

**CLAIMING ANTIGONE? THE CHARACTER<sup>1</sup> AS  
EPISTEMOLOGICAL *DIFFÉREND* IN JUDITH BUTLER'S  
*ANTIGONE'S CLAIM*<sup>2</sup> AND JACQUES LACAN'S *THE  
ETHICS OF PSYCHOANALYSIS*<sup>3</sup>**

DELOURME CHANTAL

*Université Paris Ouest Nanterre La Défense*

1. Following up on the title of one of Judith Butler's essays, *Antigone's Claim*, I would like to explore in this paper the way two thinkers, Jacques Lacan and Judith Butler, have addressed the character of Antigone. Which implies considering how the reading of Antigone and of her defiant claim turns into the site of a *différend*<sup>4</sup> enhancing two ways of addressing her as character, in the realm of thought, expressed through two different regimes, in the realm of discourse. What is it then the name of Antigone stands for in either field of thought? How do her name and the inscriptions radiating from its nexus in Sophocles' play prove to be construed and predicated by either approach? Without exploring at length how the *différend* which characterizes Antigone's plight and *Antigone's* plot has been both the focus of attention in interpretative claims and has reverberated throughout the history of its critical reception, it is however the particular site of its reconfiguring in what I mean to make a two-way dialogue between Judith Butler and Jacques Lacan that I want to question. This exercise in differential reading will enable me to trace how the interpretative *différend* is informed by discursive investments (through a working through the imaginary in one case, and the transformation of interpretation into claim in the other), whereby conceptual elaborations are inhabited by an inner *différend* between two regimes of discourse which however constitute the critical stance. To do so, I will also explore how the different sites of this interpretative *différend* reflect and problematize the literary aesthetic notion of character mainly in its classical subordination to plot and the conception of mimesis it harks back to. Such an exploration then will imply

---

<sup>1</sup>My writing this essay in English rather than French redirects the topic of "le personnage" and the network of signs and values attached to it to that related to the English polysemy of the word "character". This difference adds to some of the interpretative variations between Judith Butler and Jacques Lacan. Though both approach the play as text mainly, as writing, and through the legacy of its readings and, particularly in *The Seminar*, the filter of its translations, Lacan pays attention to the inscription of Antigone within the poetics of a tragedy, though he redefines its effect, while Butler approaches the character through the mediation of "fiction" and of identificatory "exemplariness".

<sup>2</sup>J. Butler, *Antigone's Claim*.

<sup>3</sup>J. Lacan, *L'Éthique de la psychanalyse (The Ethics of Psychoanalysis.)*

<sup>4</sup>J.F. Lyotard, *Le Différend*.

pursuing what Antigone is the name for: a character? an image? a figure? a critical site? And in so doing will approach the nature of the epistemological crisis at stake.

## Between life and death

---

2. In the two approaches, the *différend* revolves around the interpretation of Antigone's in-between position, in between life and death. More precisely, it is what makes Jacques Lacan's reading so singular, as opposed to Hegel's, his exposing to the *gaze* how much Sophocles' plot and text owe to the dramatizing of that position, as if the nature of the sentence to which Antigone is doomed by Creon had been overlooked or reduced to a mere effect of the symbolic battle opposing two types of law. Jacques Lacan's rhetoric dramatizes his interpretation as the unveiling of what other interpretations had made a blind spot : "[cette place] comment ne pas la voir dans l'action même ? — pour autant que le milieu est constitué par le moment de ce qui s'articule comme gémissements, commentaires, débats, appels, autour d'Antigone condamnée au supplice. Quel supplice ? Celui d'être enfermée vivante dans un tombeau [...] Le tiers central de la pièce est constitué par [...] ce que signifie la position, le sort d'une vie qui va se confondre avec la mort certaine, mort vécue de façon anticipée, mort empiétant sur le domaine de la vie, vie empiétant sur la mort<sup>5</sup>". Jacques Lacan entirely rephrases the conflict at the heart of the play when subjecting it to the nature of the sentence, which retroactively becomes the an-original matrix of the meaning of the whole play. He thus works from the very letter of this sentence and pays attention to its implications as generating contradictory temporal dynamics. In so doing, the first displacement he operates is from the political onto the ontological by making of *Antigone* a drama of finitude exemplified by the chorus's line within the eulogy of man : "devant la mort seulement, il ne trouvera pas de dérobade. Mais il a découvert la sortie des maladies sans remède<sup>6</sup>". In this respect Lacan's reading, unearthing the implications of this condition, fully inscribes him within his century if we go by Bernard Baas's statement : "notre siècle philosophique a fait de

---

<sup>5</sup>*Op.cit.* 291. "How can one also fail to see this position in the action itself? Given that the middle of the play is constituted of a time of lamentation, commentary, discussions and appeals relative to an Antigone condemned to a cruel punishment. Which punishment? That of being buried alive in a tomb. The central third of the text[...] informs us about the meaning of 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" (English translation, 305-306).

<sup>6</sup>Sophocle, *Antigone*, l. 361-364. "Except for death: he's got himself no relief from that, though he puts every mind to seeking cures for plagues that are hopeless".

la finitude l'affaire de la pensée. Certes ses prédécesseurs ne l'ont pas ignorée. Mais c'est notre siècle qui en a fait son affaire, c'est-à-dire non seulement l'objet insigne de la pensée mais ce qui oblige la pensée<sup>7</sup>”.

3. Lacan makes of Antigone's adamant resolution, verging on cruelty as testified by her cutting off bonds of kinship with her sister (which serves as a prologue to her claim for and being doomed to absolute solitude) an expression of pure desire, a desire that does not bind itself to an object, that is not the election of an object. Hence Lacan's downplaying of the position of the brother in relation with this desire, and of the oedipal determination of the object which other readers such as Pierre Guyomard or Judith Butler have underlined, though from different angles<sup>8</sup>. What is perhaps at stake too would be the difference between “désir” and “jouissance”, yet throughout those chapters Jacques Lacan preserves the syntagm “désir pur”. Surprisingly his construing Antigone as a figure of “désir pur” through her unblinking confrontation with death as willed death serves as a major landmark in his elaboration on the link between psychoanalysis and ethics and paves the way for the chapter where the famous and ever-enigmatic phrase “ne pas céder sur son désir” comes in.

4. I would suggest that his reflection about Antigone as figure of “désir pur” is impure however, hovering as it does between the reading of a relation to death as a phantasmatic texture and the reading of a relation to death with an ontological ring that I would like to pursue. And I would relate this ambiguity to the oscillation between the two moments in the following sentence : “Antigone mène jusqu'à la limite l'accomplissement de ce que l'on peut appeler le désir pur, le pur et simple désir de mort comme tel<sup>9</sup>”. The first part shows to what extent the phantasmatic texture of desire raises the latter notion to an abstract category for Lacan, while the second part is at odds with Antigone's insistence that her brother should be buried.

5. Lacan's reading of Antigone as between “life and death” radically renews the terms of the dialectic oscillation the phrase may imply. He indeed discloses a logic which resists dialectics, which he calls a suspension between-two-deaths, with Antigone's going beyond the limit of “natural death” and standing at the very limit for even the possibility for death to be

---

<sup>7</sup>B. Baas, *Le Désir pur*, 7. “Our philosophic century has made of finitude *the* object of thought. Its predecessors admittedly did not ignore it. But our century made it its object, that is not only its eminent object, but what *oblige*s thought.” (The translation is mine).

<sup>8</sup>J. Butler, *op.cit.*; P. Guyomard, *La Jouissance du tragique*.

<sup>9</sup>J. Lacan, Jacques, *op. cit.*, 329. “She pushes to the limit the realization of something that might be called the pure and simple desire of death as such” (348).

an object of desire, since through death it is lack which is embraced. Antigone's liminal position opens onto a beyond which is in fact on this side of desire as it is what Lacan figures as what remains unrepresentable beyond the very cause of desire, *Das Ding*: the liminality at stake has to do with an exposure as surrender to the unrepresentable. Bernard Baas, in a reading which deploys parallelisms between Lacan's thought on desire and Kant's *Critique de la raison pure*, makes of "objet *a*" (the pure transcendental object that causes the experience of desire without belonging to the desired object<sup>10</sup>) and of *Das Ding* ("l'inconditionné absolu") distinctive Lacanian features which partake of what he calls "sa critique du désir pur"<sup>11</sup>. Alive among the dead, and dead among the living, Antigone is thus read as the intractable Alterity of Lack (or lack of alterity) that is her own exclusive law and secludes her within the world or rather abstracts her from it. She stands at the very threshold where signs and body are seen as doomed to be erased, to fuse with the stone or the whiteness that are attached to her characterisation: lived to be already always lost, inscribed to be erased, uttered to be un-mourned, until through her own death she embodies this invocation from beyond the limit. The dust she covers her dead brother's body with, as index and erasure, testifies to a body language that does not author a subject<sup>12</sup>. If Antigone stands for the encroaching of death upon life, it is also inasmuch as she is one who, as acting out the "visée" of desire, makes it come true, thus embodying "ce que peut bien vouloir dire avoir réalisé son désir — si ce n'est de l'avoir réalisé, si l'on peut dire, à la fin"<sup>13</sup>.

6. This spiral-like attachment is what distinguishes her fate and Lacan's reading from the human challenge other forms of surrender to death might imply, and makes her inhuman. For all the fascination she may exert, her unblinking acceptance of Creon's sentence which she embodies as her destiny distinguishes her relation to death from philosophic readings that would come later, after the age of ancient tragedy. Lacan's retrogressive reading severs her from a philosophic tradition and unearths within tragedy a dark gem. Her character has nothing in common with the text of *Phedon*, she is no Stoic figure as can be found in

<sup>10</sup>B. Baas, *op.cit.*, 73.

<sup>11</sup>*Op. cit.*, 76.

<sup>12</sup>Sophocles, *Antigone*, l. 250-258. "Le sol était compact et sec, il n'avait pas été fendu, et il n'y avait pas de traces de roues. L'homme qui avait travaillé là n'avait pas laissé de traces. [...] Le corps ne se voyait pas ; il n'y avait pas de tombe, mais une légère couche de terre le couvrait, comme si l'on voulait éviter la souillure. Nul indice ne se voyait, ni d'une bête ni d'un chien qui serait venu sans rien arracher." ("The ground was so hard and dry. It showed no marks. No spade scratches, no pickaxe holes, not even chariot ruts. The perpetrator had not left a single clue. [...] There was no tomb, only fine dust lying over the body, enough to take the curse away. No sign of wild animals, no dogs sniffing or tugging at the corpse.")

<sup>13</sup>*Op. cit.*, 341. "what 'to have realized one's desire' might mean, if it is not to have realized it, so to speak, in the end" (361).

Deleuze's reworking of the Stoic *amor fati*, whereby it is in the nature of the event of death to come from the outside, thus calling for a will "qui veut maintenant non pas exactement ce qui arrive mais quelque chose dans ce qui arrive" that Deleuze expresses as "devenir le fils de ses propres événements"<sup>14</sup>. Caught in the noose of time that binds Jocasta's death and her own in the same lace, she is the very opposite of any idea of becoming.

7. Yet Lacan's reading of Antigone opens out onto another dimension, an ontological one this time when he comments on the bond that unites brother and sister. The bond in fact seems to split into two veins; on the one hand she is said to be the guardian of his criminality inscribed within the fateful logic of the incestuous family; on the other hand through her insistence that he should be buried, she is the one who testifies to his unique being. Lacan's reading takes on then a metaphysical ring and makes of the unique brother the unicity of the "register of being" and of Antigone the one who stands at the very limit when this register of being is to be preserved<sup>15</sup>: "le registre de l'être de celui qui a pu être situé par un nom doit être préservé par l'acte des funérailles"<sup>16</sup>. Lacan gives this ethical responsibility the surprisingly Kantian a-pathological touch of an imperative: "doit être préservé". If this register of being cannot but stem from the entry into language (how impure the medium is, psychoanalytical theory knows but too well!), the regime of the unique, of unicity is however referred to by Lacan as "pure", thus sketching a limit ascribing a transcending absolute power to being beyond the contingencies of the individual's story: "cette pureté, cette séparation de l'être de toutes les caractéristiques du drame historique qu'il a traversé, c'est là justement la limite, l'*ex nihilo* autour de quoi se tient Antigone"<sup>17</sup>. Antigone's liminality does not seem to be the same but to imply two forms bound through a chiasmus: on the one hand she stands at the limit when her own being testifies to its desire for death, on the other hand she stands at the limit when she testifies to the other's unique being beyond death.
8. What makes the brother "scandalously"<sup>18</sup> irreproducible in Sophocles' play is then this

<sup>14</sup>G. Deleuze, *Logique du sens*, 175-176. ("wanting now not exactly what happens, but wanting something in what happens, becoming the son of one's own events").

<sup>15</sup>*Op. cit.* 325. "Antigone représente par cette position cette limite radicale qui, au-delà de tous les contenus, de tout ce que Polynice a pu faire de bien et de mal, de tout ce qui peut lui être infligé, maintient la valeur unique de son être". ("It can be seen that Antigone's position represents the radical limit that affirms the unique value of his being without reference to any content, to whatever good or evil Polyneices may have done, or to whatever he may be subjected to" (344)).

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.* "The register of being of someone who has been identified by a name must be preserved by funeral rite".

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.* "That purity, that separation of being from the characteristics of the historical drama he has lived through is precisely the limit, the *ex nihilo* to which Antigone is attached".

<sup>18</sup>Jacques Lacan insists on the legacy of this scandalous statement in the critical history of the play (298).

calling for a moral responsibility which Antigone's answer of it makes unique. Lacan insists on the importance of that passage, which is the only moment when Antigone answers of her own will, and draws attention to the self-sameness that ties brother and sister ("ce terme grec qui lie soi-même au frère et à la soeur<sup>19</sup>"), metaphorizing then the ethical bond, the mutual engenderment of call and answer. Like Isaac in Abraham's eyes, Polyneices is a figure of the unique in Antigone's eyes. Her shunning all the forms of generation within kinship makes of her the daughter of this unique mutually self-engendering event. Of Lacan's making of such unicity or singularity the ethical name given to the subject of desire in the following chapter (singularly in the wake of this metaphysical turn given to the experience of being at the limit), we find an echo in Jacques Derrida's *Donner la Mort*<sup>20</sup> defining responsibility as the answer to the call of the unique (and reciprocating its identity as such). We might even take these consonances one step further: when Antigone covers Polyneices's corpse with her gestures, she enacts the dust protecting his flesh, and erases her own footprints, to such an extent that the deed, leaving no trace other than dust seems neither human nor animal. The anonymity of the ethical bond thus left unauthored can read like binding in a chiasmus-like echo the self- and other-transcending gift of the ethical bond that must remain secret or erased for it to be a genuine gift<sup>21</sup> while Antigone's inarticulate bemoaning testifies to an inarticulation that exceeds any answer to the call.

9. Antigone is the name for that which makes it impossible to reduce Lacan's ethics to a reductive form of subjective ethics: the subject can emerge to ethics only through the ordeal of this most unique singularity which for Lacan as well as for Derrida is the very condition for the questioning of ethics. All the more surprising that Derrida should acknowledge no debt to Lacan since there is a further resonance between the ordeal of desire and the ordeal that responsibility must remain in order not to be transformed into a code of conduct: according to Derrida, the paradoxical condition for responsibility not to be a code is its being tied to a secret<sup>22</sup>. In relation to desire and to death the secret might take two different forms: any relation to death within life is hollowed out by the secret of its experience as event (Antigone's and Haemon's deaths, told through mediating narratives, remain elliptic, cryptic texts), and any relation to desire is inhabited by its own dark core staged in the case of

---

<sup>19</sup>*Op. cit.* 297. "The Greek term that expresses the joining of oneself to brother and sister" (314).

<sup>20</sup>J. Derrida, *Donner la mort*.

<sup>21</sup>*Op. cit.*, 50.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*

Antigone through an enigmatic and unanswerable will: Lacan phrases this figure of desire as “une image qui détient je ne sais quel mystère jusqu’ici inarticulable puisqu’il faisait ciller les yeux au moment qu’on la regardait<sup>23</sup>” binding thus in one image death as the figure of a paradoxical image and the un-inscribable cause of desire.

10. Again the question remains: why should Lacan insert this development before his last two chapters? Why should he speak of “désir pur” and not of “jouissance” or even the death drive in those pages devoted to Antigone in a seminar which reconsiders the question of ethics after “au-delà du principe de plaisir”? I would suggest that his maintaining the word “désir” has to do with his making the issue addressed in those pages answerable to the question of ethics. However unanswerable “jouissance” or the death drive (as partaking of the phantasmatic) may seem in its intractability, the necessity of its being made to answer for its law as desire remains through what Jacques Lacan calls “les rapports de l’homme avec la dimension de la vérité<sup>24</sup>”. This however would account for the presence of those pages in a seminar about ethics but not for their presence before the last two chapters. Jacques Lacan seems to ascribe this ethical accounting for the pure and simple desire for death priority to any other form of desire: he calls the answering for the forms beauty and disaster or *Até* may conjoin in history the tragic pre-condition for psychoanalytical experience<sup>25</sup>. He thus entrusts those who engage in the experience of transference the memory of the dark gems of “l’entre-deux-morts” passed on through tragedy as a pre-condition for answering to their own pure singularity as being: “la fonction du désir doit rester dans un rapport fondamental avec la mort<sup>26</sup>”, he writes.

11. The in-between position is equally central in Judith Butler’s work as attested by the subtitle “kinship between life and death”, and is indeed a key-point of contact between the two texts, yet this dramatic and interpretative knot is read in a different light. In an ironic counter-echo, Judith Butler’s interpretation seems at first to be more Lacanian than Lacan’s as from the very first lines she interprets Antigone’s in-between position as the curse effect (the inexorability of the always already of the father’s words on the children of Oedipus); yet her interpretation owes more to the performative power of the curse through time than to a recognition of the long lasting effects of the signifier as the locus of the Other’s desire to the

---

<sup>23</sup>*Op. cit.*, 290. (“An image that possesses a mystery which up till now has never been articulated, since it forces you to close your eyes at the very moment you look at it” (304)).

<sup>24</sup>*Op. cit.*, 308. (“Man’s relations to the dimension of truth” (326)).

<sup>25</sup>The name given to his last section in the seminar.

<sup>26</sup>J. Lacan, *op. cit.*, 351. (“The function of desire must remain in a fundamental relationship to death” (373)).

point of being acted out by Antigone's deeds<sup>27</sup>. "Her punishment precedes her crime, and her crime becomes the occasion for its literalization"<sup>28</sup>. The curse is interpreted as an expression of the power of a father-figure over a child subjected to this power and not as the intersubjective enmeshing of two characters within the dialectics of law and desire. The overdetermination of the embodiment of the law by an actual father-figure and by his speech as curse shows in Judith Butler's quoting a sentence by Lacan in which he exemplified the symbolic through the transmission of his own father's speech<sup>29</sup>. That is the curse is interpreted within a logic of deeds and power and not within the dialectics of fate and destiny mediated by unconscious modes of transmission. One of Judith Butler's main paradigms is that of the actual and the effective, unlike Lacan's reading which traces the effective inscription in the actual of the unactual, the imaginary. This is where the regimes of discourse in Judith Butler's essay and Lacan's seminar stage the radicality of their *différend*.

12. Yet, if Butler thus overdetermines the signifier "death" as it turns into the fated irrevocability of a deed, her interpretative singularity lies in her unearthing in Antigone's strange place of being between life and death a potentiality for life, for desire, for speech in the form of a love within kinship that would not fall under the law of the incest taboo and its "presumption of criminality"<sup>30</sup>. As dead and yet speaking, Antigone thus becomes the name of a claim for the place of a subject and of his election of love objects which is other than normative intelligible places: "she is precisely the one with no place who nevertheless seeks to claim one within speech, the unintelligible as it emerges within the intelligible, a position within kinship that is no position"<sup>31</sup>. Yet one cannot but be struck by the paradoxical phrasing of this claim and the ambiguity of its enunciation when Judith Butler can only express it negatively as if the position/no position dualism foreclosed the other-than-norm potentiality: "a position within kinship that is no position". Who determines the law of this negation at the very moment when its law power is questioned?

13. There is yet another reason for Antigone being a figure for this tension between life and death, through her relation to her brother's death and her insistent claim that he should be given burial. Her life in death as "unlived life" is attributed to the foreclosure of the

<sup>27</sup>The prevalence of the signifier is a central paradigm of Lacanian thought which Judith Butler tends to elide through her stress on other dimensions of the structuralist vein in his thought.

<sup>28</sup>J. Butler, *op.cit.*, 77.

<sup>29</sup>*Op. cit.*, 54. "The curse of the father is in fact how Lacan defines the symbolic, the obligation of the progeny to carry on in their own aberrant directions his very words".

<sup>30</sup>*Op. cit.*, 79.

<sup>31</sup>*Op. cit.*, 78.



incestuous love for the brother<sup>32</sup>, through which as a result of repressive norms she affirms “the deathlike quality of those loves for which there is no viable and livable place in culture”<sup>33</sup>. The tomb is at one stage of the essay figured as the site of the symbolic claims entrapping Antigone within its terms, “already half-dead within the intelligible”<sup>34</sup>. The nature of the agon making the claim a crime has been the object of many debates, and the mirror effect between crime and punishment (loving the dead meted out by espousing death<sup>35</sup>) is a forceful dramatic turn given to the moment when the agon between desire and the law reveals two faces (or is it the converging knot?) of its intractable inhumanity. Judith Butler as for her rewrites and reorientates the agon onto a different political site: whereas Lacan makes of Antigone’s desire the expression of its own end, its absolute lethal sovereignty, Judith Butler makes of Antigone the subject of a claim for the love object as lost, and the object of a denial through her experience of symbolic foreclosure of the object of love and of its loss. Doomed to an unrecognized love and unrecognized loss, she is rewritten into a figure of melancholia. But she is made a figure of melancholia on two counts: one which is external through the imposed foreclosure of her objects of love, the other which is internal since her own grief and mourning, insistent as it is on one brother exclusively (“consider that Antigone is trying to grieve”<sup>36</sup>), is interpreted as a sign of self-denial whereby the other objects to be mourned (the other two brothers) are left ungrieved-for. Antigone thus becomes the name for the different forms given to this tension between death and life: as acting out death, she is the effect of the foreclosure of a form of desire within kinship and as such the name for the Butlerian rewriting of Freudian melancholy; as claiming this love, she transcends its denial and asserts the potentiality of a political subject; as grieving for an unrecognized love, she is a figure of mourning attached to Judith Butler’s elaboration of ethics.

---

<sup>32</sup>“Is it perhaps the unlivable desire with which she lives, incest itself, that makes of her life a living death, that has no place within the terms that confer intelligibility on life?” (23). I would suggest Judith Butler’s theory is a cultural theory of love rather than a theory of desire in culture, a theory of love objects rather than of the subject, of object-electing subjectivities rather than of the subject of desire. This is attested by its specific slant resulting from the prevalence of the love object as chosen. The love for the brother is not considered as a potential displacement for the love for the father, viewed through the lens of the father-figure as a case of strange loyalty: “she lives out a strange loyalty to her father, bound as she is to him through his curse” (23). Paradoxically her theory, though open to social and cultural mobility, does not allow for the mobility of the subjective relation to objects, nor for the change within the relation to the object.

<sup>33</sup> *Op. cit.*, 24.

<sup>34</sup> *Op. cit.*, 44. The Butlerian foreclosure of the incestuous love object, interpreted as an effect of the symbolic, is thus at variance with the Lacanian concept of foreclosure which points to what fails to fall under symbolic inscription.

<sup>35</sup>“Vas-y donc, en bas. S’il te faut des liens, noue-les là bas.” (1.524-525). (“Go to Hades, then, and if you have to love, love someone dead.”)

<sup>36</sup> *Op.cit.*, 79.

14. The *différend* between the two readings thus moves on to the issue of ethics. Lacan's approach to ethics encompasses an answering of the dark nexus making of desire the enemy of good, yet implies a transcending of this paradox through the preservation of being attested by burial rites and the uniqueness of the name, and an answering of the singularity of one's desire through a disclosing and a working through of its truth and of its limitations. While through the necessity to preserve Polyneices' name, the singularity of being is brought to the blazing light of the absolute, the elaboration from the signifying chain which is unique to every subject seems to be akin to stating the being of singularity. Ethics as approached by psychoanalysis is paradoxical in that it implies both a freeing of the course of desire from the law of its *Ate*, and a re-enacting as unveiling of its alienating condition, articulating thus the hermeneutic act to the heuristic dimension of its effect, while unlimiting the scope of the hermeneutic. Ethics then includes what might deny it and resist it. As for Judith Butler's approach to ethics, it is inscribed within the philosophical paradigm placed under the exclusive seal of good, which is where the ethical and the political merge. It falls under what Lacan calls the Aristotelian realization of one's own good as a collective one. It is an ethics the scope of which is the inscription and recognition as human of experiences that are the object of public denial. The mediation is not the questioning of the measure of action in relation to desire but pathos through the transformation of melancholy into a recognition of mourning. Mourning as mediation for ethics, in Judith Butler's terms, transcends the ambivalent relation to the lost object as unveiled by Freud, through being a passage to alterity and founding a sense of community. Once again, the two authors' *différend*, here viewed in the light of what the condition for and the meaning of community might be, is irreducible.

### The character as the site of an epistemological *différend*

15. In this second part, I mean to pursue the analysis of the two texts through the way the character of Antigone is approached in order to circumscribe another *différend*, between philosophical and literary discourse this time, a *différend* which is not stated explicitly in either text and which I would like to reinscribe.
16. Jacques Lacan first invites his interlocutors to encounter the character of Antigone as image. As if the starting point of his reading implied staging this intersubjective link relating reading to being read. He thus stage-manages his presence as reader or as being read — that is

his subjective position — by the text of *Antigone*, and brings her name onto the scene of the imaginary. Calling upon her as image, he stages himself as being the enchanted effect of its power, through a rhetoric which plays on the refracting effects between object and subject: thus the statement “*Antigone nous fait voir en effet le point de visée qui définit le désir*” is immediately followed by a dramatizing of *Antigone*’s fascinating image under the seal of an unknown mystery, and a half-blinding, half-unveiling game of self-conscious hood-winking, in which the receiver is made both participant and observer, as shown in the shift of pronouns : “*cette visée va vers une image qui détient je ne sais quel mystère jusqu’ici inarticulable, puisqu’il faisait ciller les yeux au moment qu’on la regardait. Cette image est pourtant au centre de la tragédie, puisque c’est celle, fascinante d’Antigone elle-même*<sup>37</sup>”. Two positions then meet at that very pivotal passage, the fascinating image and a position by which “*le sort d’une vie [...] va se confondre avec la mort certaine*<sup>38</sup>”. We might say that there is a singular stance in Lacan’s rhetoric whose reading of the effects of the tragedy, of its striking note<sup>39</sup>, is also a willing surrender to the imaginary power of its letter. To such an extent that the words “beauty” and “desire” seem to hover in an in-between enunciative site: *Antigone*’s desire for death as beauty? *Antigone*’s beauty as object of desire?

17. Yet there is more to it, since Lacan’s reading as being read also allows for a reflexive reading of the power of the image as beauty (and in that respect involves a cathartic process) by suggesting the link between the objectless beauty of sublimation and the proximity of beauty to what it conceals and reveals, that is both a relation to time and to the unrepresentable cause of desire<sup>40</sup>. *Antigone*’s beauty dramatizes the status of the letter as Lacanian signifier bearing in its very letter traces of its effect and of its cause. *Antigone*’s very name, as a signifier conveying the idea of conflict (“anti”), would then be the name for Lacan’s reading of the letter as an ever-conflicting site. This interaction can be pursued onto different levels as can be seen from Pierre Guyomard’s reading of Lacan’s seminar which interprets this fascination as determined by a charge laid on the mother-figure<sup>41</sup> but in so doing is partly read

<sup>37</sup>*Op.cit.*, 290. “In effect, *Antigone* reveals to us the line of sight that defines desire [...] this line of sight focuses on an image that possesses a mystery which up till now has never been articulated, since it forces you to close your eyes at the very moment you look at it. Yet that image is at the center of tragedy since it is the fascinating image of *Antigone* herself.” (304)

<sup>38</sup>*Op. cit.*, 291. “The fate of a life that is about to turn into certain death” (305).

<sup>39</sup>*Op.cit.*, 299. “La frappe extraordinaire” (“its extraordinary stature”, 317).

<sup>40</sup>J. Lacan, *op. cit.*: “la fonction du beau étant précisément de nous indiquer la place du rapport de l’homme à sa propre mort, et de nous l’indiquer que dans un éblouissement” (342). Transl D. Porter, *op.cit.*: “it being precisely the function of the beautiful to reveal to us the site of man’s relationship to one’s own death, and to reveal it to us only in a blinding flash” (363).

<sup>41</sup>P. Guyomard, *La Jouissance du tragique*.

by Lacan's own self-deconstructive reading of beauty. But Antigone is also the name for the letter as an ever-conflicting site in so far as she is the name for an ethical bond ensuring the preservation of Polyneices's name. As such, she is the guardian of the drama of language as naming.

18. Thus both Jacques Lacan's and Judith Butler's essays bring into play the character's identity as discourse as an essential parameter. Yet the issue is not a question of the staging of voices within the frame of drama or tragedy (soliloquies, dialogues, chorus, ...), nor a matter relating to the double enunciation of the performance. It is not so much a generic issue (as text or performance) as a common approach to the literary text as discourse. However, here again there is a *différend* in the way the issue is dealt with by both thinkers, relating to what partakes of speech and of discourse.

19. In the case of Lacan, the reading of the character of Antigone lies in his paying attention to major signifiers in the characters' speech which punctuate the radicality of a subjective position as divided from its own cause. Through the working through of its imaginary power, this subjective position is elaborated into the concept of "désir pur". The chain of signifiers as well as the metric form is approached as a signifying formula (Lacan calls them "the articulations of the play"<sup>299</sup>), which never converts into an equation with a definite meaning or the unveiling of a "mystery", but detects in the letter the unstable shaping of the imaginary and works through it what might be called the tracing of its truth. The reading is however not its own end and in turn generates a concept which renews the ethical proposal of "good" as a paradoxical universal.

20. In the case of Judith Butler, the issue is located on the interactive scene between Antigone as speaker and her interlocutors, through the nature of her discourse metaphorised by the verb "claiming" and the collective scene generated by it. Her reading of the character's speech fits into a more Foucauldian approach of the forms of discourse and of power. Speech, as testified by the emphasis on claiming, partakes of the performativity of a speech-act and if action comes back in the limelight, it is as rationality and as subjected to the criterion of the effectivity of discourse, as historical "agency". The ethical is subordinated to the political and her reading of Antigone can be read as a sort of *Aufhebung* of the Enlightenment Project which characterizes many interpretive stances among American critics. This particularly shows in what revolves around the status of Antigone as character and its supposedly

“exemplary” function. Exemplariness (which is the very other to singularity) itself is in fact at the junction between two orders: that of fiction determined by the category of “representation” (which should also call for the literary category of genres) and that of discourse in the post-Foucauldian sense of political discourse or historical agency through the notion of access to representation of unrecognised love objects and representativeness. Judith Butler’s essay consistently blurs the two orders, converts representation into “representativeness”. Her study of Antigone’s speech in the play is placed under the exclusive seal of the speech-act as authoring both acts and speech, of speech as argumentative claim. The elision of other approaches of speech are most manifest in the study of Antigone’s speech in her answer to Creon. Let me quote the passage for the sake of clarity: Creon would have her admit she is guilty of what under the performative power of his edict amounts to a crime, and she answers: “I say that I did it and I do not deny it” translated less literally by Grene as “Yes: I confess: I will not deny my deed<sup>42</sup>”. Judith Butler’s reading of the line implies a valuing of the “act” of “the claim” (which claims the act and is the act of publishing one’s deed) over the other act of “not denying”: “to claim ‘I will not deny my deed’ is to refuse to perform a denial, but it is not precisely to claim the act<sup>43</sup>”. The “non denial” is for her but the default of a claim, a non-claiming. What is elided is that there might be in speech another force than power, a force within enunciation that might not be equated with the power of assumption, that might withdraw from it or vie with it as in the case of the unrecognised assumption of the denial, that there might be an inner dis-claiming. Here “I do not deny it” expresses the choice of a speech reserve, of a reticence, which may be a case of resistance as counter power but even so implies an opening within speech of a force, a potential, which is other than assertion, other than claim. “I say that I did it and I do not deny it”: the sequence matters. Saying as voicing a choice, a desire, then going on not denying it withdraws enunciation from the pragmatic conditions enforced by Creon; it does not answer for itself either in terms of motivations nor in terms of address; it states less a sovereignty than the “pure” voicing of the act and of the saying. Yet the site of desire presses within the very enunciation, testifying to a subject who chooses not to protest of her life and to place herself under the fateful effect of this deed. The subject of desire proves to be the reserved effect of his own speech. Speech is lined with what is reserved within it, the elision of which amounts

---

<sup>42</sup>*Op. cit.*, 8. Judith Butler’s choice of the less literal translation, which emphasizes the very “deed” through the possessive “my deed” is consistent with her approach of authored and authoring speech acts.

<sup>43</sup> *Op. cit.*, 8.

to a negation of the unconscious, of the mediation of the imaginary in speech, or whatever form the unclaimed-for might take as the other to effective discourse. The foreclosing of this dimension cannot lead but to a return to the ego<sup>44</sup>. Judith Butler's reading of Antigone with Lacan seems to reveal an irreducible *différend* between theories of subjectivity and theories of political agency, as attested by her own words : "one might expect that to turn to Lacan would usher in a more nuanced and promising consideration of the unconscious"<sup>45</sup>. When Judith Butler takes up this idea of a conflict in Antigone's discourse testifying to the unconscious, the latter is not read as a divisive instance within desire but as a potential meaning which eludes her intention, as a potential *différance* she is unaware of: she is unaware that the sign "brother" may imply other beings than the irreproducible one she has elected. The *différend* reads in the slipping of the term unconscious from heteronomy to *différance* read as the desire for a future meaning to be effected: "Thus she is unable to capture the radical singularity of her brother through a term that, by definition, must be transposable and reproducible in order to signify at all. Language thus disperses the desire she seeks to bind to him, cursing her, as it were, with a promiscuity she cannot contain"(77).

21. In Judith Butler's essay, Antigone is made into a figure, in the sense not of a trope as discourse but of a trope of discourse whereby a mode of speech as claim brings into play the subjective and objective value of the genitive. Antigone's claim turns into Judith Butler's claiming of Antigone as a figure of claim, one might say an allegory of claim: yet more precisely as a figure of a conflicting claim by the standards of a political agenda whose reelaboration of theories of identity and of speech as discourse as expressed in this essay is at variance with Jacques Lacan's theory of the subject in relation to desire. A conflicting claim because as a child of Œdipus, she thwarts Judith Butler's Anti-Œdipus of sorts (or rather her After-Œdipus, in all the senses of the term), and her very exemplariness (an impure one) reflects the conflicting locus of representation and representativeness<sup>46</sup>.

22. However there might be a common ground between both readings, which has to do with the way the interaction between character and plot, and the inscription of the character in time is considered in both cases. Much of the critical debate about the notion of the character has

---

<sup>44</sup>*Op. cit.*, 21. I borrow this phrase from Judith Butler herself who states that the claim for the transformative articulation of gendered norms through kinship "is hardly a return to 'the ego' or classical liberal notions of freedom [...]".

<sup>45</sup>*Op. cit.*, 40.

<sup>46</sup>*Op. cit.*, 23. "She does it in a way that is hardly pure, and that will be difficult for anyone to romanticize or, indeed, consult as an example".

been devoted to the subordination of the character to action, and of its reversal when action is inverted into an “index” of the character<sup>47</sup> emblemized by the modernist idiom.

23. Yet Lacan’s reading suggests that there might be another reading of the relation between character and action by relating the measure of action to desire. The plot with its conflicts and outcomes is subordinated to what a desire implies of its effects through the development of action. The whole plot as form is considered as speech subjected to a desire that divides the main character as subject. Lacan’s reading of time, in keeping with Freud’s saying that destiny is ruled by the force of drives, reads plot, drama or deed in relation to the singularity of desire that inhabits it and to its effects or diffracted echoes on the other characters. Hence his disregarding details that might point to a transformative latency within time. Thus, he erases an ambiguity which appears in Creon’s text and particularly in the difference between the letter of his sentence and Antigone’s own interpretation of it, leading to her acting out this interpretation through her suicide : Creon dooms her to a life in death (“là, je l’enterrerai vivante au fond d’un cachot taillé dans le roc en lui laissant juste autant de nourriture qu’il faut pour observer la seule loi sacrée, de sorte que la ville toute entière échappe à la souillure<sup>48</sup>”) which preserves the possibility of some form of survival in the dialectics between life and death, whereas Antigone acts out the fantasy of death in life, choosing to act out the desire for the object as lack which Lacan calls “le désir pur”. Creon’s sentence is eventually differently acted out later in the play, after the oracle’s mediating intervention who enjoins Creon to yield to the dead. “Yielding to the dead” is different from “yielding to death”: it is allowing life in death to become a transformative power, and allowing more than a dialectics between the synchrony of death and the diachrony of time to take place (as Giorgio Agamben’s thought would invite us to do<sup>49</sup>), it allows for a remainder to be consented. That Creon’s sentence should be voiced through an image of food, suggests that there might be some nurturing power in this test of time experienced through the in-between zone (“Là-bas, elle implorera Hadès, le seul des dieux qu’elle respecte, et obtiendra peut-être de lui de ne pas mourir<sup>50</sup>”, Creon adds, in a closing phrase). What is the nurturing power of time, if not on the one hand a latency, a delay and on the other hand a relinquishing which is not a surrendering

<sup>47</sup>F. Lavocat, C. Mucia et R. Salado, *La Fabrique du personnage*.

<sup>48</sup>*Antigone*, *op. cit.*, l. 774-775: “I’ll bury her alive underground, in a grave of stone. I’ll leave her only as much food as religious law prescribes, so that the city will not be cursed for homicide”. Transl., 35.

<sup>49</sup>G. Agamben, *Enfance et histoire*. A point of contact between the two reflections on time may be found when Lacan states : “Antigone face à Créon se situe comme la synchronie face à la diachronie” (331).

<sup>50</sup>Sophocles, *Antigone*, l. 778-779: “Let her pray to Hades down there; he's the only God that she respects. maybe she'll arrange for him to save her life”.

to nothingness or to lack, but to which Antigone remains impervious? If she remains impervious to it for herself, she however plays a role in the mediation of diachrony, as preserver of Polyneices's name, of her sister's life and through her status as object of Haemon's love.

24. Judith Butler, as for her, does not inscribe the character of Antigone in the temporality of the plot but inscribes time within her. As the figure of a conflicting claim, of yet to be written laws, Antigone is turned into a Benjaminian allegory of time whose present holds in reserve the haunting specter of a historical future: "the trace of an alternate legality that haunts the conscious, public sphere as its scandalous future"<sup>51</sup>. In that sense, as referring to yet "unwritten laws"<sup>52</sup> she is said to prefigure the necessary challenge of the state by gender claims, as a transformative power which might signify "in a way that exceeds the reach of the symbolic"<sup>53</sup>. Judith Butler surprisingly proves to be a double of Creon, the Creon who had said that there might be a nurturing power within the spectral space of the tomb. Yet the rhetoric through which this transformative power is expressed as "exceeding the reach of the symbolic" begs reading since it seems to reduce the symbolic to effective social and cultural forms and, eliding the symbolic as the very condition of language, challenges the very possibility of the "claim". As if in her effort to legitimate gender claims onto the political ground (which is an all but necessary gesture), she did it though the opposition between unintelligibility and intelligibility, rather than through the claiming for other forms of intelligibility, which would amount to, on the one hand, recognizing a debt to the symbolic and, on the other hand, emancipating from it through its very acknowledgment. Which is where the symbolic is both universal and contingent, structural and historical.

25. So the two texts write Antigone as a figure of time in two radically opposed positions. For Lacan, she stands on the very limit where historical time encounters its denial: for him, the historical and political formulation of conflicts (within the play and its critical legacy down to the very historical moment when Lacan writes the seminar<sup>54</sup>) is questioned by the destiny of this desire (as a form of desire which can be the enemy of good) when its is staged as history. For Judith Butler, Antigone stands for a potential awaiting its actualization, its present through the transformative agency of voices which would be heirs to Antigone's

---

<sup>51</sup>*Op. cit.*, 40.

<sup>52</sup>*Op. cit.*, 40. Of which Judith Butler says that they "constitute" "the unconscious" of public law, through a slippage of the term from the realm of subjectivity to the realms of the social and the political.

<sup>53</sup>*Op. cit.*, 44.

<sup>54</sup>P. Lacoue Labarthe, "De l'éthique : à propos d'Antigone", *Lacan avec les philosophes*.



claim.

26. These two readings of time can in fact be traced within Sophocles' play. Lacan's reading invites us to pay attention to all the signifiers of generations haunted by death, some of which are swallowed up by the dark vortex of synchrony. The most significant is this image coming from one of Creon's servants, and describing Haemon as engendering his mother as dead to be: "Ta femme est morte, la mère sans défaut de ce mort ! La pauvre, elle vient tout juste de se frapper d'un coup<sup>55</sup>." As for the vision of Antigone as pregnant of a time to be, it is conveyed through the image of the Chorus suggesting that the child might father his own father: "Prince, si ce qu'il dit va au but, il convient que tu apprennes de lui<sup>56</sup>".
27. The two texts may downplay or even erase the question of the *différend* with the specificity of literary discourse as text, they however stage the character as a central parameter of its reading, and thus problematize its status as text. Through their very writing they also formulate two different approaches to the intersubjective dimension of reading : one which is under the seal of the effects of the signifier as reading and to be read, the other which defines intersubjectivity in terms of a political community. If the literary character reasserts itself through its capacity to be matrix and resistance to so many readings, through the capacity of its letter to generate questionings that exceed the figures that philosophical discourse or psychoanalytical theory construe from its mirror and away from it, yet it seems to require that the *différend* between theories of subjectivity and cultural theories of identity should find further sites of its articulation. It is true that Lacan's restriction of the political to the "service of goods", which precludes its ever being the expression of forms of being, challenges thought, yet Judith Butler's overlooking of desire in relation to its cause and her bringing the whole of the experience of love through the politicizing of gender under the flaring headlights of the political can equally be called into question. There is a necessity that the critical field should preserve the full play of this *différend*, at best to find ways of articulating it, at least to recognize the terms of its existence. Jean-François Lyotard suggests that art and literature stand precisely at the very locus of its insistence and thus calls for its formulation to be constantly renewed. A calling that cannot remain unanswered without being made into a claim for it.

---

<sup>55</sup>Sophocles, *Antigone*, op. cit., l. 1282-83: "Your wife is dead, poor woman. Fresh-killed, a mother to match this dead boy".

<sup>56</sup>Op.cit., l. 724-725: "Sir, you should learn from him, if he is on the mark".

## Bibliography

---

- AGAMBEN, GIORGIO. *Enfance et histoire*. Paris: Payot, 1978.
- BAAS, BERNARD. *Le Désir pur : parcours philosophiques dans les parages de J. Lacan*. Louvain: Peeters, 1992.
- BUTLER, JUDITH. *Antigone's Claim: Kinship between Life and Death*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.
- DELEUZE, GILLES. *Logique du sens*. Paris: Minuit, 1969.
- DERRIDA, JACQUES. *Donner la mort*. Paris: Galilée, 1999.
- GUYOMARD, PIERRE. *La Jouissance du tragique*. Paris: Aubier, 1992.
- LACAN, JACQUES. *L'Éthique de la psychanalyse. Le Séminaire : Livre VII*. Paris: Seuil, 1986. *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. Transl. DENNIS PORTER. London and New York: Routledge, 1992.
- LACQUE LABARTHE, PHILIPPE. "De l'éthique : à propos d'Antigone". *Lacan avec les philosophes*. Bibliothèque du collège international de philosophie. Paris: Albin Michel, 1991.
- LAVOCAT, FRANÇOIS, CLAUDE MUCIA et RÉGIS SALADO. *La Fabrique du personnage*. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2007.
- LYOTARD, JEAN-FRANÇOIS. *Le Différend*. Paris: Minuit, 1983.
- SOPHOCLE. *Antigone*. Trad. JEAN et MAYOTTE BOLLACK. Paris: Minuit, 1999. Transl. PAUL WOODRUFF. Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2001.
-