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FIVE REMARKS ON AESTHETIC JUDGMENT
THIERRY DE DUVE 13

THE SPLENDOR OF CREATION: KANT, NIETZSCHE, LACAN
ALENKA ZUPANČIČ 35

MUST ONE SEEK THE UNIVERSAL IN BEAUTY?
MONIQUE DAVID-MÉNARD 45

OF LOVE AND BEAUTY IN LACAN’S ANTIGONE
CHARLES SHEPHERDSO 65

TOWARDS A TOPOLOGY OF THE SUBJECT
ROBERT GROOME 85

DISSOLUTION
HERMAN RAPAPORT 99
IS BEST TO ACKNOWLEDGE FROM THE START THE ARIDITY OF THE TERRAIN. THUS WE INTRODUCE OUR INVESTIGATION WITH THESE INAUSPICIOUS REMARKS FROM CIVILIZATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS:

The science of aesthetics investigates the conditions under which things are felt as beautiful, but it has been unable to give any explanation of the nature and origin of beauty, and, as usually happens, lack of success is concealed beneath a flood of resounding and empty words. Psychoanalysis, unfortunately, has scarcely anything to say about beauty either.¹

FREUD HERE MARKS A DOUBLE FAILURE: PHILOSOPHY AND PSYCHOANALYSIS HAVE EQUALLY BOTCHED THE JOB OF PRODUCING AN AESTHETIC THEORY WORTHY OF THE NAME. LACAN SECONDS HIS JUDGMENT: "IN THE SPHERE THAT CALCULATES THE VALUE OF THE WORK OF ART, WE FIND OURSELVES REDUCED TO A POSITION THAT ISN'T EVEN THAT OF SCHOOLCHILDREN, BUT OF PICKERS UP OF CRUMBS," LABELING EVEN FREUD'S LITTLE STABS AT ANALYSIS "PRACTICALLY GROTESQUE."²

TO A DEGREE, THIS DISMISSAL IS JUSTIFIED. RATHER THAN STEMMING THE STREAM OF "RESOUNDING AND EMPTY WORDS," MANY OF FREUD'S PRONOUNCEMENTS ON ART AND ARTISTS MERELY FLOCCULATE IT. WHAT DOES THE FOUNDER OF PSYCHOANALYSIS SAY ABOUT THE RELATIONS AMONG ART, CIVILIZATION, AND DISCONTENT? ART IS INDISPENSIBLE TO CIVILIZATION INASMUCH AS IT CONtributes TO THE LATTER'S ABILITY TO PROTECT US FROM THE SUFFERING AND FRUSTRATIONS WHICH THE EXTERNAL WORLD INDIFFERENTLY DOLES OUT. WHILE ART CANNOT CORRECT OR ELIMINATE ANY OF THE PROBLEMS CAUSED BY THESE EXTERNAL CIRCUMSTANCES, IT CAN PROVIDE SUBSTITUTE SATISFACtIONS TO DIMINISH OUR EXPERIENCE OF SUFFERING. THESE "FINER AND HIGHER" SATISFACTIONS ARE "LESS INTENSE" THAN THOSE DERIVED FROM THE SATIATION OF "CRUDE AND PRIMARY INSTINCTUAL IMPULSES," WHICH HAS THE POWERFUL EFFECT OF "CONVULS[ING] OUR PHYSICAL BEING" (79-80), BUT THE "MILDLY INTOXICATING QUALITY" OF THE FORMER DOES "COMPENSATE FOR A GREAT
DEAL” (82). BEYOND THIS YIELD OF A PALLID YET STILL PALLIATIVE PLEASURE, THE AESTHETIC OBJECT IS, HOWEVER, OF “NO OBVIOUS USE” (82); FOR “ART CAN DO NO MORE THAN BRING ABOUT A TRANSIENT WITHDRAWAL FROM THE PRESSURE OF VITAL NEEDS, AND IT IS NOT STRONG ENOUGH TO MAKE US FORGET REAL MISERY” (81). ART HERE IS COMPENSATORY; ITS FUNCTION IS TO FILL IN A LACK.

IN OTHER WORDS, FREUD HIMSELF IS PARTLY TO BLAME FOR CONTEMPORARY THEORY’S REBARBATIVE RETREAT FROM AESTHETIC DISCOURSE. THE AGGRESSIVE POLEMICS OF POSTMODERNISM’S anti-aesthetics HAS MANAGED TO PUSH ALL THOUGHT OF AESTHETICS AND BEAUTY OFF-STAGE BY ATTACKING A NOTION OF ART FREUD HELPED PROPAGATE IN ARGUMENTS SUCH AS THE ABOVE, BUT WHICH IS TENDENTIALLY DERIVED FROM ORIGINAL ARGUMENTS MADE BY KANT IN HIS THIRD CRITIQUE. WHAT PROPONENTS OF AN “ANTI-AESTHETICS” ARE EAGER TO DISENGAGE—JUSTIFIABLY, IT MUST BE SAID—is THE NOTION THAT THE AESTHETIC IS A COMPLETELY AUTONOMOUS REALM BEYOND POLITICS AND HISTORY WHICH HAS NO OTHER PURPOSE THAN THAT OF MAINTAINING ITS OWN TRADITION. NOW, THIS ART-FOR-ART’S-SAKE—OR AUTISTIC—DEFINITION OF ART IS ABLE TO CLAIM SOME PEDIGREE IN KANT’S CHARACTERIZATIONS OF AESTHETIC PLEASURE AS “PURE” AND “DISINTERESTED” AND THE AESTHETIC OBJECT AS ENDOWED WITH A “PURPOSEFULNESS WITHOUT PURPOSE,” OR, FOR THAT MATTER, IN FREUD’S DESCRIPTION OF SUBLIMATION AS AN INHIBITION OF THE DRIVE THAT ALLOWS IT TO ATTAIN SATISFACTION WITHOUT ATTAINING ITS AIM. BUT THIS HAUGHTY CLAIM IS PURCHASED AT A PRICE. NOT ONLY MUST IT FOREGO ANY SERIOUS CONSIDERATION OF WHAT THE NOTORIOUSLY DIFFICULT CONCEPTS OF Zweckmässigkeit ohne Zweck [PURPOSEFULNESS WITHOUT PURPOSE] OR zielgehemmt [AIM-INHIBITED] MIGHT ACTUALLY MEAN, IT ALSO HAS TO SURRENDER ANY REAL ENGAGEMENT WITH ART.

WHILE FREUD SPOKE OF AESTHETIC PLEASURE AS A “MILD NARCOSIS,” DUCHAMP CONDEMned THE “HABIT-FORMING DRUG OF TASTE,” THROUGH WHOSE HAZE BOURGEOIS CONNOISSEURS COULD SCARCELY EXPERIENCE THE MORE UNSETTLING PLEASURES OF ART. A PROCESS OF CONCEPTUAL DEGRADATION SEEMS TO HAVE ALLOWED A PLEASURE CONCEIVED AS PURE, DISINTERESTED, OR SUBLIMATED TO BE MISUNDERSTOOD AS A PLEASURE PURIFIED OF ITS SENSUOUS OR CORPOREAL SUPPORT: A CONTEMPLATIVE PLEASURE THAT COULD DO WITHOUT ANY ACTUALLY EXISTING OBJECT. IT IS UNFORTUNATE—if I may be permitted to speak in Litotes—that by 1930, the DATE OF CIVILIZATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS,
Freud would let this degradation slip by; for the sort of art it deprecated—by Picasso, Brancusi, Schwitters, Tatlin and Lissitzky, among others—would in a few years be angrily removed from museums and, in some cases, destroyed by fascist demagogues, who would denigrate it as "the product of deviance, madness, hubris, and venereal disease, and as a threat to the ‘pure’ culture of the Aryan race." In theorizing aesthetics, everything depends on clarifying what is meant by purification; the critical question is, "purified of what?"

Though the concept of sublimation—Freud's indispensible contribution to aesthetic theory—constantly teeters on the verge of collapse into the related concepts of idealization, inhibition, and reaction formation, Lacan manages to pluck some uncharred core from the fires of confusion by focusing precisely on this question of purification as it crops up variously in both the aesthetic and psychoanalytic notions of catharsis and in the very terms sublime and sublimation. Far from being an emission, the body, as Lacan helps us to see, is a precipitate of that process of purification which aesthetic experience highlights. That aesthetic experience would be thought to include the body is from the historical perspective no surprise, since the discourse of aesthetics arose in the eighteenth century initially as a discourse on the body and the part it plays in securing the bonds of community. The point at which the body drops out is the point at which sensational life comes to be divided into pure and impure forms and this division is assumed to mark a distinction between civilized and primitive sensations. The body, aligned with the primitive sensations, is purged from the "higher" ones. Referring to the "rabble of the senses" and to a "taste of the tongue, palate, and the throat" distinct from the taste manifest in aesthetic judgment, Kant did nothing to discourage this error—to which Freud would also fall prey in Civilization and Its Discontents—of conceiving of an uncivilized, that is to say, simple and primitive form of pleasure. There is among humans no such thing, as there is no degree of civilization, nor primitive pocket of our being. And Freud knew this, every bit as much as Marx, who came close to Freud when he said,
Hunger is hunger, but the hunger gratified by cooked meat eaten with a knife and fork is a different hunger from that which bolts down raw meat with the aid of hand, nail and tooth. Production thus produces not only the object but also the manner of consumption, not only objectively but subjectively.4


WE CAN PUT THIS DIFFERENTLY: IT IS ONLY TRIVIALLY TRUE THAT WE REFRAIN ORDINARILY FROM EATING AESTHETIC OBJECTS; THE DISTINCTION WHICH IS CRUCIAL TO AESTHETIC THEORY IS NOT BETWEEN THE AESTHETIC OBJECT AND FOOD (OR SEX), BUT BETWEEN THE AESTHETIC OBJECT AND "GOODS," THAT IS: COMMODITIES. THIS IS THE POSITION OF MARXISM, THE ONE DISCOURSE THAT HAS CONSISTENTLY RETAINED THE CATEGORY OF THE AESTHETIC AS A PRIORITY OF ITS AGENDA. IN HIS INTERVENTION IN AESTHETIC THEORY IN THE SEMINAR THE ETHICS OF PSYCHOANALYSIS, LACAN CRISSCROSSES FAMILIAR MARXIST TERRITORY, TAKING NOTE OF THE GENERALIZED BRACKETING OF USE VALUE IN FAVOR OF EXCHANGE VALUE BY CAPITALISM AND THE CONSEQUENT RISE OF UTILITARIANISM AS ITS ENABLING IDEOLOGY, SINCE UTILITARIANISM SEeks TO RECONCILE EXCHANGE VALUE AND CONSUMER DESIRE BY REINSTALLING A CONCEPT OF USE AS A TRANSLATION, HOWEVER FALSE, OF MARKET VALUE. UNDER THESE TERMS, THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN PURE AND IMPURE PLEASURES BEGINS TO BE REDEFINED AS A DIVISION BETWEEN USELESS (THAT IS, PURIFIED OF PURPOSE) AND USEFUL (OR DUTIFUL) ENJOYMENT. THE WHOLE AMBIVALENCE OF MARXISM IN GENERAL TOWARD AESTHETIC OBJECTS WILL TURN ON WHETHER THIS DIVISION IS ALLOWED TO STAND AS IS— IN WHICH CASE THE VALUE OF THE AESTHETIC IS SAID TO LIE IN ITS RESISTANCE TO MARKET FORCES— OR IS REDESCRIBED AS A SOFTER DISTINCTION BETWEEN DEFERRED AND DIRECT PLEASURE/USE— IN WHICH CASE THE AESTHETIC COMES TO BE SEEN AS A MEANS BY WHICH CAPITALISM SINKS ITS TEETH MORE DEEPLY INTO THE CONSUMER, BATING HIM OR HER WITH PROMISES OF AN IDEAL WORLD IN WHICH PRODUCTION AND DESIRE WILL ADEQUATE EACH OTHER.

PSYCHOANALYTIC TERMS, repression of one thus inaccessible, untouchable good causes all the others to dissolve into the indifference that is the necessary condition of their commensurability. Through the gap that is created between the goods in the marketplace and the one that has been set aside for the exclusive enjoyment of the other—that is to say, the superego—the capitalist future opens; it is in its very substance nothing other than the idealization of this gap.

If the aesthetic object owes its value, as some Marxists rightly contend, to its resistance to the market, then this resistance must be figured in psychoanalytic terms as a resistance to the superego and its increasing repressions and idealizations. Freud is, then, descriptively accurate in discerning in the beautiful object and sublimation evidence of a palliative pleasure, yet what this pleasure palliates or tames is not some other, raw pleasure belonging to the body, but the fierce pleasure that belongs exclusively to the superego and which thus humiliates pleasure in general. In answer to the question, “of what is aesthetic pleasure purified?”, Lacan will nominate “fear and pity,” because these are the emotions that facilitate our subservience to the superego and to the imaginary ideals it sets up in order to berate us. The pathological relation, in Kant’s sense, ordinarily understood as a susceptibility to manipulation by external objects, is the result of domination by the superego, which makes us vulnerable to the judgment of others. Purified of fear and pity, aesthetic judgment erects a barrier against superegoic moralism—which goes a long way toward explaining why Jesse Helms and the “Moral Majority” targeted the National Endowment of the Arts and the “Cultural Elite” as the most despised objects of their venom.

Erecting a barrier against the superego, aesthetic judgment determines the beautiful object as that which will not be sacrificed to the general indifference toward objects. This does not mean that the beautiful object will be unapproachable, as the idealized object always is. The example of the lady in the tradition of courtly love, which is the one Lacan offers, muddies this point. What he wants to
ARGUE IS THAT BEFORE THIS TRADITION, WOMAN HAD NO VALUE IN SOCIETY AT ALL; IT WAS ONLY THROUGH THE AUSPICES OF COURTLY LOVE THAT SHE CAME TO ACQUIRE THE AURA THAT WOULD ELEVATE HER ABOVE THIS DEGRADATION, MAKING HER SOMETHING OTHER THAN AN EXPENDABLE BEING. THOUGH THIS POINT IS MUTED BY THE IDEALIZATIONS THAT TURNED THAT POETIC TRADITION OFF COURSE, THE DISTINCTION HE IS TRYING TO MAKE BETWEEN IDEALIZATION AND SUBLIMATION REASSERTS ITSELF WHEN HE CITES ONE OF THE MORE BAWDLY POEMS, SINCE IT CLEARLY DEMONSTRATES THAT SUBLIMATION IS NOT AT ALL INCOMPATIBLE WITH SEXUAL ENJOYMENT, WITH "IMMEDIATE" CORPOREAL PLEASURE. IN OPPOSING ITSELF TO THE WORLD OF ORDINARY, EXCHANGEABLE OBJECTS, THE SUBLIMATED OBJECT RENDERS VISIBLE NOT THE IDEAL, BUT THE REAL, AND GIVES US A PURCHASE ON LIFE—SENSUAL LIFE. THE SUPEREGO, ON THE CONTRARY, DEMANDS THAT WE SACRIFICE LIFE TO AN IDEAL FUTURE.

IN HER ESSAY IN THIS ISSUE, MONIQUE DAVID-MENARD MAKES THE IMPORTANT POINT THAT PSYCHOANALYSIS DOES NOT DISTINGUISH A FACULTY OF PLEASURE FROM A FACULTY OF DESIRE, AS KANT DID. IT IS POSSIBLE TO ARGUE IN LIGHT OF THIS OBSERVATION, THAT THE THIRD CRITIQUE IS THE BEGINNING OF A RE-THINKING OF THE SECOND, OF A RECOGNITION OF THE WAY THE FACULTY OF DESIRE IS NECESSARILY IMPLICATED IN PLEASURE. KANT'S CONCEPT OF THE MORAL LAW IS OFTEN ACCUSED OF RESULTING IN AN ISSUELESS DESIRE, BUT PERHAPS HIS CONSIDERATION OF AESTHETIC JUDGMENT AND PLEASURE IS A TACIT RECOGNITION OF THE VERY PROBLEMS OTHERS NOTE AND AN ATTEMPT TO SURMOUNT THEM; IN THIS CASE THE CRITIQUE OF JUDGMENT WOULD BE BETTER READ AS ONE MORE EFFORT TO ANSWER THE QUESTION, "WHAT CAN I DO?" RATHER THAN, AS KANT SUGGESTS, "WHAT CAN I HOPE?" SUBLIMATION IS NOT SIMPLY AN ACT: IT IS ACTING ITSELF,
WHICH IS TO SAY, JUDGMENT. WE MUST ENTERTAIN THE POSSIBILITY THAT ALL
OUR TALK OF "HOLDING OPEN THE FUTURE," OF "THE FUTURE OF BEING," AND
SO ON REPRESENTS NOTHING SO MUCH AS AN IDEALIZATION OF DISSATISFA-
TION, HENCE AN INCAPACITY OF JUDGMENT, AN INABILITY TO THINK OR
PERFORM AN ACT.

WHILE THE ANTI-AESTHETIC POLEMIC MUST BE CHIDED FOR ITS GENERAL
DISDAIN OF AESTHETIC THEORY, IT ALSO HAS TO BE CREDITED WITH DRAWING
OUR ATTENTION TO SIGNIFICANT SHIFTS IN THE AESTHETIC FIELD. WE THUS
BEGIN THIS SPECIAL ISSUE WITH THIERRY DE DUVE'S VALUABLE ANALYSIS OF
SEVERAL OF THESE SHIFTS AND HIS EQUALLY VALUABLE PROPOSAL THAT KANT
MUST BE RETHOUGHT IN LIGHT OF CONTEMPORARY ARTISTIC PRACTICES,
RATHER THAN JETTISONED; WE ADD SIMPLY THAT FREUD, TOO, NEEDS RETHINK-
ING IN DIRECTIONS OTHER THAN THOSE HIS RATHER CONSERVATIVE ARTISTIC
TASTE SOMETIMES LED HIM. FOR, WHAT IS NOT YET CLEAR IS WHETHER OR HOW
MUCH THESE ALTERATIONS OF AESTHETIC CRITERIA SIGNAL DISTURBANCES TO
THE VERY POSSIBILITY OF SUBLIMATION. AS A PROPAEDEUTIC TO CONFRONTING
THIS LARGER QUESTION—WHICH IS NOT ONLY AESTHETIC, BUT ALSO POLITICAL—
THE ESSAYS BELOW ALL SEEK TO SORT OUT THE THEORETICAL PROBLEMS THAT
CONTINUE TO BELEAGUER THE BEST TOOL WE HAVE FOR THE TASK: THE
CONCEPT OF SUBLIMATION.

1. SIGMUND FREUD, "CIVILIZATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS," THE STANDARD
EDITION OF THE COMPLETE PSYCHOLOGICAL WORKS OF SIGMUND FREUD,
TRANS. JAMES STRACHEY (LONDON: THE HOGARTH PRESS AND THE
INSTITUTE OF PSYCHOANALYSIS, 1961), VOL. XXI, 82-83. FURTHER REFER-
ENCES TO THIS WORK ARE MADE IN THE TEXT.

2. JACQUES LACAN, BOOK VII: THE ETHICS OF PSYCHOANALYSIS, TRANS. DENNIS
PORTER, ED., JACQUES-ALAIN MILLER (NEW YORK: NORTON, 1992), 238.

3. BENJAMIN BUCHLOH, "STATEMENT," THE DESTRUCTION OF TILTED ARC:
DOCUMENTS, CLARA WEVERGRAF AND MARTHA BUSKIRK, ED S. (CAMBRIDGE:

4. KARL MARX, GRUNDRISSE: FOUNDATIONS OF THE CRITIQUE OF POLITICAL
ECONOMY, TRANS. MARTIN NICOLAUS (LONDON: HARMONDSWORTH: PENGUIN
BOOKS, 1973), 92.
1. HOW ONE PASSES FROM CLASSICAL AESTHETIC JUDGMENT ("THIS IS BEAUTIFUL") TO MODERN AESTHETIC JUDGMENT ("THIS IS ART"), EXEMPLIFIED BY DUCHAMP'S READYMADE.

I am actually not going to explain to you how one passes from "this is beautiful" to "this is art"; I am simply going to position these two extremes in order to make you see them properly. I am ruling out, right off the bat, aesthetic judgments on nature, which won't be dealt with today since we're discussing art, and therefore human productions, artifacts. Classical aesthetics consists of phrases such as "this painting is beautiful," "this piece of music is sublime," "this poem is moving," "this garden architecture is picturesque," and other similar phrases, which for that matter you can extend to phrases of everyday contemporary language, as when one says "this song's great." All of that is a matter of classical aesthetic judgment.

Now, faced with one of Duchamp's readymades, this doesn't work. The readymade is a completely made object that a certain Marcel Duchamp, until then a painter, produced. The first one dates from 1913 (if one takes the Bicycle Wheel), or 1914 (if one takes the Bottle-rack). Because it is the first absolutely unmodified object, let us take the Bottle-rack, on which Duchamp inscribed a sentence — which is lost, moreover — then signed, and then let lie about his studio. A more or less immediate posterity made it into an objet d'art. There were several other readymades after that, among which was a metal comb for a dog, a cover for an Underwood typewriter, a snow shovel (which was very famous, entitled In Advance of the Broken Arm), and finally the most famous of them all, the well-known urinal entitled Fountain, signed with a pseudonym, R. Mutt, and submitted — but not shown, which is a long story in itself — at the first exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists in New York in 1917. A readymade is thus a work of art that the artist did not make with his own hands, but that he merely chose, signed and named.

Faced with such an object one can obviously say "this is beautiful." But to say that a snow shovel or a urinal is a beautiful object does not for all that make it art. That would remain an aesthetic judgment of the classical type directed toward the design of this snow shovel or urinal. Now, this is not how these objects make their entry into the history of contemporary art. This happens instead by
a phrase that appears like a naming or a renaming, the phrase "this is art." Modeled on the sentence, "You were Simon, I rename you Peter, and upon this rock I shall build my church," one would say, "You were snow shovel, I rename you art, and upon this new name, I anticipate that subsequent history shall form a consensus." Actually, one can say today that this Duchampian church was indeed built, that this consensus—even if it doesn’t extend to everyone, of course—is enough to make the object in question wind up in the museum. So, between the period of Delacroix (to assign an arbitrary beginning to modernity) and our own, something must have changed in the history of art, since it is an historical fact that the phrase “this is art” applied to Duchamp’s urinal helped express a judgment on a thing that would not otherwise have been viewed as art. The question now concerns the nature of this judgment.

2. HOW THE PREDICATIVE FORM OF THE PHRASE “THIS IS ART” SEEMS TO TURN IT INTO A CONCEPTUAL OBSERVATION OR A PREDICATIVE JUDGMENT ANALOGOUS TO “THIS IS A CHAIR” OR “THIS IS A PIPE.”

I had written “this is a pipe” ironically in order to evoke the common sense notion of negation [négation] and to arouse your analytic curiosity about what it can suggest about the [psychoanalytic] concept of negation [dénégation].

 Actually, “this is art” has, grammatically, a predicative structure of the same sort as “this is a chair.” Now, you realize right away that there is something not quite right with it in that there’s nothing in the traditional definition of the word “art” that would allow me to recognize an object such as a snow shovel or a urinal as art, whereas it is enough for me to master the definition of a chair in the dictionary to be capable of recognizing the corresponding object. Even assuming that I’ve never seen a chair, I would still possess the concept of a chair. This sort of evidence—the fact that the phrase “this is art,” hung on a readymade, has a structure like that of an observation or a predicative judgment—has in fact generated among Duchamp’s interpreters, as much among the theoreticians as the artists, the impression that what Duchamp did was to hook the concept of art onto the object designated by the word “this” in the phrase “this is art.” Art would thus have been a concept. Oddly enough, the same people who say this also say that Duchamp transformed the concept of art, and that the concept of art as it applies to a readymade is not the same one that was applied to works that come under classical aestheticism.

 Counting on this attribution of the so-called concept of art to an object, a new category of art is supposed to have appeared on the heels of Duchamp’s posterity, namely, conceptual art. What is called conceptual art—which I may add, in my opinion, doesn’t really merit its name—is a new artistic school that appeared a mere thirty years ago, around the middle of the 1960’s, and crystallized toward the end of the decade around a series of artists, among whom are the Art and Language group and Joseph Kosuth, who turned the theory of art into a practice—a very bad theory, in my opinion. Kosuth, in a text published in 1969 entitled Art after Philosophy (and which suggests a kind of reversal of the Hegelian proposition), claims that the word “art” is a concept and that Duchamp’s readymade proved that aesthetics in the classical sense had been discredited. What would count from then on, and would constitute the nature of art, would be the conceptual contributions that artists make and the way in which they transform the concept of
art through analyzing it. In actual fact, these conceptual contributions are more subtractions, and artists would invent nothing, since Kosuth claims in this text that the concept of art is analytic, which means it contains all its predicates in itself, and not synthetic. According to him, it is enough to conduct a philosophical inquiry (philosophy here being analytical philosophy) to extricate the properties of art, and every artist, since Duchamp in any case, has only brought something to the history of art insofar as they have extricated, through an analytic procedure of this sort, properties of the concept of art that up to that point have gone unrecognized. Kosuth’s theory also supports his own practice as a conceptual artist.

I would like to weigh in against this theory. But I don’t want to set myself against Kosuth who, as an artist, puts into practice his theory that art is theory, which obviously runs the risk of having someone say to him, “If your theory is bad, your practice isn’t worth anything either.” That wasn’t true for artists such as Cézanne or Mondrian—Cézanne had no theory, and Mondrian had very woolly-minded theories on many things, but, in my opinion, his art is in a way completely impervious to his theories. Kosuth, on the other hand, inevitably demands to be judged by the measure of his own theory—and too bad for him if it turns against him. In fact, his text is very interesting as a symptom of a theoretical impasse, which he is far from being the only one to have come up against, since he was joined in those same years by professional aestheticians, such as George Dickie, who defended completely similar positions. One can say that there is a prevailing trend in the theory of art these last twenty years, especially Anglo-Saxon theory, that claims we are done with aesthetics—in the awkward sense of feeling, in the sense of the judgment of taste—and has replaced it with a conceptual, pragmatic or institutional analysis. A good deal of the work I tried to do was provoked by the impasses of this trend within contemporary art; I was dissatisfied by the prevailing discussions on the question, while being, at the same time, as dissatisfied as my adversaries with the classical aesthetics of taste. It was actually discredited, but not in the way they believed it to be. From the moment I understood that, Kant—the summit of classical aesthetics—had become what was at stake in the discussion.

3. HOW IN FACT EVERYTHING KANT SAID ABOUT THE AESTHETIC JUDGMENT, “THIS IS BEAUTIFUL,” CONTINUES TO APPLY TO “THIS IS ART,” SAVE THAT THE FEELING ON WHICH SUCH A JUDGMENT RESTS IS NO LONGER NECESSARILY EXPERIENCED IN THE ALTERNATIVE BETWEEN PLEASURE AND PAIN. MODERN ART AUTHORIZES ALL FEELINGS, INCLUDING DISGUST AND RIDICULE, FEELINGS THAT KANT SAID WERE THE ONLY ONES TO MAKE JUDGMENTS ON THE BEAUTIFUL AND ON THE SUBLIME, RESPECTIVELY, IMPOSSIBLE. HOW MODERN ART LEADS TO A “BEYOND THE PLEASURE PRINCIPLE” FOR AESTHETICS.

Kant’s third Critique, the Critique of Judgment, marks the true birth of modern aesthetics. It had of course been prepared for by the entire English eighteenth century, by Burke in particular, but also by Gerard, Addisson, Hutcheson, and by Shaftsbury to begin with, and in Germany, by
Baumgarten. But it is Kant who first understood — and in my opinion still provides the way to understanding — the structure of aesthetic judgment and its underlying paradox.

There are, as you probably know, two parts to the Critique of Judgment: the "critique of aesthetic judgment" and the "critique of teleological judgment." Let's leave the second one aside. In the "critique of the aesthetic judgment," there are two more parts, "the analytic of the beautiful" and "the analytic of the sublime." It is "the analytic of the beautiful" that I am discussing. Among other authors — who are also aware that the aesthetics of modernity could no longer be classical aesthetics — and great readers of Kant, Jean-François Lyotard reread in a very contemporary way "the analytic of the sublime," and he makes the entire aesthetics of modernity pass through the eye of the needle of the question of the sublime. I find everything that Lyotard was able to say on the question absolutely fascinating, but there are several reasons why what he has to say is not what concerns me.

In the first place, my experience as an art lover tells me — but this is very subjective — that modern art, as it has developed over the last 150 years and as it leads into contemporary art, has never had anything to do with the sublime. Or rather when it has something to do with the sublime, it isn't very good. For instance, the painter Caspar David Friedrich — with whom it is said the sublime emerges in the history of painting — always seemed like an average painter to me, not very good. I cannot justify that; it is a purely subjective aesthetic judgment. And the paintings that correspond the most to Burke's definitions, or even to Kant's, on the sublime, namely the paintings of mountains, are his worst. Even an artist such as Turner, who certainly has something to do with the sublime, is to my mind not as good as his reputation would lead us to believe. These are entirely personal judgments. For me, the aesthetics of modernity have nothing to do with that. The sublime seems to me always too dangerously close to an aesthetic of impact, and the aesthetic of impact is kitsch.

What I've just said doesn't invalidate anything that Lyotard was able to say on the sublime, since he gave it a completely different sense, and I am probably being unfair. I'll even admit that I'm doing him wrong, in the sense that he himself gave to this term. But for me it is a question of economy, of seeking the least costly theoretical road in order to make a maximum of theoretical points all while remaining as close as possible to my experience as an art lover, without betraying it. This said, there is another reason, less subjective and more theoretical (but I could say, "more strategical"), for which the aesthetics of the sublime doesn't seem suitable to me — there is no antinomy of the sublime.

The feeling of the sublime really implies a contradiction that one lives when one experiences it — that is, the simultaneity of the feelings of attraction and repulsion, of delight and terror, as Burke said. But, as it is constitutive of the sublime, this contradiction does not call for philosophical resolution, as is the case for antinomies. It's the resolution of the antinomy that is at the center of the analytic of the beautiful, which is to say the analytic of taste. It is this resolution with which my reading of Kant deals.

It is a question of rereading the third Critique with the hypothesis presented by the ready-made — the only truly plausible one if one takes its existence as art seriously — according to which the phrase "this is art" is not an observation but in fact a judgment, and according to
which this judgment is aesthetic and not conceptual. What is an aesthetic judgment? It is a judgment of feeling. Despite all the skepticism with which an analytic ear can understand the notion of feeling, as well as the reality of feelings, I see no better definition of the aesthetic than “feeling.” And I quote Kant on that point, who says, “If we wish to decide whether something is beautiful or not, we do not use understanding to refer the presentation to the object so as to give rise to cognition; rather to the subject and his feelings of pleasure or displeasure. Hence a judgment of taste is not a cognitive judgment and is not a logical judgment but an aesthetic one, by which we mean a judgment whose determining basis cannot be other than subjective.” We therefore refer to the intuition or the representation (which is to say the perception) of the object that we have before our eyes; not to a concept that allows us to subsume the object under a category of cognition, but to feeling. What feeling, says Kant? Pleasure or pain: the aesthetic feeling would be experienced in this alternative.

Since the phrase “this is art” would, according to my hypothesis, be substituted for the phrase “this is beautiful” in order to express a modern aesthetic judgment, let us pose the question of whether or not the Kantian aesthetic remains valid if one simply replaces the word “beautiful” with the word “art” every time one encounters it in Kant’s text. This is what I did, and I’m going straight to the antinomy. Kant’s genius was to take seriously the fact that we use phrases of the “this is beautiful” type in order to express our judgments of taste (Kant was thinking especially of nature, of the sunset, of phenomena of this sort) in order to express the feeling that animates us when perceiving these phenomena. It’s very strange, because if I truly wanted to express a personal feeling, I would say, “This pleases me, this gives me a feeling of pleasure.” But in all languages, and it’s been this way for a very long time, one uses phrases such as “this is beautiful.” It’s as if the object were endowed with beauty as an objective property in the same way it’s endowed with a property of color, for example. If I say, “this book is blue,” everyone can, unless they’re colorblind, verify this. One can even verify it without the aid of a human subject. I can take a colorimeter and measure the wavelength of the light reflected by this book and determine that it falls within the band of blue. If I say, “this book is beautiful,” I ascribe to the object an objective quality that it doesn’t have, since the phrase is in fact only a translation of my subjective feeling that it is this book that stirs a feeling of pleasure in me. Now, says Kant, this objective expression that we use, even though it is not absolutely demonstrable, is justified. To have taken seriously the claim to objectivity made by the judgment of taste — when in fact it could not be anything but subjective — was inspired simplicity. Simple, that is, in the sense that “it’s easy once you know how.” He writes,

Hence the following antinomy emerges concerning the principle of taste:

1. Thesis: A judgment of taste is not based on concepts, for otherwise one could dispute about it (decide by means of proofs).

2. Antithesis: A judgment of taste is based on concepts, for otherwise, regardless of the variation among (such judgments), one could not even so much as quarrel about them (lay claim to other people’s necessary assent to one’s judgment). (§ 56)

An antinomy thus consists of a thesis and an antithesis, both of which have to be proven to be true. Thesis — the judgment of taste is not based on concepts; there is no concept of beauty, only
subjective feelings of beauty, which vary from individual to individual. Therefore one cannot argue over them, and as the popular saying goes, “there’s no arguing about taste.” (One should say, if one were more philosophical, “there’s no disputing taste.”) Antithesis—and nevertheless, Kant claims, if there were nothing but this subjective aspect of the judgment of taste, one would go no further than the judgment on the agreeable, which would simply be subjective, being a judgment of the “this pleases me” type, and we wouldn’t take the trouble of trying to demand that others approve of our judgment. Now, when we say “this book is beautiful,” we are saying, “even if I cannot prove its quality of beauty the way I can prove its color, what I am in fact saying is that it should be beautiful for everyone.” Which is to say that it is not really an objective quality that I am ascribing to the object, but actually a subjective, universal agreement that I postulate or that I claim from all subjects. It is a phrase that is basically an imperative, a prescriptive that takes on the grammatical appearance of a descriptive. That means, “you should agree with me” or “I appeal to the consensus of everyone,” to the sensus communis, as Kant said. The antithesis says, then, that the judgment of taste must indeed be based on a concept, which is to say on something that has a value, if not an objective value, at least a universal one, because otherwise one wouldn’t even be able to discuss the subject. One doesn’t even argue—it doesn’t seem to be in the spirit of things—over judgments of taste. But people do. I think that Kant’s stroke of genius was to remark that this antinomy was constitutive of the judgment of taste, and that his claim to universal approval was justified.

Because it would take too much time, I’m not going to enter into the issue of how Kant resolves the antinomy, how through a series of reflective judgments and operations of thought he manages to insist as a transcendental requirement that all of humanity is endowed with a faculty of judging that is nothing other than this sensus communis, this common sense—Kant himself says “common feeling,”—the existence of which can’t be proved to me, but which I am required to postulate on a transcendental plane.

I’ll put that another way. One says that music has a civilizing influence. What does that mean? It means that, even if every day the reality of the world says otherwise, there is something in art, in culture, and in aesthetic judgment that is on the order of an appeal to peace. To peace on earth, to approval, to common feeling, something that one could call, if one’s a humanist, a feeling of common membership in humanity, or a solidarity, a sense of community. Now, there is no proof that such a thing exists, and Kant is more skeptical in the third Critique than he had been in the first two. There is no proof that men have a common feeling, no proof that they have a gift for peace. On the contrary, war and disagreement are standard practice. And in art, in modern art in particular, I would say that the level of amplification has risen considerably insofar as disagreement is concerned, since the art that became popular in the twentieth century is an art of discord, in music as in painting, as in poetry, as everywhere; an art of antagonism, of cracks, an art that breaks conventions, which is to say an art of disagreement, an art that provokes and appeals to disagreement more than to common feeling. (That this corresponds, in art, to the enormous difficulty in remaining a humanist today, or in still having confidence in the purely rational subject of the Enlightenment, seems quite evident. This raises the question of a “beyond the pleasure principle.”)
I have attempted to reread Kant with and after Duchamp. Kant’s thesis: the judgment of taste is not based on concepts, therefore becomes for me: the phrase “this is art” is not based on concepts. And the antithesis: the phrase “this is art” must indeed base itself on a concept. My theoretical reply to this antinomy is to translate its thesis thus: “art is not a concept, it is a proper noun,” and its antithesis becomes: “art is a concept, it is the idea of art as a proper noun” (which provides less a theoretical reply than a historical one, dating back to modernity. I cannot develop that here; I did so in the first two chapters of Au nom de l’art.) The word “art,” when it is employed to express an aesthetic judgment, is a proper noun, which is to say, a noun to which one cannot give a definition in any absolute way, but of which one can only point out referents. For example, my name is Thierry. I am obviously not the only Thierry on the planet, perhaps I am not the only Thierry in this room, but I defy anyone to find any common characteristics among the Thierrys (aside from those of being of the masculine sex and a French speaker). Apart from that, in the word “Thierry,” nothing says whether the Thierrys are tall or shot, fat or thin, blond or brunette, etc. However, with the word “chair,” I can deduce a series of properties that are analytically brought together under the concept of chair.

You now see why Duchamp’s readymade was necessary for the advent of this thesis. Actually, nothing distinguishes Duchamp’s snow shovel from any other snow shovel, save that it was baptized in the name of art. I obviously consider this baptism to be extremely significant, and the bearer of a general truth. Given that a readymade can be any object (snow shovel, urinal, comb, etc.), it is thus only the index of the referent “this,” in the phrase “this is art.” What is valid for one of Duchamp’s works is valid for any work of art in modernity. That, then, is the thesis that I am defending: when it is used to baptize, the word “art” is a proper name whose bearers one can only designate by pointing. Where are the Thierrys? There’s one, there’s one, there’s one. Where are works of art? There’s one, and another one, and another one. Let’s generalize: if I were asked “What is your notion of art?”, I would answer (a reply which is as valid for you as it is for me or anyone else): I do not have, strictly speaking, a notion of art, no theory. But I can point out works of art which I think of when I say “art.” Art is not a concept; it is a collection of examples. I’ll illustrate this for you with a diagram.

The phrase “this is art” is in fact a phrase in which both the word “this” and the word “art” can be replaced by one of those little pointing hands which are the very icon of deictics. The word “this” is obviously a deictic, a designator whose designated varies according to the indicated
referent. And the word “art,” and this is much less obvious, is also a deictic, but of a particular sort — a rigid designator, as Saul Kripke would say — in other words, a proper name (Kripke has a theory of proper names as rigid designators which suits me perfectly, without my feeling obliged to adhere for all that to his philosophical essentialism.) The word “art” is therefore not a concept, but a collection of examples — different for everyone. I’ll put some of my own into the diagram, at the end of the little hand represented by the word “art”: the Mona Lisa, a Pollock (because he’s an artist that I love a great deal), a Cézanne, Brancusi’s bird, one of Beethoven’s final quartets, a book which I love very much, etc. Each one makes its own collection, and what gives the impression that the word “art” is a concept is that it refers to everything else in the collection, but doesn’t show itself. Here, in the diagram, I clarify what usually stays implicit. So, when I draw here, at the end of the other little hand what is represented by the word “this,” Duchamp’s urinal, and then I say “this is art,” I do not subsume this object under a concept, I include it in my collection. That’s how the phrase “this is art” is an aesthetic judgment, a comparative judgment: the copula “is,” which expresses an apparent identity of essence, is what established the comparison (I’ll come back to this). This phrase thus performs a baptism by applying to Duchamp’s urinal the proper name “art,” which had already, by means of a similar process of naming, been applied to an entire series of objects in my collection.

To sum up, the thesis in the Kantian antinomy, reread with and after Duchamp, would be: “art is not a concept, it is a proper noun”; the antithesis would be: “art is a concept, it is the idea of art as a proper name.” I’m not going to comment on the antithesis at length today; that would take me too far afield, because it leads one to put the regulative idea of modern art into a postmodern perspective (that’s the sense of this “after”). Let’s say that modernity would be this period in the history of art for which we didn’t have (or don’t have) any use of the word “art” other than as a proper name. Modernity would be this period of history (which, to my mind, hasn’t ended) for which the criteria determining an aesthetic judgment are radically lacking, to such an extent that one can say that modern aesthetic judgment has no determining criterion at its disposal; instead, one finds oneself case by case stark naked before the need to exercise, as Kant said, one’s reflective judgment, by giving the object under consideration the name of art. And that is obviously valid not only for the urinal, but for every work of modernity, to different degrees.

I must say a word on feeling. For Kant, the phrase “this is beautiful” rested on an alternative between the feelings of pleasure or pain, or on a mixture of the two. One can imagine a continuous gradation from pleasure to pain and vice versa. The phrase “this is art,” on the other hand, refers to a binary choice which rests on the feeling that one is or is not dealing with art. You can easily see that such a feeling varies from individual to individual, depending on one’s taste and inclinations, and above all, on each person’s degree of culture. To speak of a “feeling of having something to do with art” is to say nothing about the nature or the content of the feeling in question, and basically authorizes any feeling, including disgust and ridicule. Kant says that these two feelings are incompatible with every aesthetic judgment: disgust is incompatible with taste, which is to say the beautiful, and ridicule is incompatible with the sublime. As if by chance, these are precisely the two feelings which were most often invoked to justify the judgment “this is not art” brought against modern art.
Here I can insert a working hypothesis that will bring us back to the question of negation (Verneinung). Everything which is today considered to be a masterpiece of modernity — from Courbet’s L’Enterrement à Ornans up to Picasso’s Demoiselles d’Avignon, passing through Baudelaire’s Les Fleurs du mal, Flaubert’s Madame Bovary, Stravinsky’s The Rites of Spring, James Joyce’s Ulysses, Manet’s Déjeuner sur l’herbe and the succès de scandale it produced at the Salon des Refusés, and a multitude of other works — was exposed to judgments of the “this isn’t art, this isn’t painting, this isn’t music, this isn’t literature” sort. Such judgments have to my mind all the structure of a negation, if only because pronouncing something to be non-art is already a way of substantiating the fact that the object in question is a candidate for art. One wouldn’t speak of a urinal as being non-art or anti-art if one didn’t feel strongly that there were at least someone who claimed that it was art. The judgment “that isn’t art!” was uttered with the regularity of a clock throughout all of modernity, and was always argued by invoking feelings which poured forth either from the side of disgust, or from the side of ridicule. It was said of Courbet’s painting that it was disgusting, and the same was said of Manet’s. It was also said of a great many other artists — think of the Dadaists, for example — that their work was ridiculous. Either modern art is disgusting -- with everything that such a judgment obviously implies of a return of repressed, even scatological, sexuality — or modern art is ridiculous. On the one hand, “it’s shit,” and on the other, “a five-year-old kid could do that.”

History, until further notice, has reversed these judgments. One must conclude, then, that one can make modern art, and judge it, with any and all feelings, even those which seem to exclude the very possibility of aesthetic judgment. The expression of these judgments of disgust and ridicule did not prevent the Rites of Spring, Ulysses, Olympia, or Madame Bovary from being today recognized as masterpieces of modernity.

I just said that all feelings are authorized by modern art. Now a doubt suddenly crosses my mind that I would like to open up to you, since I happen to be speaking today to an audience primarily of analysts. It would seem that for Freud, as for Kant, there was basically only one feeling — or two: pleasure and pain, pleasure and displeasure. There might be something very pertinent in that. Freud didn’t waste his time making a principle for every one of the feelings that one can experience. There are the pleasure principle and the reality principle. And then, in the second theory of the drives, there are Eros and Thanatos. There are not thirty-six thousand drives. And in the text on negation, Freud says some very enigmatic things, since he evokes a pleasure of negation, a pleasure from which Lacan pulls several strings in the direction of sadism, on the one hand, and in the direction of foreclosure (Verwerfung) on the other. I don’t really know what to do with that — except perhaps to raise this question: do we need a topology of feelings in order to advance on a theoretical level toward an aesthetics of modernity, or can we after all be content with pleasure and displeasure? But then, what do we do with the second theory of drives, which we just called to mind? In any case, it seems to me that it isn’t by chance that Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Freud’s oh-so-enigmatic and speculative text, arose at the same historical moment as the works of art of which I just spoke, and that he found his starting point in a reflection on the traumatic neuroses. That the aesthetics of modernity is largely an aesthetics of shock, of trauma (Walter Benjamin had begun to theorize this), indicates that there must be several trails to follow in this direction. I leave that
4. HOW THIS CORRESPONDS, IN THE PRACTICE AND APPRECIATION OF ART, TO A RADICAL DISSOLUTION OF CONVENTIONS, AND HOW THIS ENDANGERS THE VERY POSSIBILITY OF EXERCISING A COMPARATIVE AESTHETIC JUDGMENT.

I told you that I was not going to explain how one passes from classical aesthetic judgment, of the "this is beautiful" sort, to the judgment "this is art." I now think I can tell you something about this passage. Phrases of classical aesthetic judgment, of the "this painting is beautiful, this piece of music is sublime, this landscape is picturesque, etc." sort, assume that one knows what a painting is, what a piece of music is, what a landscape, poem or theatrical play is, and so on. There must be a certain social consensus, then, about the conventions specific to each of the particular arts. Now, with Duchamp, one went from a system which, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was called "the Fine Arts," to a system which is today called "art," in the singular and without the word "fine" — which is to say, to art in general. This passage is not obvious. I quote myself, if you don't mind: "One should constantly marvel at, or worry over, what our era finds perfectly legitimate — that someone can be an artist without being a painter, or writer, or musician, or sculptor, or filmmaker, etc. Might modernity have invented art in general?" This sentence, which I placed on the back cover of my book *Au nom de l'art*, is always with me.

Let us take the example of painting. As long as we're in a classical civilization, which has a certain social stability, society (which is to say the cultured class, which is the only one that "counts") agrees on the technical definitions of what the object called "painting" is. A painting is a flat object that is transportable, hangs on the wall, has a frame, depicts something in perspective, obeys the rules of a genre (portrait, landscape, still life, historical painting, etc.), and is painted in oil, by hand, by somebody. That, put crudely, is the list of conventions which makes up the definition of a painting at the end of the eighteenth century. I can thus recognize a painting when I see one, in exactly the same way I can recognize a chair when I see one. The phrase "this is a painting" has nothing to do with an aesthetic judgment: it is an observation. If I then say, "it's a beautiful painting," or "this is not a beautiful painting," then I am obviously expressing an aesthetic judgment. One would thus have, on the one hand, the conventions of the painting, and on the other, the appreciation of what the artist does with these conventions, and how the artist possibly sublimates them.

Yes, but what is a convention? A convention is something that has two sides: it is on the one hand a rule, and on the other a pact. On the first side, the conventions of art, or of a given art, are technical rules for producing and judging on the part of the artist, and rules for appreciating on the part of the public. For the artist, the conventions of his or her art are before anything technical precepts. How does one make a painting? One takes canvas, stretches it over a strut, puts white gesso on it, then one takes brushes, and so on. This isn’t written in nature, that one must paint on canvas, nor that one must paint with paintbrushes and not with one’s fingers, or by throwing color onto the canvas, and so on; it is written in history, which is to say, in conventions. There are, then, a certain number of conventions of production for the painter.
that become the conventions of judging for the audience. It is within these painterly conventions that the audience appreciates the quality of the execution, reads the meaning of the painting, and more generally judges on the level of perception the resulting qualities, which are ordinarily called its aesthetic qualities.

So far, I’ve emphasized the fact that there are rules, techniques and aesthetics, and now I’m emphasizing the social aspect of these rules, and the fact that these rules are conventions, which is to say, a pact. In order to sign a pact, at least two people are needed. A convention of a given art is thus a pact made between the artist and his clientele, the artist and his audience. As long as one is in a period known as classical, artistic conventions are, on the whole, stable, which means that the precepts for making and the criteria for judging are accepted by the concerned parties according to a pact. This also implies that the parties in question are known and know each other.

Modernity arrives. What did the painters, writers, musicians, and artists who were called avant-garde do in all their respective disciplines? They broke the conventions one by one. They smashed the rules of technique, they transgressed the preferences of taste, they progressively destroyed, deconstructed or abandoned all the conventions of their art. The explanations for this phenomenon, which emphasize novelty, art for art’s sake, or the artist’s will to revolution, and which are content with that, are tautological or in any case insufficient. I think that no true artist breaks a rule for the pleasure of breaking a rule. It would be quite naive to see the avant-garde as a bunch of troublemakers who transgressed conventions for the pleasure of breaking their plaything. When one knows the history of modern art, for at least the last 150 years, one sees very well that all the great artists walked into modernity backwards and that they abandoned rules because they no longer felt the need for them. A true artist is always someone who acts aesthetically, which is to say, by his or her sensibility. This sensibility dictates to the artist that the rule which had been of value until then — for example, the rule of chiaroscuro for Manet, or the rule of monocular perspective for Cézanne — can no longer be of use. It loses its meaning, so one abandons it, one destroys it, one deconstructs it.

What does it mean now that a rule has lost its meaning, and that an artist breaks it because he or she is aware of it or is affected by it? One can read this phenomenon in two ways, depending on whether one emphasizes the rule as a precept of aesthetic technique or as a convention, which is to say a pact. One can say that it is under the pressure of a rule of technique which is aesthetically experienced as outdated, or inappropriate, or emptied of its meaning, that the artist breaks the pact, and that from that moment on he or she provokes disagreement instead of approval. Or rather, one can say that it is under the pressure of the pact experienced as being usurped, or unfounded, or unjust, or formed to the detriment of another pact, which is to say, in any case, already riddled with disagreement, that the artist breaks the aesthetico-technical rule. These two formulations are two sides of the same coin, but they allow, through simplifying, the artists known as avant-garde to be regrouped into two opposed families, which a single “theory” of the avant-garde can explain. (Let us say in passing that the advantage of this view is that it moves beyond the alternative between a formalist and an avant-garde conception of the history of modern art.)
Let's take Cézanne as an example. He's somebody who isn't concerned with anything — especially not politics. He's not concerned with anything, that is, but obeying the dictates of his perception, and finally that's what commands him to throw all [the conventions] of classical painting out the window. One can say that for Cézanne, the little bits of colored sensation were everything. He was pretty indifferent to anything else. And nevertheless, he breaks the rule, he breaks the social pact. At the other extreme of the spectrum, let's take as our example Courbet, who had socialist sympathies, was a friend of Proudhon, a regular acquaintance of the Saint-Sinomians and the Fourierists, and who subscribed to everything in the nineteenth century that aspired to a Communist utopia before the term even existed. One can say that Courbet felt the social pact to be unjust, since in order to provide for him as a painter, it bound him to a certain Parisian bourgeoisie, whereas he far preferred the peasants of Ornans. But it is in painting, the very conventions of representation, that he undoes a symbolic pact with his Parisian clientele in order to form another pact, an imaginary one, with another social class that does not purchase his paintings, but that one sees in *L'enterrement à Ornans*. I just mentioned two families of artists, using Cézanne and Courbet as examples, and through all of modernity you can, on the model of their temperaments, tip the scales in one direction or the other. I think that one can say, however, of all authentic artists that they do both at the same time: they break the aesthetico-technical rules because they feel that the social pact is usurped, and they break the pact because they feel that, aesthetically, the rules of technique are unfounded.

And that now is the heart of the matter. Modernity, in art, begins when one no longer knows who is making the pact with whom. That is, on the one hand, when art addresses anyone and everyone (a subsidiary question, which preoccupies me a great deal, but which I will not tackle today: modernity perhaps ends when one again knows who is making the pact with whom, in other words, when art ceases to comport a universal address and begins instead to occupy a specialized niche in the leisure industry), and on the other, when one can no longer limit the corporate bodies of artists through recourse to definitions of technique and aesthetics of their respective crafts: in other words, when anyone and everyone can be an artist. It is this second point which indicates the emergence of what I called art in general, which is to say, the fact that one can be an artist without being a painter, or sculptor, or poet, or musician, a fact that I still think one must not stop marveling at or worrying over. Now, the passage of particular arts (painting, music, poetry, architecture, and I don't know what else) to art in general could have been made starting from any of the arts. But, for historically complex reasons, it so happens that it is from the realm of the plastic arts, and more precisely, from painting, that art in general arises. In the plastic arts this took place more violently, more decisively, and more quickly than in the other arts, and it took place through the intervention of Marcel Duchamp. A single example: without Duchamp, would there have been John Cage? John Cage gave to the sounds of the street the same artistic readymade dignity which Duchamp gave to a snow shovel. Yet one continues to say that John Cage is a musician, a composer, or else one denies him any artistic claim (I myself have heard Xenakis do so), which explains why today, after Cage, the art galleries (but not the concert halls) are full of people who say: "I'm an artist who uses sound." A new category appeared next to the musician, but not in the same institutions: it is the "artist who makes sound."
To sum up: the necessity felt by artists of modernity to break rules, to break pacts, turns aesthetic judgment into a judgment on that very pact and on those rules and conventions. It is in this way that one passes from “this is beautiful” to “this is painting,” then to “this is art.” As long as one agrees on the rules which say “a painting is a flat object hung on the wall, etc.,” aesthetic judgment consists of saying whether it is a good or bad painting. But from the moment when, for reasons of internal necessity — what Kandinsky called “interior necessity” — the artist feels forced to break the pact which sets the conventions of the painting, he redirects the judgment — first his own and then that of the audience he is addressing — onto the very pact, onto the convention. From that point on, what’s at issue is knowing if whether one is going to restore a social pact around the breaking of the rule, and if the breaking of the rule will be able to become a rule in its turn. From that moment on, the artist is inevitably exposed to judgments claiming that conventions have not been respected in a sufficient fashion and that one cannot identify the object in question as belonging to the category in question. From that moment on, it is no longer a question of saying of the *Déjeuner sur l’herbe* that “it’s a bad painting,” it is simply a question of saying “it isn’t a painting.” And that’s indeed what happened, since it was rejected from the Salon of 1863.

You’ll say to me: yes, but we find it again at the Salon des Refusés. Precisely. We have there the first historical instance of a binary paradigm — either it’s painting (at the Salon des Refusés), or else it’s not art (at any salon) — substituting itself for the paradigm of the judgment of taste which allows for a continuous gradation from pleasure to displeasure within established conventions. In 1874, eleven years after the Salon des Refusés, Manet presented four paintings at the Salon; once again, two were refused and two were accepted. Among those refused are the famous *Bal masqué à l’Opéra*, a painting which must have seemed to someone viewing it at that time as chaotic as a Pollock seems to someone today. And Mallarmé, who was both a friend and a great admirer of Manet, perfectly understood the stakes when, taking his defense, he said in an article: “Burdened with the confused vote of the painters to choose, among the paintings presented in a frame, what truly exists as painting, the jury has nothing more to say than ‘This is a painting’ or ‘That isn’t a painting.’” In other words, the jury does not have to lay down the law aesthetically, it only has to say, according to Mallarmé, “there’s the boundary.” Now, what Mallarmé was not completely conscious of, but which he sensed even so, because otherwise he would not have expressed it in this way, is that, in fact, there is no other way to fix this boundary than by judging, since that’s what artists focus aesthetic judgment on. Ten years later, with the creation of the Society of Independent Artists, whose motto was “Neither award nor jury,” history in a way took note of Mallarmé’s intuition. At that moment, it was up to the crowd, the Baudelairean crowd, the anonymous crowd of everyday people, to say, not only whether the paintings displayed at the Salon were good paintings, but whether they were paintings at all. And thus, whether they were art.

The jury which, in 1863, accepted Cabanel or Baudry and refused Manet must have thought of the former’s work, “this is painting,” and of the *Déjeuner sur l’herbe*, “this is not art, because it’s not even a painting.” The passage from the phrase “this is a beautiful painting (or a good sculpture, or a sublime piece of music, etc.)” to the phrase “this is art,” which is to say, the
passage which in Résonances du readymade I called the passage from the specific to the generic, is made by way of the judgment of non-art, regarding which I again ask that you recall the Verneinung, the negation — “this is not a painting.” This passage would be like a three-stroke engine, whose movement has propelled the whole history of the avant-gardes. First stroke: the sensibility of a painter like Manet dictates that he focus aesthetic judgment on the conventions of painting, and therefore run the risk that one might say of his painting: “it’s not painting, it’s not art.” In this way, there appears a dynamic that divides the painter’s trade in two: a specific domain that an ontological definition of painting momentarily closes off, and a vast, open, generic field, where, just as momentarily, that which wasn’t recognized as being art can be found rejected. Second stroke: one remarks that history reverses initial judgments. A part of what was momentarily rejected as art (generic through negation) is restored to painting (specific through affirmation). In this way, a paradigm becomes apparent which opposes a retrospective whole — which is painting already recognized as such — to the anticipated projection of that which cannot be assimilated and which is essential to it: non-art.

This category of non-art is in this way a very strange no man’s land, which contains just as easily the innumerable things that no one ever thought to arrange under any of the known and recognized arts, as well as certain objects, like the Déjeuner sur l’herbe, which, although they have a certain number of characteristics that allow one to identify them as belonging to a particular art (in this case, painting), are nonetheless excluded for having transgressed one or several conventions momentarily judged to be indispensable. In 1863, the Déjeuner sur l’herbe was not admitted into the “paradise” of art which the Salon was. But neither was it banished to a definitive “hell.” It was in the Salon des Refusés, which one could indeed designate as the most advanced painting “purgatory” of its time. A specific purgatory, where the Déjeuner sur l’herbe, judged as being a non-painting, rubbed shoulders with other condemned paintings. But, judged at the same time as being non-art, the Déjeuner sur l’herbe is also sent away elsewhere, into the “limbo” of everything that — for lack of presenting the least formal characteristic capable of affiliating it specifically to this or that artistic practice — doesn’t know how to claim to be art. And there you have it: it is from this generic limbo that Duchamp will later draw his readymades.

Once pulled from this limbo, Duchamp’s urinal becomes art; it is obviously not painting, nor is it sculpture. It is only a plausible candidate for the title of sculpture, providing one first looks at it as art. Otherwise, it’s simply just a beautiful urinal, or an ugly urinal, it doesn’t really matter. Duchamp’s readymades thus signal the advent of art in general, or art in the generic sense of the term, with all specificity done away with. I would like to suggest here a path (which I didn’t follow at the time of my presentation to la Cause freudienne, but which at that time called to my mind Freud’s seminal essay and seemed to me to revive the question of negation). We just saw that in order to pass from the specific to the general, in other words, from the phrase “this is a (good) painting,” as it expresses the classical aesthetic judgment, to the phrase “this is art,” as it aesthetically names a readymade, it was necessary to pass, “logically,”
through a phrase like “this is not a painting and therefore isn’t art,” such as it was able to be applied, historically, to the Déjeuner sur l’herbe. The implication “this is not a painting and therefore isn’t art” is a negative judgment [négation] supported by a negation [in the psychoanalytic sense, dénégation]. On its own, the phrase “this is not a painting” does not necessarily imply that the “this” in question isn’t art: a concerto by Beethoven is not a painting, but it’s art all the same. And if I say that a concerto by Beethoven isn’t a painting, I’m not making a negation. On its own, the phrase “this is not art” is not necessarily a negation either, especially not (let’s forget Duchamp) if it refers to an object such as a urinal. It’s simply a negative assertoric judgment. The surest sign of negation is the therefore which links the two phrases. The paralogism which consists of drawing a universal negative conclusion from a particular negative minor premise (the major being something like “painting is an art” or “every painted picture belongs to art”) must logically have a name, although I don’t know what it is. I also don’t know if the clinical experience of analysts confirms that there is, in a general manner, the indication of a negation in such a paralogism. But what I do know is that if, before the Déjeuner sur l’herbe, for example, a subject infers “this is not art” from his feeling that “this is not painting,” it’s because this subject “knows” that it is indeed a painting and he or she is denying it.

I leave these reflections as they are, even though, as you will see, I haven’t finished with negation, nor for that matter with the logic of the therefore, of the implication. I would now like to reformulate the problem of the passage from the particular to the universal in relation to this logic. Let’s say first off that in front of a traditional painting, I can rightfully say: this is painting, therefore it is art. I know that painting is an art, and I take note that this is a painting, by comparing it to things which I know to be paintings. I simply note that the “this” in question respects conventions. If I now say of this painting “it is a good painting,” I’m judging it aesthetically. I have the feeling that it is a good painting, once again, in comparison to other paintings which I have, through experience, learned to assess as being good paintings. I compare the paintings, I also compare my feelings, and everything takes place as if I were saying to myself: this painting which I have before my eyes gives me a feeling comparable (in intensity, in quality, let’s say, in pleasure), to the feeling which other paintings that I’ve judged to be good give me, therefore it is a good painting. But if before Duchamp’s urinal, I aesthetically judge that “this is art,” to what other objects am I comparing it? To what feeling am I comparing my feeling “of being faced with art”? And how is this comparison being carried out, since I have no basis for comparison from which I can draw a logical implication?

5. HOW, DESPITE EVERYTHING, MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY AESTHETIC JUDGMENT COMPARES WHAT IS UNCOMPARABLE.

How can I compare Duchamp’s urinal to everything which my imaginary collection comprises under the name (proper name) of art? It could be said in passing: I presume
every aesthetic judgment is comparative, not necessarily consciously. Absolute aesthetic judgment doesn't exist; it is always comparative. Everything takes place as if, before such an object, one rapidly goes over all the plausible candidates for comparison in one’s mind, drawing from the things which one has of course already called “art.” So, it works to compare a painting to other paintings, but it is rather difficult to compare a urinal to a painting.

What I'm comparing is an object I have before my eyes, to something which I call my personal collection, but which I don’t have before my eyes. This may recall an entire series of problems, which resonate incredibly, in the text on negation, with the question of refinding of which Freud speaks. Hyppolite emphasizes that in this text, it is a question of a judgment of attribution and a judgment of existence; the phrase “this is art” has the appearance of a judgment of attribution: I attribute the predicate “art” to the object designated by “this,” the predicate “art” being supposed to have a series of criteria at its disposal. Now, this is not a predicate, but a proper name. There is no criterion, only a list of works which are already part of my collection, and which take the place of “criterion” for me, which is to say, of the basis for comparison. This is why aesthetic judgment would be more on the order of a judgment of existence than a judgment of attribution. In the judgment of existence which Freud speaks of in this text, and which is emphasized very nicely by Hyppolite and then later by Lacan, it is a question, when considering a representation, of judging whether or not it has a correlate in reality. And Freud says,

Thus originally the mere existence of a presentation was a guarantee of the reality of what was presented. The antithesis between subjective and objective does not exist from the first. [Freud is referring, Hyppolite emphasizes, to the myth of origin.] It only comes into being from the fact that thinking possesses the capacity to bring before the mind once more something that has once been perceived, by reproducing it as a presentation without the external object having still to be there.

Following the hypothesis that aesthetic judgment is a judgment of existence, gives us the following: I’m before the urinal; I have a perception of it (a presentation, Freud would say); I have other mental presentations that come to mind, through conscious or unconscious association, of presentations of innumerable aesthetic experiences I’ve had in the past that constitute the connective tissue of my aesthetic memory — they have for me affective aesthetic meaning. And I make sense of this urinal, or I don’t make sense of it. The test of reality, which would really allow me to justify through feeling the phrase “this is art” applied to the object before my eyes, would be to refind, in the perception of this object, some of the same affective qualities which I found in other presentations. And when Freud says that negation carries out a “dissociation of the intellectual from the affective,” I find that incredibly interesting in regard to the phrase “this is art,” since this phrase, in the grammatical disguise of cold observation which it adopts, does precisely that: it dissociates the intellectual from the affective, it uses the word “art” as if it were a concept (that’s the antithesis in the Kantian antinomy) and hides the feeling on which it rests (and that’s the thesis).

I’m quite aware that I’m opening up what are (for me) new paths, and that I’m sharing them with you (analysts) because they fall within your domain, but I will not follow them through. It’s frustrating. But that’s the name of the game: the path of negation, in which Freud sees the origin of every judgment, seems to me particularly fruitful for the study of aesthetic judgment, and I wouldn’t want to neglect telling you that the aesthetician would be very
much in need of an analyst’s insight. Any takers?

Now, let’s return to the question of comparison. I could tell myself: good, okay, this urinal is in no way comparable to a work of art, because its formal attributes do not come under the conventions which make this Cézanne a painting, this Rodin a sculpture, this Beethoven concerto a piece of music. Therefore, I cannot compare. But I could compare feelings. Can the feeling which this urinal gives me be compared in intensity or quality to the one which a Cézanne painting or a Beethoven concerto gives me? Yet this formulation leaves me just as unsatisfied, because it presumes that the feeling evoked by a urinal is rightfully comparable to the one which a painting or a concerto evokes, that the comparison is plausible. One really has to admit that these feelings are attached to objects. The objects alone are not comparable among themselves, nor are the feelings alone. One must find an equation which unites objects and feelings.

This equation is found in various places in Kant, in the first, second, and third Critiques, everywhere the “mathematical” gives way to the “dynamic,” everywhere the “constituent” principles withdraw before the solely “regulating” principles, everywhere the “determining” judgment is lacking and is replaced by the “reflective” judgment. It is found under the name of analogy and indicates an indirect comparison: \( A \) is to \( B \) as \( C \) is to \( D \). The best part is that it is also found in Duchamp, under the well-chosen name algebraic comparison, and the example he provides of it, with his priceless humor, is the perfect Ubu-esque incarnation of the relations which can be fostered between a piece of porcelain for the bathroom and the scatological feelings which it evokes, when the whole claims to have the high values of art: \textit{arrhe est à art ce que merdre est à merde}. That, then, is the formula which gives rise to the aesthetic judgment that allows me to say, facing Duchamp’s urinal, “this is art” (see the diagram below), insofar as this judgment is comparative: the urinal object is to the feeling which this urinal gives me what the set of art works in my collection are to the feeling which I’ve learned through experience to expect from works of art, and which I sum up in a word: the feeling of having something to do with art. Let’s put that in the form of a diagram:

\[
\begin{align*}
A & \rightarrow C \\
B & \rightarrow D
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\text{Urinal} \quad \rightarrow \quad \text{Collection}
\]

\[
\text{feeling for} \\
\text{the urinal} \\
\text{feeling for} \\
\text{art}
\]

I have no other argumentation to justify my inclusion of Duchamp’s urinal in my collection. To justify my judgment, it would take another one, which considers the first to be sound. That’s the Kantian thesis: I admit that my judgment is subjective, and I call on — in the empirical — the precedent set by the history of art, on which I support myself (I am not the first to consider \textit{Fountain} to be art) and which I call on to restate the soundness and fairness of my judgment. But I express my judgment as if it were an objective truth. That’s the antithesis: I call on — in the transcendental — a universal, unprovable and probably unattainable agreement. One cannot prove the truth of an aesthetic judgment because there is no form of syllogistic, inductive, implicative or “therefore” reasoning which can lead to it. One cannot state one’s judgment, by a quasi-reasonable analogy which takes a detour through the equality of
two relations between things of which the fourth is and remains unknown.

I think that the *algebraic comparison* provides the formula of every comparative aesthetic judgment, even when the objects are comparable because conventions declared them to be. It is in any case the only way to compare what is not comparable. I’m reading to you what I was able to write on the preceding in a little text which is precisely entitled “To Compare the Uncomparable”: “In reality, aesthetic judgment is not a direct comparison. It doesn’t place in the balance something that is a candidate for the name of art on one side, and on the other all the works which have already passed the exam, nor for that matter a feeling of having something to do with art on one side, and on the other a feeling of vague and general art which would be like the affective common denominator of everything which one considers to be art. It’s a comparison by analogy, an “as if” comparison. When you decide to place a work of art into your collection, and especially if it’s a work which has very few or no precedents, a thing which nothing in the way of medium, form, style or subject has prepared you to view it as art, but which compels you despite everything to compare it to all the art which you have in your collection, a thing so unexpected that to call it “art” in the most generic sense of the term is precisely what is at stake, a thing which has every chance of provoking a feeling of having nothing to do with art, you will not do so by basing yourself only on your past experience. Comparisons fail. And yet, it’s as if you passed it through a comparative form of “reasoning” which would say: this thing, which asks me to compare it to all the things which I consider to be art, is, to the things already present in my collection, what the disturbing feeling of having nothing to do with art which this thing gives rise to, is to the feeling which my past experience has taught me to expect from art. And here are other possible readings of this same algebra because, as in algebra, it’s possible to switch the terms: this thing here, which for me is not yet art, entertains toward the feeling of non-art which it gives rise to the same relation as the one the totality of my art collection entertains toward my expectations. Or again: the feeling which so shatters my expectations compares to these same expectations the way this unexpected thing compares to everything I’ve named “art.” Or again: my experience with art is to the things which this experience has led me to collect what my inexperience before this new thing here is to the thing in question. And so on.”

I “stumbled” upon the work of Marcel Duchamp in 1975 and I’m not sure I’ve finished with it. All the thoughts which I’ve shared with you this evening developed in the interval, be it the seventy or so years after Duchamp “invented” the first readymade, the thirty years after Duchamp began to rival Picasso for the title of the most important artist of the century, or the twenty years after *Fountain* was entered with great pomp into the museums of modern art. Now I’m speaking of it as if it were “a thing which has very few or no precedents, a thing which nothing in the way of medium, form, style or subject has prepared you to view it as art,” a thing “so unexpected that to call it ‘art’ in the most generic sense of the term is precisely what is at stake, a thing which has every chance of provoking a feeling of having nothing to do with art.” I’m taking my time, that’s for sure.

For a long time I reflected on this urinal as a *fait accompli*, wondering under what conditions any object had been called “art” by the official culture of today, and I found the answer, in a perfectly self-referential manner, in the work of Duchamp, bringing out what I called the four
enunciative conditions of the phrase “this is art,” as it can apply to any object. (That’s the first chapter of Résonances du readymade.) But this work left me profoundly unsatisfied, because it put me in the position of a Martian anthropologist coming to the planet Earth who, with a detachment close to that of Nero watching Rome burn, was asking himself what humans at the end of the twentieth century were really able to gather together under the name of art.

I realized that it wasn’t possible to say, “My contemporaries think that a urinal is art,” without taking a side myself. I was unable to let myself, for ethical or political reasons, be detached in this way. My culture is for me a real stake, lived if you like; since I didn’t choose to live in the age in which I live, the art of my age is for me a living passion. Leaving it as a fait accompli entailed the danger of liquidating modernity’s acquisitions. It would have been to accept that the whole historical process of destruction, deconstruction or abandonment of traditional artistic conventions ended in the absence of convention as a new convention. If “anything goes” is the norm, one might as well close up shop. For this reason, I felt that I didn’t have the right to say this is art” without myself making a judgment on this urinal, without saying, “This is actually art,” and arguing this judgment if need be.

In some ways, I can say that my argument is all the theoretical work which Duchamp made me do and which he has made so many other interpreters of contemporary art do. But that’s only a sign of the work’s richness, an indication, not a proof. For example, Duchamp led me to construct an aesthetic theory which uses a single theorem: art is a proper name. But try to justify your baptizing this or that thing as art by means of this theory. It doesn’t work (which, obviously, delights me). And I find myself again, like you, like everyone, facing something which in the last analysis, is a matter of feeling, of the feeling this urinal actually gives me of being art, for millions of almost imponderable reasons. That, I believe, is Duchamp’s great ethical contribution. Far from having appropriated a urinal, and of having, like King Midas, touched it with a gesture that transformed it into art — that’s what many of his adversaries as well as his flatterers think they can reduce it to — he gave all of us, we “observers who are making paintings” (the expression is his), the responsibility of having to repeat, when facing this urinal or this snow shovel, and each for his or her own reasons, “Yes, it’s art,” or on the contrary, “No, it isn’t art.”

We’re always asking for revisionism on the subject, and if we didn’t, it wouldn’t be interesting, because to have embalmed any object as stirring or as restless as this one — an object that effectively has no aesthetic properties in the classical sense of the term — to have embalmed it forever and put it in the museum, would be to mortify it if the object weren’t open to the provocation which constitutes the injunction that everyone must reconsider it for themselves. It’s only on that condition that I say, “Yes, I’m struggling so that Duchamp’s urinal will still be in the museum 500 years from now,” which is for all that, I have to say, a very strange idea — and damned funny.

— Translated by Marc Lowenthal
1. Published in *Quarto, Revue de l’École de la Cause freudienne en Belgique*, n. 53, winter 1993-94. The text is the retranscription of the recording of a talk given at the *Cause freudienne* in Brussels, December 17, 1993, through the kind invitation of Yves Depelsenaire. I have, of course, somewhat “cleaned” and revised the text, but I have as much as possible tried to preserve its oral and quasi-improvised character, the only written material that I relied on being the five points set off in captials here and numbered from 1 to 5. [This note is the author’s. Subsequent notes are those of the editor.]


3. The French has “(d’)après Duchamp” in order to indicate that de Duve rereads Kant both “according to” and “in the wake of” Duchamp.


5. Duchamp’s sentence is not easily translated into English. “Arrhe” is a conjugation of *arrher*, meaning “to give earnest money for” or “to make a deposit on.” The French word “merdre” has elsewhere been translated as “shitte.” Not an actual French verb, it is the first word of Jarry’s *Ubu Roi*. 
In his Critique of Judgment, Kant approaches the question of the beautiful in four steps, with four paradoxical definitions, which all revolve around the “signifier of the lack” — the word without or devoid of. Beauty is “a liking without interest,” “universality without concept,” “purposiveness without purpose,” and “necessity without concept.” Kant’s basic operation in these definitions consists in what one might call essential subtraction: in each of the definitions quoted above, Kant deprives the first notion exactly of that which is considered to be its essential characterization. Is it not the essence of every liking or pleasure (Wohlgefallen) that it is bound with interest? Is it not the essence of universality and of necessity that they are based upon concepts? Is it not the essence of purposiveness that it has a purpose? The beautiful thus becomes the quality of something organized around a central void, and it is this very void which somehow dictates its organization. “Purposiveness without purpose,” for example, does not simply refer to something that, while having no purpose, nevertheless strikes us as if (the famous Kantian als ob) it had one. The question is not simply that of comparison or resemblance, and the opposition is not that of the appearance of a purpose versus the actual absence of any purpose. The mystery of the beautiful does not reside in the question, “How can something that has no purpose produce such a striking effect of purposiveness?” The point is rather that the absence of the purpose in the “center” and the purposiveness of what is organized around this central absence are intrinsically connected. It is not that we detect some purposiveness in spite of the absence of any purpose; that is, it is not that the relation between the two elements is that of contradiction, but rather the relation is that of a specific form of mutual sustaining.

What we called essential subtraction can be expressed even better in terms of extimité, defined by Lacan as the “excluded interior,” as something which is “excluded in the interior.” This is precisely what Kantian definitions aim at: the beauty names the effect of this excluded interior. Where the excluded dimension remains included as excluded, it is via its own exclusion that it becomes operative as the organizing power of its “surroundings.” It is quite remarkable that in his discussion of art in relation to the question of sublimation, Lacan accentuates almost the same structure as Kant. He stresses that in every form of sublimation, emptiness (or void) is determinative, although not in the same way. Religion consists of avoiding this void,
whereas science and/or philosophy take an attitude of unbelief towards it. As for art, "all art is characterized by a certain mode of organization around this emptiness." Of course, the emptiness at stake is not just any kind of emptiness or void, but precisely "that excluded interior which . . . is thus excluded in the interior." The other name for this void or emptiness is das Ding, the Thing.

Previously we took the example of "purposiveness without purpose," which might be slightly misleading since we encounter the same term (purpose) on both sides. A better example is that of "pleasure without interest," or, in another translation, "liking devoid of all interest," which will help us to clarify in detail how this "interior exclusion" actually works and what its consequences are. The notion of "pleasure devoid of all interest" also has the advantage of becoming, since Nietzsche's critique, the emblem of the Kantian conception of the beautiful and the topos of contemporary philosophical debate concerning the notion of the beautiful (and of art in general).

Nietzsche's attack on Kant's notion of "pleasure devoid of all interest" is famous enough. Nietzsche identifies Kant's position with that of Schopenhauer's (which is, in itself, a very problematic identification) and sees in it a "reactive" approach to art. According to Nietzsche, disinterested delight is an absurd notion resulting from the fact that we approach art exclusively from the standpoint of the spectator, and a non-creative spectator at this. Art and its appreciation are in no way "disinterested operations." To Kant's definition of the beautiful, Nietzsche opposes Stendhal's, which defines the beautiful as "a promise of happiness" and implies, according to Nietzsche, the recognition of the power of the beautiful to excite the will (and thus the interest). As appealing as this critique might seem, it very much misses Kant's point, which is in fact quite close to Nietzsche's own views.

But what exactly does the formula "pleasure devoid of all interest" aim at? Kant calls the pleasure that is still linked with interest (or need) "agreeableness." If I declare an object to be agreeable, this judgment "arouses a desire for objects of that kind." This does not mean that with the next stage, the stage of the beautiful, or "devoid of all interest," this desire disappears — the point is that it becomes irrelevant. Let us clarify this with one of Kant's own examples, the "green meadows."

The first stage is the objective stage: the green color of meadows belongs to objective sensation. "Meadows are green" is an objective judgment. The second stage is the subjective stage: the color's agreeableness belongs to subjective sensation, to feeling; "I like green meadows" is a subjective judgment, which also means, "I would like to see green meadows as often as possible." This is a "yes" to the object (green meadows) which is supposed to gratify us (Kant's term). The third stage is a "yes," not to the color, but to the feeling of the agreeable itself, a "yes" not to the object that gratifies us but to the gratification itself, i.e. a "yes" to the previous "yes." Here it is the feeling itself, the sensation that becomes the object (of judgment). "Green meadows are beautiful" is a judgment of taste, an aesthetic judgment, which is neither "objective" nor "subjective." This judgment could be called "acephalous" or "headless," since the "I," the "head" of the judgment is replaced, not with some impersonal objective neutrality as in statements of the type "the meadows are green," but with the most intimate part of the subject (how the subject feels itself affected by a given representation as object). "Devoid of all interest" means precisely that we no longer refer to the existence of the object (green meadows), but only to the pleasure that it gives us.
It is striking how close this third stage is to one of the central themes of Nietzsche's philosophy, the theme of the "affirmation of affirmation." As Deleuze showed very well, the point of the Nietzschean "yes" is that it has to be itself affirmed by another "yes." There has to be a second affirmation, so that the affirmation itself can be affirmed. For this reason the Dionysian "yes" (the "yes" to everything that provides pleasure and enjoyment) needs the figure of Ariane in order to be completed. This could also be a way of understanding what is usually referred to as Nietzschean "anesthetization of life": if life should be a "yes" to a "yes," then this means precisely that it should be "aesthetisized" (in the Kantian sense of the word). Life must involve passion (engagement, zeal, enthusiasm, interest), but this passion must always be accompanied by an additional "yes" to it, otherwise it can only lead to nihilism. This "yes" cannot be but detached from the object, since it refers to the passion itself. The great effort of Nietzsche's philosophy is to think and articulate the two together. "Yes" to the "yes" cannot be the final stage in the sense that it would suffice in itself. Alone, it is no longer a "yes" to a "yes," but just plain "yes" — the "ee-ahh," the donkey's sound of inane, empty enjoyment. Thus, for Nietzsche, the figure of affirmation can only be a figure of a couple, and the aesthetic detachment only a "yes" to the greatest involvement.

But how exactly does this couple function? We know that any real involvement excludes simultaneous contemplation of it. And yet they must be somehow simultaneous, they must always walk in a pair (i.e. constitute one subjective figure), otherwise we would not be dealing with the "affirmation of affirmation," but with two different types of affirmation. The figure that corresponds to this criterion is the figure of creation — or, in other terms, the figure of sublimation. The creation is never a creation of one thing, but always the creation of two things that go together: the something and the void, or, in Lacan's terms, the object and the Thing. This is the point of Lacan's insisting on the notion of creation ex nihilo, and of his famous example of the vase: the vase is what creates the void, the emptiness inside it. The arch-gesture of art is to give form to the nothing. Creation is not something that is situated in the (given) space or that occupies a certain space, it is the very creation of the space as such. With every creation, a new space gets created. Another way of putting this would be to say that every creation has the structure of a veil. It operates as a veil that creates a "beyond," announces it, and makes it almost palpable in the very tissue of the veil.

The beautiful is the effect of a surface which is supposed to hide something (else). One must note, however, that the beautiful here no longer remains within the frame of the Kantian definition: it is not the pleasure that we find in the harmony between a given form and an indeterminate concept of the understanding. Lacan's notion of the beautiful actually combines two Kantian notions, the beautiful and the sublime. This is why he often uses the term "sublime beauty." Beauty no longer refers to the (harmonious) form, but to the splendor, éclat, that seems to emanate from certain objects which may very well be "ugly" or, at any rate, "plain" if taken only in their form. What makes them "glitter" is their relation to something else, the fact that they function as a screen for something else. One of the finest examples of the beautiful image's relation to the "abyss," the background upon which it emerges, which it announces and at the same time forbids access to, is probably Poe's tale "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar."
relation is precisely that which exists between the repulsive and formless mass, the disgusting dissolution, the substance of jouissance into which Valdemar’s body is transformed when he is woken up from the mesmeric trance and, on the other hand, the sublime body of Valdemar, maintained for seven months in a state of mesmeric trance, under the disguise of which it transforms irrepressibly into the Thing (in Freud’s as well as John Carpenter’s meaning of the word). “There lay a nearly liquid mass of loathsome — of detestable putrescence.”7 It is because of the reader’s awareness of the near presence of this “liquid mass of loathsome” (long before it finally reveals itself at the end of the story) that its surface, the body of Valdemar, produces an effect of beauty: the object-body is thus “elevated to the dignity of the Thing.”8 This is why in relation to the phenomenon of the beautiful Lacan speaks of the fantasy which he formulates in terms of “a beauty that mustn’t be touched,”9 which is his “conceptual translation” of Kant’s “devoid of all interest.” The shift that this translation produces is a very subtle one: it posits the breakdown of the object, linked to the appearance of the beautiful, as the very effect of the beautiful (and not as its condition). Kant goes to the trouble of performing a kind of “phenomenological reduction,” of “putting in parentheses” the existence of the object (and the pleasure or displeasure that we can find in its existence), in order to arrive at the “devoid of all interest.” Whereas Lacan’s point is that “putting in parentheses” the existence of the object is the effect of the beautiful on our desire and not the state of mind that we must achieve first in order to be able to appreciate the beautiful (this is, once again, closer to the Kantian conception of the sublime): “the beautiful has the effect, I would say, of suspending, lowering, disarming desire. The appearance of beauty intimidates and stops desire.”10

We must be very careful in understanding this statement. It does not imply that beauty is on the side of the Thing and the intimidated desire on the side of the subject. On the contrary, they both refer to one and the same thing which is to be situated in the space that lies between and separates the subject and the Thing. But the appearance of the beautiful is at the same time precisely what creates this “space in-between,” this distance. The “spectator” who finds something beautiful acts, participates actively in its being beautiful and, in finding something beautiful, he re-acts in the active sense of the word. The “splendor” of beauty is a kind of shield that the artist and the “spectator” raise, in a kind of complicity, at the very point of das Ding. This shield is made to stop desire: desire, as it were, stops at beauty and remains with it, not wishing to go any further. It is not that the desire for the beautiful is suspended, but rather that desire is suspended, “frozen” within the realm of the beautiful.

This modified notion of the “devoid of all interest,” which implies the engagement of desire at a certain distance, a “respect” in the sense of “do not come too close to the beautiful,” is not far from Nietzsche’s conception of the beautiful. In Will to Power, § 852, for example, he writes: “To pick up the scent of what would nearly finish us off if it were to confront us in flesh, as danger, problem, temptation — this determines our aesthetic ‘yes.’ (‘That is beautiful’ is an affirmation.)”11 The opposition between the “scent” and the “flesh,” in which the scent is the locus of the beautiful and the flesh (or “danger”) its excluded interior, is perfectly compatible with the Lacanian conceptualization of “sublime beauty” (as well as with Kant’s theory of the sublime). When Nietzsche links the notion of the scent (which expresses the same idea as the veil — another word that Nietzsche likes to use) to his notion of affirmation, this points precisely in the
direction of the simultaneous appearance of two things: the involvement and the distance, the “danger” and the “pleasure,” the Thing and the object. In other words, it points in the direction of sublimation.

It might seem that it is precisely the notion of sublimation that opposes Nietzsche’s and Lacan’s conceptions of art (and creation in general). Is not the notion of sublimation a “reactive” notion par excellence (reactive in Nietzsche’s sense of the word, i.e. non-affirmative, non-active), implying that art can only be an “answer” and never a proposition, affirmation, invention? At best, art would be a “yes” to a “no” (i.e. to the impossibility of attaining satisfaction there where it is originally sought). Another question connected to this is the one of the “aesthetics of the ugly” (or the “explicit”): we know that not all art moves in the direction of “sublime beauty.” Traditional wisdom about sublimation describes the latter as the process of converting the explicit (which is considered to be forbidden and/or impossible) into the implicit (which, because of its ambiguity, is socially acceptable and/or possible). Moreover, the explicit is supposed to be linked to the sexual, whereas in the implicit the sexual character is no longer directly visible. This is, according to Lacan — who here adopts an almost Nietzschean discourse — what “the foolish crowd thinks.” Sublimation actually presupposes a change of object, yet this “change of object doesn’t necessarily make the sexual object disappear — far from it, the sexual object acknowledged as such may come to light in sublimation. The crudest of sexual games can be the object of a poem without for that reason losing its sublimating goal.”

In order to demonstrate this, Lacan stops at a poem that belongs to the literature of courtly love, while at the same time being quite sexually explicit. If our idea of courtly love (and of the sublimation that it involves) is that we are dealing with “idealization,” we are now in for a big surprise. Here is a part of the poem:

Though Lord Raimond, in agreement with Lord Truc Malec, defends Lady Ena and her orders, I would grow old and white before I would consent to a request that involves so great an impropriety. For so as “to put his mouth to her trumpet,” he would need the kind of beak that could pick grain out of a pipe. And even then he might come out blind, as the smoke from those folds is so strong.

He would need a beak and a long, sharp one, for the trumpet is rough, ugly and hairy, and it is never dry, and the swamp within is deep. That’s why the pitch ferments upwards as it continually escapes, continually overflows. And it is not fitting that he who puts his mouth to that pipe be a favorite.

There will be plenty of other tests, finer ones that are worth far more, and if Lord Bernart withdrew from that one, he did not, by Christ, behave like a coward if he was taken with fear and fright. For if the stream of water had landed on him from above, it would have scalded his whole neck and cheek, and it is not fitting also that a lady embrace a man who has blown a stinking trumpet.

This poem is a good example of “aesthetics of the explicit,” as well as proof of the fact that not all art moves in the direction of “sublime beauty.” It is clear that “sublime beauty” with its splendor is not the only “shield” that can step in between the subject and the Thing, thus diverting the subject from feeling just pure horror or disgust or plainness. The other “shield” or way of reacting is laughter. The tragic or sublime paradigm consists in creating the surface of the Thing, creating something as the obverse of the void that can be inhabited by all sorts of projections of things that would “finish us off if they were to confront us in flesh,” the surface playing the role of the “last veil.” The comic paradigm, on the other hand, is not so much a process of “tearing
down the veil” and peaking on the other side, revealing the actual ridiculousness of the “sublime object,” as it is a process of describing the Thing (in a certain way, of course — the poem quoted above can also be categorized as the process of describing the Thing). Good comedies do not just say, “The Emperor is naked” — they display and lay out a whole set of circumstances or situations in which the nakedness is explored from many different angles, constructed in the very process of its display. If the tragic/sublime paradigm implies that we elevate an object to the dignity of the Thing, the comic paradigm could be said to consist in elevating an object to the very indignity of the Thing.

Another commonplace about sublimation is that it provides a substitute satisfaction. Sublimation, however, should be distinguished from the symptom as compromise formation which belongs to the economy of substitution (a repressed drive returns in the form of a symptom by means of a signifying substitution). The object or “formation” that is the result of sublimation can be composed of metaphors, but is not itself a metaphor or a stand-in (for something else). This is why Lacan, following Freud, links the question of sublimation to the question of drives. Sublimation is the satisfaction of the Trieb. This does not mean that a drive which cannot find its satisfaction in the object that it originally aims at (because of certain social prohibitions) is then forced to find its satisfaction elsewhere, in some more “acceptable” way. The point is that the “structure” of the drives is in itself the very structure of sublimation: “The sublimation that provides the Trieb with satisfaction different from its aim — an aim that is still defined as its natural aim — is precisely that which reveals the true nature of the Trieb insofar as it is not simply instinct, but has a relationship to das Ding as such, to the Thing insofar as it is distinct from the object.”

When, in The Four Fundamental Concepts, Lacan returns to the question of the drive, he reformulates the difference between the object and the Thing in terms of the difference between aim and goal. Let us suggest an example of this difference, as well as of the difference between instinct and drive: the child’s instinct to suck the nipple in order to be fed becomes the drive when the aim (or the object) of sucking is no longer milk, but the very satisfaction that it finds in sucking. Thus, a child sucking its finger already has some experience of the drive. The “change of object” that characterizes the drive, as well as sublimation, is the shift from the object that gives us satisfaction (i.e. the “natural” object, the object that can satisfy a certain need) to the satisfaction itself as an object. We are not dealing with substitution, but rather with a “deviation” or “detour.”

Two questions arise at this point. First, can we simply say that drive equals sublimation? And second, considering that sublimation covers a much larger field than the field of art, what is the specificity of “artistic sublimation”? In reply to the first question, we could say that if the drive is a “headless” procedure, sublimation is not. Sublimation is a kind of “navigator” of the drives, and this is why it plays such an important role in society. Collective, socially accepted sublimations “lead” the drives to certain fields where they can “relax” and “let themselves go.” As Lacan points out, however, it is not simply that society approves of drives only in certain delimited fields, but also that society needs to “colonize the field of das Ding with imaginary schemes” that sublimations tend to produce.

In answer to the second question, let us propose some general lines that can account for principal differences between science, religion, and art, as three major fields of sublimation.
If we define the core of sublimation (i.e. the Thing) in terms of the Lacanian notion of the real, we can say that:

1. Science is based upon the supposition that there is no real that could not be formulated within the symbolic. Every Thing belongs to or is translatable into the signifying order. In other words, for science, the Thing does not exist; the mirage of the Thing is only an effect of the (temporal and empirical) deficiency of our knowledge. The status of the real here is the status of something not only immanent, but also accessible (at least in principle). It should be noted, however, that even though — because of this attitude of disbelief — science seems to be as far as possible from the realm of the Thing, it sometimes comes to embody the Thing itself (the "irrepressible," blind drive that may lead directly to the catastrophe) in the eyes of the public. Suffice to recall Frankenstein’s monster or, from more recent times, Dolly, or the idea of clones in general.

2. Religion is founded upon the supposition that the real is radically transcendent, Other, excluded. The real is impossible and forbidden at the same time, it is transcendent and inaccessible.

3. Art is founded upon the presupposition that the real is at the same time immanent and inaccessible. The real is what always "sticks" to the representation as its other or reverse side. This reverse side is always immanent to the given space, but also always inaccessible. Each stroke always creates two things: the visible and the invisible, the audible and the inaudible, sense and nonsense, the imaginable and the unimaginable. In this manner, art always plays with a limit, creates it, shifts it, transgresses it, sends its "heroes" beyond it. But it also keeps the spectator on the "right" side of it.

In the most general terms, the limit at stake is that between pleasure and pain, the limit of the "pleasure principle." This limit is in itself a flexible, plastic limit. It can be given many different forms and it can very well include a portion of what lies beyond the pleasure principle. The example of the latter is what Kant calls the sublime: in the sublime, the Thing is not evoked by its veil, by its noticeable presence-in-absence, but instead is present in the excess of the forces (or magnitude) displayed before us. And yet, as Kant is careful to add, we can only enjoy it aesthetically if we are "in a safe place," if the destructive force that we admire does not reach us "physically." The distance, the "devoid of all interest," is the consequence of the fact that the object at stake concerns us at the very core of our being. Art is the very process of creating this distance. But it is crucial not to forget that there is a double movement involved in this creation. The point is not that there is first this unspeakable Thing and that art enters the scene to make it possible for us to relate to it. Art is not simply a mediator between the subject and the Thing, but rather, art is what creates this Thing in the first place. This brings us back to the notion of what is "excluded in the interior": the arch-gesture of art is precisely that of creating an "excluded interior," of producing the very void around which it spreads its "net."


8. This is, of course, Lacan’s well-known definition of sublimation.

9. Ibid, 239.

10. Ibid, 238.


13. Ibid, 162.


15. Jacques-Alain Miller has pointed out that the object that corresponds to the drive is “satisfaction as object.” Cf. “On Perversion,” in: *Reading Seminars I and II. Return to Freud*, ed. B. Fink, R. Feldstein, M. Jaanus (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), 313. So, contrary to the common belief, sublimation does not proceed from some “unnatural,” “depraved,” or “unacceptable” desire to something more “natural” (in the sense of being more acceptable), but rather from something perfectly natural (sucking a nipple in order to be fed) to something “unnatural” (sucking a woman’s breast or a penis for the sake of sucking, for the very pleasure of sucking).

16. One could also say that the logic at stake is that of a supplement.

So far, we have been considering the concept of universality from the viewpoint of its internal consistency, and also its use — taking precisely the confusions that affect it into account — in conceiving the difference between the sexes in psychoanalysis. I am now going to consider not so much its definition as its function, where it is a question of making a field such as art yield to the discipline of the universal and the particular. This presupposes a reading of Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, but also a confrontation of the results of this book with another approach to production in art that we will take from the example of Leonardo da Vinci’s work.

Why Leonardo? Because he is an artist who spoke remarkably well about his technique, and comparing the spectacle of his works to his writings, one grasps pretty well that one cannot simultaneously understand what pictorial technique is and also seek the universal in beauty. I say this a bit bluntly to start: Kant’s obsession with the universal prevented him from understanding the production and contemplation of what is called the beautiful in art. And if one wishes to describe artistic production, one has to stop employing the terms universal and particular because this is not where the problem lies. What is art about if the question of the universal is wide of the mark? Sublimation, of course, with the result that we shall compare the Kantian notion of disinterested satisfaction with the Freudian notion of sublimation, which will finally allow us to take stock of the vicissitudes of perverse drives in art — something that the scheme of the universal and the particular also fails to conceive.

First a word on the bluntness of this judgment concerning the third *Critique*. This is a wonderful, delightful book. A pure moment of thought in which Kant reevaluates what he laid down earlier — the finitude of the knowledge of the object, and the necessary rigors of morality — and where, without renouncing what he established before, he changed the sense of it by ensuring the diversified unity of our experiences and thought. The experience of the sublime appears as the aesthetic lining of moral experience; beauty is characterized as the promise of happiness which thus escapes from moral doctrine as it does from art, but each time in ways that are specific and that answer to each other. The play of the imagination lies harmoniously within a relationship of faculties freed from the constraints of schematism and, as a result, this very schematism
finds itself redefined as a constraint that reason imposes on physical knowledge, but that does not belong to the thought of all reality, and perhaps not to the knowledge of life. Purpose, both subjective and objective, is reintroduced into the exercise of judgment, restoring a meaning to the ambiguity of the word “nature” that still and always concerns the universe, untouched by human beings, and that brings a spontaneity into life and beauty that no one can avoid attributing to it. From the spontaneity that is nature, artistic genius, even in its opacity, knows how to take over, to rightfully hold the place of that spontaneity which is irreducible to the merely physical laws of the constitution of a nature. The a priori principles that are at work in knowledge appear as so many restrictions on the relations between our otherwise encompassing faculties. These faculties reconcile us with the world and with ourselves, since in this range of uses it is always, as Kant often said, a question of the same faculties of knowing, feeling, imagination, understanding, and reason—that were first defined in the knowledge of the object in the strict sense, but are still to be found in the recovered peace of this bridge thrown over the abyss of the separation between theoretical and practical reason.

In short, a number of its readers consider the Critique of Judgment to be Kant’s greatest book as well as a work of pacification. But that it restores a harmony that one had believed to be lost since the Critique of Pure Reason does not mean that this wonderful book of subtlety is true. And it is precisely not true when it deals with the beautiful. For in order to link art to knowledge and morality, and therefore unify reason in all its states, it reutilizes the category of quantity and, in a way no less arbitrary, the idea of the universality of the judgments of taste that depends on it, to account for beauty and, in the description of human action, morality.

DISINTERESTED SATISFACTION AND THE UNIVERSAL WITHOUT CONCEPT

To say things in yet another way, Kant defines taste with two phrases: “disinterested satisfaction” and “universal without concept” (purposefulness without purpose will occupy us less here). Now the second of these expressions prevents taste from taking advantage of the interest of the first. This notion of “disinterested satisfaction” cannot but hold our attention: who has not experienced the calming pacification of the pleasure that beautiful things provide? That it truly is a question of a satisfaction roots aesthetic experience in the faculty of experiencing pleasure and pain, and indicates at the same time that our desires, in this pleasure, experience a transformation. Lacan defined this transformation long ago in Seminar 11, when he spoke of the Apollonian, pacifying effect of painting, which calms the quest of the gaze in the scopic drive: “He (the painter) gives something for the eye to feed on, but he invites the person to whom the painting is presented to lay down his gaze there as one lays down one’s weapons.” Kant defined this same phenomenon of detachment by saying that, in the experience of beauty, pleasure no longer adheres to its object and is indifferent to the question of the latter’s reality. Since the distinction made in Philebus between mixed pleasures and pure pleasures, which is to say, those who do not follow the experience of a lack, philosophers, but not only they, have been in search of this transformed modality of our desires. The same Plato, in The Symposium, also said that in one’s erotic and philosophical education, in order to not be a slave to the object of our desires, it is a question, when becoming “detached” from a unique object, of seizing the idea of beauty that
emerges in the multiplication of beautiful objects. The experience of beauty is this moment when the attachment to an object ceases to be a chain—even when the erotic attraction is not immediately overcome. According to Kant, the beautiful arts allow us to settle straightaway into this freedom from what binds us to that core which all art theoreticians have sought to characterize. Could not one say that the Freudian notion of the sublimation of drive, which is illustrated in art in a privileged way, corresponds, for the inventor of psychoanalysis, to this same approach? A sublimated drive is a drive whose aim is transformed: it is no longer a question of an immediate, real, sexual satisfaction, and yet the desire that underlies creation does not renounce itself as in repression. Rather, it takes pleasure in expressing itself, in transforming itself into a representation of itself that will be able to also awaken in other humans the recognition of these desires present in them, always steadfast but repressed. Is it not a question of the same thing concerning the beautiful in all these formulations? In particular, do Kantian philosophy and psychoanalysis say the same thing about this moment of beauty? Not exactly, but again it is necessary to say of what this decisive gap consists. Let us simply point out, for the moment, that even if Freud, in regards to sublimation, indeed defined a modality of the drive that no longer demands immediate sexual satisfaction, he nonetheless claimed that pleasure, in art, gives up nothing. If it replaces the pleasure taken in the existence of a coveted object with a pleasure taken in its representation, something of the omnipotence of infantile desires continues to underlie the artist’s activity, which is what makes for its paradoxical success in the effects of recognition that it produces in others: shared omnipotence is a ludic experience of the pleasure of the beautiful, since the artist reveals what others do not know how to see, hear, or sense in themselves. A pleasure that one would call disinterested, because it is transformed with regard to its aim; and yet Freud would not say that taste is a judgment, nor that it breaks the subject’s attachment to their objects. Sublimation implies no “superior faculty of experiencing pleasure or pain,” and it does not distinguish the faculty of desire from the faculty of experiencing pleasure or pain. To sublimate is a vicissitude of the drive, and as such, it is a doing, a production carried by a desire; it is not a reflective judgment.

What actually characterizes Kant is the link that he establishes between the idea of disinterestedness and that of judgment. One can only be free in relation to the desire that binds us to real things if one judges; and if one judges, one makes the category of quantity, and therefore the concept of universality, intervene in one’s judgments. Kant only thinks the detachment of interest in the existence of the object, in art, through commenting on “disinterested satisfaction” by means of the “universal without concept.”

THE “COMPARATIVE GENERALITY” OF MUNDANE PLEASURES AND THE “UNIVERSALITY WITHOUT CONCEPT” OF THE BEAUTIFUL

Let us reread the few paragraphs—§6 to 9—of the Critique of Judgment in which the fundamental distinctions are stated. First of all, as distinct from Plato but also from Freud, Kant separates the superior faculty of experiencing pleasure and pain from the faculty of desire: to say that the beautiful is neither the agreeable nor the good is to authorize us to treat of the beautiful only after the distinction between the desires are interested in the existence of their object, and those
that are interested only in the representation of said objects is established. Moral desires want the reality of certain situations, they are interested; sensual desires are absolutely and, it seems, quite simply attached to the presence of the object that they want to enjoy. This famous Kantian distinction between the good, the pleasant and the beautiful is in fact a true festival of universality. To reflect on art is, for Kant, to specify from what subtle order, neither simply empirical nor altogether transcendental, the quest for the universal that makes us say: “It is beautiful” starts out. One must multiply the terms that qualify the various forms of the universal: even the pleasant is sometimes susceptible to a “comparative generality,” bound to the culture of sensations in what are called the mundane pleasures. We know that Kant had a great appreciation for dinners in the city, and that he cared about thinking the status of the community, labile but invaluable, that is formed in the space of an evening. Think of a man who knows how to converse with his guests by charming all their senses during a meal, and by making them enjoy what joins them, while the pleasure of conversation is kept alive and replaces the pleasure of the gustatory senses. One would not say, however, that this man has taste; for the community that is taking shape here takes shape too much at the level of the sensations. But one could say that it is a question here of giving rise to a “comparative generality”: the guests form a whole, since they together take advantage of the same pleasures thanks to the talent of their host, but this whole remains a community de facto; it is not juridically founded, it would not know how to justify itself by right to the universal in the experienced pleasure nor by an obligation to experience it.

That Kant names this community a “comparative generality” is quite interesting for our purpose: this means that, in comparing pleasures, the whole does not free itself as would a founding authority of facts, which was the case, in morality for example, with the unconditional authority called law. Previously, I suggested that the detachment of this authority from the total series of facts that it judges is perhaps characteristic of a masculine structure of desire, that there is no need to detach the unconditional, save for a desire to totalize the series of substitutive objects, and that, in feminine sexuality, the relationship to the law either does not exist, as Kant momentarily suggests, or it goes by another process than the formation of an ideal bound to a series of objects that the law renders equivalent. Even if, in 1798, Kant forgot the remarks that he dared to make in 1764 regarding the fact that among women there was no sense of duty, it is interesting to note that he nevertheless examines aesthetic experiences in which the agreement of the sensations experienced by the guests remains immanent in sensing itself. Our philosopher insists on saying, at this point, that the guests enjoy together the sensations they share; a transient community is created this way, but it remains a pure fact that cannot lay claim to any rational justification.

The judgment of taste is a completely different matter. The pretension to universal validity is, according to Kant, really a component of this judgment, in that it basically belongs to it, but in a paradoxical fashion: in the aesthetic emotion that says “This is beautiful,” one requires the assent of all, but this requirement cannot justify itself with reasons; it is something like a universality in anticipation of itself, and Kant pronounces this term of anticipation: one waits for everyone’s agreement to a judgment of taste. It is a matter of the universal in a legal sense, but one which, because it cannot justify itself the way a moral or legal principle justifies itself, creates a community in anticipation of its own justification, which Kant calls common sense. It is no longer the
communicative enjoyment of a society dinner, but the requirement of a community of judgment that awakens with the experience of aesthetic emotion, and that retains this empirical something to which the term of anticipation alludes. The judgment of taste is the anticipation of a universality, but one that is the effective agreement of everyone and not the participation in a community that knows how to say what it consists of and could make it obligatory for every human to join. Universality is not a postulate of aesthetic reason the way it is an imperative of practical reason, but it is implied in the very heart of the judgment of beauty and anticipated like a universal voice, like a concert. In refining the expressions that specify the forms of universality, Kant plays on the etymology of the terms he uses: the agreement on the beautiful (Einstimmung) is expected as a universal voice (allgemeine Stimme). This is untranslatable into French [or English] and interesting, since it is a question of joining an empirical reality, the voice — which was already important in the conversations of the society dinners — to a community of law that is no longer the comparative generality of these dinners. It is also interesting because the metaphor of the voice qualifies moral duty as well: the categorical imperative that addresses every person is the voice of reason, but in moral doctrine it can only precisely be a question of metaphor, whereas in aesthetic experience, the one who says “It is beautiful” needs the real approval of the others; it is their opinion that he wants to hear, when he ventures to judge some work as beautiful, and this does not involve a metaphor. This is subtle and ambiguous: in one sense, it is because the beautiful cannot be rationally postulated as universal that it emerges in a sharing that is empirical, but in the form of a law attributable to all. From this moment on, this empirical something that characterizes the anticipation renders aesthetic life civilizing, since it makes people live together, and in a fashion that is not that of a simple sharing of sensations, but that of the exercise of judgment: in aesthetic experience, one attributes one’s own opinion to everyone, and the disagreements in fact that never fail to arise about this or that object take away nothing from the fact that people seek that unanimity which is just as much a law of the beautiful, but a law perpetually anticipating its own formulation. To attribute inevitably one’s own opinion to others, such is the space of deployment of taste, and it is essential that the approval is ludic, even if it is not thought of as optional: this game points to the fact that, in the search for universality, it is not our senses that command, but our reflection. In the end, the impression of beauty never concerns the object in itself, Kant eventually says crudely, but the felt agreement of our faculties that develops on the occasion of the quasi-presence of an object, and therefore this universality expected as a law as well is, at bottom, more an occasion to meet with our fellow creatures, to feel that they are fellow creatures thanks to this shared judgment, than a pleasure taken from these objects. Beauty is never objective; it is the deployment of a universal subjectivity that all people require without being able to justify it when it is met.

One could continue endlessly with the commentary on Kant’s affirmations of the universal “in play” in beauty: the requirement for universality is more than an acknowledgement and less than a principle. The judgment of taste only lends each person the approval that it gives rise to, like a “particular case of the rule for which it awaits the confirmation not of concepts, but of the support of others.” The expected universal connects the subjects without objectivizing their connection, and yet people are right to say “it is beautiful,” as if the beautiful were objective, since aesthetic judgment is analogous to a judgment of knowledge whose validity it
can presuppose for everyone. The error of common language is thus justified as an allusion to the transcendental function of the universal — determining in theoretical reason, reflective in aesthetic reason.

The essential thing is that in describing this game, aesthetic life puts itself in touch with knowledge, morality, knowledge of the living, and even the philosophy of history and law, since this universal that deploys itself in the order of facts, while it defines itself as a law, is also precisely what governs history as the advent of the law. Between the unsociable sociability of human beings and the common sense that the beautiful requires, one can thus describe other passages and other harmonics. So if what I called Kant’s subtlety made the universal appear in the judgment of taste, this indicates that by taking an interest in the beautiful, Kant takes an interest in the coherence of his own thought above all. If there is play in the *Critique of Judgment*, is it not first to be found in the pleasure Kant takes in organizing, through art, the endless cross-references among the diverse aspects of his thought? The notion of the universal is the instrument of this game of mirrors, but one could just as well say that it conceals the operation. For after all, in this seduction that the Kantian architectonic exercises thanks to the work carried out by the notion of the universal, is it really a question of beauty?

"DEDUCTION" OF THE JUDGMENT OF TASTE?

Let us return for a moment to §6 of the third *Critique*, that is, to the passage on the definition of the beautiful as that which pleases, irrespective of any interest in the notion of universal without concept. There we again find a sort of scenario or scene, halfway between an example and a concept, which we had already remarked on in our analysis of morality, and which in that analysis allowed Kant to state that the feeling of being at fault before the law is identical to the idea that the law holds for every man. Universality is here introduced starting from the question of the unimportance of the reality of the object that one judges to be beautiful: “For if someone likes something and is conscious that he himself does so without any interest, then he cannot help judging that it must contain a basis for being liked [that holds] for everyone.” The judgment that attributes the satisfaction of beauty to anyone is posited as being the necessary corollary of detachment, and as there is in fact nothing evident in this transition that he nonetheless names deduction, Kant develops the experience of thought that it implies: “He must believe that he is justified in requiring a similar liking from everyone because he cannot discover, underlying this liking, any private conditions, on which he might be dependent, so that he must regard it as based on what he can presuppose in everyone else as well.”

What a complicated operation! To say that taste is a judgment is to pass from the idea of detachment, in relation to the presence of the object, to the attribution of an experience shared by every man. This implies that the intimate or personal character of the experience of beauty lets itself be accurately described through the opposition between what is “private” and “public,” and that this opposition can be equivalent to the logical opposition of the particular to the universal, which are two of the categories of quantity defined in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. From that point on, there is a logical infrastructure to the experience of the beautiful and the quantity of the judgment that takes note of it in the discourse is specified: the judgments of beauty express them-
selves as singular judgments since the subject is taken in its totality in them — it is this rose taken as an absolute that is declared to be beautiful, and yet there is a transcendental genesis of this singular judgment that makes the particular, and then the universal, intervene.

As in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, universality is highly complex here, and this complexity is displayed in the German text: “Denn da es sich nicht auf irgendeine Neigung des Subjekts (noch auf irgendein anderes Interesse) gründet, sodern da der Urteilende sich in Ansehung des Wohlgefallens, welches er dem Gegenstände widmet, völlig frei fühlt: so kann er keine Privatbedingungen als Gründe des Wohlgefallens auffinden, an die sich sein Subjekt allein hinge, und muss es daher als indenjenigen begründet ansehen, was er auch bei jedem anderen voraussetzen kann.”6 *Jedermann* translates as “everyone,” but this term, borrowed from the previous sentence, emphasizes the series of affected individuals, and the Kantian “deduction” actually breaks up the whole in a precise way: to obtain the everyone of the judgment of taste, one must first pass through the series of sensations designated by an indefinite pronoun that directs the operation of detachment — satisfaction does not ground itself on some inclination nor on some other interest, whatever it may be. One finds again here the essential polyphony of the category of the universal, which one could just as easily call confusion, since the shift from one meaning of the term to the other is never thematized as it is carried out. From seriality one passes to absoluteness which is thought as totality — here, it feels entirely free — sometimes as unreservedness, as was the case for the “evident” heterogeneity of the moral law that stands out clearly in relation to all the perceptible interests. This shift is accompanied by a transition, from an objective phenomenality — one case and then another to defer its value each time — one passes to the objectivity of a principle, which is of a different nature since it is identical to a transcendental and subjective authority. As in the “deduction” of the moral judgment, one here needs to imagine a lack of differentiation among the objects, one case after the other, in order to be able to give a content to the “everyone.” The negation of the perceptible inclinations is carried out on a case by case basis, and this produces the “total” liberty of the subject of the judgment of taste. To say that the subject is totally free sums up positively, and after the event, the serial annulment of attachments. The absolute then passes from the serial totality to the radicality of the detachment in relation to the perceptible objects. A result, after the adverb “completely” was pronounced, the “everyone” of the *jedermann* was modified, each person is an everyone. Moreover — this characterizes the judgment of beauty and was not to be found in morality — to obtain the complete series of subjects, one passes through the other subject in order to get to the whole: the non-dependence experienced by the subject of aesthetic pleasure motivates him to convene other subjects potentially capable of the same detached pleasure. The universality of the judgment of taste therefore has an intersubjective structure.

But how do we make the idea that one does not adhere to the object in its very materiality equivalent to this other idea, according to which the beautiful is beautiful in that it holds for every individual? In order to extract the universal from detachment, one has to assume that the contemplator would realize, in the intimacy of the experience, that he or she does not adhere to the real of the beautiful object, and would then replace an “I do not really want to enjoy this object” with an “it is beautiful not only for me but for everyone.” Is the passage to the requirement for universality truly the inevitable fate of the experience of disinterestedness? When one renounces an object of desire, is it through the construction of an inner scenario, thanks to which
one attributes it to anyone? Does one truly pass through a moment in which attachment would be synonymous with particularity, a particularity which one may defer by attributing what one experiences to anyone whatsoever? Is this term “particular” logical, referring to the quantity of a hypothetical judgment of the “this is beautiful for me” type, or is the equivalence established between “I am interested in the existence of an object” and “it pleases me” not rather anthropological or phantasmagorical: when one wants something, does one want it for oneself alone? If such were the case, one would be dealing here less with a conceptual identity between the idea of disinterestedness and that of the universal, than with an empirical example, pathologically determined, as Kant would say, or with an experience that has the structure of a fantasy, as Freud would say, which is to say, of a combination of things seen and heard, worked out after several decisive and traumatic events that impose this work of representation on the subject, a work that concerns precisely the relationship to the presence and absence of the situations and objects that he wishes to enjoy or whose presence he would like to produce.

The difficulty, in this text, comes from the ambiguous status of what Kant names “deduction.” The first possibility is that it is a question of phenomenologically following the experience with a paradoxical satisfaction in what it exposes as “not private”: “This object pleases me. In this pleasure, it is not the material, which is to say, the existence of the object that binds me, I — I as subject and I alone — am not attached to it; therefore, this satisfaction is not exclusively mine. It is constituted by the experience of sharing it calls for.” In this first case, the experience of beauty assumes an empirical redoubling of the subject, and is an inner test of the aesthetic pleasure that develops an entire scenario closely related to fantasy: this experience would show by example, and without its having been made clear, how beauty averts possessiveness, or the jealousy of attractiveness, on the double condition that the subject is divided and reasons (with himself). The second possibility is that it is a question not of describing the experience of the beautiful, but rather, as Kant does starting from §5, of putting together a typology of satisfactions, and of opposing the fact of the agreeable to the law of the beautiful, even if this law is perpetually anticipating its own rule. But in neither of the two cases can one understand how the universal without concept “emerges” from the experience of beauty’s non-attachment to the object. If it is a question of the description of a process, far too many elements are allusive, and the category of quantity artificially covers over the stages of the experience of reflexive satisfaction. If it is a question of a typology of satisfactions, the process of inner detachment from the satisfaction is lost. One will remark, moreover, that the first reading cannot be carried through to the end by Kant, for that would endanger the principle — which he sets down in the third Critique, but which he did not set down in 1764 — of a distinction between the faculty of desire, in action, and the faculty of experiencing pleasure and pain, in aesthetic life.

Moreover, one remarks that, as in the thematic concerning the categorical imperative — whose existence remained suspended — in the analysis of examples to which one opposed the evidence of duty with a negation, it is in negative formulas, which make the non-attachment to the object arise, that Kant passes off as a deduction the mise-en-scene of the subject’s relation to him-or-herself, a relationship which is supposed to make evident the implication of the two distinct concepts of detachment and universality of the subjects affected by beauty. Kant then refines his position by specifying what this universal without concept means. He shows that the demand
for universality that is linked to the experience of beauty presents itself as a logical and consti­tutive demand in reality, whereas it is only in this demand of the subject that the transition from
the non-attachment to the object to universality consists. The subject can only express what takes
place by saying that the object is beautiful, whereas it is a question of this demand to find in
others this pleasure as soon as it is assumed to be sharable.

The passage from disinterested satisfaction to the universal without concept can only be called
a deduction at the expense of neglecting the text as a string of sentences: what, in the sequence
of sentences, "conceals" the conceptual hiatus in such a way that it becomes indiscernible is, in
fact, very precise. It is a question, on the one hand, of transforming the negative but active
process of the detachment from the object into a positive reference to another human who is
supposed to be present in the aesthetic emotion. On the other hand, it is also a question of simpli­fying the evoked scenario by summing it up through the theme of the universality of the judg­ment of taste.

BEAUTY: INTIMATE AND PUBLIC

This "deduction" of the universality of the judgment of taste offers an excellent example of
what, it seems to me, generally characterizes philosophy as such: it is a question of a text that
makes one forget, through the logical categories that it convenes, that it is written as a text,
which is to say, by the syntactic and semantic resources that produce a thought thanks to the
contingency of a style. Stage right, the doctrine of the beautiful as universal without concept,
in all its subtlety in comparison with the doctrine of the judgment of knowledge and of moral
judgment. Stage left, but present in the same text, and not in another space, a scene that
makes us witness the production of the aesthetic subject, which is to say, of an intimate
subjectivity that nevertheless only exists when exposed. For the most interesting moment of
the text, the one that requires Kant's densest piece of writing, has not yet been explained. It
is to be found, however, in the critical sentence that I quoted in German, and that is supposed
to deduce the universal without concept from the satisfaction ohne alles Interesse, which would
be better translated as "satisfaction that does without all interest" in order to indicate the
active privation of the work in the disinterestedness. Kant describes a strange subject here. A
subject completely intimate and original in the production of his own privacy and yet
flaunted thanks to other eyes: "he cannot find the ground of this satisfaction in any private
conditions connected with his own subject [an die sich Subjekt allein hinge], and hence it must
be regarded as grounded on what he can presuppose in every man." The verb hingen means
at the same time "to be hooked onto" and "to be dependent on." It is the negation of the
encounter with the object that introduces the idea of a subject: the beginning of this text
evokes, in effect, by denying it, a subjectivity that would be produced in its reflexive charac­ter by the dependence on an object. And the negation of all dependence of this nature, far
from being the removal of all subjective reflexivity, is the discovery of the universal reflexiv­ity of the judgment of beauty. In other words, even if the material satisfaction is rejected, its
evocation nevertheless helps one see that there is production of a subject, which is to say, of
a reflexivity of thought in relation to itself in the aesthetic experience.
Of course, the subject who says “it is beautiful” is detached from every objective interest, but the denied conditional through which the attachment is evoked helps one think the reflexivity of the subject; then this subject, at first evoked as intimate, identifies its satisfaction by the very fact that it has to be shared with everyone else. A fact of satisfaction is here interpreted, as before, as attributed to everyone except the one who experiences it. Such is the strange “fact of aesthetic reason” to which Kant invites us.

The notion of a universal without concept cannot expose itself without evoking the division of the subject at the very moment it is produced. This staged relationship of the subject to itself that carries out the passage from aesthetic emotion to a judgment that would include a requirement for universal recognition, sends us back, in fact, to a choice made by Kant, who presents it, wrongly, as a rationally obvious fact: he starts from the fact that, in the experience of beauty, the subject is not attached to the object as in a desire that would like to consume this object or enjoy it. And he interprets this fact by applying the category of the particular to an emotion attached to the real existence of his object. The quality of enjoyment is said to be particular. The second of the categories of quantity defined in the table of the Critique of Pure Reason is supposed to be able to take account of the experience of beauty, and it is thanks to this application of the category of quantity that the unity of human reason in all the domains of its display is assured. It is also through this application that the Kantian reflection on art and the phenomena of life allows for a reevaluation of the two first Critiques. The moment of decisive thought, then, is not first the use of the category of the universal, but the intervention of the category of the particular. An enjoyment of the object in its materiality is a private enjoyment, which is to say, particular in logic. Kant makes the decision to interpret “private” by “particular.” Now the experience of beauty, while private, also likes to think itself as public; it is a pleasure that waits to be shared, that calls for other humans to form a community that will name itself common sense. And it is a question of a subjective community precisely because the shared pleasure does not come from the object, but from what it occasions in all the subjects concerned: an agreement of the faculties that becomes perceptible in the same way for everyone. Since the community of pleasure is completely homogeneous on the occasion of the contemplation of an object, and since a universal concept gives objective form to what can be cognitively apprehended of it, we attribute to the object that quality of beauty which instead belongs to the accord between our faculties, and we say: “This is beautiful.” The demonstrative here has the appearance of being a particular subject. But, as it refers to a transcendental elaboration that makes the universal intervene, “this” thing is, in fact, like a logical subject, a synthesis of particular and universal, which is to say, a singular. The judgments of taste are singular judgments, says Kant, and not particular judgments, as their grammatical form would make one believe: the aesthetic quasi-object is in fact a totality onto itself alone, precisely because it gives rise to a judgment that only makes sense as a universal. Through this subtle dialectical logic, Kant refers to this paradoxical character of beauty that is at once both intimate and capable of being shared. The detachment in relation to enjoyment does not prevent a certain character of intimacy from subsisting in aesthetic pleasure, yet it is an intimacy that does not exclude, but, on the contrary, requires sharing and recognition. The three categories of quantity — universal, particular, singular — help to interpret the aesthetic experience and to approach an effective and paradoxical dimension of art: it is intimate and it is shared
nonetheless. And as a result, the “it” of “it is beautiful” refers less to the object than to the subjective experience required of each by all.

WHAT MAKES BEAUTY SHARABLE

But is it really necessary to interpret the paradox of aesthetic pleasure, intimate and sharable, through categories of quantity? Is the exposed intimacy at work here essentially particularity, as Kant maintains? One can see why he does so: he wants to present as self-evident the separation of the agreeable and the beautiful, of jouissance and taste that is a judgment. But as a result, he never himself analyzes this paradox of beauty which he attaches to the categories of judgment: particular, universal, singular. To free oneself from the object is to cease shutting oneself up in the particularity of a sensible jouissance, and is therefore to go toward the universal, be it without concept. Linked to this is the thesis that when one takes unrestricted pleasure, it is never in the matter of the art object, but in its form, which refers us back to the free play of the faculties. Now, if it is indeed true that an artist does not have a relationship of erotic dependence, such as desire, to what he creates, if he arouses something other than jouissance in others, is it truly because the art objects are quasi-objects, important never for their material qualities, but only for their formal qualities that create the stakes for a judgment of taste? What is it that makes a painting no longer simply the private object of a painter? And what does “private” mean here?

This is what we will show: if one no longer conceals the paradox of the experience of the beautiful — intimate and public, in effect — by applying to it categories of quantity, it becomes possible to describe what we call beautiful in the very process of its production and in its recognition as beautiful by people other than the artist. In what does the detachment of an object of enjoyment that is made in the perfecting of a pictorial style consist, for example? This is where Leonardo da Vinci becomes our guide: we know that this artist was seized by a sexual ambiguity that expressed itself both in the diversity of his activities (which some people consider disorganized), and by the almost always unfinished character of his pictorial works. But the problem is to understand how da Vinci’s flight before the completion of a canvas was transformed into the invention of a pictorial style, l’infinìto, and how this very transformation reveals something original about the works, private in the sense of intimate, to the public as much as to the artist.

In his study on Leonardo—Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood—Freud insists on these points, often pertinently, even if he is mistaken on other ones, as has been shown since. In particular, he stresses the fact that Leonardo’s sexual ambiguity ensured the dominance of knowledge over art in his activity: the inexhaustible character of the natural investigations brings about, better than the obligation of completing a commissioned work, the constraint of incompleteness that supports the uninteresting activity of Leonardo. But Freud, who, through da Vinci, settles some scores with philosophy, by preferring art, is unaware that the operator of ambiguity, in Leonardo’s work, traverses the distinction of art and science, or rather ignores it. Da Vinci did not prefer science to art; he searched everywhere to bring to light the moment when the distinction between beings and things is not established, the moment, which can be seized by the painter or the draftsman-scientist, when the separation of types of beings is made without being assured, when the flat and rational perspective becomes stabilized for the time being starting
from an anamorphosis, in which form is resolved in the indistinct and provisional play of shadow and light. Freud, after a closely conducted psychological inquiry into da Vinci’s childhood, in the end states that the psychoanalyst has ultimately nothing to say on genius as such, even if he can reveal the things of life that mark the work. But is it not, on the part of Freud, with a too exclusively psychological critique that he tackles the question? Not that there is no point in knowing what double maternal figure Leonardo had dealt with, nor in what manner, accountable and ritualized, he reacted in his notebooks to the death of his father and mother. But these elements, indispensable to the knowledge of who Leonardo was, still say nothing about the process by which, in calling up these subjective pieces of information, the techniques of the painter and of the scientist make of them something other than his own personal and private business, as Kant would say. In other words, Freud stops at the threshold of a theory of sublimation, to which Leonardo nevertheless gives access, through his commentary on his own productions. The technique of the painter Leonardo, the “sfumato,” which is to say, the invention of a relationship between form and color, which sometimes emphasizes the clarity of the lines of the drawing and sometimes blurs them; the art of light and shadow that turns the clarity of painted forms into a fragile and indistinct moment of the visible; and also the science and art of perspective, which is also only a particular moment of the multiple anamorphoses that it organizes, all these characteristics of the art of da Vinci are the material development, which is to say technique, of the ambiguity of his sexual desire. But from the moment when a sexual ambiguity develops into a style, it is no longer just that of an individual — in this case, Leonardo. That means two things: on the one hand, style replaces or transforms the immediate pleasure that made Leonardo enjoy sexually ambiguous objects, and this because he created other objects with colored material and forms no less material and more or less vague, depending on which parts of the painting one studies; on the other hand, since his sexual desires are displaced by becoming embodied in the materials that make ambiguity appear, this ambiguity becomes recognizable to all those who look at his paintings. It becomes recognizable as something of themselves that they do not know. Hence the appearance
of revelation that beauty produces, and this paradox of exposed intimacy that Kant indicates without understanding. Could one not consider the Kantian notation of the production of beauty as being about something that is not simply private, but which the categories of the particular, the universal and the singular do not help us conceive? These categories, in effect, efface the displacement of the objects of the drive produced by Leonardo’s techniques and theories.

THE BEAUTIFUL IS THE UNKNOWN OF A PRACTICE

From this perspective, one can understand that da Vinci’s objective is never to define beauty. The term “beauty” indicates, in the Notebooks, that the stakes of the painter’s or scientist’s activity are met, that he has indeed grasped through practice, the relationship between the distinct and the indistinct that serves as his window onto the world. The terms “beauty” or “grace” punctuate the process by which the drives find themselves objects in a technique, with the consequence that Freud had indeed seen: sublimation by art often develops perverse aspects of the drives, precisely those that do without direct sexual satisfaction and eroticize the paths of the drives themselves, by making new objects of these paths. The benefit of such substitution has to do with creating a world in which no stable sexual determination holds, and in which the artist alone, in the way he defines himself, causes the ambiguous poles of a differentiation that no law determines to flare. Leonardo da Vinci never defines the beautiful, but this term, which peppers his writings, indicates how a technique or a learning satisfies it. Here is an example, pictorial at first:

A high degree of grace is conferred by the shadow and light to the faces of those who are seated in the doorway of dark dwelling places and such that the observer’s eyes see the somber part of the face invaded by the shadow of this dwelling place and the lit part brightened up by the brilliance of the air. Through this heightened contrast of shadow and light, the face acquires strong contours, within the lit part almost imperceptible shadows. This representation with the heightened effect of shadow and light gives the face its beauty.8

The moment of beauty is not the pure contrast of shadow and light, it is its capacity to be modified until discreetly becoming its opposite; almost imperceptible and yet present, the shadow of the light, almost imperceptible the darkness of a reflection. To draw forth this moment of the indecisive, thanks to the mastery of the distinction and the subtle technique that makes it deviate, such is the passion of this painter, who “snatches” the word of beauty when he feels it given concrete expression. The problem is no longer, then, knowing if such an object is real, as the faculty of desire would require, or if its reality is a matter of indifference, as the faculty of experiencing pleasure and pain would require. This Kantian distinction lost its value as soon as one analyzed the sublimation at work, it was instead a hindrance to the intelligence of the process in question.

Likewise, the precision of his anatomical and naturalist drawings is, in his studies — that of Leda for example9 — in the service of imperceptible transitions between the body of a woman, the curves of the creepers, of which it cannot be known whether they are terrestrial or aquatic, and the volutes of a snake’s body that hugs Leda’s hand. Da Vinci manages to theorize this practice of drawing in a philosophy of analogy between microcosm and macrocosm, but these
discourses break with that theory’s tradition, for they only matter as commentary on this production of imperceptible transitions through which ambiguity takes place, for our pleasure. The draftsman and the painter are called scientists; they are said to possess the loftiest science, but this science still consists of making forms appear suddenly and playing with their indistinction. These theories, moreover, might just as well be fictions: one knows da Vinci’s letters, addressed to an imaginary speaker, which outlines in words the design movements in the description of a battle or even a flood. The description of battle is like a hymn to the metamorphoses of dust: sometimes aerial when it is raised by the movements of horses and combatants or when it permeates the hair “and all the lightness of conquerors, flowing in the wind”; sometimes, on the contrary, heavy as a fall: “If you show the fall of a combatant, you must indicate the trace of the foot that slipped in the dust converted into bloody mud.”

We could go on forever citing the metamorphoses of the forms in drawing, painting, technique, by emphasizing the exchanges of beings and things over which the artist becomes the demiurge. And we are sharing this pleasure, even if we are not preoccupied by the same ambiguity as Leonardo, precisely because he transforms this ambiguity through the materiality of his works; from that moment on, we can recognize ourselves there and enjoy it, free at the same time from what is for many an intolerable passion for the ambiguous directly experienced and haunting.

What is it that allows one to say, before the works of da Vinci, that this inexhaustible invention of the indistinct and distinct is sexual? It is, no doubt, the intense pleasure of the senses, and in particular of the eyesight, which is incessantly convoked there. Of course, it is not a question of an immediate sexual satisfaction, which is to say, one obtained from commerce with another body, but the artist works the same perceptible materials as those that provoke sexual desires. He simply introduces into an exacerbated culture a sense that dismisses the customary collaboration of our senses at a time when these latter allow themselves to be fascinated by what we call an object of desire. The result is that, in a sublimated drive, the immediate sexual satisfaction can be indefinitely put off and replaced by pleasure. Sublimation is the very process of these substitutions of objects whose course one can follow, since the works are their trace. In the last analysis, one does not even have to know any longer precisely which strong sexual drive propels the series of substitutions, since the object becomes what is made visible by this very trajectory. To liberate oneself from the object by recreating it in a selective fashion, such is the passion of the work of detachment which Kant spoke about.

But as soon as one endeavors to seize this process, the Kantian anthropology, and the logic of the particular and the universal that guards it, no longer holds: in order to grasp how a draftsman’s practice can produce a fascinating ambiguity in the visible, it is not useful to separate on principle the agreeable from the beautiful nor the beautiful from the good. It is not useful to distinguish the faculty of desire and the faculty of experiencing pleasure and pain. These distinctions only rest on the false idea that desire would like to consume its object, and on the other false idea that everybody knows well what the reality of an object is that the faculty of desire wants to produce. With Kant, the very idea of detachment — whose utility for grasping aesthetic satisfaction he nevertheless senses — is a simplistic notion because it is dependent upon the preliminary idea that everybody agrees on what it means to want to “realize” a state of fact. We can no longer be Kantian, after Freud: since the object of the faculty of desire is essentially substitutive,
it is advisable first to think on what basis — not of absence, but of necessary substitutions — its presence is conceivable or ruled out.

Aesthetic satisfaction is not *ohne alles Interesse*. It retains from the object scraps of presence that it recreates differently, and in the satisfaction taken in the “reality” of the object, there are also some significant features that produce this reality for us. It is futile to imagine an automatic break between the agreeable and the beautiful, for the object that Kant called agreeable necessarily detours consumption and possession.

This detour of consumption, just like the detachment of a reputedly immediate satisfaction, is a process through which practice invents substitutions of objects and significant features, and both processes can only be described if one gives up summarizing them in advance by a logic, which incorrectly assumes the importance of the category of quantity in grasping them.

**AN ALTERNATIVE: TO GRASP A THOUGHT AT WORK OR TO CONSTRUCT ITS LOGIC**

It is remarkable that one cannot at the same time be attentive to the processes of substitution of objects in an artistic practice or in a dream, and unify in advance all the uses of thought by declaring that the beautiful is a universal without concept. The intervention of this concept is perhaps interesting if one appreciates the *jouissance* that Kant experienced in the coherence of his own thought, but it prevents us from conceiving what art satisfies in us. On the contrary, when one provides oneself with the means to think the detachment of the object as a process, the confrontation between art and philosophy appears in a new light. The substitutions of objects of the drive, of which the artist’s material practice is the work itself, are less subdued in the production of artworks than in philosophy. In the latter, logic actually tends, without ever managing to quite do so, to break the bridges between fantasies and concepts. One will have grasped that Kant’s application of the category of quantity to all fields of experience, whatever its pertinence in relation to each one may be, indeed guarantees the idea of a unity of reason. But this unity is achieved only by means of considerable conceptual prejudice and by making it impossible to grasp the detachment of concepts in relation to the process of the drives. That is to say again, as a relation that takes the paradoxical form of a recusation. What differentiates art from philosophy is this recusation — creative in the grand systems — of relations which, nevertheless, continue to weave together fantasies or drives and concepts in this paradoxical mode of exclusion.


5. Ibid., 46.


9. Ibid., 163.

10. Ibid., 60.
It is a maxim among men that when an exploit has been accomplished it must not remain hidden in silence. What it requires is the divine melody of praising verses.


It was then, perhaps, that some individual, in the exigency of his longing, may have been moved to free himself from the group and take over the father’s part. He who did this was the first epic poet; and the advance was achieved in his imagination... He invented the heroic myth... The myth, then, is the step by which the individual emerges from group psychology... The poet who had taken this step and had in this way set himself free from the group in his imagination, is nevertheless able... to find his way back to it in reality. For he goes and relates to the group his hero’s deeds which he himself has invented.

Freud, *Group Psychology* (postscript B).

I. TRANSMISSION: OF LOVE AND BEAUTY

When so much of the story is already known, when the content or action is already defined as mythic, in the sense that it belongs to ancient history — to the stories by which we identify ourselves as a group, a people and a community — when the events are part of a narrative that we have already heard a thousand times, and interpreted anew with every generation, we may as well begin without rehearsal, without setting the stage too much, as if the drama were already at an end, its destiny played out long ago, before we were even born, leaving us simply to bear witness, to reflect on one or two details, in their supreme and somewhat esoteric isolation. Beginning thus, by making a cut in the highly complex and overdetermined symbolic network, we might be able to detach a few elements, in order to see how the story looks when it is gathered once again around these somewhat eccentric, but in no way simply arbitrary features.

To begin, therefore, let me simply isolate two elements in Lacan’s reading of *Antigone*, two features which are also two relations. One of these takes place on the stage, within the action of the play; the other takes place between this action and the audience who comes to witness its unfolding. Within the play, it is a question of Antigone’s relation to her brother and the strange desire or fate, the compulsion or responsibility that binds her to her brother, and more precisely to that brother who is dead but not yet buried, that singu-
lar and irreplaceable brother towards whom Antigone alone is able, or willing, or compelled to act [εγὼ δὲ ταφὸν χοσούς ἀδελφὸν πορεύομαι, 80-1]. If Antigone is, for Lacan, the figure who “does not give up on her desire,” if she represents desire in its most radical and stubborn persistence (“perseverance,” Lacan says, using a word that explicitly calls attention to the father), if she is the heroine of the tragedy, who assumes the absolute responsibility (S7, 88) for this work of mourning—an act of burial which will also entail her death—if she chooses her fate with unwavering clarity from the opening lines of the play, all these features would come to rest, according to Lacan, on the singular relation that binds her to her brother, this particular brother, a troubling and even wounded attachment that all the commentaries have found disturbing, some to the point of wanting to excise from the play the famous lines in which she proclaims this singular bond, in language that cannot any longer be contained, according to Lacan, by the famous Hegelian account of the antagonism between the family and the state. Her link to her brother would thus be the decisive point that allows us to gather up all the other details—Antigone’s status as the tragic heroine, the ethical nature of her position, her persistence in her desire, her relation to death, and so on. How then are we to understand this singular, triumphant, and catastrophic attachment? Lacan insists upon one word: “love.” “Antigone is the heroine,” Lacan says (S7, 262). “She’s the one who shows the way of the gods. She’s the one . . . who is made for love rather than for hate” (S7, 262; see Sophocles, line 523).

The way of the gods is the way of love, and Antigone is guided by their unwritten law (S7, 278; line 454), which not only binds her to her brother, but governs the entire course of the dramatic action, determining Antigone’s relation to every other figure within it: to Creon, Haemon, Ismene, her father, and thus to politics, marriage, family, and even the unfortunate past, the evil that descends from Oedipus (ἀπ Οἰδίπου κακόν, 2), transmitting across the generations the legacy of a crime that she did not commit, but that she (the child of incest) chooses to assume as her own, as her own destiny or fate. She announces her decision in terms of love in the opening lines of the play, using the word φιλία, which she repeats in many places. And after her condemnation, when she is about to be “shut up in a tomb” (S7, 280), cast aside unburied and unmourned, the third choral ode tells us that she goes forth like a goddess and a warrior, and that her face is radiant and shining. She is τὰ εἰκόναεινεστάτα, Lacan says, the most shining and manifest (from “φαίνο” and “φαίνομενον”: she is the shining of the “Thing,” in Lacan’s vocabulary), and what shows in her eyes is love, according to the chorus, which uses the words ἔρως and Ἀφροδίτα (lines 781-90).

In the vocabulary that runs from φιλία to ἔρως, then, we are asked to see, not two discrete concepts (a familiar contradiction between erotic and brotherly love, or between friendship and passion), but rather a movement of exposition and clarification. The purity of her love for her brother (φιλία), and the filial piety that supports her act of mourning, would thus be revealed, in the end, as a desire (ἔρως), which must also be understood as a power (the power to act: “I did the deed,” she says, “and I won’t say otherwise” [line 443]), and as evidence that a “moment of decision” has been reached (“It is time,” she says to her sister in the opening lines of the play, “for you to show whether you are noble and well-born or not” [line 38]).

Without elaborating this matter in any detail, we may nevertheless already see two points in Sophocles’s text that will have a decisive impact on the development of Lacanian theory. For
Antigone’s desire, understood as a matter of action and time, cannot be reduced to a purely “symbolic” phenomenon. If we believe that the Lacanian theory of desire can be grasped in terms of “metonymy” and infinite symbolic displacement, this conclusion can no longer be maintained, for Antigone’s desire — in its ferocious and singular commitment to the corpse of Polyneices — has a specific determination that refuses all symbolic substitution. This is the problem of the object relation. Her desire (and this is the first point) thereby reveals a specific temporality, a particular relation to death — her brother’s death, but also her own — that she alone is able to sustain. Unlike Ismene, who flees in the face of death, accepting her symbolic position as a “woman,” in the concrete determination that this signifier has been given (“We must remember that we are women who cannot fight against men,” Ismene says, “and that we are ruled by those whose power is greater . . . I shall obey those in authority” [lines 61-7]), Antigone, by contrast, rejects this position, refusing to take refuge, plunging headlong into death, and rejecting the name of “woman” that has been established by the State (“It is honorable [kalon, beautiful] for me to do this and die” [72]). Her relation to death is not merely symbolic (despite claims that Lacan regards death as symbolic), since the fulfillment of this relation to death requires her action in the world (and this is the second point), compelling her to follow through in deed what she has explained to the audience in words. This is also what Aristotle says about tragic drama, that it concerns the unfolding of a noble action, the completion of an action that must be significant enough for us to say it is properly heroic. Antigone’s desire thus cannot be grasped in terms of a generalized metonymy, but must be understood in connection with a more precise account of both action and time. It is precisely this desire — this singular, mysterious, and somewhat troubling power — that gives Antigone her subversive and fascinating power over us, a power whose divine aspect (Aphrodita) shines forth, made visible in her face as “beauty.” The first relation, then, would be marked out as follows:

Antigone ---------- > brother 

(love)

The second feature that concerns us is located in the relation between the action of the play and the audience that bears witness to that action. If Antigone is not only the heroine, but the heroine for us, if it is she who most of all attracts our attention and rouses our emotions, if we are drawn towards her in a kind of horrified captivation that both attracts and repels, moving us forward in pity even as we recoil in fear, then she is the principal focus for what Aristotle calls “katharsis,” that obscure but crucial experience which is definitive of tragedy as such. It is an open question as to how we should understand this experience, which is so closely tied to the problem of “affect” or “emotion” — a problem that must be understood not only in the Greek context (where “catharsis” already belongs to an interpretive apparatus imposed by Aristotle on an experience and an aesthetic structure whose meaning, as Jean-Pierre Vernant has argued, may have been profoundly different in the time of Sophocles), but also in the context of psychoanalysis (where the “cathartic method” has a long and complicated history, and where “affect” is but poorly understood).
Freud repeatedly insists on this difficulty. Speaking of the difference between anxiety and other “feelings,” for example, he writes: “Anxiety, then, is in the first place something that is felt. We call it an affective state, although we are also ignorant of what an affect is” (SE 20:132). And if we turn from Freud to Lacan, the question is no easier. For although we are frequently encouraged to believe that Lacan simply avoids the problem of affect—at least, according to numerous commentaries, which have quickly settled into the comfortable dogma that Lacan is only interested in the signifier, and has no interest in “affect” (which must be left to other “non-Lacanian” thinkers, such as André Green and Julia Kristeva)—it is clear that the entire Lacanian discourse on jouissance is partly a re-working of the Freudian theory of affect. Without entering into this difficulty in any detail, we can at least say that, whether one interprets katharsis on the model of medical “purging,” or as a quasi-religious “purification,” or indeed in some other way (for Lacan will reject both views [S7, 244–45, 312]), this experience of “emotion,” of pity and fear, is a defining feature of tragedy as such, understood as a specifically aesthetic phenomenon. As Kant also says, it is precisely this affective feature, this dimension of pleasure and pain, that makes aesthetic experience such a difficult terrain for philosophy, and distinguishes the work of art from both scientific and moral phenomena, as well as from immediate or everyday experience.

For the distinctively aesthetic experience of tragedy, everything would thus depend on our relation to the figure of the hero in her captivating presence: the proper accomplishment of tragedy, its very capacity to fulfill its function as a work of art, would come to rest on this link of fascination and horror that binds us to Antigone. All the other features of the drama—the pronouncements of the chorus, the stupid and brutal application of Creon’s edict, the logic of the plot and the entire sequence of stages in which Antigone’s movement toward death is slowly unfolded, from the entreaties of Haemon, to the warnings of Teiresias, to the final destructive events—all this would radiate outward, according to Lacan, from the single and decisive point of Antigone herself, insofar as she works upon us, drawing the audience into a gradual experience, which is neither the “ordinary” experience of immediate reality, nor the “philosophical” experience of thinking and conceptual reflection, but rather the experience of catharsis, in which one passes through a certain relation to pity and fear, a relation that would seem to be paradoxically traumatic and tranquilizing—disturbing and yet somehow also pacifying. All the features of tragedy would thus seem to find their center in this unique attachment, this bond that is far from simply pleasurable, but that draws us inexorably towards Antigone. How then are we to understand this bond, this singular and somewhat troubling attachment?—troubling, because, as Aristotle says, it is strange that we humans should take pleasure in the representation of death, that we should turn ourselves towards death when the animal would simply turn away in fear. What then is our attachment to Antigone? Lacan insists upon one word: “beauty.” It is the sheer radiance of Antigone, the uncanny power of her image, what Lacan calls “her unbearable splendor” (S7, 247), that draws the audience to her. “Antigone,” Lacan says, “reveals to us the line of sight that defines desire. This line of sight focuses on an image that possesses a mystery which up to now has never been articulated... that image is at the center of tragedy... the fascinating image of Antigone herself” (S7, 247).
The second relation, our link to the image of Antigone, could thus be marked out as follows:

\[
\text{audience} \quad \rightarrow \quad \text{Antigone} \quad \text{beauty}
\]

We are faced here with an image that cannot be immediately raised to the level of the concept, or drawn into the strife between opposing principles. To isolate this image, according to Lacan, is therefore to go beyond the famous “conflict between the two divided powers of ethical substance.”\(^\text{12}\) Lacan insists upon this point, in explicit opposition to Hegel: “over and beyond the question of family and country,” he says,

over and beyond the moralizing arguments, it is Antigone herself who fascinates us, Antigone in her unbearable splendor. She has a quality that both attracts and startles us in the sense of intimidates us; this terrible, self-willed victim disturbs us.

It is in connection with this power of attraction that we should look for the true sense, the true mystery, the true significance of tragedy. (57, 247)

We must open a parenthesis at this point, for the translation is not right here. Lacan says that Antigone has a quality “qui nous retient et à la fois nous interdit” (290), a quality which holds us back, which restrains and at the same time prohibits us. The text thus says neither “attracts” nor “startles.” It is rather a question of prohibition (like a force imposed from without: the father’s “no”), but at the same time of holding or restraint (like an internalized sense of conscience, not an external prohibition but a capacity to “hold oneself back”), which Lacan will later develop in terms of the categories of “modesty” and “shame” (characteristics conspicuously lacking in Creon, whose law knows no restraint).

This unexpected link between the image and the law, manifested in the figure of Antigone—the fact that an imaginary support ("beauty") now seems to supplement and perhaps even modify Lacan’s conception of the law—is what authorizes Lacan to connect beauty and desire, terms which he previously opposed to one another, insofar as the imaginary aspects of beauty are said to be distinct from the symbolic dimension of desire. The paradoxical character of this unexpected relation between the image and the law, however, is that beauty does not simply arouse desire, as common sense might lead us to suppose (this is Plato’s worry about art in its relation to enthusiasm, as well as Kant’s concern, the entire discourse on “disinterestedness” being a protracted effort to temper or refine the arousal of our merely sensuous “appetite,” on behalf of a proper “reflective judgment”); on the contrary, beauty now moves from the imaginary register and takes on the function of a veil, which restrains and even prohibits. Lacan thus speaks of “the extinction or tempering of desire through the effect of beauty” (249): “It is when passing through that zone that the beam of desire is both reflected and refracted till it ends up giving us that most strange and most profound of effects, which is the effect of beauty on desire” (248, emphasis added).\(^\text{13}\)
In short, something is happening to the concept of the imaginary in Lacan’s thought: it is as if the image of Antigone were suddenly able to function at the level of the law, yet without being a name or a signifier, or as if, in the face of this “terrible beauty,” we were confronted with a “no” that not only forbids (qui nous interdit), but also holds and restrains (qui nous retient), since this image does not simply interdict, with the celebrated “negativity” of the signifier (which “murders the thing”), but rather provides a support, a “form” and a “presence” which restrains us, so that the image of Antigone would function not like a mirror (in the imaginary) but like a veil—an image aligned with the concepts of shame, humility, or modesty: “I should like to introduce here,” Lacan writes, “as a parallel to the function of the beautiful, another function... a sense of shame” (298). One might recall that, for Lacan, the phallus is also a veil, a point of intersection between the image and the law, whose imaginary character—if one should reduce it to this level—is profoundly misleading.¹⁴ Such a reduction allows the boy, for example, to believe that he is not castrated, just as it allows the girl to believe that something is deficient, or that something anatomical has been lost. One might therefore be tempted to leap directly from the sublime image of Antigone to the phallus (as if the woman were always a stand-in for the phallus), but Lacan will not move so quickly: “Do the fantasm of the phallus and the beauty of the human image find their legitimate place at the same level? Or is there, on the contrary, an imperceptible distinction, an irreducible difference, between them?” (S7, 299). Let us leave these questions as they are, and take up our thread again. It is enough to have a glimpse of what is at stake in the development of Lacan’s thought, as we follow his account of Antigone.

We have isolated two relations and two terms: we have Antigone’s relation to her brother, and our relation to Antigone, the first defined by love, the second by beauty. The love that draws her towards her brother would be the crucial feature underlying her status as the tragic heroine and the subject of desire, while her beauty would be the decisive element that allows us in turn to be drawn towards her in pity and fear.

We can now take another step, for it is clear that these two relations are themselves related: it is love that allows or compels her to assume her fate in such a way that we in turn come to be fascinated with her radiant image, captivated and drawn through the experience of tragedy. These two relations are thereby linked to one another, in a curious process of transmission or translation: if her love for her brother allows Lacan to define her as the heroine of desire, it is this same desire that shines forth in her face, and makes her the object of fascination for us, the unbearable image that draws us through the experience of catharsis that is the crucial and defining feature of tragedy itself. These two attachments—of love and beauty—would thus be linked to one another, as if her love for her brother were somehow handed over to us: a gift in the form of tragic experience.
II. THE SUBLIME IMAGE

Let us look more closely at these two relations, focusing for the moment on this image. For it should be clear that, in addition to its peculiar force, its power to move the audience towards catharsis, this image also has effects within the action of the play. “Nothing is more moving,” Lacan says, “than that himeros enarges, than the desire that visibly emanates from the eyelids of this admirable girl” (SL, 281; he is citing line 796 in the third choral ode). “Enarges” means “visible,” “manifest” and “clear”; it also means “appearing in bodily form,” and it is used in this sense—by Homer, for example (Od 16.161; Il 20.131)—to designate those times when the gods take on a corporeal shape.15 “Himeros” means “desire” or “love,” but it also means “longing,” yearning in tears and grief.16 It indicates a link between desire and mourning, and Lacan insists that it is only after Antigone has given voice to a long lament for everything that she is giving up—a lament that some commentators have regarded as a mistake, since it seems to compromise the unity of her character, which has thus far been so steadfast and unrelenting (SL, 280)—it is only after this lamentation that she appears in such a light that the chorus in turn is able to lament, to raise a cry about her suffering, and to look on the law of the city as something that suddenly appears unjust: “Antigone,” Lacan says,

will lament that... she will never have any children, that she will never know a conjugal bed... that she is departing ataphos, without a tomb... without a dwelling place... And it is from this same place that the image of Antigone appears before us as something that causes the Chorus to lose its head... [that] makes the just appear unjust, and makes the Chorus transgress all limits, including casting aside any respect it might have for the edicts of the city. Nothing is more moving than that himeros enarges, than the desire that visibly emanates from the eyelids of this admirable girl. (SL, 280-81, emphasis added)

This new relation between the image and the law, in which desire is suddenly made visible, shining forth with this effect upon the city, and making the just appear unjust, should allow us to clarify an earlier question, for if Antigone’s love for her brother has largely been expressed in terms of philia during the course of the play, this philia is transformed, and shines forth in her eyes as the divine power of eros (she is “amachos... theos Aphrodita,” the chorus tells us, “the invincible goddess Aphrodite,” lines 781-800), precisely at the moment of a speech that gives voice to mourning. The moment of mourning would thus mark the transformation of philia into eros, and highlight the peculiar divinity of Antigone’s image, its sublime and blinding radiance, while at the same time it brings into view the singular transmission of her solitary act, its capacity to reach beyond itself, disrupting the world of the chorus and the city, with all the political effects that this entails.

We must therefore stress not only the shift from philia to eros, in accounting for Antigone’s “love” or “desire”; we must also attend to the link between action and speech, the peculiar logic that binds Antigone’s deed (the solitary act of burial that is grounded in her desire), to the memorial of that deed, the testimony she gives in the form of her lament. For this memorial does not simply record her loss, in the sheer passivity of historical documentation (“My journey’s done. One last fond, lingering look I take” [lines 807-10]). On the contrary: Antigone’s speech must be understood as the completion of her deed (“I did the deed, and I won’t say otherwise” [line 443]), as the proper accomplishment and fulfillment of her act, unfolding it completely, by bestowing upon it the full weight of its tragic consequence, and the power of its effect upon the city. What
is given, transmitted, and accomplished by her speech must thus be understood as integral to the
domain of her action itself, as the Lloyd-Jones translation (and a fuller citation) reveals: “Behold
me, citizens of my native land, as I make my last journey, and look on the light of the sun for the
last time.” Antigone thus calls on the chorus to bear witness, thereby not only completing her act,
but securing her heroic status, through this speech that she makes on the verge of death. For as
Jean-Pierre Vernant has stressed in relation to Achilles, it is precisely this stubborn, persistent,
almost pathological relation to death that sets the hero apart from the rest of the community, and
constitutes “excellence (arete) accomplished. By a beautiful death, excellence (arete) no longer has
to measure up in the eyes of others, or prove itself by confrontation. It is accomplished in a single
blow, for once and for all, in the exploit that puts an end to the hero’s life.”17 Antigone’s lament,
therefore, is not merely speech, but on the contrary stands as the fulfillment of her deed, which
acquires through her words a peculiar fecundity within the city-state, turning philia into eros, and
allowing the divine aspect of Antigone’s love for her brother to be manifested before the chorus,
in its full and terrible atrocity.

And yet, if we thereby stress the relation between her solitary act and its effect on the commu-
nity of others, this should not lead us to conclude that her act was addressed to the city. On the
contrary: Antigone buries her brother simply because she wants to, simply because she must,
and not because she seeks to prove a point to anyone else, or because she aims at some useful or
calculated end. We need to mark with particular vigilance the enigmatic relation between the
extreme and unmistakable solitude of her act—an act which, as Carol Jacobs has noted, is relent-
lessly marked by Sophocles as taking place “in secret” and in “silence,” without leaving any trace
—and the public significance that this act comes to have, the weight that it acquires in the course
of its transmission within the domain of the city-state.18 For it is clear, and Sophocles repeatedly
insists, that her decision to act has no bearing on the world of the living. And in fact, it is clear
from the opening lines that Antigone already keeps company with the dead — with her father,
her brother, and the gods below. No rivalry, no struggle to the death, no master-slave relation can
be applied to the singular act she undertakes. The supreme and even inhuman indifference that
Antigone displays, not only toward Creon, but even towards her sister, underscores in the most
severe way her terrifying solitude. And yet, precisely through this detachment—in which every
living relation and every object of human tenderness is cast off with a ferocious and austere indif-
ference — Antigone’s solitude is at the same time manifested, so that the cost of this detachment
is made visible within the city, where her loss is transmitted and registered. The enigmatic power
of Antigone’s desire must be grasped in terms of this incalculable and traumatic manifestation
of a force that has nothing to do with her relation to the state, but whose effects—in spite of her
supreme indifference—have an impact on the destiny of the city. Such is the peculiar power of
desire, beyond all calculation or willful intention. And such is the curious, delicate, and enig-
matic character of her action, that it is not intended as a response to Creon’s edict, but is under-
taken in silence, without the slightest concern for others—neither for Creon or Haemon, for her
sister or even herself — while yet, at the same time, and precisely because of this solitary and
divine indifference, her action reaches the world of the living, to whom it was not addressed.
This, we can say, is what makes heroic action, since it is only through this peculiar and incalcu-
lable transmission that her action comes to have the public and communal significance which
must be present, according to Aristotle, if we are to call the act heroic.

Here again, Vernant’s remarks, though focused on the hero of epic, can help us to capture the curious detachment of Antigone, what might even be called her stubborn intransigence, which cannot be understood as a matter of “defiance,” or in terms of any rivalry or struggle to the death. This is, in fact, the crux of Lacan’s objection to the Hegelian reading, dominated as it is by the contest between Creon and a supposedly defiant Antigone. No defiance can capture the terrible austerity of her desire, detached as it is from the community of the living. The crucial feature of her action lies rather in the supreme indifference she displays, her disregard for any consequences in the world of the living—a hardness she reveals in the opening lines of the play, as though her choice had already been made in advance. Speaking of Achilles’s comportment towards death, Vernant underscores in the clearest way what her solitude means for the relation between the hero and the community. “Achilles,” he writes:

didn’t even have to make any choice. He found himself, from the very outset, on a path to a short life. And dedicated in advance—one might say by nature—to a beautiful death, he was in his very existence permeated by the aura of a posthumous glory to which he was already promised. This is why it was impossible for him, in following this code of honor, to negotiate or adjust—to accept any mitigating circumstance, bow to any pressure, entertain any cowardly compromise, or to entertain even the least accommodation. This system no longer functioned for him. For Achilles, every offense, no matter where it came from, and no matter how high might be the social position of its author, was equally intolerable and ineradicable: every excuse, every honorable effort to make amends, no matter how satisfactory it might seem from the standpoint of his narcissistic gratification, or from the perspective of the public reparation it might make—all this was vain and ineffective... This extremism of honor made Achilles into a figure on the margins, forced to take refuge in the haughty solitude of his wrath. And the other Greeks condemned him in this excess, regarding it as a waywardness of spirit, a form of Error personified—as \textit{Ate}.\textsuperscript{19}

This is what we mean by the “atrocity of desire”—“atrocity,” a word derived, as Lacan points out, from \textit{ate}, meaning blindness, infatuation, delusion, and recklessness, but also fate, doom, anguish, guilt, pestilence and abomination. It is this supreme waywardness and detachment that cuts the hero off from the community, leading her to act in haughty solitude and indifference, but at the same time in a manner that turns out to have incalculable effects, so that her act still reaches the world of the living, to whom it was not addressed.

This strange relation between the hero and the community is what Freud describes when he speaks of the function of the artist, in the famous postscript to \textit{Group Psychology} that we have taken as an epigraph. For the artist is precisely that figure who, “in the exigency of his longing,” Freud says, is “moved to free himself from the group and take over the father’s part.” For the poet, of course, this act is “achieved in his imagination,” not by a display of courage on the field of war. But like the hero, so also the poet, however freed from the group, is not altogether cut off from the community, Freud says. On the contrary: “the poet who had taken this step and had in this way set himself free from the group in his imagination, is nevertheless able... to find his way back to it in reality. For he goes and relates to the group his hero’s deeds which he himself has invented” (SE, 18:136). Turning back for a moment at the threshold of her departure, suspended for a moment between symbolic and real death, Antigone thus speaks “just enough”—just long enough—in that suspended instant which is “time enough” for her solitary act to be transmitted.
Lacan is not alone in remarking on the curious character of this transmission (may we not say “sublimation”?), in which Antigone’s heroic act — a solitary act of ruinous devotion, undertaken in reckless fury, and solely for itself — somehow reaches beyond itself, rebounding upon the city, precisely at the moment of mourning, when, in a singular lamentation, Antigone turns the head of the chorus, causing it to weep, and leading it to see the law of Creon for what it is — namely, an arbitrary brutality that exceeds the bounds of justice. The chorus likewise elaborates this passage from *philia* to *eros*, and the correlated link between her blinding image and its power to move, to turn our heads and our judgment: Antigone, the chorus says, is *daimonion* *teras* (line 375), a “strange vision,” according to the Loeb translation. She suddenly appears as *daimonion*, a half-goddess Lacan says (281) (born of the gods, *alla theos toi kai theogennes* [line 832]), “daemonic” and *teras*, “strange,” and more precisely “monstrous,” “teras” meaning a sign, a wonder, a marvel or a portent, but also a monster or monstrosity (a meaning carried in the English “teratology”). She is monstrous, in the sense of *to deinotaton*, the most wondrous of all the many wonders on the earth — in the words of the first choral ode so famously discussed by Heidegger in the *Introduction to Metaphysics* (*polla ta deina koudev anthropou deinotaton pelei* [line 332], “of all that is strange on the earth, none is stranger than man”). Thus, if this blinding light — one might even say this “gaze” — that moves the chorus is *eros* (and even *theos Aphrodita*, line 800, the “goddess that looks forth from the eyes of the girl”), it is *this same light* that makes Antigone the object of fascination and power for us, the moving force of catharsis. In short, while the force of her image is clear throughout the play, and while her stubborn willfulness is captivating from the outset, and even the sign of an almost divine power, it is only when she begins to mourn her own loss that her image begins to have this additional effect, this political effect, such that the chorus now *begins to see* the law of the city as unjust. Such is the curious and subtle relation between the image and the law, or between the apparently distinct domains of beauty and justice. And such is also the link of transmission between her love for her brother and the power of her image over us.

III. PSYCHOANALYSIS AND ART

Love and beauty — these are the two elements that concern us. And we may as well acknowledge the somewhat eccentric nature of the decision that would isolate these particular features, when there are grander and more cataclysmic things that might be discussed. In the technical vocabulary of tragedy, “love” and “beauty” are not the first or the most obvious words. To be sure, Lacan does not avoid the fateful, agonistic features of the play — the tyrannical fury of Creon, who pursues his enemy even after death, or the final lament of Antigone, who despite her unwavering commitment knows very well what she will have to sacrifice. The grand and more obviously “tragic” themes are not absent, then, but it should strike us as somewhat unorthodox that Lacan allows these two features to have such organizing force, in relation to the other components of the tragedy — particularly in relation to the historically canonized debate between the two great ethical principles (family and state, *dike* and *nomos*) that have organized the reception of the play.

We may therefore be justified in suspecting that the choice of these elements — whatever light they may shed on tragedy — has a close connection to Lacan’s own thinking, at this particular moment in his work, about matters internal to psychoanalytic theory. If he turns to *Antigone* in order to speak (somewhat perversely, it might be said) of love and beauty, we should be prepared
to understand this choice at least in part from within the development of Lacan’s own thought. From this standpoint, we may venture the following explanation: problems have arisen in the theory of psychoanalysis, and these features of Antigone are offered as a step forward. If this is so, it should be possible to show precisely what these problems are, and thereby grasp more clearly the reasons for Lacan’s defiantly eccentric treatment of the play. At the same time, however, if his remarks have a legitimate bearing on tragedy itself, it should also be possible to show how these features (whatever they may mean for psychoanalysis) contribute to the classical treatment of tragedy as an aesthetic phenomenon. The proof that Lacan’s reading also aims to engage the text at this literary and philosophical level would be found in his discussion of other commentators—Goethe and Bernfeld, to be sure, but above all Aristotle, Kant, and Hegel, his rivals not (or not only) in terms of what they may teach us about psychoanalysis, but in terms of their contribution to the history of aesthetics.

Love and beauty would thus be open to a double analysis. To put the point somewhat schematically, we may say that Lacan’s treatment of the beautiful (the image of Antigone, “l’éclat d’Antigone”) is both a revision of the theory of the imaginary, a treatment of the image that will eventually (in Seminar 11) culminate in the concept of the gaze—which is no longer a purely imaginary phenomenon—and also a meditation on aesthetics, and more precisely, an engagement with Kant’s treatment of the beautiful in The Critique of Judgment, and Aristotle’s discussion of catharsis in the Poetics—an experience (according to Aristotle) in which pleasure and pain are mixed, and which (according to Lacan) is primarily grounded in the sublimely veiled image of Antigone. And as for love (the nodal point of Antigone’s relation to her brother), it is likewise to be understood both as a development within psychoanalysis, and more precisely as a new account of the “object relation” (the corpse of Polyneices, which Antigone devotedly covers with a veil of dust), and also as a contribution to the theory of tragedy, and in particular a reflection on the status of the tragic hero, and the “law”—or perhaps the blindness, delusion, or recklessness (ate)—that governs her heroic action (and it is here that Lacan’s engagement with Hegel is particularly important).

Our diagram can thus be elaborated further. Suspending for a moment the psychoanalytic axis of the argument (the imaginary, the gaze, and the libidinal relation to the object), let us focus only on the link between Lacan’s account and the philosophical tradition (on the one hand, Aristotle and Kant, on the other hand, Hegel, and the laws that orient the hero in relation to the family and the state):

```
Aristotle  
catharsis

beauty
Kant

Antigone  
brother

tragic hero
desire

love
Hegel
```

The difficulty with such a linkage between Aristotle and Kant will not be lost on readers. For Lacan would thereby seem to yoke together two incompatible views, not only combining...
“ancient” and “modern” aesthetics (a historical question that dominates this seminar), but also forcing together a passive and contemplative theory of “rest” and “disinterestedness,” organized around the “pure form” of the image (Kant), with a more active and affective theory of “emotion,” in which the passions of the soul are mobilized (Aristotle). The difficulty is clear: our relation to the figure of Antigone would be at once “cathartic” and “disinterested.”

Furthermore, in a second “contradiction” (and we now factor in the psychoanalytic axis of the argument), this peculiar, Kanto-Aristotelian “experience” of the audience — apparently unique to the aesthetic domain — would at the same time have a bearing on the psychoanalytic experience, since the kind of emotion or affect that is proper to psychoanalysis, the engagement of desire that it (like art) entails, is not like the emotion one feels in everyday life, but occurs within a horizon of deliberate artifice, a specific and highly controlled discursive operation. In analysis, emotion is not engaged at the level of immediate experience, but (like the mythical material presented in tragic drama) is remembered, repeated, and worked over again, in a deliberate labor of symbolization (Durcharbeiten). Like tragedy, the analytic setting presents us not with the unfolding of a real event, but with a representation of some kind, a repeated or reduplicated experience, recalled from ancient times, and staged or mediated by language. Like artistic representation, the analytic experience is in fact a genre, a discursive form whose setting is governed by a series of highly determined (though performatively malleable) rules and techniques — a form whose Poetics one might almost write. In short, the twin concepts of the beautiful and catharsis, specifically confined by the philosophers to the region of art, would thus isolate a strictly “aesthetic” domain (since tragedy requires its own treatise, distinct from the Ethics and Metaphysics, just as the “reflective” judgment of taste cannot be confused with the “determinate” judgments of pure and practical reason), while at the same time, without losing this specificity, and indeed precisely by maintaining it, this “aesthetic” experience would have a bearing on the domain of psychoanalysis and the uniquely analytic experience. Thus, in addition to the peculiar yoking of Aristotle and Kant, we are faced with a curious intersection between aesthetic and analytic “experience,” both being defined as distinct from moral and cognitive experience, as well as from the immediate experience of reality.

Although it is perhaps somewhat schematic, we might say that the first apparent paradox or contradiction, the joining of Kant and Aristotle, will be resolved by the Freudian theory of sublimation: what is manifested in the beautiful (a containment of the gaze that Lacan regards as pacifying, or as aligned with the functions of prohibition and shame), and experienced in the form of catharsis (where pity and fear are engaged), is a work of sublimation. If this is so, we might suspect that the second paradox (the peculiar way in which the experience of art, specifically defined as “aesthetic,” can at the same time have a bearing on psychoanalysis) can be approached in similar terms: what Freud finds in art, under the heading of the beautiful and the “work” of imagination, would find its analogue, beyond art, in whatever remains of “catharsis” in psychoanalytic theory (for there are heated debates about its continued legitimacy). If this is so, we might suspect that the second paradox (the peculiar way in which the experience of art, specifically defined as “aesthetic,” can at the same time have a bearing on psychoanalysis) can be approached in similar terms: what Freud finds in art, under the heading of the beautiful and the “work” of imagination, would find its analogue, beyond art, in whatever remains of “catharsis” in psychoanalytic theory (for there are heated debates about its continued legitimacy).22 In art, as in analysis, we would thus find a domain of experience that asserts its independence from cognitive and moral thought, as well as from “real” experience, each being a unique domain (though enigmatically neighboring each other), defined by a peculiar engagement of the passions that simultaneously tempers and restrains, trans-
forming the relation between desire and jouissance: both forms of experience would thus testify to a work of sublimation.

It is this protracted encounter with tragedy, then, that gives Lacan the means, not only to rethink the aesthetic dimension of affect (catharsis) and the imaginary (beauty), but also to develop the question of affect in psychoanalytic terms, through an account of the relation between desire and jouissance. With these factors in mind, we might add to our diagram as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aristotle</th>
<th>tragic hero</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>catharsis</td>
<td>desire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>affect (pathemata)</td>
<td>the object relation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>beauty</td>
<td>affect (jouissance)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kant</td>
<td>brother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>audience</td>
<td>Antigone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>affect (aesthetic pleasure)</td>
<td>love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the gaze</td>
<td>Hegel</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These developments are more than we can outline in such a brief account, and clearly the question of affect proliferates on this reading, since it is by no means identical in each instance (sublimation is perhaps not “one”). But even these superficial remarks should allow us to grasp in a general way both what Lacan claims to contribute to the analysis of tragedy, and what tragedy contributes to the development of Lacanian theory.

We have sketched the outlines of a conjunction between the aesthetic and psychoanalysis, around the concepts of beauty and catharsis. On this account, the discussion of “beauty” would belong squarely within the aesthetic register, though it also bears on psychoanalytic theory. To say that the treatment of love (Antigone’s relation to her brother), by contrast, is introduced largely for analytic reasons, however, is not defensible at first glance, since obviously — as we have already suggested — the vocabulary of the play (philia and eros) and the relation between its characters (not only Antigone and her brother, but Antigone and all the others — Ismene, Haemon and Creon), are dominated by the question of love and hate, love and the law. And yet, the link between love and the internal affairs of psychoanalysis (above all the problem of object-libido) allows to understand more clearly why Lacan, in Seminar 7, is so concerned with the status of the “object” — the “Thing” and the “object,” and the entire problematic of “object-libido.” For although it is true that there is, in the case of both catharsis (Aristotle) and the image (Kant), a precise “object” to be specified, we must note that when we turn to the question of love, and Antigone’s relation to her brother, the object cannot be defined in the same way. In a formula: Polyneices is not for Antigone what Antigone is for us. The relation to the object must therefore be negotiated more precisely, along the axis separating love and beauty. We may well claim that our relation to Antigone (defined by beauty and catharsis) depends upon her relation to her brother (defined by love), but this does not mean the two relations are equivalent. The aesthetic
power she has over us is indeed grounded in the sovereign ferocity of her love, and this connection requires explanation, but it does not mean that our experience of catharsis is identical with her assumption of her desire. To be sure, our experience may be vaguely designated as an “affect,” a certain engagement of jouissance, just as her love may be characterized in terms of a “libidinal object relation” in which “affect” and jouissance are present. There is a difference, however, between the image (“beauty”) and the body of Polyneices: something in the register of the object thus remains to be specified more precisely. This is why we have argued that, whereas the image of Antigone can clarify both tragedy (Aristotle and Kant) and psychoanalysis (the imaginary and the gaze), “love,” by contrast, would be more exclusively concerned with matters internal to psychoanalysis.

In short, although it is somewhat schematic and oversimplified, we might propose the following schema: the first issue — love — is introduced for largely analytic reasons (as a supplement to the theory of desire, and as a mediation of the libidinal “object,” the corpse of Polyneices that draws Antigone toward her fate), while the second issue — the beautiful — has a bearing not only on Freud and the Lacanian concept of the imaginary, but also on the classical theories of aesthetics. Accordingly, we will suggest that love and beauty present us with two forms of sublimation, two vicissitudes of the drive, one that bears on the object (the corpse of Polyneices), and another that bears on the image (Antigone herself). Only the latter is properly speaking “aesthetic.” The former, although it is given to us through the play, is clearly not, from the perspective of Antigone herself, a matter of aesthetics. Thus, while our relation to Antigone can only be understood if it is grasped in its aesthetic particularity, as a specifically aesthetic form of “emotion” or “experience,” Antigone’s love for her brother, and indeed the entire work of mourning, is not an aesthetic phenomenon. In each case, there is “affect,” and a necessary engagement of jouissance, but the two forms of this “experience” cannot be immediately equated, or collapsed onto the same conceptual level.

Nevertheless, this claim is overly schematic, because it is already clear that Antigone’s love for her brother is the source of her power over us: if she captures our attention with her sheer presence or radiance (what Lacan calls l’éclat d’Antigone), it is only insofar as the divinity of eros is manifested in the image she presents. Our (“aesthetic”) relation to Antigone thus depends on her (“non-aesthetic”) relation to her brother — transmission, translation, the gift of art that exceeds its own domain, but only in being rigorously true to its aesthetic character. At the same time, her (“non-aesthetic”) relation to her brother is clearly a representation (“aesthetic”): as Aristotle would say, it is not a real action, but the imitation of an action in the context of the theater. The precise status of her action, and our relation to that action, thus cannot be understood unless they are grasped in the context of the theatrical presentation that gives them their specific sense and power. All this would be recalled for us, not only by the Aristotelian doctrine of represented action — with its requirements of completeness, reversal, nobility, and the like — but also by the Kantian doctrine of “disinterestedness,” which insists upon the difference between the character of a judgment of taste and the judgment of existence, as well as cognitive and moral judgment. Again we find a movement from one domain to the other, a passage leading from Antigone’s act of love, defined by Lacan in terms of the “ethics of desire,” to the aesthetic domain of disinterested and spectatorial expe-
rience. The relation between these two modes of sublimation (in love and art) is thus extremely tangled and complex.

As a result, if we claim that we are concerned with two modes of sublimation, of which only one is properly aesthetic (the spectatorial relation to beauty), the other being concerned with analytic matters (the libidinal relation to the object, and the status of love within the theory of desire), it should be clear that this claim is not a simple one. At the same time, however, the distinction should not be lost altogether, and it should be recalled that when Lacan speaks of Aristotle and Kant — when he speaks of the function of the beautiful in relation to the *Critique of Judgment*, and when he speaks of catharsis in relation to the *Poetics* — he is concerned with the image of Antigone, and not with the problem of love. Likewise, when he speaks of love in this text, and raises the question of libido (the distinction between “ego-libido” and “object-libido”), he is concerned with the object of the drive — not, in this instance, with the scopic drive, the gaze which (at least in this text) emerges in the aesthetic domain, but rather with the corpse, the object of Antigone’s libidinal attachment, defined by some readers as a destructive attachment, and even as the index of Antigone’s pathological drive toward death, but also open to an account — and this is where Lacan’s emphasis falls — in which this attachment emerges as the divine relation of eros, through which her heroic status, and indeed her ethical significance, is triumphantly manifested.

The two modes of sublimation — two “vicissitudes of the drive” — would thus be divided between the gaze and love, between the lack in the visual field, represented by Antigone’s blinding image, and the corpse of Polyneices, the object divested of all imaginary features, purified of narcissism, in order that it might return in the name of a love that is beyond the law. For it is only here, in this austere renunciation, that love surpasses the order of the ego: whatever he was in life, whatever good or evil he may have done, and indeed apart from any return that Antigone may receive from her deed (which sacrifices children, her husband, and all the goods that govern the world of the living, which is bound by the law and the principle of pleasure), Antigone’s act marks an absolute rupture with the symbolic economy and a break with the principle of pleasure: it is the emergence of a relation to the object that exceeds what can be written in the tables of the law. “There only may the signification of a limitless love emerge, because it is outside the limits of the law, where it alone may live” (SII, 276).


4. “Perseverance” calls attention to the “severity” of the father (“le père sévère”), and yet this word designates not only the severity of a father whose fate is passed down to his daughter like a punishment or malediction, but also the very opposite, the desire that “perseveres” in spite of this inheritance, since Antigone chooses her fate in an explicit and even willful decision that her sister is not able to share. Unlike Ismene, Antigone’s paradoxical choosing of her fate would thus be the index of desire itself, for “perseverence” also means “responsibility,” as Lacan is at pains to point out: “Haftbarkeit, which is perhaps best translated by ‘perseverence’ but has a curious resonance in German, since it also means ‘responsibility,’ ‘commitment’” (88). Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 1959-60, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: Norton, 1992). References are preceded by S7, for “Seminar 7.” I will occasionally cite the French, *Le seminaire, livre VII: l’etique de la psychanalyse*, 1959-60, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 1986).

5. The famous lines are those in which Antigone speaks of the irreplaceability of Polyneices (lines 902-15), and the singularity that distinguishes him from a husband or children, for whom she claims she would not have acted in the same way. Antigone’s speech on the uniqueness of the brother thus disrupts what one might have taken to be the fundamental conflict of the play, the great agon that sets two equally compelling claims, the family against the state, against each other. See Michelle Gelrich, *Tragedy and Theory: The Problem of Conflict since Aristotle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

6. George Steiner’s survey of scholarly opinion about Antigone is heavily oriented by this distinction between filial “love” and transgressive “desire” (eros), an interpretation largely grounded in the Romantics, for whom the erotic relation between brother and sister is perversely privileged, on account of its supposed purity and intimacy, and in spite of the incestuous barrier that ought to protect the love between brother and sister from all such erotic ties. See George Steiner, *Antigones* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984). I am suggesting that Lacan’s account breaks with this reading, since “eros” does not carry, for him, this Romantic sense of “erotic” transgression, the relation to the object being rather different in her case.

7. In *L’individu, la mort, l’amour* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), Jean-Pierre Vernant has written about the heroic relation to death in ancient Greece, stressing that the hero has generally been condemned to an early death from the very start, usually by some oracle or divine will, so that the only matter that remains is whether the hero will be able to convert that death into a noble one. Antigone’s unrelenting relation to death would thus be modeled precisely on the heroic warrior, whose death has already been determined, but who knows how to act in the face of death, with a courage that others do not share. If we follow this line of thought, however, it would be necessary to consider — following the work of Nicole Loraux — the peculiar way in which women take up this relation to death, in a manner that is close to the death of the warrior, but not identical (since women, as she observes, die by hanging, or by throwing themselves from cliffs, and rarely by falling on their swords, for example). See Nicole Loraux, *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman*, trans. Anthony Forster (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987). Antigone has thus been buried alive and “left to die,” but will not accept this position, and instead of “being killed” (in passive resignation) decides to “take her own life” in the proper heroic fashion, not waiting for death to come, but running ahead to meet it once her act is complete. And yet she meets death in a manner that explicitly belongs to the woman, and indeed to her mother Jocasta, who was likewise found hanging by her neck. To these remarks by Vernant and
Loraux I would add, moreover, that genre may introduce yet another consideration, since one does not die in epic as one does in tragedy—or for that matter in philosophy. Achilles, Antigone, and Socrates, on this account, would thus provide us with three figures of mortality, three styles or genres of a relation to death, in which the forms of sexual difference might be differently inscribed.

8. For an argument distinguishing the tragic understanding of concepts such as “action,” “agency,” and “subjectivity” from the modern understanding of these terms, see Jean-Pierre Vernant, Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York: Zone Books, 1988). For some brief but lucid remarks on the Aristotelian framework in which the concepts of desire, deliberation, choice and action are situated (already at a certain distance from tragedy itself), see Gellrich, Tragedy and Theory, 104-07. And finally, for some excellent remarks on the role of catharsis in psychoanalysis, and its precursors in the history of science, see Léon Chertok and Isabelle Stengers, A Critique of Psychoanalytic Reason: Hypnosis as a Scientific Problem from Lavoisier to Lacan, trans. Martha Noel Evans (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992).

9. And again, in the Introductory Lectures: “A certain ambiguity and indefiniteness in the use of the word “Angst” will not have escaped you. By ‘anxiety’ we usually understand the subjective state into which we are put by perceiving the ‘generation of anxiety’ and we call this an affect. And what is an affect...?” Then, as if this were not tentative and problematic enough, Freud elaborates, only to add the following: “I do not think that with this enumeration we have arrived at the essence of an affect” (SE 16: 395).


13. “How do we explain the dissipatory power of this central image relative to all the others;” Lacan asks? “The articulation of the tragic action is illuminating on the subject. It has to do with Antigone’s beauty. And this is not something I invented; I will show you the passage in the song of the Chorus where that beauty is evoked, and I will prove that it is the pivotal passage. It has to do with Antigone’s beauty and the place it occupies as intermediary between two fields” (248).

14. “All these propositions merely conceal (voiler) the fact that it [the phallus] can play its role only when veiled (voieil), that is to say, as itself a sign of the latency with which any signifiable is struck, when it is raised (aufgehoben) to the function of signifier. The phallus is the signifier of this Aufhebung itself, which it inaugurates (initiates) by its disappearance.” Jacques Lacan, Écrits: A Selection, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977), 288. Jacques Lacan, Écrits (Paris: Seuil, 1966), 692.

15. See Homer, The Iliad, 2 vols., trans. A. T. Murray (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998 [Loeb edition]), and Homer, The Odyssey, 2 vols., trans. A. T. Murray, revised by George E. Dimrock (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998 [Loeb edition]). The passage from the Iliad reads, “hard are the gods to look upon when they appear in manifest presence (energeis);” the Odyssey speaks of Athena, who “stood against the door, showing herself to Odysseus, but Telemachus did not see her before him, or notice her; for it is not at all the case that the gods appear in manifest presence (phainontai enargeis) to all.”

17. *L'individu, la mort, l'amour*, 42. See also note 7.


20. In fact, it is not clear that the judgment of the chorus actually changes at the moment it hears Antigone’s lament, as Lacan appears to claim. It is notoriously difficult to glean a clear judgment from choral odes, which speak an archaic language, marked by notoriously empty and pious pronouncements (saying “woe is me,” in effect, or “what disaster will come upon us next?”), and ridden with allusions to mythical figures, which function as a kind of allegorical commentary whose purport often remains obscure. Nevertheless, the clearest indication that the chorus’s judgment has actually turned against Creon (which does not mean they were ever on his side) comes, not with Antigone’s lament, but only after the admonitory speech of Teiresias (line 1064 ff.), which Creon heeds too late.


TOWARDS A TOPOLOGY OF THE SUBJECT

ROBERT GROOME

Editor's Note:
By request, this article is not available for electronic distribution. Pages 83-94 have been removed from this document.
In *The Metastases of Enjoyment*, Slavoj Žižek summarizes Lacan’s reversal of the Freudian conception of sublimation:

Lacan is quite justified in inverting the usual formula of sublimation, which involves shifting the libido from an object that satisfies some concrete material need to an object that has no apparent connection to this need: for example, destructive literary criticism becomes sublimated aggressivity, scientific research into the human body becomes sublimated voyeurism, and so on. What Lacan means by sublimation, on the contrary, is shifting the libido from the void of the “unserviceable” Thing to some concrete, material object of need that assumes a sublime quality the moment it occupies the place of the Thing.

Žižek’s account relies, in part, on Lacan’s remark in Seminar 8, *Transference*, that “by an inversion of the term sublimation, I have earned the right to say that here we see deviation with respect to the end that fashions itself in an inverse sense as the object of a need.” The context in which this statement occurs is the relation of libido to the erogenous zones in correspondence to another relation, namely, that of demand and desire. In the *Écrits*, Lacan argues that the erogenous zones are delimited by way of an isolation of “the metabolism of the function” that itself is based on an anatomical cut or opening that results in a structure or topology of the zone characterized by a border or rim, for example, the lips of the mouth, the rim of the anus, and so on. And in Seminar 11, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, this topological understanding of the erogenous zones is explicated at length in terms of the drives. In Seminar 8, cited by Žižek, it turns out that the immediate context out of which his citation has been excerpted is that of breast feeding. Alluding to the erogenous zones, Lacan tells us almost right from the start that desire exists in the *margin of the demand* which makes up its place or field. In other words, if the mouth demands something from an other, it is sure to follow that desire will accompany this demand in its margin, the lips. Speaking of how the infant latches on to the mother’s nipple, Lacan tells us that in the demand for breast milk there is also an eroticism that becomes the support of pleasure that takes on a value that Lacan calls *agalma: merveille, d’objet précieux*. It is this latching on to the *agalma* by way of a certain “voluptuousness of nibbling” that we arrive at “what we could well call a sublimated voracity.” This sublimation, we should not forget, is already in the works in so far as it is always already in the margin of demand which, as Lacan suggests, is actually the field or place constitutive of demand. It is here that a certain dialectical relation could be imag-
inated between desire and demand, the desire in the margin sublimating demand by way of a Hegelian sublation (Aufhebung).

Nevertheless, we should not lose sight of the agalma which is nascently the trait of sublimation insofar as this is perceived to be an ornament or marvelous appendage that characterizes a certain supplementary excess of desirability and pleasure that poses itself as their cause. Lacan calls the agalma a “part object” that escapes appropriation by the one who desires to possess it, because it has undergone a transformation from the ordinary into the beautiful. Among the examples Lacan provides is a heroine bearing her breasts, as in the case of those heroic poses taken by the female form in Greek statuary. This contrasts rather sharply with the discussion that comes somewhat later about the infant latching onto the nipple. In comparing the two cases, however, it is obvious that the one example is really a sublimation of the other. Indeed, the shift from the mother’s real breast to the image of the heroine’s exposed chest concerns what Lacan calls perfection, or, beauty. Such a disclosure is proper to places such as ancient temples where such perfection can be sheltered or kept safe from the profane. It is within such sequestration that the female form expresses itself as something other than a corporeal object required by nature and demanded by the nursling. That is, within the temple we can see a shift from woman as a body that can be latched onto, to woman as an imagined form that escapes physical appropriation. To put this in traditional terms, the shift is one from the real to the ideal, a shift that has occurred because of a certain dissolution of attachment to the body.

In Seminar 8, Lacan gives this rather familiar account a new twist. Eros, Lacan says, works by retroaction. That is, the eros of the erogenous border retroactively gives significance to a demand that would be cognitively unknowable without it. Conversely, without the demand there would be no place for desire to install itself; hence, demand works retroactively as well.

In fact, it is not because of primitive hunger that the erotic value of the privileged object takes on its substance here. The eros that inhabits it comes about nachträglich, by retroaction, and not only après coup: it is within this oral demand that the place of desire excavates itself. If there were no demand with the love that it projects beyond itself, there would not be this place of desire within it that organizes itself around a privileged object. The oral phase of the sexual libido requires this place be excavated by the demand.

Demand, of course, can latch on to its object. By definition, desire cannot. This means that we are always dealing with some sort of object relation in which the issue of the relation or link is posed in terms of a demand and desire that puts into question some assumptions maintained by, say, Mrs. Klein and the British School, “splitting,” among them.

Wilfred Bion, it is well known, spoke of “attacks on linking,” and to some extent this is also what Lacan explores from time to time in his writings. The way desire mediates demand could be construed as such an attack to the extent that desire is never satisfied in terms of latching on, hence depriving demand of its fill. At the same time, desire compensates us by way of sublimation: the object of demand is transformed into the impossible supplementary object of preciousness that Lacan calls the agalma. In this way an Other relation to the object is established at the cost of renouncing it physically. No doubt there is the umbra of beatitude to be gained. But as Žižek emphasizes, there is also anxiety. The beautiful goddess persecutes those who do not conform to her wants, which is to say, the sublime is not without its own demand and desire.
For those who wish to investigate what it means to live in the sway of a terrible beauty there is always Michel Leiris's *L'âge d'homme* to be consulted. In fact, it's a treasure trove of attacks on linking whose master signifier is the experience of sexual impotence. Fortunately, Leiris is compensated for his troubles by an awesome sublimation.

In his later seminars, Lacan will introduce topology theory in order to completely reconstitute an understanding of what makes up a psychological relation. We know that central to these lessons (for example, on the Borromean knot) is the emphasis upon the cut and the dissolution of the relation as such. Indeed, Lacan's last seminar was even entitled “Dissolution.” Was it in the wake of this attack on linking that a terrible beauty was born? Certainly at Caracas he spoke of an “indestructible desire” which he linked to the *Cause freudienne*. It is a *cause* which is also—and here I hope Žižek would agree—a *chose-une chose freudienne*. Not only that, but it is a Freudian thing that Lacan values so much that it has to be kept apart from even the students, put in a sanctum, as it were, for only the truly devout. Hence, since we have to move a bit quickly, I propose the following correlation which has already suggested itself: dissolution = sublimation.

If Lacan, at the end of his introductory remarks in Caracas in July of 1980, says “it's you, by your presence, who make it possible that I teach something [quelque chose],” then by dissolving his Ecole, Lacan puts that “thing” at a distance and renames it “la cause freudienne,” as if the “thing” had retroactively caused Freudianism to happen. This “thing” becomes our cause for desiring Freud and, by extension, psychoanalysis, and it does this by becoming Freud's “thing,” a “thing” that we not only demand but desire, a “thing” that is sublime. By means of dissolution, Lacan's teaching can take up residence in the pantheon of Freud as if it were inherently Freud's thing all along, and not just any thing but *la cause freudienne*. By means of dissolution, Lacanian theory retroactively becomes the prime mover of Freud. Maybe this is why in his seminar at Caracas, Lacan announces, “it's up to you to be Lacanians if you wish; as for me, I am a Freudian.”

If we are to speak of a sublimation of psychoanalysis, I would be inclined to imagine that Lacan's *Écrits* have, in some sense, always been an attack on linking that works in the service of a certain dissolution whose effect is one of sublimation, the birth of a terrible beauty which acts as the cause of desire, and not only of our desire, but of the desire of Freud, Father of psychoanalysis. Were the fantasm of a certain desire capable of being formulated as a proposition, it would go something like this: if you, Father, had lived long enough to read my *Écrits*, they would have become the cause of your desire for me, the follower who is also your prime mover. There's a logical twist or knot in all this, of course, which raises the point that when studying knot theory in Lacan, one is already in contact with an aesthetic formulation of twistedness whose laces both attach and detach. As such, the Borromean knot could serve as one of the emblems of the sublimation of psychoanalysis, its being twisted loose in such a way that it exists independently as sublime *agalma*, or a supplementary beauty. In Seminar 27, *Dissolution*, Lacan purposely acts out the pedagogical cutting of the Borromean knot in order to sublimate his teachings: “Are you my students? I don't prejudge it. Because I'm in the practice of raising my students myself.” Clearly, if the students have been cut loose, and if, therefore, an attack on linking has been carried out, it has been for a higher purpose—sublimation.


3. Ibid., 172.

4. Ibid., 250.

5. Editor’s translation, “Est-ce que vous êtes mes élèves? Je ne le prejuge pas. Parce que mes élèves, j’ai l’habitude de les élever moi-même.”
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Peter Buse and Andrew Stott, *Ghosts: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, History* (New York: St. Martin's, 1999).


ON SCIENCE AND TRUTH

UMBR(a): A Journal of the Unconscious is currently seeking articles for its upcoming spring 2000 issue, “On Science and Truth.” The issue will address the questions of how psychoanalysis defines science and how it defines itself in relation to science. In the discourse of “Science and Truth,” Lacan says, “It is unthinkable that psychoanalysis as a practice and the Freudian unconscious as a discovery, could have taken on their roles before the birth of science.” This statement provokes questions not only about science and psychoanalysis, but also about history. Is the claim Lacan makes a historicist one? Is Lacan providing a historical account of the origins of psychoanalysis? What is the status of the unconscious as a “discovery”? Did the unconscious exist before Freud? If we generally think of science as a discourse that excludes the unconscious, how can we understand the birth of science as that event which also made possible the elaboration of the unconscious? Is psychoanalysis a science, and if not, why and how is the development of psychoanalysis, according to Lacan, so definitively tied to the birth of science? Is truth as conceived of by science the same as truth in psychoanalysis?

UMBR(a) seeks articles that take up any of these questions or related questions posed by the intersection of psychoanalysis and science (including the fields of mathematics, linguistics, technology, and politics). We are interested in writing that will engage Freud and Lacan, as well as other figures such as Jean-Claude Milner, Alain Badiou or Louis Althusser.

Submissions should be 1,500-6,000 words in length, must be submitted on a 3.5 diskette (MSWord) and in hard copy, and must be received no later than December 1, 1999. Please send all submissions to:

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