

AN IDIOTIC ACT: ON THE NON-EXAMPLE OF ANTIGONE

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Antigone, Medea, Selma Jezkova, Mary Kay Letourneau, Andrea Yates... Žižek has over the years utilised a number of characters, both fictional and existent, and usually female, to illustrate various aspects of his Lacanian-derived conception of ethics. The contexts in which these characters are to be located and the actions they engage in determine them, for Žižek, as suitable ethical examples. This article will focus on one such example, perhaps the most obvious; Antigone. For Žižek, the crucial aspect of both Sophocles' *Antigone*, the play, and Antigone, the character within the play, lies in what he, following Lacan,¹ terms her 'act'.² The term 'act', in Lacanian theory, is differentiated from the sense of "mere behaviour"³ by the location and persistence of desire. This is to say that the act is necessarily a subjective undertaking and that it can be understood to be coterminous with the assumption of subjectivity and the responsibility entailed in such an assumption, the Freudian *Wo Es war, soll Ich werden*. Where behaviour would describe the response to needs, for example, the act is defined by the impetus of desire. Desire makes the subject act and as such the weight of responsibility for the act committed lies with the subject. Desire cannot be treated as a given which would determine the subject's act without the subject's volition. The very subjectivity which would be taken to act cannot be described without the manifestation of desire which would allow its constitution. But such desire must always be particular to the subject; it is the subject's desire. The act would be the moment of subjective assumption in which the desire which

¹ J. Lacan. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*. Ed. J.A. Miller. Book VII. *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* 1959-1960. Trans. D. Porter. London, Routledge, (1986) 1992. p. 282.

² S. Žižek. *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* London, Verso, 2001. pp. 165-178.

³ J. Lacan. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*. Ed. J.A. Miller. Book XI. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Trans. A. Sheridan. London, Penguin, (1973) 1977. p. 50.

is in one is manifest and thus brought into existence. The act in this sense should be understood to be coterminous with the emergence of desire; the act is desire made manifest. It is in this sense that the Lacanian act is always, necessarily, *idiotic*, in the etymological sense, wherein *idios* would designate 'one's own'.

Lacan insists immediately after his commentary on *Antigone* that the act necessarily partakes of a double instance of judgement. The subject, in acting, must make the judgement to act and the judgement of the act. Or, phrased otherwise, there is in the act both the judgement to act and the judgement to act in this particular way. As no rule exists to define how or when one must act, the weight of both moments of judgement must lie solely with the subject. That is, in acting, and in the moments of judgement indispensable to the concept of the act, the subject necessarily assumes the weight of responsibility for the choice to act. The act is then also contemporary with the possibility of the ethical.

For Žižek, Antigone's act at the beginning of the play is such a moment of an act in the full and properly Lacanian sense of the term. If 'the great unwritten, unshakeable traditions'⁴ invoked by Antigone can be situated as indicative of her desire, then her act would be understood to be the manifestation and subjective assumption of this desire. There is in the act, says Lacan, always 'an element of structure, by the fact of concerning a real that is not self-evidently caught up in it'.⁵ This would appear to correspond to the structure we encounter in *Antigone*. The laws of the gods 'speak' from beyond, that is, on the side of the Real. Which is, of course, to say they do not in fact speak at all. They are manifest in *Antigone* and given expression through her act in such a way that 'it isn't a question of recognising something which would be entirely given, ready to be coopted'.⁶ In

⁴ Sophocles. *The Three Theban Plays: Antigone, Oedipus The King, Oedipus At Colonus*. Trans. R. Fagles. London, Penguin, 1984. p. 82, line 505.

⁵ J. Lacan. op.cit. 1977. p. 50.

⁶ J. Lacan. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*. Ed. J.A. Miller. Book II. *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954-55*. Trans. S. Tomaselli., New York, Norton, (1978) 1988. p. 229.

giving voice to the law of the gods, Antigone should be understood to have created and brought forth '*a new presence in the world*'.⁷ She should, that is, be understood to have named her desire and, moreover, assumed herself as the cause of this desire.

For Žižek, Antigone functions as the ethical example *par excellence* insofar as she is understood to '*exemplify the unconditional fidelity to the Otherness of the Thing that disrupts the entire social edifice*'.⁸ Capitalising the 'O' of 'Other' in the '*Otherness of the Thing*', Žižek can be understood to be emphasising the *Thing*, *das Ding*, as it relates to the field of the Symbolic. That is to say, *das Ding* as it would represent the limits of the Symbolic field, *das Ding* as indicative of the insistence of the lack in the Other as it is experienced by the subject. It is, as such, that *das Ding* would be understood as (a name for) that which would disrupt '*the entire social edifice*'.⁹

The act, for Žižek, describes the moment of suspension of the Symbolic, the recognition of the limits of the Symbolic. In such a moment of recognition it is not that the Other would somehow be suspended to be subsequently resolved as a moment of a dialectic or integrated into a subsequent schemata. The act, for Žižek, is not a moment of *Aufhebung*. Rather, in the Žižekian act, one would assume the very location of the lack which persists in the Other:

*it is not so much that, in the act, I 'sublate'/'integrate' the Other;
it is rather that, in the act, I directly 'am' the Other-Thing.*¹⁰

For Žižek, the ethical import of the act, (and the act is for Žižek the very definition of the ethical moment), is separated from any notion of responsibility for or towards the other. His is not an ethics of responsibility but, rather, his understanding of ethics is as the momentary

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ S. Žižek. *op.cit.* 2001. p. 157.

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 160.

and, in the moment, absolute suspension of the Symbolic order. The ethical act, for Žižek, is neither a response to the other nor a response to the Other.

*The (ethical) act proper is precisely neither a response to the compassionate plea of my neighbourly semblant (the stuff of sentimental humanism), nor a response to the unfathomable Other's call.*¹¹

Žižek contrasts this notion of the '*ethical act*' as assumption of the lack in the Other, as the assumption of the location of *das Ding*, with the Derridean notion of ethics as decision. A notion described by Critchley as follows:

*the political decision is made ex nihilo, and is not deduced or read off from a pre-given conception of justice or the moral law, as in Habermas, say, and yet it is not arbitrary. It is the demand provoked by the other's decision in me that calls forth political invention, that provokes me into inventing a norm and taking a decision. The singularity of the context in which the demand arises provokes an act of invention whose criterion is universal.*¹²

Žižek perceives in this passage, and by extension, in the Derridean original, '*two levels of the decision*'.¹³ It is with this bifurcation of the decision that Žižek takes issue. The decision, understood as the act, would, for Žižek, have to be such that the two moments of decision he perceives in Derrida's and Critchley's accounts would coincide. Here, Antigone is offered as the paramount example.

¹¹ *ibid*, p. 161.

¹² S. Critchley '*The Other's Decision in Me (What Are the Politics of Friendship?)*' in S. Critchley *Ethics-Politics-Subjectivity*. London, Verso, (1997) 1999. p. 277.

¹³ S. Žižek. *op.cit.* p.162.

*Is it not, rather, that her decision (to insist unconditionally on a proper funeral for her brother) is precisely an absolute decision in which the two dimensions of decision overlap?*¹⁴

Žižek's point here is that separating the decision into two moments, into, that is, the 'decision to decide'¹⁵ and 'a concrete actual intervention',¹⁶ is to render the decision or the act as non-absolute. That is, it is to render the act as less than an act. The act, for Žižek, as we have seen, is situated in the moment of suspension of the Other, what he terms directly '*being*' the '*Other-Thing*',¹⁷ the assumption by the subject of the irrecoverable rent in the social edifice. To incorporate as a necessary aspect of the act its reinscription in the Symbolic is, for Žižek, to miss the radicality of the act.

The question which insists here is that, in divorcing the act from any reinscription in the symbolic, is not one necessarily, from a Lacanian perspective at least, rendering the act as the impossibility of the ethical? That is to say, Žižek's deployment of the 'act' appears closer to what Lacan designates as *passage à l'acte*, an action in which one takes flight from the Other, an action which would properly entail the, albeit momentary, dissolution of the subject and consequent impossibility of the ethical. Phrased otherwise, the act so divorced from its reinscription is not party to a judgement which, in Lacan's understanding, would define the ethical;

*an ethics essentially consists in a judgement of our actions, with the proviso that it is only significant if the action implied by it also contains within it, or is supposed to contain, a judgement, even if it is only implicit. The presence of judgement in both sides is essential to the structure.*¹⁸

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 163.

¹⁸ J. Lacan. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*. Ed. J.A. Miller. Book VII. *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* 1959-1960. Trans. D. Porter. 1992. London, Routledge, 1986, p. 311.

Lacan's insistence upon there being two moments of judgement essential to the ethical effectively separates ethics, on the one hand, from mere behaviour and, on the other, from mere occurrence. What happens, in order to be understood to have happened to a subject and to be understood to have been caused to have happened by a subject must entail a minimum inscription in the Symbolic order, an inscription, that is, on the level of meaning. In order for an act to partake of the responsibility which would render it ethical, this moment of inscription in meaning must be retroactively read into and assumed in the very decision to act. For Lacan, in his invocation of Freud's *Wo Es war, soll Ich werden*, it is in the moment of the assumption of subjectivity that the subject retroactively reads its responsibility into its actions. The subject, in assuming itself, assumes responsibility for the act of its own emergence. It is important to acknowledge here the two moments of judgement on which Lacan insists as definitional of ethics cannot be reduced to a strict chronology. The two instances of judgement are, rather, indicative of two levels. The judgement to act, that it is necessary or desirable to act, necessarily entails the judgement that acting in *this* way is preferable to acting in *another* way; for example, by doing nothing. In so judging, the subject is by necessity creating a new norm, regardless of how contingent or particular such a norm may be. In judging, then, the subject must both inscribe its judgement, its choice, in the Symbolic and assume utterly the weight of this judgement or choice. That is to say, the act, insofar as it is to be considered ethical, necessarily entails the assumption of responsibility in the field of the Other.

In this sense, Derrida's notion of '*the other's decision in me*' is actually closer to Lacan's act than Žižek would have us believe.¹⁹ In Derrida's discussion of the decision in *Politics of Friendship*, the emphasis is on the incommensurability of the decision to any traditional notion of subjective agency and the related notion of responsibility. Derrida's point is that a

¹⁹ Y. Stavrakakis. '*The Lure of Antigone: Aporias of An Ethics of the Political*', *Umbr(a)* 2003; *Ignorance of the Law*. New York, SUNY Centre for the Study of Psychoanalysis and Culture, 2003. pp. 117-130.

decision, in the classical sense of *décaedêre*, a cut, a break, and thus an absolute decision as opposed to a mere calculation which would unfurl on the basis of a prescription, is still necessarily understood in a context. This is precisely not to say that the decision is reducible to its context, which would be to rejoin to the logic of a calculation. The decision must, rather, be seen as breaking from the context which would precede it and be reinscribed in a context which would then be distinct from that which preceded it. It is the moment of responsibility here which would render the decision ethical and distinct from a mere occurrence or behaviour. It is the reinscription of the decision in the realm of comprehension which allows the subject to assume responsibility.

In contrast to a traditional notion of subjective agency, a subjectivity which, in Derrida's understanding, would be closed in on itself and thus incapable of responsibility, '*a subject to whom nothing can happen, not even the singular event for which he believes to have taken and kept the initiative*',²⁰ Derrida posits the notion of the decision as signifying '*in me the other who decides and rends*'.²¹

*The passive decision, condition of the event, is always in me, structurally, another event, a rending decision as the decision of the other. Of the absolute other in me, the other as the absolute that decides on me in me. Absolutely singular in principle, according to its most traditional concept, the decision is not only always exceptional, it makes an exception for/of me. In me. I decide, I make up my mind in all sovereignty - this would mean: the other than myself, the me as other and other than myself, he makes or I make an exception of the same. This normal exception, the supposed norm of all decision, exonerates from no responsibility. Responsible for myself before the other, I am first of all and also responsible for the other before the other.*²²

²⁰ J. Derrida. *The Politics of Friendship*. Trans. G. Collins. London, Verso, (1994) 1997. p. 68.

²¹ *ibid.*

²² *ibid.*, pp. 68-9.

We might understand Derrida here as indicating that there is that in the subject which is irrecoverable to any sense of self-identity, that which would escape the 'monadology' of the ego; the subject, that is, as inadequate to itself. The decision reduced to a moment of self-sufficiency of the subject would not be a decision in the traditional sense at all but would rather be contained as a moment of calculation, inextricable from the '*calculable permanence (which would) make every decision an accident which leaves the subject unchanged and indifferent*'.²³ It is in contrast to this that the notion of the other's decision in me figures as the impossibility of self-identity, the rupture in the subject which can neither be contained nor recuperated. It is precisely from such a notion that Derrida adduces the possibility of responsibility.

Responsibility cannot remain responsibility when it is immersed in the pre-given. If subjectivity is closed upon itself, then responsibility cannot lie with the subject. The weight of the occurrence would rather remain with that system or field of understanding of which the calculation would be a moment. It is in response to the other, to '*the other in me*' that responsibility becomes a possibility precisely because such a response cannot be contained within a pre-given system of knowledge.

*To give in the name of, to give to the name of, the other is what frees responsibility from knowledge - that is, what brings responsibility unto itself, if there ever is such a thing.*²⁴

This is not, for Derrida, to separate responsibility in any absolute sense from knowledge, it is not to say that responsibility has nothing to do with knowledge. It is rather to point to the fact that, in the decision, as an ethical possibility, responsibility is impossible if the decision is reduced without remainder to knowledge.

²³ *ibid*, p. 68.

²⁴ *ibid*, p. 69.

...one must certainly know, one must know it, knowledge is necessary if one is to assume responsibility, but the decisive or deciding moment of responsibility supposes a leap by which an act takes off, ceasing in that instant to follow the consequence of what is - that is, of that which can be determined by science or consciousness - and thereby frees itself (this is what is called freedom), by the act of its act, of what is therefore heterogeneous to it, that is, knowledge.

*In sum, a decision is unconscious.*²⁵

Knowledge, for Derrida, is an indispensable prerequisite for the decision and, subsequently, for the assumption of responsibility but the decision cannot itself be reduced to knowledge without this rendering it 'less' than decisive, rendering it, that is, in the realm of pure calculation. On the other hand, without knowledge, there remains no possibility of responsibility insofar as responsibility would entail a context, a conception of that for and towards which one would be responsible and how. Responsibility thus figures and can only arise between the closed automaticity of the system of knowledge and the 'meaninglessness' that would be beyond any systematisation. Without exceeding knowledge, the decision is but a part of knowledge and thus not of the subject. Without returning to knowledge, the decision has no sense; it is purely arbitrary.

Is not this notion of the decision commensurate with the notion of the ethical in Lacan, with the notion of the ethical act as that which can appeal to no guarantor in the Other, as that which by definition takes place at the limits of the Symbolic order, as that which cannot be reduced to the law and yet, at the same time, must be inscribed in the Symbolic order? Is this not commensurate with the notion of the ethical as a pulsational moment which emerges from but must also assume a place in the Symbolic?

²⁵ *ibid.*

Contra Žižek's notion of the act which must be located absolutely beyond the Symbolic order, both Derrida's 'decision' and Lacan's 'act' are such that, in order to be understood as ethical, they must entail a moment of (re)inscription in the order of the comprehensible, or, for Derrida, knowledge, and for Lacan, the Symbolic. That is to say, in insisting on the exclusivity of what he terms identification with the 'Other-Thing' as the defining moment of the act, Žižek might be understood to precisely occlude the ethical potential from the act. Returning to Antigone, if, in Žižek's terms, her act is possible because of '*the direct identification of her particular/determinate decision with the Other's (Thing's) injunction/call*',²⁶ then it is difficult to see in what sense such an act might be considered ethical.

It is, however, for Žižek, precisely this exclusivity, the radical suspension of the Other without recourse to a further moment of reinscription which *does* render the act ethical. Antigone figures here, as we have noted, as the paramount example of the act as a moment of absolute suspension. Antigone, for Žižek, '*does not merely relate to the Other-Thing, she - for a brief, passing moment of, precisely, decision - directly is the Thing, thus excluding herself from the community regulated by the intermediate agency of symbolic regulations*'.²⁷ It is in so excluding herself from the community, in situating herself beyond the regulations of the Symbolic order, that Antigone can be understood, for Žižek, to have engaged in a proper act, precisely because the act, for Žižek, is not simply '*beyond the reality principle*' in the sense that it would be the engagement of a performative reconfiguration of reality, of, that is, the Symbolic. Rather, the act is that which would '*change the very co-ordinates of the "reality principle"*'. This is not to suggest that for Žižek the act entails performing the impossible. Žižek's point concerns the very structuration of what would be considered (im)possible in the first place. The radical character of the act lies in the fact that it would be that which alters the very contours of what would be considered possible. Or in moral terms, it

²⁶ S. Žižek. *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* London, Verso, 2001. p. 163.

²⁷ *ibid.*

would not be that which would challenge the received notion of the good but rather it would be that which would redefine what might be considered as good.²⁸

In this context Žižek conceives of Antigone as an example of (ethical) civil disobedience. This is not to resort to a reading of *Antigone* as the story of a conflict between two notions of justice or two instances of the law. In Žižek's reading there is the law on the one hand, the socio-political world of Creon's city, and there is the suspension of this law or 'reality' on the other. That is to say, Žižek recognises Lacan's point that the '*unwritten, unshakeable traditions*'²⁹ invoked by Antigone should not be understood to constitute an alternative conception of justice or competing sense of law so much as that which would insist in her beyond the law. Antigone, in Žižek's reading does not '*decide to disobey the positive law out of respect for a more fundamental law*',³⁰ rather she '*defies the predominant notion of the Good*'.³¹

Žižek explains this point in terms of the Platonic distinction between truth and *doxa*. Where for Plato, we might understand that *doxa* is insubstantial opinion, while the truth is universal, eternal and immutable, in Žižek's understanding, our conception of this distinction might be seen to have been reversed. That is, *doxa* would reflect how things '*really are*'³² in the sense that we would derive our notion of the Good or even our understanding of the world and the manner in which 'it works' from consensus, tradition or even opinion polls. Opposed to this, it would be the act which would intervene as the purely subjective and unique 'truth'. A 'truth' which is clearly, then, not 'true' in the Platonic sense of corresponding to some perpetual higher order but is rather 'true' in the sense of the moment of a pure creation which would 'expose' the

²⁸ *ibid*, p. 167.

²⁹ Sophocles, *The Three Theban Plays: Antigone, Oedipus The King, Oedipus at Colonus*. Trans. R. Fagles. London, Penguin, 1984. p. 82, line 505.

³⁰ S. Žižek. *op.cit.* 2001. p.167.

³¹ *ibid*, p. 168.

³² *ibid*.

conventions of knowledge to be inadequate and force their reconfiguration. For Žižek, the act would be such a truth insofar as the act would be that which would resist and refuse recuperation to the pre-existent symbolic matrix. Where something like a speech act would, by definition, rely 'for its performative power on the pre-established set of symbolic rules and/or norms',³³ the Žižekian act would signal a break with any pre-established or given order.

This, for Žižek, would be 'the whole point of Lacan's reading of *Antigone*'.³⁴ In his reading, Žižek emphasises Antigone's willingness to risk her 'entire social existence',³⁵ her defiance of the 'social-symbolic power of the City embodied in the ruler (Creon)'.³⁶ Through so doing, Antigone could be understood to have entered the realm of 'symbolic death',³⁷ that is to say, she can be understood to have situated herself outside the symbolic space of what was, previously, her society. For Žižek, such a moment of self-expulsion is tantamount to a 'suspension of the big Other',³⁸ a radical break with and from the Symbolic order.

In order to emphasise and clarify this radical character of the act, the fact that the act should be radically divorced from the Symbolic, that it should be envisaged as irrecoverable to the Symbolic, Žižek contrasts it with what he terms the performative 'staging' of revolt, or 'performative reconfiguration' ³⁹ of the Symbolic order. Such performative reconfiguration would be exemplified in the position taken by Judith Butler in *The Psychic Life of Power* where she discusses the possibilities of subjective 'resistance to given forms of social reality'.⁴⁰ In *The Ticklish Subject* Žižek responds to Butler's advocacy of forms of resistance which would

³³ S. Žižek. *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*. London, Verso, 1999. p. 263.

³⁴ *ibid.*

³⁵ *ibid.*

³⁶ *ibid.*

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ *ibid.*

³⁹ *ibid.*, p. 264.

⁴⁰ J. Butler. *The Psychic Power of Life*. Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1997. p. 97.

successfully reconfigure and thus, contingently at least, offer the potential of ameliorating one's social condition(s), warning against the illusion of assuming to have successfully challenged from within that which is always already in a position to recuperate any such challenge. The distinction here, for Žižek, is that between a reconfiguration which would maintain the terms of the Symbolic and a reconfiguration which would transform the very contours of the Symbolic and thus the terms in which the reconfiguration might be understood.⁴¹

Žižek's point can perhaps be illustrated in the common-place notion of reverse discrimination where the very points of discrimination are precisely upheld in the process of their supposedly politically correct reversal. Some negative aspects of discrimination against 'the disabled', for example, may be addressed through the implementation of quotas for the employment of a certain percentage of 'disabled' workers but such regulation cannot but uphold the demarcation of certain people as 'disabled' and potentially stigmatised *and* maintain the significance of factors otherwise deemed 'irrelevant' to the criteria of employment or ability to 'do the job'.

A position like Butler's entails, for Žižek, both an overestimation of the effectivity of 'performative reconfiguration' and an underestimation of the potential for the more thoroughgoing revolt which would be exemplified in the character and act of Antigone. For Žižek, it seems, it is this thoroughgoing rupturing status of the act with regard to the Symbolic, the impossibility of situating the act in or recuperating the act to the Symbolic which renders it ethical.

What, however, are we to make of Žižek's insistence on the act as irrecoverable to the Symbolic? In the distinction that he puts forward between performative reconfiguration and absolute reconfiguration, one might be justified in asking how the latter might be possible. Clearly here Žižek is not suggesting that everything of the Symbolic is razed. He is not suggesting, for example, that the Greek spoken in Thebes would cease to

⁴¹ S. Žižek. *op.cit*, 1999. p. 264.

be spoken after Antigone's act. He appears, rather, to be suggesting that the meaning of the symbolic or social edifice is unavoidably altered. Emphasising the moral aspect, as Žižek does, this would mean, for example, not that the term 'good' could no longer be applied but rather that what precisely would be understood by the term 'good', if 'good' is ever in fact understood precisely, would have been altered. That is, the contours of the Symbolic would have changed such that the relations between terms within the Symbolic would have been altered. But is this the same as saying that the Symbolic would have undergone a thorough revision? Or, to phrase the question slightly differently, how might one judge whether the change in the Symbolic has been thorough enough to count in Žižek's schema as *thorough*? This brings us to a significant point concerning the Symbolic which Žižek appears to glide over.

The Symbolic order is necessarily experienced by the subject as Other, as an Other of which there is available no objective and totalising conception. That is to say, the Symbolic as Other figures only insofar as it figures in relation to the subject who would encounter it. The Symbolic order is a structural condition which, as it manifests for and in relation to the subject, can only be seen to exist insofar as it exists for that subject. Conjoined with this, the Symbolic would be the field in which the subject would assume its constitution and, thus, from which it would retroactively posit its emergence. While, then, the Symbolic and the subject obviously cannot be reduced to (aspects of) one another, neither can they, in this context, be separated from one another.

The conception of the act as a reconfiguration of the Symbolic would then have to figure as a subjective undertaking. In terms of Antigone's act, the act would not only be Antigone's in the sense that she performs it but it would be hers in the sense that it is performed in relation to the Symbolic order as it manifests for her. This would be to acknowledge that the act can only be experienced by the subject. But even in order for the subject to be understood to have experienced the act or to have experienced itself as acting this would necessitate the act's (re)inscription in the Symbolic. The act, as coterminous with the

assumption of subjectivity, is necessarily pulsational. One cannot (permanently) occupy the act.

We should perhaps remember here Lacan's claim from *Television* that '*Suicide is the only act which can succeed without misfiring*'.⁴² Suicide would be such an act precisely because it is not, from the subjective perspective, reinscribed in the Symbolic. There is in suicide no continuation, no possibility of recuperation by or to the Symbolic but also, quite clearly, no possibility of subjectivity either. That suicide is the only act which can succeed without misfiring is not to advocate suicide, it is, rather, to recognise the impossibility of other acts not misfiring. Suicide is the only act which would not entail a recuperation to the Symbolic by the subject who would have committed it.

The point remains here, however, even acknowledging this subjective relation to the Other, that any act at all, in Žižek's understanding of it, might figure as ethical even if this means that it only figures as ethical for the particular subject who has *acted*. Which is precisely to say that there is available no means to differentiate the ethical from the unethical. To paraphrase Simon Critchley's question concerning Badiou's notion of the event, and there does appear to be some theoretical resemblance between Žižek's 'act' and Badiou's 'event', *how and in virtue of what is one to distinguish an ethical act from a non-ethical act?*⁴³ Critchley continues his critique of Badiou by imagining what he characterises as '*the pragmatist inference*'.⁴⁴ Again, to borrow Critchley's point, the pragmatist might agree that there is no possibility of distinguishing between the ethical and non-ethical act, thus introducing a form of moral relativism. Situating the act in exclusive relation to the symbolic cannot but, then, render the ethics which might otherwise pertain to the act as purely arbitrary.

⁴² J. Lacan. *Television*. Trans. D. Hollier, R. Krauss and A. Michelson. New York, Norton, (1974) 1990. p. 43.

⁴³ S. Critchley. '*Demanding Approval: On the Ethics of Alain Badiou*', in *Radical Philosophy*, 2000. 100, p. 23.

⁴⁴ *ibid*.

Invoking Kant, Žižek represents the ‘proper ethical act’ as ‘doubly formal: not only does it obey the universal form of law, but this universal form is also its sole motive’.⁴⁵ Moreover, the proper ethical act is inherently transgressive. It is not merely a matter of allegiance to a universal duty without pathological motives but it is an allegiance to a form of action which will redefine the very form of the prior conception of what would constitute the good, the norm, the Symbolic order. Žižek’s ‘moral law does not follow the Good - it generates a new shape of what counts as ‘Good’’.⁴⁶ The proper ethical act is then, for Žižek, not so much defined by its irrational nature but is that which would institute a new conception or criteria for what counts as rational at all. Nothing which precedes an act is adequate to the task of judging the act.

What Žižek’s description of the act omits is the crucial point that even that which would ‘appear’ to conform to the existent law might be an act. The act does not need to be ‘transgressive’ in the sense in which Žižek applies the term, which is to say that, because the existent norms are or the existent system is always already without adequate foundation, the act is always already, by definition, excessive with regard to the law. That is to say, the existent system cannot somehow be bracketed off such that only that which would appear to be transgressive of the system, providing that it is also enacted without pathological motives, is admissible as an ethical act. No system can adequately, in itself, account for its own ground (arche). At the same time, any system which appeals outside itself for its grounds simply shifts the problem to another level wherein the external source of authorisation would, in turn, require grounding. It is such a *reductio ad infinitum* that allows the possibility of ethics as that which is not contained within or reducible to the law or system. That is, in order to avoid reducing the ethical moment to a facet of the system, it must be conceived as the subjective response in the face of the system. This does not then mean, however, that the space of ethics is contra the law or system in the base sense of being against the letter of the law, in which

⁴⁵ S. Žižek. op.cit. 2001. p. 170.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*

case it would necessarily be determined by the law or system. It is rather that the ethical, in being that which the law cannot contain, is beyond or outwith the law or system. That is to say, to avoid the position of automaton, to avoid slavish adherence to the law, it would be necessary for the subject to judge in each situation. Through such judgement the subject would assume the locus of justification for its action or stance. Such a logic is necessarily the case whether the resultant judgement proves to be, in effect, in accordance with or contra existent practices or norms. In this sense, not only can the ethical not be reduced to the law, but neither can it be reduced to an aberration of the law.

As Žižek himself makes clear, the act is radically distinguished from '*a simple criminal violation*'.⁴⁷ This, not because the act is necessarily a violation without pathological intent or because the act is a violation in the name of a competing conception of right or justice but precisely because the act entails the assumption of cause by the subject without illusory appeal to some other (or Other) foundation for action. It is in this sense that the act would be properly described as a suspension of the Other. The act is located at the limits of the authority of the Other, the act is the point of subjective intervention without appeal to anOther authority.

This is a point that can perhaps be deduced from Žižek's comments on the impossibility of coincidence between one's particular act or insistence, the fidelity to this or that cause, and the insistence of *das Ding*. This point in Žižek is somewhat obfuscated by his insistence on conflating the Other with the Thing. It is perhaps possible, however, to clarify this point by allowing these two terms the specificity with which Lacan applies them. The Other, as we have seen, can be understood as coterminous with the Symbolic order insofar as it manifests as a subjective experience. The Other, that is, is the Symbolic order as it is, and with the specificity with which it is, encountered by the subject. *Das Ding* is that which cannot be recuperated to either the Symbolic order or to the Imaginary order. It is that of the Real which would insist at the limits of subjective experience. It is, in the context of 'intersubjectivity', that of the other which cannot be

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

accommodated to a point of recognition, that in the other which can neither form an aspect of identity nor be reduced to a point of signification. It is also, then, that in and of the subject which can neither be reduced to imaginary identification nor recuperated to a system of signification. What Žižek characterises as the insistence of '*the Other-Thing*'⁴⁸ would be more accurately described as that in any encounter which cannot be recuperated to a totalising comprehension. It is the insistence of this Thing which cannot adequately be accommodated which would be indicative of the lack in both the other and the Other. In the encounter with the Other, the Other is experienced as demanding of the subject. It is such a demand which would be indicative of *das Ding*, insofar as *das Ding* might be that which would satisfy this demand. In this sense, *das Ding* can be understood to be a name for that which the Other is experienced as lacking.

It is clear then that, as Žižek appears to acknowledge, there is no possible correlation between the (particular) insistence of the subject and *das Ding*. If there were, then this would be to simultaneously 'solve' the lack in the Other and the lack in the subject. Which would be to say that there is no subject and no Other for the subject. There would be, that is, no Symbolic order in which the act could be (re)inscribed.

The act should rather be understood as the subject's always inadequate response to the Other (and the other). The act is the moment of production of *something* in response to the other and the Other, precisely in the sense that that *something* is not *the Thing*, is not adequate to *das Ding*. The act would be the moment of subjective assumption, the moment of the subject's causing its desire to come forth. But such desire is never something which would be '*entirely given*',⁴⁹ it is something which must be brought into the world anew. Insofar as the subject's act is to be understood, it must be reinscribed in the Symbolic and, in being so

⁴⁸ *ibid*, p. 165.

⁴⁹ J. Lacan. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*. Ed. J.A. Miller. Book II. *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*, 1954-55. Trans. S. Tomaselli., New York, Norton, (1978)1988. p. 229.

inscribed, it does necessarily alter the Symbolic. It is in this sense that, as Žižek correctly notes, the act is a *creatio ex nihilo*. It is in the act that ‘*the subject creates, brings forth, a new presence in the world*’.⁵⁰ It must however be emphasised that it, the act, is commensurate with the moment of subjective assumption. That is, that the act is the act for the subject who would have constituted itself in the act. Or, phrased otherwise, the act is the subjective moment of assumption and is thus only experienced as such by the subject. This is not to argue that Antigone is a non-ethical example. It is rather to emphasise that the very concept of an ethical example is non-sensical. The ethical consists in the moment of assumption of and as the cause of one’s existence as subject. It is availed of no exterior support or justification.

It is precisely for this reason that Antigone’s act does not constitute the *exemplary* instance of the *ethical act*. Antigone, that is, cannot, and does not in Lacan’s reading, function as an ethical example.

Lacan’s reading of Antigone is not, then, concerned with the ethical status of her choice or her act. Lacan is rather concerned with *Antigone* as artefact, as a dramatic work and with the work’s relation to the spectator. Within the context of the play, Antigone, the character, functions as a spectacle. It is her splendour, not her act which has ethical significance. This, not because her splendour is in itself ethical, but rather because the spectacle of Antigone forces (a potentially ethical) reaction from the audience.

One manner in which we might begin to appreciate Lacan’s discussion of *Antigone* is in the relation between the Imaginary, Symbolic and Real. What one might term the conventional reading of *Antigone*, a reading which would interpret the play as staging the confrontation between two competing conceptions of justice, such as that presented by Hegel in *The Phenomenology of Mind*, is what we might characterise as a reading which prioritises the Symbolic. Žižek’s reading, which acknowledges the Lacanian point that the ‘unshakeable traditions’ might

⁵⁰ *ibid.*

not refer to another conception of justice, is no less such a Symbolic reading. In his interpretation, the act is defined exclusively in relation to the Symbolic and, thus, Antigone's revolt is, for Žižek, a revolt against the Symbolic. The central significance of *Antigone*, the play, for Lacan, however, lies in the repeated motif of the limit. The limit here cannot be reduced to the simple limit 'between' the Symbolic and the Real. It is also the limit of the Imaginary, a particular instance of limit on which Lacan, in his reading, places considerable emphasis. This is not to suggest that Lacan's reading rebounds to another extreme. The point is rather that the three realms can never be fully disentangled (except, that is, in the case of psychosis).

For Lacan, the significance of *Antigone* lies precisely in its ability to convey the limit point which would mark the intersection of the realms of the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real. It is crucial to acknowledge here that this limit point does entail but cannot be reduced to the limit of the Symbolic. To so reduce the limit point to the gap where the Symbolic opens onto the Real, to, that is, occlude the Imaginary, results in those notions of the play as a contest or opposition between different approaches to the law or convention, whether this be in the sense of two competing conceptions of justice (Hegel) or between two competing approaches to the law, that is to say, between fidelity to and transgression of the law (Žižek). While such approaches are not without significant insights, it is only in reinstating the imaginary dimension that we can really begin to appreciate the ethical, as opposed to moral-juridical, significance of the play. Those readings which would emphasise exclusively the rent in the Symbolic cannot but render the play a discourse on law to the exclusion of the ethical. As such, the so-called ethical example of Antigone cannot but falter. Where there is no ethics, where ethics is foreclosed, there can be no example of the ethical. It is only in reintroducing the imaginary dimension that the ethical import of the play can be brought to light. It will, however, be brought to light in a manner which directly occludes the possibility of commandeering it as an

example. That is to say, through Lacan's reading of *Antigone* we can begin to appreciate that the ethical avails itself of no examples.

For Lacan the figure of the other necessarily entails the correlation of the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real. The encounter with the other, that is, can be reduced to neither the dimension of the Symbolic nor the Imaginary but rather, insofar as it entails both, it indicates the limit point where they would open onto the Real. That is to say, there is imaginary identification and there is symbolic comprehension, there is an overlap wherein imaginary identification would partake of a minimum of symbolic ordering and, beyond this, *something* insists which would refuse any such recuperation. This would be the limit point of *das Ding* and, for Lacan, '[i]t is around this image of the limit that the whole play turns'.⁵¹ The image of the limit is dispersed so thoroughly through the play that it, quite literally, cannot be contained. It cannot, that is, be recuperated to a straightforward symbolisation. The play, in this sense, demonstrates the insistence of the limit without itself becoming a self-contained discourse on the limit.

That the figure of Antigone might be held up as the focal point here is not to say that the limit is, exclusively, Antigone's. The motif and functioning of the limit is evident too in the other characters, the action and setting of the play. The notion of the limit central to the play is, as Lacan stresses, articulated '*throughout the text of Antigone, in the mouths of all of the characters and of Tiresias*',⁵² the seer or prophet who can be understood to signify the limit which would open onto the future, and, moreover, '*in the action itself*'.⁵³ One example of the functioning of the limit in the play would be the sentence passed on Antigone, that she is to be entombed alive. Not only is the sentence itself to place Antigone in the realm between life and death - she is to be placed in a chamber reserved for the dead while still alive, she is to be made to experience that which

⁵¹ J. Lacan. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*. Ed. J.A. Miller. Book VII. *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* 1959-1960. Trans. D. Porter. London, Routledge, (1986) 1992. p. 268.

⁵² *ibid*, p. 248.

⁵³ *ibid*.

would be the reserve of the already dead before she is dead - but, in addition, the passing of the sentence itself already situates her in a living relation to death such that her anticipation of certain death must be borne while she still lives. Hers is a '*situation or fate of a life that is about to turn into certain death, a death lived by anticipation, a death that crosses over into the sphere of life, a life that moves into the realm of death*'.⁵⁴

What does make the character of Antigone stand out in the play is her beauty or, more precisely, her function as the beautiful, as that which would exceed the limits described in the play, the limits both of comprehension and of imagination. What makes the character of Antigone exceptional within the play is that she is presented as that which would be situated, impossibly, on the other side of the limit, in the realm of the Real. It is in this sense that Antigone comes to figure as or is raised to the status of *das Ding*. This is to say, in Lacan's terms, that Antigone is presented as 'inhuman'.⁵⁵ This is not, however, to situate her as something monstrous or abhorrent. When the chorus describes her as *ᾠμός*, a term Lacan translates as '*something uncivilized, something raw*',⁵⁶ it, the chorus, is still intent on recuperation. To describe her as *ᾠμός* would still be to situate her, to recuperate her to a certain comprehension, to insist on situating her in terms of the Symbolic. It is precisely insofar as Antigone cannot be situated, cannot be recuperated to a fixed idea that she functions for Lacan as the beautiful. It is important here to grasp that the notion of 'beauty' is not meant to refer to any convention, any delimited conception of (what would count as) physical or idealised beauty.⁵⁷ Beauty cannot be captured in an image as such. Beauty, for Lacan, is rather a function and to speak, then, of Antigone's beauty is to relate something of her function. That is to say, what is important in the character of Antigone is how she functions in relation to desire. Not, that is, how Antigone functions in relation to her desire but rather how Antigone, as beauty, functions in relation to the

⁵⁴ *ibid.*

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, p. 263.

⁵⁶ *ibid.*

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, p. 297.

desire of the one who watches her. In relation, that is, to the desire of the spectator.

Significant here, then, is the relation between beauty and desire, a relation which Lacan describes as '*strange and ambiguous*'.⁵⁸

On the one hand, it seems that the horizon of desire may be eliminated from the register of the beautiful. Yet, on the other hand, it has been no less apparent ... that the beautiful has the effect, I would say, of suspending, lowering, disarming desire. The appearance of beauty intimidates and stops desire.

*That is not to say that on certain occasions beauty cannot be joined to desire, but in a mysterious way, and in a form that I can do no better than refer to by the term that bears within it the structure of the crossing of some invisible line, i.e. outrage. Moreover, it seems that it is in the nature of the beautiful to remain, as they say, insensitive to outrage, and that is by no means one of the least significant elements of its structure.*⁵⁹

The function of the beautiful here is extrapolated in terms of the work of art and it is as a work of art that both *Antigone*, as dramatic art work, and *Antigone*, as an artistic creation within that art work, would be understood to function in relation to desire. This mysterious relation between beauty and desire cannot be reduced to the idea that beauty would, simply, be that at which desire would aim. Rather, in relation to the object which would be constituted as an object of beauty, desire is split such that it is this very splitting which would constitute the object as beautiful. That would be to say, the object might only be understood as beautiful as an effect of and on the desire which would manifest in relation to it. There is, here, no discernable and monolinear relation of cause and effect.

⁵⁸ *ibid*, p. 238.

⁵⁹ *ibid*.

In its status as limit point, the beautiful is that which would split desire, or in the terminology of later Lacan, that which would render the separation and, at the point of separation, the conjunction of desire and the drive. Desire is that which defines the subject in relation to lack. Desire, as such, cannot attain satisfaction. The drive, on the contrary, is that which maintains satisfaction through continuously circulating its object. The beautiful is that which would encompass both such points, thus, simultaneously reflecting the drive and allowing it to continue on its route and maintaining desire as unsatisfied. There is thus in the object of beauty both a moment of transfixion and a moment of satisfaction. If the object of beauty were capable of entirely satisfying desire it would be destructive of the subject but if it were incapable of providing satisfaction, it would lose its attraction. It is this conjunction of seemingly incommensurate characteristics which sets the beautiful apart.

Desire is thus not ‘completely extinguished by the apprehension of beauty’⁶⁰ but it is drawn on into that realm in which it could not subsist.

*It [beauty] seems to split desire as it continues on its way, for one cannot say that it is completely extinguished by the apprehension of beauty. It continues on its way, but now more than elsewhere, it has a sense of being taken in, and this is manifested by the splendor and magnificence of the zone that draws it on. On the other hand, since its excitement is not refracted but reflected, rejected, it knows it to be most real. But there is no longer any object.*⁶¹

Desire has no object in the proper sense of the term. It is, in the terms of later Lacan, the drive which would take for itself, or which would be constituted in relation to, an object. The beautiful is unique in that it would allow for the conjunction of these two terms, or as Lacan has it in

⁶⁰ *ibid*, p. 249.

⁶¹ *ibid*, pp. 248-9.

the context of *Seminar VII*, for the splitting of desire into that which will retain an object and that for which '*there is no longer any object*'.⁶²

It is as an example of the beautiful that Lacan reads *Antigone* and, particularly, within the play, *Antigone*. It is as such that, with Lacan, we find something in the text '*other than a lesson on morality*'.⁶³ This is not to claim that *Antigone* has, for Lacan, no ethical import. It is, after all, in the context of his seminar on the ethics of psychoanalysis that he spends considerable time discussing the play. It is rather to stress that the ethical import of the play lies not in the moralising arguments it might be understood to put forward, whether these be in the sense of a discourse between competing conceptions of the just or (moral) good or in the sense of an advocacy of a position of transgression. While both these positions are, of course, possible, neither addresses the question of ethics. They remain, rather, on the side of (questions of) the law. The ethical is by definition a subjective moment, the moment of subjective assumption in response to the lack encountered in the Other and the other. The ethical, that is, is the moment of assumption of that point which refuses recuperation to an image or to a rule, that point where the Symbolic and the Imaginary break down or break open upon the Real. In terms of the moral law, the ethical is the point at which the subject assumes upon itself the impossible place of that which would guarantee the law. In terms of the Imaginary, ethics is the response to that in the other which refuses recuperation to a coherent image of identification. To render *Antigone* or *Antigone* as an ethical example, or as *the* ethical example *par excellence*, is to assume to generalise that which is by definition beyond generalisation. That is to say, to confer upon *Antigone* the status of example would be to make of *Antigone* and her act a rule which might be followed; *thou shalt transgress the symbolic*. But such an example is clearly not an ethical example at all. The ethical moment would necessarily resist any such generalisation and return in the form of the necessity of the subject assuming upon itself the impetus to follow (or reject) the example. This is

⁶² *ibid.*, p. 249.

⁶³ *ibid.*

clearly, also, not to set *Antigone* apart in this sense. It is not especially that *Antigone* or Antigone's act cannot function as an ethical example. It is rather that the ethical cannot be exemplified without recuperating it to a law. Which is to say, precisely, without rendering it other than ethical.

What Antigone can function as is an example of the beautiful. But even here, it should be stressed that the example is not definitive. As Lacan stresses in a number of places, other examples can be found and the example should be one's own; '[i]f you don't find this example convincing, find others'.⁶⁴ That is to say, Antigone functions as an example of the beautiful only insofar as she functions as the beautiful for the (particular) spectator. Insofar as she does function so, she and the play of which she is an element, can be understood to situate the spectator in relation to their desire and *this* is what is significant in terms of ethics.

As beautiful, as that which would simultaneously reflect and lure our desire, Antigone would demand a response. This demand would be the subject's confrontation with the desire that is in it. That is to say, in its location at and as the limit point of the Real, that at which desire would impossibly aim, the beautiful can be understood to be that which would ask of the subject, '*Have you acted in conformity with the desire that is in you?*'⁶⁵ As, that is, that which can simultaneously support and lure desire, that which allows the subject to confront *das Ding* without it destroying the subject, the beautiful would be that which would allow the subject to confront the desire that is in it and thus begin to name this desire, to bring it into the world. That is to say, it is precisely insofar as the beautiful allows the possibility of encountering the limit of the Real without subsuming the subject in the Real and thus rendering the subject impossible, that it allows the subject the possibility of both confronting its desire and inscribing its desire in the Symbolic.

It is in this sense that the beautiful would entail a cathartic function. The beautiful would allow the possibility of the purification of desire, not in the sense of allowing the subject to attain and occupy pure desire but in

⁶⁴ *ibid*, p. 297.

⁶⁵ *ibid*, p. 314.

the sense of allowing the subject to experience its desire stripped of the trappings of the Symbolic and Imaginary orders and, significantly, to return to the Symbolic and Imaginary orders, bringing with it '*a new presence*',⁶⁶ something which cannot simply be accommodated as though it had always already been there. The ethical significance of *Antigone* lies, therefore, not in Antigone's act in the sense that her act would function as the quintessential ethical example but, rather, the ethical significance of the play lies in the manner in which it would relate to the desire of the spectator.

The extent to which we can discuss Antigone's act at all is the extent to which it has been or is being (re)inscribed in the Symbolic. This should alert us to the ambiguity of the act insofar as it can become a topic for discussion. Antigone's act, in the proper Lacanian sense, is *her* act. It is only available for her. What impacts of Antigone's act on others is either/both a moment of emergence of the Real and/or a Symbolic recuperation depending on the moment of logical time from which it is perceived. That is to say, we might discern separate moments in Antigone's so called act. There would be the moment of incomprehension wherein the act disrupts and cannot be explained. There would also be the moment of comprehension wherein the act is slotted into a framework of explanation - e.g. Antigone promotes an alternative discourse on what is just, Antigone constitutes the revolutionary stance *par excellence* precisely because she promotes no discourse on justice at all but is understood to have introduced a moment of radical disruption for the social weave of Thebes. Neither of these perspectives, however, can be adequate to the act as it is assumed by Antigone, if it is in fact an act at all. Given that she is never more than a fictional character, one might be justified in pointing out that 'she' cannot assume anything. The pertinent ethical question in *Antigone* is how we, the audience, the spectator, the reader, respond to the

⁶⁶ J. Lacan. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*. Ed. J.A. Miller. Book II. *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*, 1954-55. Trans. S. Tomaselli., New York, Norton, (1978) 1988. p. 229.

play and respond beyond the play. The only true act in *Antigone* is precisely not *in Antigone*, it is *in response to Antigone*.

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