

# Comparative Philosophies of Tragedy: Buddhism, Lacan, and Ashes of Time\*



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In the year 676 CE, on the eighth day of the first month of the Chinese calendar, a Buddhist priest named Yinzhong gave a lecture on the *Nirvān Sutra* at the Faxing Temple in Guangzhou. Suddenly, there rose a gust of wind, and the flag started swaying. One monk suggested: “The agitation of the wind!” Another monk remarked: “No, it’s the agitation of the flag.” Huineng, a monk of humble origin who later rose to prominence in the Buddhist tradition, interjected: “What is in agitation is neither the wind nor the flag, but the human heart” (*Yifa Pagoda Chronicles*). This is the quote Wong Kar-wai projected onto a background of rising and falling waves at the beginning of his film *Ashes of Time*.<sup>1</sup> The message is clear: what creates restlessness, what stirs motions and emotions in the universe, is desire. *Ashes of Time* is a film about desire and the memory it stirs, as well as the relationships of desire and memory to the tragic dimension of human existence. While Wong’s film displays a keen sensitivity to the Buddhist understanding of desire and pain, the final words of *Ashes of Time* embrace a perspective on existence which acknowledges, but ultimately departs from, this Buddhist wisdom. To analyze the role of desire and memory in

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relationship to tragedy in *Ashes of Time*, I will be comparing and contrasting insights from Buddhism and Lacan—two perspectives which display not only thematic but also historical continuities.<sup>2</sup>

The Buddhist notion of a cosmic will blindly struggling against itself is embodied by different characters throughout the film. In this paper, I will focus on the two protagonists, Huang Yaoshi and Ouyang Feng, nicknamed respectively Dongxie (“Perverse East”) and Xidu (“Malicious West”). Huang is deemed perverse because of his unconventional, Don Juan-type character. Ouyang is associated with malignity because he is consumed by envy, never having known happiness in life. Huang is a womanizer while Ouyang never makes advances towards any woman. Huang came from the East and Ouyang from the western outskirts of China. Despite these differences in character and in location, the two men fall in love with the same woman and meet the same fate—neither can touch her, and they both lose her forever when she passes away. Each learns in his own way the pain of desire through loving this woman. Each tries in his own way to deal with his anguish while she is still alive, and each finds a different response to suffering upon her death.

The woman beloved by the two men is from Ouyang’s birthplace—the White Camel Mountain. Admired by two men, the woman loves only Ouyang. Worried about being rejected, Ouyang sets his career above love and refuses to tell the woman that he loves her. Deeply hurt, the woman marries Ouyang’s brother to jilt him. Ouyang implores her to elope with him on her wedding night, only to be rejected. What he fears the most—rejection—is thus brought about by his own efforts to avoid rejection. Ouyang leaves and vows never to return to the White Camel Mountain.

Despite Huang’s affairs with different women, he never makes any advance on his dream woman. For him, the unattainable is the desirable. Because he truly loves this woman and because he wants to go on loving her, he refrains from approaching her sexually. However, because he loves her and wants to be around her, he obliges her request to visit Ouyang every year during the peach blossom season and bring her some news of him.

Finally, the woman passes away. Before she dies, she entrusts a bottle of Wine of Forgetfulness to Huang, asking him to give it to Ouyang so that he may forget her. Huang tastes the wine first, after which he forgets everything. The only vague memory he has is that he loves peach blossoms, and he retreats to an island populated with peach trees, calling himself Master of the Isle of Peach Blossoms.

At the news of the death of his beloved, Ouyang for the first (and the last) time tries the Wine of Forgetfulness, only to find that the more he wants to forget, the more he remembers. Interestingly enough, while his former memory prevents him from returning to his birthplace where his beloved resides, his attempt to deal with the painful experience—her death—allows him to relate to memory in a new way. The film ends with the transformation of memory from a punishing into a sustaining force that allows him to return to the White Camel Mountain.

### Desire Versus Need

The Huineng quote at the beginning of the film captures the restlessness that permeates the universe. Restless is the heart of every character, consumed as each is by desire. Desire is movement, and with motion and emotions, time comes into being.<sup>3</sup> Desire thus temporalizes human existence, giving rise to both expectation and memory. Desire can take the form of anticipation of a future when the desired object can be obtained. It can also reveal itself as memory—memory of an enticing object that is lost, and regrets over an unrealized vision of plenitude which possession of the desired object could have brought. As a result of this missed opportunity, all that remains is futile yearning—memories which are no more than ashes of time. But a drastic turn takes place toward the end of the film whereby the ashes of time takes on a new meaning. No longer merely a passive leftover from time, desire as well as the memory it stirs emerge together as a power that can reduce time to ashes. In Lacanian terms, the series of images generated by desire passively drifting through time finally gets “quilted” by a *point de capiton*—a “miraculous turn” whereby a supplementary signifier emerges as a point of reversal which retroactively changes the character of all previous signifiers into their opposite.<sup>4</sup> In order to elucidate how this turn comes about, let me first explain two different ways of desiring.

The pain arising from desire has to do with a lack suffered by a subject. For Buddhism, the answer to this pain is to understand that “the subject” is an illusion, and as such desire is also an illusion that one must forgo. Lacan, on the other hand, associates truth and ethics with a subject (\$) and an Other (Ø) as they are barred by desire. This contrast stems at least in part from the differing meanings of desire in Buddhism and Lacan. For Buddhism, desire designates all needs and wants arising from activities of the will. It is an all-embracing term

that includes not just desire but also the drive in Lacanian thought. The barred subject (\$) of Lacanian discourse can easily be confused with a mere craving and wanting individual if one overlooks the distinctions between the \$—that is, a *decompleted* subject—and a mere *incomplete* subject. Just as there are two kinds of lack—decompletion and incompleteness—there are also two ways of responding to lack. Only one of them can be called real desire according to Lacanian ethics.<sup>5</sup> In this paper, I will use the term “desire” in the Buddhist sense—desire as the general condition of lack suffered by all-willing sentient beings. I will reserve the term “real desire” to designate that which Lacan associates with truth and ethics.

The most common human response to a lack is to chase after the desired object. We might designate this as the case of an individual<sup>6</sup> “*driven* by desire.” At first sight, such an individual might look like an active subject, in that she is constantly taking action to obtain the desired object. In reality, however, she is merely a *reactive* being totally deprived of subject agency, in that her actions are merely reactions, dictated as they are by pulsation of neediness. This kind of desire is actually the individual’s own need in disguise.<sup>7</sup> This is false desire also for the following reason. Despite the fact that the subject in question here is lacking, his aim is the negation of his lack. The individual yearning for completion, like the infant rejoicing at the illusory image of its completion in the mirror, is operating in the register of the imaginary rather than that pertaining to desire.

By contrast, a real desiring subject accepts and *actively* assumes her lack as constitutive of human subjectivity. She desires absolutely an impossible object which is always already lost. Unlike the first kind of desire which uses the other to complete the self, the second kind of desire does not aim at self-satisfaction by appropriating the other or negating desire. By desiring the impossible, the subject accepts the impossibility of any project of “self-realization” and maintains a permanent openness to the other. For this reason, Lacan associates real desire with ethics.

Buddhism does not differentiate between the ways in which sentient beings suffer from the activities of their will, and hence it would treat the second kind of desire as equally illusory as the first. Lacan, on the other hand, associates the second kind of desire with truth and ethics. By actively choosing incompleteness, the real desiring subject becomes an agent rather than a victim; as such, she rises above pain. This is the case with Ouyang at the end of the film. Prior to the death of his beloved, he wants to block all memory of his beloved because

memory would only serve as a reminder that whatever is remembered is now lost. At the news of her departure from the world, his first impulse is to escape from this traumatic loss by drinking the Wine of Forgetfulness. When that effort fails, he begins to actively accept that his beloved is permanently gone. This active acceptance of loss transforms memory from a curse into a salvation. Formerly, memory would only remind him of what he no longer possessed. The relation of memory to loss is now turned around completely: "When you no longer possess something, what you can hold on to is your memory," reflects Ouyang.

### **The Avoidance of Desire**

From a Lacanian viewpoint, the first kind of "desire" cannot be called desire at all because it aims at the negation and avoidance of desire. The individual concerned desperately seeks release from this pain either by trying to catch her desired object or by denying her need. It is precisely in trying to get rid of this pain, however, that she becomes trapped in pain. The reason is that "lack" is constitutive of the human condition. Desire can never be satisfied, and the satisfaction of one need will soon give rise to another need. Nor can this lack be denied: repressed needs will only return to haunt the individual with doubly intense pain. These are the respective situations in which Huang and Ouyang find themselves in their initial attempts to avoid desire. Buddhism and Lacan are unanimous in finding such imaginary desire problematic. This is precisely what both Ouyang and Huang are guilty of before the death of their beloved turns their love object into an impossible object.

For most of the film, Ouyang tries to avoid desire by convincing himself and his beloved that he is autonomous and has no need for love. In other words, he tries to declare himself as free from desire. Huang uses a very different strategy. He keeps seducing women. At first sight, Huang looks like someone totally abandoned to desire. A closer reading, however, reveals that Huang is perpetually seeking an object to complete himself and thereby to negate desire. Instead of actively assuming lack as constitutive of his subjectivity, Huang is constantly on the run from real desire.

The two protagonists' inability to face their real desire is also evident in their attempts to get rid of memory—that is, memory of the good object which stirs their desire. To escape from memory, Ouyang leaves his birthplace where his beloved also resides. Huang, for his part,

resorts to the Wine of Forgetfulness. Instead of allowing himself to be decompleted by memory of the good object he can never possess, Huang tries to restore himself as a full subject (S) with a magical wine which can erase the past and leave open only the future. The wine promises to wipe out the irrevocable past and enable in its stead a future of possibilities. Living “every day as a new beginning,” Huang seeks to be rid of the pain associated with the impossible Dream Woman by substituting in its place a multitude of *possible* women.

Despite these endeavors, neither protagonist succeeds in avoiding desire. Neither of them can give up their object of desire. Although both seek to cut themselves off from the past, both keep returning to the past and to (memories of) their ideal woman. Ouyang insists that “the best way to preempt rejection is to reject others.” Notwithstanding Ouyang’s efforts to cut all ties from the object of his desire, every woman who stirs his fancy immediately arouses memories of his beloved. He cannot help but think of his sister-in-law in response to Murong’s caresses, and an image of her again surges up in his mind as he watches the girl waiting stubbornly for someone to help avenge her brother. Huang’s attempts to avoid desire equally fail. His series of new loves provides no answer to his disquietude. By indulging in endless flirtations, he seeks temporary obliviousness to his unalterable predicament, only to be confronted later with redoubled intensity by the ever-present menace of a deeper split in his subjectivity which can never be healed. As it is, no matter how many “new starts” Huang makes, no woman can ever fulfill his needs. He keeps returning to visit his dream woman—and this despite the painful awareness that he can never touch her.

### **Desire and Pain**

If Ouyang’s strategy looks like a gesture of bad faith, Huang’s tactic seems doomed to failure be it considered from a Buddhist or Lacanian standpoint.

#### ***1. The Other is Barred: The Subject Cannot be Completed by the Other:***

In Lacanian terms, there is no big Other who can provide all the answers to one’s problems and take away the split from one’s subjectivity.

##### *a. The objet a Resists Positivization*

The cause of desire is the *objet a*, not any *object* in the phenomenal world.<sup>8</sup> Desire can never be satisfied because desire is not a relation

to an *object* but a relation to a gap—and this gap is the *objet a*. The *objet a* can never be positivized, externalized, objectivized, or secured. “True love” cannot be possessed because the true cause of human desire is the unobtainable *objet a* rather than the spurious *objects* and phony substitutes that stand in for it.<sup>9</sup> Huang’s attempt to find love with one woman after another is a doomed project, because it is precisely when the object is obtained that the *objet a* is not obtainable. As Lacan observes, “it is precisely because desire is articulated that it is not articulable” (*Écrits* 302/804).

*b. “There is No Relation between the Sexes”<sup>10</sup>*

The desire for completion is perhaps the most strongly expressed in relations between sexes. Unfortunately, given that the *objet a*, rather than any particular object, is the cause of desire, the subject can never find in her partner what is needed to complete herself. The lover seeks what she lacks in the beloved, but—as Lacan explains in *Seminar VIII*—“what the one lacks is not what is hidden within the other.” In the same seminar, Lacan uses expressions such as “disparity” and “*imparité*” to describe the fundamental impossibility of relationships between lovers.

Confronted by the brutal reality that the perfect object is unobtainable, Huang resorts to a few strategies. With regard to the one woman he loves, he finds consolation in reversing “the desirable is unobtainable” into “that which is unobtainable is desirable,” thereby disguising the impossible object<sup>11</sup> as something he chooses to keep at bay. At the same time, he keeps chasing one substitute object after another. But then, once an object comes within reach, he becomes immediately disillusioned and moves on to another.

From a Buddhist viewpoint, unenlightened humanity does not understand that both the desiring subject and the desired object are as imaginary, illusory, and void of substance as “flowers in the mirror, and the moon in the water.”<sup>12</sup> Lacan has a more elaborate theory on the imaginary dimension of conventional love relationships. For Lacan, human beings have the propensity to willfully imagine love as a mutually complementary relationship in order to conceal the traumatic dimension of desire. People insist on finding their “perfect partner,” but they keep running up against disappointment, shifting from one object to another. Love as an illusory escape from desire masks the fact that no one can ever become “the proper object” for another, and that as divided subjects (\$), human beings are doomed to ignorance not only of the desire of the other but also that of

one's own. The uncanniness or otherness of desire divides one from oneself and as such condemns one to the demand for an impossible love. Huang's withholding of himself from his dream woman and his dissolute relationships with all other women are two sides of the same coin: both illustrative of human beings' doomed attempts to cover the impossibility of relation between the sexes.

## 2. *Impermanence*

Desire temporalizes human existence. The very nature of desire is time. In other words, where there is desire, there can be no permanence.

Let me begin with the desiring "subject."<sup>13</sup> Given that the *objet a* is unobtainable and that there is no relation between the sexes, the lack associated with desire can never be appeased. According to Buddhism, which associates desire with all needs and wants arising from the activity of the will, desire traps human beings in a condition alternating between pain and boredom. Desire unsatisfied causes tremendous pain. But once satisfied, it would only lead to boredom. Following boredom, a new desire for a new object arises. This way, the whole cycle of pain and boredom replays itself over and over again. The "subject" thus remains always in flux.

Yet impermanence characterizes not just the lover but also the beloved. Even if a big Other who can fully satisfy the lover can be found, death is inevitable. The big Other whom one has been hypostatizing can suddenly vanish into nothingness. Hence Lacan's famous observation: "The big Other doesn't exist." Even if the beloved is a perfect fit for the lover, death bars both the big Other and the subject. It is the ultimate reminder that both are destined to be incomplete.

According to Buddhism, suffering (*dukkha*) arises from the causal chain comprised of ignorance (*avidya*), desire (*kama*), and action (*karma*). We desire sense pleasures in our ignorance of the fact that all is impermanent. Devoid of any ultimate reality, phenomenal existence is merely a conglomeration of mental constructs. Unenlightened humanity is a blind will ignorant of its illusions. It continues to attach itself to, and strive for, things subject to change and decay. This way, it gets caught in cycles of endless striving, eternal becoming, and perpetual self-objectification. Desire and unfulfillment get locked into a vicious cycle that feeds *karma*, leading to continual rebirth.<sup>14</sup> This is how desire enslaves benighted humanity to the cycle of time.

"All (existence) is suffering," says the first of the Four Noble Truths. To act is to suffer, to love is to suffer, to will is to suffer. The characters

in Wong's film are symbolic of humanity, which continues to desire completion even though desire by default renders self-completion an impossible project. As desiring beings, the characters in the film are all condemned to the same fate: unrequited love and unfulfilled passion. Huang and Ouyang respond to the resulting pain and disappointment in a manner characteristic of humanity: fantasy. Huang fantasizes that one day he will find his dream woman among all women while Ouyang fantasizes that he is self-sufficient with no need for love. Fantasy is anything but a Buddhist awakening to the vanity of human passion and aspiration. And indeed, fantasy fails both Huang and Ouyang when they are confronted with the stark reality of their beloved's mortality.

The film is for the most part the story of unenlightened humanity: of people's endless craving and wasted desire. It is a story of human existence as a life of want, of pain and suffering, until all is reduced to the ashes of time. This is one dimension of tragedy—the dimension that pertains to the consciousness of the vanity of human existence, referred to since Miguel de Unamuno as “the tragic sense of life.” This is also the dimension of tragedy that Buddhism emphasizes. Yet another dimension of tragedy emerges near the end of the film when the tragic hero actively assumes the inadequacies inherent to the human condition and thereby rises above the tragic sense of life.

### **Salvation**

Both Buddhism and Lacan see the ego as the cause of various forms of human malady. They differ in their positions regarding the relations between the *objet a* and desire. From the perspective of Buddhism, the *objet a* and desire would look like products of the will-to-become (*bhava-tanha*), as manifested in humanity's tendency to get caught up in the world with its passions and strivings. Unlike Lacan, ultimate wisdom for Buddhism resides in transcending not only the ego but also desire.

#### ***1. The Buddhist Answer***

As discussed above, the longing for a big Other to complete oneself is reactive. Since the craving individual cannot stand on her own, the impermanence of the Other inevitably induces a form of impermanence in oneself also. This latter kind of impermanence expresses itself as a never-ending and incessant restlessness of the cycle of birth

and death (*samsāra*). As Joan Stambaugh points out, “it is the inability to achieve rest or finality which characterizes the so-called finitude of existence” (132).

Since human suffering is intertwined with time, all attempts to overcome pain and death by means and methods which are themselves time-bound are destined to failure. Puligandla observes: “It is only through knowledge that transcends everything which is characteristic of existence in time and which provides the insight into the ground of time-bound existence itself that man can conquer suffering, fear of death, and death itself and thereby attain immortality” (Puligandla, “Time and History” 168). This liberating knowledge of the fundamental emptiness (*śūnyatā*) underlying all existence “is what constitutes *nirvāna*—the release from the pain and suffering of time-bound existence” (Puligandla, “Time and History” 168). Given that desire for the impermanent gives rise to action (*karma*) which in turn causes further existence, it is sufficient to forgo desire in order to neutralize action and future pain.

#### a. Buddhist Forgiveness and Nirvāna

Instead of being crushed by the knowledge of the non-existence of both the subject and the other, Buddhism moves beyond the pain of existence by “forgiving” fantasy and the human condition. By *for-giving*<sup>15</sup> desire and suffering—that is, by *letting go* of desire and suffering—one becomes liberated from both. To forget desire, rather than to forgive it, would be merely to repress desire, which Buddhism does not counsel. Repression, an action (*karma*) in itself, would only bring about the return of repressed desire (*kama*), and thus the *karma* would never end. Forgiveness, on the other hand, is founded on letting go. The word “forgive” in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is defined as “giv[ing] up” one’s own resentment or claim, rather than the giving of a gift to another, the latter being popularized by Derrida’s reading of the word.<sup>16</sup> By underscoring the relationship of “*vergeben*” to “*Gabe*” without simultaneously foregrounding the inversion effected by “*ver-*,” and likewise of “forgive” to “gift” without stressing the negation performed by “*for-*,” Derrida’s ethics of forgiveness risks reinforcing the tendency of modern Western ethics to *prioritize action and, by implication, its subject*.<sup>17</sup> In contrast, the primary basis of forgiveness in Buddhism is the *forgoing of action and its agent*. Derrida’s reading predicates forgiveness on *oneself* giving, Buddhism on *giving up oneself*. The former still claims ownership to the act of giving, the latter gives up on own-

ership altogether.<sup>18</sup> It is interesting that even Western semantics bear out this Buddhist insight of “letting go” as the primary foundation of forgiveness.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* also points out an earlier usage of “forgive” meaning “to give up one’s resolve (*to do something*).” It is precisely in this sense of the forgoing of passion and action—that is, the giving up of one’s self—that renders Buddhism a praxis of forgiveness and of *nirvāna*. *Nirvāna* is forgiveness. It is only when one realizes the self as a foolish fancy and forgoes all passions and claims that one can be liberated from being reborn again and again. *Nirvāna* can be achieved neither by indulging in, nor by condemning, desire. It can only be arrived at by forgiving desire. To condemn desire is still to give power to desire, condemnation being a *reaction* to something that disturbs one’s composure.

Through forgiveness (rather than forgetfulness), Buddhism moves beyond blind, self-destructive desire. Through forgiveness, Buddhism liberates human being beyond the human wheel—beyond its perpetual revolution around the *objet a*. The state of *nirvāna* is reached “when a saint (*arhat*), by uprooting craving eliminates the fuel on which the flames feed, thereby achieving a state in which [one] will be reborn no more” (Smart, “Nirvāna” 517). In *nirvāna*, one is “completely free from all forms of bondage and attachment, having overcome and removed the cause of suffering. It is also the state of perfect insight into the nature of existence” (Puligandla, *Indian Philosophy* 58).

Note that all kinds of liberation associated with *nirvāna* can ultimately be traced back to liberation from the self, which is why the negation of self-asserting desire is called “no-self” or “I-negation” (*anatta*) in Buddhist ethics. All kinds of forgiveness, as explained before, are based on a forgoing of the self. The self originates from the will-to-become (*bhava-tanha*),<sup>19</sup> hence liberation takes the form of going beyond and transcending this will.

Interesting to note here is a major difference between Buddhism and Western thinking—a difference that ultimately bears on some significant divergences between Buddhism and Lacan. Contrary to most Western thinkers who locate the core of freedom in the subject-agent, Buddhism regards the self as the source of unfreedom. This East-West contrast looks especially intense if one uses the Anglo-American model as the primary example of the Western paradigm. The Anglo-American tradition has mainly followed Hobbes’s definition of freedom as “absence of external Impediments” (189). While Anglo-American thinkers tend to hold the view that unfreedom originates

from the outside, Buddhism believes that it is the self that prevents one from being free.

As a subversive thinker in the West and as someone with great respect for Buddhist and Daoist thinking, Lacan studies closely the unfreedom that originates from obsession with the self. Like Buddhism, Lacan traces human sufferings to attachment to the ego. While Lacan problematizes the ego and the full subject, he is nonetheless distinct from Buddhism in his acceptance and even insistence on the split subject (\$) as the locus of ethics. Like his predecessor, Freud, Lacan regards the elimination of the subject as highly dangerous. This is obvious in his criticism of political and religious mysticism, some traces of which he detects in “the oceanic feeling” described in *Civilization and its Discontents*. In contrast to Lacan, Buddhism would regard both the \$ and the S as illusions and the cause of human suffering. For Buddhism, there is no subject in the first place. Accordingly, one must ask: whence comes the barred subject except through illusion?

The implication of this difference between Buddhism and Lacan goes deeper. As a state liberated from the self, *nirvāna* is necessarily a state beyond both desire and drive, beyond both the *objet a* and time. Forgoing the self entails giving up the *objet a* and time. This is because both the *objet a* and time are not external to the self; rather, they arise from one’s lack. The object cause of desire is internal rather than external to oneself, which is why no particular object can appease it. Likewise, time is movement arising from desire. As such, giving up the self necessarily means transcending both the *objet a* and time. Thus *nirvāna*, rising above desire, is timeless.

Contrary to Lacan, Buddhism would deem the *objet a* to be subject to temporality (*kāla*) and is thus impermanent, the reason being that impermanence permeates desire and the desiring self. For this reason, the *objet a* also needs to be transcended also, because that which is generated within time will itself be reduced to ashes *in* time. To give *in* to the *objet a* would only mean giving the last word to time in the (*a*)shes of time. A Buddhist form of “desublimation”<sup>20</sup>—the recognition of both the *a* and time as phantoms of blind human wills that can consummate themselves only by consuming themselves to ashes—seeks to offer a way of transcending (instead of merely traversing) fantasy<sup>21</sup> and the pain of existence.

This is a position Lacan cannot accept. For Lacan, what is caught within time is the *object* and not the *objet a*. The object can die, but not the *objet a*.<sup>22</sup> The (*a*) is not subject to temporalization, the exemplary

case being that love abides beyond the ravages of time. In *Ashes of Time*, the woman beloved by both protagonists passes away, but she as the *objet a* remains and continues to affect their existence. The fact that love subsists beyond the aging and mortality of the beloved well illustrates the *insistence* of (*a*) against time.<sup>23</sup> The *core* of fantasy persists beyond time—its allure immune to wears and tears. This happens despite, and also precisely because of, the fact that the promise held out by the *objet a* never was, cannot be, and never will be realized. The *objet a* resists the restricted economy of time through which a currently absent object can be made present in the future. The *a* cannot be recaptured in, or through, time. On the contrary, time is captured by the *objet a*, expressed by the fact that desire—associated with movement and time—revolves around its cause. Moreover, time is not only captured by the *objet a* in that its movement has to obey the dictate of the object cause of desire. Time is also arrested by the *objet a*—in other words, the *a* seems to hold time still—in the sense that time fails to erode the allure of the unknowable (*a*), or heal the wound, the anguish, and the lack created by the *objet a*.

In light of this, we might appropriately call the film “(*a*)shes of time,”<sup>24</sup> which brings the (*a*) together with time in an agonistic relationship and problematizes a premature elevation of either the *objet a* or time. On the one hand, since the *objet a* is internal to the desiring subject, which itself partakes of the temporal cycle of birth and death, it seems inconceivable that the *objet a* can escape impermanence. On the other hand, (*a*)shes of time reveal the (*a*) as an irreducible remainder left over from time—an (*a*) which cannot be captured and domesticated by time. To explore this tension between the (*a*) and time in Wong’s film, it is necessary to turn to the topic of memory. Memory is not just one existential expression of time. It is also an articulation of desire. Obviously, what animates memory is the *objet a*. One remembers an object not because of the object, but because of the way it is libidinally cathected.

The Buddhist forgoing of the self, of desire, and of time naturally means letting go of memory also, memory being itself a product of desire and a karmic residue. Focusing on Huang and Ouyang’s transformed relationship to memory toward the end of the film, I will explicate how *Ashes of Time*, which begins with a Buddhist aphorism, ends with a solution outside traditional Buddhist wisdom.

## 2. *The Lacanian Answer*

The deepest anguish over the vanity of human passion is crystallized by the death of the woman loved by both Ouyang and Huang. Death mocks the futility of all longing and striving, and reduces both the object of desire and desire itself to ashes of time. Despite the fact that both Huang and Ouyang have been coping with the loss of their dream woman while she is still alive, it is when she dies that the loss becomes concrete and final. Now that she is dead, the woman lingers in their minds, only as a painful reminder that she is completely and forever beyond their reach. Death confronts them with the definitive reality of the vanity of desire as well as the impossibility of love, of mutual complementariness, and of relation between the sexes.

While she is still alive, the two protagonists already resort to different strategies to avoid confronting their real desire. This avoidance is at its most acute when news of her death first arrives. Both try to get her out of their minds by drinking the Wine of Forgetfulness. However, just when one is about to accept that both the *objet a* and time are doomed to turn into ashes, a surprising turn takes place. Neither the (*a*) nor time crumbles away as mere illusion—as “ashes”—at the end of the film. Instead, because of the insistence of the (*a*), the “(*a*)shes of time” can never be reduced to mere “ashes of time.” Both the *objet a* and time are forgiven toward the end of the film by Ouyang Feng—the narrator and the true protagonist of the film—but they are forgiven in a manner different from that of Buddhism.

In response to this indescribable pain, Huang and Ouyang each find his own solution: Huang resorts to a “forgetting-remembering,” Ouyang to a “forgiving-remembering.” Huang liberates himself from pain by withdrawing from memory and from the human world—a choice that seems to recall the Buddhist practice of detaching oneself from the phenomenal world. But there is a twist: in his forgetting is some kind of remembering. Ouyang, on the other hand, overcomes the pain of loss precisely by holding on to memory. Memory is a reminder that what is remembered is already lost, yet the object can never really be lost precisely because there is memory. Memory, which begins by trapping Ouyang in his traumatic loss, ends up liberating him from loss.

The two protagonists’ divergent characters and temperaments are also reflected in their differing responses to the same problem. In order to rid himself of the burden of the past, in order that everyday can be a new beginning, Huang drinks the Wine of Forgetfulness and

forgets most of what happened before. By rejecting memory, Huang frees himself from his enslavement to time. The past ceases to have any power over him, which leaves him “master” of the present. Time thus crumples into ashes for the “new” Huang. But what about the *objet a* which supposedly transcends time? Does Huang manage to free himself from it also?

In the midst of Huang’s oblivion, one sensation remains: his love for peach blossoms. He delights in them so much that he retreats to an island of peach blossoms and calls himself the Lord of the Isle of Peach Blossoms. What has been obliterated from his consciousness was the source of his fantasy for peach blossoms: peach blossoms are associated with the one woman he truly loves. Every year when the peach blossoms bloomed, she would send Huang to visit Ouyang so that he could bring back the latest news of her true love. Seeing peach blossoms means that he can see her again, that he can once again be close to his love.

Through this reconfiguration of fantasy, Huang is able to get over the loss of his object of desire by connecting himself instead to the object cause of desire—that is, the *a*. In other words, Huang neither treads the Buddhist path of transcending desire altogether, nor does he commit a gesture of bad faith by escaping from desire. Rather, his forgetting contains a form of remembering: having forgotten the woman whom he desperately desired, her image nonetheless remains with him in spirit—even though the “original” image has been replaced metonymically by peach blossoms.

Despite this insight, the last words of the film are given to Ouyang, the true protagonist and also the narrator of the story. Like Huang, Ouyang at first also tries to conquer pain by drinking the Wine of Forgetfulness. However, unlike Huang, Ouyang reacts in the opposite way to the wine. “The Wine of Forgetfulness was only a joke,” laments Ouyang. “The more one wants to forget, the more clearly one remembers.”

Up to this point, Ouyang cannot help but be haunted by the past. A person who is haunted becomes paralyzed in the sense that she cannot live in the present. Her existence is dragged back into the past by ghosts which erupt into the present. That is to say, a person haunted can only *react* to the past, and as such is incapable of *acting* in the present. In order not to allow the present to be drowned by the past—in order to live again—a person must dispossess the ghosts of their claims on the living present.

Failing to destroy the ghost of the past with the Wine of Forgetfulness, Ouyang develops a new relationship to memory. Prior to the death of his beloved, memory of loss and rejection prevents Ouyang from returning home in the White Camel Mountain. The feeling of remorse and destitution becomes most acute when he receives news of her death—but it is precisely at this moment that Ouyang re-cognizes memory as a blessing rather than a curse. Before, memory always reminds him of his irretrievable loss and wounded pride, and he tries to deny memory by imagining himself to be an autonomous individual without any need for anyone. Significantly, it is when Ouyang can no longer escape the decompletion of the big Other and himself that his imagined completeness is disrupted. Only with the acceptance of his desire as intrinsic and unique to his subjectivity can Ouyang attain true separation from, and real defiance of, any external object's power to hold sway over him. In other words, only when he fully accepts incompleteness as intrinsic to human existence can he become *active rather than reactive*, evident in the way Ouyang gains his liberation from the vengeful spirits of desire and time by becoming reconciled to them and to himself: "When you no longer possess something, what you can hold on to is your memory." With this understanding, Ouyang *turns his reactive relationship into an active relationship to desire*.<sup>25</sup> With the subject's acceptance of pain, pain loses its power over the subject.<sup>26</sup>

By *forgiving* memory and reconciling himself to it, Ouyang gains the courage to return to the White Camel Mountain. Even though his beloved is no longer alive, Ouyang finally makes peace with her by making peace with the place he associates with her. Now stripped of its fury, memory becomes a source of sustenance from which he can draw meaning for his existence. The traversal of fantasy transforms Ouyang from a man paralyzed by negative thoughts into a man of action, and he is to emerge eventually as the Lord of the West.

This is to say, memory has two faces. On the one hand, memory signifies that all is lost, since what exists in memory is a past that no longer has any reality. To indulge in memory is to chase after illusions. On the other hand, memory also signifies that all is not lost, since memory preserves in our inner consciousness things that are subject to decay in the external world. What is doomed to mutability in the material world can be preserved forever in our hearts and minds through time. Memory, itself a product of time, can thus help us conquer time. While memory is, on the one hand, mere ashes and leftovers from time, it has on the other hand the power to reduce time

to ashes by way of the *other* path of the genitive: the ashes of time are also its own.<sup>27</sup> The phrase “ashes of time” thus refers to two signifieds at one and the same time.

To valorize memory as a way to “possess to eternity” goes against the Buddhist cultivation of non-attachment to things—a non-attachment arising from the understanding that all is impermanent, that the phenomenal world is ultimately nothingness, and that conceptual constructs are in the end devoid of any significance. Ouyang’s decision strikes out a path different from Buddhist wisdom. All phenomenal objects being transient, he now seeks permanence not in the outside world but in his “own” inner consciousness—that is, in memory. *So long as he lives and loves, his beloved will never die.* She is, and will remain, coextensive with his existence.

Ouyang’s new realization, however, is subject to another challenge. One of the characteristics attributed by the Buddha to the individual is *anatta*—the no-self doctrine which “implies both that living beings have no eternal souls and that there is no cosmic Self” (Smart, “Buddhism” 417). Just at the point when memory seems to have conquered time by eternalizing an external object in one’s inner consciousness, the permanence of that inner consciousness is itself put into question. From a Buddhist perspective, unenlightened beings suffer, and are continually reborn into cycles of suffering, precisely because they cannot get over attachment to the ephemeral—including attachment to the self and to one’s inner consciousness. Ouyang’s embrace of memory as something he can “possess,” from this point of view, is to court disaster in a universe where nothing—including memory and desire—has any real substance. Ouyang seems to be committing the four conceptual perversions or reversals underlying human delusion as described by the *Mahāyāna* texts: “(1) seeing a self in what lacks self; (2) seeing permanence in the impermanent; (3) seeing happiness in what is suffering; and (4) seeing purity in the impure” (Lusthaus 84).

Yet memory cannot be so easily reduced to a mere temporal expression of desire. No doubt, memory can be viewed as a manifestation of desire in time: one remembers because one desires. The temporal dimension of memory is evident in how desire from the past insists in the present. The movement created by desire is also experienced in terms of time—as when one remembers how an object of desire was forbidden in the past and as one strives for a future in which this object can be obtained. Hence memory seems to be created by desire and its temporalization of human existence. However, memory

is a highly ambiguous expression of the human will, and it bears a double, rather than single, relation to desire and time. On the one hand, memory is a commemoration of desire, and thus a celebration of unenlightened humanity's craving for the impermanent. At one and the same time, however, memory arrests desire into stillness. Ouyang gives himself over to memory, precisely because memory is more than a one-dimensional spiritual capacity. His awareness of memory as a double-edged weapon renders his embrace of memory a tragic heroic gesture. His resolution to embrace memory in its permanence-impermanence reminds us of, and helps elucidate, the ambiguous injunction of the ethics of Lacanian psychoanalysis. At the conclusion of his *Ethics Seminar*, Lacan gives us not an imperative command but a twice-repeated statement that the only thing one can be truly guilty of is to have "*céder sur son désir*." Samuel Weber rightly insists on the paradox of this French formulation:

"*Céder sur son désir*" can mean not just "give way on" one's desire but also to "give way to it." And in a certain sense, the two are difficult to distinguish, given the essential heterogeneity of desire itself. For how can one give way on a desire that is, in essence, the desire of the Other? Or rather, is not giving *way on* it also giving *way to* it? To give way to the desire of *another* is to give away desire *as one's own*. If there is a solution of such a paradox, it can only be in its "proper articulation," as Lacan puts it, of the *way* itself, which grafts the two ways *on-to* one another, making way for the double, or divided notion of *giving way on-to one's desire*. (142)

The ethical relationship to desire is marked by a split from within, precisely because desire is always already heterogeneous to itself. Desire, as the desire of the Other, always involves betrayal of both the subject and the Other. Thus for Lacan, "it is precisely because desire is articulated that it is not articulable" (*Écrits* 302). To "give way on-to desire" creates a similar dilemma for the subject, since "*céder sur son désir*"

is always accompanied in the destiny of the subject by some betrayal. . . . Either the subject betrays his own way, betrays himself, and the result is significant for him, or, more simply, he tolerates the fact that someone with whom he has more or less vowed to do something betrays his hope and doesn't do for him what their pact entailed. (*Ethics* 321)

The slipperiness of desire renders necessary a double-reckoning—a unique insight that Lacan provides us in the field of psychoanalysis.<sup>28</sup> Memory, by both commemorating and arresting desire, is a way of not

“giving way on-to” desire—of not “giving way on-to” the impermanent in the permanent and the permanent in the impermanent.

Ouyang shares with Lacan’s tragic heroine Antigone one characteristic. Both go beyond the limit and confront directly the *objet a*. As such, neither Ouyang nor Antigone has any more illusions about life. Instead of rejecting desire altogether, however, both end up embracing the object cause of desire without succumbing to desire. Thus they both succeed in not “giving way on-to” desire.

*a. Tragedy and the Ethics of “ne pas céder sur son désir”*

At first sight, it seems that both Huang and Ouyang have failed in their responses. Whether withdrawing into seclusion like Huang or returning to the human world like Ouyang, neither can ever have the woman he loves. So what’s the point for Huang to continue to love peach blossoms and for Ouyang to cherish his memory? In either case, each man’s object of desire is already gone, and what he has—peach blossoms or memory—seems a poor substitute. Yet sublimated into aesthetic contemplation or memory, desire has lost its power to inflict pain. It becomes, rather, a nurturing power, and both Huang and Ouyang eventually find contentment in life.

In psychoanalytic terms, desire as Buddhism understands it has lost its power to inflict pain on Huang and Ouyang toward the end of the film because the drive which once invested their passion has been tamed and transformed. What used to be the complete big Other—the woman who seemed to promise ultimate salvation to their lives—has become a barred Other, which is why Huang and Ouyang are both content to accept “substitutes” rather than chasing after a perfect Other in futility and agony.<sup>29</sup> The subjects themselves—both Huang and Ouyang—have also lost their arrogance and become split subjects. This is evident from the way Huang no longer indulges in making himself the man desired by all women. As for Ouyang, while pride had once prevented him from returning to the White Camel Mountain—associated with his rejection by his beloved—he is now able to return to his previous home and embrace the memory of his relationship with his late sister-in-law in all its dimensions—memory of both happiness and pain, of both sweetness and humiliations. His return, in other words, is only made possible by his assuming the position of a lacking subject.

Finally seeing the world as what it is—with no more illusions about

human affairs and endeavors—Ouyang and Huang overcome want and suffering and the all-consuming war of will with itself. They do so not by giving up desire, as Buddhism suggests, but by refraining from giving way on-to desire. Like the characters, the film performatively enacts the Lacanian ethics of “*ne pas céder sur son désir*,” and it arrives at this ethics as Huang and Ouyang arrive at their final resolutions. Not unlike Huang and Ouyang’s own lives, the film is haunted by regrets over the past until shortly before the ending. The dead—in the form of gnawing memory—keeps coming back to haunt and dominate the present. The past is so overpowering that little sense of “the living present” can remain. Indeed, had it not been for the radical change at the end, the film would have become an exemplification of the repetition compulsion under which the present would keep being dragged back into the past, under which each “new beginning” would be but another enactment of an “originary” vanity of all human passion. The ending, however, changes this mood entirely. When Huang and Ouyang come to their new resolutions, the film finally stops repeating the same old story. A radical break is introduced: the fury of the past is tamed and transformed into a source of nourishment by a new form of memory.

To end our meditations, let us take a look at the tragedy of the (a)shes of time, or *Ashes of Time* as tragedy. For Buddhism, tragic circumstances give us insight into the illusory nature of cause and effect engendered by the human will, and release us from the world of woe and suffering. With this wisdom, we cease our willing and striving, and we find freedom outside the world of necessity. By contrast, Lacan’s tragic hero refuses simply to turn away from existence. Instead of adopting a Buddhist “letting-go of grasping which finally issues in *nirvāna*” (Williams 77), she would not “give way on-to” her desire. In this sense, *Ashes of Time* is more a Lacanian than a Buddhist tragedy. Memory, made possible by the object cause of desire and time, is used by its tragic hero to bring both to rest. *Ashes of Time* affirms both the (a) and time even as they are arrested by memory: the truth is, memory is the child of a union between time and the (a)—the child of time and something which seems to abide beyond time.

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## NOTES

- 1 The Chinese title of Wong Kar-wai's film is *Dongxie Xidu* (*The Perverse East and the Malicious West*). It was renamed *Ashes of Time* when it was exported outside the Chinese speaking world.
- 3 The Buddhist understanding of desire goes hand-in-hand with its belief that time *is* occurrence itself. This perspective on time forms quite an interesting contrast to the prevalent modern Western view that time is a framework in which things occur.
- 4 See Lacan, *Seminar III* 268. See also Žižek's explication in "The Limits of the Semiotic Approach to Psychoanalysis," 92.
- 5 See especially Lacan's *Seminar VII*, entitled *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*.
- 6 I try to reserve the term "subject" for the desire associated with Lacanian ethics because Lacan contrasts the imaginary ego to the desiring subject. Lacan, however, is not entirely consistent in his usage. The term "subject" is also used in association with the sadistic superego, even though under those circumstances, Lacan would specify the sadistic executioner as wanting to become a "full Subject" rather than a barred subject. See Lacan's "Kant *avec* Sade."
- 7 Lacan distinguishes between need, demand, and desire—a distinction which emerges in 1957 (*Seminar IV* 100–01, 125) but only crystallizes in 1958 ("Signification of the Phallus," *Écrits*). I have chosen to use the term "need" in a much more general sense than Lacan to denote a human being's urge to possess an external object in order to fulfill himself or herself. This use of the word "need" should be immediately accessible to any reader; at the same time, it still allows me to differentiate between active desire and reactive desire, or real desire in the Lacanian sense versus an imaginary version of desire—a differentiation not present in Buddhist thought.
- 8 The contrast between the *objet a* and *object* can be better elucidated by setting it in the context of Lacan's criticism of object-relations theory. Dylan Evans explains Lacan's objections to object-relations theory as follows: ". . . by locating the object in the register of satisfaction and need, object-relations theory confuses the object of psychoanalysis with the object of biology and neglects the symbolic dimension of desire" (124).
- 9 The term *objet a* has been associated with the imaginary (*Seminar II*, 1955) and the symbolic (*Seminar V*, 1957) in the earlier stages of Lacan's career. But beginning in 1963 (*Seminar X*), the *objet a* increasingly acquires connotations of the Real, and it is in this sense that most Lacanian scholarship since Žižek has been using the term *objet a*. My paper follows Žižek's practice.
- 10 Lacan first proposes his famous formula "*il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel*" in 1970 (*Seminar XVII* 134), and takes it up again in 1972–73 (*Seminar XX* 17).
- 11 The impossible object is closely related to the impossibility of relation between the sexes.
- 12 This Chinese proverb is taken from Pei Xiu's Xianmi Pagoda monument.
- 13 I try reserving the term "subject" for "real desire," which is associated with Lacanian ethics. I put "subject" in quotation marks to distinguish it from the Lacanian desiring subject. (See footnote 7.)
- 14 R. Puligandla explains the causal chain of suffering as follows: "(1) For the Buddhist . . . there [is] no eternal and unchanging entities either within or without man. It is craving (*bsnā*) which produces and sustains the illusion of such entities . . . (2) Being impermanence, existence is painful and is the source of

suffering (*dukkha*) of all kinds, physical, psychological, etc. The term *dukkha* is to be understood . . . as the impermanence itself of all existence. (3) Ignorance is not only the absence of knowledge of reality but also the holding of wrong views concerning it. It is ignorance that is the source of man's state of suffering, bondage, and unfreedom. (4) The law of *karman* [*sic*] is the principle of universal causality, according to which every event produces an effect(s) which in turn serves as cause(s) bringing about further effects, and so on. *Karman* [*sic*] is generated by ignorance, lack of knowledge of the nature of existence. *Karman* [*sic*] acquires a kind of psycho-moral continuity through rebirth" (Puligandla, "Time and History" 166–67).

- 15 "For-" is an Old English and Middle English prefix meaning "away, apart, off," as in forbid, forget, and forgo. It is a prefix that inverts or negates the act it qualifies. Thus to forbid is to prohibit or to command to act against, and to forgive is to get up and to let go of one's claims.
- 16 See especially Derrida's *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*. See also his *Given Time and The Gift of Death*. Focusing on the suffix "give" in "forgiving" and "geben" in "Vergeben," Derrida interprets forgiveness in terms of a gift, glossing over how "Ver-" in German, as much as "for-" in English, negates or inverts the act it modifies. For instance, "*sich versprechen*" is to misspeak, as much as "to forget" is to fail to get hold of.
- 17 The moment Derrida stresses is the "giving" in the "forgiving." The subject, who is the agent of the act, is inevitably hypostatized—and this despite Derrida's repeated attempts throughout his works to deconstruct subject-centered reason.
- 18 One may argue that Derrida's position does not contradict Buddhism, in that a gift can be made only when there is some form of sacrifice of oneself and one's property. Yet there is tremendous difference between the Western giving of oneself and the Buddhist giving *up* of oneself. The former is predicated upon a self who gives; the latter teaches that the self does not exist. Despite Derrida's vision of "a forgiveness without power: *unconditional but without sovereignty*" (*Cosmopolitanism* 59), his theory requires that a self be in place for forgiveness to occur—a self to whom an injury has been done yet capable of generosity to the other. In fact, Derrida explicitly states that "genuine forgiveness must engage *two* singularities: the guilty . . . and the victim" (*Cosmopolitanism* 42, my italics). Forgiveness, in other words, requires a radically singular confrontation between a *self* and an *other*. Pursuing the logic of this structure of forgiveness, it even seems clear that the other is actually secondary to the self: forgiveness is no forgiveness without there being *first* a suffering self. If there is no such self, the other will not even be relevant. For Buddhism, by contrast, it is the forgoing of the self which makes possible forgiveness. In fact, forgoing the self *is* forgiveness.
- 19 To communicate this Buddhist thinking in Lacanian language, this will-to-become manifests itself as a lacking subject (\$) striving to become a full subject (S).
- 20 This is a term adopted from Lacan's *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*.
- 21 Lacan insists on traversing rather than transcending fantasy. The former brings about some reconfiguration of the subject's mode of jouissance and some modification of her fundamental mode of defense. See *Seminar XI* 273. Lacan does not believe in transcending fantasy for two reasons. First of all, there is no unproblematic "reality" for psychoanalysis. Secondly, Lacan emphasizes the protective function of fantasy which *veils* castration (*Seminar IV* 119–20) and the lack in the Other (*Écrits* 313).
- 22 Lacan deems the *objet a* to be the final *irreducible* reserve of libido. See the seminar of 16 January 1963 in *Seminar X*.

- 23 See *Seminar XX*, where Lacan opposes the female logic of insistence to the male logic of existence.
- 24 I am making a double reference to the film and to the theme relating the (*a*) to time. The “*a*” needs to be in the lower case as a reminder of the *objet a* that makes itself felt in the insistence of the ashes, and in the insistence of some-Thing in the ashes themselves. The use of a big “A” here may mislead readers to confuse the *a* with the big Other (*Autre*) in Lacanian discourse. The lower-cases in this expression also more truthfully reflect the film’s refusal to hypostatize either “ashes” or “time.”
- 25 In Lacanian terms, the *decisive turn* taking place here illustrates the “miracle” of the *point de captation*, whereby the climactic barring of the big Other retroactively changes all the “*external*” limitations from which he thinks he has been suffering (namely, rejection by his beloved) into *internal* ones. No longer projecting his inability to achieve self-realization onto a big Other which says “No” to his enjoyment, Ouyang finally realizes that self-completion is impossible rather than forbidden.
- 26 Reversal of fortune has been regarded as an important element of the tragic plot since Aristotle. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle says that the action of a tragedy “should be single and complete, presenting a reversal of fortune [*peripeteia*].” However, following through Lacan’s theory of tragedy would lead us to the discovery that *tragedy requires not just a reversal in the plot but also a reversal of reversal effected by the tragic hero*. A mere reversal of fortune in plot is not enough to make a tragedy; it can only yield a melodrama. To have a real tragedy, there must be a tragic hero capable of subjectively assuming his or her external reversal of fortune, and who, by so doing, rises above this external reversal. For Lacan, tragedy is ethics precisely because there is this kind of subjective assumption of an external calamity, which brings about a subjective reversal of an objective reversal. In the case of Ouyang, for example, an external reversal takes place when he becomes barred by memory of loss. Yet a reversal of reversal follows when Ouyang actively assumes this loss and as such turns memory from a vengeful spirit into a form of sustenance.
- 27 This is adapted from Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*: “the specters of Marx come on stage from the other side. They are named according to the other path of the genitive—and this other grammar says more than grammar. The specters of Marx are also his” (98).
- 28 My reading of Lacan, in other words, sides with Samuel Weber rather than with Slavoj Žižek, Joan Copjec, Renata Salecl, and Alenka Zupančič. Žižek and his colleagues maintain a non-ambiguous reading of “*ne pas céder sur son désir*” as meaning “do not cede your desire.” It seems that Lacan, in his brief flirtation with Buddhism, may have been too wary of desire to valorize it in a one-dimensional manner. For Buddhism detects in desire a dark side, which Lacan refers to as the drive. Interestingly, it is in the *Ethics Seminar*, where Lacan confirms Buddhism’s insight, that he notes, in his reading of Antigone, the entwinement of desire with the (death) drive. For Lacan, this entwinement gives us unusual insight into the negative side of desire, as well as the ethical dimension of the drive. To interpret “*ne pas céder sur son désir*” as merely “do not cede your desire” amounts to ignoring both the ambivalence of desire and the ethics of the Real.
- 29 Note that the “substitutes” they now accept are different from the substitutes Huang relies on when the two men’s dream woman is still alive. The substitutes Huang used to look for are particular *objects* in the phenomenal world. Upon the woman’s death, however, Huang turns to aesthetic contemplation of—instead of craving for—peach blossoms. Ouyang, on the other hand, is able to give up

his beloved in her phenomenal existence for his memory of her. To use a non-Lacanian language, one can say that pure love has replaced desire for possession in both cases.

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