

The act reconsidered: *Actcidental* Antigone and the new wounded

Louis Matheou

Department of Psychosocial Studies, Birkbeck, University of London, Malet St,
Bloomsbury, London WC1E 7HX, UK.
E-mail: lpmatheou@gmail.com

Abstract This paper defends a Lacanian reading of political subjectivity apropos trauma against Catherine Malabou's neurobiological critique of psychoanalysis. Malabou claims that our political era is increasingly characterised by the new wounded – post-traumatic subjects who are clinically and theoretically beyond psychoanalysis. Through a retelling of Sophocles' *Antigone* using a novel taxonomy of Lacan's concept of the act, a new type of Lacanian subject is revealed that refutes Malabou to ensure the continuing relevance of the psychoanalytic lens on contemporary politics. *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* (2018) 23, 330–349. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41282-018-0098-8>; published online 13 July 2018

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Jacques Lacan was, by his own admission, 'not a man of the left' (Lacan, 1991/2007, p. 114). 'What you aspire to as revolutionaries,' he warned students at the Université de Paris VIII in 1969, 'is a master. You will get one' (p. 207). And yet, despite often playing the conservative master himself, Lacan devoted a whole year of his seminars to a phenomenon that has rightly been described as a 'utopian moment of sorts in [his] work' (Fink, 1997, p. 79) – the psychoanalytic act. Whilst its original setting was the clinic, in political psychoanalytic theory the act is now situated at the point where intra-subjective and socio-political revolution meet. At the level of the subject's experience, this politicised form of the act can take the subject beyond the desire for a master and partially extricate it from its subjection to power. On the terrain of its formal impact, the act can be the complete revolutionary reconfiguration of the socio-political and can dramatically reframe our understanding of what is possible and what is not.



Since Lacan formally introduced the act in his (1967–1968) *Seminar XV*, the thinker to have mobilised it most productively is Slavoj Žižek. In Žižek's hands, an act might be any of the following: the moment when Keyser Söze murders his own family in *The Usual Suspects* (1995), which liberates him from the control of their kidnappers (Žižek, 2011, p. 122); the Russian Revolution, which dramatically overhauled existing social and political structures (Žižek, 2001a, pp. 113–17); Tito's 1948 declaration of Yugoslavia as a non-aligned communist state – a previously unimaginable internal revelation of the cracks in the Stalinist universe (Žižek, 2001b, p. 45); or the gesture of refusal by Herman Melville's character Bartleby in *Bartleby the Scrivener* (1952), whose retort of 'I would prefer not to' opens up a new space outside the hegemonic order in which he lives (Žižek, 2009b, pp. 381–5). The diversity of these examples is testament to the evolution of the concept in Žižek's work and its gradual transformation into something similar to Alain Badiou's (1988/2006) notion of the event. Here, though, I would like to look at the specifically subjective dynamics of the Lacanian–Žižekian act by offering a new reading of just one of Žižek's (1998, 2001a, b) most foundational examples of the act: Antigone's act.

Sophocles' (2011) play *Antigone* revolves around the refusal of Creon, King of Thebes, to allow Antigone's dead brother Polyneices a proper burial. Antigone defies Creon and unrepentantly attempts to bury her brother; she is caught in the process and condemned to be buried alive, but hangs herself beforehand. For Žižek, Antigone's suicidal gesture is the epitome of the act. To be precise, though, Antigone commits suicide twice. The first time is in her refusal of Creon, by which she forfeits her 'entire social existence [... and suspends] the socio-symbolic network which guarantees [her] identity' (Žižek, 1998). The second suicide is Antigone's bodily suicide, when she hangs herself. As Yannis Stavrakakis (2010) puts it, Žižek views Antigone's act as a 'cut in the Real' (p. 5) – 'it is a total refusal of the Symbolic, a pure 'no!'' (Žižek, 2001b, cited in Stavrakakis, 2010, p. 5). In this formulation, it is the self-destitution of a subject that places itself in complete opposition to the Symbolic order and goes so far beyond concern for its own well-being that it is wholly willing to destroy itself. The act is thus a moment of radical autonomy and rupture in which the subject throws off the desires and authority of state or society or Other.

In what follows, I want to reconsider Antigone's act in light of Lacan's proclamation that 'suicide is the only act that can succeed without misfiring' (Lacan, 1990, p. 43). Much has already been written on the temporality of the act (Stavrakakis, 2010, 2011; Neill, 2011), the nature of signification in the act (Pluth, 2007), the role the act plays in Žižek's political ontology (Johnston, 2009; Parker and Cuéllar, 2014), the psychoanalytic permutations of the act (Rowan, 2016), the politics of the act (Glynos, 2000; Grigg, 2008), and the transformation of the subject in the act (Pluth, 2007; Ruti, 2012; Rothenberg, 2010; McGowan, 2010). But, until now, Lacan's puzzling statement on suicide has not received serious and sustained attention. I believe that if we do take it

seriously and, to a certain extent, read Lacan against himself, we can reveal the presence of another, previously undiscovered, version of the act – what I am calling the *actcident*.

The significance of this discovery is partly exegetical. It demands a closer differentiation between modalities of the act than is currently present in debates around the nature of signification and the play of temporality in the act. But the *actcident*'s concerns also extend beyond internal Lacanian disputes. Its explication is at the same time a defence of the idea of psychoanalysis as a tool with which to understand contemporary politics; a defence, that is, against the work of Catherine Malabou and in particular her (2012b) notion of the new wounded. The new wounded, Malabou explains, are those people 'who suffer psychic wounds that traditional psychoanalysis cannot understand' (p. 9) and who characterise global political violence today. If Malabou's diagnosis is correct, the defining political subjectivity of our time will lie outside the clinical and theoretical jurisdiction of psychoanalysis.

Malabou's claim rests on two fundamental premises. The first is the 'impossibility [from a neurological perspective] of separating the effects of political trauma from the effects of organic trauma' (p. xviii). She thus treats the victims of severe cerebral lesions (i.e. brain damage) and advanced Alzheimer's (i.e. serious neurodegeneration) in the same way as some victims of extreme socio-political violence: the sufferers of war trauma, targets of continuous drone warfare, victims of electroconvulsive shock torture, or the *Muselmänner* of Nazi concentration camps – 'those men who, having become indifferent to everything, let themselves die' (p. xvii). In certain severe cases, individuals can enter into a post-traumatic state that is characterised by affective absence and neural disconnection. Politico-cerebral trauma deprives them of desire and leaves them utterly indifferent to the world around them; it can strip their reserves of memory, demolish the Symbolic texture of their subjectivity and destructively create new identities that have no apparent links to the preceding subject.

The second premise of Malabou's argument is the claim that politico-cerebral violence consists of the abstract and brutal shocks of a politics that 'cancels itself as such and takes the appearance of nature' (p. 156). In his critique of Malabou, Žižek (2008) points to George Soros' currency speculation in the 1990s as an instance of this abstract violence at its purest: 'on the one extreme, the financial speculation going on in its own sphere, with no transparent links to the reality of human lives; on the other extreme, a pseudo-natural catastrophe (suddenly and unexpectedly losing jobs [especially in South-East Asia]), with no apparent reason at all' (p. 9). Whilst not all pseudo-natural catastrophes result in the post-traumatic subjectivity of the new wounded, the novelty of such violence derives from the "disenchanted" post-religious [nature of our] era [... It is now] much more directly experienced as [a] meaningless intrusion of the real' (p. 11).



If, then, Malabou is right that contemporary politics is increasingly characterised by the production of the post-traumatic new wounded through the abstract shocks of an external real, what can psychoanalysis offer by way of explanation? Malabou's contention is precisely that the new wounded should not and *cannot* be placed on the couch, for how can a subject without desire, affect, libidinality or biography enter analysis or be understood with psychoanalytic theoretical vocabulary? The new wounded thus threaten to render psychoanalysis clinically and theoretically speechless, and, if they are the defining figures of politics today, would also seem to overhaul the psychoanalytic reading of political subjectivity apropos trauma.

The relevance of the *actcident* to all this stems from the shared form of the subject it produces with the subjectivity of the new wounded. As will become clear, the end result of the *actcident* is also the post-traumatic subject (though it arrives there by different means from the effacement of politics and nature). In explicating this subject in Lacanian terms – as *actcidental* Antigone – my hope is to show that, far from fatally demarcating the limits of Lacanian thought, Malabou's challenge actually allows us to expand its conceptual horizon. The *actcident* bonds the chief Lacanian–Žižekian theory of radical autonomy with a neurobiological account of political violence and destructive subjectivation. And, if successful, this drawing together of the clinical, the cerebral and the political will help ensure the continuing relevance of the psychoanalytic reading of political subjectivity.

The subject and the traversing of fantasy

In its original form, the act is a moment in which, as Lacan (1967–1968) asserts, 'the subject is, as a subject, entirely transformed'. This transformation is not socio-political, as it will later become with Žižek, but firmly situated within Lacan's theory of the subject and his thoughts on the end of analysis.

Lacan construes the subject as the result of the division 'between the necessary loss of its being on the one hand and the ever alienating meaning in the Other on the other hand' (Verhaeghe, 1999, p. 176). It is important to note that to talk of this subject is to talk of both a subject of desire and a subject of lack. Existing within language and the Symbolic and in subjection to the Other – or to be 'castrated', as Lacan (1967–68) puts it – is to lack. A subject desires because it lacks being and seeks to recover it by reclaiming *objet petit a* – the object-cause of its desire, a causative reminder of being which the subject (erroneously) believes will fill its lack and make it whole again. And a subject also lacks because desire is metonymic (i.e. it can never recover that 'lost' being) and is based on the Other's co-extensive lack/desire. The subject, Lacan (1967–68) decrees, 'is only realised exactly qua lack'; one cannot, therefore, be a subject without being in some way a subject of lack.

Lacan reasons that the castrated subject-analysand should aim for the ‘traversing of fantasy’ as the endpoint of analysis. If fantasy serves to obscure or hide lack by staging the Other’s desire, its traversal involves a confrontation directly with the subject’s lack or the Other’s desire itself. When the neurotic subject traverses the fundamental fantasy (the nucleus of its phantasmatic relation to the Other’s desire), the ‘divided subject assumes the place of the cause, in other words, subjectifies the traumatic cause of his or her own advent as subject, coming to be in that place where the Other’s desire – a foreign, alien desire – had been’ (Fink, 1997, p. 62). The subject, in a moment of self-destitution, confronts its own ‘constitutive division’ (Rowan, 2016) and places itself in the position of *objet petit a*. In doing so, it assumes the position of its own and the Other’s lack (or non-existence). After this point, the subject no longer attempts to win the desire and recognition of the Other; instead, it recognises that both itself and the Other are split, inconsistent, and phantasmatically inter-dependent. The subject that has traversed fantasy is inaugurated by this insight that the Other does not in fact exist, and so no longer tries to position itself in relation to the Other’s desire. It gives up on the idea of a ‘Sovereign Good’ (Lacan, 1986/1992, p. 300) that would enable it to regain total unity and wholeness, and affirms instead the ‘wound of its subjectivity’ (McGowan, 2010, p. 11). How exactly, then, does this event of drastic psychic metamorphosis occur?

Aphanisis

The traversing of fantasy occurs through the act. In the psychoanalytic setting, this can be understood as a type of action that transforms the relations of transference that characterise two other types of action that Lacan discusses: acting out; and the *passage à l’acte*.

An example of acting out that Lacan gives is of a young homosexual woman treated by Freud (Lacan, 2004/2014, pp. 114–130) who would intentionally walk around with her lover in the areas near her father’s work in an effort to attract his attention. In the context of analysis, this disruptive staging of fantasy was done ‘with [her] analyst in mind’ (Johnston, 2009, p. 145) and was therefore oriented ‘toward the Other’ (p. 146). In contrast, the *passage à l’acte* is not an enactment of fantasy but a ‘reaction to (and against) [...] this “scene” in which the subject maintains a desirable position for the Other’ (Pluth, 2007, p. 100). In the young woman’s case, she was unable to control her anxiety after actually being seen by her angry father and quickly committed suicide. This was not a message addressed to someone, but an exit from the scene of fantasy and an ending of the conversation, so to speak, with the Other.

The psychoanalytic act proper refers to the dissolution of transference between analyst and analysand; it is ‘the elective moment when



psychoanalysand passes to psychoanalyst' (Lacan, 1969, p. 1). It is not addressed to the Other (unlike acting out) and through it the subject traverses fantasy by fundamentally reconfiguring its relations with the Other and its desire (unlike the *passage à l'acte*).

If the act is understood in this way as the traversing of fantasy, then in the moment of the analysand's act, the subject is left, 'however briefly, floating in the unanchored void of an anonymous, faceless form of subjectivity' (Johnston, 2009, p. 153) and, for that moment, ceases to exist as a subject. The act is this escape from the Symbolic and encounter with the Real, wherein the subject, caught between meaning and being, disappears in what Lacan (1973/1978) would call an *aphanisis*, and returns with its subjective structure modified. The reason it disappears is that to traverse the fundamental fantasy is to approach something so central to the subject that 'dissolving' it also dissolves the subject itself. The act thus inaugurates a different subject with an augmented set of Imaginary (or ego-based) and Symbolic attachments and identifications that are based on its new relationship to the Other and its desire.

From desire to (death) drive

The essential narrative of the Lacanian act to this point has been about a type of action-event that creates a subject that has traversed fantasy and that returns anew from the act with a modified set of subject-Symbolic co-ordinates. Žižek extends this narrative by developing the notion that the subject of the act moves from desire to drive. As Mara Ruti (2012) writes:

the act emerges during moments of breakdown when the subject is past the point of polite negotiation, when there is no choice but to stake everything on a stubborn stance of defiance that attacks the Other's hegemony – that represents a categorical rejection of the (enigmatic or obvious) signifiers of the Other's desire. (p. 78)

In her unyielding refusal of Creon, Antigone – our case in point – pursues her desire to the point where the drive or, more specifically, the death drive, takes over. Žižek (2009a) helps explain the transition:

[T]he weird movement called "drive" is not driven by the "impossible" quest for the lost object; *it is a push to directly enact the "loss" – the gap, cut, distance – itself* [...] drive is not an infinite longing for the Thing which gets fixated onto a partial object; "drive" IS this fixation itself in which resides the "deathly" dimension of every drive. (p. 229, italics in original)

The shift from desire to drive is a shift from the impossible satisfaction offered by the lost object to the enjoyment/*jouissance* derived from the libidinally infused failure to attain the object – in the ‘compulsion to encircle again and again the site of the lost Thing’ (Žižek, 2002, p. 273). Thus, the object of desire ceases to be important because the libidinal trajectory becomes the focus.

Critically, in going beyond desire, the subject of the drive also places itself in opposition to the Symbolic. This is a result of the non-Symbolic and disruptive character of *jouissance* and the attachment to blind, excessive, repetitive failure that its animation through the drive entails. What this means is that, inasmuch as *jouissance* is ‘a form of enjoyment that is willing to exceed the parameters of life’ (Hook, 2016, p. 232) and go beyond the pleasure principle, the subject of the drive is properly the subject of the death drive. This is not the death drive as some instinctual urge or powerful wish for self-erasure, but as an excessive force that goes beyond the subject and proceeds without concern for its welfare or its Symbolic positioning. So, though the death drive involves a disregard for life, it is less a desire for death than a surplus vitality or a ‘mode of unnatural (“undead”) libidinal animation which exceeds what is required of the organism as a biological unity’ (p. 235).

The death drive would yield an act when a ‘symbolic compulsion attempt[s] to block the death drive’s excessive attachment’ (McGowan, 2010, p. 17). Antigone, in her refusal to give up on the proper burial of her brother – pursued from desire into drive – commits Symbolic suicide. She stakes the entirety of her social existence in her ‘no!’ to Creon and so ‘eschews both the values and laws of the Other and the role it plays as a symbolic regulatory mechanism in moderating what [she] wants’ (Hook, 2016, p. 244). This Symbolic suicide heralds the Antigone of the death drive, in which she lives ‘with a supreme, serene disregard for the finite, mortal animality’ (Johnston, 2009, p. 157) of her own embodiment. Antigone finds a type of freedom in this supreme disregard for her own well-being and status and in living according to her *jouissance*. Indeed, she lives the death drive all the way up to her own bodily suicide, which entails the complete destruction of her physical life and her accompanying (lived) subject-Symbolic position.

Suicide – the only successful act

This would seem to suggest that, as the most total rejection and disavowal of the Symbolic, suicide is the most complete form of act. Such a hypothesis finds concrete affirmation in Lacan (1990), who writes that ‘suicide is the only act that can succeed without misfiring’ (p. 43). As Calum Neill (2003) suggests, the reason for this is that suicide



is the only act available to the subject which cannot result in a persistence of lack. Postsuicide, there is no subject to lack. And just as there is no subject, neither is there an Other for the subject, there is, that is, no symbolic order in which the act could be (re)inscribed. (Neill, cited in Stavrakakis, 2011, p. 305)

A serious problem arises here, though, because Lacan (1966–1967) also says that ‘the act is signifying’ (p. 74). If that is so, how could the dead subject of the perfect act do anything with signifiers? How can the total refusal of the Symbolic in suicide be anything other than its annihilation? If the subject is meant to return from the act with its subjective-Symbolic structure modified, how can it do so if it simply does not return?

One way to think through the ostensible impasse of signification and suicide is to make the distinction between the subject (in its broader sense) and the physically living subject. Whilst physical death marks the end of the living organism, it does not mean the end of the subject (of the signifier). Symbolic existence can continue beyond the parameters of biological life and, conversely, biological life can, in a manner, continue beyond the Symbolic. Lacan (1986/1992) illustrates this idea with the notion of the zone ‘between two deaths’ (pp. 270–291). It is in this zone that we find Antigone after her Symbolic suicide (her ‘no!’ to Creon by which she forfeits her social position) and before her bodily suicide. The order of these two deaths, though, can be reversed, and the subject can live on in the signifier past physical death (in obituaries, gravestones, legacy and so on) – which itself can herald a Symbolic re-birth or immortality (as with the hunger striker who dies for the cause). The point being that suicide does not necessarily destroy the Symbolic, and signification does not end just because physical life does.

Nevertheless, to establish that death is not necessarily the end of signification is not to detail the precise operations of signifiers in the act. So far we have understood the act as the traversing of fantasy and as the product of a conflict between death drive and the Symbolic. But approaching the question of signification in the act requires much closer attention to the play of signifiers and temporality while and immediately after it occurs. We must ask: Is the act the moment of the ‘no!’ or is it the process of the subject’s return? Is it the escape from the Symbolic and encounter with the Real, or the return from the Real and the re-encounter with the Symbolic? In other words, does an act signify (positively) or suspend signification (negatively)?

Signification in the act

Žižek (1999) claims that in Lacan the ‘act is a purely negative category’ (p. 160) and argues, as Neill (2011) explains, that it is the moment of ‘radical suspension

of the Other without recourse to a further moment of reinscription' (p. 221). The moment of Antigone's suicidal gesture is, as we have seen, for Žižek the epitome of the act – it is a cut in the Real without signification; her 'no!' is an absolute refusal of the Symbolic.

Arguing against Žižek, Stavrakakis (2010) maintains that, whilst an act does entail an encounter with the Real, 'this encounter only becomes conscious through the failure of the symbolic and... has to be... articulated, registered within the symbolic.' He also writes that 'a proper act [...] involves the production of a signifier of the lack in the Other and an attempt to institutionalise this empty signification' (p. 4). Neill (2011) goes further, maintaining that 'even in order for the subject to be understood to have experienced the act or to have experienced itself as acting this would necessitate the act's (re)inscription in the symbolic' (p. 225). Antigone's suicide is therefore not an act for Neill because the act is in the moment of 'subjective assumption' (p. 227). It operates where the Real and Symbolic meet, and so here Stavrakakis and Neill uphold the impossibility of the act as pure negativity, for it is only when the act makes necessary recourse to signification (and so fails as a pure negativity) that it can succeed. In these readings, then, an act has to fail in order to succeed; that is, it has to involve the re-establishment of the Symbolic (and the different relationship between subject and Other thereafter) in order to be effective.

The Stavrakakis-Neill line of reasoning is certainly not without justification in Lacan. If a new subject comes into existence after the act then without Symbolic reinscription there is no act; as Adrian Johnston (2009) asserts, an act 'conjures into existence a signifying structure [...] after the (f)act' (p. 147). However, in *Seminar XIV* (1966–67), Lacan also suggests that a subject must necessarily misrecognise the act which created it as the result of a disavowal (*Verleugnung*). This means that the moment of subjective assumption is simultaneously the erasure of the event of the act, and that the act is always already over at the point of reinscription. The act, therefore, is in the 'no!' – the moment of absolute negativity – because in an act that is successful because it misfires and reinscribes (i.e. fails and recreates) the Symbolic, it is as if the act itself had never happened. What, then, would be the difference between the pre- and post-act Symbolic co-ordinates?

Pluth (2007) offers yet another reading of how signifiers operate in an act, arguing that, if the act involves the subject's reintroduction into the Symbolic, then what the subject experiences 'is a return to an original position, one in which a subject is first subjected to a signifier' (p. 131). This is not 'a mere repetition of the subject's origin, but a repetition that recreates, bringing about a new way for the subject to be in relation to signifiers, the Other, and the real' (p. 132). The act is indeed a negativity, but 'with a positive insistence' (p. 137).

It so happens that this idea of negativity with positive insistence is also an apt summary of what has so far only been implied about the death drive – that it is



both the destruction and recreation of the Symbolic. As mentioned, it destroys because it exceeds the Symbolic and because of the destabilising/annihilating capacities of *jouissance*. But it also recreates because it makes the subject

[an] eternal slave to endless movement, to continuation [...] And the symbolic order, and subsequently the subject him or herself, is constructed around this emptiness of motion, which is the void. But, as the eternal void in motion, the death drive is also the breeding ground for all subjectivity and the symbolic order itself. So, at the end, the disintegrating symbolic order and subject meet their beginning: the nothingness in which all was and will be created. (Dawkins, 2015)

Thus, that moment of radical negativity in the act – of the Real – is the death drive with the positive insistence of continuation. In an act, the Symbolic order will return in perverse form; Antigone will find enjoyment in her renunciation of Creon and her social position. But the Symbolic *will* return, and the death drive – as radical negativity with positive insistence, or ‘active nothingness’ (Dawkins, 2015) – ensures it.

So, where does all this leave us with respect to Lacan’s (1990) declaration that ‘suicide is the only act that can succeed without misfiring’ (p. 43)? We can now suggest that an act, in order to re-inaugurate the subject and reconfigure its relations to signifiers, the Other and the Real, should be understood as a doubled moment. The first is the moment of radical negativity; the second is its inevitable reinscription in the Symbolic – and in order to properly bring about a new subject, an act must ‘fail’ (as pure negativity) in order to succeed (as renewed subject-Symbolic). *Not all acts, however, involve both moments.*

Two acts: minimal and maximal

In their debates over signification in the act, Pluth, Neill, Stavrakakis and Žižek all seem to have overlooked something crucial. If every act must fail but suicide is the only kind that that can succeed without misfiring, then what Lacan’s proclamation provides is the proper *trajectory* of the act. It indicates that the act aims towards death in suicide and the discontinuation of lack. And, that the physically living subject is surely not expected to reach this endpoint or it would cease to exist, suggests that Lacan (intentionally or not) envisions *two endpoints* to the act: one broadly contiguous with the end of analysis and the traversing of fantasy; and another where the death drive meets death in the very literal sense. I believe this in turn suggests that there are two types of act: a *minimal* act in which the subject returns anew from its confrontation with its constitutive division and lives by its *jouissance* (Antigone’s initial refusal of Creon and her ensuing life *qua* death drive); and a *maximal* act in which there is no lack at all –

an act that fails to yield a subject (Antigone's literal suicide). In its minimal form, the act succeeds because it fails; in its maximal form, the act fails because it succeeds.

Now, the obvious issue with the maximal act is whether or not it can be considered an act at all because, afterwards, there is no physically living subject to speak of. But here we could ask: Are there conceivable circumstances in which the subject could commit suicide and yet continue to live or, more specifically, where suicide both succeeds and fails, where there is a living subject and yet not lack? Technically speaking, this should not be possible because, as we have already seen, to be a (castrated) subject is to lack and so the cessation of lack should also be the cessation of subjectivity. To tackle this apparent impossibility, we might work through three potential instances of a subject that commits suicide in an act and yet continues to live (without lack).

The first can be found in the Buddhist conception of *an-atman* and the goal of Nirvana, which would liberate the individual from desire and suffering. This can be understood as a prolonged attempt at a kind of virtual or Imaginary suicide, in the sense that *an-atman* aims at disidentification from the ego. The Buddhist subject would utter an infinitely repeated 'no!' to the illusory ego, and would confront its constitutive division. It is true that Lacan himself also sees the ego as a kind of decoy or mode of entrapment, and we could conceptualise the Buddhist act as a movement towards the act or as an Imaginary act of self-destitution. Whilst this might be a suitable way to end analysis for some neurotics, it would surely be an overstatement to suggest that this recognition as such would take the Buddhist subject beyond lack. In Nirvana (if this is even possible as a permanent state of being), what might end is the active compulsion to search for (lost) objects, not one's structure as castrated subject.

The second option, perhaps counter-intuitively, is the minimal act; the reason being that Antigone's refusal of Creon is a type of suicidal continuation – a Symbolic suicide that announces an 'undead' Antigone. It places her into Lacan's zone 'between two deaths' (Lacan, 1986/1992, pp. 270–291) – in the Symbolic and of the body. In this zone, accessed initially through Symbolic suicide, Antigone does not destroy the Symbolic totally but 'recreates it to satisfy an undying urge to continue: [...] living yet dead' (Dawkins, 2015). In other words, the death drive resuscitates the Symbolic and Antigone – enjoying her perverse relation to the Other – lives a form of death.

Like the Buddhist, however, Antigone between two deaths is not a subject beyond lack. As the 'alive while dead' subject of the death drive, Antigone is a form of life in death but what changes is her relation to her lack, not her fundamental constitution as lacking being. She finds enjoyment in the impossibility of acquiring the lost object, but this does not change the fact that the object has been 'lost'. As well as this, the death drive is not the destruction of the Symbolic order, but 'the will to create [it] from zero, to begin again' (Lacan, 1986/1992, p. 212) – just on Antigone's terms.



A third act – the *actcident*

The last instance of a suicidal subject beyond lack is the post-traumatic subject, and here we do succeed in giving form to Lacan's confusing statement on the suicidal act. Imagine another scene in which Antigone, possessed by the suicidal force of her 'no!' to Creon, attempts to commit suicide. This time, though, her attempt fails and she does not die, but instead suffers severe neurological damage. From this point on Antigone is indifferent to the world and affectively absent, living completely cut from her reserves of memory and separated from her old Symbolic identity. Far from returning from the act, having confronted and subjectified her constitutive division, as in the minimal act, or ceasing to physically exist at all, as in the maximal act, Antigone continues to exist, but exhibits no desire and no longer seems to be a subject of lack. This is the Antigone of the *actcident*, the Antigone of an act that does not misfire and in which suicide both succeeds and fails.

The *actcident* is an act in which the death drive meets with a traumatic incidence that results both in the death and continued survival of the subject. It occurs when a suicidal 'no!' meets a non-negotiable trauma that acts as an *ersatz* death for the subject. It is somewhere in between the Lacanian act (both minimal and maximal) and Malabou's (2012a) notion of the 'accident'.

An accident, Malabou explains, is an 'ontological violence that gives rise to a new being which has nothing in common with its preceding form' (p. 17). The subject of such trauma is 'signaled by indifference and coldness' (p. 14) and 'remains suspended in the post-traumatic form [...] a subject who misses nothing – who does not even lack lack, as Lacan might have put it' (p. 90). The subject of the *actcident* shares its key features with the post-traumatic subject – it too would be without lack or libidinality and yet continue to live. *Actcidental* Antigone thus becomes the post-traumatic survivor of her own death – the form of her own destruction.

To re-purpose Malabou's description of an accident, the *actcident* is also

the form of the impossibility of fleeing. The impossibility of flight where flight presents the only option. We must allow for the impossibility of flight in situations in which an extreme tension, a pain or malaise push a person towards an outside that does not exist. (p. 10)

It is no coincidence, as Malabou notes, that this is the way in which Freud describes the drive – that constant force that 'no actions of flight avail against' (p. 10). The implication is that the suicidal 'no!' is also the articulation of the impossibility of flight – the point where there 'is no choice but to stake everything' (Ruti, 2012, p. 78) – and the result is a transformation that is also the death of the subject that existed before the *actcident*. Antigone, pushed to

the point where flight presents the only option, survives her own death, but lives without connection to her pre-*actcident* form. She is the subject of a third act; an act that does not misfire and yet still yields a subject – the post-traumatic subject beyond lack. In other words, *actcidental* Antigone is a member of the new wounded.

The *actcident* thus creates a different type of subject to the other acts – this total transformation in subjectivity is not reached by either the minimal or maximal versions, and is precisely what Malabou accuses Lacan of being unable to theorise. However, we have so far described the subject of the *actcident* in predominantly Malabouian – not Lacanian – terms, and a number of highly problematic questions remains. What does it mean to be ‘incapacitated’, as it were, of desire and lack? Is *actcidental* Antigone still even a subject in the Lacanian sense? How would she fit into Lacanian thought in any substantial way? Does she return to some kind of ‘pure form of subjectivity’ (Žižek, 2014, p. 98)? What relation, if at all, would she have to a Symbolic identity? How does signification in the *actcident* work? Would clinical psychoanalysis be able to offer anything to this subject? If we are to integrate the new wounded into the Lacanian framework, it is to these questions that we must now turn.

Malabou, Badiou, and the limits of psychoanalysis

Malabou’s own discussions of the post-traumatic subject’s relation to Lacanian psychoanalysis are instructive here. She claims that, in cases where a person suffers a neural disconnection, the ‘traumatised victim’s speech doesn’t have any revelatory meaning [...] there is no representation [...] no example of separation’ (Malabou, 2013). Clinically speaking, how do you treat a subject who therefore might be considered ‘beyond unconscious’ (Žižek, 2008) and who would experience no transference in analysis?¹

More specifically, Malabou (2013) argues that one of the major challenges posed by this figure of the post-traumatic subject is that it cannot be accounted for by Freudian–Lacanian thinking on the temporality of trauma. For Lacan, she writes, a ‘specific trauma, such or such empirical shock, may happen only because a more profound and originary trauma, understood as the Real or as the “transcendental” trauma, has always already occurred’ (Malabou, 2013). In the case of the post-traumatic subject, though, a ‘neural disconnection does not trigger any previous conflict. Instead, the post-traumatised subject disconnects the structure of the always already. The post-traumatised subject is the never more of the always already’ (Malabou, 2013); there is no Symbolic integration of an external trauma which connects to the primary trauma of the Real. Malabou finds implicit company here in Alain Badiou, who, as Pluth (2007) explains, thinks that



the kind of signifying practice characteristic of an act [...] cannot think of an “effective destruction of the former law” that was governing the subject. There is always a return of the same law – in the sense that any constitution of the subject presupposes an exclusion of a traumatic real. This exclusion would be the primary, inevitable law for any subject. (p. 127)

Both Badiou and Malabou, therefore, define the Lacanian subject by the fundamental law of the exclusion of the traumatic Real, and neither believes Lacan is capable of theorising a subject that is not constituted by it. The ramifications of this critique for the psychoanalytic purview are clear: If *actcidental* Antigone no longer abides by this fundamental law of the subject, then neither she nor the post-traumatic subject as members of the new wounded are psychoanalytic subjects at all. The question, then, is can Lacan theorise a subject that is incapacitated of lack and that appears not to abide by the most fundamental law of the subject – the transcendental trauma of the Real?

Anxiety, psychosis, and the absent trauma of signification

The closest Lacan gets to a subject without lack or a subject who is in some way unanchored from the Symbolic is with his interpretations of anxiety and psychosis. In *Seminar X*, Lacan (2004/14) links anxiety to *objet petit a* and to lack; anxiety, he says, is the lack of lack itself and not, as Dylan Evans (2006) explains, ‘the absence of the breast, but its enveloping presence; it is the possibility of its absence which is, in fact, that which saves us from anxiety’ (p. 12). Anxiety is therefore an affective response to a lack of distance from *objet petit a* – the overwhelming effect of the Other’s desire. Lacan (1978/1991) also suggested that in another sense anxiety can be the result of the impossibility of mediation in the Real, or ‘this something faced with which all words cease and all categories fail, the object of anxiety *par excellence*’ (p. 163).

Yet it must be evident that the *actcidental* does not involve the over-proximity of *objet petit a* or the anxiety of the Real as object because the *actcidental* subject has no desire or affect to speak of. It does not attempt to position itself in phantasmatic rapport with the Other; nor does it, being affectively absent, seek either to stage *jouissance* in fantasy or approach the Real as object of anxiety. What happens in the *actcidental* is thus precisely the eradication of *objet petit a*.

What, then, of psychosis? Lacan finds that in the psychotic subject the split inaugurated by the Other as language – constitutive of subjectivity itself – has failed. In order to become a subject, as already noted, the child must yield to the Other as language and submit to signification. But, if the child refuses to do so, it achieves a kind of victory over the Other at the expense of its very subjectivity.

The psychotic thus experiences a kind of freedom ‘before’ the letter (Fink, 1997, p. 66). For Lacan, psychosis can also result from a failure to properly signify the Name-of-the-Father. Fink writes: should ‘this signifier be missing, none of the other signifiers represents anything at all [...] In psychosis, the barrier between mother and child offered by that name is not erected in solid enough fashion’ (p. 74). The consequence is the subject’s inability to defend against the invasion of *jouissance* and a failure of or hole in the Symbolic itself. As well as this, psychosis might also involve a shortage of *points de capiton* – the quilting points that tie the signifier to the signified and which are ‘similar to the little lines of force that an upholstery button forms on the surface of materials’ (Ruti, 2012, p. 79). As such, ‘the psychotic experience is characterised by a constant slippage of the signified under the signifier’ (Butler, 2014, p. 158). Lacan (2005/2016) develops his formulation of psychosis further still in the 1970s, presenting it as the untying of the Borromean knot of the Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary. This can involve the subject’s inability to situate their experience Symbolically and to distinguish between the Symbolic and the Real.

For Žižek (2008), the subject of psychotic disintegration can be found in Malabou’s post-traumatic subject:

when Malabou insists that in the true trauma of the real [...] it is the subject itself which lacks [...] does she not echo Lacan’s notion of the subject’s disintegration caused by the psychotic over-proximity of the object? (p. 25)

As with anxiety, though, again it is not a question of any kind of proximity to *objet petit a*, because the *actcidental* subject does not have any relation to it. It is not a case of psychic unsuturing from the Symbolic – either ‘before the letter’ or in the slippage of signification – nor is it the result of a shortage of *points de capiton* or an inability to distinguish Symbolic from Real or to defend against *jouissance*. True, as with anxiety, there is a relation between psychotic breakdown and the act in that the former can precipitate the latter and because there is a failure of Symbolisation in psychosis. But the *actcidental* subject is not psychotic (and its status as *actcidental* would not be structurally determined).

Consider that an act ‘transcends altogether the discursive (spatial) limits of the symbolic and, operating as a cataclysmic real creation, opens itself onto the void of eternity’ (Stavrakakis, 2011, p. 304) and then retakes a spatial dimension in Symbolic reinscription. By contrast, an *actcident* is *the very failure to return from the beyond of signification: the Real qua void of radical negativity*. As Ruti (2012) suggests, if ‘analysis relies on the signifier to reconfigure our destiny, the act (usually temporarily) ushers us beyond signification – to a place that demolishes the quilting points that customarily hold together our symbolic universe’ (p. 82). The minimal act is therefore a re-quilting that must necessarily be preceded by such a de-quilting. Accordingly,



the subject of the *actcident* remains at the point of de-quilting in the realm beyond signification. If this is so, and the affectively absent subject that fails to return from the Real is also deprived of its libidinal force (which would renew the Symbolic), then *the actcidental subject does not re-experience the founding trauma of signification*.

This reading of the subject of the *actcident* aligns up to a point with Žižek's (2008) characterisation of the post-traumatic subject as the pure subject of the death drive. He views this figure as the 'subject at zero-level: like an empty house where nobody is home' (p. 27). This subject is 'detached from external reality, disengaged, reduced to the persisting core deprived of its substance [...] the void that cannot be identified with any determinate positive content' (p. 26). It is the 'pure subject of the death drive: in it, only the empty frame of death drive as the formal-transcendental condition of libidinal investments survives, deprived of all its contents' (p. 23). Whilst it may not be entirely accurate to say that this subject would be *jouissance*-less (because death drive implies *jouissance*), its *jouissance* would be 'muted', so to speak. The subject of the *actcident* would thus also be a 'zero-level' subject – the empty, 'pure form of subjectivity, the form which already must have been there' (p. 27).

However, Žižek claims that the trauma that creates the post-traumatic subject is only traumatic inasmuch as it resonates with the founding trauma of subjectivity. He sees the traumatic incidence not as the destruction of the law of exclusion of the traumatic Real, but as a kind of repetition of it, which 'emerges when a living individual is deprived of its substantial content' (p. 27). At this point, Žižek and the *actcident* part ways. The trauma of the *actcident* can find no resonance with the originary trauma of subjectivity because it is *the very impossibility of the traumatic exclusion of the Real that founds the subject*. If the *actcident* is the impossible beyond of signification from which the subject does not return – that is, if it does not re-experience the founding trauma of signification – then *originary trauma will never have happened*. The Symbolic is effectively destroyed for the (physically living) subject, which as a result never gets (re-)founded as a subject. The *actcident* is therefore precisely that which both Malabou and Badiou accuse Lacan of being unable to theorise – the destruction of the fundamental law of the exclusion of the traumatic Real.²

Conclusion

I have tried to show here that *actcidental* Antigone is the subject of a third act which, until now, had not been drawn out of Lacanian theory. I believe that she is the form of Lacan's proclamation that suicide is the only act that can succeed without misfiring, and that she can be both outside the fundamental law of the exclusion of the traumatic Real and expositured through the Lacanian conception of the subject. I hope to have positioned her as a figure of *rapprochement*

between psychoanalysis and Malabou and, in so doing, I also hope to have dispelled Malabou's claim that psychoanalysis is incapable of fully understanding the defining political subjectivity of our time.

One final question remains, though: taking all this into account, can *accidental* Antigone still really be called a subject? How could she, if, as I have been arguing, she is 'beyond unconscious', incapacitated of lack, the form of the destruction of *objet petit a*, the absence of fantasy, the impossibility of signification, the effective destruction of the Symbolic and the failure of the transcendental trauma of the exclusion of the Real?

Strictly speaking, she cannot. I suggest instead that her relation to the Lacanian subject (both before and after the minimal act) can be understood as somewhat analogous to a mathematical equation that Lacan (1966–67) occasionally deployed: $\sqrt{-1}$. The square root of any negative number is an impossibility 'within the system of real numbers [...] [it] is produced by [...] and yet cannot fit within the system' (McGowan, 2010, p. 18). In this way, *accidental* Antigone is produced by and yet stands outside the Lacanian model of the subject, registering and exceeding its limits as such. To (cautiously) illustrate this symbolically, as Lacan often did with his concepts, perhaps the following adaptation of the idea of a negative square root might work: $\sqrt{-}$ \$.

Here, $\sqrt{}$ would represent the act, that which re-founds or recalls the subject; \$ would remain the symbol for the barred subject, as it is with Lacan; and '–' would be the non-negotiable traumatic incidence that separates the act from the *accident*. The formula for the *accident* is thus the square root of the subject as negativity – the result of which is the registration of the limits of the subject itself and the production of both *accidental* Antigone and the new wounded.

About the Author

Louis Matheou works with the Department of Psychosocial Studies at Birkbeck, University of London. His research explores the intersections of psychoanalysis, poststructuralism and contemporary political theory.

Notes

- 1 That being said, therapeutic ineffectuality is hardly new to the clinic. Freud (1914/1957) once suggested that psychotic subjects might not be able to form viable transference relations with their analyst, and in this precise technical sense they may not be workable psychoanalytic subjects at all.
- 2 A fair rejoinder to this notion of subject *qua* absence of originary trauma would be to ask what happens to the *sinthome* in all of this. In the *accident*, if we do not have signification or enjoyment, then we also do not have the *sinthome*.



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