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The Νόμος Beyond the Ἄτη: Lacan on “Antigone” in Seminar VII

Michael Pantazakos *

Antigone is undoubtedly a play about νόμος, about “law”; but as Lacan says, the putative conflict of legal discourses between Creon and Antigone that Hegel thought was reconciled by the play’s end contemplates a fundamentally erroneous interpretation.¹ While Creon clearly serves as protagonist to Antigone, Sophocles did not mean to portray nor would his audience have understood each to assume, respectively, contrary postures of legal positivism versus natural law. Although this agonistic equipoise has dominated the course of the play’s commentary in general over the centuries, a reading founded on such *prima facie* simplicity is necessarily distorted. Moreover, Sophocles nowhere suggests that the specific conflict between Antigone and her uncle is geared to a progressive, socially teleological synthesis, as the unrelenting *stichomythia* between Creon and Haemon about how to rule a polis pointedly demonstrates.²

Lacan, however, probes deeper, naturally, and reveals the person of Antigone to be not a reconciler but “an intermediary between two fields that are symbolically differentiated,”³ namely, between the realm of the Law that is essentially a network of occlusive signification and its repressed other, the realm of the Thing. This zone of mediation, which Lacan analogizes to a Pauline dialectic, reveals, or perhaps better,

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1 See: Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, ed. by Jacques-Allain Miller, trans. by Dennis Porter (New York: Norton, 1992), p. 249.

2 See: Sophocles, *Antigone*, ll. 728–765, in Loeb Edition, ed. and trans. by Hugh Lloyd-Jones (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994). Although I have consulted this and several other standard versions, the English translations to the play are my own. This is necessary in order to remain faithful to Lacan in as much as he often uses the original Greek in either a figurative or even hyper-literal manner that is uniquely attuned to expressing his psychoanalytic theory but clearly not for the central purpose of conveying either the poetry or even the plain sense of the language. The Greek text is from the Loeb Edition.

3 Lacan, *op. cit.*, p. 249.

necessitates the revelation of “sin” (that is, the Thing) through Law as a desire for death that Lacan says “takes on an excessive, hyperbolic character.”⁴

It would be manifestly untrue to both Sophocles and Lacan, however, to read Antigone beyond this relation of Thing and the Law into the death-wish sin itself. She is not subject to such desire because her impetus is more primal, more subterranean, if you will, and her condition, engendered by Creon’s law, is not a want of dying but an “existing on the boundary between life and death, the boundary of the still living corpse.”⁵ This locus between planes of *l’étant* (individual being) and *l’être* (being itself) Antigone occupies literally by Creon’s edict that she be entombed alive, albeit his law is merely *causa secunda* in that regard, for she is herself moved by *ἄγραπτα κάσφαλή... νόμιμα*,⁶ by “unwritten and unfailing [...] laws.”

Thus, Antigone cannot be understood as antinomian but as *αὐτόνομος*, which term must not be apprehended either figuratively as “autonomous” or literally as “a law unto herself,” but rather as “one who realizes law into herself.”⁷ She is one who, as Lacan explains, “appears as a pure and simple relationship of the human being to that of which he miraculously happens to be the bearer, namely, the signifying cut that confers on him the indomitable power of being what he is in the face of everything that may oppose.”⁸

Compared to that ineluctable force which always drives toward a beyond that is the limit of the Real, Creon’s *κυρήγματα*, his mere “proclamations,” are rather bathetically impuissant, admitting not of Law, ironically, but of its direct converse, *ἄμαρτία*, “sin, error, or mistake,” which Lacan understands more deeply to signify a “non-participation in the Thing.”⁹ Disagreeing somewhat with Aristotle, moreover, Lacan posits that *ἄμαρτία* is not a heroic quality but characteristic rather of the anti-hero, and thus not of Antigone, faithful unto her own death, but of Creon, whose “obstinacy and [...] insane orders”¹⁰ lead to the innocent deaths of others, albeit — and this point is fundamental for Lacan — unquestionably not his own. Although his

4 Lacan, *op. cit.*, pp. 83–84.

5 Lacan, *op. cit.*, p. 268.

6 Sophocles, *op. cit.*, ll. 454–455.

7 Lacan, *op. cit.*, p. 279.

8 Lacan, *op. cit.*, p. 282.

9 Lacan, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

10 Lacan, *op. cit.*, p. 277.

ἀμαρτία catalyzed Antigone's situating herself in the field of the Other, it in no way belongs to Creon.¹¹

Here, Lacan's RSI schema pictorially manifests the true nature of Creon's ἀμαρτία far better than its imprecise rendering into English as "sin," for the term ἀμαρτία does not signify an ontological state of inherited and perpetual self-corruption but, like its Hebrew Biblical correlative *khet* is drawn from military terminology and means literally "to miss the mark," as would an archer, for example. Therefore, if we may indeed imagine Antigone centered in the turbulent, anarchic hole of the schema as *objet a*, we might also consider Creon's enactment against the burial of Polynices and legal condemnation of Antigone, his principles of order, in other words, quite off the mark. He is situated, rather, somewhere amid the field of the Symbolic, where he will be eventually caught in the net of his own regulations or rather, attempts to regulate desire.

This latter point I will return to hereafter in discussing the limit of the "Άτη (Atë) Antigone seeks to go beyond and against which Creon dashes his very existence. Before that can be made clear, however, it is essential to note that this boundary is νόμος but not in a restricted sense only pertaining to law, for the term has three other equally vital and interrelated meanings, namely, that of musical modes, of money, and, most broadly construed, of belief.

Regarding the first, Lacan, following Aristotle, quite rightly emphasized the role of music in mobilizing tragic catharsis along "the topology of pleasure as the law of that which functions previous to that apparatus where desire's formidable center sucks us in."¹² That prior law Antigone serves beyond fear, beyond pity, beyond all desire, even for that of death. Thus, having done the deed, Antigone leaves the realm of superfluous prosaic expression forever as she sings her final, departing lines, all metered verse, and in the singing of her κομμός her passionate "lamentation," she becomes at last a creature of pure music, that is to say, of νόμος.

As for Creon, however, we might turn back to Shakespeare and think of him in hearing these lines, *mutatis mutandis*, from *The Merchant of Venice*: "The man that hath no music [that is, no νόμος] in himself [...] is fit for treason, stratagems, and spoils. Let no such man be trusted."¹³ Thus, Antigone's νόμος, her music, her law, moves him not because, as sole ruler of Thebes, that is, as tyrant, he believes that only his

11 Lacan, *op. cit.*, p. 277.

12 Lacan, *op. cit.*, pp. 245–246.

13 Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, V.i. ll. 93, 94, and 97.

word is law and he proceeds to make enactments solely on that hollow foundation. As his son presciently warns, however, *ὅστις γὰρ αὐτὸς ἢ φρονεῖν μόνος δοκεῖ, ἢ γλώσσαν, ἢν οὐκ ἄλλος, ἢ ψυχὴν ἔχειν, οὗτοι διαπτυχθέντες ᾤφθησαν κενόι*, "whoever thinks he himself alone is wise, or that no other speaks or thinks better than he, this person when laid open is found to be empty."¹⁴

When this inevitably comes to pass, Creon will undergo a remarkable if ruefully belated transformation. Until then, however, he resists obstinately the music, the law, the *νόμος* of the other, whether Antigone, Haemon, or any and all of his fellow citizens. Yet, in doing so, he devalues *νόμος* in both concept and practice because denying the small other is akin to denying the great Other, the divine basis of law itself, or rather, in Lacanian terms, the dynamic relation between Law and the Thing. With this belief undermined, *νόμος* becomes *νόμισμα*, that is, law is literally reduced to mere coinage, to a common, quintessentially substitutable medium of exchange. The unwitting irony of Creon's character, however, is that, for all his railing against shallow profiteering, he is ultimately confounded when Antigone, Haemon, and Eurydice abjure with personally fatal consequences the commutative ethos for which he militates.

Yet, believing himself whole, Creon did not at first understand that what motivated their rebellion, as it were, against his rule was not the act of dying, or rather, the event of death itself, but a matter of belief on their own part in a split relation to the dimension of truth and the non-coincident order of event. Early in the play, the Guard warns Creon that *ἡ δεινόν, ᾧ δοκεῖ γε, καὶ ψευδῆ δοκεῖν*,¹⁵ "it is terrible, O at least for he who believes, to believe in what is false." That type of belief is denoted by *δοκεῖν*, which means essentially to judge by appearances, by seeming, by a self-contradictory positing of the true event, that is, an acceptance of the wholeness of a master signifier as the irresistible predicate of a (theoretically unending) chain of subsequent signification, which is also to say submission. But Creon, at first, does not see the danger to others or to himself in denying the split subject, as evinced in his incredulous retort to the Guard, *κόμψευέ νυν τῆν δόξαν*,¹⁶ "so, now you would cut appearance in two!"

The belief that drives Antigone, however, is of an entirely different species, characterized not by *δόξα*, by an unrefracted fantasm of external completeness, but by *νόμος*, by an internal desire paradoxically split by the beauty of its objectless realization, that is, split by the *νόμος*, by the

14 Sophocles, *op. cit.*, ll. 707–709.

15 Sophocles, *op. cit.*, l. 323.

16 Sophocles, *op. cit.*, l. 324.

event of Law, but also by the truth of belief in the beyond the Law limits. Creon's ἀμαρτία, then, his sin, his error, his missing the mark, is yet another unsustainable substitution, namely, that of replacing δόξα, which desires entitlement, with νόμος, which desires empowerment. Thus, when Haemon in boldly democratic fashion declares πόλις γὰρ οὐκ ἔσθ' ἦτις ἀνδρός ἔσθ' ἑνός,¹⁷ "there is no city that belongs to a single man," Creon replies with wrathful but no less sincere perplexity, οὐ τοῦ κρατοῦντος ἢ πόλις νομίζεται,¹⁸ "is not the city believed to belong to its ruler?" — which may also be translated, "does not the city by law belong its ruler?", for νομίζειν (to believe) is a variant of νόμος.

Yet, belief in the Law is precisely what Creon's deontic imperatives abnegate, the belief for which Antigone chooses death, the belief in the νόμους χθονός, the laws of the earth, or perhaps better, of the underworld.¹⁹ Now the conflict between the two may be clearer, for their dispute is not about extrinsic law versus intrinsic nature but about the inviolate law of human nature itself, a law that is both unwritten and unailing, *i.e.*, both beyond signification and beyond resistance. By crossing the border of Creon's ordinance, Antigone thus moved herself into a beyond of another law, which act necessarily casts doubt on his right to exclusive control of the polis and so threatens to plunge it into ἀναρχία, that is, she threatens him with "anarchy," literally meaning "without a unique ruler," which was to Creon the greatest evil imaginable. What Creon failed to recognize until far too late, however, was that the evil of his own edict prompted Antigone's transgression, or as Lacan draws from the text, her going ἐκτὸς ἄτας, beyond the limit of the ἜΑτη.²⁰

An understanding of this term, ἜΑτη, is indispensable for grasping Lacan's interpretation of the play, if not his general ethic of psychoanalysis entire, so at least a brief explication is required before proceeding.

ἜΑτη is a goddess, a daughter of Zeus, and, by some accounts, a personification of misfortune. However, as Lacan rightly noted in criticizing this narrow definition, "it doesn't have anything to do with misfortune."²¹ What is meant by ἜΑτη instead is a form of delirium leading to reckless conduct, that is, reckless only as a matter of ordinary convention, for the state of ἜΑτη is said to arise for a divine purpose often so inscrutable as to upturn all tables of human valuation. Thus, in

17 Sophocles, *op. cit.*, l. 737.

18 Sophocles, *op. cit.*, l. 738.

19 Lacan, *op. cit.*, p. 276.

20 Lacan, *op. cit.*, p. 270.

21 Lacan, *op. cit.*, p. 264.

reference to the play, as Lacan states, evil is mistaken for good in that Antigone's good differs from everyone else's, that is, the so-called "evil" of breaking Creon's inhuman law against burying Polynices is in reality an unrecognized "good" that affirms sacred kinship rituals that touch the very heart of the human entity.²²

Lacan's view of Antigone's resistance is supported by the tradition in Hesiod that Ἄρτη shares the nature of her sister Δυσνομία, which may be translated "lawlessness,"²³ but which no less a personage than Solon himself understood as a "bad constitution."²⁴ Thus, as Lacan argues, Antigone does not move beyond the Ἄρτη as an advocate of nature against law but motivated by the desire to uphold the chthonic law against the law of the tyrant, which, indeed, provided the original structure of opposition that drove her to act.

On this point, Lacan is in full accord with Homer, who noted that the Λίται (Litai), the sisters of Ἄρτη, who personify litanies, or prayers, and who follow after Ἄρτη to heal the damage caused by her recklessness, would typically come even without Ἄρτη to bring great blessings to men — that is, as long as the ritual law is followed in honoring them. Thus, Homer says in the *Iliad* that, "If a man venerates these daughters of Zeus as they draw near, such a man they bring great advantage, and hear his entreaty; but if a man shall deny them, and stubbornly with a harsh word refuse, they go to Zeus, son of Kronos, in supplication that Ruin [Ἄρτη] may overtake this man, that he be hurt, and punished."²⁵

By refusing to allow Antigone to appeal directly to the Λίται through ritual prayers of mourning to heal the pain of a brother's death, Creon set up an impasse between which "no mediation is possible [...] except that of this desire with its radically destructive character."²⁶ However, this is by no means of necessity, for, as Lacan says, "no doubt things could have been resolved if the social body had been willing to pardon, to forget and cover over everything with the same funeral rights. It is because the community refuses this that Antigone is required to sacrifice her own being in order to maintain that essential being which is the family."²⁷

Antigone's sacrifice also reveals a beyond of desire that lies in the field beyond signification, beyond the boundary of law, beyond the limit

22 Lacan, *op. cit.*, p. 270.

23 Hesiod, *Theogony*, l. 230.

24 Solon, "Fragment 3", in *Iambi et Elegi*, ed. by M. L. West (2nd ed., 1989).

25 Homer, *Iliad*, translation by Richard Lattimore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 9:508–512.

26 Lacan, *op. cit.*, p. 283.

27 Lacan, *op. cit.*, p. 283.

of the Ἄτη, because, as the Chorus comments, οὐδέν' ἔρπει θνατῶν βίोटος πάμπολυς ἐκτὸς ἄτας,²⁸ "to no one of mortal existence comes fulfillment except by Ἄτη," that is, Antigone, as the agent of her own discourse of desire, speaks directly to her radically split self as an other so that the chain of signification or knowledge of that desire is deposed in favor of a radical individuality that can determine its own subjectivity in the production of an irreducible master signifier.

In short, Antigone thus becomes αὐτόγνωτος,²⁹ "self-knowing," which characterization, Lacan says, "should be heard alongside the γνώθι σεαυτόν (the commandment to 'know thyself') of the Delphic oracle. One cannot ignore the meaning of the kind of self-knowledge attributed to her."³⁰ But this is exactly what Creon cannot abide, not merely because Antigone's self-knowledge challenges his presumed authority to determine the parameters of social discourse but even more because Creon has fundamentally failed to gain his own knowledge of self in the same way, that is, by the split subject that realizes objective truth can never be told in the process of the primary signifier's relation to its necessarily consequent and endless signifying chain.

Only after Teiresias, the blind prophet, foretells the disaster sure to fall upon Creon's house does the tragedy begin to turn against him. As Lacan argued, Creon's ruin came οὐκ ἄλλοτρίαν ἄτην,³¹ not from another's, that is, from Antigone's Ἄτη, but αὐτὸς ἀμαρτῶν,³² from his own error, rather, his own ἀμαρτία.³³ The original sense of the term, moreover, is preserved here, because Teiresias explicitly calls himself an archer who has shot into Creon's heart sure arrows, whose sting he cannot escape.³⁴

Now Creon has begun to be moved from his place of repose in the Symbolic toward the center, to the turbulent hole of being that Antigone already occupies, where not knowledge but self-knowledge governs. Thus, stirred at last by the frightful prognostication of Teiresias, Creon actually begins to speak like Antigone, declaring ἔγνωκα καὶ τὸς καὶ ταρασσομαι φρένας,³⁵ "now that I know myself I am shaken to the core." Moreover, just as Antigone did, Creon now confronts the same

28 Sophocles, *op. cit.*, ll. 613–614.

29 Sophocles, *op. cit.*, l. 875.

30 Lacan, *op. cit.*, p. 273.

31 Sophocles, *op. cit.*, l. 1259.

32 Sophocles, *op. cit.*, l. 1260.

33 Lacan, *op. cit.*, p. 277.

34 Sophocles, *op. cit.*, ll. 1084–1086.

35 Sophocles, *op. cit.*, l. 1095.

impasse, for, as he says, *τό τ' εἰκαθεῖν γὰρ δεινόν*,³⁶ "to yield [to myself] is a terror," but *ἀντιστάντα δὲ Ἄτης πατάξαι θυμὸν ἐν λίνῳ πάρα*,³⁷ "resisting will dash my will against the boundary of Ἄτη beyond," or more literally, "into the net of Ἄτη." In other words, Creon finally must brave the essential human dilemma, either to accept the terrifying power, the Ἄτη, of the split self which subsumes death in life, or to seek artificial asylum in a fantasm of language that would regulate desire but is fated to failure because the Real always slips through the holes in the net of signification.

Unfortunately, Creon comes to this realization too late. Although, in the end, he takes the blame for the deaths of Antigone, Haemon, and Eurydice — although, in the end, he too comes to the side of the νόμος, the law and the music, for his final words are not spoken but sung, all comfort is denied him. Just as he prevented Antigone from ritual prayer for her dead brother, that is, from invoking the healing powers of the Λίται, so too is Creon forbidden, as the Chorus commands, *μὴ νυν προσεύχου μηδέν*,³⁸ "do not now utter a single prayer." Moreover, just as Antigone lived between two deaths, now Creon, having lost irretrievably what cannot be replaced, understands himself already as *ὄλωλότ' ἄνδρα*,³⁹ "a dead man." Indeed, the second death he sought to inflict upon Polynices and Antigone he now suffers, as he says to the messenger who revealed Eurydice's suicide, *αἰαί, ὄλωλότ' ἄνδρ' ἐπεξεργάσω*,⁴⁰ "Alas, you are trying to kill a dead man a second time!" Thus, in the end, Creon's final desperate, in fact, utterly panicked entreaty is for the best fate of all, which is to be led to his *τερμίαν ἀμέραν*,⁴¹ his "last day," or more literally, the day that leads him to the *τέρμα*, the ultimate "boundary" (or even "terminal") to the highest — *ἴτω ἴτω*, he desperately cries, *ἴτω ἴτω*⁴² — "Let it come, let it come!... Let it come, let it come!"

To Sophocles, however, Creon's end is fitting, for *μεγάλοι δὲ λόγοι μεγάλας πληγὰς τῶν ὑπεραύχων ἀποτείσαντες*,⁴³ "the great words of the boastful man must be atoned by great pains," that is, to be fully human one must breach the limits of language to the beyond that is ineffable but not the less essential, to the beyond of Ἄτη, or to speak as

36 Sophocles, *op. cit.*, l. 1096.

37 Sophocles, *op. cit.*, ll. 1096–1097.

38 Sophocles, *op. cit.*, l. 1337.

39 Sophocles, *op. cit.*, l. 1288.

40 Sophocles, *op. cit.*, l. 1288.

41 Sophocles, *op. cit.*, l. 1330.

42 Sophocles, *op. cit.*, ll. 1328 and 1331.

43 Sophocles, *op. cit.*, ll. 1350–1352.

Lacan, to the very level of *Jouissance*. The moral of the play, therefore, if we may indeed posit one (or just one), is that Antigone breaks through to that level out of *ἔρως ἀνίκητε*,⁴⁴ "love unconquered." For love's sake Antigone is willing to die, because love, according to Hesiod,⁴⁵ is the oldest of the gods and so preeminent even above Hades, even above death itself. But love is not love unless it is love of the other. That is the lesson of Antigone's death, of her life in death, of her life beyond death. Yet, Creon never realizes this in himself and so destroys all he is by destroying all he loves. That, according to both Sophocles and Lacan, is his just punishment — and our dire warning.



44 Sophocles, *op. cit.*, l. 781.

45 Hesiod, *Theogony*, l. 120.