Antigone and the Sublime: Acts of Impossible Affirmation

Lindsay Parkhowell
University of Potsdam
Department of English and American Studies
Am Neuen Palais, 10, 14469, Potsdam, Germany
Email: parkhowell@uni-potsdam.de

Abstract:

In this article, I interpret Antigone through the philosophical category of the sublime, which enables her to transcend the order of nature and her empirical self. Through a close textual analysis of the Greek word *amechanos* (impossible), I argue that Antigone manages to affirm a place for herself within the incoherent kinship legacy left her father Oedipus by resolutely honouring her brother as an end-in-himself. At the same time, this burial also affirms her nature as a "mother bird" opposed to the normative gender roles available within Kreon's *polis.* Understanding Antigone as a sublime figure also helps to explain two otherwise inscrutable references in the text: the first when Antigone compares herself to Niobe, and the second when the chorus describe her as the only person to enter Hades "alive". My argument that Antigone becomes a sublime Idea concludes with an analysis of her through the rhetorical figure of *hypotyposis,* or as an indeterminate analogy that exists concurrently between the realms of aesthetics (sublimity) and ethics (autonomy).

Keywords: Antigone, the sublime, the impossible, aesthetics, gender relations, German Idealism, ethics

Introduction

Antigone is an exceptional figure, but where does her power come from? Drawing upon Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment philosophers, I will interpret Antigone through the category of the sublime, which offers Antigone the power of the transcending the order of nature and her empirical self. Following this, I will analyse how her project of honouring her brother as an end-in-himself is fraught by impossible relations, because it is a position that can never be generalized within a rule or law. Antigone's *eros* for *amechanos,* or love for the impossible, exposes her problematic place within the kinship structure, while also providing the grounds for a twofold affirmation based on her famed autonomy: affirming the value of "irreplaceable singularity" represented by the burial of her brother, and affirming her nature in opposition to the norms of the political regime represented by Kreon.

Despite the fact that she is consigned by Kreon to a "nowhere place" (Green 1991, 204),[1] she continues to speak, to affirm her nature and to make visible her position and person. The fact that

Antigone acts at the limits of the intelligible confers upon her a status beyond generation and decay, which is acknowledged by the Chorus when they say that she will, alone among people, descend alive into Hades. Antigone's sublime sacrifice is to become an Idea that can live on in mythical memory after she is dead, which is why she compares herself to Niobe before she dies, that "Phrygian stranger" who could still weep through the rock that she was transformed into.

Finally, I will discuss how Antigone's subjecthood precedes the temporal order within which all 'fully' human narratives are produced. The chorus recognise this when they refer to her as a *daimonian teras,* a "spiritual prodigy or portent – a holy monster" (McNeill 2011, 37). They link her inhumanity to her spirituality, her ability to presage things to come by exposing her place within the symbolic order that governs intersubjective relations; at the same time, she comes to represent both moral autonomy and sublime transcendence, a paradoxical representation which, drawing upon Jean-Francois Lyotard's *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime* (1994), I argue should be viewed through the rhetorical lens of *hypotyposis* or analogy. In this way, Antigone is not an aesthetic figure that results in goodness, but rather an aesthetic symbol for an unrepresentible (impossible) good.

Antigone and the Sublime

In Kantian aesthetics a sublime experience is one in which an idea is unable to be represented by our faculties of sensible intuition. The imagination cannot play host to the immensity of the idea, and this inadequacy results in the sublime, an experience which is both pleasurable and painful to us, because it simultaneously involves both the defeat of our imaginative capacity of representation and the exaltation of our reason. Kant distinguishes between two kinds of sublime experience: In the mathematical sublime, the elevation of reason as a supersensible faculty is achieved in response to the imagination's inability to conceive of infinite magnitudes, while in the dynamical sublime, we achieve dominion through reason over natural events that make us feel physically powerless.

Both categories can be applied to the figure of Antigone. In the mathematical sublime Kant writes "that is sublime in comparison with which everything else is small" (Kant 2000, 134). The very idea of autonomy, which Antigone embodies, speaks of the independence of self-law from any other influence, and therefore also the precedence of this self-law over all others. Whether or not human beings are able to be autonomous and generate law by themselves is certainly an imperative by which all others can be considered small, because it sets itself up as the power that can command all others. Therefore, Antigone also evinces the dynamical sublime, because her idea of autonomy establishes dominion, i.e. power over other powers. The chorus recognise that Antigone's actions are incomparable to anyone else's when they refer to her as someone "alone among mankind**"**, as singular, when she is going to her death (Grene 1991, 882).

At the same time, the contemplation of the sublime in nature introduces the idea of an end or teleology to our capacity to reason. As Kant writes, "as we never meet with such an end outside ourselves, we naturally look for it in ourselves, and, in fact, in that which constitutes the ultimate end of our existence – the moral side of our being" (Kant 2000, 181). It is through the sublime that

we apprehend the Idea of reason, which is to say the unconditioned or absolute, the first in the chain of causality, in a form that is almost "intuitable" (Lyotard 1994, 187). As I will argue in my conclusion, *Antigone* dramatizes this relationship of thought to moral action, while at the same time producing an impossible gap between them: for although the sublime gives Antigone the power to transcend empirical conditions, it also remains unrepresentable as an Idea that cannot be reduced to any particular situation or person.

While Kant writes that in the face of nature's sublime power "the humanity in our person remains undemeaned even though the human being must submit to that dominion" (Kant 2000, 145), later Counter-Enlightenment thinkers argued instead that the self-transcendence of the sublime no longer exalts the dignity of human reason, but rather splits the subject by elevating her beyond an empirical and natural existence. Adorno writes:

> The sublime was supposedly the grandeur of human beings who are spiritual and dominate nature.... Even in Kant's formulation it was tinged with the nothingness of man; in this nothingness, the fragility of the empirical individual, the eternity of his universal destiny – his spirit – was to unfold. (Adorno 1997, 198)

Adorno views the split instigated by the sublime as creating a field in which the fragility of the empirical individual is sublimated into the eternity of her spirit. His claim that "the legacy of the sublime is unassuaged negativity" describes a situation in which a sublime self-representation cannot exist positively because we are never truly emancipated from our predicament within nature (1997, 198). While the liberation offered by the sublime is to sublimate a power that seek to dominate us, this liberation remains dependent upon the object that inaugurated it for its force. Therefore, a person who achieves a sublime self-representation would not only be undermined by their inability to ever give this Idea a sensible representation (according to the Kantian logic), but also by the way it separates them from their natural being.

This helps to explain why Antigone describes her husband as the "Lord of Death" (Grene 1991, 877), as dying for a principle takes upon the human body the immensity of an idea that the body cannot truly sustain or live out. Further, is it not paradoxical to even say that a person *could* even achieve sublime representation, because they would then be seeking to give expression to the unrepresentible? In fact, once committed to, such an endeavour would be fraught within impossible relations. I will now turn to close reading of the play, focusing upon how the concepts of the impossible, autonomy, and nature support my reading of Antigone's sublimity, before returning to the philosophical category of the sublime, and its shadow, the elemental, in my conclusion.

Impossible Relations: Limits and Ends

In my analysis of the theme of impossible relations in *Antigone,* I want to focus on the way Sophocles establishes the contours along which the possible and the impossible are delimited through

his early characterisation of Ismene and Antigone. Then I will focus on why the end that Antigone pursues, the burial of her brother to emphasise the principle of his irreplaceable singularity, represents an "impossible" (ἀμήχανος) end, one that can never be generalised because it must remain particular. Finally, I will compare this principle with the idea of instrumental ends espoused by Kreon.

In the opening scene of the play, Ismene presents a reasonable case for respecting the limits of possible action. These limits are, for her, socially demarcated, outlining her role as one citizen unable to oppose the majority of other citizens and as subordinate to sovereign law, and naturally demarcated, highlighting how it is not in her nature as woman and subject to transgress male law, or act in a manly manner. While she acknowledges that to obey Kreon is to offend the memory of her dead family, she will "beg those beneath the earth to give me their forgiveness" (Grene 1991, 74-75).

Antigone, by stark contrast, is from the outset resolute on burying her brother no matter what the cost. She refers to Ismene's arguments as an "excuse" and states that she obeys a law higher than any that can be set on Earth, for "the time in which I must please those that are dead is longer than I must please those of this world" (Grene 1991, 93; 86-87). Her emphasis that Polyneices' burial must be made visible to others is central to my later arguments about Antigone's affirmation. When Ismene suggests that Antigone should bury him in secret and promises to herself keep silent, Antigone emphatically responds that she "will hate you (Ismene) still worse for silence" (Grene 1991, 100). Antigone's commitment to "pleasing those I should please most", leads Ismene to answer in the conditional: *"If* you can do it. But you are in love with the impossible (ἀμήχανος)" (Grene 1991, 184; 104-5).

This is the first emergence of the Greek word 'impossible' (ἀμήχανος) in the text, and I want to note that it emerges in the context of a conversation about what sort of natures can contest or must submit to power, conceived of in both state (sovereign) and natural (manly) senses. The *LSJ* includes "extraordinary" or "enormous" in the sense of infinitely great or inconceivable in its list of definitions; the reader should note here the parallels to the incomparably great magnitude of the sublime. As in English the prefix ἀ attaches to denote 'not' or 'without' to the word μήχανον, which means device or machine, often specifically a military device such as a battering ram. We draw the sense that something ἀμήχανος cannot be routinised or generalised, it is unable to be 'mechanised'. This is a very different understanding to the one we would have if the word had been δύναμις, power.

Antigone responds to Ismene's conditional with a denial. In words that seem eerily prescient of the end that her actions will bring her to, she says: "when I can no more, then I will stop" (Grene 1991, 106). Here we can see the first demarcator of the possible for Antigone; the limits of the possible are bounded by her own capacity or momentum for action, to the limits of her strength, rather than an external boundary (as the external boundary of state force constrains Ismene.)

Kreon's first speech marks a counterpoint to Antigone's fiercely individualistic stance. His hubris is to seek to control divine law, to extend his political power into death: "he that is loyal in death, in life alike, shall have my honour" (Grene 1991, 188).[2] The importance of the complementary worldviews of Kreon and Ismene is that their position on what is possible or deserving of honour, and of what cannot be transgressed, is based upon a foundation combining divine sanction (it invokes the

gods), political power (it is unlawful) and temporal control (a narrative defining the present in relation to past and future). Understanding this allows us to understand that Antigone's opposition is to the normative, social and temporal orders that govern Thebes, and that her sublimity gives her the power to transcend these orders.

But what is the nature of Antigone's "impossible" end or goal?[3] the most detailed and passionate explanation occurs in her final speech, which is given in Grene's translation as:

> If my husband were dead, I might have had another,
> and child from another man, if I lost the first.
> But when father and mother both were hidden in death
> no brother's life would bloom for me again.
> That is the law under which I gave you precedence,
> my dearest brother, and that is why Creon thinks me
> wrong, even a criminal... (1991, 966-975)

Antigone holds the action of honouring her brother with precedence over her own survival because it exhibits the principle of "irreplaceable singularity": he cannot be replaced (he is unique *to her*) and nobody else is like him (he is singular). She wants to honour him as he is in-himself, irrespective of whatever he did during life; furthermore, as McNeill notes, Antigone privileges this principle of honouring her family over its immediate living representative in Ismene. He further observes that once the burial rites are performed, Antigone considers her duty discharged and does not fetishize or in any way concern herself with Polyneices' body: "The paradoxical situation in which Antigone finds herself is that in seeking to honour her dead brother as or for himself her deed must take as essential the material remains that her deed seeks to render inessential. By honouring him in burial, Antigone seeks to distinguish her brother as he is in himself from his material remains" (McNeill 2011, 13).

Honouring Polyneices as he is in himself represents an impossible (ἀμήχανος) end in another sense as well, because the radically individualised idea of a person in-themselves is something that cannot be routinized, or generalised. This principle cannot be brought into the "machinery" of social interaction. Through his interpretation of the linguistic reasonances within *Antigone,* McNeill shows how Sophocles intends for the relation between instrumental ends and ends-in-themselves to be characteristic of the juxtaposition of Kreon and Antigone. The *auto-* compound assigned to Antigone is *autonomy,* or self-law, the capacity to be a self-legislating moral agent; whereas the *auto-*compound assigned to Kreon by Tiresias in his warning to him is αὐθαδία (authadeia), "prideful stubbonness" (McNeill 2011, 31-32). Therefore, within Kreon's conception of moral behaviour, not forgetting that he has exemplified himself as the standard-bearer of public morality, Antigone's commitment to honouring the incomparable worth of her brother is set apart from the legitimised moral action within Thebes. It is literally incomprehensible to Kreon, who views moral action as circumscribed by instrumental ends.[4]

Antigone's Autonomy and her Place within Kinship

When Antigone stakes her life on the irreplaceability of Polyneices she is also emphatically coming to stand for this principle herself. She will not accept Ismene's paradigm of self-interest subordinated to force, or Kreon's paradigm where familial and personal interests are subordinated to the state in life and in death, but radically emphasises her status as a deliberate being with both the ability, and the right, to choose what she thinks is right. This is true even as the focus of her deliberation, her commitment to its absolute fulfilment regardless of the cost, fixates her upon death and ultimately results in her status as a living being descending into death.

But what is her precise interest in the principle of "irreplaceable singularity"? One could argue that the denial of a proper burial for Polyneices has occasioned the rupture between death and life that leads to the necessity for Antigone to defend and exalt this principle. However, while this may be true, it is also clearly true that Antigone has a deeply personal interest in honouring Polyneices himself and not anybody else, as she speaks longingly of lying with her brother in death. It is my belief that, through her overwhelming commitment to honour her brother as an end-in-himself, Antigone asserts a place for herself within the symbolic order that governs inter-subjective relations, precisely because of her family legacy that has denied her a coherent place within kinship. The fact that she buries Polyneices twice, mirroring the dual burial of her father Oedipus, shows how Antigone uses the present to perform her duty to both family members, a burial that "reflects and institutes the equivocation of brother and father" (Butler 2000*,* 61).

As Butler writes in *Antigone's Claim*, the particular fate that desire suffers in language is to be unable to signify only the single object of stated desire, but also to contain references to all other significations that may be called up by this word or belong to the field that it negates in order to attain meaning. Therefore, when Antigone

> claims that she acts according to a law that gives her most precious brother precedence, and she appears to mean "Polyneices" by that description, she means more than she intends, for that brother could be Oedipus and it could be Eteocles, and there is nothing in the nomenclature of kinship that can successfully restrict its scope of referentiality to the single person, Polyneices. The chorus at one point seeks to remind her that she has more than one brother, but she continues to insist on the *singularity and non-reproducibility* of this term of kinship. (Butler 2000, 77, my italics)

Within the larger social and cultural context, Antigone is condemned to never have a clearly-defined and intelligible position within the kinship structure; as the product of incest she will always inhabit more than one kin position, and therefore be denied the stability and coherence that a clear-delimited role within the kinship structure confers. This is her inheritance from her father, and it means that she can never be recognised as 'fully' living, because she can never operate within the inter-subjective field without being an uncertain subject, at best, and a source of horror, at worst, for other subjects. Therefore, for Antigone, the self-reflexivity of an irreplaceable and singular subjecthood would mean to inhabit, for *the first time in her life,* a position that is not equivocal, but fixed and sure.

Antigone's unconditional commitment to acting morally in regards to her brother's burial is given its impetus by the accumulated weight of the past upon her, her existence as a social being exposed to the uncertain fate of 'dying within life', a person denied coherence at the very limits of the culturally intelligible. If we say that Oedipus's journey is one of self-knowledge, of discovering his place within the symbolic order by seeking to precede that order (through taking the place of his own father and marrying his own mother), then Antigone's journey is one of moral determination, of epitomising the agency available to people born into a situation that is outside of their control, but which they can nevertheless call up their human agency to respond to. In their final exchange the chorus says to Antigone:

> Yes, you go to that place where the dead are hidden,
> but you go with distinction and praise.
> [...] it was your own choice and alone among mankind
> you will descend, alive,
> to that world of death. (Grene 1991, 878-885)

Here Grene has translated αὐτόνομος, which means "one's own law" or "self-law" with connotations of independence, as "your own choice", presumably for reasons of verse compatibility. But to be autonomous means more than a choice, it means to be capable of agency based on a self-given law that is or can be independent of other influences. Antigone has come to embody autonomy, and we can imagine that this represents a victory for her, because it has assured *her own place* within the symbolic order that governs inter-subjective relations, as a person able to determine herself based upon her self-law and not only as the product of an incestuous legacy fated to live out a social death.

Anti-Nature and Antigone's Affirmation

Although she asserts her place, Antigone also knows that she has been consigned to "nowhere" within the social and normative orders as they are constructed under Kreon: She describes herself as having "neither a home among the living or the dead" and then repeats the point (Grene 1991, 905-907). Thus, from a social perspective *Antigone* dramatizes not only the conflict between private conscience and public law that the play is famous for,[5] but also the struggle for some types of people and some forms of social relations to be publically recognised as 'liveable'. In this section, I want to show that Antigone herself clearly is aware that that it is not in her nature to possess a socially-sanctioned, conventional role within the normative order, and that part of her affirmation is to affirm her own nature *even though* she cannot achieve a sanctioned place. Towards the end of her life she compares the hypothetical trajectory her life might have taken implicitly with the nature that is her own:[6]

> *Had I been* a mother of,
> of children, and my husband been dead and rotten,

I would not have taken this weary task upon me
against the will of the city.... (my italics, 961-4)

[Kreon] now takes me
by the hand and leads me away,
unbedded, without bridal, without share
in marriage and in nurturing of children. (Grene 1991, 972-6)

If Antigone could have been a wife and mother, and fit herself into the paradigm of harmonious intercourse between the state, the gods, and the domestic extolled by Kreon in his first speech, then the necessity of becoming a radically individual moral agent, an agent obeying "a greater, indeterminate time" (McNeill 2011, 14) than that of earth where the undying laws of the gods reside, would never have had to emerge. But the drama of *Antigone* and the resoluteness of its title character shows, I think, that we are not meant to take Antigone's hypothetical comparison as wishful or regretful thinking. It is a lament for what she never could have been, which borrows from the normative language of society but renders as inescapably distant the goals of this society through her use of the conditional.

Antigone's name gives a clue to her nature. Her name is a compound of *anti-,* meaning against, alike or compared to, and *gonē,* meaning birth or offspring. So while her name reflects the role of resistance that she has in the play, just as Polyneices's (poly= many, nieces= strife) name reflects the great strife that he brings to Thebes, this interpretation should not merely focus upon Antigone as a figure resisting Kreon, because she explodes the patriarchal rule that he personifies, as is shown at the end of the play when Kreon is completely alone, repentant, and powerless. While Antigone cannot provide any alternative political order to supplant Kreon's, she *can* embody an alternative principle radical enough to completely destabilise this order.

Antigone's elevation of an absolute end above all other obligations refuses the subordination of familial ties to the state extolled by Kreon in his first speech. As McNeill notes, the description of Antigone as a "mother bird whose nest is robbed of her hatchlings" provides a clue to her nature which drives this end, which is "by her deed not to bring forth some indeterminate offspring, but to bring forth her brother as he is in himself" (McNeill 2011, 422-428). McNeill continues that Antigone "contrasts the indeterminate 'whatever brother' (ἀδελφὸς ὅστίς) that could naturally spring forth from a living mother with the individual brother she addresses as 'you'. It is this brother that she has delivered forth in his individuality", a reading that is markedly different from Alenka Zupančič's reading of the role of the incest taboo in the play (See McNeill 2011, 423; Zupančič 2023, 70-73).

Antigone cannot claim a 'position' for herself within the social order, because there are none available. As Butler writes, she is the "one with no place who nevertheless seeks to claim one within speech, the unintelligible as it emerges within the intelligible, a position within kinship that is no position" (Butler 2000, 78). But she can make as visible as possible her claim to selfhood, which is based upon her nature of paradoxically bringing into "life" her brother as an end-in-himself, a duplicity

of life and death which is mirrored in the dual burials in the play and based upon a sublimity of negation and transcendence. While Antigone cannot socially affirm a place *for* herself, she can and does affirm *herself,* as the eventual recognition of Haimon, Ismene, and the Chorus shows.

Discovering Antigone's Self-chosen Lineage: the Elemental and the Sublime

We have seen how Antigone was born into problematic kinship relations. It was her lot to struggle with Oedipus's legacy, a situation that wounds her as "the most painful" when it is mentioned (Grene 1991, 913). However, we have also seen how in her opposition to the very facts of her social existence, she has come to be autonomous and an exemplar for the principle of honouring life as an end-in-itself, a principle which is not subordinate to the norms of her society. Before she dies, even though Antigone considers herself completely alone with no friends on earth, she does appeal to the myth of Niobe as what is "most like" to herself, and it is through this comparison, and its relation to the sublime and the elemental, that I want to end my explanation of her subjective formation.

> "But indeed I have heard of the saddest of deaths –
> of the Phrygian stranger, daughter of Tantalus,
> whom the rocky growth subdued, like clinging ivy.
> The rains never leave her, the snow never fails,
> as she wastes away. That is how men tell the story.
> From streaming eyes her tears wet the crags;
> *most like to her* the god brings me to rest." (885-891, my italics*)*

Incidentally, Sophocles also wrote a play about Niobe, of which only papyrus fragments survive. The parallels between Antigone and Niobe are many. Niobe is seen as the epitome of the bereaved mother who weeps through the stone because all of her children are dead. But before this she was a symbol for giving birth to beautiful children, as she had fourteen children, and it was her hubris in mocking Leto (who had only two children, Artemis and Apollo) that led to all of her children being killed. Although Antigone does not exhibit the same hubris as Niobe, she does suffer like a mother with dead children, as the counter-birth she honoured Polyneices with shows; further, just like Niobe, she also lives on after her bodily death, although in her case she is not petrified forever into rock. It is the sublimity of her idea that lives on in mythical memory, and to see how a sublime idea has this 'eternal' or 'undying' status I want to investigate the relationship of the sublime to elemental nature.

Adorno writes in *Aesthetic Theory* that for Kant "the unleashing of the elemental was one with the emancipation of the subject and thus with the self-consciousness of spirit" (Adorno 1997, 196). By this I take him to mean that as spirit becomes conscious of itself through its sublimity, the subject is emancipated through her use of reason. Simultaneously the elemental, which is what is left of nature after it has been negated, is also present as a force which has been stripped of its intentionality to favour

the subject's rationality. Adorno's understanding of the elemental is clarified further when he writes of modern art that it is "spiritualised not by the ideas it affirms but through the elemental – the intentionless – that is able to receive the spirit in itself" (Adorno 1997, 196).

The metonymic similarity that Adorno proposes between the elemental as intentionless clarifies the role of nature in relation to the sublime. Because nature must remain *unerklärlich* (inexplicable; see Lyotard 1991, 183) within the Kantian framework, the sublime transcendence must reduce the natural to an intentionless force by determining the power of human reason as having dominion over the power of nature. Because to be *unerklärlich* is also to be seen as sacred, the sublime also transfers to the subject a holiness that could only be fulfilled if the human being were infinite and divine. The subject must be, according to sublime logic, as inexplicable to herself as the natural realm was *before* the emancipation of the subject as reasoning being.

It is for this reason, I believe, that Antigone compares herself to Niobe, because the raw consuming power of elemental nature provides an intentionless ground so that a transcendent, sublime idea can represent the triumph of spirit over the empirical world; and as that idea will live on, so that Antigone can go down into Hades 'alive', so too will the elemental, not petrified into rock as with Niobe, but nevertheless present in its anthropomorphic and necessarily pre-social state in her walled-in grave.

I believe the simultaneous existence of these contradictory qualities is why the chorus receive Antigone as a *daimonion teras,* a holy monster or spiritual portent (McNeill 2011, 37). She is a figure who can presage the way that things will come to be, by exposing her place with the symbolic order that governs inter-subjective relations, but that others receive this knowledge as monstrous, as recognisably inhuman. Can Antigone, whose subjectivity delves into a pre-social elemental nature, and who speaks from the limits of the culturally intelligible, tell us something about the constitution of the human, and the pre-political, pre-social inhumanity that has been sacrificed in order to bring the political and social spheres into being? The chorus seem to think so, for in a play concerned with political destabilisation, oppression and death, they sing an ode to the great achievements of human beings. By doing so in such a 'debased' context, they raise the spectre of whether the greatest achievements of humanity are predicated upon or arise from "inhumanity".

The Unworldliness of Sublime Action

Now that we understand how Antigone stakes her life to insatiate the absolute worth of her brother, to bring him into being as an end-in-himself, the spectre of aesthetics as ethics is raised. Given that aesthetics is an autonomous realm of experience, separate from the realm of practical reason, how can an aesthetic experience (or, in Antigone's case, a sublime self-representation) ever come to instantiate a moral principle, which must be a determinate concept? The interest involved in aesthetics is precisely pleasure without end, or better, without the idea of end, as it involves the pleasure we take in the endless play of forms proper to the faculty of imagination. And yet any moral principle must set up an end that it views as good and worthy of universally applying as law. Properly speaking, once

aesthetic pleasure would become finalised under a determinate concept of the good then it would then cease to be aesthetic and become practical and moral; and yet both are present in Antigone.

In my concluding remarks I want to show how we can receive these paradoxical but parallel realms that are both present in the figure of Antigone, and then I want to return to analogy as the open-ended and necessarily indeterminate means by which to do so. I will analyse the sequence of how aesthetics ignites into morality that the Kantian system provides, and then discuss how *Antigone* dramatizes this sequence.

It is through aesthetics that we realise the moral law, because the particular character of aesthetic judgements as reflective judgements enables us to be aware of this singularly human capacity for reflection. As Kant writes, "intellectual ... good, estimated aesthetically, instead of being represented as beautiful, must rather be represented as sublime" (in Lyotard 1994, 181). He also differentiates the finality given by nature with the finality given by reason: "it (the sublime) gives on the whole no indication of anything final in nature itself, but only in the possible *employment* of our intuitions of it in inducing a feeling in our own selves of a finality quite independent of nature" (Lyotard 1994, 181).

In his work *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime* Jean-Francois Lyotard provides a reading of the relationship between ethics and aesthetics in the analytic of the sublime. He is interested not only in the relationship of the third critique (aesthetics and teleology) to the second (practical reason), but also in the general economy of the faculties and how the imagination relates to reason. Lyotard writes that the reflective judgement of aesthetics provides a "gesture" (182) towards what the finality of the human being could be. This gesture is then taken up by the faculty of reason, which subordinates the imagination and understanding to its project of achieving human finality under the auspices of practical reason which can actualise this finality. But why, we should ask, does practical reason hold primacy over the other faculties, and what happens to the sublime experience once this transfer to ethics and action is effected?

The end of thought as practical reason is twofold. First, thought gives practice "a necessary access ... to the supersensible i.e., freedom (the absolute of causality)" (Lyotard 1994, 176). The absolute, the unrepresentable Idea that the sublime evokes, must be absolute causality, because this would be the first in the chain of determinations that would result in any other Idea. Therefore what is unrepresentible in the sublime is the Idea of reason as such, because it can take no sensible form, and this Idea is also practice as such, because it is the absolute of causality i.e. the beginning or absolute of all subsequent events. From the human perspective this is called freedom. And second, the transcendental dictate of reason, however it seeks to subordinate the empirical world, must also "make itself heard by a thought immersed in the world of empirical interests, conditions, and charms" (Lyotard 1994, 177)" i.e. be made practical.

To summarize the sequence, in the sublime we experience the impetus to actualisation as such, to being practical as such, because it raises the Idea of absolute causality, which then propels reason back into the practical realm with the need for this idea to actualise itself, to connect transcendental

reason and the empirical world. The realisation of this idea can never remain sublime and aesthetic, but must 'cross over' the realms separated by the latter two *Critiques* and become moral and practical.

The sublime provides an instantiation of the ultimate ground of rationality, which is practical morality, while itself never being practically instantiated. A sign illuminated by a flame that then extinguishes itself. Even though aesthetics cannot *act,* never be actualised, could the sublime be characterised as an *un*worldly action, in the sense that it evinces a transcendental principle that cannot appear in the empirical world but that is nevertheless analogous to practical action, and ignites, in fact, the impetus for practical action? Here the theme of the impossible in Antigone's sublimity returns. Her sublimity is to stand for the idea itself, the principle of moral action as such, which can only ever be imperfectly realised by finite beings; in bringing this idea to life, she is seen to be communing with the dead, with an *un*world that is still of *this* world in the sense that she is still a living, breathing being holding discourse with other living, breathing beings. Even her suicide can be seen as the perverse side of her sublimity, as she determines her own end instead of being condemned to half-life and half-death in the tomb.

Within the economy of the faculties, the imagination is sacrificed in order to provide greater and greater expansion of reason's sense of its own capacity. But this means that nature, which for Kant is always *unerklärlich,* and therefore in some sense sacred, is also sacrificed to reason. The sacredness of nature is sacrificed for the absolute Idea. Is the Idea then expected to assume a mantel of holiness? Here the description of Antigone as a *daimonion teras,* a holy monster, also returns, this time in the sense of both her 'holiness' and her 'monstrosity' as present in the paradox of a finite being attempting to live out an infinite Idea. As Lyotard writes, there is a "destruction or consumption of the given, the *Stoff* of free natural form, in order to obtain in return the countergift of the unpresented" (Lyotard 1994, 188). *Antigone* also dramatizes this move because it shows the loss commensurate to this transfer, and suggests that the superiority of the turn to practical reason and moral action in its ideal form come at the cost of the finite empirical being.

Conclusion: Antigone as Analogy

There is a necessarily open ended and indeterminate conclusion to Antigone, because we can receive her both as the sublime aesthetic figure, and as the attempt at embodiment of an absolute moral principle. She exemplifies the paradoxical parallel between these two separate realms. Kant recognises the parallel nature of his 'autonomous' realms of practical reason and aesthetics, but warns against seeking to bridge the two: "in the case of two dissimilar things we may admittedly form some conception of one of them by an *analogy* which it bears to the other, and to do so even on the point on which they are dissimilar; but from that in which they are dissimilar we cannot draw any *inference* from one to the other on the strength of the analogy" (Kant 2000, 328-329)." As Lyotard puts it, "one can in short say that "*as* the beautiful, *so* the good", but not "*if* the beautiful, *then* the good" (Lyotard 1994, 165).

The character of Antigone has already provided the model for analogous thinking appropriate to our interpretation of her, as a dual figure representing both the moral and aesthetic realms, and the impossibility of bridging the two. In a previous section I discussed how she claims a lineage for herself via an analogy with Niobe, and how this lineage opposes itself to the normative order because it opposes Antigone's nature with the natural as it is normatively constructed. But the ability to draw 'like' and 'unlike' comparisons from a subjective perspective is also the ability to present a mobile and non-finalised view on the formation of subjective identity. This view is the one we should take with Antigone. We should leave as necessarily indeterminate the two figures, the agent of moral action and the sublime actress, in order to consider them both unreduced. This is a way of honouring the sacrifice her figure enacts and not subjugating the impossible aim of her journey through a reductive, partisan account.

It is also a way of not committing a kind of heresy in the Kantian eyes, which would be to go against the critical project that has separated as autonomous the three realms (pure, practical, aesthetic/teleological). There are "two heteronomous subjects, the one that is constantly born to itself without being interested in doing so, without wanting it, in the pure pleasure of the beautiful, and the one that is always held to act in the interest of the realisation of the law" (Lyotard 1994, 164). Instead of as a bridge between the two, we can best view Antigone through *hypotyposis,* which is "the operation that consists in putting in view something that (analogically) corresponds to an invisible object" (Lyotard 1994, 164). In this way, she is not the beautiful that results in goodness; she is a beautiful symbol for an unrepresentible (impossible) good.

Endnotes:

1. All quotes from *Antigone* are taken from Grene's translation, and the line number, not the page number, is given to facilitate comparison with other versions.
2. This viewpoint has been strongly put forward in Anne Carson's rewriting of the play, *Antigonick.* See, for example, Carson's rather blunt characterization of Kreon's "verbs for today / Adjudicate / Legislate / Scandalize / Capitalize" (Carson 1995, 16).
3. In her recent book *Let them Rot: Antigone's Parallax,* Alenka Zupančič provides her own reading of impossibility in *Antigone* based upon prohibition of the incest taboo, as well as he "particular hole in the structure of kinship" which is revealed by Antigone's emphasis on Polyneices' irreplaceable singularity. See, in particular, Chapter 3: Let Them Rot, pages 52-59.
4. McNeill is perspicacious on this point through his analysis of Kantian morality and Antigone. He writes, "Essential to Kreon's instrumentalism is his inability to see human motivation in any terms but wages, price and profit. Antigone in contrast is or seeks to be motivated by respect for the dignity – the incomparable worth – of her brother as an irreplaceable individual, as an end in himself" (McNeill 2011, 13).
5. For an in-depth discussion of the contrasting positions of familial obligation (Antigone) and loyalty to the state (Kreon), see Knox 1983, 84-90.
6. McNeill's discussion of Antigone's nature has influenced me here, for example Antigone's "claim is that if she were "born" or "by nature" (ἔφυν) a mother of children, or if she had a husband rotting away for her, she would not have borne the labour of *this very task* (τόνδ) against the might of the citizenry.... Her nature is very different from the nature of a wife and mother of children as she understands the latter" (McNeill 2011, 23).

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Note: Quotes from the play *Antigone* are taken from the Grene translation unless otherwise stated, and numbers cited in-text refer to line and not page number.

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