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Book Review Essay: “Let Them Rot: Antigone’s Parallax” by Alenka Zupančič?

Review of *Let Them Rot: Antigone’s Parallax* by Alenka Zupančič, Fordham, 2023, 88 pp.

Alenka Zupančič seems almost apologetic for having written a book about *Antigone*, but we should be glad she did so. Her book is the result of a workshop given in Brussels in January 2020, a rather interesting point in time to say the least, and as she observes: “*Antigone* comes into focus...every time there is some significant tectonic shift or crisis in the social fabric, in the symbolic structuring of the law, or in the wider realm of morality or *Sittlichkeit*” (Zupančič, 2023, p. 81). The gravity of the current crisis has in fact helped her see things and think about things at work in the play that we might otherwise overlook. As she argues, the play highlights an antagonism that is not just a “hostility and conflict between two (or several) elements” in a society, as the classical/Hegelian reading of the play in terms of the rights of the family versus the rights of the state would have it, “but rather in the sense in which Marx talked about ‘class antagonism’: not simply as conflict *between* different classes and their interests but as something that pertains to the very logic of the space, or reality, in which these classes exist” (Zupančič, 2023, pp. 2-3). In other words, *Antigone* has come into focus for Zupančič because it presents us with an antagonism that is not just about who occupies the seat of power, or about a fundamental wrong being done to some particular segment of society, but rather an antagonism that threatens the unravelling of the social fabric itself. At stake, Zupančič suggests, are the very boundaries of the nature/culture distinction – hence the themes of sexuality, death, burial, and incest take center stage in her study.

She is also able to use *Antigone* to expand on and sharpen some of her insights from *What is Sex?* As she wrote there:

in psychoanalysis sex is above all a *concept* that formulates a persisting contradiction of reality. And...this contradiction cannot be circumscribed or reduced to a secondary level (as a contradiction between already well-established entities/beings), but is – *as a contradiction* – involved in the very structuring of these entities, in their very being. In this precise sense, sex is of ontological relevance: not as an ultimate reality, but as an inherent twist, or stumbling block, of reality. (Zupančič, 2017, p. 3)

Antigone herself seems to have a similar ontological relevance in light of this book, but the twist is that here, Zupančič is considering what it would be, subjectively, to occupy such a position. Part of the appeal of *Antigone* at this moment for her is precisely the fact that the play presents us with a form of subjectivity we have a hard time accepting. “We have...become accustomed to condemning any subjective surplus – that is to say, any surplus of subjectivity – as harmfully excessive and disturbingly *hysterical*”: a description that fits *Antigone* to a tee (Zupančič, 2023, p. 81). But there are also a series of questions: Was *Antigone*’s subject position a solution to certain impasses? Is it still one? Is it an ideal? Or does it rather illustrate something impossible and unattainable? As opposed to the multiplicity of identities available in the

contemporary world, according to Zupan*?*i*?*, *Antigone* shows us how subjectivity is

something other than this neoliberal valorization of individualities; it is ‘hysterical’ in its essence. It aims not at uniqueness or at its personal rights, but at what is rotten in the state of things, in the order of things. Freud saw this very clearly. Hysteria is never just a personal problem: it is a problem of a *certain structuring* of power and social links. (Zupan*?*i*?*, 2023, pp. 81-2)

Lacan (1992) famously talked about the play in his seminar on the ethics of psychoanalysis (delivered during the Algerian War, it should be noted), when he was thinking of the specificity of the analyst’s desire and its role in the clinic: a theme he continued to study the following year, considering Socrates and Alcibiades as exemplars of desiring and desirousness in his eighth seminar, *Transference* (Lacan, 2015). There is of course another tragic figure Lacan discusses in that seminar, Sygne de Coûfontaine in the Coûfontaine trilogy by Paul Claudel, and in closing I will consider Lacan’s remarks on her in the wake of Zupan*?*i*?*’s observations about *Antigone*, hoping to continue with some aspects of Zupan*?*i*?*’s line of thinking.

What makes for Antigone’s unique and excessive stance is of course the tangled family situation she is in. Hence the idea that Antigone herself is the locus of a parallax, a nodal point where perspectives and boundaries get scrambled. Zupan*?*i*?* uses a few different jokes to illustrate this idea – from the anthropological paradox “there are no cannibals here, we ate the last one” to Lacan’s often used “I have three brothers, Paul, Ernest, and me.” The latter she uses very cleverly as an example of a sort of incestuous phrase, “something like an impossible picture of the ‘I of the count’ copulating with the ‘I who counts,’ the subject of the statement relating to the subject of the enunciation in an impossible, forbidden way” (Zupan*?*i*?*, 2023, p. 62). As she points out, Oedipus himself could have used the phrase accurately (p. 63)!

But the radicality of Antigone’s stance and her persistence with what is for all intents and purposes an incestuous desire is epitomized by the line from the play that Zupan*?*i*?* uses for the title of her book. It is of course drawn from Antigone’s dialogue with her sister, in which she observes that had the burial-ban been placed on her husband, or her children, she would in fact have “let them rot.” Zupan*?*i*?* uses this to point out how Antigone’s stance is not driven by any concern for “universal humanity” even that of “the worst criminals, on account of which everybody deserves a burial. Perhaps everybody does indeed deserve a burial, but here’s the rub: Antigone wouldn’t do it for everybody” (Zupan*?*i*?*, 2023, p. 51). Given that her parents are dead, she can never have another brother. She can always have another child, another partner, etc. With this singular attachment, Zupan*?*i*?* observes, “it is almost as if she is trying to patch up a hole in the structure of kinship or as if that *particular* hole in the structure of kinship was especially unbearable, charged with something far beyond what it actually is” (Zupan*?*i*?*, 2023, p. 52). A hole that is exacerbated by Creon’s own excessive prohibition of their brother’s burial.

In making and insisting on her particular claim, Antigone aims not so much at an all-encompassing universality (‘we are all human beings’) as at a principle. Her justice is principled, saying something like, *You cannot push this limit, play with it, without consequences*. To argue and prove her point (and her justice), *she is willing to be that consequence*. (Zupan*?*i*?*, 2023, p. 16)

The middle section of the book contains some wonderful reflections on death and burial, themes that also touch on the distinction between the natural and the cultural, but I want to focus in what follows on Zupan*?*i*?*’s discussion of the incest taboo in her last chapter.

The idea that incest taboos are neither natural nor cultural, or, equally as well, that they are *both* natural and cultural, makes them into something that is “in nature more than nature...and... something in culture more than culture” (Zupan*?*i*?*, 2023, p. 69). This is what allows incest itself to function as a name for “the impossible point of this conjunction of sexual reality (including the genetic, chromosome combinatory involved in reproduction) and the signifier (purely symbolic relationship)” (p. 70). While it is fairly obvious what incest taboos forbid (and while it is well known that, culturally and historically, they operate in different ways), as Zupan*?*i*?* observes, there is also something impossible about what transgressing them

promises. As she puts it, incest taboos are the “paramount case of prohibiting the impossible, or prohibiting what is in itself impossible” – a “symbolic prohibition” that “covers a real impossibility and invites transgression. Transgression presents the ontological impossibility as something that is, in principle, possible yet unattainable, lingering out there, beyond the limits imposed by the law” (p. 70).

In *Gender Trouble* Judith Butler took Claude Lévi-Strauss to task for making a similar point, misreading his remarks about Freud’s myth of the father of the primal horde for a denial that acts of incest are ever committed (Butler, 1990, p. 42). Differentiating what the taboo prohibits, which has a sort of impossible-transcendental-mythical status from the empirical incest (which is never *that*) that characterizes the case of Antigone and her family, what makes *Antigone* a “drama of desire” for Zupan?i? (2023) is how it illustrates the fact that

incest is itself a mythical Thing; it does not exist. More precisely, it exists only as taboo, *as prohibition* of something that is in itself impossible. Empirical incest, which of course exists, is something else; it involves both desire and death.^[1] It would be wrong to see an empirical incestuous relationship as some kind of plunging into eternity, into a fullness of enjoyment, without loss. (p. 73)

And it is the very empirical nature of Antigone’s incestuous relations and origins that gets at the heart of what Zupan?i? (2023) identifies as *Antigone’s* “parallax”.

Rather, empirical incest is the paradoxical (and hence) ‘monstrous’ figure in which the condition of desire (lack) directly appears as the Other. The Other is not the carrier of the mysterious object, implying an objectification of the Other (The Other appearing as object of desire); what occurs is, rather, an ‘otherization’ of the object, the object (lack, death) appearing as Other. It is not simply a return to some primordial oneness or fullness; it involves desire, and hence lack, yet with an ‘impossible’ twist in which the Other embodies, so to say, their own disappearance, loss, death. It is like desire turning on itself, desiring its own condition as its object. (p. 73)

Again, a description that fits the character of Antigone to a tee.

With the idea that an incest taboo functions to prohibit something that is impossible anyway (empirical incest is not *that*, it is never the thing itself...), Zupan?i? is chiming in with what Lévi-Strauss had claimed in his *Elementary Structures of Kinship* about how Freud’s myth of the primal horde functions. (This is the passage I think Butler misreads in *Gender Trouble* as a denial that incestuous acts ever occur):

Like all myths, the one presented in *Totem and Taboo* with such great dramatic force admits of two interpretations. The desire for the mother or the sister, the murder of the father and the sons’ repentance, undoubtedly do not correspond to any fact or group of facts occupying a given place in history. But perhaps they symbolically express an ancient and lasting dream. The magic of this dream, its power to mould men’s thoughts unbeknown to them, arises precisely from the fact that the acts it evokes have never been committed, because culture has opposed them at all times and in all places. (Lévi-Strauss, 1949/1969, p. 491)

It is particularly interesting to think of the play *Antigone* in this light as well as that of the following remark. Going against Freud’s idea that certain rituals might be reminders or traces of earlier transgressions, Lévi-Strauss (1949/1969) argues instead that

Symbolic gratifications in which the incest urge finds its expression, according to Freud, do not therefore commemorate an actual event. They are something else, and more, the permanent expression of a desire for disorder, or rather counter-order. Festivals turn social life topsy-turvy, not because it was once like this but because it has never been, and can never be, any different. (p. 491)

This sheds a rather interesting light on the figure of Antigone and her appeal in times of social fracture. Shall we also say that there is something impossible about Antigone herself as well? Probably, but the point is

that, as Zupan?i? points out, her stance becomes so very intriguing and appealing in times when it is very clear that something is especially rotten in the social order itself.

The incest theme is a particularly effective way of getting at the distinctness of Antigone's subject position, but there is also an interesting contrast Zupan?i? draws between Oedipus and Antigone that I want to consider in closing, since I think it also says something about where we are now. Towards the end of the book, Zupan?i? writes that "Unlike Oedipus, Antigone is not the hostage of her word. Rather, she is a hostage of desire, of the way in which her desire relates to the desire of the Other" (Zupan?i?, 2023, p. 75). The term 'hostage' here is, I think, carefully chosen, as it is the very term Lacan uses in his eighth seminar when discussing the differences between ancient and modern tragedy, as well as the subject positions they entail. It is also the name of the first play (*The Hostage*) in the trilogy by Paul Claudel that Lacan comments on.^[2]

At the time, Lacan (2015) claims that Oedipus is the hostage of his word because of his relation to the family *Até* – its divinely ordained and irrevocable fate. As Lacan put it, Oedipus was "guilty... of the responsibility he receives for the debt stemming from the *Até* that precedes him" (Lacan, 2015, p. 301). It was a debt he could never pay off. Within this framework, however, he did have the option of lamenting and cursing his destiny: This is how Lacan reads Oedipus's famous "*me phunai*" in the last play of the Oedipus cycle, *Oedipus at Colonus* – his lament that it would have been better never to have been born. On Lacan's interpretation, the utterance of this cry affords Oedipus a bit of subjective space, as it articulates a gap between what he calls the subject of the enunciation and the subject of the statement. (The very gap that is elided in the joke "I have three brothers, Paul, Ernest, and me," which, as we saw earlier, Zupan?i? describes as incestuous!) The phrase, with its "*me*" acting like Lacan's well known "expletive *ne*" discussed in other contexts, indicates that the subject of the enunciation has attained some breathing room with respect to what is said, to its destiny, let's say, as articulated at the level of the statement. As Lacan puts it, subjective laments like this show us "the tip of desire's iceberg" (Lacan, 2015, p. 301). Importantly, such laments are indications that a subject is capable of desiring, despite the strictures of the Other.

Antigone, of course, shows us much more than the mere tip of desire's iceberg, famously not ceding on her desire at all, following it right to the end, up to being entombed alive. But interestingly, as Zupan?i? suggests, both Oedipus and Antigone are roughly in the same spot, insofar as it is true that there *is* some *Até*, some destiny, or, rather, an Other that they are wrestling with. In other words, both are indeed hostages – Oedipus of the Word, Antigone of desire. But, both were at least afforded a space in which desire was possible.

Which brings me to my point. For Oedipus and Antigone...there is at least still an Other! Lacan's discussion of Claudel's trilogy in seminar eight was motivated by his interest in the subjective consequences of the decline of the paternal ideal, or, as he would put it later: What happens when there is no Other of the Other? What are the conditions for desire in post-Oedipal times? In seminar eight, Lacan framed this topic in overtly Christian/death-of-God terms: What happens when the Word (destiny, fate) becomes flesh, when it descends from the heavens and becomes something supported and borne only by the human? The consequence is that there is no Other of the Other, and the subjective burden changes.

When there is no Other of the Other, Lacan's suggestion is that all we are left with is the ability to "curse *ourselves*" instead of our destiny, the Other, the gods (Lacan, 2015, p. 302). Thus, modern tragic subjects are tasked with the excessive burden of "assuming responsibility for the very injustice" they suffer from, the very order that, in the case of Sygne herself for example, "she abhors" (Lacan, 2015, p. 303).^[3] The very "space" for desire is closed off. The puzzle, Lacan suggests, is to find some way to "conjugate a minus that is not complemented by a plus": the "minus" of course referring to castration, lack, desire; the "plus" we could read in different ways, but in this context perhaps we can take it to be what is promised by the violation of taboos (Lacan, 2015, p. 325). What Lacan is getting at is a stance vis-à-vis castration and lack that is not looking for supplements (Antigone, as hystericized as she is, is still, as Zupan?i? points out, a hostage to the Other's desire, and is still getting some compensation out of that, we could say, even if it

results in her death...)

Lacan concludes that Sygne is not so much the hostage of the Other's desire – the Other has collapsed. She is rather a hostage of her continued *belief* in the Other... an Other she gives herself the task of propping up. This leads to a distinct and much less glamorous status when compared to Antigone: Lacan contrasts Antigone's shimmering "splendor" – the force of her desirousness – to the psychosomatic tic Sygne develops, which he compares to a repulsive "twitching on the part of life" itself (Lacan, 2015, p. 277). Zupan's point that Antigone is a hostage of her desire is intriguing and seems correct, and is no doubt precisely what makes Antigone such a fascinating figure. She resonates more than Sygne does, although Sygne's somatization and her sort of reactionary subjectivity (bound with propping up an Other, in the form of the *ancien régime*, whose time had come), I fear, is a more accurate portrayal of the impasses and dilemmas of contemporary subjectivity. The extent to which these differences between ancient and modern tragedies and subjectivities are relevant when thinking about the current conjuncture depends, I suppose, on how historicist one is, and how historicist one takes psychoanalysis to be. Questions for another time!

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Notes:

[1] Whereas what I am calling "transcendental" or structural incest wouldn't – EP

[2] With permission, in what follows I am drawing from some remarks made in an unpublished paper written with An Bulkens and presented at the "Lacan: Clinic and Culture" conference held at Duquesne

University in October 2022. I do however take full responsibility for any errors or howlers the following might contain!

[3] For a bit of context, Sygne knowingly married the man responsible for executing her family and parceling out her land for sale, in order to save the life of the Pope and help restore the King of France to power. The restoration is of course largely a façade, and at the end of the play Sygne rather impulsively and obscurely takes a bullet meant for her husband. The trilogy, which spans the 19th century, can be said to be about the subjective effects of the end of the feudal era and the forward march of the liberal-democratic capitalist order.

Bio:

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