

Abstract

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud juxtaposes his discussion of the life and death instincts in “elementary organisms” to the tragic drama he sees enacted in his grandson’s *fort-da* game. Freud’s insights into the death drive are given an added tragic dimension in Lacan’s reading of *Oedipus at Colonus*. Here Lacan establishes the *anti-* or even *post-*humanist credentials of tragedy by insisting that it is the death of the subject which is Sophocles’ ultimate preoccupation. By placing Greek tragedy’s confrontation with the death drive in dialogue with the instincts of the “germ-cell”, the chapter demonstrates how psychoanalysis offers a perfect model for understanding antiquity’s contribution to posthumanism.

Keywords

Sophocles, Freud, Lacan, posthumanism, tragedy, fort-da, death drive

Precarious Life

Tragedy and the Posthuman

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5.1. Who invented the human?

In a recent article in the *Independent* and again in a lively discussion with Edith Hall on BBC Radio Three, Ian Jenkins made the claim that the “Greeks invented the human being.”¹ Jenkins, the curator of Greco-Roman antiquities at the British Museum, was speaking in the context of its recently opened exhibition *Defining Beauty*. For him, the Greeks’ intense appreciation of the human form manifested in their sculptures prefigures the modern understanding of the human: “We humans,” he says, “are at the centre of the Greek universe. They are an anthropocentric tradition in the way that the great religions are not. [...] The Greeks imagined their gods in the image of mankind, not as fearsome, nebulous abstractions.”² In this, Jenkins seems to suggest, the Greeks are the natural ancestors of modern secular humanism. But the same marble statues

¹ Ian Jenkins cited in article in the *Independent*, [Montgomerie \(2015\)](#). Many thanks to the editors of this volume as well as audiences at NYU and the Classical Association Annual Meeting in Bristol for their invaluable comments on this essay. Some passages expand and reformulate material first published in [Leonard \(2015\)](#).

² [Montgomerie \(2015\)](#).

which inspired Jenkins to associate the Greeks with a recognizable and familiar concept of the “human” had a very different effect on E. R. Dodds. At the start of *The Greeks and the Irrational*, he speaks of his encounter with a fellow museum goer who remarked as he stood before the Parthenon sculptures: “I know it’s an awful thing to confess, but this Greek stuff doesn’t move me one bit.”³ For Dodds and his interlocutor, far from suggesting a communality, the cold, pristine marble instead spoke to the profound inaccessibility of the Greeks. This chance meeting would lead Dodds in a very different direction, one which would convey to future generations of classicists the strangeness, even the monstrosity, of Greek culture. For Dodds, it would seem, it made no sense to talk about “we humans” especially in the context of the Greeks and their religion.

Writing a decade or so after Dodds, Michel Foucault would give a very different chronology to the invention of the human: “Man,” he proclaimed in 1966,

is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end. If those arrangements were to disappear as they appeared, if some event of which we can at the moment do no more than sense the possibility [. . .] were to cause them to crumble, as the ground of Classical thought did, at the end of the eighteenth century, then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea.⁴

³ Dodds (1951) 1.

⁴ Foucault (2002) 422.

For Foucault, man is an invention explicitly of the *postclassical* age—man coincides with the waning of the authority of antiquity at the end of the eighteenth century and the advent of modernity.⁵

We may hear echoes in Foucault's peroration of Cassandra, who in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* imagines human life as a picture blotted out by "the dash of a wet sponge," but in predicting the end of man, Foucault was fully in tune with the apocalyptic melody of his own age. In the wake of the atom bomb, the specter of total annihilation hung over the globe. Foucault could also have been thinking as a Frenchman about the process of decolonization and the long overdue decentering of Europe which ensued. Each age has its own catastrophe. Our particular catastrophe is climate change: the realization that human beings are responsible for world destruction. We have, so the scientists tell us, been living in the era of the anthropocene, an era which dates roughly to the end of the so-called "Classical" epoch that Foucault invokes. The age of the anthropocene is the age of industrialization, it denotes a period where the human impact on the atmosphere, on land use, on ecosystems, biodiversity, and species extinction has grown exponentially. The notion of the anthropocene has thus paradoxically become the site both of man's greatest narcissism and of a critique of anthropocentrism. Man has simultaneously never been so aware of his/her power and so aware of his/her fragility. If nuclear war and decolonization provide the context for Foucault's *anti-humanism*, then climate change could explain the urgency of some of the debates within what has come to be known as *posthumanism*. While Foucault provocatively and presciently imagined man being washed away by the forces of

⁵ While the *Order of Things* posits this divide between ancient and modern, it is significant that in the *History of Sexuality* Foucault's genealogy of the self has its genesis in antiquity.

the rising oceans, posthumanism mobilizes objects, organisms, and animals to relativize human experience. Both positions, it might be said, want to put us in our place.

As my juxtaposition of Dodds, Aeschylus, Foucault, and posthumanism implies, the temporalities of the discourses of the human are complex. While I have associated Foucault with antihumanism, others co-opt him into the posthuman canon. The force of the *post* in posthumanism has an interesting charge and can be interpreted in a number of different ways. At one level it is *post* because in the chronologies of criticism it comes after both the humanism of the Renaissance or the Enlightenment and the so-called anti-humanism of structuralism and post-structuralism. Its postness also reflects its emergence in a period which is particularly self-conscious about technological innovation and about the role that machines, computers, and prostheses have come to play in human experience. At another level, the preposition *post* is an alternative to the antagonism of the *anti*: it could potentially triangulate the binary between humanism and anti-humanism. Its postness suggest that we should move beyond this old tired debate. Alternatively, one could see posthumanism as an intensification of anti-humanism and in this sense it would act as a critique of the persistent anthropocentrism of even the most radical anti-humanisms. For all Foucault's emphasis on the contingency of man, even he never conceptualized the world from the perspective of the non-human. Yet another dimension is implied by Cary Wolfe in his introduction to the book *What is Posthumanism?*. There he specifies how his "posthumanism is [...] analogous to Jean-François Lyotard's paradoxical rendering of postmodern: [in that] it comes both before and after humanism."⁶ This is where antiquity can and has played an important role. *Pace* Jenkins, premodern conceptualizations of

⁶ Wolfe (2010) XV.

life, human and otherwise, can act as a corrective to the universalist assumptions of the humanisms of modernity.

I want to look at one particular ancient contribution to this debate. Perhaps to an even greater extent than the Parthenon marbles, Greek tragedy has long played a role in modernity's investigation of humanism. In Hegel, it is Oedipus who in giving the solution "man" to the riddle of the Sphinx seals the association between tragedy and the human. From a posthumanist perspective, we might note that it is Oedipus' encounter with animality that presses him to "man" as the answer to the animal-riddle; in fact, it is the female animal—here in the form of the Sphinx—who calls man to his identity. More than a century after Hegel, Jacques Lacan in the *Ethics of Psychoanalysis* now returns to Sophocles to question the association between tragedy and humanism:

Some people have said . . . that Sophocles is a humanist. He is found to be human since he gives the idea of a properly human measure between a rootedness in archaic ideals represented by Aeschylus and a move toward bathos, sentimentality, criticism and sophistry that Aristotle had already reproached Euripides with. I don't disagree with the notion that Sophocles is in that median position, but as far as finding in him some relationship to humanism is concerned, that would be to give a wholly new meaning to the word. As for us we consider ourselves to be at the end of the vein of humanist thought.⁷

For too long, Lacan argues, we have found in Greek tragedy's conflicts between agency and finitude a reaffirmation of humanity. Lacan, by contrast, "sees himself at the end of [this] vein" and instead wants to enlist Sophocles to what he saw as his decidedly *anti*-humanist project. Can

⁷ Lacan (1997) 273.

Lacan's avowed *anti*-humanist Sophocles offer us new insights into the question of the *post*-human? This paper takes the psychoanalytic reading of Greek tragedy as its focus and investigates ancient drama's own questioning of the human. If tragedy can challenge Jenkins's easy assimilation by showing us how we have *never* been human, does it also have the capacity to expose the limitations of the current posthuman turn?

5.2. Freud and the germ cell

In his *Introductory Lectures to Psychoanalysis* Freud talks about the three, so-called, "narcissistic wounds" that have been inflicted on humanity. The first blow to what Freud calls "the naïve self-love of men" was orchestrated by Copernicus, who made us realize that our earth "was not the centre of the universe but only a tiny fragment of a cosmic system of scarcely imaginable vastness."⁸ The second blow came with Darwin, who destroyed "man's supposedly privileged place in creation." The third, and what Freud calls "most wounding," blow was dealt by Freud himself, who revealed how the "ego is not a master in his own home." These three narcissistic wounds, these three blows, rupture the transhistoricism of humanism, alienating us from our history, our sense of place in the world, and from the ancients so often taken to be our forebears.

But for all the stress he places on this succession of revelations, Freud's account in the *Introductory Lectures* is not predicated on a chasm between antiquity and modernity. Speaking of the cosmological blow, Freud claims, "this is associated in our minds with the name of

⁸ Freud SE XVI, 285.

Copernicus, though something similar had already been asserted by Alexandrian science.”⁹ In a later reworking of this passage Freud pushes the discovery back still further to the “Pythagoreans” and declares: “Even the great discovery of Copernicus, therefore, had already been made before him.”¹⁰ Freud folds the pre-existence of cosmological theories in antiquity back into his general thesis about the vulnerability of mankind’s self-love. Copernicus was not a master in his own home and modernity, for all its rhetoric of progress, is not capable of keeping out the intrusion of antiquity.

Beyond the evident irony of Freud’s statements about the demise of narcissism being expressed in a passage replete with his own narcissism, what interests me is the way that Freud shines a spotlight on the ability of ideas from the ancient world to unsettle an account of the human. Psychoanalysis, as the site of a certain *posthumanism*, thus finds its source for critique in antiquity. Indeed it would not be difficult to make the case for Freud’s posthumanist credentials. His emphasis on sexuality presents man in his naked animality. More important still, in his foregrounding of the unconscious he threatened the site of human exceptionalism. In overthrowing the primacy of reason, Freud laid the ground for a different conception of life. Nowhere is this more evident than his discussion of the life and death instincts in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*:

The instincts which watch over the destinies of these elementary organisms that survive the whole individual, which provide them with a safe shelter while they are defenceless against the stimuli of the external world, which bring about their meeting with other germ-cells, and so on—these constitute the sexual instincts.

⁹ Freud SE XVI, 285.

¹⁰ Freud SE XVII, 140.

They are conservative in the same sense as the other instincts in that they bring back earlier states of living substance; but they are conservative to a higher degree in that they are particularly resistant to external influence; and they are conservative too in another sense in that they preserve life itself for a comparatively long period. They are the true life instincts. They operate against the purpose of the other instincts which, leads, by reason of their function, to death.¹¹

Freud's fundamental insight into the dynamics of existence is no philosophical exposition on human finitude, but the exploration of the instincts of a "germ cell." In choosing the "germ cell" as the object of analysis, Freud decidedly threatens the priority of human life with a focus on life as such, what we would now call vitalism. Indeed by analogizing the experience of human and primitive cellular life, Freud draws attention to what Jane Bennett has called the "vital materiality" of existence:

Vital materiality better captures an "alien" quality of our own flesh, and in so doing reminds humans of the very *radical* character of the (fractious) kinship between the human and the non-human. My "own" body is material, and yet this vital materiality is not fully or exclusively human. My flesh is populated and constituted by different swarms of foreigners. The crook of my elbow, for example, is "a special ecosystem, a bountiful home to no fewer than six tribes of bacteria" [Nicholas Wade]. The *its* outnumber the *mes*. In a world of vibrant matter, it is not enough to say that we are "embodied." We are, rather, *an array of bodies*, many different kinds of them in a nested set of microbiomes.¹²

¹¹ Freud SE XVIII, 40.

¹² Bennett (2010) 112–13.

Nevertheless, within several pages Freud's microbiome has ceded its place to a different account of vitality:

The germ-cells themselves would behave in a completely “narcissistic” fashion—to use a phrase that we are accustomed to use in neuroses to describe a whole individual who retains his libido in his ego and pays none of it out in object-cathexes. The germ-cells require their libido, the activity of their life instincts, for themselves, as a reserve against their later constructive activity. [. . .] In this way the libido of our sexual instincts would coincide with the Eros of the poets and the philosophers which holds all living things together.¹³

Changing the focus to the “whole individual,” Freud ascribes narcissism to his cells. Despite the cosmological force of Eros in a figure like Empedocles, it seems to me that in his reference to poets, Freud further transfers the discussion to a human, if not to say, *humanist* plane. The instincts of biological organisms give way to the poetic vocabulary of *Eros*. As Freud would write elsewhere of his adoption of the language of *eros*: “Anyone who considers sex as something mortifying and humiliating to human nature is at liberty to make use of the more genteel expressions “Eros” and “erotic”. I might have done so myself from the first and thus spared myself much opposition.”¹⁴ Freud's genteel Greek would seem to stand as the last defense of “the naïve self-love of man.”

But there is more at stake in the classical reference than a concession to gentility. Freud's classical vocabulary gestures towards a longer intellectual history. For despite Freud's denial of

¹³ Freud SE XVIII, 50.

¹⁴ Freud SE XVIII, 91.

influence, critics have detected a precursor to his life and death drives in another figure who would create his own posthuman antiquity:¹⁵

Their two deities of art, Apollo and Dionysos, provide the starting-point for our recognition that there exists in the world of the Greeks an enormous opposition, both in origin and goals, between the Apolline image-maker or sculptor and the imageless art of music, which is that of Dionysos. These two very different drives (*Triebe*) exist side by side, mostly in open conflict, stimulating and provoking (*reizen*) one another to give birth to ever-new, more vigorous offspring in whom they perpetuate the conflict inherent in the opposition between them, an opposition only apparently bridged by the common term “art”—until eventually, by a metaphysical miracle of the Hellenic “Will”, they appear paired and, in this pairing, finally engender a work of art which is Dionysiac and Apolline in equal measure: Attic tragedy.¹⁶

In designating the Apollonian and the Dionysian as *Triebe*, drives, Nietzsche lays the groundwork for *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.¹⁷ The resonance is perhaps at its strongest in his description of Apollo:

¹⁵ See, in particular, Gordon (2001) 55–71.

¹⁶ Nietzsche (1999) 14.

¹⁷ Freud notoriously denied the influence of Nietzsche on his thought. Both were influenced by Schopenhauer, whose tragic thought pervades both Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy* and Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. On the relationship to Schopenhauer and Nietzsche and the wider context of Freud’s “reluctant philosophy” see Tauber (2010<CE: Spelling mismatch in citation “Tauber 2010”. Please check>). ML Tauber is correct.

Thus in an eccentric sense, one could apply to Apollo what Schopenhauer says about human beings trapped in the veil of maya: “Just as the boatsman sits in his small boat, trusting his frail craft in a stormy sea that is boundless in every direction, rising and falling with the howling, mountainous waves, so in the midst of a world full of suffering and misery the individual man calmly sits supported by and trusting the *principium individuationis*.” (*World as Will and Representation*). Indeed one could say that Apollo is the most sublime expression of imperturbable trust in this principle and of the calm sitting-there of the person trapped within it; one might even describe Apollo as the magnificent divine image (*Götterbild*) of the *principium individuationis*, whose gestures and gaze speak to us of all the intense pleasure, wisdom and beauty of “semblance.”¹⁸

The image of Apollo calmly navigating the seas and preserving the individual from the onslaughts of the external world has a strong echo in Freud’s discussion of “elementary organisms.” In Freud’s hands, the *principium individuationis*, which Nietzsche identified with Apollo, becomes the pleasure principle. It is the life instinct which preserves the individual by providing a safe shelter from the onslaughts of an outside world. But these life instincts also conserve the individual against its *internal* destruction through death. Nietzsche’s Olympian duel between Apollo and Dionysus is transformed by Freud into a contest between *Eros* and *Thanatos*:

Our speculations have suggested that Eros operates from the beginning of life and appears as a “life instinct” in opposition to the “death instinct” which was brought into being by the coming to life of inorganic substance. These speculations seek to

¹⁸ Nietzsche (1999) 16–17.

solve the riddle of life by supposing that these two instincts were struggling with each other from the very first.¹⁹

In this conflict between different drives (*Triebe*), Freud envisions a bounded self in conflict not only with an external world but also with itself: “If we are to take it as a truth that knows no exception that everything dies for *internal* reasons—becomes inorganic once again—then we shall be compelled to say that ‘*the aim of all life is death*’.”²⁰

While Nietzsche populates his essay with Greeks, Freud’s text teems with primitive organisms. And yet, Freud would soon give a social context to the discussion of the death drive. In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud projects the struggle between *Eros* and *Thanatos* onto the screen of culture. Its core thesis about the origins of civilization in the sublimation of aggression restages at the societal level the conflict we previously witnessed at the microbiological level. Art, literature, music, even political organization, emerge as the by-products of the clash between *Eros* and *Thanatos*. If “art” is the term that bridges the conflict between Nietzsche’s Apollo and Dionysos, civilization is the remainder of the struggle between Freud’s life and death instincts. But there is one cultural by-product that retains a special place in his narrative:

The analogy between the process of civilisation and the path of the individual development may be extended in an important respect. [. . .] The super-ego of an epoch of civilisation has an origin similar to that of an individual. It is based on the impression left behind by personalities of great leaders—men of overwhelming force of mind or men in whom one of the human impulses has

¹⁹ Freud SE XVIII, 61.

²⁰ Freud SE XVIII, 38.

found its strongest and purest, and therefore often its most one-sided, expression. In many instances the analogy goes still further, in that during their lifetime these figures were—often enough, even if not always—mocked and maltreated by others even despatched in cruel fashion. In the same way, indeed, that the primal father did not attain divinity until long after he had met his death by violence. The most arresting example of this fateful conjunction is to be seen in the figure of Jesus Christ—if, indeed, that figure is not a part of mythology, which called it into being from an obscure memory of that primal event.²¹

Tragedy is the art form that best expresses the “epoch’s superego.” In the constant *va et vient* of destructive aggression and instinctual renunciation, civilizations restage the drama of the primal horde. Although it is Jesus Christ who is named here, know from *Totem and Taboo* that it is Oedipus who stands behind the mythology of the “primal event.” The great leader and his inevitable fall models the dynamics of civilization. Oedipus is the figure in whom *eros* and *thanatos* conjoin in the most dramatic fashion.

5.3. Oedipus and the death drive

But while *Civilisation and its Discontents* tracks the tragic dynamic of culture modeled on Oedipus, it is Freud’s self-appointed successor, Jacques Lacan, who will explicitly seal the relationship between Oedipus and the competing forces of the life and death drives.²² For Lacan it is Oedipus’ fate that illustrates how: “The human being himself is in part outside life, he

²¹ Freud SE XXI, 141–2.

²² See Razinksy (2013) 215.

partakes of the death instinct.”²³ While Freud had focused his discussion of Oedipus on Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Lacan argues that “Oedipus’s analysis is only completed at Colonus.”²⁴ In his return to Freud, Lacan reminds us:

Don’t forget that Oedipus’s unconscious is in fact that fundamental discourse which accounts for the fact that Oedipus’s history has for a long time, forever, been written, accounts for the fact that we know it, and for the fact that Oedipus is totally ignorant of it, despite his having been its plaything from the start.²⁵

Oedipus’ unconscious forms the central plank of Freud’s decentering of the human subject. By showing how the ego is not master in his own home, Freud reveals the fragility of individual consciousness and upends the enlightenment vision of Oedipus. As Shoshana Felman has shown, Freud’s Oedipus demonstrates to Lacan “that the unconscious is the discourse of the Other.” For, as he goes on to argue, “the unconscious is the subject unknown to the self, misapprehended, misrecognised by the ego.”²⁶ Lacan, however, reveals the centrality of death to Oedipus’ unconscious: “when we come to talk of death again, I will perhaps try and explain to you the end of Oedipus’ tragedy, as the great dramatists have portrayed it. You should read *Oedipus at Colonus* [. . .]. There you will discover that the final word of the relation of man to this discourse

²³ Lacan (1988) 90.

²⁴ Lacan (1988) 214.

²⁵ Lacan (1988) 209.

²⁶ Lacan (1978<CE: Reference “Lacan 1978” has not been provided in the Bibliography. Please check.>ML this should read as Lacan 1988) 59, in Shoshana Felman’s translation (1987) 129.

of which he is ignorant, is death.”²⁷ Lacan turns to a particular passage in Sophocles’ play to elucidate this declaration:

In *Oedipus at Colonus*, Oedipus says the following: *Am I made man in the moment when I cease to be?* That is the end of psychoanalysis—the psychoanalysis of Oedipus is only completed at Colonus, when he tears his face apart. That is the essential moment, which gives the story its meaning.²⁸

Oedipus’ question to Ismene, which might be translated more literally as “When I no longer exist, then I am a man?” (*O.C.* 393), unlocks the drama for Lacan.²⁹ In locating his identity as a man in the moment of his death, Oedipus reveals the identity of the subject in its own negation.

Oedipus becomes in Lacan’s terms “the subject beyond a subject.”³⁰ The story of Oedipus’ death at Colonus is exemplary for Lacan because it illustrates the entry of Oedipus into collective discourse *through his death*. This is the longer passage from the *O.C.* on which Lacan draws:

Oedipus What, had you come to hope that the gods would ever have concern enough for me to give me rescue?

Ismene Yes, that is my hope, father, from the present oracles.

Oedipus What are they? What has been prophesied, my child?

²⁷ Lacan (1988) 209.

²⁸ Lacan (1988) 214.

²⁹ As Simon Goldhill points out to me, Lacan misses the irony, or even the sarcasm, of Sophocles’ locution “ἄρ’”—“So when I’m dead, I finally get to be a mensch . . .”.

³⁰ Lacan (1988) 210.

Ismene That you will be desired some day, in life and death, by the men of that land, for their safety's sake.

Oedipus And who could profit from such a one as I?

Ismene Their power, it is said, proves to be in your hands.

Oedipus When I no longer exist, then I am a man?

Ismene Yes, for the gods now raise you up; but before they worked your ruin. (trans. R. Jebb)

Οἰδίπους: ἤδη γὰρ ἔσχεσ' ἐλπίδ' ὡς ἐμοῦ θεοῦς

ᾧραν τιν' ἔξειν, ὥστε σωθῆναι ποτε;

Ἰσμήνη: ἔγωγε τοῖς νῦν γ', ᾧ πάτερ, μαντεύμασιν.

Οἰδίπους: ποίοισι τούτοις; τί δὲ τεθέσπισται, τέκνον;

Ἰσμήνη: σὲ τοῖς ἐκεῖ ζητητὸν ἀνθρώποις ποτὲ

θανόντ' ἔσεσθαι ζῶντά τ' εὐσοίας χάριν.

Οἰδίπους: τίς δ' ἂν τοιοῦδ' ὑπ' ἀνδρὸς εὖ πράξειεν ἄν;

Ἰσμήνη: ἐν σοὶ τὰ κείνων φασὶ γίγνεσθαι κράτη.

Οἰδίπους: ὅτ' οὐκέτ' εἰμί, τηνικαῦτ' ἄρ' εἴμ' ἀνήρ;

Ἰσμήνη: νῦν γὰρ θεοὶ σ' ὀρθοῦσι, πρόσθε δ' ᾧλλυσαν.

(Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*, 385–94)

Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* recounts Oedipus' transition from transgressive individual and social pariah to symbol of collective safety. This transition crucially takes place at the moment of his death. By narrating Oedipus' metamorphosis from man to myth, Sophocles also narrates

Oedipus' entry into language. Lacan's aim in turning to Oedipus is to understand the relationship of the ego to discourse. The ego, he argues,

is caught in a chain of symbols. It is an element indispensable to the insertion of the symbolic reality into the reality of the subject, it is tied to the primitive gap of the subject. On account of that, in its original sense, within the psychological life of the human subject it is what appears as closest to, as most intimate with, as on closest terms with death.³¹

For Lacan, the ego is close to death because it exists as a nodal point between "the common discourse, in which the subject finds himself caught, alienated, and his psychological reality."³²

Lacan describes the splitting of the self that occurs when one learns to use (an) other's language. The entry into language is experienced by the subject as a form of death. Oedipus' death is thus crucial to understanding the nature of his fractured identity and a myth through which to understand our own.

Within this context, it is notable that the famous description of the *fort-da* game that sets the scene for *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*—that is the game in which the young child repeatedly throws his toy to the edge of the cot only to reel it back again—is analogized by Freud to the creation of tragedy:

Finally, a reminder may be added that the artistic play and artistic imitation carried out by adults, which unlike children's, are aimed at an audience, do not spare the spectators (for instance, in tragedy) the most painful experiences can yet

³¹ Lacan (1988) 210.

³² Lacan (1988) 210.

be felt by them as highly enjoyable. This is convincing proof that, even under the dominance of the pleasure principle, there are ways and means enough of making what is in itself unpleasurable into a subject to be recollected and worked over in the mind. The consideration of these cases and situations, which have a yield of pleasure as their final outcome, should be undertaken by some system of aesthetics with an economic approach to its subject matter. They are of no use for *our* purposes, since they presuppose the existence and dominance of the pleasure principle; they give no evidence of the operation of tendencies beyond the pleasure principle, that is, of tendencies more primitive than it and independent of it.³³

The “motive for play” that Freud identifies in his young grandson is paralleled by the urge for artistic imitation that persists into adulthood. Tragic poetry would in this sense be a form of repetition compulsion—or alternatively a therapeutic working through—which allowed the spectators to recuperate the “unpleasurable” content of the play in an act of pleasurable spectatorship. Tragedy on this analysis has nothing to do with the death drive because the painful experiences that the spectators witness are filtered through an Apollonian veil of aesthetic enjoyment. But as Lacan argues: “the significance of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is that that isn’t enough”:

What Freud’s primary masochism teaches us is that, when life has been dispossessed of its speech, its final word can only be the final malediction expressed at the end of *Oedipus at Colonus*. Life doesn’t want to be healed. The negative therapeutic reaction is fundamental to it. Anyway, what is healing? The

³³ Freud SE XVIII, 17.

realisation of the subject through a speech which comes from elsewhere. This life we're captive of, this essentially alienated life, ex-sisting, this life in the other, is as such joined to death, it always returns to death.³⁴

In turning to *Oedipus at Colonus*, Lacan questions Freud's understanding of tragedy. Analysing Oedipus through his end at Colonus reveals how tragedy cannot be contained by the pleasure principle. The real outcome of tragedy is not the life but the death instinct. As Shoshana Felman phrases it: "*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* stands to *The Interpretation of Dreams* (the work in which Freud narrates for the first time his discovery of the significance of *Oedipus the King*) in precisely the same relation in which *Oedipus at Colonus* stands to *Oedipus the King*."³⁵ In his recalibration of Freud, Lacan replaces the Oedipus of *eros* with the Oedipus of *thanatos*.

Nevertheless, while Lacan emphasizes the anti-humanism of tragedy by bringing the death drive to the fore, he obscures the posthumanist force of Freud's depersonalized drives. The death drive that Lacan envisions has a decidedly human form. Where Freud's discussion of drives derives some of its power from showing the human subject to extrahuman forces, Lacan in a sense repersonalizes these instincts in the move from *eros* to *thanatos*. In contradistinction to Freud, whose drives are common to all organisms from the germ cell upwards, so to speak, Lacan seems to assume that what is most human about us is our death. Indeed by aligning the divided subject of psychoanalysis to the death drive, does Lacan not run the risk of resurrecting a different kind of humanism?³⁶ Within contemporary theory, tragedy has repeatedly been invoked

³⁴ Lacan (1988) 232–3.

³⁵ Felman (1987) 138.

³⁶ Honig (2013) 38.

in the formulation of what Bonnie Honig has called a “mortalist humanism”: “Humanism,” she writes,

has in recent years been making a comeback; not the rationalist universalist variety discredited by post-structuralism and the horrific events of the twentieth century, but a newer variant. This humanism asserts that what is in common to humans is not rationality but the ontological fact of mortality, not the capacity to reason, but the vulnerability to suffering.³⁷

Should one understand Lacan as a mortalist humanist? Defined by our finitude and not by our desires, Lacan’s humans could be seen as bearers of a rather conventional and common humanity. But he will insist otherwise:

That is what life is—a detour, a dogged detour, in itself transitory and precarious, and deprived of any significance. Why, in that of its manifestations called man, does something happen, which insists throughout this life, which is called meaning? We call it *human*, but are we so sure? Is this meaning as human as all that? A meaning is an order, that is to say, a sudden emergence. A meaning is an order which suddenly emerges. A life insists on entering into it, but it expresses something which is perhaps completely beyond this life, since when we get to the root of this life, behind the drama of the passage into existence, we find nothing beyond life conjoined to death.³⁸

³⁷ Honig (2013) 17.

³⁸ Lacan (1988) 232.

The *precarious life* that Lacan describes is a life without significance. This is a life that can only be betrayed and split and never fulfilled by entry into the symbolic and into the world of signification. It is not a life given meaning by virtue of its precarity, but a life whose potential for meaning is negated by its *telos* in death. “The drama of the passage into existence” is completely overshadowed by the tragedy of death. Moreover, where mortalist humanism emphasizes *communality* as an essential component of human loss, the relationship of Lacan’s divided self to a community is much more circumspect. Nevertheless, both Lacan and Judith Butler, in her book *Precarious Life*, understand fragile lives as lives lived in common with others. For Lacan, as we saw, it is a subject’s entry into collective language that constitutes both her identity as a subject and her orientation towards death. Butler’s human vulnerability is a recognition of the necessity of intersubjectivity:

There is a more general conception of the human with which I am trying to work here, one in which we are, from the start, even prior to individuation itself and, by virtue of bodily requirements, given over to some set of primary others: this conception means that we are vulnerable to those we are too young to know and to judge and hence, vulnerable to violence; but also vulnerable to another range of touch, a range that includes the eradication of our being at the one end, and the physical support of our lives at the other.³⁹

Where Lacan emphasizes discourse as the site of primordial interdependence, Butler pays attention to the bodily needs which open us to others. Bonnie Honig has criticized Butler for failing to recognize a *third* possibility for human communality between “eradication” and “support.” She posits collective action as an alternative to the violence of sovereignty that both

³⁹ Butler (2004) 31.

Lacan and Butler reject for different reasons. “Action,” Honig argues, “. . . is a non-sovereign performance that works to reconstitute communities and inaugurates new realities. Action exposes us to mortality, we may die in action, after all; but it is not about grievability.”⁴⁰ By failing to recognize action, Butler, just like Lacan, subsumes “the drama of the passage into existence” to the tragedy of mourning. Yet, if both Lacan and Butler emphasize a life that “does not want to heal,” Lacan nevertheless acknowledges some agency—one might even say, some action in concert—involved in living such a life: “Anyway, what is healing? The realization of the subject through a speech which comes from elsewhere.”⁴¹

5.4. We have never been human

Tragedy, I want to argue, is this “speech which comes from elsewhere.” In his essay “And say the animal responded?”, Derrida takes Lacan to task for his failure to listen to a voice which comes from elsewhere—in this case the voice of the animal. Despite his desire to “subvert the subject,” Derrida exposes Lacan’s deafness to the language of what he calls the *ahuman*.⁴²

Language may come from the Other but this Other for Lacan is always an Other understood from the perspective of the human. Although Lacan thinks it is language as such that calls the human being into question, Derrida will argue that it his very emphasis on speech and language that is the site of Lacan’s anthropocentrism. He sees this dynamic played out in a quotation from

⁴⁰ Honig (2013) 43–4; Honig also configures this debate in terms of a conflict between ethics and politics (17–35). See also Leonard (2005).

⁴¹ Lacan (1988) 23.

⁴² Derrida (2003) 121.

Lacan's "The Direction of Treatment": "It must be posited that, produced as it is by any animal at the mercy of language [*en proie au langage*], man's desire is the desire of the Other."⁴³ As

Derrida reacts:

(This figure of prey symptomatically and recurrently characterizes "animal" obsession in Lacan at the very moment when he insists so strongly on dissociating the anthropological from the zoological; man is an animal but a speaking one, and he is less a beast of prey than a beast that is prey to language.) There is no desire, and thus no unconscious, except for the human.⁴⁴

Lacan's language may symptomatically fall prey to bestial figuration, but his theory of language nevertheless reaffirms the distinction *and* the hierarchy between human and animal. For Derrida, speech is what reintroduces the human back into Lacan's discourse. But does it matter what language Lacan speaks? When Lacan speaks Greek, when he speaks *tragic* Greek, is he speaking in a human language? In designating Greek tragedy as a "speech that comes from elsewhere," I want to argue that while Lacan himself seems to reinscribe the human, psychoanalysis in its engagement with tragedy could remain receptive if not to the animal, then, at least, to the posthuman. By this, I do not mean to imply that the Greeks were literally not humans, nor even that they did not have an interest in the human form: rather, I want to question what it is about the term human that supposedly gives us a connection to the Greeks? What, in other words, are the assumptions that lie behind Ian Jenkins's use of the phrase "we humans"? Far from investing in tragedy as a celebration of humanism, Freud and Lacan in their different ways turned to ancient drama to explore the problem of human life. Rather than finding a prototype for liberal

⁴³ Lacan (1977) 264.

⁴⁴ Derrida (2003) 122–3.

individualism, modernity has uncovered in tragedy a model of radical intersubjectivity—an intersubjectivity that repeatedly calls the human subject into question.⁴⁵ While in Lacan, this questioning of the subject remains ultimately anthropocentric, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud juxtaposes his discussion of the life and death instincts in “elementary organisms” to the tragic drama he sees enacted in his grandson’s *fort-da* game. By placing Greek tragedy’s confrontation with the death drive on a continuum with the instincts of a “germ-cell,” Freud’s text, and psychoanalysis more generally, offers a model for understanding antiquity’s contribution to posthumanism. In Freud’s reading of Greek tragedy the temporal dislocation of antiquity converges with a structural decentering of the human to deliver a wounding blow to the self-love of man.

But if tragedy, as I have implied, can show us how we have never been human, can it also expose some of the limitations of the posthuman as it is presently conceptualized? And if it is right to think of posthumanism as a reaction to the threat of climate change, can antiquity provide a resource which amounts to more than a nostalgic yearning for a preindustrial age? Posthumanism in its current guise seems to be beholden to a certain scientificity. It envisages our own culture as exceptional in its technological innovation and presents science in some senses as both the problem and the solution to the problem. Posthuman theorists thus waver between rethinking the human as either an animal or a cyborg—that is as either what lies outside or beyond the human in the natural world or as the product of human over-inventiveness. Greek tragedy, on the other hand, rejects the either/or logic of modernity and positions its human protagonists on a spectrum of sub- and supra-human possibility. In Vernant’s famous reading,

⁴⁵ See also Benjamin (2010) for a similar argument about the role of ancient tragedy and philosophy in continental philosophy.

Oedipus is *both* a *pharmakos*—a sacrificial animal—and a *tyrannos*—a divine king.⁴⁶ Contra Hegel, Oedipus, for Vernant, is never simply “man,” he is always at the same time more and less than human. But while there is, for sure, a hierarchy implied in this “more” and “less,” there is also a focus on the interconnectedness of these states of being. From the perspective of the gods, human life is no more exalted than animal life—indeed, Oedipus is destined to experience his life as if he were a beast. In fact, tragedy shows us that it is precisely when we think we are a god—or even a man—that we are exposed as a beast. The solution that tragedy suggests is not to go beyond man nor to double down on man but to hold on to all the human and non-human dimensions that tragedy risked exploring. The current posthuman turn is enthralled to science and its promise of rescue, but perhaps it can itself be rescued by this almost lost history of man—a history which sees man on a spectrum from the animal to the monstrous. This tragic history is available to be excavated from beneath the ongoing humanism of one posthumanist after another including Freud and Lacan. On this reading, Foucault may be right to say that “man is an invention of recent date.” For even if all those years ago Oedipus offered “man” as his answer to the riddle of the Sphinx, we all know how far that got him! Perhaps Sophocles is telling us that if we think man is the answer to the question of the animal, perhaps the animal is also part of the answer to the question of man.

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