

ŽIŽEK'S ACT AND THE LITERARY EXAMPLE

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ABSTRACT

This essay focuses on the role of literary characters in Slavoj Žižek's political theory. Žižek, when theorizing political agency, likes to turn to literary texts such as Sophocles's *Antigone* or Herman Melville's *Bartleby, The Scrivener*, which exemplify his concepts. In his thinking, the truth of theory lies in its exemplification, in its practical demonstration. Thus the literary characters (Bartleby, Antigone) who provide examples register the fatal limits of his theory insofar as they prove to be models of authentic political agency, which one cannot actually follow. At the same time, however, they prove to be decisive in allowing Žižek to manipulate his readers in a more indirect and yet crucial manner.

KEYWORDS

Slavoj Žižek; agency; the act; fiction; literary characters; Antigone; Bartleby

I

This essay is concerned with the specific function of fictional characters, with special emphasis on the literary ones, in Slavoj Žižek's political theory. It is based on the following simple insight: Žižek, when theorizing political agency, likes to turn to literary and sometimes also film characters who exemplify and dramatize his concepts. It therefore evolves around the question of why fiction plays such a specific role in Žižek's edifice.

Cultural digressions occur frequently in Žižek's work, and some claim that the exemplary character of Žižek's theory is its defining characteristic. Scott Stephens and Rex Butler, for instance, see in such a propensity for digressions a way in which Žižek's writing manifests itself as "endless enquiry into its own discursive conditions." Cultural examples, from Stephens's and Butler's perspective, index the fact that there is no philosophical concept that is free from its necessarily twisting enunciative conditions, i.e., its exemplification. Like the mediators in the psychoanalytical process of *passee*, cultural examples can be said to deform Žižek's thought system, but this is precisely where to look for the truth of this system.¹

1. Butler and Stephens draw a parallel between Žižek's discourse and the institution of *passee* in Lacanian psychoanalysis, by which the analysand becomes an analyst by giving an account of his analysis to a committee of analysts through two witnesses who are still in analysis. The two, moved by unconscious impulses, are expected to distort the message. Yet the decision depends precisely on whether such distortions still manage to communicate a certain truth of the analyst-to-be, in fact: "These distortions *are* the truth." See Rex Butler and Scott

In particular, the foregoing must apply to the acts of the fictional characters who stage Žižek's concept of the ethico-political act proper (the ethical and political dimensions remain inseparable in his work). Some cultural examples, allegedly, serve didactic purposes in order to illustrate abstruse theoretical concepts (e.g., the Lacanian Real), while others are explored in more detail to arrive at controversial interpretations. The fictional figures in question, however, are privileged among all others, for they articulate the ultimate wager of Žižek's whole theoretical project—his concept of political agency—which they dramatize, translating concept into action, theory into praxis.

In his early publication *For They Know Not What They Do*, Žižek shows that exemplarity, truth and action/praxis are all closely interrelated. He targets the problem of exemplarity when drawing an analogy between hysteria and Hegel's figures of consciousness in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. These figures, writes Žižek, represent examples which "subvert the very Idea they exemplify,"² revealing the implicit presuppositions or unspoken impasses inherent in the idea itself. The ascetic's asserted denial of his body, when put into practice, is nothing but a constant preoccupation with it and with the ways of mortifying it. The notion that such examples represent the (subversive, unconscious) truth of a theoretical attitude is a perspective that can also be traced in Žižek's view of philosophy itself. From his discussion of other philosophers such as Heidegger, Derrida, Habermas, or Butler, it becomes clear that the truth of philosophy, for Žižek, lies in the actual praxis the particular "system" leads to; the political failures, whether collaboration with Nazism or ultimate conformity in regard to the status quo, reveal a disavowed impasse in the theoretical work. Such a political failure need not concern the thinker himself/herself (e.g., Habermas as a state philosopher, Heidegger as a Nazi sympathizer); those who follow this philosophy are also likely, as a consequence, to make serious political mistakes (e.g., Heideggerians in Communist Yugoslavia³). In other words, the truth of

Stephens, "Editors' Introduction," in *Interrogating the Real*, by Slavoj Žižek, edited by Rex Butler and Scott Stephens (London: Continuum, 2005), 3–4. Italics in the original.

2. Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment As a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 2008), 143.
3. "When, in my youth, I was bombarded by the official Communist philosophers' stories of Heidegger's Nazi engagement, they left me rather cold; I was definitely more on the side of the Yugoslav Heideggerians. All of a sudden, however, I became aware of how these Yugoslav Heideggerians were doing exactly the same thing with respect to the Yugoslav ideology of self-management as Heidegger himself did with respect to Nazism: in ex-Yugoslavia, Heideggerians entertained the same ambiguously assertive relationship toward Social self-management, the official ideology of the Communist regime—in their eyes, the essence of self-management was the very essence of modern man, which is why the philosophical notion of self-management suits the ontological essence of our epoch, while the standard political ideology of the regime misses this 'inner greatness' of self-management . . . Heideggerians are thus eternally in search of a positive, ontic political system that would come closest to the epochal ontological truth, a strategy which inevitably leads to error (which, of course, is always acknowledged only retroactively, *post factum*, after the disastrous outcome of one's engagement)." Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999), 13.

a philosophical notion is the political drama of those who profess it, which leads one to the conclusion that the ultimate success of philosophy is workable politics. The political motivation is also what lurks behind Žižek's Lacanian revival of German idealism, as he himself attests in a 2007 interview with Michael Hauser:

So I think that I'm very traditional, basically, that German idealism, the metaphysics of German idealism, still offers the best conceptual tools to deal with the crisis we are approaching. Because, as Hegel knew, philosophy and crisis are always connected. All philosophy, it's clear, Hegel, Heidegger, Marx, even Plato—you cannot imagine Plato without the political crisis of Greece. No wonder that Plato's representative book is *The Republic*, which, typically, although you have all of Plato's ontology there, the metaphor of the cave and so on, but nonetheless all this emerges to answer which kind of political order we need. So, that would be the point.⁴

Earlier, in *The Ticklish Subject*, Žižek writes unequivocally:

While this book is philosophical in its basic tenor, it is first and foremost an engaged political intervention, addressing the burning question of how we are to reformulate a leftist, anti-capitalist political project in our era of global capitalism and its ideological supplement, liberal-democratic multiculturalism.⁵

Žižek's philosophical project is therefore driven by a deeply political interest. Naturally, all this immediately poses a question about both Žižek's own political interventions and the success or failure of Žižek's politics as it emerges from his heterodox re-reading of German idealism through Lacanian psychoanalysis. The latter is registered by literary examples.

Literary characters often appear at the end of Žižek's books, precisely where abstract issues (interlaced with discussions of culture) elaborated on in the text are to be led to a desired conclusion, i.e., a proposal for alternative forms of political agency. While they embody a decisive move from abstract concepts to concrete models of behavior, they can literally be said to test Žižek's theory *in actu*, staging its deadlocks or implicit presuppositions, its politics, and its truth. This is also attested by the fact that they have become frequent sites of debates over Žižek's politics.

Unlike other cultural works that Žižek likes to explore in detail, in his use of literary characters as exemplary agents he does not engage in lengthy interpretation and is not actually interested in the details of the plot. In fact, the texts are usually condensed into a single, aesthetically charged gesture which is employed to animate the point of the whole theoretical project. Thus we are presented with Antigone's monstrous insistence or Sygne de Coufontaine's repulsive tic combined with Bartleby's inert "I would prefer not to."⁶ In what follows I will examine these figures as crucial points of

4. Michael Hauser, "Humanism Is Not Enough: Interview with Slavoj Žižek," *International Journal of Žižek Studies* 3, no. 3 (2009): <http://zizekstudies.org/index.php/ijzs/article/view/211/310>.

5. Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 4.

6. Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 381; Herman Melville, *Bartleby, The Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street*, in *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities*, Israel Potter:

convergence of Žižek's philosophy, politics and aesthetics. In the first part of this essay, I will examine their peculiar role of "impossible examples" that register the failure of Žižek's attempt at prescriptive politics. Later on, I will shift my focus and examine fictional characters as specific rhetorical tools that make possible a more intimate relationship between readers and Žižek's theory, and that play a role in Žižek's attempt to unite theory and practice.

II

The political stakes of Žižek's philosophy lie in his revival of Cartesian subjectivity, namely its subversive hidden core, which was first registered and further developed by Kant (who, according to Žižek, ultimately shrank from the radical implications of his own conclusions) and later Hegel. This radical core of German idealism has been left unnoticed by post-structuralist theories that, however, claim to be the inheritors of this particular tradition.⁷ The post-structuralist achievement (of, for example, Althusser or Foucault) is represented by the detailed and intricate exploration of the ways in which human subjects are always already determined by factors beyond their control (power, ideology, etc.), which offers little hope for political agency. Žižek's rise to popularity in Western academia can also be attributed to the fact that, at least at first sight, he seems to overcome what some perceive as the political deadlocks of post-structuralism.⁸ On account of his Lacanian tools, Žižek manages to extract a notion of an absolutely autonomous, if unconscious and non-substantial, subject that remains irreducible to socio-historic conditions.

From Žižek's complex discussions of subjectivity, two moments seem especially relevant for the discussion of the ethico-political act, namely, the subject as a void and the subject as a negative-contractive force, the "vanishing mediator" between nature and culture, both notions having profound political ramifications.

His Fifty Years of Exile, The Piazza Tales, The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade, Uncollected Prose, Billy Budd, Sailor (An Inside Narrative), ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (New York: Library of America, 1984), 635–72; Sophocles, *Antigone*, trans. J. E. Thomas (Clayton, DE: Prestwick House, 2005); Paul Claudel, *The Hostage*, trans. Pierre Chavannes (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1917).

7. Matthew Sharpe and Geoff Boucher, *Žižek and Politics: A Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 65.

8. In their introduction to a collection of critical responses to Žižek's work, *Traversing the Fantasy*, Matthew Sharpe and Geoff Boucher note: "Positions that wholly 'write away' the subject in the play of some other more profound ontological instance—whether arch-writing, power, or the body without organs—tend infamously to be left wondering about their own position of enunciation and to what agency they might be addressing their 'radical' appeals. By contrast, Žižek's (Kantian-Hegelian) 'critique of metaphysics' aligns itself directly and from the start with the reflexive (or 'apperceptive') potential of individuals—precisely as subjects—not only to 'stand out' from, but also to actively intervene in and change, the historical orders into which they have been 'thrown.'" Geoff Boucher and Matthew Sharpe, "Introduction: Traversing the Fantasy," in *Traversing the Fantasy: Critical Responses to Slavoj Žižek*, ed. Geoff Boucher, Jason Glynos, and Matthew Sharpe (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), xiii.

The implicit radicality of Descartes's inaugural attempt to think purely formal subjectivity devoid of any content apart from "I think" is taken into account, according to Žižek, by Kant's objection that the subject is not self-transparent.⁹ It is the "X that thinks," the formal "unity of apperception" that itself makes experience possible and thus must be logically presupposed, but its notion can never be filled with intuited experiential reality.¹⁰ Adrian Johnston explains: "The (presupposed) being of the Kantian noumenal subject can only ever appear, within the frame of phenomenal (self-) experience, as a void."¹¹ In other words, the subject, as an inaccessible locus that sustains what we perceive as reality, can be registered only indirectly, in the way the reality we encounter is never consistent, never a harmonized totality. This is, however, always obfuscated, in Lacanian terms, by unconscious fantasy on the level of an individual, or ideological fantasy on the level of a society. As Fabio Vighi explains,

we *are* the very impossibility that we ascribe to external reality, and that [reality] we must constantly disavow or displace if we are to connect with it. The very surplus generated by our attempt to grasp the meaning of the world is both what prevents us from fully grasping it and what allows us to engage with it in its material guise.¹²

Thus the subject-as-void corresponds to the basic incompleteness of reality (both epistemological and ontological); in Lacan's conceptual edifice, the barred subject is correlative to the barred Other.

Žižek draws an analogy between this Kantian transcendental subject and Lacan's subject of the empty signifier without a signified (which has been primordially repressed). The latter is distinct from ego—a sense of identity, inner richness. There is a connection, however, between the subject and the ego. The subject, as a formal structure lacking "any positive-substantial determinations,"¹³ underlies man's potentiality to assume an infinite number of identities, roles, and mandates, without being reducible to any of them. It manifests itself only in the form of a failure of every self, man's ultimate non-coincidence with himself. This deficiency, however, is what drives identity formation; the urge to embrace identities and roles is but a defensive strategy to avoid the abysmal negativity that disavowed truth about our being. Nothing attests to the Žižekian subject better, Adrian Johnston claims with regard to the postmodern celebration of multiple and diffused subject-positions:

[T]he more one insists upon subjectivity as a dispersed multitude of shifting and unstable identity-constructs, the more one is confronted with the necessity of positing a

9. See Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 13.

10. Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative*, 14.

11. Adrian Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2008), 62.

12. Fabio Vighi, *On Žižek's Dialectics: Surplus, Subtraction, Sublimation* (London: Continuum, 2010), 133.

13. Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 44.

universal, empty, and contentless frame, a formal void, as the backdrop against which the “mad dance of identifications” takes place.¹⁴

The ultimate point, however, is that the ruling social order can never capture the subject by its “ideological interpellation”; there is always a negative dimension that escapes it.

The subject is sometimes also described as a dynamic gesture, a contractive force, and a kind of madness. Descartes’s withdrawal into radical doubt, Kant’s transcendental imagination, and the Hegelian “night of the world”¹⁵ are coupled with the Lacanian death drive to introduce the freedom of subjectivity as “the violent gesture of contraction that negates every being outside itself,”¹⁶ man’s capacity to cut his ties to his immediate environment. This impulse is sometimes theorized by Žižek in terms of a disruptive withdrawal from immersion in the so-called natural cycle, man’s “denaturalization.” Already not nature, but not yet culture, this move is one of the basic dislocations in which humanity is thrown out of joint with its object, on account of which man never fits his environment, which remains a state of radical contingency and as such open to change. The subject names an imbalance introduced in the self-sufficient functioning of the natural world, the process of satisfying one’s biological instincts. It is presented as the drive that persists beyond mere biological life, as “beyond the pleasure principle.”¹⁷ Culture is then merely an attempt to control and discipline this excess which makes culture possible, yet in itself remains ultimately indifferent to and incompatible with its laws and its norms. It is this basic-level indifference towards social conventions and rules, as well as towards one’s self-interest, which constitutes the basic ethical dimension of the death drive, the abyss of freedom as subjectivity.

The drive then manifests itself as a “wild, unconstrained propensity to insist stubbornly on one’s own will, cost what it may,”¹⁸ on account of nothing but the excess that defines the subject. Such explosive occasions, when the drive at the heart of human beings rises to the surface, correspond to moments when subjects “traverse their fundamental fantasy” insofar as they acknowledge the disavowed beliefs that tie them to a particular social

14. Johnston, *Žižek’s Ontology*, 11–12.

15. “The human being is this night, this empty nothing, that contains everything in its simplicity—an unending wealth of many representations, images, of which none belongs to him—or which are not present. This night, the interior of nature, that exists here—pure self—in phantasmagorical representations, is night all around it, in which here shoots a bloody head—there another white ghastly apparition, suddenly here before it, and just so disappears. One catches sight of this night when one looks human beings in the eye—into a night that becomes awful.” Hegel quoted in Donald Phillip Verene, *Hegel’s Recollection: A Study of Images in the Phenomenology of Spirit* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1985), 7–8, quoted in Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 29–30.

16. Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 34.

17. Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 37.

18. Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 36.

organization and perceive the latter's contingency, its very inconsistency on account of the excess (of the death-drive, of the *jouissance*—the pleasure in pain beyond the pleasure principle) around which the social-symbolic fabric is structured.

By virtue of its negative restlessness, the subject is capable of rejecting all of its symbolic mandates, of cutting itself off from the social fabric (undergoing a so-called symbolic death), and withdrawing into the abyss of autonomous subjectivity from which any reality can be radically questioned while new possibilities emerge. It is this unconscious and unruly dimension which escapes socialization that forms the basic structure of the act, the paradigm of the ethico-political agency. Such a negative cut of “wiping the slate clean,” of a violent subtraction from the socio-symbolic field, is a necessary pre-requisite for a truly new beginning (a new individual identity, a new symbolic order). The events that exemplify the act in its collective dimension are revolutions, such as the French revolution of 1789 or the Russian revolution of 1917. For individual examples of the act, which by far outnumber Žižek's examples of collective revolts, Žižek prefers to have recourse to fiction.¹⁹

III

Žižek's literary examples of the act are often adapted from Lacan's commentaries on literary texts as they appear in the latter's seminars *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* and *Transference*. Oedipus at Colonus, Antigone, and Sygne de Coûfontaine are figures driven precisely by the excessive drive, “unyielding right to the end, demanding everything, giving up nothing, absolutely unreconciled.”²⁰ As Žižek himself comments:

In all his [Lacan's] great literary interpretations, from *Oedipus* and *Antigone* through Sade's *Juliette* to Claudel's *Hostage*, he is in search of a point at which we enter the dimension of the “inhuman,” a point at which “humanity” disintegrates so that all that remains is a pure subject. Sophocles's *Antigone*, Sade's *Juliette*, Claudel's *Sygne*—they are all figures of such an “inhuman” subject.²¹

I wish to focus on *Antigone*, in particular, the comprehensive exegesis of which appears at the end of Lacan's *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. Antigone's act is one of the most frequently cited examples in Žižek's work, as well as a frequent target of criticism that aims at Žižek's political (mis)appropriation of Lacanian theories.²² One of the reasons for the

19. The exceptions include Žižek's account of the case of the American teacher Mary Kay Letourneau, who had a love affair with her underage student. See Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 382–88.

20. Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960*, vol. 7 of *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (London: Routledge, 1992), 310.

21. Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 42.

22. See, for example, Yannis Stavrakakis, “The Lure of Antigone: *Aporias* of an Ethics of the Political,” in *Traversing the Fantasy: Critical Responses to Slavoj Žižek*, ed. Geoff Boucher, Jason Glynos, and Matthew Sharpe (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 171–82, or Ian Parker, *Slavoj Žižek: A Critical Introduction* (London: Pluto Press, 2004), 78.

controversial nature of Žižek's use of the text, however, lies in the ambiguous function of Antigone's agency in Lacan's commentary.

In Lacan's *Ethics* Antigone's suicidal insistence on the burial of her brother despite Creon's interdiction exemplifies the ultimately transgressive and destructive nature of desire (the death drive) and its incompatibility with any established social values and norms. At the same time, through Antigone, Lacan focuses on the cathartic function of tragedy. Like psychoanalysis, tragedy confronts us with the true nature of desire and it does so by aesthetic means, via the hero's sublimity and grandeur. The question remains of whether the hero also represents exemplary ethical behavior. Lacan's text seems to vacillate between descriptive and prescriptive levels, while both positions can be argued, a fact which divides Lacanians into two camps. On the one hand, Lacan explicitly discusses the limits of psychoanalysis at the beginning of the seminar.²³ Psychoanalysis, like tragedy, guides us toward an existential experience but then leaves us at the threshold to find our own measure, our own direction in between destructive, transgressive desire and the social goods. As Marc De Kesel notes, we are no heroes and we always compromise our desire in one way or another.²⁴ On the other hand, we are presented with a tragic heroine who is explicitly praised and admired in the text for having remained true to her desire. Importantly, towards the end of the seminar, Lacan famously articulates that "the only thing one can be guilty of is to have given ground from one's desire," which is likely to be understood as commanding that no ground be given at all.²⁵

23. "On the other hand, I will straight away point out to those who might be inclined to forget it, or who might think that I am following in this direction only by referring to the moral imperative in our experience—I will point out that moral action poses problems for us precisely to the extent that if analysis prepares us for it, it also in the end leaves us standing at the door." Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 21. In a similar vein Lacan writes: "psychoanalysis can accompany the patient to the ecstatic limit of the 'Thou art that,' wherein is revealed to him the cipher of his mortal destiny, but it is not in our mere power as practitioners to bring him to that point where the real journey begins." Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror-phase as Formative of the Function of the I," trans. Jean Roussel, in *Mapping Ideology*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 1994), 99.

24. See Marc De Kesel, *Eros and Ethics: Reading Jacques Lacan's Seminar VII*, trans. Sigi Jöttkandt (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009), 264.

25. Lorenzo Chiesa further argues that Antigone must be acknowledged as an ethical model since it follows from Lacan's statements that her actions lie at the heart of psychoanalysis: "I believe that Antigone as an image of lack is also inevitably understood by Lacan as a *model* for the ethics of psychoanalysis as articulated in Seminar VII. This can be easily demonstrated by means of a simple syllogism. We are told that Antigone represents 'the essence of tragedy'; we are also told that 'tragedy is at the root of our [psychoanalytic] experience,' and hence (the suicidal nature of) Antigone's act is at the root of Lacanian psychoanalysis. An aesthetic ethics cannot be reduced to an aesthetics: the centrality of Antigone's image can be extracted only from Antigone's own *act*." Lorenzo Chiesa, *Subjectivity and Otherness: A Philosophical Reading of Lacan* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 177. However, far from suggesting that Lacan praises a suicidal action, Chiesa argues that Antigone presents us with a deadlock in Lacan's edifice that can be satisfactorily resolved only from the standpoint of Lacan's later writings.

While acknowledging the validity of interpretation in favor of the descriptive, Žižek seems to suspect in that reading a tendency to confine Antigone's radicalism exclusively to the realm of aesthetics and treat "aesthetic contemplation of a radical ethical stance . . . as a supplement to our 'real life' compromising attitude of 'following the crowd,'"²⁶ a stance which, according to Žižek, cannot be claimed as Lacanian. Žižek, conversely, seems to consider Antigone as more than relevant to our political or ethical behavior and approaches her act as a paradigm of the ethical-political act proper. Yet, as we shall see, his actual treatment of this fictional example emerges in a similarly equivocal manner. As in Lacan's interpretive case of her, in Žižek's hands Antigone's act oscillates between exemplarity and the merely revelatory.

IV

In one of his encounters with the theory of Judith Butler,²⁷ Žižek has recourse to a reading of *Antigone* precisely as he ponders the possibility of a genuinely subversive and autonomous action. As both Butler and Žižek agree, we are unconsciously (phantasmatically) invested in the specific symbolic and social organization that we are born into and that gives us identity. The problem is then how it is at all possible to undermine or displace such an organization. In Butler's view (as paraphrased by Žižek), the Lacanian (forced) choice remains confined either to fundamental alienation in the symbolic order or to the transgression of that order at the price of psychosis. Any other resistance remains "a false transgression" and ultimately serves to maintain and further reproduce the law. The Žižek *vs.* Butler debate, however, asserts another option: "the effective symbolic rearticulation *via* the intervention of the real of an *act*."²⁸ The *act* constitutes a violent withdrawal from any symbolic identifications with their concomitant unconscious (phantasmatic) supports. The *act* is at the same time performative, it is a negative intrusion which, Žižek claims, at once transforms the socio-symbolic coordinates.

Enter Antigone. Via her defiance of Creon's order and her stubborn insistence on the burial of her brother, as Žižek claims, Antigone manifests her disregard of the "big Other," i.e., the whole normative system that regulates inter-subjective

26. "It is possible to read Lacan's interpretation of *Antigone* asserting that Antigone is not a model to be followed, but just a fascinating image, an aesthetic appearance: Antigone's fascinating beauty explodes when she is elevated into the position of the living dead on account of her not compromising her unconditional desire. If, however, this implies that in 'real' life we should follow the 'safe' path of remaining within the symbolic coordinates and allowing the radical stance of 'going to the end' only in the guise of aesthetic image, does this not reduce art to the aesthetic contemplation of a radical ethical stance, as a supplement to our 'real life' compromising attitude of 'following the crowd'? If there is anything foreign to Lacan, it is such a stance." Slavoj Žižek, "Concesso non Dato," in *Traversing the Fantasy: Critical Responses to Slavoj Žižek*, ed. Geoff Boucher, Jason Glynos, and Matthew Sharpe (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 246.

27. See Slavoj Žižek, "From 'Passionate Attachments' to Dis-Identification," *Umbr(a)*, no. 1 (1998): 3–17.

28. Žižek, "From 'Passionate Attachments' to Dis-Identification," 5.

relations in a community. She not only puts at stake her entire social identity, but also sacrifices everything that ties her to the community, even perhaps all that is dear to her (her libidinal attachment to her sister and her potential marital happiness with Haemon) for the sake of a cause that matters to her more than life itself. Both Lacan and Žižek thus locate her in the domain “between two deaths,” beyond the adhesion to biological life, in the sphere of the death drive. Let us proceed to how this actually affects or transforms the very community.

In *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?*, Žižek emphasizes that, through the way in which Antigone’s demand defies social reality (the big Other), she does something deemed impossible within the coordinates of the life of the polis. Antigone creates a new horizon of possibilities and, as a result, changes the contours of that reality itself; what is considered good and not good, possible or impossible. Antigone’s stubborn insistence determines afresh what is considered as the sovereign good in that particular social milieu.²⁹ The extent of such a transformative effect of the act, however, depends utterly on the particular position of the agent(s) in a society.

Žižek further focuses on Antigone as the figure of the Other qua real, as the inhuman partner. Antigone relates to her cause directly; her demand is not communicated through the symbolic order and that is why it emerges as monstrous. While Žižek differentiates between the imaginary Other, with whom one engages in mirror-like relations (of competition, of mutual recognition, etc.), and of the symbolic Other (the explicit or implicit social rules and codes), Antigone, as the agent of the act, represents the real Other, “the Other with whom no symmetrical dialogue, mediated by the symbolic order, is possible.”³⁰ As the embodiment of inhuman excess, the abyss of subjectivity, which usually remains hidden behind symbolic and imaginary shields, she is frightening. This inhuman aspect is translated into aesthetic terms, into the sublime monstrosity of Antigone that is later adopted by other writers for other literary characters, such as Sethe from Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* (1987) or Euripides’ *Medea*, both of whom kill their own children. Paul Claudel’s *Sygne de Coûfontaine* commits suicide by intercepting a bullet meant for her husband, whom she despises and hates. For Žižek, her act lacks any of the ancient sublimity or grandeur and, being modern, remains merely repellent.

The crucial point, however, arrives when we learn that while acts emerge as traumatic encounters for others, they also do so for the agents themselves. The agent remains a stranger to his own act, which becomes difficult to subjectify, to assume as one’s own, for the act is something external, radically contingent or even psychotic.³¹ Moreover, we do not commit such acts, they

29. See Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism? Five Interventions in the (Mis)use of a Notion* (London: Verso, 2001), 168, 172.

30. Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?*, 163.

31. A psychotic is someone who can project his own private social reality and ignore the dependence of the Other. Even though Žižek differentiates between the act and the psychotic *passage à l’acte*, uncannily, they seem to overlap. See Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief* (London: Routledge, 2001), 84.

occur to us, and we must come to terms with them, concludes Žižek. Beyond any strategic-pragmatic calculation, they are acts of absolute freedom that we perform blindly, in utter passivity, “as an *automaton*, without reflection.”³² Naturally, such coincidence of freedom and necessity fatally complicates Žižek’s implicit invitation to follow Antigone’s example, as well as any possible ethical-political program one might derive from Žižek’s theory of agency.

V

Not surprisingly, Žižek has faced a lot of criticism precisely on account of *the act* he focuses on, namely its excessively violent nature,³³ “its suicidal heroic ethics.”³⁴ The act, moreover, seems to dwell far beyond any everyday, necessarily pragmatic, politics and thus poses the danger of introducing an excuse precisely for what Žižek otherwise relentlessly criticizes: a life of political quietism, redeemed in advance by the comfortable waiting for a miraculous act. As if to respond to this criticism or eager to intervene in the debate on the “what should be done” question, at the end of *The Parallax View* Žižek proposes an alternative form of subversive agency. In the last chapter, Žižek launches a fierce critique of a form of imaginary resistance which, in the final instance, remains dependent on the law and order it rebels against. The “rumspringa resistance,” a representative of which Žižek perceives in Simon Critchley, shrinks from actually trying to take over the situation—since, above all, it enjoys its own dissident status.³⁵ In contrast to this resistance, Žižek proposes a politics of withdrawal. While we cannot plan the act, what we can do is to eschew activity. For where there is no activity, something else becomes evident, i.e., the very space where that activity is taking place, its symbolic coordinates, the socio-political organization in its violence and its radical contingency.

Herman Melville’s Bartleby, the protagonist of *Bartleby, The Scrivener* (1853), comes to exemplify precisely this kind of subtractive politics. Like many others before him, Žižek focuses on Bartleby’s repeated utterance in the form of “I would prefer not to”:

We can imagine the varieties of such a gesture in today’s public space: not only the obvious “There are great chances of a new career here! Join us!”—“I would prefer not to”; but also “Discover the depths of your true self, find inner peace!”—“I would prefer not to”; or “Are you aware how our environment is endangered? Do something for ecology!”—“I would prefer not to”; or “What about all the racial and sexual injustices that we witness all around us? Isn’t it time to do more?”—“I would prefer not to.” This is the gesture of subtraction at its purest . . .³⁶

32. Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?*, 162.

33. See, e.g., Simon Critchley, “Violent Thoughts about Slavoj Zizek,” *Naked Punch*, supplement, 11 (2008): 3–6.

34. Stavrakakis, “The Lure of Antigone,” 173.

35. “[I]s not Critchley’s position one of relying on the fact that *someone else* will take on the task of running the state machinery, enabling us to engage in critical distance toward the state?” Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 333. Italics in the original.

36. Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 382.

It is clear that Žižek does not read the utterance as radically indeterminate (as Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, or Giorgio Agamben do), but rather as a statement of refusal, a sign of withdrawal. Not the negation of a predicate, for Žižek it becomes an affirmation of a non-predicate (after Kant's negative judgment). Bartleby does not refuse to do something but he *wants not to do it*. For Žižek this slight shift marks the difference between transgression that feeds on what it opposes and a gesture which, as an active preference for the negative, remains independent of the dominant ideologies and thus moves beyond the fatal embrace of hegemony and of its negation. At one point we are told that Bartleby's "I would prefer not to" has the structure of a Lacanian *Versagung*: a rejection of the symbolic order as such, a purely formal rejection without any content, which cannot be integrated into the realm of meaning. Like *the act*, this enigmatic statement remains incomprehensible from the point of view of the order in which it intervenes. In the same book Žižek turns to the character of Sygne de Coûfontaine, and to the subject of the death drive, to elaborate on the *Versagung* structure. The void of both Sygne's and Bartleby's refusal repeats and enacts the radical negativity of subjectivity, the Real over which words stumble. Both are driven by an excess that cannot be grasped or represented by their respective social milieux.

In a sense, Bartleby can be read as a culmination of Žižek's efforts to translate his complicated metaphysics into concrete models of human agency. At first sight, what the character of Bartleby is taken to exemplify appears almost as a prescription. A refusal to undertake any activity that only helps the deleterious system to maintain itself can quite easily be translated into a conscious step. However, this aspect of Bartleby's "I would prefer not to" uneasily combines precisely with the act of *Versagung* as an expression of the unconscious death drive, the transcendental point of Žižek's materialism. Problematically for Žižek's theory, there is a clear gap between the two. Fabio Vighi's question is precisely to the point:

Should we think of subtraction as a goal to be actively pursued, or as an event that takes place irrespective of our conscious intervention?³⁷

And he further points to the danger that

I might be convinced that I "subtract" for all the right social and political reasons, while unconsciously I fetishize my disengagement through a range of disavowed modalities of enjoyment.³⁸

The withdrawal always risks being another form of false resistance. As Vighi argues later on, our conscious agency is unlikely to become a truly subversive political intervention unless driven by an unconscious drive; our unconscious

37. Vighi, *On Žižek's Dialectics*, 137.

38. Vighi, *On Žižek's Dialectics*, 136. Interestingly, Fabio Vighi tries to resolve this deadlock of Žižekian politics by suggesting that many people do not even need to subtract from the present order as they are already disconnected from it. He points to the dispossessed masses of people, inhabitants of slums, refugees, etc. The point would then be to unite/identify with them. See Vighi, *On Žižek's Dialectics*, 21, 137.

must then be piloted by a political project, otherwise it is not likely to achieve much. Even though Bartleby could be perceived as an attempt to connect the two aspects (the pragmatic and the unconscious), his renowned statement and withdrawal in Žižek's reading fail to do so, for Bartleby's "I would prefer not to" remains split from inside.

Matthew Sharpe sees the failure of Žižek's theory to link the conscious-pragmatic in its Kantian strategy. In his opinion, Žižek moves from phenomena back to their transcendental conditions of possibility; however,

[t]o abstract from this realm in order to disclose the semantic, historical or ultra-transcendental conditions of its possibility (or of the language that political agents use to frame their understandings) means that the employee of this philosophical mode of argumentation can say nothing directly concerning the actuality of this realm, nor concerning the norms, ideals or projects which might inform political praxis within it. In his inimitable fashion, Žižek only brings this "abyss of essence" between the ontic and ontological, or empirical and transcendental realms to a hypostasized head, when he openly argues that from the perspective of ordinary political life, the mode of action authentically true to the subject's terrorizing death drive must appear as diabolically evil.³⁹

Further than this, the death drive should be not only "diabolically evil" but even monstrous or abhorrent, as Žižek's description of the heroes' acts suggests. When translated into everyday reality, Žižek's metaphysics remains and must remain repulsive, if not incoherent. Literary fiction then enacts the incompatibility of the two levels—of the Real and the real, the gap between Žižekian transcendental truth and politics—through the fictionality of the example and its extreme aesthetics.

VI

Let us first address the specifically exaggerated aesthetics that surround the act. Adrian Johnston sees in Žižek's inclination to employ excessive adjectives (repelling, horrific, etc.) a more general phenomenon of the subject's anxiety over *jouissance* and the drives that pose a threat to its well-being. Such exaggerated aesthetic designators merely register the tension and conflict between the subject's striving for balance and the drives—their incompatibility with our well-being, with the pleasure and reality principles.⁴⁰ We are confronted with the deeds of Antigone, Bartleby and Sygne, who are presented to us as the true picture of who we are. At the same time, they are described as threateningly inhuman (repulsive, monstrous, inert, etc.) and thus impossible to identify with. In this way, however, we perceive the disturbing power, uncontrollable nature, and externalness of the unconscious drive.

Once the drives distort the fragile balance of the subject, the following occurs, as Žižek describes it:

The result of experiencing and/or witnessing some excessively cruel (or otherwise libidinally invested) event, from intense sexual activity to physical torture, is that, when,

39. Matthew Sharpe, "Critchley is Žižek": In Defence of Critical Political Philosophy," *Critical Horizons* 10, no. 2 (2009): 194.

40. Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology*, 59.

afterwards, we return to our 'normal' reality, *we cannot conceive of both domains as belonging to the same reality*. The reimmersion in 'ordinary' reality renders the traumatic memory of the horror somewhat hallucinatory, derealising it. This is what Lacan is aiming at in his distinction between reality and the Real: we cannot ever acquire a complete, all-encompassing, sense of reality—some part of it must be affected by the 'loss of reality', deprived of the character of 'true reality', and this fictionalised element is precisely the traumatic Real.⁴¹

Precisely this logic of the Real of the drive as incompatible with "reality" can be perceived in Žižek's depiction of the act via fictional heroes/heroines. The act, as a traumatic intrusion into ordinary reality, is grasped through that reality in the form of fiction; it is thus that its irreducibility to that reality is felt and experienced. In a certain sense, the truth of the Žižekian act could not be conveyed otherwise. In *The Fright of Real Tears*, when discussing the decision of Krzysztof Kieślowski, the Polish filmmaker, to abandon documentaries for feature films, Žižek claims that it is *only* through the distance guaranteed by fiction, the awareness that what is at stake is a false image (e.g., an actress playing her role), that one can express or feel the trauma of the Real—the Real of subjective experience.⁴² Otherwise it is simply rejected as obtrusive and simply too horrid. The only possible representation of the Real and thus also the representation of agency of the drive requires the suspension or distancing of the symbolic network through fiction.

VII

When discussing Žižek's failure to be prescriptive, Jodi Dean suggests that Žižek occupies the position of an analyst who frustrates the perception of himself as "the subject supposed to know" and intentionally upsets the demand to tell us what to do. Like the analyst, Žižek merely creates the occasion so that we can figure it out for ourselves. The criticism of Žižek for his lack of concrete political vision is, according to Dean, more suggestive of the critics' unwillingness to tackle the problem themselves.⁴³ Indeed, in the documentary film *Žižek!*, Žižek appears to be mindful about the transference relationship he happens to be in with regard to his audience. He takes into account the fact that many look up to him as to "the bright intellectual" with all the answers. He confirms Dean's hypothesis when he explicitly speaks of trying to place himself in the analyst's position and to purposely disappoint the demands others address to him in order to force his interrogators to face the very problem of their demand.⁴⁴ Elsewhere he insists that philosophers in general, when expected to intervene in the public space, should act

41. Slavoj Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears: Kieślowski and the Future* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 66. Italics in the original.

42. See Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 30.

43. See Jodi Dean, *Žižek's Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2006), xix–xx.

44. See Žižek in Astra Taylor, dir., *Žižek!* (Zeitgeist Films, 2005).

toward their audience in a manner not unlike that of analysts towards their patients.⁴⁵

Levi Bryant takes Jodi Dean's point even further when he suggests that we should treat Žižek's texts primarily as psychoanalytic interventions. When trying to understand Žižek's political program, rather than what Žižek says, we ought to consider what he does. Žižek's theses, like the Lacanian psychoanalyst's interpretations, regardless of whether they are accurate or not, themselves reconfigure the framework of the situations into which they intervene.⁴⁶ This approach is also validated to an extent by Žižek himself when he claims that the task of philosophy is, above all, to change the basic concepts of the debate.⁴⁷

Bryant's and Dean's approach to Žižek's politics is thus perfectly legitimate. Yet it is one which risks disclaiming the clearly discernible intention on Žižek's part to articulate a prescriptive model of political behavior. As the case of *Bartleby* implies, Žižek does attempt to propose practical solutions and answers and is apparently interested in having us converted to his vision of what should be done at the moment, hardly a classically conceived psychoanalytic interest. In agreement with Matthew Sharpe, Žižek's confusing prescriptions are much more a matter of the gap between his transcendental philosophy and everyday politics than a question of Žižek's intentional efforts to frustrate his readers' demands. However, this is not to diminish the interventional or psychoanalytical aspects of Žižek's texts as described above; rather, one simply should not ignore the fact that in the light of his own thesis, presented at the beginning of this essay, Žižek's project is a fiasco. His theory fails at the prescriptive level. One ought not to reject him for that reason (as Ernesto Laclau or Simon Critchley do⁴⁸) and thus remain blind to the more indirect effect of Žižek's work, but all the same one should not disavow the failure.

Literary characters, then, reflect both aspects: they are the loci of the conflict between Žižek's philosophy and Žižek's politics but their function can also be described in terms of the performative and interventional nature of his theory. For, besides being exemplary if impossible agents, fictional characters represent a way in which it is possible to decisively intervene in the reader's world.

VIII

As Bryant reminds us, Žižek's principal method, as announced by the latter in the foreword to *The Parallax View*, is that of short-circuiting levels that

45. Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, *Philosophy in the Present*, ed. Peter Engelmann, trans. Peter Thomas and Alberto Toscano (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 50.

46. See Levi R. Bryant, "Symptomal Knots and Eventual Ruptures: Žižek, Badiou, and Discerning the Indiscernible," *International Journal of Žižek Studies* 1, no. 2 (2007): <http://zizekstudies.org/index.php/ijzs/article/view/30/89>.

47. See Badiou and Žižek, *Philosophy in the Present*, 51.

48. See Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005), 237; Simon Critchley, "Foreword: Why Žižek Must Be Defended," in *The Truth of Žižek*, ed. Paul Bowman and Richard Stamp (London: Continuum, 2007), xiv.

are usually kept apart; for instance, a reading of a hegemonic subject matter through the lenses of a marginal or excluded element (e.g., reading Lacan through popular culture, or Heidegger through pornography, etc.). By combining what is considered mutually incompatible, Bryant argues, Žižek dissolves fixed libidinal attachments. As a consequence, possibilities not previously discernible in the configuration emerge and must be reacted to by other elements.

Precisely such “impossible” short-circuiting is what is at stake in Žižek’s employment of fictional agents. As we have said, everyday political reality and the theory of the act as exemplified by fiction remain incompatible. However, the strategic confrontation of mutually untranslatable perspectives is precisely what defines the Žižekian parallax gap, a juxtaposition of two incompatible sides of a phenomenon which “can be grasped only in a kind of parallax view, constantly shifting perspective between two points between which no synthesis and mediation is possible.”⁴⁹ Therefore, the importance of the juxtaposition of social reality with its recognized models of political agency, on the one hand, and fictional characters, on the other, lie not only in the reader’s changed view of forms of political agency but the transformed status of agency as such: acting itself becomes something different. This shift of the subjective position, as well as the status of agency, emerge as a consequence of oscillating between recognized forms of agency and the act with its fictional “impossible” examples.

Looking at political reality through fiction distances readers from that reality, and contests the naturalness of its implicit dogmas. The point is to launch an annihilatory attack on contemporary cynicism and a loss of faith in grand political causes as against the heroic background of ancient and modern literary texts and films. In addition to that, Žižek’s admiration for the radical deeds of the heroes and heroines indirectly invites us to grasp their greatness negatively, through the recognition of our own limitations (i.e., our own cynicism, our own strategic compromises, etc.). As Žižek writes about film, its ultimate achievement as a cultural form

is not to recreate reality within the narrative fiction, to seduce us into (mis)taking a fiction for reality, but, on the contrary, to make us discern the fictional aspect of reality itself, to experience reality itself as a fiction.⁵⁰

By looking awry at social reality through fiction—e.g., through Bartleby’s gesture of non-preference or via Antigone’s insistence—we might experience our own “reality” as contingent, and its accepted ways as arbitrary. What is at stake, in other words, is “traversing the fantasy” which sustains our social organization as the only legitimate one, and necessary.

In his recent volume *Living in the End Times* Žižek introduces a slightly different version of the thesis from the one I cited at the beginning of this essay. When discussing the overall strategy of the book, he draws an analogy between Lacan’s performative concept of interpretation—“Interpretation is

49. Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 4.

50. Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears*, 77.

not tested by a truth that would decide by yes or no, it unleashes truth as such. It is only true inasmuch as it is truly followed” and Marx’s Thesis XI: “Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.”⁵¹ Both Lacanian psychoanalysis and Marxist theory exemplify the “dialectical unity of theory and practice” insofar as the value of theory lies in the transformative effects it produces in its recipients. Here what is important is apparently not so much a coherent articulation of a viable political project, but rather the very interaction between a theoretical thesis and its audience. The ultimate goal becomes an intervention that is effective to such an extent that it manages to interfere in the unconscious of the individual and, by extension, even the transindividual, which itself jump-kicks social transformation. If otherwise, we are left with nothing but a fetishistic split—“I know very well . . . but nevertheless”—illustrated by Žižek’s frequently repeated joke about the ignorance of chickens.⁵² In such a case, however, it is in the actual dialogue between the reader and the theory that the stakes lie—the reason for the most sophisticated strategic-rhetorical approach, the important part of which is the fictional characters. For, according to Žižek, truly great art confronts us with the fundamental fantasies of both our personal and social realities, inviting us to traverse them. It seems no coincidence that Žižek attributes to fiction a psychoanalytical power precisely when he writes that “fiction intrudes into and hurts *dreams themselves*, secret fantasies that form the unavowed kernel of our lives.”⁵³

It might be possible to relate the peculiar role of the fictional characters to Žižek’s repeated suggestions related to the emancipatory power of art,⁵⁴ exemplified in his writing almost exclusively by opera. Art, it seems, entertains precisely the power to speak to the very negative restlessness hidden in human beings; the drive as the excessive yearning for what radically differs from whatever is, which therefore cannot be assigned any content, and of which Simone Weil writes:

And what is this good? I have no idea— . . . It is that whose name alone, if I attach my thought to it, gives me the certainty that the things of this world are not goods.⁵⁵

51. Quoted in Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London: Verso, 2010), xiii.

52. “For decades, a classic joke has been circulating among Lacanians to exemplify the key role of the Other’s knowledge: a man who believes himself to be a grain of seed is taken to a mental institution where the doctors do their best to convince him that he is not a grain of seed but a man; however, when he is cured (convinced that he is not a grain of seed but a man) and allowed to leave the hospital, he immediately comes back, trembling and very scared—there is a chicken outside the door, and he is afraid [it] will eat him. ‘My dear fellow,’ says the doctor, ‘you know very well that you are not a grain of seed but a man.’ ‘Of course I know,’ replies the patient, ‘but does the chicken?’” Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 251.

53. Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears*, 77.

54. See, for example, Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears*, 272, or Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute; or, Why Is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (London: Verso, 2000), 159–60.

55. Simone Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, trans. Richard Rees (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 316, quoted in Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 80.

Towards the end of *The Fragile Absolute* Žižek describes a scene from the movie *The Shawshank Redemption* (dir. Frank Darabont, 1994), where a convict talks about the emancipatory effect of Mozart's opera on the prisoners. As Žižek describes it,

In hearing this aria from *Figaro*, the prisoners have seen a ghost—neither the resuscitated obscene ghost of the past, nor the spectral ghost of the capitalist present, but the brief apparition of a future utopian Otherness to which every authentic revolutionary stance should cling.⁵⁶

At work are the sites of utopian Otherness, where the abyss of freedom at the core of human being finds its articulation. And it is this negative restlessness that Žižek is trying to bring alive in his audience through his appropriation of Antigone, Sygne, or Bartleby.

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