeek (1978: ad loc.), “It is certainly preposterous to read an incestuous intention into the words, whatever insinuation may be heard in some utterances of Creon’s.” One always wonders when someone forbids you to interpret a text in a manner to which they have just drawn your attention about the motivation for such a police action. Again there is no argument about the meaning of the Greek, only about the licit and illicit inferences one can make from the text’s content. Compare sugkoiμâmai (= sun + keimai, for which meta + keimai is an obvious periphrasis) at Sophocles, Electra 274; Euripides, Phoenician Women 54; Aeschylus, Agamemnon 1258; and sugkoiμήσis at Plato, Phaedrus 255e. No one would think to argue for a non-erotic reading in these passages, although the literal import of the word is the same as that of meta + keimai in the passage under discussion.
with her brother is both reductive (who said it did?) and a manifest attempt to ignore the consistent incestuous imagery and themes that saturate this and other scenes in the tragedy, as well as the Theban cycle as a whole.\footnote{Oudemans and Lardinois (1987: 112–13, 167, 172); Zeitlin (1990: 149); Ormand (1999: 90–92); Benardete (1999: 9, 62, 97–98).} Rather, as Judith Butler points out, Antigone is one who was born into a conflation of the positions that anchor the most elementary of Symbolic codes, the bonds of kinship and their corollary, the incest taboo, and as a result she is from the beginning tainted by its transgression and hence beyond the Symbolic per se (2000: 18–22). She is sister, daughter, and aunt simultaneously. She is, in fact, long since dead: she has no unambiguously recognized place within the Symbolic from which she can make her claim to legitimacy, to a law that will be recognized by all.

Creon, then, does not so much represent the tyrant who forces Antigone to make an impossible choice between life and freedom, but rather he is the inflexible embodiment of the civic norms that her pursuit of a desire beyond the bounds of those articulated within the realm of common life both requires and transcends. Her choice thus represents a pure ethical act that is shaped neither by the banality of a self-interested selection among communally recognized goods nor the self-loathing of conforming to a code that is both recognized and despised (Julien 1990: 112; Žižek 1992: 77). Such an ethical choice, as Lacan implicitly acknowledges, is Kantian in its devotion to a pure concept of duty, but psychoanalytic in its predication on a highly individualized desire that cannot be generalized, with regard to its content, into a universal ethical maxim of the kind that Kant required (Lacan 1986: 68, 365–66).

Antigone’s choice, her desire, is pure precisely to the degree that it ultimately rejects all claims of otherness and encloses itself in what Patrick Guyomard, in his critical response to Lacan’s reading, sees as an incestuous narcissism. For this latter-day French psychoanalyst, it is Creon’s bitter ability finally to learn from his mistakes, rather than Antigone’s suicidal purity, that presents the real ethical model (1992: 45, 52, 62–64, 75). But for Lacan, it is the beauty of Antigone’s choice of a good beyond all recognized goods, beyond the pleasure principle, that gives her character its monumental status and makes her a model for an ethics of creation as opposed to conformity (1991: 13). It is for this reason that he cites Antigone’s self-comparison to the ever-weeping, petrified Niobe, another princess encased alive in stone—as the central axis around which the play turns (ll. 823–33). In this one image
we see brought together the themes of beauty, monumentality, and death in a singular apotheosis of tragic transgression (Lacan 1986: 311, 315, 327). Beauty for Lacan represents the perfect moment between life and death, a moment both articulated by and beyond time and desire, a moment whose true achievement can only be imagined as the incarnation of a pure desire beyond any recognizable object.\footnote{See Lacan (1986: 291, 344; 1991: 15, 154); Julien (1990: 114–15); Žižek (1989: 135); Copjec (2002: 218); and Oudemans and Lardinois (1987: 188–90).}

For Lacan, then, as will be the case for Foucault in his turn to antiquity, the search for an ethics leads above all to an aesthetics of existence, to the search for the beautiful life (Foucault 1994d: 415; 1994c: 617).\footnote{See note 13.}

Not to cede on one’s desire, Lacan’s formula for Antigone as an ethical model, is not therefore to absolutize the object of one’s desire into a timeless good, but to recognize the nature of desire as a situated lack that points beyond itself (1986: 368, 370). To not cede on one’s desire is the conscious affirmation of finitude, and hence of contingency, as the condition necessary for the sublimation and transcendence of that contingency.\footnote{See Renaut 1993 on Heidegger and Sartre’s conception of finitude as the condition for the subject’s self-transcendence. Lacan was a greater reader of both.}

In other words, for us to go beyond the bounded nature of our position within the world of Symbolic law, i.e., beyond the pleasure and reality principles, we must die to the subject position that defines what \emph{we} are (1986: 328–29). Like Antigone, we too must be “long since dead”: for in affirming our desire we affirm both our necessary situatedness and our capacity to go beyond it.\footnote{In a sense, the affirmation of that capacity is what makes one already dead: for to posit the ability transcend one’s subject position is already to stand outside it. This is precisely what Ismene cannot do. Of course, the moment we step beyond, a new position begins to form beneath our feet, lest we slide into irreversible psychosis or the second death.} Creon’s dictates make possible Antigone’s desire to transgress them, and Antigone’s affirmation of her desire can only point beyond the law by recognizing that it is defined and bounded by the law. If Antigone were an innocent, blithely unaware of Creon’s edict, when she buried her brother, there would no tragedy, no transcendence. In more orthodox Freudian terms, the death drive is necessarily implicated in the pleasure and reality principles even as it points beyond them.

True ethical action does not simply reproduce the Symbolic law. It introduces something new into the Real. It creates a place for our existence. Analysis is the prelude to moral action as such, because it is what makes our desire, as a relation to the law, visible. Antigone’s “no,” then, stands as a demand addressed to Creon’s law, to what Lacan defines
as the Other, but her demand is only authentic in relation to that law (Lacan 1986: 30, 331). It projects an absolute transcendence that can only be founded upon the contingent. On a Lacanian reading, Creon is not opposed to Antigone, but the condition of her possibility.

3. Reading Antigone

Whereas Creon’s language and attitudes associate him with the aggressive, manipulative rationalism of the Ode on Man, Antigone appears as part of the human-dominated natural world. In her grief she is the mother bird lamenting her empty nest (ll.423–25), the hunted animal. She herself compares her fate to that of Niobe, fused with the organic process of nature . . . (ll. 826–27). (Segal 1990: 164–65)

The reciprocal affection between parents and children on the one hand and brothers and sisters on the other represents the model of what the Greeks called philia. The word philos, which has a possessive force corresponding to the Latin suus, denotes first and foremost that which is one’s own, that is, for the relative, another relative close to him. Aristotle on several occasions and in particular when writing about tragedy tells us that this philia is based on a kind of identity felt between all the members of an immediate family. Each member of the family is an alter ego, a sort of double or multiplied self, for each of his relatives. (Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1981: 6–)

In its beauty, Sophocles’ Antigone presents what Lacan defines as a “sublime object.”39 Our ethical obligation as readers and analysts is to be true to this object to the precise degree that it transcends all normative categories. As Antigone does not cede on her desire, neither can we assimilate her tragedy to a pre-existing set of critical categories, even psychoanalytic ones. This is an obligation to the text, but it is simultaneously an obligation to our own desire as readers, critics, and subjects: for the encounter with the sublime object is one that must shake us to our very core if it is not to be a factitious or mechanical exercise in the application of reassuring truisms. To meet our obligation to the sublime text we must go beyond the dictates of the pleasure and reality principles, beyond good and evil to encounter pure desire: the moment in which the canons of meaning shudder before their own beyond.

In many ways, this ethical obligation to beauty is met not by subjecting the text to a pre-existing theoretical model, but by the practice of

old-fashioned philology. We must closely attend to the play of meaning in the text and the ways in which it transcends our normative canons of the good, the true, and the beautiful, that is to say our day-to-day unreflective commerce with our larger Symbolic communities as defined by our profession, our ideological commitments, and our personal histories. The problem, of course, is that good, old-fashioned philology has almost never existed and what has passed for attention to the text has too often been an exercise in domesticating it to norms of intelligibility, canons of taste, and concepts of historical plausibility alien to the brute facticity of the text itself. We have submitted to Creon’s laws rather than pursued the sublime object in all its strangeness. We have ceded on our and the text’s desire in the name of utility, in the name of conformity to a reality principle that would predetermine the limits of our experience and its signification, in the name of le bonheur.

To demonstrate how this ethical (and hence philological) obligation to the text, and its own aesthetic transcendence of the already given, could be pursued in relation to Lacan’s own proof text, therefore, I propose to pursue a close reading of the Antigone’s opening lines, taking as little for granted as possible while allowing the unfolding of the alien, conflicting, and at times repetitive forms of meaning that inhabit these lines to proceed with a minimum of interference. Antigone’s first sentence is addressed to her sister Ismene before dawn outside the royal palace. As is typical of Thebes on the Athenian stage, already we are in a space that is explicitly beyond the norm. Athenian women of good families were not to be found running about in the street in the middle of the night (Wohl forthcoming: 2). We begin thus in a place outside the law to announce an edict of the new tyrannos, Creon, and to seek the support of a woman and a sibling in its transgression:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{ΚΟΙΝΟΝ} & \text{ αὐτάδελφον Ἰσμήνης κάρα,} \\
\text{ἀρ’ ὀἰσθ’ ὁ τί Ζεὺς τῶν ἀ’π’ Οἰδίπου κακῶν} \\
\text{ὁποῖον οὐχὶ μῶν ἔτι ξάκασαιν τελεῖ;} \\
\text{οὐδὲν γὰρ ὤτ’ ἀλγείνόν ὤτ’ ἀτης ἄτερ}^{40} \\
\text{ὀτ’ αἰσχρόν οὔτ’ ἀτιμόν ἔσθ’}, \text{ ὁποῖον οὐ} \\
\text{τῶν σῶν τε κάμὼν οὐκ ὀποιπ’ ἐγὼ κακῶν.}
\end{align*}
\]

40. See Gross’s gloss “‘(nothing) not without destruction’; since the accumulation of negatives gives the reverse of what Antigone means, K[amerbeek] reads οὐδὲν instead of the second οὐτ(ε), ‘(nothing) painful and (nothing) which is lacking destruction’ but the sense is clear in any case” (1988: ad loc.). for a survey of the textual difficulties see Jebb (1900: 243–46).
Oh common wombmate, dear head of Ismene,
Do you know what if any of the evils from Oedipus
Zeus has yet to accomplish for the two of us still living?
For there is nothing painful nor without atê
Nor shame nor dishonor such as
I have not seen in your evils and mine.

The first two words after the initial vocative interjection are all but impossible to translate in anything approaching their original concision. They form a tautology whose harshness most translations smooth over (Watling 1947: 126; Grene 1992: 161; Woodruff 2001: 1). Jebb’s, “my sister, my own sister” in no way does justice to the strange conjunction of these two words, reducing them to the recognizable sentiments of the nineteenth-century drawing room (1900: ad loc.). Rather than seeking to find a solution to this problem, let us linger over these words, resisting the urge for an overhasty naturalization while paying close attention to their resonance with the whole of Sophocles’ closely wrought text.

*Koinon* normally means something “held in common, shared.” What is the shared thing, the thing held in common addressed here? On first hearing, it would appear to be the *autadelphon*, a kinship term, which here appears in its lengthened form rather than the more normal *adelphos*. While conventionally translated “brother” or “sister,” as Benveniste has pointed out (1969: 1.220–21), Greek uses a periphrasis for male and female siblings, unparalleled in other Indo-European languages. *Autadelphon* literally refers to one of two or more people or things that have shared the same womb or *delphus*. The term thus names one of the play’s central themes. hence, *Antigone* will later refer to herself as one who does reverence to those who have shared the same entrails (*homosplanchnous sebein*, 511). The less common lengthened form, *auta-delphon*, underlines the literal content of the word and prevents its rapid assimilation to a purely conventional kinship term. It is an image of one flesh, inseparable in the womb and beyond (Segal 1990: 180; Leonard 2005: 127). Why, then, is *koinon* even necessary? Does it not merely repeat the idea inherent in *auto*? “Oh common same-wombed one” these opening syllables seem to cry. What same-wombed one is not common, is strange, is *unheimlich*, we might well ask? Moreover, the neuter, as Griffith notes, “may suggest also their ‘common brother’”: Eteocles, Polynices, or Oedipus

41. He is of course constrained by the bonds of Victorian poetic decorum.

Indeed, it is same-wombedness that is at the heart of the Oedipal family romance. The self-enclosed world of the tauto-logy is precisely what opposes Antigone’s obligations to family and professed love of death to the ordered realm of civic law and virtue that Creon proposes to inaugurate with his edict forbidding the burial of the rebel Polynices (Segal 1990: 179–81; Benardete 1999: 9, 97–98). Similarly, it is Oedipus’s own discovery of an excessive sameness, of a strange commonality at the heart of his being, that will cast him beyond the bounds of civic life in the Antigone’s belated prequel (Butler 2000: 61). In fact, words that begin with the auto-prefix have a peculiar prominence throughout the play (Benardete 1999: 2; Wohl forthcoming: 18). Not only does autadelphos occur twice more (503 and 696) where it refers unambiguously to Polynices, but also, and perhaps most famously, Antigone herself is later referred to as autonomos (824), a reference to her being a law unto herself, a self-enclosed, self-legislating unity, who rejects the otherness of the law of the polis, of the Symbolic community in which intersubjective norms of human conduct are imposed and negotiated (Loraux 1987b: 165–67; Tyrrell and Bennett 1998: 104; Lacan 1986: 328–29).

But wait! Surely, I have committed the worst sort of howler. Only someone possessed of the most elementary Greek would fail to recognize that autadelphon is not a substantive but an adjective modifying the neuter kara. It turns out that I have been creating difficulties where none exist—all in the name of an extraneous theoretical agenda. Yet before we deliver ourselves over to premature self-flagellation, perhaps it would be best to ask whether the words yield themselves up to common sense quite as quickly as my interlocutor might claim. Perhaps, just perhaps, the original construction is not resolved quite so easily as it appears. First, the word autadelphos is always a substantive elsewhere in the play. Second, while it would be incorrect to say that koinos can never mean “related by consanguinity” as Kamerbeek claims (1978: ad loc.), it is far from the most common meaning, and it is never used of things rather than persons, nor is it ever once used in Kamerbeek’s sense elsewhere in Sophocles, even when referring to Antigone and her siblings. Thus, if we take autadelphon as an adjective, and translate

42. A search of the Thesaurus Linguae Graecae database reveals only six instances of the word in classical Greek, three of which are in this play.
literally, the result is something like that recommended by Gross in his commentary (1988: ad loc.), “shared ... real-sister head of Ismene.” The image is grotesque. Even if with Gross we insert a parenthetical “in parents” after “shared,” the result is only slightly less strange than imagining Antigone and Ismene as a two-bodied monster. Kara, it will be quickly added, is synecdoche for the person of Ismene, like Latin caput, and hence a term of endearment, not a reference to an actual head. Yet the translation, “shared” or “common same-wombed person of Ismene” is every bit as much an offense to our commonsense notions of independent personhood and individuality as that of a “shared (in parents) head,” and, inasmuch as the emphasis is on their being one flesh, it is hard to keep the image of the “head” as head out of one’s mind. Indeed, the more one struggles to construe the grammar of this line, the more it seems to cry out for a comma after autadelphon, so that kara stands as an appositive, rather than the substantive modified by the adjective, “Oh shared same-wombed one, head/person of Ismene.”

Nonetheless, before we adopt the truly old-fashioned philological expedient of an emendation, even one as unobtrusive as an extra comma, should we not ask ourselves if the crux we have ferreted out in this first line is not reflective of a deeper structure, one that stretches not only throughout this opening passage but also throughout the play as a whole? For the question of whether or not to insert a comma is in fact nothing less than the question of how to articulate the relation of shared flesh to the discrete personhood of the two sisters and by extension to their two brothers, and to Oedipus, their father/brother. In this question, we find the entire dialectic that characterizes Ismene’s relation to Antigone. The essence of that relation is embodied in the tension between the koinon autadelphon and the principle of individuation denoted by the proper name, Ismene, in line 1. That tension represents a conflict between an order of existence of finite, separate individuals, which is explicitly announced as masculine and civic in nature within the play and which Lacan labels the Symbolic, and an order of mutual reflection and fleshly interrelation, which the play casts

43. It is important to remember that the punctuation is a latter-day editorial convention and so, therefore, is the strict grammatical distinction it implies.

44. Although individuality is problematic in an ancient context, nonetheless, it is difficult to dispense with and hardly anachronistic. As Vernant observes, “Civic cult is attached to a concept of σωφροσύνη consisting of control, self-mastery, each being situating itself in its place within the limits assigned to it” (1965: 2.81). Nonetheless, this is clearly not the freestanding Cartesian cogito, but a notion of the individual as constituted by and within the community.
as feminine and domestic and which Lacan labels the Imaginary. This tension characterizes Ismene’s simultaneous attempt to adhere to the norms of civic conduct through assuming the position designated for her gender by the law and her refusal to abandon Antigone even in the face of the law’s condemnation and seemingly certain death (Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1981: 1–6, 16; Oudemans and Lardinois 1987: 88, 233; Tyrrell and Bennett 1998: 76–77).

The structure of this double movement is very precisely embodied in the next two lines. Leaving aside the textual controversy concerning ho ti versus hoti, these two singularly difficult lines directly address Ismene concerning what sort of evil, out of those stemming from their father, Zeus has not yet brought to pass for the two of them who are still living. On the one hand, line two seems to move firmly in the direction of the principium individuationis, with its verb in the second person and two proper nouns. There is a you who “knows.” Zeus is the active agent of the finite verb telei, and Oedipus is the origin, if not the owner, of the evils brought to pass. On the other, this opening out of the closed incestuous world of common flesh and shared being into the world of intersubjective recognition and responsibility, of articulation before the law, already contains the seeds of its own negation. Who is this Zeus? The anthropomorphic force behind the name, as Griffith notes, seems particularly attenuated in these lines (1999: ad loc.). Zeus is less a proper name, denoting a discrete individual with articulable motives and desires, than synecdoche for an impersonal force, even as the oft noted hyperbaton, which shifts the name into a syntactically anomalous position (Kamerbeek 1978: ad loc.), foregrounds the very agency that seems to be lacking. Similarly, the phrase “the evils from Oedipus” at once names his acts (the evils he committed: parricide, incest, the curse laid upon Eteocles and Polynices), their consequences (the evils he suffered: exile, blindness, the mutual slaughter of his sons), and their origin in the curse of the Labdacids (Jebb 1900: ad loc.). In what sense, we must ask, are these evils Oedipus’ and how are we to understand them in relation to the “we” who are “still living” and for whom they are “yet to be accomplished”?

This last question gains particular poignancy when we reflect upon the force of the duals, nôin and zôsain, in line 3. These are the first of what Griffith notes to be “a dense cluster of duals” throughout the

45. Like Kamerbeek (1978 ad loc.), I would contend that eti may be taken with either zôsain or telei. Indeed, I would argue for an ex commune construction.
play used to describe “murderous brothers, disunited sisters, sister and
dead brother, dying bride and groom” (1999: ad loc.). Extrapolating
the conceptualization behind the duals to its logical conclusion, Anti-
gone and Ismene are here conceived as a unit: not separate individuals,
but one substance from a common womb, the womb that is the origin
of Oedipus’s evils (Wohl forthcoming: 15). It is Antigone’s desire to
assert and maintain these failed unities, to return to the oneness of the
flesh and lie with her brother in the grave that fuels the central conflict
of the play embodied in the countervailing forces of a transgressive
oneness and an ultimately sterile and self-destructive logic of radical
separation. As Charles Segal sums up:

Even her dual form when speaking of herself and Ismene in the third
line has its significance, for it repeatedly denotes the polluted fratricides . . . and comes to mark a shift of allegiance on Antigone’s part
as she leaves the living kin for her bond to the dead. Creon’s path
is, of course, just the opposite: he insists on “difference” and carries
it to its logical conclusion in the face of those bonds of sameness
which the gods finally vindicate. (1990: 183)

Antigone is the autognòtos (875), the “self resolved,” the autonomos,
who cannot admit the other except as the autadelphon, the same-
wombed, that is, as a member of a potential self-reflecting dual. The
experiential reality of that dual, however, is characterized by the con-
stant presence of atê defined paratactically in lines 4–5 as “pain,”
“shame,” and “dishonor” that is, by the experience of a shared trans-
gression of, and rejection by, the Symbolic law.

The force of the dual is explicable but not translatable. It asserts
as an unarguable grammatical fact the existence of an intermediate
category between the absolute identity of the one and the fundamental
difference of the many: the self-reflecting two. In the Labdacids’ tale of
internecine murder and incest, of the two as the transgressive one or
the one as the murderous two, this increasingly archaic piece of Greek
morphology looms large. Throughout the play, it is self-consciously
manipulated to achieve maximum effect. Thus Ismene, who attempts
to occupy the impossible middle position between Creon’s difference
and Antigone’s sameness, replies to Antigone’s first speech:

46. Steiner’s assertion that the dual only occurs at the play’s beginning and therefore
we cannot be sure of its significance is incorrect (1984: 113). Compare Loraux (1987b:
173–74); and Tyrrell and Bennett (1998: 44–45 and 78) on the significance of the dual.
Not one story of those who are dear, Antigone, whether sweet or painful has come to me, outside of the fact that we two were stripped of two brothers dying as a pair on one day from a double hand.

The deliberate alternation between ones and twos is designed to draw attention to the dual as a fundamental textual signature of Oedipal incest and murderous strife, in contrast to both the normative individual of fifth-century Athens and the social collective of the dêmos, represented on stage by the chorus.

The unambiguous connection of the grammatical dual to the incestuous story that lies at the heart of the Oedipus tale, to the atê of the Labdacids, is made explicit, however, in Ismene’s next speech:

Alas, consider, oh my sister by birth, how the father to the two of us died hated and notorious, for self-revealed crimes having torn out his two eyes himself with his own self-working hand. 47

Then the mother and wife, a double name, Destroys her life with knotted ropes.

Third, two brothers on one day The wretched pair by killing themselves Accomplish a common fate with each other’s two hands.

47. “αὐτοφώρων . . . αὐτὸς αὐτουργῶ χερί: c.f. 1, 55–7nn. . . . αὐτοφώρος usually means ‘detected in the very (αὐτό-) act’: but here ‘self-detected,’ and perhaps also ‘in an incestuous act’” (Griffith 1999: ad loc.).
The duals at the end of the passage come thick and fast. But throughout these closely packed lines, tragic fate is embodied by a shared flesh (sister by birth, father, mother, brothers) whose division into self-reflexive twos (the two of us, two eyes, double name, two brothers, wretched pair, two hands) resists the separation of the Symbolic law, the intervention of the third as represented by Creon’s notion of communally defined goods and rule-based philia. These twos, these incestuous duals, in the end collapse into a self-reflecting identity (self-revealed, himself, self-working, themselves, common) that is ultimately indistinguishable from death itself (killing): “Third, two brothers on one day.”

This tension between Imaginary reflection and Symbolic law is also embodied precisely by Creon’s and Antigone’s competing notions of philia articulated in the play’s opening lines (Griffith 1999: 123; Goldhill 1986: 88–103). As David Konstan has made us aware, there are essentially two concepts of philia operative in classical Greece. These are an inheritance of a complex of values that, as Benveniste has shown (1969: 1.335–53), are predicated on an originary notion of the philos as being a person or thing intrinsically bound to the self—through ties of kinship, tribal and political loyalty, guest friendship, and/or companionship (Santas 1988: 8; Benardete 1999: 12–13). For this reason, the Homeric usage of philos, especially when applied to body parts, is thought to differ little from that of the possessive adjective. Philos, then, is most directly contrasted with ekhthros, that which is “outside, other, inimical” (Nagy 1979: 242–44; Goldhill 1986: 80–83). Thus Antigone ends her first speech (line 10) by asking Ismene if she has heard what evils are now approaching their philoi (i.e., Polynices) from their ekhthroi (i.e., Creon).

As Konstan observes, this use of philos to signify that which is part of the “same” is the primary sense in Homer, where the word is used exclusively in the adjectival form. And while certain types of interpretation may have gone too far in reducing the affective dimension of such ties to the purely functional, nonetheless archaic philos cannot be translated “friend” without serious distortion. The same is true for the abstract noun philia as it is used both in archaic and classical texts where the term “friendship” would be inadequate to those aspects of it that apply to kinship and other forms of meaning that imply a sense of shared being. In addition, however, Konstan argues that the classical period sees the emergence of philos as a noun explicitly used in contrast or coordination with kinship terms, meaning an “achieved relationship” of mutual loyalty and affection (1997: 1–67). This is philos as “friend.”
Antigone defends the archaic view of *philia* as inextricably linked to an essential oneness, in which legal and Symbolic identity is secondary to the primal oneness of Being. For her the *philoi* are those who share the bonds of flesh and blood. She will lie *philê* with *philos* in Polynices’ grave, not because his cause was just, not because of the existence of an “achieved relationship” that they have constructed between them, but because he is who he is (Lacan 1986: 324–25; Guyomard 1992: 42n.7). A husband, she says, or even a son, can be replaced but, with both parents in the grave, a brother is irreplaceable (lines 909–12). That tear in the oneness of the flesh cannot be mended. There is no possible exchange or substitution, no way to fill this gap within the domains sanctioned by the pleasure and the reality principles. “Doing this,” she says, “it is a beautiful thing to die.”

For Creon, however, *philia* is a fully legal and rule-bound relationship. Its purpose is to promote the civic good and is firmly a part of the kingdom of *biens* of which he is the foremost representative (Lacan 1986: 300–1; Oudemans and Lardinois 1987: 164). Dearness for Creon is a function of submission to the law. As he argues in a speech that would be later quoted with approval by Demosthenes, and which represents what many in Sophocles’ audience would have considered accepted truth:

> Whoever considers a friend or kinsman [*philon*] greater than his fatherland, I say this one to be of no account. For I—let ever-vigilant Zeus know this—would neither be silent seeing disaster [*atê*] approaching the citizens, instead of safety, nor would I ever count as a friend (*philon*) a man bearing ill will to my land, knowing this that when the city is safe we make friends [*philous*] for ourselves by sailing on a sound ship of state. (182–90)

Creon here represents a kind of civic-minded vision of *philia* that excludes all aspects of kinship, flesh, and enjoyment (Griffith 1999: ad loc.). He does not seek to traverse the veil of *atê* but to avoid it (even as he ultimately falls prey to it). His position is at once that of the new constitutional order in democratic Athens (Tyrrell and Blake 1999: 46–47; Oudemans and Lardinois 1987: 161; Knox 1982: 35, 38–39), and a totalitarian insistence on the law as law, without any grounding in family, tradition, or the immediacy of shared being (Steiner 1984:

48. On the textual controversies surrounding these lines since at least the time of Goethe, see Lacan (1986: 298); Tyrrell and Bennett (1999: 112–14); and Griffith (1999: ad loc.).
37; D. Allen 2000: 91–92). In the end, Creon refuses to recognize the world of enjoyment that supports and grounds the law and his desire. And that refusal leads to the destruction of his family and himself (Benardete 1999: 74–75; Tyrrell and Bennett 1999: 90–91). By the same token, Antigone’s refusal to recognize the claims of the law, her pure desire to transgress the barrier of até, leads her from the Symbolic death affirmed by the pleasure principle to the second death, which is its beyond. Her destruction is not the product of an error in judgment, hamartia, like that of Creon, but of a fundamental and uncompromising disposition toward Being.

In her insistence on her desire to the point of death, a desire that transcends all rational calculations of Symbolically determined utility, a desire that points beyond the pleasure and reality principles, she embraces the familial até of the Labdacids. Like Niobe, she becomes both more and less than human, immortalized as a sublime figure of beauty in death, a figure of folly and awe. In the process, she becomes a profoundly ethical figure in her uncompromising singularity. At the same time, she points to the desire and obligation of the analyst to listen to the text, to be true to its indeterminacies and contradictions, its self-transcendence, its awesome foolishness. All Creon’s rational calculations, while constituting the grid that makes this moment possible and necessary, can never fully account for it. They can only attempt to contain it within the constraints of a self-satisfied instrumental reason that when confronted with Tiresias’ horrible truth sees only baseness, bribery, and bad faith. Creon remains blind until the awful moment when he is brought up short before the image of his son’s dying body clasping the beautiful corpse of Antigone.

It is here, to this unthinkable abyss, that a true ethics of psychoanalysis leads. The talking cure as conceived by Lacan takes the analysand not to the world of facile adaptation and normalization, but makes possible the direct confrontation with the destitution of desire and the consequent embrace of Being:

The question of the Sovereign Good has always been posed for man, but the analyst knows that this is a closed question. Not only does he not have what one demands of him, the Sovereign Good, but he knows there isn’t any. Having led an analysis to its term is nothing other than to have encountered this limit where the entire problematic of desire is posed. (Lacan 1986: 347)

With freedom from the Sovereign Good, however, comes the possibility
to realize one’s desire in all its idiosyncrasies, to withdraw from an exclusively instrumentalized and utilitarian relation to the world, and to encounter a beauty that cannot be confined to immediate use. It is Antigone, according to Lacan, as sublime object who points the way to a pure desire, and so to a true spiritual practice, that can transform us, like Niobe, into something fundamentally awe-full and new. 49

4. Conclusion: Ethics and the Other

He yawned: he had finished his day; he had finished with his youth. Already certain tried and true ethical systems discretely proposed their services to him: there was clear-eyed Epicureanism, smiling indulgence, resignation, sober maturity, stoicism, each of which would allow him to taste minute by minute, like a connoisseur, his failed life. He took off his jacket; he began to loosen his tie. He repeated to himself as he yawned, “It’s true, it’s really true, I’ve come to the age of reason.” (Sartre 1981d: 29)

[Alcibiades] comes to ask Socrates for something that he does not know what it is, but he calls it agalma. Some of you know the use I made of this term a while back, I want to use it again, this agalma, this mystery that, in the fog surrounding the gaze of Alcibiades, represents something beyond all recognized goods [biens]. (Lacan 1973: 283–84)

Lacan’s reading of the Antigone represents a crucial juncture in the complex network of affiliations that ties the work of Sartre, Camus, and Anouilh to the later Platonic turn of Derrida, Foucault, and Lacan himself. The central problem we are left with at the end of Les mouches and Caligula is how, in a world beyond good and evil, does a philosophy of the act create an ethics and a politics that is not a betrayal of its fundamental insight into the ungrounded nature of our being (and hence our freedom, our absurdity, and our nausea). How do we distin-

49. As Leonard observes, Derrida and Irigaray have both criticized the gendered nature of Lacan’s reading. Irigaray objects to Lacan’s complete neglect of the civil dimension of Antigone’s discourse. Derrida notes that the ethics of desire cannot exist outside the political (Leonard 2005: 130–33, 140). As I have argued throughout this text, in the final analysis the ethical and the political cannot be separated, even if they are not identical. This argument will be extended in the next chapter. For a reading of the formula of “ceding on one’s desire” that is neither confined to the exclusively ethical or the feminine, but directly addresses the politics of enjoyment from a queer perspective, see Zoberman (forthcoming). More damaging is Leonard’s observation that there is no textual basis for Lacan’s assertion that the Antigone supports his reading that Jocasta is “the active agent of Oedipus’ incest” (2005: 128–29).
guish Orestes’ act of murder from Caligula’s, from that of the genuine fascist? This search for an authentic ethics, for a genuine relation of self to self and to others, is also that faced by the protagonist of Sartre’s novel, L’âge de raison, the final lines of which are quoted above. Having come to a clear-sighted recognition of his fundamental emptiness, of his lack (manque de l’être), how does Mathieu move forward without succumbing to the allure of the various consoling fictions that present themselves either in the guise of ethical systems of the past or of the muted bonheur of the present? To accept a Stoicism or an Epicureanism tout fait is not to make an ethical choice but to fail to. By the same token, the rejection of bourgeois bonheur—of the narcotized happiness of compromise and bad faith, of forever ceding on one’s desire—is indistinguishable on its own from the empty self-assertion of Anouilh’s Antigone who seeks death “pour personne, pour moi.”

The fundamental problem, then, faced by Lacan is how to establish an ethics of desire, of one’s own unique relation in time, space, language, and society, to the lack at the heart of being. How does one establish an ethics of psychoanalysis, which is neither a naked assertion of the will to power nor a fundamental denial of our desires through assimilating them to a system of recognized goods—of moral commodities traded in the daily commerce between the pleasure and the reality principles? The modernist turn to antiquity, which sought in the allegorical equation of present and past to dramatize these questions, was of necessity unable either to solve or to transcend them because it was predicated precisely on that equation, on an effacing of difference. This is not what Lacan offers. Rather, through his reading of Antigone’s desire for a good beyond all recognized goods—which is predicated on her unrepeatable relation to Creon and his edicts, to the âté of the Labdacids, to her incestuous parentage, and to the conflict between competing historical concepts of philia—Lacan seeks to create an ethics that neither conforms to a pre-existing moral system nor revels in an authoritarian solipsism. Beyond this duality of self-denial and pre-oedipal narcissism, the ethics of psychoanalysis is always and only realized in relation to a precise and historically located other. It demands and is the product of a particular unrepeatable narrative (Armstrong 2005: 86, 137–39). This psychoanalytic ethics of desire is thus necessarily also an ethics of difference. Antigone, like Freud’s Dora or the Wolfman, 50 may serve as an example, but we cannot be her. Antigone’s desire is authentic only to the extent that it is unique,

50. Two famous characters from his case studies.
and it is unique only in its simultaneous relation to and constitution by the Other (Creon, the *polis*, the Law, etc.).\(^{51}\)

From this recognition, it is but a short step to Lacan’s reading of the *Symposium*, for it is precisely the question of the relation between desire and the Other that is at stake in the eighth seminar, *Le transfert*. As Lacan makes clear above, Alcibiades’ desire is conceived along lines directly parallel to those of Antigone: his search for the Socratic *agalma* represents a desire for a good “beyond all goods.” Of course, Alcibiades, as one who has yet to embrace philosophy (*philosophia*) fully, does not understand that. He does not recognize his desire. He believes its object is something that is directly in Socrates’ possession, that it is a good exchangeable with other goods. It will only be in Socrates’ refusal to grant him that object that Alcibiades will have the occasion to recognize the true nature of his desire. For however fleeting a moment, Alcibiades, as a result of his intimate commerce with the philosopher, begins to analyze, and hence care for, his soul. He comes to have an inkling of the possibility of a good beyond those recognized by the agonistic world of the democratic *polis*. With that intuition, however, comes the simultaneous realization that he can stay in that world of competitive political honors (*philotimia*) only by stopping his ears, by rejecting Socrates’ *atopia* in favor of the subject position Athens has bequeathed him, and thus by ceding on his desire.

Still, I swear to you, the moment he starts to speak, I am beside myself: my heart starts leaping in my chest, the tears come streaming down my face, even the frenzied Corybantes seem sane compared to me. [ . . . ] [H]e makes it seem that my life isn’t worth living! You can’t say that isn’t true, Socrates. I know very well that you could make me feel that way this very moment if I gave you half a chance. He always traps me, you see, and he makes me admit

\(^{51}\) This is the foundation of its empirical nature, of its status as History or the Real. As Richard Armstrong reminds us, Lacan in his insistence on this point is very Freudian. Indeed, it is precisely this insistence on the unique and the unrepeatable that separates psychoanalysis from the discipline of psychology and the other normative (and normalizing) social sciences:

> The importance of the empirical for Freud lies not in what can be replicated in the laboratory, but what is experienced between the analyst and the analysand: the phenomena of transference and resistance. (Armstrong 2005: 43; emphasis in original)

It is precisely the constructed nature of our experience as a relation with the Other (the analyst, father, the love-object, the Symbolic) that guarantees its profoundly historical and differential nature.
that my political career is a waste of time, while all that matters is just what I most neglect: my personal shortcomings, which cry out for the closest attention. So I refuse to listen to him; I stop my ears and tear myself way from him, for, like the Sirens, he could make me stay by his side till I die. (215e–216b; Nehamas and Woodruff 1997: 497–98)

Socrates’ discourse thus represents a true “thought from the outside.” It is literally without a place (atopos) in the world of the polis. Owing to its simultaneous focus on an absolute interiority (the self, the soul, the psyche) and an absolute externality (the forms, the one, the good, the beautiful), it exists beyond the bounds of civic ideology. In the Alcibiades, the Symposium’s prequel, Socrates, however, claims that it is only through philosophy, only through a genuine care of the self, that Alcibiades will eventually be able to be a true success in politics, because only then will he recognize the nature of the good and be able to seek it for his fellow citizens. (The Alcibiades will be a crucial text for Foucault.)

It is thus only through a love of wisdom (philosophia), only through a species of desire, that one can come to a real thought from the outside, that one can encounter a mode of thought and self-relation that does not simply repeat the founding prejudices of a given community and thus nullify ethical and political action. This “askesis,” in turn, this “exercise of the self, in thought,” as Foucault reminds us, is the true labor of philosophy (Foucault 1984a: 15). And, as we shall see, it is precisely in the complex and overdetermined nexus between philosophy, ethics, psychoanalysis, and the construction of the subject that Derrida and Foucault will respond to Lacan. These responses, in turn, will be made in terms of their own distinctive readings of the Platonic corpus.