

Reading the Illegible:

On Žižek's Interpretation of Lacan's 'Kant with Sade'

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During the early 1980s, Slavoj Žižek belonged to the chosen few who had been personally invited by Jacques-Alain Miller to participate in his closed seminar on Lacan's 'Kant with Sade'.¹ Even though I shamelessly admit that, at the time and for a long time afterwards, I was deeply envious of this small privileged circle's weekly opportunity to enter into a direct discussion with Miller, this is not to say that I simultaneously felt that Žižek was undeserving of his place in this small, private cénacle of luminaries. Given Žižek's legendary loquacity and his deep familiarity with the Western philosophical tradition, not to mention his razor-sharp wit and his habitual penchant for the counter-intuitive insight, Miller should have counted himself lucky that Žižek was available to enliven and enlighten the debates. To all intents and purposes, Žižek's calling was an entirely justifiable act, in the sense that Miller could not have wished for a better interlocutor. To the best of my knowledge, no record (recording and/or transcription) of this special confluence of minds survives, yet I have always imagined those historical exchanges to follow the same format as that adopted (or arising) during Miller's two famous lectures on 'Kant with Sade' at Kent State University in Ohio at the end of May 1989—Miller taking charge of the proceedings and presenting his views very much 'with Žižek', who

incessantly interrupts and occasionally steers the master's discourse with his own observations, questions and illustrations.² Hence, if many years later Žižek would concede that it was during his Parisian years that he truly discovered and came to appreciate Miller's pedagogical genius, Miller himself also undoubtedly benefited tremendously from Žižek's unstoppable barrage of disruptive, dispersed critical comments, which would not have been a paragon of pedagogical genius, but indicative of a certain genius all the same.³

Irrespective of what really happened during those mythical, most exclusive, private gatherings on Lacan's 'Kant with Sade' in Paris—and of which Miller would give us, his general public, only a little snippet at his weekly Wednesday lectures—one cannot overestimate the importance Lacan's essay would come to acquire for the development of Žižek's own thought. If, as Žižek claims in *The Indivisible Remainder*, 'Kant with Sade' is "the theme which, perhaps, provides the key to the entire Lacanian theoretical edifice", I feel equally justified in positing that 'Kant with Sade' constitutes the linchpin of Žižek's own entire philosophical oeuvre.⁴ From Žižek's seminal 1989 monograph *The Sublime Object of Ideology* to his most recent major theoretical interventions, such as the treatise *Sex and the Failed Absolute*, i.e. during a period of more than thirty years covering more than seventy single-authored and edited books in English, there are very few volumes in which 'Kant with Sade' is not invoked in one way or another as part of Žižek's argumentation, be it in the context of highly charged, polemical discussions about political ideology, or as part of more light-hearted reflections on the 'dark obscene dialectical underside' of popular culture.⁵ In addition, as any cursory reader of Žižek's books will easily ascertain, and as he himself underscored at the very beginning of *The Most Sublime Hysteric*—his Parisian doctoral dissertation originally published in French in 1988—the methodology of reading an author, or an established body of ideas, with an ostensibly antagonistic, seemingly irreconcilable correlative is a standard Žižekian rhetorical

strategy that runs through his entire intellectual project, and which endows it with its well-known, irresistible incongruity: Hegel is read with Lacan, Lacan is read with Hitchcock, ideology is read with dirty jokes, and so on.⁶ Finally, for all I have been able to establish through my reading of roughly 25,000 pages of Žižek's works, 'Kant with Sade' is the only *écrit* by Lacan that comes with its own unequivocal categorical imperative: in an 'early' text, whose origin more or less coincides with the publication of *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek insists that "one must read 'Kant with Sade'".⁷ The point not to be missed, here, is that Žižek does not exhort his readership to read Kant with Sade, as he had done in *The Most Sublime Hysteric*, but that he emphasizes one's ethical duty to read 'Kant with Sade', i.e. the infamous essay by Lacan whose first version dates back to 1962 and which was subsequently revised for publication in *Écrits*.⁸

Of course, the fundamental problem with fulfilling one's ethical duty, as Kant himself remarked in his *Critique of Practical Reason*, is that no human being, however rational it may be, is really up to the task, and that the asymptotic approximation of this endlessly postponed, full compliance with the moral law may in itself come at the cost of a great deal of pain, which is supposed to be endured as much as possible in favour of the realisation of the highest, transcendental good.⁹ In other words, the ethical duty to read 'Kant with Sade', non-negotiable as it may be, constitutes a radical impossibility, for the pure and simple reason that 'Kant with Sade' is totally illegible. I am not saying this because on various occasions Miller opined that this essay is one of the most difficult texts in *Écrits*—a huge selection of Lacan's writings whose 'mainstream' papers are already widely considered to be distinctly and infuriatingly cryptic—but because Lacan himself admitted as much at a press conference in Rome on 29 October 1974: "[N]o one has ever sent me any remarks on that article ['Kant with Sade']. It is true that I am incomprehensible [in it]".¹⁰ I am also saying it, because I myself

bear the indelible marks of the horrendous pain I had to put up with when, for reasons that should not concern us here, I agreed to comply with the ethical duty not only to read ‘Kant with Sade’, but to describe and explain each and every aspect of its totally impenetrable contents.¹¹

Hence, if there is a discernible centre to the Žižekian universe, this indispensable nucleus, around which his entire constellation of thoughts revolves, constitutes a radical impossibility which, as will become clear from my exposition below, is not to be understood as an impossibility per se, but rather as the retroactive configuration of the impossible as “what did happen”—as Žižek himself accentuates in *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle* and elsewhere.¹² The implication can only be that any serious critical analysis of Žižek’s works needs to focus on this impossible reading of Lacan’s ‘Kant with Sade’; every other approach, every commentary that moves away from this focal point is *de facto* ancillary—what the Germans tend to refer to as ‘*ein Kriegsnebenschauplatz*’, an imaginary accessory to the actual battleground, where the real war is taking place. It would be disingenuous of me not to confess though that my reason for tackling Žižek’s impossible reading of Lacan’s ‘Kant with Sade’ is also conditioned by more ‘pathological’ motives and is thus not nearly as pure as it may seem. The fact that ‘Kant with Sade’ constitutes the beating heart of Žižek’s intellectual body is an extremely welcome opportunity to seek compensation and indemnify myself for the intolerable pain I endured when trying to make sense of the most incomprehensible of Lacan’s *écrits*.

At this point, I should also disclose that I see my own essay as a critique rather than a mere criticism. Its main purpose is to question Žižek’s answers rather than to provide another (alternative, purportedly better) answer to the questions he raises. In the process, I shall highlight some factual errors and omissions in Žižek’s reading, yet these infelicities may be

less important than my critical reconstruction of the coherence and consistency of Žižek's numerous interpretations of 'Kant with Sade' as they appear throughout his works, whereby I intend to 'stress-test' his arguments and conclusions against Lacan's (and Sade's) own propositions, evaluating the concrete repercussions of Žižek's dialectical engagement with this most abstract of texts, and opening up some new perspectives on how (not) to read Lacan. Inevitably, my critique will eventually take me beyond the boundaries of 'Kant with Sade', into a brief reconsideration of Žižek's interpretation, portrayal and eventual re-writing of Sophocles' *Antigone*.¹³ In Žižek's works, 'Kant with Sade' is never far removed from *Antigone*, and so it is next to impossible—in this precise assignment of locating and evaluating the impossible burning core of Žižek's thought—not to engage with *Antigone*, the play as well as its eponymous heroine. Of course, this should not surprise anyone who has read Lacan's (eminently readable) *Seminar VII, The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, in which the detailed commentary of *Antigone* follows his 'primal' association of Kant and Sade.¹⁴ In fact, Miller's own initiative to run a private seminar on 'Kant with Sade' during the early 1980s probably would not have occurred if he had not decided to select *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, the only seminar Lacan himself intended to turn into a monograph, as the first seminar to be released after Lacan's death.¹⁵

As I indicated above, 'Kant with Sade' traverses Žižek's work from the beginning, which is generally situated in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, to its (provisional) end. The challenge of articulating a solid critique of his reading of Lacan's text is thus almost exactly the opposite of the challenge of reading Lacan's text itself. Whereas the latter is only possible by unleashing and allowing oneself to become totally absorbed by a ferocious centrifugal force, which takes the reader into the widest and most diverse sphere of philosophical, literary and other references, against which Lacan's exceptionally dense 'arguments' slowly begin to

acquire a certain meaning, the former requires the creation of an equally mighty centripetal force, which condenses Žižek's scattered, iterative yet persistently thought-provoking comments on 'Kant with Sade' into a more or less manageable shape. Much like those of all serious scholars, Žižek's reflections on 'Kant with Sade' represent thought-in-motion, which not only implies that a thorough critique can only proceed from a sustained process of restoration, whereby the various 'philosophical fragments' are brought together into some form of temporary unity, but more importantly that one cannot single out a particular assertion for critique, without taking account of the meaning, or indeed the lack thereof, it acquires retrospectively, when it is repeated (often *verbatim*) in a different context, for different purposes, and with a different agenda.

Having embraced this methodology, and borrowing Derrida's intellectual metaphor in *Life Death*, I propose that Žižek's reading of 'Kant with Sade' is conceived as an itinerary of three rings.¹⁶ The first ring, which shall be the main focus of my essay, entails the circular movement between Kant and Sade. In the second ring, which I shall only briefly address owing to restrictions of space, the apparent deadlock of this movement between Kant and Sade is then transcended and resolved through the figure of Antigone and, more precisely, the metaphysical dimension of Antigone's act. Finally, in the third ring, the ethics of Antigone's act is employed as a paradigm for articulating the 'conditions' of socio-political change. In my essay, I shall present the third ring alongside my succinct presentation of the second, and it will be primarily articulated as a set of questions, partly because I believe that at this stage of his itinerary Žižek's own answers are less forthcoming and more ambiguous, partly because my own questions may give him an opportunity to clarify and concretise the practical recommendations for transformational change that emanate from his ethico-political thought. However, unlike the three rings of Lacan's notorious Borromean knot, this set of

rings is both strictly hierarchical and impossible to untie.¹⁷ The hierarchy is to be situated in the fact that the first ring, which lies at the centre of Žižek's theoretical edifice, is the *conditio sine qua non* for the second ring, and that the latter equally conditions the third. At the same time, the rings are impossible to untie, because (as I shall demonstrate) the 'concrete universality' around which the third ring revolves is already at stake in the first and also occupies a key aspect of the second.

As regards the movement between Kant and Sade (the first ring), Žižek argues that the most innovative contribution of Lacan's text is not to be found in his statement that Sade is the truth of Kant, i.e. that there is a sadistic dimension to the Kantian categorical imperative, but is rather to be situated in the much more implicit and much more disturbing proposition that Kant is also the truth of Sade.¹⁸ Insofar as Sade represents the truth of Kant, Žižek often moves beyond Lacan—whose assertion is generally restricted to the observation that Kant's principal aim (in the *Critique of Practical Reason*) of formulating a moral law that is entirely devoid of empirical, 'pathological' objects inadvertently descends into a rational justification for sacrifice and murder—because he tends to formulate a whole panoply of reasons as to why the categorical imperative harbours an element of sadism, yet he ultimately comes to the conclusion that presenting Sade as the truth of Kant is just stating the obvious and as such blatantly self-evident, if not to say utterly banal.¹⁹ The wide array of reasons Žižek adduces starts with Lacan's own declaration that the strict formality of Kant's imperative generates a new, obscene injunction to enjoy, but gradually crystallizes into the idea that the Sadean perversion erupts as a result of Kant's unwillingness to acknowledge the ultimate consequences of his own ethical system, which coincides with Žižek's contention that Sade is effectively the symptom of Kant.²⁰ Sade thus appears as the 'pathological' result of Kant's (unconscious) self-betrayal, which occurs when he himself compromises on his desire to draw

the ultimate conclusion from his aspiration to articulate a purely formal ethical system. From the late 1990s, however, Žižek has consistently constructed this obscene, symptomatic, Sadean truth of Kantian ethics as a glaringly banal truism, whereby his countless remarks to that effect are commonly preceded with the question: “What’s all the fuss about?”²¹ It is important to emphasize, here, that Žižek does not associate the underlying sadism of the categorical imperative with Arendt’s ‘banality of evil’, whose revelation will return further on, in a different context, but that he judges Lacan’s first principle of ‘Kant with Sade’—Kant as “a flower of sadism”—to be palpably trite and patently feeble.²² Still, I would consider Žižek’s value judgement, here, to be primarily a cunning rhetorical strategy, which is mainly designed to give more weight to the second principle, of Sade secretly adhering to Kantian ethics. Were the principle to be as banal as Žižek claims it to be, we probably would not have had to wait almost exactly 100 years for Nietzsche to expose it, and another 50 or so for Horkheimer and Adorno to unfold it. Were it to be as banal as Žižek claims it to be, Lacan’s ‘Kant with Sade’ would probably be much less impenetrable than it effectively is.

As mentioned above, the second proposition is much more implicit in Lacan’s essay, insofar as he never explicitly proclaims in it that Kant is also the truth of Sade. In ‘Kant with Sade’, Lacan concludes that the libertine’s obstinate ambition to set desire free, to liberate it from all constraints, is a law upon itself and that Sade (his libertine heroes) remains therefore in a state of “submission to the Law”, but it is only retrospectively that Lacan reformulates this conclusion as Sade being a Kantian.²³ It is no doubt fair to say, here, that Žižek is much more categorical than Lacan, yet in this case his unequivocal insistence helps us coming to grips with an easily overlooked aspect of Lacan’s essay: Sade is a closet Kantian.²⁴ However, at this precise point, Žižek’s reading of ‘Kant with Sade’ displays a first inconsistency, which relates specifically to the nature and the effect of Sade’s hidden Kantianism.

In *The Indivisible Remainder*, Žižek argues that the Kantian quality of the libertines' desire, which translates into an absolute 'will to jouissance', is tantamount to its purification: "Lacan 'purifies' Sade: the sadist Will-to-Enjoy is the exemplary case of a pure, non-pathological desire."²⁵ This inference is re-stated in 'Kant with (or against) Sade' as Lacan recognizing (in the Sadean libertines' law of desire) "'a pure faculty of desire', since desire *does* have a non-pathological, a priori object-cause", notably "what Lacan calls *objet petit a*."²⁶ In my reading of Žižek's reading, he also acknowledges this "pure, non-pathological desire" as what supports the objective of the 'second death' in the so-called 'system of Pope Pius VI', which constitutes one of the longest philosophical disquisitions in Sade's *Juliette*.²⁷ Lacan first adumbrates the libertine pontiff's vision in Chapter 16 of his seminar *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, whereby he underscores his Holiness's ultimate wish to secure a more absolute form of destruction than that which merely takes away a living organism's earthly existence (the so-called 'first life'), through which the remnants of the substance's body would still re-enter a new natural cycle of regeneration.²⁸ What Sade's Pope Pius VI aspires to accomplish is a much more radical annihilation, which breaks the endless alternation between life and death.²⁹ It is this supreme obliteration that Lacan designates as the 'second death' and which Žižek glosses as "the destruction, the eradication, of the cycle itself, which then liberates nature from its own laws and opens the way for the creation of new forms of life *ex nihilo*."³⁰ It is crucial to highlight, here, that the concept of the 'second death' is Lacan's own invention, because throughout his extended sermon the Pope only ever refers to the need for the extinction of the second life.³¹ This nuance is less important for Lacan than it is for Žižek, because (as the quote shows) Žižek sees in the second death a necessary precondition for what he initially terms 'materialist creationism' and later captures as "the zero-level starting point out of which the fragile/inconsistent reality emerges."³² I shall return

to the latter development at the very end of my essay, yet the ‘second death’ is clearly an index, here, of another type of purification—a perfect cleansing which coincides with the complete liquidation of the most fundamental (constraining) law of all, i.e. that of Mother Nature itself.

Elsewhere, however, Žižek acknowledges that the Kantian law which continues to underpin the Sadean will to jouissance limits its implementation and renders it fundamentally impure. The Sadean libertine is thus not nearly as autonomous as she or he thinks, or as the Kantian categorical imperative would bestow upon his or her ideology. All in all, Žižek formulates two main reasons in support of this ineluctable return of the impure in Sade’s libertine philosophy. First, he avers that Sade’s vision of an emancipated desire and its associated unconditional will to jouissance can only be realised at the level of particularity. As he puts it in *Looking Awry*: “[A]ny attempt to give to the ‘right to enjoyment’ the form of a universal norm in conformity with the ‘categorical imperative’ necessarily ends in a deadlock”, because it “excludes reciprocity”.³³ Of course, what we encounter here is a prototypical example of having your cake and eating it. One cannot maintain that Sade is a closet Kantian and then proclaim that his Kantianism fails at the point where he cannot be a Kantian. Either Sade’s law of jouissance meets the conditions of the categorical imperative or it doesn’t. Yet from the late 1990s, Žižek develops another reason as to why the purity of the Sadean enterprise is effectively a massive illusion. In ‘Kant with (or against) Sade’, he argues that the Sadean libertines, much like Kant before them, compromise on their grand dream of setting desire free, because they remain ineluctably enslaved to the voice of Nature, which is first conceptualized as a fundamentally capricious, external structure, and then reconfigured as an ethical force in its own right.³⁴ For Žižek, this also explains why the Sadean libertine is never cold enough: “his ‘apathy’ is a fake, a lure concealing the all too passionate engagement

on behalf of the Other's jouissance."³⁵ Žižek's second reason for doubting the purity of the Sadean desire comes closest to Lacan's own emphasis in 'Kant with Sade' on the flaw in the Sadean universe, yet it only scratches the surface of Lacan's profound scepticism as to the absolute freedom of the libertines. I do not want to go so far as to claim, here, that Žižek himself compromises on his desire to articulate the limitations of Sade's heroes, yet he definitely could have done more to explicate Lacan's critique of Sade in 'Kant with Sade', which revolves around four distinct observations.

First, the libertines' desire is always already mediated by another desire, which not only manifests itself in the (ethical) voice of Nature, but much more crucially in the fact that they cannot realise their vision without singling out victims for torture and sacrifice. In this respect, Lacan rekindles his own classic formula that 'desire is the Other's desire', but he also (implicitly) repeats an argument made by Maurice Blanchot in his path-breaking 1949 essay '*La raison de Sade*' (Sade's Reason): "When 'being the master' of myself means 'being the master of others', when my independence does not come from my autonomy, but from the dependence of others on me, it is obvious that I forever remain connected to others and that I need them, even if only to obliterate them."³⁶ Second, the libertines persistently fail in realising their desire, because they do not succeed in bridging the constitutive gap between knowledge and desire. Time and again, they think they know what it means to desire like a libertine, yet every so often they have to admit, occasionally to their own downfall and sacrifice, that their knowledge was on the side of virtue rather than in the service of vice. The most striking illustration of this disparity between knowledge (of libertine desire) and desire (for libertine knowledge) is provided by the hideous Saint-Fond, who gladly shares with his brothers-in-arms his deepest wish that the suffering he inflicts upon his victims lasts forever and continues to haunt them in the afterlife, without thereby realizing that in harbouring this

wish he has broken one of the foundational rules of the libertine ideology, namely that each and every concept of an afterlife needs to be destroyed at its root.³⁷ And so the great Saint-Fond inadvertently presents himself as a secret proponent of the libertines' enemies, which leads to his being unmasked as a fake libertine and condemned to death. Third, when all is (philosophically) said and (sexually) done, the libertines constantly have to admit that all their criminal acts—extreme as they may be, both in terms of the number of sacred principles that have been violated and the number of virtuous people that have perished in the process—are but a mediocre semblance of the ultimate act of destruction they fantasize about. Some libertines, such as Belmor, are more vocal about this failure than others, yet at the end of the day it is as if all the libertines have to concede: “I always thought that I would be able to do and be this, but now I’m not so sure anymore that I have what it takes”.³⁸ In ‘Kant with Sade’, Lacan attributes this irreparable disparity between libertine fantasy and libertine deed to the fact that, *à la limite*, the libertines are enslaved to the inescapable fact that, as human beings of flesh and blood, their *jouissance* is forever contaminated by pleasure: “[T]he [Sadean] executioner’s *jouissance* . . . does not spare his *jouissance* the humility of an act in which he cannot help but become a being of flesh and, to the very marrow, a slave to pleasure.”³⁹ Contrary to what Arendt claimed in her reports on the Eichmann trials, the radical evil of the Sadean libertines is therefore not buttressed, much less enhanced, but rather stymied to the point where they become desperate, by the fact that they can only *imagine* themselves to be superhuman gods. No matter how hard they try, time and again they have to accept that they are just banal human beings compared to the heroes they portray themselves as in their fantasy. Ironically, perhaps, the only space the libertines finally identify as being conducive to the preservation of radical, absolute freedom, insofar as the truth of their desire will never be compromised in it, is that of (creative) writing.⁴⁰ I shall return to this point at the end of

my essay, because it probably constitutes one of the most advanced arguments in ‘Kant with Sade’—with other than merely literary repercussions—and it is almost completely absent from Žižek’s interpretation of Lacan’s essay. Fourth, Lacan suggests that, for all their exhaustive (and exhausting) attempts at championing the libertine cause, Sade’s heroes never succeed in converting anyone and, more importantly, many of the victims somehow miraculously succeed in retaining their features after they have been subjected to the most horrible bodily tortures.⁴¹ Hence, virtue is never transformed into vice, and virtue’s extraordinary capacity to survive constantly throws the libertines off-guard. Even the exquisitely delicate, virginal, and aptly named Eugénie in *Philosophy in the Boudoir* does not exchange her virtuousness for vice. As Madame de Saint-Ange discloses at the beginning of the play, she had met the young girl at a convent sometime before and noticed how the venom of immorality was already circulating in her heart.⁴² Eugénie is not another Justine; she is rather a young Juliette, whose inborn proclivities merely require a little more education for them to come to full fruition.

Much more than Žižek, Lacan thus underlines the fundamental bankruptcy of the libertines’ ideology of absolute destruction.⁴³ However, this is also where Lacan stops and where Žižek continues to seek a workable solution to the deadlock. Whatever he may ascribe to Lacan by way of desire to rupture the vicious cycle between Kant and Sade by insisting on the necessity of a “critique of pure desire”, or the identification of a “pure faculty of desire”, Lacan never compromises on the observation that there is no way to escape the deadlock: every subject’s alienation (to the symbolic moral law) leads to a return of the (pathological) object and every subject’s attempt to separate him- or herself from this alienation by adopting the position of the object invariably leads to a new alienation, unless the separation exceeds the boundaries of the subject’s earthly life and results in physical death.⁴⁴ For Lacan,

this is not only how the (neurotic) fantasy operates, but it is also the fundamental, inescapable truth of the (neurotic) human condition. However, whereas Lacan accepts the deadlock, Žižek is adamant that an escape-route can be found. In this way, he transforms Lacan's constitutive constellation of forces into a largely incidental, situational set of variables. In Žižek's works, Lacan's necessity becomes a new contingency, which can be resolved through a reconceptualization of the act. In Žižek's view, the key paradigm for this new ethical act that breaks the vicious cycle of Kant and Sade is Antigone, which represents the second circle in his intellectual itinerary.⁴⁵ The hinge between the first and the second circle is thereby to be found in the motto 'Do not give up on your desire!'.

Žižek's proposed integration of Antigone and the Sadean libertines is already detectable in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, in which he aligns "the dignified Antigone sacrificing herself for her brother's memory" and "the promiscuous Juliette giving herself over to enjoyment beyond all limits".⁴⁶ However, as his thought progresses and he comes to accept that the Sadean libertines, including Juliette, remain bound to the ethical voice of Nature, in whose name and on whose behalf they commit their atrocities, Antigone starts to appear as a purer version of Juliette. For example, in *The Metastases of Enjoyment*, Žižek avers that Antigone is "the exemplary case of a pure ethical attitude", because (as he puts it elsewhere) "Antigone does *not* obey a command that humiliates her, a command effectively uttered by a sadistic executioner".⁴⁷ The first thing to note, here, is that Žižek's prime motive for aligning Antigone and Juliette, and for eventually abandoning Juliette in favour of Antigone, is the ethical precept "Do not give up on your desire!", which is also the hinge between the first and the second circle of Žižek's intellectual itinerary.⁴⁸ However, even though Žižek consistently attributes this axiom to Lacan, it has absolutely no basis whatsoever in Lacan's work. The only passage in Lacan's oeuvre in which a version of this formula appears is the final lesson of

Seminar VII, in which he proposes to outline the psychoanalytic paradoxes of ethics.⁴⁹ But the transcription of Lacan's words, which has been verified and deemed accurate, reads: "I propose then that, from an analytical point of view, the only thing of which one can be guilty is of having given ground relative to one's desire [*Je propose que la seule chose dont on puisse être coupable, au moins dans la perspective analytique, c'est d'avoir cédé sur son désir*]." ⁵⁰ Nowhere in his seminar, nor elsewhere in his lectures and writings, does Lacan employ the last part of this phrase with a negative, as in "not giving up on one's desire". And nowhere does Lacan elevate this (already absent) negative phrase into an ethical imperative.⁵¹ On the contrary, after having formulated the first psychoanalytic paradox of ethics, Lacan insists that it is the subject's inexorable fate to *always* give up on his or her desire and that this structure of self-betrayal is fundamentally inscribed into the subject's destiny.⁵² Žižek's interpretation of this passage from Lacan's *Seminar VII* thus constitutes a fundamental misreading, although it has to be said that, over the years, he has not been alone in 'perverting' Lacan's words in this way.⁵³ Of course, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with 'giving up on Lacan', that is to say with abandoning his current of thought, or taking it into a different direction, yet in that case one should also have the courage to state that Lacan was wrong and why.⁵⁴

Let us assume, however, that Antigone really does succeed where Juliette and her fellow libertines fail. How should we interpret Antigone's act, then? At this point, a second inconsistency appears in Žižek's work. Whereas the first inconsistency de-stabilizes the integrity of the first ring (see above), this inconsistency jeopardizes the solidity of the second. In an attempt to account for the nature and function of Antigone's act (of burying her brother Polynices against Creon's prohibition), Žižek depicts Antigone as a figure who performs an autonomous ethical act, which renders her uncannily terrifying (in accordance with Heidegger's interpretation of the word *δαίμόν* in the second choral ode of Sophocles' play),

and which allows her to exceed and transform the structure of the symbolic order.⁵⁵ Yet Žižek oscillates here between situating this autonomy in Antigone's embodiment of a pure signifier, which would take her desire in the direction of the drive, and her transcendence of the unresolvable dialectic between authoring the moral law and obeying its principles by incarnating the excess that is the object *a*.⁵⁶

Beyond this inconsistency, Žižek nonetheless continues to emphasize that Antigone's act is ethical, exemplary, and pure, despite the fact that her stubborn refusal to comply and her unconditional insistence on her own moral authority also turns her into a proto-totalitarian figure, i.e. the historical antecedent of what Žižek designates as 'ontological totalitarianism'.⁵⁷ However, what enables Antigone to leverage her transgressive deed as an effective conduit for "reconsidering the symbolic Law as a set of contingent social arrangements open to change" is the absolute contingency of her act, which coincides with a "momentary suspension of the big Other" and which creates its own (new) rationality, away from the abstract universality of the law (as a categorical imperative) towards the concrete universality of a transformational intervention.⁵⁸ Apart from the fact that I do not doubt that Lacan would have radically disagreed with almost every element of Žižek's argument, quite a few aspects of it cannot but strike anyone familiar with Sophocles' *Antigone* as fundamentally at odds with the substance of the narrative. Space prevents me from listing all the points where Žižek's depiction of Antigone does not chime with Sophocles' portrayal of her, so I shall restrict myself to just one instance of disparity, although this particular instance may very well dislodge the foundations of Žižek's entire construction. What allows Žižek to continue to rely on Antigone as a paradigm for effectuating (socio-political) change is the radical contingency of her act, which acquires both its status and its transformational power from the fact that it proceeds from and incorporates the lack in the Other. Drawing on Lacan's formulation in his

essay on logical time, Antigone's act thus derives its contingency from its being structured by a subjective logic of anticipated certainty.⁵⁹ However, even though it is true that Antigone is thrown into a state of debilitating turmoil after she has committed the deed, one cannot say that her act was contingent, insofar as it was accidental, unexpected, or unplanned. Antigone shares her plan to defy Creon's orders with her sister Ismene from the very beginning of the play and she effectively undoes the initial act, which one could indeed perceive as a spontaneous, momentary lapse of reason, by performing the burial rites on her brother twice. Hence, Žižek's claim that Antigone's act is radically contingent crumbles purely on the basis of an attentive reading of Sophocles' text.⁶⁰ Reading *Antigone*, one is tempted to rephrase Freud's own famous 'ethical' axiom 'Where id was, there ego shall be' ('*Wo Es war, soll Ich werden*') as 'Where contingency was, necessity shall be'.⁶¹ Were Žižek to retort that contingency and concrete universality correspond exactly to a sudden emergence of subjectivity, I would reply that, from a Lacanian standpoint, this does not preclude the necessity of the structural circularity between alienation and separation. Even though the two operations are non-reciprocal (alienation does not undo separation and vice versa), they are strictly concordant (the one always leads to the other, *ad infinitum*).

This issue is all the more important since the concrete universality of Antigone's contingent act also constitutes the hinge between the second and the third circle of Žižek's itinerary, which entails the articulation of the conditions for socio-political change. As I announced at the beginning of my essay, I shall simply describe this third circle in the form of a series of questions, in part because I am not so sure that, at this stage, Žižek provides the answers, in part because, if he does have them, I would like to give him the opportunity to present them in a more coherent, synthetic account. If, as Žižek puts it in *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle*, "only such an 'impossible' gesture of pure expenditure [as it is to be found in Antigone's

contingent, concrete universal act] *can change the very co-ordinates of what is strategically possible within a historical constellation*”, how can we reasonably expect, or encourage ordinary (banal) human beings of flesh and blood to enact this risk and to take their chances that a ‘fragile/inconsistent (new) reality’ *may* emerge as a result of the zero-level starting-point they have unwittingly created?⁶² Antigone’s act may be less of a fantasy than the Sadean libertines’ ideology of absolute destruction, yet she is still a fictional character. Wherein lies the inspirational value of the contingency of Antigone’s act for the concrete universality of real-life individual and social protest, especially in light of the fact that, more than ever before it seems, the transformational potential of every form of risk-taking is crushed by the brutal force of established discursive power structures (see the protests against the coup in Myanmar, the protests against the rigged elections in Belarus, the protests against the extrapolation of Chinese law to Hong Kong, the attempt to orchestrate the downfall of Erdogan, etc.)?

When, at the very end of *Absolute Recoil*, Žižek posits that “the rise of a new Master-Signifier is not the ultimate definition of the symbolic event: there is a further turn of the screw, the move from S_1 to $S(A)$, from new harmony to new disharmony, which is an exemplary case of subtraction” and then goes on to call for a politics of radical emancipation “which practices subtraction from the reign of a Master-Signifier”, I agree with him, and I know how this could be facilitated within the confines of a clinical psychoanalytic setting, but how does one put this into practice in the socio-political arena?⁶³ If, as Žižek has intimated in various public lectures and podcasts, this effectively involves a transition from acting to thinking, then what kind of thinking might enact this process of subtraction?⁶⁴ Isn’t it the case that thinking might only acquire the status of a contingent, concrete universal act after a long, laborious process of narrative re-framing, which Freud called ‘working-through’ and Lacan

termed the 'traversal of the fantasy'?⁶⁵ And wherein lies the power of writing in all of this? As Lacan suggested in 'Kant with Sade', the Sadean libertines persistently fail in realizing their fantasy of absolute destruction, yet Sade-the-man did not stop writing. Something in his desire did not stop being written, so that it was in his writings that he himself came closest to transcending the limitations of the symbolic order and to occupying the position of object *a*, *pace* his performing this act of writing mainly from the confines of a prison-cell or the constraints of a madhouse.⁶⁶ Bizarrely, the only time Žižek reflects upon the relation between the content of Sade's writings and the act of writing that gave rise to it, he states: "[C]reepy is not primarily the content of the Marquis de Sade's writings (their content is rather dull and repetitive) but 'why is he doing it?'—everything in Sade is a 'sadist perversion', everything except his writing, the act of doing it, which cannot be accounted for as a perversion."⁶⁷ Apart from the fact that by no means 'everything' in Sade is a 'sadist perversion'—Sade wrote countless novels and plays in which not a single libertine appears—Žižek totally misses what is perhaps the most radical point of Lacan's 'Kant with Sade'. Whereas the libertines only ever *aspire* to be incorrigible perverts, their neurosis always somehow sliding in and forcing them to admit that they are but a mediocre shadow of what they fantasize about, Sade's own incessant act of writing novels whose extreme cruelty forces all readers to "square accounts with their desires", as Lacan puts it, is probably the only point where perversion really does enter the equation.⁶⁸ Žižek's aforementioned statement should therefore be inverted, so that it reads: nothing in Sade is a 'sadist perversion', nothing except his interminable act of writing the most extremely cruel, libertine novels, the act of doing it, which cannot be accounted for as some kind of neurosis. Of course, this rekindles the question whether the (perverse) pen could indeed be mightier than the (neurotic) sword. Isn't the real transformational potential to be situated largely outside the contents of what is being written, within the very act of

writing? And what is the role of the public intellectual in all of this, especially under conditions of global capitalism? What does Žižek himself intend to achieve with his unstoppable series of books, essays, commentaries, and criticisms? Taking account of the three circles of his intellectual itinerary, what is Žižek's answer to the three famous Kantian questions that underpin the interest of our reason? The first circle: What can I know? The second circle: What ought I to do (given that I cannot know my desire)? The third circle: What may I hope (given that I cannot know my desire and that resistance seems futile)?⁶⁹

Notes

- 1 Slavoj Žižek & Glyn Daly, *Conversations with Žižek*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004, p. 34. See also Slavoj Žižek, *Slavoj Žižek on Jacques-Alain Miller*, 6 November 2015, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9eMbN7pqNMA>, accessed on 12 August 2021.
- 2 Jacques-Alain Miller, A Discussion of Lacan's 'Kant with Sade', in Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink & Maire Jaanus (Eds), *Reading Seminars I and II: Lacan's Return to Freud*, Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 1996, pp. 212-237.
- 3 Slavoj Žižek & Glyn Daly, *Conversations with Žižek*, p. 34.
- 4 Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters*, London-New York NY, Verso, 1996, p. 172.
- 5 Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London-New York NY, Verso, 1989; Slavoj Žižek, *Sex and the Failed Absolute*, London-New York NY, Bloomsbury, 2020.
- 6 Slavoj Žižek, *The Most Sublime Hysteric: Hegel with Lacan* (2011), Thomas Scott-Railton (Trans.), Cambridge-Malden MA: Polity Press, 2014, p. 2. For the original French text of Žižek's dissertation, see Slavoj Žižek, *Le plus sublime des hystériques. Hegel passe*, Paris: Point Hors Ligne, 1988.
- 7 Slavoj Žižek, The Limits of the Semiotic Approach to Psychoanalysis (1990), in *Interrogating the Real*, Rex Butler & Scott Stephens (Eds), London-New York NY: Bloomsbury, 2005, p. 105. In an editorial comment, the editors of this anthology point out that they "revised the translation and made corrections to certain grammatical and terminological errors" in Žižek's original text, yet the phrase in question appears in exactly the same form in the original version. See Slavoj Žižek, The Limits of the Semiotic

- Approach to Psychoanalysis, in Richard Feldstein & Henry Sussman (Eds), *Psychoanalysis And . . .*, New York NY-London: Routledge, 1990, p. 95.
- 8 Slavoj Žižek, *The Most Sublime Hysteric*, p. 100; Jacques Lacan, Kant with Sade (1962), in *Écrits*, Bruce Fink (Trans.), New York NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006, pp. 645-668.
 - 9 In Book 2 of his *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant wrote: “Complete conformity of the will with the moral law is, however, *holiness*, a perfection of which no rational being of the sensible world is capable at any moment of his existence”. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), Mary Gregor (Ed. & Trans.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 102. For Kant’s reflections on pain and displeasure, see Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, pp. 52-55.
 - 10 See Jacques-Alain Miller, Sobre ‘Kant con Sade’ (1985), in *Elucidación de Lacan. Charlas brasileñas*, Buenos Aires: Paidós, 1998, p. 201; Jacques-Alain Miller, A Discussion of Lacan’s ‘Kant with Sade’, p. 212; Jacques Lacan, The Triumph of Religion (1974), in *The Triumph of Religion, preceded by Discourse to Catholics*, Bruce Fink (Trans.), Cambridge-Malden MA: Polity Press, 2013, p. 83.
 - 11 See Dany Nobus, *The Law of Desire: On Lacan’s ‘Kant with Sade’*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.
 - 12 Slavoj Žižek, *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle*, London-New York NY: Verso, 2004, p. 80. See also Slavoj Žižek, “What Some Would Call . . .”: A Response to Yannis Stavrakakis, *Umbr(a): A Journal of the Unconscious*, 2003, 4, p. 132.
 - 13 Sophocles, *Antigone*, in *Antigone/Women of Trachis/Philoctetes/Oedipus at Colonus*, Hugh Lloyd Jones (Ed. & Trans.), Cambridge MA-London: Harvard University Press, 1998, pp. 1-127; Slavoj Žižek, *Antigone*, London-New York NY: Bloomsbury, 2016.
 - 14 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar. Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis (1959-1960)*, Jacques-Alain Miller (Ed.), Dennis Porter (Trans.), New York NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1992.
 - 15 For Lacan’s (failed) intention to publish *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* as a monograph, see Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar. Book XX: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge (Encore) (1972-1973)*, Jacques-Alain Miller (Ed.), Bruce Fink (Trans.), New York NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998, pp. 1 & 53. As to Miller’s reasons for choosing *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* as the first seminar to be published after Lacan’s death, see Jacques-Alain Miller, *Entretien sur Le Séminaire avec François Ansermet*, Paris: Navarin, 1985, p. 33; Jacques-Alain Miller, *Del síntoma al fantasma. Y retorno (1982-1983)*, Silvia Elena Tendlarz (Ed.), Silvia Baudini (Trans.), Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2018, pp. 144-146.
 - 16 See Jacques Derrida, *Life Death (1975-1976)*, Pascale-Anne Brault & Peggy Kamuf (Eds), Pascale-Anne Brault & Michael Naas (Trans.), Chicago IL-London: The University of Chicago Press, 2020; Jacques Derrida, To Speculate—On ‘Freud’, in *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond* (1980), Alan Bass (Trans.), Chicago IL-London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987, p. 259 note 1.
 - 17 See Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar. Book XIX: . . . or Worse (1971-1972)*, Jacques-Alain Miller (Ed.), A. R. Price (Trans.), Cambridge-Medford MA: Polity Press, 2018, p. 75; Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar. Book XX*, p. 124.
 - 18 With very few exceptions, when Žižek invokes Sade he does not refer to the extraordinary life of the Marquis de Sade, but to a sub-section of Sade’s voluminous writings, notably his so-called libertine novels, the most famous of which are (the unfinished) *The 120 Days of Sodom*, *Justine or the Misfortunes of Virtue*, *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, and the monumental *Juliette*. See Marquis de Sade, *The 120 Days of Sodom* (1785), in *The 120 Days of Sodom and Other Writings*, Austryn Wainhouse & Richard Seaver (Trans.),

- London: Arrow Books, 1990, pp. 181-674; Marquis de Sade, *Justine or the Misfortunes of Virtue* (1791), John Phillips (Trans.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012; Marquis de Sade, *Philosophy in the Boudoir or, The Immoral Mentors* (1795), Joachim Neugroschel (Trans.), London: Penguin, 2006; Marquis de Sade, *Juliette* (1797), Austryn Wainhouse (Trans.), New York NY: Grove Press, 1968.
- 19 Lacan's own, most succinct formulation of his thesis actually appears at the very end of *Seminar XI* rather than in 'Kant with Sade' itself. See Jacques Lacan. *The Seminar. Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1964), Alan Sheridan (Trans.), Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994, pp. 275-276.
 - 20 For Žižek's (re)formulation of Lacan's argument, see for example Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 81 and Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*, London-New York NY: Verso, 1991, p. 232. For the argument that Sade is the symptom of Kant's philosophical compromise, see Slavoj Žižek, Afterword: Lenin's Choice, in Slavoj Žižek (Ed.), *Revolution at the Gates: Selected Writings of Lenin from 1917*, London-New York NY: Verso, 2002, p. 243; Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*, Cambridge MA-London: The MIT Press, 2003, p. 54; Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View*, Cambridge MA-London, 2006, p. 94; Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, London-New York NY: Verso, 2008, p. 209; Slavoj Žižek, Dialectical Clarity versus the Misty Conceit of Paradox, in Slavoj Žižek & John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?*, Creston Davis (Ed.), Cambridge MA-London: The MIT Press, 2008, p. 238; Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, London-New York NY: Verso, 2012, p. 817. In an essay from the late 1990s, Žižek also correctly points out that Lacan's thesis had already been anticipated by Adorno and Horkheimer in 'Excursus II' of their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, yet he forgets to mention that the first to intimate the potential inhumanity of Kant's categorical imperative (without therefore bringing in Sade) was actually Nietzsche, who stated in *On the Genealogy of Morals*: "the categorical imperative gives off a whiff of cruelty [*der kategorische Imperativ riecht nach Grausamkeit*] . . ." See Slavoj Žižek, Kant with (or against) Sade, in Elizabeth Wright & Edmond Wright (Eds), *The Žižek Reader*, Oxford-Malden MA: Blackwell, 1999, pp. 283-301; Theodor W. Adorno & Max Horkheimer, Excursus II: Juliette or Enlightenment and Morality, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), John Cumming (Trans.), London-New York NY: Verso, 1997, pp. 81-119; Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), Douglas Smith (Trans.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 47.
 - 21 See Slavoj Žižek, Kant and Sade: The Ideal Couple, *Lacanian Ink*, 1998, 13, p. 12; Slavoj Žižek, Kant with (or against) Sade, p. 288; Slavoj Žižek, Author's Afterword: Where Do We Stand Today?, in Slavoj Žižek, *The Universal Exception*, Rex Butler & Scott Stephens (Eds), London-New York NY: Bloomsbury, 2006, p. 382; Slavoj Žižek, *Disparities*, London-New York NY: Bloomsbury, 2016, p. 332; Slavoj Žižek, *Sex and the Failed Absolute*, London-New York NY: Bloomsbury, 2020, p. 113.
 - 22 See Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963), London: Penguin, 1977. For the phrase "flower of sadism", see Jacques Lacan, *The Triumph of Religion*, p. 83.
 - 23 For Sade's "submission to the Law", see Jacques Lacan, Kant with Sade, p. 667. In *Seminar VII*, Lacan alluded to the Kantianism of Sade's libertine ideology when he stated that "there is no lack of Kantian echoes in the attempts to articulate moral systems that one finds in a vast literature that might be called libertine", yet the actual assertion that Sade

was a Kantian did not enter Lacan's discourse until 1967, as a certain retrospective reformulation of 'Kant with Sade'. See Jacques Lacan, *Seminar VII*, p. 79; Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire XIV: La logique du fantasme (1966-1967)*, lesson of 14 June 1967, unpublished; Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar. Book XX*, p. 23.

- 24 For the antecedents and the explicit promotion of this formula in Žižek's oeuvre, see Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying With the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology*, Durham NC-London: Duke University Press, 1993, p. 70; Slavoj Žižek, Kant with (or against) Sade, p. 288; Slavoj Žižek & Mladen Dolar, *Opera's Second Death*, London-New York NY: Routledge, 2002, p. 141; Slavoj Žižek & Glyn Daly, *Conversations with Žižek*, pp. 131-132; Slavoj Žižek, Author's Afterword: Where Do We Stand Today, p. 382; Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*, London: Profile Books, 2008, p. 165; Slavoj Žižek, *Disparities*, p. 332; Slavoj Žižek, *Sex and the Failed Absolute*, p. 113.
- 25 Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder*, p. 173.
- 26 Slavoj Žižek, Kant with (or against) Sade, p. 299. This point is restated almost *verbatim* in Žižek's most recent volume *Sex and the Failed Absolute*: "Lacan asserts the necessity of a 'critique of pure desire': in contrast to Kant, for whom our capacity to desire is thoroughly 'pathological', Lacan claims that there is a 'pure faculty of desire'." In other places, Žižek refers to the Sadean perversion as "pure reason". See Slavoj Žižek, *Sex and the Failed Absolute*, p. 114; Slavoj Žižek & Glyn Daly, *Conversations with Žižek*, p. 62.
- 27 Throughout his works, i.e. from beginning to end, Žižek erroneously situates this disquisition in Book 5 of *Juliette*, because it actually occurs at the end of Book (Part) 4. See Marquis de Sade, *Juliette*, pp. 765-798; Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 134; Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do*, p. 261; Slavoj Žižek, *The Most Sublime Hysteric*, p. 174; Slavoj Žižek, *Disparities*, p. 334; Slavoj Žižek, *Sex and the Failed Absolute*, p. 50. Now, I would prefer not to think that Žižek has never read *Juliette*, and this error may seem like a minute, inconsequential infelicity, yet given the significance Žižek himself attributes to numbers in his works—see, in this respect the second (expanded) edition of Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*, London-New York NY: Routledge, 2001, p. xx—and the fact that the error is repetitive, the psychoanalyst in me is tempted to interpret 5 as the number of Žižek's (unfulfilled) desire, which would in this case represent a desire to exceed the fundamental quadripartite structure of Lacan's theory. However, in a more serious vein, I should also point out that the way in which Žižek 'quotes' the system of Pope Pius VI in his most recent works, such as *Disparities* and *Sex and the Failed Absolute*, borders on the unforgivable, at least from a scholarly perspective. In both of these books, the long quote 'from Sade' that is set apart from the rest of the text is in fact a literal quote from a book by Aaron Schuster, which is only mentioned directly at the start of the chapter in the first volume and as an unpublished manuscript after the quote in *Sex and the Failed Absolute*, whereby Schuster's own attributed citations from Sade in this paragraph are no longer referenced. See Slavoj Žižek, *Disparities*, pp. 334-335; Slavoj Žižek, *Sex and the Failed Absolute*, p. 50; Aaron Schuster, *The Trouble with Pleasure: Deleuze and Psychoanalysis*, Cambridge MA-London: The MIT Press, 2016, pp. 39-40. For the logic of the quadripartite structure in Lacan's oeuvre, see Jacques-Alain Miller, *1, 2, 3, 4 (1984-1985)*, available at <http://psicoanalysisdigital.wordpress.com/2012/05/22/1-2-3-4-1984-1985/>
- 28 See Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar. Book VII*, pp. 210-217.

- 29 The qualification that it concerns *Sade's* Pope Pius VI is important, because he is the only character in *Juliette* that is not entirely fictional. Also, when the novel was first published (in 1797) Pope Pius VI (Count Giovanni Angelo Braschi) was still very much alive and would have been abhorred by the 'philosophical system' of his fictional persona.
- 30 Lacan first mentions the notion of the second death three weeks after his initial discussion of the system of Pope Pius VI, i.e. during his seminar session of 25 May 1960, which is also the first session of his commentary on *Antigone*. See Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar. Book VII*, p. 248. For Žižek's gloss on the second death, see Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 134. For similar glosses in Žižek's works, see Slavoj Žižek, *The Most Sublime Hysteric*, pp. 74 & 175; Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, p. 161 note 6; Slavoj Žižek, *Disparities*, p. 335.
- 31 See Marquis de Sade, *Juliette*, p. 770. The reason as to why Pope Pius VI does not refer to a second death, but to a second life is not immaterial to the essence of his philosophical system: what is at stake is the absolute, total, irreversible extermination of all traces of life.
- 32 For 'materialist creationism', see Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism? Five Interventions in the (Mis)use of a Notion*, London-New York NY, Verso, 2001, p. 173. Note the first word of the book's subtitle. For the subsequent formulation, see Slavoj Žižek, *Disparities*, p. 335.
- 33 Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*, Cambridge MA-London: The MIT Press, 1991, pp. 167-168. For a similar argument, see Slavoj Žižek, *The Fetish of the Party* (1996), in *The Universal Exception*, Rex Butler & Scott Stephens (Eds), London-New York NY: Bloomsbury, 2006, p. 102.
- 34 Slavoj Žižek, *Kant with (or against) Sade*, p. 295.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p. 298. For similar statements, see Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?*, p. 113; Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View*, p. 93. In various places, Žižek writes that Lacan designated the ethical force of Nature in the Sadean universe as the Supreme-Being-in-Evilness, yet the latter notion (*l'Être suprême en méchanceté*) is actually part of what one could call the 'system of Saint-Fond' in *Juliette*, which is explained at the end of Part 2 of the book. See Marquis de Sade, *Juliette*, p. 399; Slavoj Žižek, *Kant with (or against) Sade*, p. 295; Slavoj Žižek, *Author's Afterword: Why Hegel is a Lacanian*, p. 343 note 7; Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View*, p. 93; Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, pp. 475-476 note 21; Slavoj Žižek, *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism*, London-New York NY: Verso, 2014, p. 82 note 35.
- 36 Maurice Blanchot, *Sade's Reason* (1949), in *Lautréamont and Sade*, Stuart Kendall & Michelle Kendall (Trans.), Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2004, p. 23. Blanchot's essay is not mentioned by Lacan in 'Kant with Sade', yet he recommends its study to his audience during his seminar session of 30 March 1960. See Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar, Book VII*, pp. 200-201. The principle that 'desire is the Other's desire' has its roots in Lacan's work from the early 1950s and it is repeated on no less than three occasions in 'Kant with Sade'. See Jacques Lacan, *Kant with Sade*, pp. 652, 658 & 662.
- 37 Marquis de Sade, *Juliette*, pp. 395-406. It is worth mentioning that Saint-Fond's discourse occurs in response to a previous libertine lecture by Clairwil, which he believes to be insufficiently libertine . . . In 'Kant with Sade', Lacan invokes the disparity between knowledge and desire in two different ways. First, he posits that "desire is not the subject, for it cannot be indicated anywhere in a signifier of any demand whatsoever, for it cannot be articulated in the signifier even though it is articulated there [*pour n'y être pas*

- articulable encore qu'il y soit articulé]*". Second, he adduces it by way of a rhetorical question pertaining to his own reading of Kant: "But if the credence we lent to the *Critique* due to the alacrity of its argumentation owed something to our desire to know [*notre désir de savoir*] where it was heading, can't the ambiguity of this success [of our desire to know] turn the movement back toward a revising of the concessions we unwittingly made [as regards the possibility of knowing our desire to know]?" See Jacques Lacan, *Kant with Sade*, pp. 653 & 662.
- 38** In the words of Belmor: "[A]ll the deeds ambitioned by all the most infernal and the most malignant spirits that ever were, in their most disastrous effects were nought compared to what we dare desire . . ." See Marquis de Sade, *Juliette*, p. 522.
- 39** Jacques Lacan, *Kant with Sade*, p. 652.
- 40** See, for example, Marquis de Sade, *Juliette*, pp. 525 & 1193.
- 41** Jacques Lacan, *Kant with Sade*, pp. 665 & 654. Žižek mentions the unassailable beauty of the Sadean victims in various places, but he tends to see it as an avatar of their immortality, which would then in itself constitute the Sadean correlative of Kant's postulate of the immortality of the soul in his *Critique of Practical Reason*. See, for example, Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality*, London-New York NY: Verso, 1994, p. 213; Slavoj Žižek, *Kant with (or against) Sade*, p. 290; Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real (Reflections on 11 September 2001)* (2002), in *The Universal Exception*, Rex Butler & Scott Stephens (Eds), London-New York NY: Bloomsbury, 2006, p. 304; Slavoj Žižek, *Absolute Recoil*, p. 334.
- 42** Marquis de Sade, *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, pp. 7-9.
- 43** Lest I be accused of poor scholarship, I should mention that Lacan's critique of Sade is not limited to the four areas I described, yet his additional criticisms are less germane to the philosophical (in)consistency of the libertines' ideology and more attuned to Sade's qualities as a writer. For example, Lacan insinuates that, for all the transgressive contents of his libertine novels, Sade's style in it remains rather conventional, and he also deplores the author's lack of wit. On at least two occasions, Žižek expresses his agreement with Lacan with regard to the latter point, yet I cannot bring myself to sanction Lacan's and Žižek's opinion here. Apart from the fact that some authorial comments in *Philosophy in the Boudoir* and *Juliette* are absolutely hilarious, Sade's entire libertine corpus could definitely be constructed differently—as one, sprawling political satire—and his place in André Breton's *Anthology of Black Humour* could therefore be well-deserved and indisputable. See Jacques Lacan, *Kant with Sade*, pp. 664-666; Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do*, p. 234; Slavoj Žižek, *The Limits of the Semiotic Approach to Psychoanalysis*, p. 105; André Breton, *Anthology of Black Humour (1940)*, Mark Polizzotti (Trans.), San Francisco CA: City Lights Books, 1997, pp. 45-58.
- 44** See Slavoj Žižek, *Kant with (or against) Sade*, p. 298; Slavoj Žižek, *Sex and the Failed Absolute*, p. 114. In 'Kant with Sade', Lacan never considers the possibility of a critique of pure desire. In fact, after having formalized the libertines' "utopia of desire", he playfully suggests that the Kantian universality is rewritten as a *Critique of Impure Reason*. See Jacques Lacan, *Kant with Sade*, pp. 653-654. For alienation and separation as the two constitutive operators of the fantasy and the neurotic psychic structure, see Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar. Book XI*, pp. 203-215; Jacques Lacan, *Position of the Unconscious (1960)*, in *Écrits*, Bruce Fink (Trans.), New York NY-London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006, pp. 703-721. In the latter text, Lacan employs Empedocles' act of throwing himself

- into the crater of Mount Etna as an example of a successful separation. See Jacques Lacan, *Position of the Unconscious*, p. 715.
- 45 I would prefer not to think, here, that Žižek has thereby fallen into the trap of the logical fallacy of *post hoc ergo propter hoc*. Just because it is true that, in *Seminar VII*, Lacan's discussion of *Antigone* follows his explanation of the vicious cycle between Kant and Sade, this does not imply that *Antigone* appears in this place *because of* this vicious cycle, even less that Sophocles' heroine might provide us with an answer to the questions Kant and Sade failed to resolve.
 - 46 Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 117. See also Slavoj Žižek, Author's Preface: The Inhuman, in *Interrogating the Real*, Rex Butler & Scott Stephens (Eds), London-New York NY: Bloomsbury, 2005, p. xxvi.
 - 47 Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment*, p. 69; Slavoj Žižek, Kant with (or against) Sade, pp. 298-299.
 - 48 See, for example, Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment*, p. 70; Slavoj Žižek & Glyn Daly, *Conversations with Žižek*, p. 163; Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, p. 54; Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View*, p. 94; Slavoj Žižek, *Disparities*, p. 334.
 - 49 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar. Book VII*, pp. 319-322.
 - 50 *Ibid.*, p. 319. Dennis Porter's English translation of the phrase is rather clumsy and unnecessarily verbose. A better, more straightforward rendition could be: "the only thing one can be guilty of is having given up on one's desire".
 - 51 It is therefore quite painful to see Žižek mention on two separate occasions that 'do not compromise your desire' "was never used again by Lacan in his later work". See Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, p. 54; Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View*, p. 94. The point is not that the formula was never used again by Lacan, but that it was never used! I should also remind the reader here that, on 26 January 1983, Jacques-Alain Miller devoted an entire session of his own public seminar to the danger of turning Lacan's ethical paradox into a negative imperative, evidently to no avail . . . See Jacques-Alain Miller, *Del sintoma al fantasma*, pp. 193-204.
 - 52 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar. Book VII*, p. 321. The reason as to why Lacan presents this quandary as a paradox is that guilt is generally associated with the opposite of 'giving up on one's desire'. Giving up on one's desire suggests that one did *not* do what one thought one was supposed to do, whilst the common conception of guilt is that it emerges when one has done something one thought one was *not* supposed to do.
 - 53 For similar mis-interpretations, see Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil (1998)*, Peter Hallward (Trans.), London-New York NY: Verso, 2001, p. 47; Alenka Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real: Kant, Lacan*, London-New York NY: Verso, 2000, pp. 250-251; Mari Ruti, *The Singularity of Being: Lacan and the Immortal Within*, New York NY: Fordham University Press, 2012, p. 71; Simon Critchley, *Tragedy, the Greeks and Us*, London: Profile Books, 2019, p. 130; Deborah Anna Luepnitz, *Antigone and the Unsayable: A Psychoanalytic Reading, American Imago*, 2020, 77(2), p. 355. For a detailed critical analysis of this misreading in all its logical inconsistencies and spurious ramifications, see Marc De Kesel, *The Real of Ethics: On a Widespread Misconception*, in Brian W. Becker, John Panteleimon Manoussakis & David M. Goodman (Eds), *Unconscious Representations: Psychoanalytic and Philosophical Perspectives on the Body*, Abingdon-New York NY: Routledge, 2018, pp. 76-93.
 - 54 Both in *The Puppet and the Dwarf* and in *The Parallax View*, Žižek posits that Lacan's *Seminar VII* is "the point of deadlock" for Lacan, because he comes "dangerously close to

- the standard version of the ‘passion for the Real’” in it, i.e. the philosophy of eroticized transgression advocated by Georges Bataille. See Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, p. 54; Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View*, p. 94. However, the deadlock that Žižek identifies here is artificial, because it is the corollary of his own mis-reading of Lacan’s seminar as ending in the imperative ‘Do not give up on your desire!’
- 55 Sophocles’ *Antigone* contains the first recorded instance in history of the word αὐτόνομος, which could be rendered literally in English as ‘by virtue of one’s own law’. See Sophocles, *Antigone*, p. 81. Owing to this, scholars have often depicted Antigone as the historical paragon of humanism, because she is held to epitomize the indomitable power of the human spirit. It is in the same context that Hegel referred to *Antigone* for the first time in his own works, notably as a marginal note to a manuscript from 1796 that is known by its incipit *Jedes Volk . . .* See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Jedes Volk . . .* (1796), in *Gesammelte Werke, Band 1: Frühe Schriften 1*, Friedhelm Nicolini & Gisela Schüler (Eds), Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1989, p. 368. Heidegger’s interpretation of *Antigone* appears in his 1935 lecture course *Introduction to Metaphysics*, but primarily in his 1942 lectures on Hölderlin’s hymn ‘The Ister’. See Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1953), Gregory Fried & Richard Polt (Trans.), New Haven CT-London: Yale University Press, 2000, pp. 112-126; Martin Heidegger, *Hölderlin’s Hymn ‘The Ister’*, William McNeill & Julia Davis (Trans.), Bloomington/Indianapolis IN-London: Indiana University Press, 1996, pp. 51-122. When Žižek refers to Heidegger’s reading of the play, he only ever mentions the *Introduction to Metaphysics*. See Slavoj Žižek, *On Violence*, pp. 59-60; Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, p. 832; Slavoj Žižek, *Absolute Recoil*, p. 401. I should also emphasize that throughout his commentary on *Antigone*, Lacan steers away from all suggestions that Sophocles’ heroine is really acting autonomously, i.e. only according to her own law. See, for example, Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar. Book VII*, p. 273.
- 56 For Antigone’s act as the emergence of a pure signifier, see Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, p. 106; Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, p. 84; Slavoj Žižek, *Antigone*, p. xv. For Antigone as the autonomous subject who transcends the dialectic between authorship of and obedience to the moral law via the object *a*, see Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief*, London-New York NY: Routledge, 2001, pp. 138-140.
- 57 See Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?*, pp. 157-160.
- 58 For “reconsidering the symbolic Law as a set of contingent social arrangements”, see Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real! Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates*, London-New York NY: Verso, 2002, p. 99. Note the first word of the book’s subtitle. For ‘absolute contingency’, see Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, p. 309. For “momentary suspension of the big Other”, see Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, London-New York NY: Verso, 1999, p. 263. For the act as creative of its own (new) rationality, see Slavoj Žižek, *Revolution at the Gates*, p. 243. For the transition from abstract to concrete universality, see Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, p. 567. The argument that I have summarized in one sentence originates in a vehement and often caustic discussion between Žižek and Yannis Stavrakakis, which starts in the pages of a 2003 issue of the journal ‘Umbr(a)’ and culminates in a long section in Žižek’s 2008 volume *In Defense of Lost Causes*. See, in this respect, Yannis Stavrakakis, *The Lure of Antigone: Aporias of an Ethics of the Political*, *Umbr(a)*, 2003, 4, pp. 117-129; Slavoj Žižek, ‘What Some Would Call . . .’, pp. 131-135; Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, pp. 304-333.

- 59 See Jacques Lacan, Logical Time and the Assertion of Anticipated Certainty: A New Sophism (1945), in *Écrits*, Bruce Fink (Trans.), New York NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006, pp. 161-175.
- 60 Apart from this fundamental disparity between the text of Sophocles' *Antigone* and Žižek's representation of its eponymous heroine, I should draw the reader's attention to two additional misreadings, which are less significant, but nonetheless indicative of a certain hastiness in Žižek's engagement with Sophocles and Lacan. First, in at least three places Žižek identifies Antigone's ἄτη with the zone between-two-deaths, to which she is condemned after she has been sentenced by Creon and before she takes her own life. See Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute*, pp. 155-156; Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, p. 512; Slavoj Žižek, *Antigone*, p. xxiii note 1. However, for Lacan, ἄτη is the real barrier Antigone intends to cross and, as such, that which truly conditions her entering the zone between-two-deaths. For Lacan, Antigone's desire to bury her brother is therefore just a pretext, a welcome opportunity to fulfil another desire, namely the eradication of the curse (ἄτη) that has devastated the House of Labdakos since time out of mind. This is also why Lacan does not see Antigone's desire to bury her brother as a pure desire, but rather as a desire that is already conditioned by another desire (to break the family curse), which is in itself conditioned by her mother's desire. See Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar. Book VII*, pp. 263 & 283. Second, in *Absolute Recoil*, Žižek argues that the tragedy of Antigone's act turns into comedy in the first antistrophe of her final 'argument' with Creon, notably where she invokes mythical examples of eternal damnation. See Slavoj Žižek, *Absolute Recoil*, p. 335; Sophocles, *Antigone*, p. 81. However, this 'theatrical' moment is far less comedic than Antigone's final lament, in which she directly addresses the corpse of Polynices and whose authenticity remains disputed to this day precisely for this reason, as Goethe famously conceded to Eckermann on 28 March 1827: "There is a passage in *Antigone* [verses 909-912] which I always look upon as a blemish, and I would give a great deal for an apt philologist to prove that it is interpolated and spurious", because it is "quite unworthy" of Sophocles and "almost borders on the comic". See Johann Peter Eckermann, *Conversations with Goethe (1836-1848)*, London: Penguin, 2022, pp. 371-372. Žižek quotes these verses (909-912) in *Less Than Nothing*, yet only to demonstrate that Antigone's act generates its own norm and therefore acquires a dimension of concrete universality. See Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, p. 567. Interestingly, in *Absolute Recoil*, which succeeds *Less Than Nothing*, Žižek also refers the reader back to Chapter 5 (note the number) of *Less Than Nothing* "[f]or a more detailed analysis of the comical turn in *Antigone* [*sic*]", yet in this chapter there is literally 'less than nothing' about comedy in *Antigone*. In it, Žižek merely announces what he himself would realize in 2016 in his own re-writing of *Antigone*, namely the option of an alternative ending of the tragedy, in which both Creon and Antigone are punished and the Chorus takes control of the polis. See Slavoj Žižek, *Absolute Recoil*, p. 335 note 18; Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, pp. 323-324; Slavoj Žižek, *Antigone*, p. xxiv. The principal section on *Antigone* in *Less Than Nothing* occurs in Interlude 4 (note the number): Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, pp. 566-568.
- 61 Sigmund Freud, New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis. Lecture XXXI: The Dissection of the Psychological Personality (1933a), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 22, James Strachey (Ed. & Trans.), London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1964, p. 80. On numerous occasions, Lacan too reformulated Freud's phrase, whereby he generally replaced the

term 'ego' with 'I' (*je*) or 'subject' (*sujet*). See, for example, Jacques Lacan, *Science and Truth* (1965), in *Écrits*, Bruce Fink (Trans.), New York NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006, p. 734.

- 62 Slavoj Žižek, *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle*, p. 81. The italics are Žižek's.
- 63 Slavoj Žižek, *Absolute Recoil*, p. 411.
- 64 See, for example, Slavoj Žižek, *Don't Act, Just Think* (2012), available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lgR6uaVqWsQ>, accessed on 18 May 2021.
- 65 See Sigmund Freud, *Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through* (Further Recommendations on the Technique of Psycho-Analysis II) (1914g), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 12, James Strachey (Ed. & Trans.), London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1958, pp. 145-156; Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar. Book XI*, p. 273.
- 66 Some of Sade's libertine novels, such as *Philosophy in the Boudoir* and *Juliette*, were indeed written after he had been released from prison and before he was committed to a mental institution. The link between Sade's writings and the object *a*, which is part of Lacan's second schema in 'Kant with Sade', is no longer identifiable in the English edition of *Écrits*, because the letter '*a*' was considered a typographical error and therefore deleted. See Jacques Lacan, *Kant with Sade*, p. 657. To the best of my knowledge, the only place where Žižek engages with this specific part of 'Kant with Sade', which may very well be one of its most original and thought-provoking features, is in a rarely quoted 1992 essay. See Slavoj Žižek, 'In His Bold Gaze My Ruin Is Writ Large', in *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Lacan (But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)*, London-New York NY: Verso, 1992, p. 222. Surprisingly, perhaps, the most perspicacious champion of Lacan's idea—even though Lacan did not receive a single mention—was Michel Foucault who, in his 1970 lectures on Sade at the State University of New York in Buffalo, situated the truth of the Sadean enterprise in Sade's incessant act of writing. See Michel Foucault, *Lectures on Sade* (1970), in *Language, Madness, and Desire: On Literature*, Philippe Artières, Jean-François Bert, Mathieu Potte-Bonneville & Judith Revel (Eds), Robert Bononno (Trans.), Minneapolis MN-London: University of Minnesota Press, 2015, pp. 93-146.
- 67 Slavoj Žižek, *Disparities*, p. 190.
- 68 Jacques Lacan, *Kant with Sade*, p. 658, translation modified.
- 69 See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), Marcus Weigelt (Ed. & Trans.), London: Penguin, 2007, p. 635.