Postmodern Spiritual Practices

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Published by The Ohio State University Press

Miller, Paul Allen.
The Ohio State University Press, 2007.
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Chapter 4

Lacan, the *Symposium*, and Transference

Freud also observed overvaluation in the case of transference-love, when in the therapeutic situation there is “a transference of feelings onto the person of the doctor” though the situation in the treatment does not justify the development of such feelings. In the next paragraph Freud tells us that transference-love, somewhat surprisingly, occurs in the case of male as well as female patients (towards a male doctor). (Santas 1988: 121, citing SE XVI, 442)

The internal contradiction of a morality of happiness, in which one aims only at the happy state of the subject, is that this prey flees us insofar as we search for it. If we pursue happiness, we are never happy. We obtain a bit of rest, a bit of peace, but only in the moment that we renounce the quest and transfer in some way our happiness into the happiness of an Other. However this Other is named—Justice, the Good, Duty, Moral Law, God—it is by losing oneself in it that one finds oneself again. (Festugière 1950: 332; uppercase in the original)

1. Why Antigone Must Read the *Symposium*

One of the most disturbing things about Lacan’s reading of Antigone is her absolute dedication to the obscene kernel of her enjoyment (*jouissance*), to *das Ding*. There is an asocial immediacy to absolute enjoyment, to pure desire, which while profoundly ethical—in the sense of representing an absolute dedication to the transformation of self, which the realization of a desire beyond the pleasure and reality principles requires—nonetheless also figures a rupture with the Symbolic order as we know it (Irigaray 1977b: 95). It is an ethics that demands the transgression of the law as its universal maxim (Lacan 1966f). This is a most peculiar ethics to say the least, and one that certainly does not seek to promote happiness as it is commonly understood. But, is such an ethics good? Could we, would we, want to live in a world peopled by Lacanian Antigones, a world of beautiful,
but monstrous enjoyment, the world of the death drive (Žižek 1992: 134)?

Maybe Guyomard is right in his critique of Lacan’s reading. Maybe Creon should be our model (1992). At minimum, Lacan’s interpretation provokes a number of questions. Does the choice of Antigone not ultimately rest on an ethical model of incest and self-destruction (Lacan 1986: 83)? Are the good and the beautiful to be equated if the pursuit of the latter leads not to calm repose but to the sublime depravity of Niobe turned to stone and Antigone’s virginal bedding by Hades?

What happens, then, if we translate this ethics from the individual to the *polis* as a whole? As a model of collective action, would not the choice of Antigone represent precisely the very aestheticization of politics that Benjamin describes as the essence of fascism (1969: 241–42)? And if so, does not Lacan’s Antigone, therefore, in the last analysis rejoin Anouilh’s? The *Liebestod* of Haemon with Antigone is, on this reading, only too Wagnerian, a love-death every bit as moral as Hitler’s Nuremberg rallies and the suicide bomber hell-bent on paradise.

Such an interpretation, however, is an impoverishment of both Lacan and *Antigone*. It assumes that Antigone’s *jouissance* exists without Creon and that her desire for death represents an ahistorical constant. It assumes that the law, and hence its transgression, is one and unchanging. In opposition to a monolithic present, it can offer only what Witt describes in Anouilh’s case as “timeless worlds of the imaginary past, childhood or death: a kind of pre-Oedipal *jouissance*” (2001: 235). Yet, if such is the case, then, any drive toward aesthetic transcendence would be equally fascist, an assertion of the death drive in the name of beauty. Antigone’s “non” would always necessarily, as in the case of Anouilh, lead to the affirmation of an empty will to power. Why does she defy Creon, bury her brother, and seek death? “Pour personne, pour moi.”

Such questions pose not merely an abstract theoretical problem, devoid of practical consequence, but one on which the bedrock questions

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1. This question, I would argue, is as urgent for Sophocles’ Antigone as for Lacan’s. It is, of course, true that it is anachronistic in the extreme to assume that Sophocles proposed Antigone to his audience as an ethical model. But that is precisely the way she has functioned in the western imagination for the last two centuries. Lacan, on one reading, does little more than draw the necessary consequences of the status that Antigone already holds in our thought. If the results are disturbing, that is no reason to shoot the messenger.

2. Mussolini confided to the biographer Emil Ludwig that “everything depends on dominating the mass like an artist’ . . . his ambition was to make a dramatic masterpiece of his own life” (Witt 2001: 6).
of meaningful political and ethical action rest. For if we accept Guyomard’s position that it is Creon, not Antigone, who presents the real ethical model, if we have determined that ethics is a process of choosing from the socially recognized goods sanctioned by the pleasure and reality principles as they exist under a given Symbolic regime, then we have necessarily foreclosed the possibility of not only a radical critique of the existing order, but also of any fundamental transformation of ourselves. Guyomard’s reading of Lacan’s interpretation of the Antigone poses precisely the problem that we outlined in chapter 2’s investigation of the modernists: “Are we not then doomed to choosing between a suffocating positivist dystopia and a fascist utopian beyond?”

The fact is, however, that Antigone’s desire has no sense outside the signifying chain that makes it possible and that articulates its demand for transcendence. Creon’s edicts may not, as Antigone intimates, be the material cause of her desire “to lie dear with dear” in the arms of death, but nonetheless without them her demand would be an empty signifier devoid of content. What would Antigone be if there were no Creon? What could she possibly mean? Moreover, it is not the case that without Creon the content of her desire would be different, but the form would remain the same. Creon in a meaningful sense is but metonymy for the Law and for the Symbolic norms of kinship, exchange, and behavior that constitute the fabric of Greek society (Steiner 1984: 37; Segal 1990: 164–65). However, those norms never exist in abstraction (Butler 1990: 28, 55, 76). They never exist per se, but always as a historically specific set of signifying practices, of discrete unrepeatable speech acts that occur within a larger set of discursive norms that render them intelligible (Holquist 1990: 167; Voloshinov 1986: 167). This is what Lacan means when he says the big Other does not exist. The imagined totalization of rules and expectations that make up the Symbolic as a single coherent system, to which we must adhere in order to be recognized as subjects, has no reality except as a series of events that appeal to a diverse and often incoherent body of implicit rules and expectations that ground their intelligibility. Creon is the synecdochic evocation of this Other whose ultimate nonexistence, yet tragic efficacy, the play lays bare, even as Antigone’s desire can only be articulated in terms of a transgression of these very rules, which are always of necessity particular and historically determined.

Jouissance, the enjoyment that is beyond the pleasure principle,

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then, becomes the condition of possibility for the meaningful transformation of self and other, for the radical negation of what is. It is at once transgressive and the ground necessary for the creation of any authentic new regime of pleasure and its limits (Bataille 1957: 15, 43, 75; Janan 1994: 5). As Julia Kristeva writes:

In our modern societies without any beyond, or at least with transcendence removed from this world (Protestantism) or reduced to dust (Catholicism in its present crisis), counterculture remains the sole refuge of jouissance because it is precisely an a-topia, a place removed from the law, a lock in the canal of utopia. (1979: 13)

**Atopia**, it will be recalled from the last chapter, is what characterizes both Socrates in his refusal of the unexamined goods (*biens*) of the traditional Athenian *polis* and Antigone in the purity of her desire (see page 64).

“Counterculture” is perhaps an unfortunate translation for Kristeva’s “contre-société,” with the image of drug-addled hippies and naive rock stars out to “change the world” that it necessarily conjures. Nonetheless, it should not be missed that it was precisely in the canalization and ultimate collectivization of new modes of jouissance that sixties radicalism made its most lasting contributions to postmodern society.

Gay, lesbian, and women’s liberation are all ultimately senseless except in their ability to posit forms of enjoyment that are beyond the law, that transgress the norms of phallic and patriarchal subject formation. Nor are such moments of atopia limited to explicitly sexual matters. The lives of the saints, the self-mortification of the desert fathers, monastic practices of all sorts, both Buddhist and Christian, represent fundamental attempts to transform and collectivize radically different forms of being in the world and the forms of jouissance they establish.4

By the same token, the utopian socialist movements of the last two centuries posited radically different relations between the subject and the community of recognized goods, and hence new forms of enjoyment that demanded in turn new forms of intersubjectivity. Likewise, the surrealists, the dadaists, and other avant-garde artistic movements of the early twentieth century all posited fundamentally new forms of beauty, existence, and enjoyment.5 Nor would any of these movements—

4. On the relation between jouissance and mysticism, that is as an encounter with being, with the not-all that escapes the Symbolic, and hence its relation to woman, see Lacan (1975: 66–71, 76–77); Luepnitz (2003: 228–29); and Janan (1994: 30).

5. On Lacan’s relations with the surrealists as well as other members of the artistic
from the desert fathers to Queer Nation—have been possible without the violence, the obscenity, and the excess that, from the perspective of normative culture, defines radical transgression, and a true “thought from the outside.”

Psychoanalysis and its ethics, from this point of view, are the enemies of all forms of quietism and resignation that, through the discourse of a master, seek to deny the passions. Psychoanalysis seeks to rouse them, to incite us to insist on our desire and not to settle for any substitutes, including normative sexual satisfaction (Jameson 1988: 44; Braunstein 2003: 107). Thus Žižek argues that Lacan’s ultimate political goal was to produce an analytic collective whose discourse was sustained not by any claims of mastery or authority but by the very surplus of enjoyment that is the sign of the object of desire’s relation to the Real. Psychoanalysis “asserts a violent passion to introduce a Difference, a gap in the order of being” (Žižek forthcoming).

Moreover, it is precisely in terms of the insistence on new forms of collective enjoyment that Antigone’s claim, as Judith Butler observes, resonates with particular clarity today:

[For this is] a time in which the family is at once idealized in nostalgic ways within various cultural forms, a time in which the Vatican protests against homosexuality not only as an assault on the family but also on the notion of the human, where to become human, for some, requires participation in the family in its normative sense. . . . [T]his is a time in which kinship has become fragile, porous and expansive. It is also a time in which straight and gay families are sometimes blended, or in which gay families emerge in nuclear and non-nuclear forms. What will the legacy of Oedipus be for those who are formed in these situations, where positions are hardly clear, where the place of the father is dispersed, where the place of the mother is multiply occupied or displaced, where the symbolic in its stasis no longer holds? (2000: 22–23)

The moment Butler describes is precisely one in which Antigone’s desire has become collectivized, in which the relations between law, pleasure, kinship, and transgressive enjoyment have become directly and insistently problematized. Such a collective demand, however, is not able to be generalized into an ahistorical universal, nor is it conceivable

outside the particular structures that gave rise to it. The notion that all those who practice same-sex eroticism at any time or in any place have an inherent, inalienable right to participate in marital institutions based on modern Christian conceptions of heterosexual monogamy becomes ridiculous as soon as it is formulated in universalizing terms. At the same time, there is absolutely nothing ridiculous about the demands for gay marriage in the specific legal and cultural context of postmodern western society. Similarly, Antigone’s demand, when abstracted from fifth-century concepts of family, *philia*, the proper relation of the individual to the *polis*, the status of women, and the broader cultural resonances of the myth of the Labdacids, may appear gratuitous and perverse. It gains its beauty and power, Antigone’s sublime transcendence, only to the extent that its historical particularity is restored. Her *jouissance* is not pre-, but post-Oedipal, in all senses of the word.

Paradoxically, where this recognition of the historical contingency of Antigone’s (and our) desire leads is to the recognition that *das Ding*, while logically prior to the subject’s entry into language and the Symbolic, in fact has no pre-empiric existence. Rather it is always a retrospective construction of the “not all,”6 of that which exceeds a given Symbolic formation and its grid of intelligibility (Silverman 2000: 16; Copjec 2002: 6; Žižek 2004: 60). If the cardinal ethical principle of psychoanalysis is not to engage in the self-betrayal entailed in ceding on one’s desire, then the analyst’s role is to assist in this retrospective reconstruction that leads the subject through her signifying chain, its own unique pattern of associations, recollections, slips, dreams, and interpretations to the realization of the lack that structures its being (Lacan 1986: 362, 368–71). The analyst’s role is to assume the position of the Other, the principle of coherence that founds the system, to serve as a kind of placeholder guaranteeing that “the inconsistent string of ‘free associations’ will retroactively receive meaning” (Žižek 1992: 39).

This principle of coherence for which the analyst stands is ultimately the phallus,7 the missing object that everyone wants to be or to

6. This is of course Lacan’s term for the position of the feminine in the psychic economy as that which escapes the phallic totalization of the masculine Symbolic. As such, it represents Lacan’s rereading of Hegel’s dictum, said in relation to Antigone, that “woman is the everlasting irony of the community” (Hegel 1977: 288). The feminine for Lacan, however, unlike Hegel, is a position, under which he includes his own Ecrits, not a category of being. See Lacan (1973: 13, 53–71, 75); Irigaray (1977b: 106–7); Kristeva (1979: 15); Janan (1994: 30); Weed (1994: 89); Leonard (2005: 132–33). *Das Ding* ultimately occupies the place of the lost plenitude of a retrospectively posited unity with the maternal.

7. The fantasy of phallic plenitude has clear resonances with Aristotelian *eudaimonia,*
have, which, if present, would ground the system of Symbolic norms in the Real and thus close the gap between our Imaginary self-projections and our social and linguistic identifications. The phallus represents the desire of the Other, the clef de voûte that would supply this consistency (Julien 1990: 124; Janan 1994: 21; Luepnitz 2003: 226). But the desire that the phallus names is defined precisely as that which is missing, as the founding lack, difference, or gap that is required if the signifying system is to function. It is a signifier without equal precisely because it has no signified. The phallus literally means nothing. It points to the impossibility of Symbolic closure, to there never being a last word, a meaning that would be completely adequate, bringing the process of signification and association to a close. The analyst’s role is to figure this lack and thus make possible the recognition and realization of the analysand’s desire as a specific and unrepeatable relation to the signifying chain (Lacan 1991: 18).

The assumption of this position is called transference. In the analytic situation as formulated by Freud and Breuer in their Studies on Hysteria, at the same time the analyst becomes the object of desire, and his or her desire is also necessarily solicited. These two phenomena are known as transference and countertransference respectively. Lacan condensed these two inherently related notions into a single formulation, the “desire of the analyst,” in which the genitive is both subjective and objective. They are at the center of his reading of Plato’s Symposium, which opened seminar 8, Le transfert (1991), and which immediately followed his reading of the Antigone (7).

The conjunction of the ethics of psychoanalysis with the problem of transference is anything but fortuitous (Leonard 2005: 185). The analytic situation is precisely the moment in which the analyst’s individual ideological and libidinal investments come face to face with those of the analysand who seeks understanding, liberation, and ultimately the realization of his or her own desire. The ethics of analysis demands a

as David Wray has pointed out to me. Lacanian ethics, however, seek to traverse the fantasy rather than to realize it. Lacan’s continued use of the term phallus, even while denying that the phallus is the penis, is the source of controversy (Feher-Gurewich 2003: 194; Lacan 1982: 168). His usage is defended by some because it points precisely to the confusion of the penis with the phallus that founds patriarchy’s long and sordid history. “Because I have a penis, I have a special claim to Symbolic power” (Ragland-Sullivan 1986: 283). Others contend the continued use of the term helps to perpetuate its reign (Tort 2000: 176–77).

8. As should be clear from this formulation, Lacan’s concept of the phallus assumes the universality of castration (Luepnitz 2003: 227).

radical openness to the desire of the other and a simultaneous refusal of a false objectivity, of a disavowal of our own inescapable demand (Chaitin 1996: 180–84).

More precisely, in the analytic situation, the analysand, through transference, metaphorizes the analyst, as the Other to whom the discourse of demand is addressed, into the place of his or her desire. The analyst comes to occupy the position of that desire and his or her refusal to comment directly on the associative chain of the analysand produces the surface on which the analysand in turn comes to recognize the nature of that desire. The danger comes in the possibility—indeed the necessity—of countertransference, that is, in the process whereby the analyst’s own desires are solicited by the discourse of the analysand. Like Socrates in his relation with Alcibiades, the moment the analyst yields to these solicitations, the analytic situation is reversed and the doctor becomes the patient, the beloved the lover, and the chain of association short-circuits. By the same token, the moment the analyst refuses the countertransference, the moment Socrates refuses the affective bond, then all hope of Alcibiades’ pursuit of the good is lost, the transferential relationship is broken (Lacan 1991: 185–86).

It is thus only through a profound knowledge of the nature of his or her own desire that the analyst can serve as the mirror for the analysand and countertransference be turned into a means of investigating, rather than satisfying or frustrating, the desire of the other. It is only through an understanding of the fundamentally empty nature of his or her desire that the analyst can serve in this role (Lacan 1986: 347–51; 1992: 127). That emptiness is not a void or absence, but a refusal of every fetish, a fundamental openness: the recognition of desire per se (Žižek 1991: 131; Feher-Gurewich 2000: 369; Freiberger 2000: 225–26). As Diotima teaches Socrates in the Symposium, Erôs (Desire) can never represent any specific good (beauty, wisdom, wealth, happiness), but can only be fully realized in the pursuit of the good per se. Transference, metaphoricity, and substitution are thus not means to an end, but inherent in the nature of desire itself (Julien 1990: 120). Like Socrates, the analyst must be able to lie on the couch with Alcibiades and arise in the morning unstained.

Transference, the search for a subject supposed to know, cannot be escaped (Žižek 1990: 168). The analyst is always desired and desiring. But the analyst must respond with a relentless and ascetic negativity that reveals the illusory nature of each neurotic, fetishistic substitution,

without yielding to the temptations of countertransference, of impos-
ing one’s own fetishes, one’s own object of desire, as a totalizing dis-
course of mastery. Analysis is both the product of and an answer to
suffering. It demands an ethics of care (Silverman 2000: 29–50) and
listening, a loving Socratic asceticism, and a relentless criticism of all
attempts to arrest the discourse of desire, to normalize it, and to cede
on its realization by accepting, as Cephalus does in Republic Book 1,
the decreed range of acceptable social goods (biens) as the definition of
our being (Blondell 2002: 168–73).

2. Socratic Therapy: Γνῶθι σεαυτόν

Dialogue is, in a certain sense, already an exercise in death. For, as R.
Schaerer [1969] has said, “corporal individuality ceases to exist at the
moment in which it exteriorizes itself in the logos.” . . . From the perspec-
tive of the story of the death of Socrates in the Phaedo, we see that the
“I” that must die transcends itself in an “I,” which is henceforth a stranger
to death, because it identifies itself with the logos and thought. (Hadot
1995b: 110)

Perhaps Plato’s use of myth and image is an attempt to state something
about the limits of reason, together with an insight into the consequences
of this limit for ethical conduct. What if he is simply propounding what
appears to be a metaphysics for the sole purpose of having it subverted in
the destructive/interpretive act that transforms it into an ethical practice?
Plato is well aware of what he is doing. He is engaged in something very
like a Wittgensteinian “destruction,” which recognizes the necessity of
appealing beyond the system of cultural constructions of ordinary lan-
guage in order to discover not a real entity, but the possibility—already
implicit in the language of the crowd . . . of articulating another standard
for our conduct than the parental, conventional, and theoretical constructs
that hold us in the sway of their imaginary power. (Freiberger 2000: 242)

In this section, we shall examine the relation between Socratic and
psychoanalytic practice, and their respective conceptions of desire. The
Socratic elenchos, the process of question, answer, and refutation
that lies at the heart of the Socratic dialectic as it is presented in the
early and portions of the middle11 and even late dialogues (Nehamas

11. I will continue to use this conventional distinction between the shorter, aporetical
dialogues, and the longer more elaborate “constructive dialogues,” though, as Blondell
argues (2002: 10–13), there is no unambiguous proof that the shorter aporetical dialogues
uniformly date to an earlier period than the so-called “middle dialogues.” See also Annas
(1993: 19).
lacan, the Symposium, and Transference

1998: 72), is, of course, very different from the analyst’s self-effacement. Indeed, Socrates’ interlocutors are asked to do anything but free associate. Rather there is a relentless demand for definition as each succeeding approximation reveals the degree of delusion under which the various interlocutors suffer. As Socrates explains in the Apology, he roamed the streets of Athens trying to disprove the oracle at Delphi’s pronouncement that he was the wisest man alive. This could not be true since the only thing Socrates knew was that he was empty, that he knew nothing. Surely, amidst all the wise poets, politicians, and craftsmen of Athens there were many wiser than he. Nonetheless, when Socrates came to question these people, time and again he found that although they possessed certain skills (technai), or had a knack for certain activities, they could give no rational account (logos) of either that knack or of themselves. Nor were they able to show that the possession of these skills in any way made them better, happier, or more just, yet every one of them considered himself to be knowledgeable. In the end Socrates concludes, much to his surprise, that the oracle was right: not because he possesses some special wisdom that he could dispense to others, but because he alone knows that he knows nothing. Nonetheless, this knowledge provides no satisfaction in and of itself. The pursuit of wisdom does not abate. To cease from asking questions would be to pretend to have an answer, to pretend that one possessed bounded determinate knowledge separate from the process of investigation that produced and uncovered it, to pretend to be a god (Hunter 2004: 86–87). But Socrates rejects this hubristic reification. His intention, therefore, is to continue questioning all those he encounters, both to try to find someone who knows more than he and, failing that, to lead others to the knowledge that they too know nothing (20c–23b; Ledbetter 2003: 114–16).

The goal of the elenchus, then, is to produce self-knowledge and hence to adhere to the precept carved over the entrance to the oracle at Delphi, “Know thyself,” which, it turns out, is little more than a variation on the oracle’s pronouncement that Socrates is the wisest of all men. Thus, one formulation of the self-knowledge produced by the Socratic dialectic is precisely a recognition of one’s own emptiness in the Lacanian sense, an encounter with pure desire through the methodical exteriorization of the self in the logos by means of the emotionally charged situation of dialogue with a Socratic master.

In the end, after having conversed with Socrates, his interlocutor no longer knows why he does what he does. He becomes conscious of
the contradictions of his discourse and of his own internal contradictions. He doubts himself. He comes like Socrates to know that he knows nothing. But by doing this, he takes a certain distance from himself, doubles himself, with a part of himself even identifying with Socrates in the mutual accord that Socrates demands of his interlocutor at each step in the discussion. (Hadot 1995b: 55)

Thus in the greater Alcibiades, Socrates presents himself as a suitor to the young aristocrat, and as an earnest of his love, leads the youth through a series of questions and answers to the realization that he is utterly lacking in self-knowledge, and hence of any real knowledge of matters of state. Yet it is precisely this dialectic of question and answer, revealing the interlocutor’s own emptiness to himself, that proves so seductive and all but irresistible. As Alcibiades says of his encounters with Socrates in his speech in the Symposium, which we have quoted before:

> Whenever I hear his words my heart leaps more than that of Cybele’s Corybantic priests, and tears pour forth. I see many others also suffering these same things. . . . And still, even now, I am aware that if I were to wish to lend my ears to him, I could not hold out, but I would suffer the very same thing. For he forces me to agree that, although I am still greatly lacking, I neglect myself while busying myself with the affairs of the Athenians. And so, I force myself to stop my ears and run away in flight, as from the Sirens, lest I grow old seated here by him. (215d–216a)

Alcibiades must choose between a career as a politician and a general and the siren song of philosophical self-knowledge. The jouissance that is the “love”—or, as Diotima makes clear, the “desire,” erōs—of wisdom (philosophia) is, as in the case of Antigone, the encounter with a good beyond all the traditionally recognized goods of the Athenian polis—political accomplishment (philotimia) and personal fame (kleos)—beyond the pleasure principle.

12. For a more thorough discussion of this dialogue, see chapter 6.
13. Worshippers of Cybele, depicted in Catullus 63, they castrate themselves in a ritual marriage to the Great Mother goddess. Alcibiades is thus unmanned in his devotion to Socrates, even as the effect of Socrates’ discourse is compared to the orgiastic rites that accompany this mystical union.
That encounter is staged, and the desire realized, through the erotic reciprocity that characterizes Socratic discourse (Halperin 1990a: 270). Gregory Vlastos describes the peculiar mix of intellectual and erotic charge that makes up the Socratic dialectic as follows:

That form of passionate experience invented by Plato, which should count as the original, and always primary, sense of “Platonic love,” is a peculiar mix of sensuality, sentiment, and intellect—a companionship bonded by erotic attraction no less than by intellectual give-and-take. (1970: 39–40)

The give and take between master and student, lover and beloved has as its primary effect to reveal to the student/analysand the empty nature of their fantasy construction, i.e., of the system of goods around which they have organized their lives in conformity with the pleasure principle. This traversing of the fantasy is achieved primarily, not through Socrates’ doctrinal declarations nor through the pronouncement of long and eloquent speeches in the manner of a rhetorician such as Gorgias or Hippias (Gorgias 449b–c, 461c5–462a10; Hippias Minor 373a; Blondell 2002: 40–41), but through the methodical examination of the interlocutor’s discourse in the crucible of the Socratic elenchus.

A fine example of the process is delivered in the Lysis. Socrates is making his way from the Academy to the Lyceum, two of the three main gymnasias in Athens, looking for conversation partners and handsome young men. The gymnasias represented sites of general culture—physical, spiritual and artistic—in the Greek world. It is no accident that Plato and Aristotle would later set up their own formal philosophical schools in these two gymnasias. The gymnasias were also the places where men met to exercise in the nude and hence were the sites of many erotic encounters (Symposium 217b–c; Hubbard 2003: 3–4, 69, 163). Socrates runs into two young men, Hippothales and Ctêsippus. The former, we find out, is deeply, but unrequitedly, in love with the aristocratic young Lysis, composing poems and speeches in his praise, but all to no avail. Socrates informs him that this is wholly the wrong strategy. Praising young boys only makes them arrogant and does not encourage them to yield. Hippothales then asks Socrates to tell him what sort of logos one uses in conversation (dialegomenos) with a young man in order to become dear (prospilês) to him. Socrates responds that it is difficult to say, but “if you were to wish to make him come into words (logous) with me, perhaps I would be able to show you with respect to what things it is necessary to converse
with him (*dialegesthai*) in place of those that these men say you now say and sing” (206c4–7). I have chosen to translate this passage quite literally to bring out the ambiguities of the Greek. On the one hand Socrates says merely, if you invite him to talk with me I will show you how to converse with a boy. On the other, the passage is filled with the burgeoning technical vocabulary of Platonic philosophy\(^{16}\) and can also be translated, “if he were to enter into the realm of the *logos* with me, I would be able to show you how to enter into a dialectical conversation with him [and then you would see how to become truly *philos* (“dear,” “a friend”) to the young man].” Thus, on the one hand Socrates offers a lesson in seduction, a kind of pederastic *ars amatoria*. On the other hand, what he really presents is an initiation into philosophy that is shown to fascinate these young boys in a manner analogous to Alcibiades. Hippothales accepts Socrates’ offer to show him how to talk to boys.

After some brief preliminaries, Socrates enters into a dialectical conversation with the young men about the nature of *philia*. The end result, however, is “aporetical” (Robin 1964: 39–40; Derrida 1994: 179). This is a common feature of the early dialogues, in which what counts is the practice of the dialectic and “the transformation it brings. Sometimes the function of the dialogue is . . . to reveal the limits of language, the impossibility of communicating moral and existential experience” (Hadot 1995b: 105). In the case of the *Lysis*, what makes a man *philos* to another is never sufficiently defined. For the good man by definition cannot be deficient in any way. Thus he will not be a friend either to another good man, since he is self-sufficient, or to a bad man who can bring him only harm. Nor will a bad man be a friend to a bad man since a bad man is one who by definition cannot do good and so he will benefit neither from befriending another bad man, nor from being befriended by one. Likewise, the bad man, in so far as he is bad, will not love the good man and so will not befriend the good. The only possibility left open is that someone who is neither good nor bad would befriend the good, in so far as he or she suffers some evil and so has need of the good, just as a sick man has need of medicine. This last option anticipates Diotima’s doctrine in the *Symposium*, in which Erôs is described as a *daimôn* because he occupies an intermediate position between good and evil, the beautiful and the ugly, the gods and men. Yet Socrates in the *Lysis* hesitates to accept this solution.

\(^{16}\) The *Lysis* is often considered a relatively early dialogue, almost certainly written before the *Gorgias*, the *Republic*, and the *Symposium*, whose later discussions of dialectics and *philia* it nonetheless anticipates. See Vlastos (1970: 35–37).
unreservedly, for it seems to imply that the good is desirable, and hence truly good, only in the presence of evil. Or as Socrates says:

Ταῦτα μὲν γὰρ φίλου ἐνεκα φίλα κέκληται, τὸ δὲ τῷ ὄντι φίλον πᾶν τοιναύτιον τοῦτον φαίνεται πεφυκός. φίλον γὰρ ἢμιν ἀνεφάνη ὄν ἐχθροῦ ἐνεκα, ἐὰν δὲ τὸ ἐχθρὸν ἀπέλθοι, οὐκέτι, ὡς ἔοικ’, ἔσθ’ ἢμιν φίλον.(220e2–5)

These things are called dear on account of being dear, but in truth the dear appears to be wholly the opposite of this nature: for the dear has been manifest to us on account of that which is inimical, if the inimical should depart, it would most likely no longer be dear to us.

This line of reasoning would be tough sledding for most adolescent boys. The aridness of the dialectical argumentation here is striking. The repetitions of philos and ekthros seem to empty the terms of meaning as though they were counters moved about on a mental chessboard.

In the end, other solutions for the problem of what it means to be a friend or dear are proposed, but none is completely satisfying. Clearly, then, when Socrates is proposing the elenches as a means of seduction, he is exemplifying his famous irony. We are a long way

17. Socrates does manage to coax Menexenus, Lysis’ cousin, into agreeing to the proposition that the lawful and sincere lover should be held dear (phileisthai) by his boy (222a6–b1). This seems primarily a joke designed to demonstrate the power of eristic argumentation to extort consent from young boys. One of the charges against Socrates, of course, was corruption of the youth. But unlike those sophists who specifically advertised the ability to make the weaker argument the stronger, Socrates concedes the specious nature of his argument (222e1–7) even as he demonstrates his superiority as an erastês to Hippothales.

18. Vlastos (1991: 115–17) argues that the elenches is jettisoned by Plato in the Lysis, Hippias Major, and Euthydemus as he moves away from imitating Socrates and toward the establishment of a properly Platonic philosophy. The Lysis he argues presents but a pale imitation of the elenches because the teenagers, unlike Calicles and Polus in the Gorgias, do not offer their own theses, but merely respond naively to Socrates’ questions. It is often left to the latter then to demolish his own arguments. But Vlastos’s position, while brilliantly argued, is clearly an oversimplification (Blondell 2002: 10–11). First, elenctic argumentation can be found throughout the corpus, even if at times it becomes less prominent or less intense. It clearly features in Socrates’ interrogation of Agathon in the Symposium, Diotima’s interrogation of Socrates in the same work, the last section of the Phaedrus, the Philebus, the Meno, the greater Alcibiades, and elsewhere to a greater or lesser extent. Second, the elenches is not always as robust in the early works as Vlastos would have us believe. Ion in the dialogue that bears his name is certainly no better at argument than Lysis and Menexenues are in the Lysis. Third, as the seventh letter makes
from Ovid’s seductive wit in this dialogue. The investigation of the nature of \textit{philia} produces no firm conclusions, only dizzying exercises in dialectical argumentation that produce lines such as, \textit{ἐνεκερ ἄρα τοῦ φίλου <τοῦ φίλου> τὸ φίλου φίλον διὰ τὸ ἐχθρὸν} (“Thus on account of the dearness of the dear, the dear is dear through the inimical”) (219b2–3),\textsuperscript{19} which would be of doubtful efficacy as a means of either seduction or persuasion.\textsuperscript{20} Indeed, Socrates himself admits at the time to becoming “dizzied” or “drunk” from the convolutions of his own argument (216c5, 222c2).

And yet, oddly, his conversation with Lysis seems to have had the desired effect. The dialogue closes with Socrates saying:

And so what might we still do with the \textit{logos}? Or is it clear that there is nothing more to be done? And so now, we must, just like the sophists in court, ponder all that has been said. For if indeed neither the loved, nor the loving, nor the same, nor the different, nor the good, nor the familiar, nor any of the things we have gone through—there were so many I no longer remember—but if none of these is dear I no longer know what I might say.\textsuperscript{21} (222e1–7)

The confession of aporia at the end of such an exercise might well be thought to dash all of Hippothales’ erotic hopes, but it seems that Socrates’ have been enhanced. In the final lines of the \textit{Lysis}, as the others leave, Socrates turns and says to his two young interlocutors:

Now, Lysis and Menexenus, we have become laughing stocks, both I, an old man, and you. For these leaving will say that we think ourselves to be friends of one another [or, \textit{to be dear to one another}]—for I place myself among you—but we have not at all been able to say what a friend [or, \textit{the dear one}] is. (223b4–7)

\textsuperscript{19} The text is Race’s (1983).
\textsuperscript{20} One of the readers for the press suggested that the line was meant as an example of Gorgianic playfulness, but in the context of the dialogue as a whole, it smacks more of an exercise in logic chopping than of the clever deployment of the rhetoric of repetition.
\textsuperscript{21} The normal assumption is that \textit{legô} is deliberative subjunctive (Race 1983: ad loc). Morphologically, however, there is no reason why it might not be indicative, in which case the final clause would be translated, “I no longer know what I am saying,” a very Lacanian sentiment.
Whether Socrates has in fact become “dear” to the boys is left unclear, but it seems that others will think so, precisely because he has inserted himself into their midst. Collectively, they all will be ridiculous because they have become friends without being able to define what being a friend is. Yet in that they are no more ridiculous than other men, who, as the Apology demonstrates, regularly make claims to titles or status that they can neither define nor defend. Moreover, in emptying out the term philos, in reaching the point where they no longer know what it means, in having become “drunk” on the logos, they have very precisely gained an insight into their own natures, which those who laugh at them do not have. They now know that they do not know. How real the boys’ insight is—whether like Socrates in the Apology they now know that, at least on this topic, they know nothing—will determine if they do, in fact, become the philoi of Socrates and of the sophia he seeks. This alone will decide if they have truly become bonded by a common desire, for which Socratic conversation is the unique and all but indescribable vehicle.

If that is indeed the case, however, what they would come to love in Socrates through the dialectic is something more and other than Socrates himself. If the Lysis demonstrates anything, it is that what we love (phileo) in the other is not the other as itself, but the other as the representative or vehicle of the philon (“the dear”). Thus, as Vlastos writes in his commentary on the Lysis, “to say of another person that he or she is what you really and truly love would be to lapse . . . into moral fetishism” (1970: 10n.25):

Socrates . . . goes on to argue that just as we love the doctor for the sake of health, so we love health for sake of something else; hence, short of an infinite regress, there must be a πρωτόν φίλον, οὐ ἐνεκα καὶ τὰ ἄλλα φαμέν φίλα εἶσαι—a “first [i.e., terminal] object of love, for whose sake, we say, all other objects are loved” (219D), this being the only thing that is “truly” (ὑπὸ δολεθώς) or “really” (τῷ ὄντι) loved—or, more precisely that should be so loved. There is danger, Socrates warns, that “those other objects, of which we said that they are loved for its sake, should deceive us, like so many images of it” (219D2–4). So unless a man we loved actually was this πρωτόν φίλον, it would be a mistake to love him “for his own sake,” to treat him, in Kant’s phrase, as “an end in himself.” We would then stand in need of a philosopher, like Socrates, to cure us by his dialectic, to break the illusion, and to make us see that what we “really” love is something else. (Vlastos 1970: 10; brackets in original)
The recognition and transcendence of this fetishism is what constitutes the real difference between Socrates’ art of love and that of Hippothales. Hippothales desires the erotic possession of Lysis. His resort to encomia is not an effort to realize the boy’s desire, but to enter into a relation of exchange in which Lysis will grant him his favors in return for the flattery proffered (Nightingale 1995: 109). But Socrates becomes dear to the boys precisely insofar as he reveals that what they love in him is not what he personally has on offer, but something that is beyond himself, a prôton philon, that in itself cannot be described (219d2–4): the original dear Thing on account of which all else becomes dear. One can hardly imagine a more Lacanian formulation of love than that supplied by Vlastos himself: what we desire in the other is the encounter with that which is lacking at the heart of our being, the lost transcendental ideal that would render us whole and beyond the contingencies and compromises of Symbolic exchange and the pleasure principle (Žižek 1991: 169; 1993: 90; Lacan 1973: 119; Copjec 2002: 34). It is, in turn, this fundamental lack, the search for the original dear Thing, that as Diotima observes makes us human, because only the gods, as perfect beings, do not desire anything—even wisdom—and thus the gods (just like the wholly ignorant) are never philo-sophoi.

The dialectic, then, is not an exchange relationship, as Alcibiades believes in the Symposium and as Hippothales hopes in the Lysis. It aims not at a simple quid pro quo. Rather, the give and take of the Socratic elenchus performed under the sign of erôs reveals both your position in, and the limits of, the reigning system of beliefs (doxa). In doing so, it does not offer a prefabricated wisdom (Hadot 1995b: 106), or one that can be detached from the process of intellectual intercourse in which it is born (Symposium, 208e5–209c7). The Socratic practice of the pursuit of wisdom ultimately aims at that which cannot enter into relations of exchange and substitution. “His wisdom is simply not negotiable” (Nightingale 1995: 59). It is precisely a jouissance, an ethical commitment, that like Antigone’s is beyond the pleasure principle and thus beyond the very Symbolic means through which it is revealed (Žižek 1991: 36; Copjec 1994: 176–77). The master can prepare the student through a practice of intellectual rigor and purification, in which the intellectual and emotional fetishes (political ambition, vanity, sexual fixation) that stand between the student and the pursuit of wisdom are shown for the fragile and shoddy constructions they are,

22. Compare the Pergamene boy story in the Satyricon.
and the possibility of a beyond of the fantasy life they structure is envisioned, but he cannot produce or transmit the experience of that wisdom per se (Festugière 1950: 49, 191; Koyré 1962: 20; Blondell 2002: 100, 124). The student must leave the cave under his or her own power.

Nonetheless, an objection will be forthcoming, “This is a fine model perhaps for the aporetical dialogues such as the Lysis, the Euthyphro, and the Ion. In these dialogues, as in the Apology, the elenchus is but a means of revealing the delusion of others. But what of the great middle dialogues, such as the Republic, the Phaedrus, and the Symposium itself? There is most assuredly the elaboration of a positive doctrine in these dialogues, and the elenchus itself is often reduced to a mere mode of exposition.” This is not the place to engage the numerous assumptions that lie behind this response with the fullness they merit. It would take us too far afield from the nature and significance of Lacan’s reading of the Symposium. Let it suffice to note first that, although there are undeniable stylistic and even doctrinal differences between those dialogues commonly labeled early and those labeled middle and late, at no time does Plato or Socrates simply lay out a set of propositions that are to be taken as true teaching. They are always open to the interchange of question and answer, and any given proposition must be able to marshal logoi in its defense (Diès 1941: xvi; Gadamer 1991: 2, 10–11; Annas 1993: 18; Szelizák 1999: 15–19, 42, 55–60, 108; Blondell 2002: 42). Indeed, the portrayal of Socratic questioning as a form of demystification rather than mere exposition—with aporia as its possible and even desirable end—is not limited to what are termed the early dialogues (Blondell 2002: 12–13), but is in fact explicitly thematized in such later works as the Theaetetus (187b–c, 210a–d) and the Sophist (230a–d). Moreover, Plato famously never speaks in propria persona in the dialogues, and to reduce Socrates to being a mere spokesman for Plato is highly problematic, since it ignores that in some dialogues he is clearly closer to what is presumed to be the historic Socrates (e.g., the Apology) than in others (Philebus), while in still others he has at best a minor role (Sophist, Statesman, Timaeus, Critias) or does not appear at all (Laws). This is not to say that Socrates does not frequently espouse ideas that are probably quite similar to Plato’s and that the role of Socrates in this regard does not change from dialogue to dialogue. Nonetheless, the idea that in any given dialogue one

24. For more on this common division of the dialogues, see Vlastos (1991: 46–47) and accompanying bibliography.
could simply delete the name Socrates and write in Plato has no warrant (Koyré 1962: 18; Nehamas 1998: 87; Blondell 2002: 17–19). The notion that Socrates is merely the mouthpiece of Plato presumes that one has already abstracted a pure philosophical content from the text, which escapes all modes of figuration or rhetorical distortion, and that one can then take this pure meaning, which exists separately from any particular textual instantiation, and go back to the text and find it directly exemplified in Socrates and therefore claim that Socrates is the spokesman of that philosophy. Such a procedure, however, is not only illegitimate, since pure meaning apart from any vehicle of inscription never exists for human intelligence, but also circular, since the initial abstraction is then used to validate itself.

Second, when what appears to be positive doctrine is presented, it appears in mythological or allegorical forms that deliberately defy acceptance as literal truth. When asked to describe the good in the Republic, Socrates responds that he cannot, but he can say what it is like. This leads to the analogy between the good and the sun, which in turn leads to the myth of the cave. When Socrates describes the chariot procession of the gods before the forms in the Phaedrus, it is not only a manifestly mythological evocation of the transcendental realm, but it is in the context of a discussion of love, poetry, and other forms of divine madness. Moreover, it is inscribed within a self-conscious palinode to his previous speech, itself a response to Phaedrus’ performance of Lysias’ purported tour de force demonstrating that boys should only yield to those who do not love them. Lastly, when Socrates recounts Diotima’s teaching on erôs, he not only disclaims personal authority—in a dialogue that already problematizes authorship and transmission by presenting itself as the report of a report of what had happened years earlier at Agathon’s party (Hunter 2004: 26–27)—but he is also directly followed by the irruption of the drunken Alcibiades onto the scene, thus forbidding the image of true lovers ascending the scala amoris to the prôton philon, beauty itself, from being the last word on desire.

The ironic juxtaposition of Alcibiades’ grotesque entrance and his subsequent praise of Socrates with Diotima’s evocation of erotic transcendence creates a deliberate interpretive gap between these two textual surfaces that forces the reader to read each of these moments as an ambiguous figurative evocation (metaphor? metonymy? inversion? parody?) of the other. By means of this juxtaposition, the dialogue itself comes to function as a kind of Silenus box so that the incongruity of its rhetorical surfaces serves to project the possibility of an infinitely more
precious depth, an agalma that lies deep within. The Silenus box is, of course, the image that Alcibiades uses to describe Socrates himself (215a). Alcibiades’ drunken speech, thus, not only functions as an ironic sequel to Diotima’s vision of the beautiful in itself (auto to kalon 211d3), it also provides the reader with an interpretive model by means of which he or she might understand the relation of the speech to that which comes before. Yet by simultaneously evoking and performing the model of the Silenus box, the speech sets up an interpretive mise-en-abyme, as content and interpretive frame come to occupy the same rhetorical space. The result is an irresolvable difference between surface and depth that will not allow the fundamentally ironic relation between Alcibiades’ grotesque immediacy and Diotima’s abstract ideality to be resolved, but forces each reader to continue his or her own dialectic with the text and the interpretive community that surrounds it (Hunter 2004: 10–11, 129–30; Wohl 2002: 163; Nehamas 1998: 61–68).

Third, in so far as positive doctrine is presented in the middle dialogues, it is presented as an ontology of the forms, yet the exact nature of that ontology is far from a settled question, both in the scholarship and within the dialogues themselves. What is the relationship of the forms to each other and to actual empirical experience? What is their origin? How does their status as intelligible essences relate to the individual instances that manifest them and that, according to the method of collection and division as presented in the Phaedrus and the Philebus, constitute them (Zuckert 1996: 73; Nehamas and Woodruff 1995: xli–xlv; Boussoulas 1952: 8)? The appeal to the ontology of the forms, then, does not in fact provide a uniform and stable doctrine from which appropriate ethical, political, and aesthetic choices can be unreflectingly deduced. The forms, as presented within the dialogues, do not unproblematically dictate the nature of what is. Rather they force the interlocutors to probe the nature of what they understand as the intelligible bases of knowledge and experience, and challenge them to find an unambiguous warrant for their lives beyond the limits of existence acknowledged by the dominant discursive regime, i.e., the Symbolic (Hadot 1995b: 103, 120). What are the good, the beautiful, and the just, not as instantiated in any particular representation, but in themselves? How can we understand these concepts to be meaningful without reducing them to mere imitations of the accepted doxa and hence voiding them of any critical content? The doctrine of the forms, as

25. The effect becomes all the more profound when one begins to factor in the other speeches as well.
presented in the dialogues, invariably by means of myth, analogy, and fiction, does not represent the end of inquiry, but provides the spur to examine its conditions of possibility. The forms, as we shall see in our later readings of the *Phaedrus*, *Philebus*, and the seventh letter, function in the dialogues less as a final answer to the question, *τί ἐστιν*, from which all else can be deduced, than as a turn to philosophy, the *logos*, and the systematic questioning of all that is, in the name of a unity of being that both transcends and embraces the immediate (Festugière 1950: 184n.1, 187; Gadamer 1991: 82–83; Szelizák 1999: 49).

Plato’s metaphysics, then, are far less the imposition of an authoritarian system *à la* Popper than a critique of what is (Hadot 1995b: 104–5; Foucault 1983a). They point far more to what is lacking in the present than to what must always and everywhere be the case. It is precisely the gap between the world of sensual immediacy and the desire for transcendental completion, beyond the pleasure principle, that the doctrine of the forms articulates with admirable immediacy. As such, the distinction between the ironic figure of Socrates in the aporetical dialogues and the mythopoetic philosopher of the great middle dialogues is maybe more apparent than real, at least in terms of the existential demands placed upon the subject (Gadamer 1991: 4–5; Wallace 1991: xv–xvii).

The forms, in fact, articulate the irony of immediate existence, the necessary self-alienation of the unreflective life, as one pursues a satisfaction that remains forever elusive. They represent the same insistent demand for an account (*logos*) of the self and its claims to knowledge, on the level of Being, as Socrates does in the *Apology* on the level of subjective existence. It is the pure desire for this completion that Alcibiades misrecognizes as the beautiful *agalma* concealed within Socrates’ Silenic exterior: making Socrates the possessor of a hidden substance that could then be passed in whole or in part to Alcibiades himself (Nightingale 1995: 123–27; Vlastos 1991: 36–37). In doing so, he not only fundamentally misrecognizes Socratic desire as an object that can be given in exchange, good for good, he also transfers his desire onto the person of Socrates as the reflection of his own fundamental lack.

In the end, the *agalma*, the beautiful icon that Alcibiades perceives beneath Socrates’ grotesque exterior, is literally no Thing (Leonard

26. This is not to deny Plato’s aristocratic sympathies, but as the Marxist critic Peter Rose observes, Plato’s responses to the crises facing aristocratic culture, both in democratic Athens and throughout the Greek world, were never simple or monochromatic (1992: 331–69). See also Platter for a good concise articulation of both sides of this argument and an admirable presentation of how any simple argument for Plato as either reactionary aristocrat or cryptoprogressive is necessarily oversimplified (2005).
2005: 186). It is the gap marked by the loss of the first Thing, the prôton phi lon, and it is infinitely precious: for it is our relation to this desire (erôs), this lack, at the heart of Socrates that points us toward that transcendence of the fantasy self bequeathed by the realm of recognized goods that is the final project of both philosophy and Lacanian psychoanalysis. The agalma, thus, is the embodiment of that mediating relation of the human to the divine,27 which Diotima defines as the daimonic, and whose primary instantiation within the Symposium is found in the myth of the birth of Erôs himself (Halperin 1994: 48; Robin 1964: 120). Moreover, it is this very daimonic nature that animates the desire we term philo-sophia: the concrete practice through which we come to know, and thereby to transcend, ourselves by means of a determined relation of erotic reciprocity and mutual dialectical testing, in the presence of a Socratic master (Wohl 2002: 164–65; Lacan 1991: 190–91; Robin 1929: xci–xcii). It is thus no accident that, as many commentators have noted, Erôs, the barefooted daimôn described in Diotima’s speech, bears a striking resemblance to Socrates himself (Nightingale 1995: 129; Robin 1929: lxxx, ciii–cvi; 1964: 109–10), nor that Lacan reads the latter as a figure for the analyst.

3. Lacan reads the Symposium: Le transfert

Socrates is the “precursor of the analyst” in so far as he says that he “knows nothing except what concerns desire” (Symposium, 177d). It is a question of épistémé,28 of a knowledge concerning not only the discourse of those who speak on love, but also he who publicly speaks his love: Alcibiades. (Julien 1990: 118; emphasis in original)

[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)

As Jeffrey Carnes has noted, the Symposium is not only a natural choice for Lacan, but Aristophanes’ myth reads as if it were made to order for the Parisian analyst.29 In it:

27. Understood as those beings who possess in perpetuity the good and the beautiful and are therefore not affected by desire.
28. The accentuation in French of this Greek word varies from author to author.
The impulse toward sex has its origin in the recognition of castration—of the loss (or impossibility) of fullness. Zeus, the phallic father, punishes and says “no” yet also gives us sex (while hiding his own desire). Indeed, this _coupure_ or cut gives rise to the individual subject himself, who is a _symbolon—a tally, a half of his former self, but also a symbolon in the sense of a signifier_. This individuation, not freely chosen, is the source of sexual desire, a mark of our mortality and imperfection. . . . (Carnes 1998: 114–15)

It is Aristophanes, Lacan notes, who introduces the concept of the splitting of the subject, or _Spaltung_, which played a central role in Freud’s etiology of desire (Lacan 1991: 108, 144; Carnes 1998: 115). Lacan goes on in his eleventh seminar, _The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis_, to develop Aristophanes’ myth further by adding the concept of the _lamelle_, i.e., a “thin blade or membrane.” The _lamelle_ represents both the effective agent that splits the initial dyadic unity of self and other—emblematically portrayed in psychoanalysis as the infant’s Imaginary relation with the mother—and that which remains after the splitting of the subject, i.e., the desire that pushes us to seek what we have lost, but also that which, as desire, guarantees that we will never find it.

This, Lacan observes, is the crucial difference between the Aristophanic and Freudian accounts: according to the Platonic Aristophanes, subjects seek their “sexual complements”—but in psychoanalysis, they seek that which is gone forever (Lacan 1973: 211, 221, 223, 229; Žižek 1996: 192–93). Indeed, as Lacan reiterates on more than one occasion, “there is no sexual relation.” There is no possibility of the perfect other who is able to restore us to fullness, because the originary lack that defines our desire (as Socrates and Diotima recognize 199d–e, 201e–202e) is in fact a retrospective reflection into the past of who we are now far more than it is a simple cause of what we are to become. For Lacan, following in the wake of Heidegger and Sartre, the lack that constitutes the subject is a function of the very contingent relation of the subject to the world. It defines the necessary negativity of that relation, and hence the subject’s capacity to desire the other, to

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30. The related English term, _lamella_, does not really translate the French _lamelle_, which retains the notion that it is the diminutive of _lame_, the blade of a knife or sword, as well as signifying a membrane between cells.


32. I use the term here in its technical, philosophical sense, of that which introduces a change in the existing state of things, which negates what is. Hence, a better translation for
want more than what is. We are always from the moment we enter into language and self-consciousness in excess (de trop) of both ourselves and the world: a half without a whole. We desire to be a whole, to return to a fantasized Aristophanic state of completion and continuity with the world before the perceived rupture of our specific difference. We desire to be not for ourselves—“pour personne, pour moi”—but in ourselves. Yet, as Lacan, Heidegger, and Sartre all perceived, such a nostalgic desire can only orient the subject toward a future that simultaneously creates, or better renders effective, the past (Renaut 1993: 53, 187–89). The nostalgia for a lost wholeness is always the desire for a different future.

It is the future that decides if the past is living or dead. The past, in effect, is originally a project, as the present leaping forth of my being. And, in so far as it is a project, it is an anticipation; its sense comes from the future it sketches in advance. . . . The past’s power comes only from the future: in whatever manner I live or appreciate my past, I can do so only in light of a projection of myself into the future. (Sartre 1943: 556)

It is precisely this complex relation between the facticity of the present, the projection of the future, and the etiological force of the past that defines the temporality of desire. The lack at the heart of being, like das Ding, is a retrospective construction from within the structures of the Symbolic, not a pre-empiric cause. Thus, Antigone could not exist without Creon. Indeed, she is already dead only with respect to the Law that he represents and the desire his edict necessarily projects. By the same token, Alcibiades could not exist without Socrates, nor could desire without the Law and its beyond. From a Lacanian perspective, these binary oppositions are always, at the same time, a function of difference, of language’s division of the manifold of experience into categories and determinate entities (Eco 1976: 71–79), the annihilation of which would result in psychosis or Symbolic death. They are thus also a function of our entry into the realm of erotic substitution that constitutes the threshold of the pleasure and reality principles.

Sartre’s Being and Nothingness (L’être et le néant) might well be Being and Negating. For a more complete discussion of the concept of the negative in its philosophical and specifically Hegelian dimensions, see P. A. Miller 1998.

33. See the famous passage in La nausée (Sartre 1981c: 150–60).
Lacan’s rereading of Aristophanes’ speech, however, is nothing more than a gloss on Diotima’s own corrective: we do not desire our missing half (the past); we desire what is good (the future, that toward which we project ourselves; 205d–e). The Aristophanic fantasy of completion thus holds out a possibility that Eros, defined as a *philo-sophos* (lover of wisdom), can by nature never attain (Nightingale 1995: 126–27), a possibility that would represent the very end of philosophic desire, one that Socrates explicitly refuses in the *Apology*. We desire what is missing, but what is missing is not us, but precisely our own transcendence, that which is both in and beyond us: in us because as the *Lysis* (216d5–217a2) and the *Symposium* (202a–b) demonstrate, if we were wholly lacking in the good, we would have no basis for desiring it, since that which is completely evil cannot desire the good; beyond us because what we desire is ultimately the *prôton philon,*³⁵ according to the *Lysis*, or the form of the good and the beautiful, according to the *Symposium*.

Both sides of this complex equation are captured in a pun Diotima makes when she encourages Socrates to accept the possibility of substituting “the good” (*to agathon*) for the “beautiful” (*to kalon*) when answering the question what does the desiring one desire. The answer, we learn, is first to be happy and second that “it is in the possession of *tôn agathôn* [good things/goods/Agathons] that happy ones come to be happy” (204e–205a1). The poet Agathon is of course the host of the party and portrayed as the object of attraction to both Socrates and Alcibiades. “Moreover, we must never forget that Agathon himself (‘Mr. Good’) is also the most beautiful (*kallistos*) person at his own party (e.g., 213c5)” (Hunter 2004: 87). The pun is made all the easier by the fact that the convention of marking proper names through capitalization did not yet exist in Plato’s Greek. Lest we miss the erotic implications of the pun, it becomes clear immediately in Diotima’s correction of Aristophanes when she says, “My *logos* says that desire is neither of the half or the whole, unless, my friend, in some way it happens to be Agathon/good.” Thus the happy are happy to the extent they possess that which is good, but that which is immediately good is Agathon. We do not desire completion but the transcendence of the self in the possession of the object of desire. And the object of desire is at once that which corresponds to our own internal lack (our other half), that which we accept as one of the chain of substitutions in the endless

³⁵. The *prôton philon* may seem to be first temporally when it appears in a narrative exposition, but its priority is in fact logical rather than temporal.
metonymy of desire under the reign of the pleasure principle (goods), and that which causes us to go beyond the very structure of our identity in the realization of our pure desire (the form of the good, the prōton philon). The poet Agathon, in turn, stands as an ironic metonymy for each of these.

What Lacan is investigating in his reading of the Symposium, however, is not merely desire or love. He is interested in a special kind of love, that which a patient feels for his or her analyst. The essence of the transferential relationship is the possibility of substitution or metaphor, and the fundamental model for this substitutive relationship, according to Lacan, can be found in the complex interplay between Socrates and Alcibiades. Two different, but complementary, levels of substitutability can be found in their relationship as defined in the Symposium’s final movement: the well known inversion of roles wherein erastês and erômenos exchange places, as Socrates becomes the object of Alcibiades’ desire (Wohl 2002: 130–31, 163–64); and the potential of substituting Agathon for the object of desire of both Socrates and Alcibiades, so that each comes to occupy for the other the logically necessary, but empty, third position that makes Symbolic relationships of equivalence, and hence substitutability, possible.36 This third position is precisely that occupied by the analyst in the typical psychoanalytic scenario. Nonetheless, transference is not a phenomenon limited to the analyst’s couch. It is, as Lacan observes, in the nature of love and of Symbolic relationships per se (Julien 1990: 74, 120; Henderson 1993: 125–26). The psychoanalytic relationship is only a specific instance of this more general phenomenon.

The first level of substitution, that between the erastês and the erômenos, and hence between Socrates and Alcibiades, is the most apparent in Plato’s text and the easiest to elucidate. Alcibiades tells us that it is well known that Socrates was his first lover, but when he sought for Socrates to affirm his desire for him directly, the philosopher always evaded him. Alcibiades therefore sets out on the path of seduction hoping to come to possess Socrates’ wisdom—the agalma or image of divine essence locked inside his Silenic exterior—by allowing Socrates

36. On “triangular desire” as the essence of emotional identification with, and structural imitation of, Socrates, see Blondell (2002: 107). The logical necessity of a third position to make any determination of value, and hence comparison and exchange or substitutability, possible was first demonstrated in modern times by Hegel (1977: 58–66 and passim), and then specifically elaborated upon by Marx (1976: 125–77) in his notion of the universal equivalent. On the relation of these dialectical systems of thought to Freud and Lacan, see Goux (1990: 9–63).
to possess him in the more conventional pederastic sense. Yet theirs is anything but a normal pederastic relationship since the older lover has become the object of pursuit and the younger beloved, the pursuer (215a4–222a6). The unusual nature of this situation is highlighted by the fact that certain early commentators have felt that the eruption of the drunken Alcibiades on the scene of the Symposium’s orderly exchange of speeches in praise of Love constituted a breach in the stylistic and thematic unity of the dialogue. Indeed, Lacan remarks, the dialogue’s first French translator, Louis Le Roy, chose to end his text with Socrates’ recounting of the lesson of Diotima, believing that the Alcibiades passage was a joking coda that was neither integral to the dialogue nor appropriate reading matter for a Christian nation (1991: 30–31, 36; Lloyd-Jones 1996: 100–101; Le Roy 1558: 180r).

Yet, as Lacan also notes, the theme of substituting the lover for the beloved is present from the earliest speech in the dialogue, where Phaedrus praises both Alcestis’ dying in place of Admetus and Achilles’ taking the place of Patroclus after the latter’s death (179b4–180b5). The first is an example of simple substitution along the lines of Alcibiades and Socrates. Alcestis assumes the role of Admetus, without any relationship to a possible third position that would make a more general equivalence possible. The case of Achilles, however, as Phaedrus observes, is worthy of greater praise and wins him the reward of spending the hereafter in the Isles of the Blessed. In it, the erômenos does not merely take the place of the erastês but actually becomes a subject of desire in his own right. “Achilles, having come to the aid of and having avenged his erastês, Patroclus, not only dared to prefer to die in place of, but also in addition to, the one whose life had already ended” (179e5–180a2; emphasis mine). In short, Achilles can occupy the vacant place of the erastês and die in turn, precisely because Patroclus himself has died, has moved to the vacant third position. It is the transformation of Achilles into a lover, into one who actually occupies the place of Patroclus, that is so miraculous (Lacan 1991: 69):

Aeschylus talks nonsense when he says that Achilles desires Patroclus. He was more beautiful not only than Patroclus but than all the heroes, and he was still beardless, since he was much younger, as Homer says. Truly, this is why the gods greatly honored his virtue in love, moreover they wonder, admire, and esteem it more when the erômenos is fond of the erastês than when the erastês is fond of the boy: for such a boy is more godlike than the lover of boys; he is divinely inspired. On account of these things, the gods honored
Achilles more than Alcestis, sending him to the Isles of the Blessed. (180a4–b5)

Achilles does not simply mirror Patroclus, in the manner of Alcestis and Admetus, but actually assumes his position, suffers what he suffers. As Lacan shrewdly notes, such a transformation must assume that one of the two positions in the essentially dyadic love relationship has become vacant, so that the necessity of a third position (in this case death) must be posited (1991: 63). The existence of this more complex triadic love relationship, in turn, looks forward to that of Socrates, Alcibiades, and Agathon.

Alcibiades’ attempt to seduce Socrates, of course, fails. The merely dyadic pattern of substitution comes up short. Socrates refuses to adopt the passive position because he refuses to admit the existence in himself of a positive substance that is the object of Alcibiades’ desire (Lacan 1991: 185, 188). Rather he recognizes that what Alcibiades in fact desires is Socrates’ desire, that is, to realize his own desire through the desire of the Other (Lacan 1991: 202–3; Julien 1992: 122). It is for this reason that Alcibiades must paradoxically seek signs of Socrates’ love, while confessing that it is universally known that Socrates was his first lover. Why does he need signs of that which is already beyond question? He seeks not so much to confirm Socrates’ love but to possess it as an object (Lacan 1991: 185). Socrates in his recognition that Eros is not a positive substance, as demonstrated in Diotima’s speech, but rather a daimonic mediator between presence and absence, mortal and immortal, the ugly and the beautiful can truly grant Alcibiades’ desire only by refusing him (201d1–204c6; Lacan 1991: 144; Clarke 1995: 13, 19–20; Carnes 1998: 115). This recognition of desire as a fundamental lack constitutes the essential kernel of Socrates’ erotic mastery (Lacan 1991: 185–86). It represents the constitutive emptiness that through the intensely personal process of Socratic dialectic, with its characteristic erotic reciprocity, leads from attraction to the beautiful body to the “ecstatic contemplation” of beauty itself (210a–212a; Vlastos 1991: 78). This recognition of pure desire is in fact the *agalma* Alcibiades seeks and that Socrates, in refusing the latter’s advances, grants, if only Alcibiades could recognize it (Žižek 1991: 7; see also Berger 1994: 107). It is the recognition of the constitutive lack at the heart of desire that makes substitution itself possible but also infinite, for as Diotima in the *Symposium* and Socrates in the *Phaedrus* demonstrate, what is desired in the individual beloved is not that which the individual possesses but the possibility of seeing in the individual that good which is
lacking or lost from the self. The *agalma* for Lacan, thus, stands for the “lost” object (or *objet petit a*) whose absence is constitutive of both human desire and individual identity, and which itself stands as the embodiment of that more fundamental loss designated by *das Ding.*

We are now in a better position to see how Socrates occupies the place of the analyst in the transferential relationship (Julien 1990: 118). The goal of Lacanian psychoanalysis, as we have already seen in Lacan’s examination of its ethics through the figure of Antigone, is not to provide patients with interpretations or answers, but to allow them to realize their own desires as constituted in their ambivalent relation to the world of conventionally recognized goods (Lacan: 1991: 18; Schneiderman 1983: 94; Ragland-Sullivan 1986: 81–82). The end of analysis is not the acceptance of a single *sovereign good* to which the subject must submit or be labeled perverse, but the realization of one’s own constitutive lack (Lacan 1986: 347). It is this empty place of desire, which is occupied and made visible by the analyst, that engenders the transferential relationship summed up by Lacan in the phrase “the desire of analyst.” And it is here that the Socratic lesson is most to be taken to heart:

It is not to say that the analyst ought to be a Socrates, or pure, or a saint. Without a doubt these explorers like Socrates . . . can give us some indications concerning the field in question. This is an understatement. . . . Rather it is exactly because they have done the exploration that we are able to define . . . the coordinates that the analyst ought to be able to recognize simply to occupy the place that is his, i.e., that vacant place that he ought to offer to the desire of the patient in order that he might realize himself as the desire of the Other. It is for this reason that the *Symposium* interests us.38 (Lacan 1991: 128)

Thus it is through the empty space of Socrates’ desire that Alcibiades can realize his own, but only insofar as Socrates presents himself as one who desires but does not yield to false satisfactions—that is, only insofar as Socrates remains an *erastês* and refuses the seduction of becoming Alcibiades’ *erômenos*, something he could become only by declaring (paradoxically) his desires in the manner of a conventional *erastês*.


38. The same could be said of the *Antigone*. 
To return to the paradigm offered in Phaedrus’ speech at the beginning of the dialogue, the challenge is for Alcibiades to become Achilles. He must transform himself from an erômenos into a true erastês by occupying the vacant place of the desire of the Other. It is this more complex, triadic substitutive relation—exemplified by Achilles—that is glimpsed in Alcibiades’ relationship to Agathon (to agathon), as mediated through the desire of Socrates (222b4–223b2). Instead, what he has desired to this point is merely to remain at the level of Alcestis, who took the place of her lover while staying the beloved. He has fallen prey to the siren song of the Athenian dêmos and his own philotimia, and so remains within the subject positions allotted to him by the dominant Symbolic system. In the process, as we see, he has failed to serve both the polis and the good.

The Symposium leaves the actual consummation of Alcibiades’ ultimate transformation an open question, since at the very moment when Socrates is to praise Agathon in front of Alcibiades, a second crowd of revelers bursts in, bringing the evening’s orderly proceedings to a close. But, as Lacan notes:

That Socrates should praise Agathon is the response not to a past, but a present demand of Alcibiades. When Socrates praises Agathon, he gives satisfaction to Alcibiades. He gives satisfaction through his actual act of public declaration, of putting on the plane of the universal Other that which happened between them behind the veils of shame. The response of Socrates is this—you can love the one I am going to praise because praising him I, Socrates, will know how to show the image of you as a lover, insofar as it through the image of you as a lover that you are going to enter onto the road of higher identifications that the way of beauty traces. (1991: 189–90)

In his evocation of the way of beauty and of the road of higher identifications, Lacan here clearly alludes to the central myth of the Phaedrus, which, as Phillipe Julien notes, features a perfect description of the mutual identification of erastês and erômenos, and the consequent possibility of a substitution of places through their recollection of, and identification with, a vacant third position, the lost realm of the forms (1991: 121). The role of the analyst, like that of Socrates, is to be the midwife that makes this intellectual birth—through the power of

recollection in the field of desire—possible: for it is through the erotic reciprocity of the *elenchus*, that a pure desire beyond the pleasure and reality principles can be realized by one who, unlike Alcibiades in the end, has the courage not to cede on his or her desire.

4. Conclusion: Desire, Ethics, and the Other

Now, some people are pregnant in body, and for this reason turn more to women and pursue love in that way . . . while others are pregnant . . . with what is fitting for the soul to bear and bring to birth. And what is fitting? Wisdom and the rest of virtue, which all poets beget, as well as all the craftsmen said to be creative. But by far the greatest and most beautiful part of wisdom deals with the proper ordering of cities and households, and what is called moderation and justice. When someone has been pregnant with these in his soul from early youth, while he is still a virgin, and having arrived at the proper age, desires to beget and give birth, he too will certainly go about seeking the beauty in which he would beget; for he will never beget in anything ugly. Since he is pregnant, then, he is much more drawn to bodies that are beautiful than to those that are ugly; and if he has the luck to find a soul that is beautiful and noble and well-formed, he is even more drawn to this combination; such a man makes him instantly teem with ideas and arguments about virtue—the qualities a virtuous man should have and the customary activities in which he should engage; and so he tries to educate him. (*Symposium* 208e–209c; Nehamas and Woodruff 1997: 491–92)

Phaedrus: And you, my remarkable friend, appear to be totally out of place [atopos]. Really, just as you say, you seem to need a guide, not to be one of the locals. Not only do you never travel abroad—as far as I can tell, you never set foot beyond the city walls.

Socrates: Forgive me my friend. I am devoted to learning; landscapes and trees have nothing to teach me—only people in the city can do that. (*Phaedrus* 230c–d; Nehamas and Woodruff 1995: 6)

Antigone, on Lacan’s reading, seeks a good beyond the pleasure principle, beyond the compromises that our daily unreflective commerce with the world necessarily entails. In so doing, she, like Anouilh’s heroine, chooses death before happiness or *le bonheur*. But where in Anouilh’s case this is ultimately a form of pre-oedipal narcissism, Lacan’s Antigone is the product of a specific, historically localizable narrative—and hence irretrievably implicated in the Other. Yet she cannot either be simply reduced to the terms of that historical narrative or assimilated to the dominant narratives of the present. As such, she can never be contained within the bounds of our own pre-Oedipal
fantasy constructions, but must always stand as a point of difference, the marker of a form of enjoyment that cannot be encompassed within the dominant forms of Imaginary and Symbolic identification. An ethics founded on Lacan’s Sophoclean Antigone will at once demand a commitment to unrepeatable historical specificity and to its necessary transcendence.\(^\text{40}\)

Antigone may present the model of a psychoanalytic ethics for Lacan, but as the structure of Seminars 7 and 8 make clear, she represents only the first movement in the complex dance that the desire of and for the analyst entails. Alcibiades too seeks a good beyond all recognized goods, but what his and Socrates’ example shows is that this desire need not lead to Haemon’s bloody ejaculation on Antigone’s cold, dead cheek. The Socratic model may lead to a kind of death to the world, as revealed by the image of the philosopher’s discourse being a Siren song capable of holding Alcibiades immobilized. But as Diotima’s speech in the Symposium and Socrates’ great speech in the Phaedrus (as well as numerous statements in the Phaedo) make clear, this death to the manifold, contradictory, and ultimately unsatisfying goods of the dominant Symbolic system is but a prelude to a fuller life whose desire is embodied precisely in the pursuit of wisdom (philosophia), that is, the pursuit of the ideal and unreachable transcendence of the forms. The task of psychoanalysis, like that of philosophy, is not to impose a single vision of the object of that desire, not to substitute for it one particular fetish, but to come to a recognition of that desire through an encounter with one’s own emptiness. We must not stop our ears, as Alcibiades says he must if he is to remain in the kingdom of recognized goods. We must not cede on our desire, as he did in his final decision to seek dominance within the existing structure of the polis. Alcibiades’ choice to eschew the Siren song of Socratic desire is one that Plato’s target audience, even more than Lacan’s, knew would lead to the personal and political disasters of bad faith, self-betrayal, and collaboration.\(^\text{41}\)

The desire of the analyst is then, as we have seen, the medium through which the analysand comes both to realize the nature of his desire and to have the ability not to cede on it. The analysand desires

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\(^{40}\) This is not to say that Lacan’s actual practice of historicization is in fact satisfactory or that it would come close to meeting the rigorous demands of professional classicists, to whom he did not presume to speak. It is rather a matter of formal recognition within a psychoanalytic context and relative to the theatrical practice of his modernist predecessors.

\(^{41}\) Witness the case of Brasillach (chapter 2) and, some would say, Sartre’s own later compromises with the Stalinist PCF.
the analyst’s desire, as Alcibiades does Socrates’. He wishes both to be the object of the analyst’s desire and to desire what the analyst desires. In the same way, as Diotima notes, the young man whose psyche is burgeoning with desire seeks beauty first by desiring the beauty of another, and then by desiring that which the other desires. Through this process he enters into a ladder of substitutions that at once reveals to the youth the nature of his own desire and opens it out to the world beyond that of received opinion and sensual immediacy, disclosing that of wisdom and justice. Nor is that realm an asocial or apolitical space of personal virtue and solipsistic desire. As Diotima observes above, “by far the greatest and most beautiful part of wisdom deals with the proper ordering of cities and households, and what is called moderation and justice.”

Socrates’ estrangement from the city, then, should not be equated with a quietistic withdrawal. His atopia at once places him outside the bounds of the polis, but also enables him ultimately to have a more effective engagement with it. As Phaedrus notes paradoxically, Socrates’ atopia is in fact founded on engagement. He is like a stranger in his own land, not because he is always abroad, but precisely because he never leaves. His constant engagement is with the citizens of the polis, for only they can teach him the nature of virtue and justice. But that teaching is not achieved through a simple process of unreflective imitation: it is the product of a direct and focused engagement with the nature of those citizens’ desire and its relation to Socrates’ own. That engagement, in turn, occurs precisely through the kind of elenctic testing exemplified in the Lysis and the Apology, as well as through the existential challenge of the forms as seen in the Symposium, the Phaedrus, and the Republic.

Socrates appears like a stranger because he is at once outside and inside the community. Indeed, he is so deeply embedded that he appears to have no place at all. He is the intimate other that reveals both what the community is and what it wants to be, without his ever being fully assimilable to the dominant Symbolic structures that define the polis. He is a true “thought from the outside” that is only receivable as such because of his deep interiority. Consequently, he is not only a fit emblem of Lacan’s vision of psychoanalysis, but also of the privileged status of antiquity in general, and of Platonic philosophy in particular, for a truly postmodern spiritual practice.