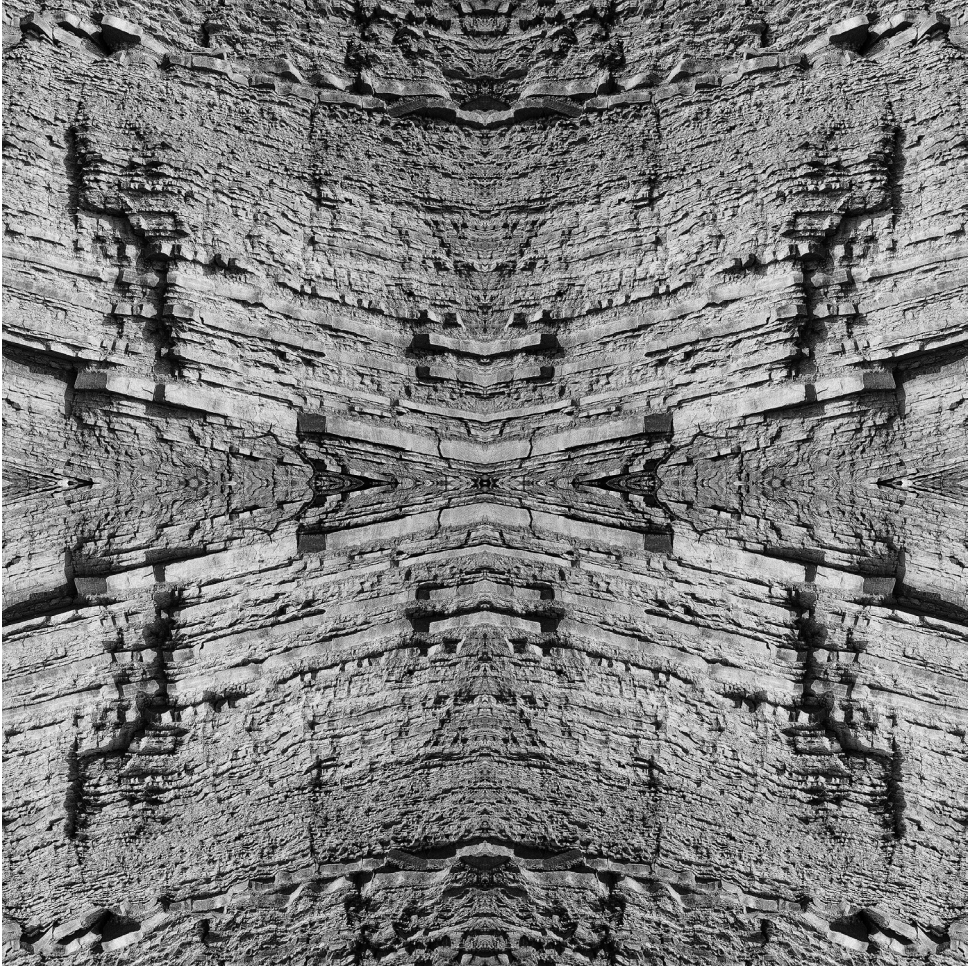


PART I

COSMOLOGY / THEOLOGY OF LOVE



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ANTIGONE / SAVITRI

In this chapter, we wish to delineate new ethical spaces, by following the deeds of two heroic women from the literary and religious tradition—Sophocles’s Antigone and Savitri from the *Mahabharata*. What they have in common is that in their lives and/or deaths, and in their heroic deeds, they were in a close relationship to the deceased and to death. But also to life. In this, they were guardians of cosmic laws, with their sacred sexual and generational genealogies. Despite their tragic fates, they were and remained sacred guardians of basic cosmic laws, related to the living and deceased, heaven, earth, and the underworld. In Heideggerian language, they were, as it were, in a close proximity to the elements of ancient cosmic order and cosmic laws; in their deeds, they acted and spoke out of a belonging to Being (to *deinon*).

Today, it seems that we have lost our relation to the cosmos and its ethical order. We live in a civilization offering us a plenitude of earthly goods, including various ethical and political laws, and justice in one of its forms. In this fabricated world we (who are we?)¹ (un)willingly tolerate evil and violence in one of its varied forms and are thus not able to posit an unconditional ethical demand against them. Being subjected to different forms of power, we cannot find a peaceful repose, a place to host (hospitality) and protect peace for the concrete living others. This chapter wishes to place Sophocles’s *Antigone* into a new ethical framework and point toward some elements for a possible new cosmico-feminist interpretation of justice. It will elaborate on the logic of *agrapta nomima* (unwritten/divine laws) and the logic of ethical gestures toward mortals (both deceased persons and living beings). It will show how Antigone’s sacred duty was to preserve the equilibrium of the cosmic order (with its sexual and generational genealogies), and how this equilibrium has been lost in our times, in fact, how it has

been subjugated to various forms of power since Creon's political act. According to Luce Irigaray²—whose teachings have been my inspiration for years—this was possible only with the Greek substitution of ancient law and cosmic justice with an inauguration of new political laws, as defended by Creon, who finds ancient unwritten laws obsolete. We know that even Hegel—by fully acknowledging this shift and by highly praising Antigone for her acts—was still not willing to support Antigone's adherence to those ancient laws, representing a sacred order of femininity. New ethical gestures and a new view of justice are thus needed in our times; gestures that are more closely related to the human body, deceased (as in Polyneices), but also gestures for the living corpse (Agamben), any child, or a (wo)man on the very edge between life and death, or any other living body in pain. Universally then, no duty and no justice can be more important than our adherence to the deepest cosmico-ethical layers of both our faith and our knowledge, an awareness rooted in our bodily sensibilities and interiority.

Antigone

From Hegel to Irigaray, Sophocles's Antigone has provoked major thinkers and raised key ethical questions: from divine law to human law, from ethics to morality, from cosmic awareness to modern political life, in all these contexts, interpreters and authors such as Hegel, Lacan, Butler, Irigaray, and Žižek have searched for the proper *measure*, delineating the most sensitive space of all—the space of proximity between the sexuate subjects, between kin members (even hinting at incestuous relationships between them), or, as in more politically invested readings—among the members of a political community. The languages of psychoanalysis, ethics, theology, and law were used and merged in the many and varied readings of this ancient drama. But originally, *Antigone* is a tragedy about cosmic laws and hospitality toward others as members of a kin, but also others as strangers.

According to Irigaray, unveiling the meaning of Antigone is not an easy task in our culture.³ It is a task requiring from us a descent into entirely different modes of our intersubjective thinking as we inhabited them from our predecessors. Clearly, this also is an intercultural task, since Western man cannot find the way by himself. Irigaray's awakening through Yoga testifies to this. And there are only few contemporary

philosophers that are sensitive to this task in its entirety. We would dare to (in this sense) only add Jean-Luc Nancy (perhaps Agamben) to Irigaray. Now, at the very beginning of his *Being Singular Plural*, Nancy cites Nietzsche from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*:

Like me, guide the virtue that has flown away back to the earth—yes, back to the body and life: so that it may give the earth its meaning, a human meaning! . . . Let your spirit and your virtue serve the meaning of the earth. . . . Human being and human earth are still unexhausted and undiscovered.⁴

Nancy is right in his diagnosis: this earth—now at this moment—“is anything but sharing community of humanity.”⁵ There is no compassion on this earth, no sense of an *être-à-plusieurs*, as he states. Moreover, in his *Corpus*, first by enumerating the atrocities committed in the last century against the humanity, Nancy—by reflecting the jurisdiction of bodies—rightly observes that we’d need a *corpus*, namely “the areality of corpses: of bodies indeed, including the dead body.”⁶ What Nancy is aiming at is to delineate spaces, places, topics, perhaps new grounds for bodies, being able to go beyond mere “dialectical respiration from the ‘same’ to the ‘other.’”⁷ Here we can already sense another *justice*, coming from this sense (or sensitivity) for the bodies and their places. But we will stop here and return to *Antigone*.

What kind of love and justice is then revealed to us in this play of Sophocles? Authors of an excellent study on *Antigone*—namely, Max Statkiewicz and Valerie Reed, state that *Antigone* is “‘the turning point in the ethical thinking of our time’ and ‘an embodiment of the ethical value of the community,’”⁸ in a sense of Agamben’s *coming community* (*comunità che viene*). Is it not that out of the Hegelian claim on the collision between two equally valid claims (Creon versus *Antigone*) there comes our uncertainty regarding justice: “familial love, the holy, the inward, intimate feelings—hence known also as the law of the nether gods—collides with the right of the state.”⁹ To be able, then, to view justice or *Gerechtigkeit* not as one-sided, but as an integral ethical law, we have to admit the inner logic of this collision. *But this is impossible*. *Antigone*’s faith and her radical ethical care for the other, the brother-as-corpse, is deeper than any one-sided view as proposed by Hegel, Lacan, Butler, Žižek, or many others. *Antigone*’s ethics is best understood when confronted with Heidegger’s and Irigaray’s ontologies

on one side, and Levinas's and Derrida's views of justice on the other. These are all thinkers, being in the close vicinity of an ancient Greek and Indian (Presocratic: as Heidegger and Irigaray with her relation to pre-Vedic cults and sources and Yoga) or divine (as in Levinas and Derrida) justice: this is the realm of divine law and *agrapta nomima*.¹⁰

According to Rémi Brague, we can understand the divinity of Greek law only beginning with Sophocles. For Brague, these divine laws (and accompanying justice, of course) are so old that "they really did not appear, since they are so obvious, that there is no beginning in them"¹¹ (*qu'elles n'ont pas de point d'émergence*). For the double setting of an *ethical archeology* and *ethical anatomy*¹²—or relation between morality (with justice) and ethical gestures toward the other *in her body*, the other in pain, and equally the deceased and dead bodies—this simple but pregnant observation by Brague is indeed of key importance. *Agrapta nomima* can only be inscribed in our hearts and our bodies. We all are the inheritors of this sacred message, being inaugurated by Antigone's act and—as we shall see later—having also important intercultural consequences. Divine laws and our bodies as sacred stelas, furthermore, the logic of a sacrificial body, the body as a tabernacle (M. Douglas);¹³ this also is an inauguration of a plane where Derrida and Levinas meet with their interventions into the very logic of justice. In this tradition (Ancient Near East and Old Testament), washing the body—a living body—is "an enactment that replicates atonement for restoring the sanctity of the tabernacle."¹⁴ The same holds for Antigone's now ancient Greek ancestral care for Polyneices's corpse: it is an act, necessary in order to regain the lost cosmic order, to remove, or to wash out the impurity brought into this world by Creon's political act. This is why there is no antagonism between two different ethical worlds (according to Hegel and his followers, *eine sittliche Macht gegen die andere*) in Antigone: her act rests in divine law and divine justice; it is an act inscribed in the feminine body and as such it is *an-archic*. In the body as a microcosm a "shared background knowledge"¹⁵ is stored. According to Levinas, these ancient rights of the other person, and their justice, are apriori: they have an *ineluctable authority* and demand from us an *inexhaustible responsibility*, one compared to Antigone's claim.¹⁶ Phenomenologically, they lead us toward radical proximity in intersubjectivity, toward the event of meeting, goodness, and peace.

In the pre-Homeric Greek world, the guardians of these ancient cosmic laws were Erinyes (and along them Gaia, Hades, Persephone/

Demeter, Kore, etc.). In the pre-Vedic, and later in the Vedic world, this place had been secured by deities from the Proto-Shakta-Tantric cults on one side, and later from the Adityas—Varuna, Mitra, and Aryaman—on the other. But let us hold off for a moment with the intercultural aspects and first reflect upon the world of pre-Homeric deities and Irigaray's interpretation of the tragedy. According to Walter F. Otto,¹⁷ pre-Homeric and pre-Olympic deities of the ancient chthonic religion testify for the close proximity of the Greek (wo)man to the elements of nature. These elements appear philosophically in the world of both pre-Socratic and Upanishadic philosophers, but later they reappear only in Schelling, Feuerbach, Heidegger (via Hölderlin), Irigaray, and Caputo. Caputo, for example, pleads for greater respect for intuitions, based on the ancient mythic elements, forgotten all the way in our philosophies and theologies, and in our view of justice—human and divine. Invoking Irigaray, Caputo mentions “sun and eye, air and breath, wind and spirit, sea and life, rock and god”; we may add, for the sake of our reading of Antigone—earth and the netherworld.¹⁸ Now, to return to the Greek world: it seems that Antigone is a guardian of this sacred cosmic order, as represented within this elemental world. Otto mentions in this sense ancient laws, or, better, ancient justice, as an interruption into this world. The gods that belong to the Earth, argues Otto, all belong to the principles of femininity (perhaps matriarchy)¹⁹ and stand against the later masculine orders of the Olympic gods. This ancient earthly order is a place where also Antigone's act is rooted. This is a magical world: with the corpse of Polyneices lying there on the earth, unburied as prey for dogs, and any corpse or living dead (*Agamben*) in *our* world not being cared for, or being *deserted, betrayed, forgotten*, the sacred equilibrium of the cosmic order is broken. This intrusion of an injustice into the cosmic order means that sexual and generational orders, and of course also natural orders of fertility (food, grain), are unsettled and broken. The basic principles of *a life* are endangered, including death as its part. Twins (as Indian Yama and Yami), brothers and sisters, sharing the same womb, as in the case of Antigone and Polyneices; mother and child . . . This now is not yet a world of morality (or, not any more), nor any form of “justice”; we may add that it is this cosmic order that is the meaning of *apriori* in the above-mentioned Levinasian sense, including the phenomenological consequences.

But before we approach Irigaray's understanding of Antigone, we need to delineate the tragic paradox of Sophocles as understood by Hegel

in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Hegel positions Antigone in the spiritual world of the pagan (Greek, therefore not yet Christian) morality in which the family (as represented by Antigone) and the *polis* (as represented by Creon) are mutually exclusive; the particularity of the family life cannot be reconciled with the universality of the *polis* and Sophocles's play is thus caught in this tragic dichotomy, according to Hegel.²⁰ The Greek Penates stand opposed to the universal Spirit of Hegel. The spirit *must* become incarnated within the political community and its citizens (men—in the case of the Greek world, but also in the case of the modern, yet still predemocratic Christian and Western world). And thus the conflict between divine law and human law is actually the conflict between the two sexes in their predefined roles within Hegel's *grand œuvre*. While men are destined to become full citizens, women are limited to family life—sister must now, as wife, become the head of the household. The relation between husband and wife therefore takes precedence over other familial relationships (such as between brothers and sisters, or parents and children). With her decision to resist Creon's famous edict, Antigone enters forbidden territory in morality, and Hegel will never be able to reconcile himself with this move by Antigone (and Sophocles). In Hegel's own words:

Since the community only gets an existence through its interference with the happiness of the Family, and by dissolving [individual] self-consciousness into the universal, it creates for itself in what it suppresses and what is at the same time essential to it an internal enemy—womankind in general. Womankind—the everlasting irony [in the life] of the community—changes by intrigue the universal end of the government into a private end, transforms its universal activity into a work of some particular individual, and perverts the universal property of the state into a possession and ornament for the Family.²¹

Still, for Hegel, under the heaven of his concept of *Sittlichkeit*, Antigone is manifesting the Divine Law: as a woman, she stands in the vicinity of divine laws—the feminine, for Hegel, possesses the highest intuitive (but not conscious)²² awareness of the ethical. While in her role of the wife the ethical life of a woman is not pure, this changes in her relationship to her brother. Hegel tried to repair his otherwise masculinely appropriated

notion of sexual difference by representing the relation between brother and sister as an ethically pure example of an equilibrium between the sexes, based on their shared blood and their mutual lack of desire (later, the lack of physical passion will become an ideal within the spiritual bond of Christian marriage). In this view, for Antigone the loss of her brother is irreparable; but, again, this relation is itself limited—ideally, brother necessarily passes from the divine law into the sphere of the human law, *polis*. Antigone may act from pure ethical intuition as related to unwritten divine laws, but again, she cannot (or is not allowed to?) move beyond her own limitations, for Hegel. We may now ask ourselves: Was then Antigone's act of burial of her deceased brother not a *double intrusion* into higher spiritual orders? First, by not obeying Creon's state orders, as a woman, she transgresses the ethical order of the Hegelian *Sittlichkeit*; secondly, by remaining (allegedly) caught in her feminine-intuitive ethical drive, Antigone, as it were, *redeems* (and not only takes care of, as this divine obligation falls naturally to the sister—as ordered by divine laws operating within the family and thus positioning also the family within the universal) her brother's corpse) and inaugurates a new transethical order that was not accessible either to her sister Ismene or to any of his male relatives, or, ultimately, to Creon.²³ *Antigone transgresses the limits of both life and death*. But this could not be allowed—either in the Greek *polis* or in the Hegelian (-Christian) world. As argued by Patricia Mills, Antigone clearly and openly “transcends the limitations of womanhood set down by Hegel.”²⁴ In the concluding part of the book we will address these highest redemptory traits in Antigone's acts, which were therefore not accessible to Hegel. We may now conclude our reading of Hegel by stating that Antigone brings an alien law into this world—a new law, also inaugurating new ethical standpoints in this world—of remembrance and forgiveness.²⁵

Now, for Irigaray, Antigone represents a key point in the history of mankind; as a woman and as a sister she incorporates in herself three orders: of life and cosmic order, order of generations, and order of sexuate differentiation. This is how Irigaray summarizes this task:

The law or the duty Antigone defends at the risk of her life includes three aspects that are linked together: respect for the order of the living universe and living beings, respect for the order of generation and not only genealogy, and respect for the order of sexuate difference. It is important to stress

the word “sexuate,” and not “sexual,” because the duty of Antigone does not concern sexuality as such, nor even its restraint as Hegel thought. If this was the case, she ought to have privileged her fiancé Haimon and not the brother. Antigone undertakes the burial of her brother because he represents a singular concrete sexuate identity that must be respected as such: “as the son of her mother.” For Antigone, human identity has not yet become one, neuter, universal as Creon’s order will render it. Humanity is still two: man and woman, and this duality, already existent in the natural order, must be respected, as a sort of frame, before the fulfilment of sexual attraction or desire.²⁶

Antigone’s decision (famously, she gives precedence to brother over the potential child or husband) shows her cosmico-ethical intuition: she cannot substitute a potential other to the concrete living other, or, even more radically, to his corpse. She must also secure an identity for herself, for her self-affection. But she must protect her dead brother, not only from decay but principally from his wandering as a ghost, being deprived of his memory, his past, and, paradoxically, his future. For Irigaray, brother and sister represent two horizontal identities: “She must secure for her brother the memory of a valid sexuate identity, and not just of an anonymous and neutralized bodily matter.”²⁷ Again, she thus wants to preserve life and cosmic order.

This is why we cannot relate to the interpretation by Martha Nussbaum, who in her *Fragility of Goodness*, while reading Antigone and leaning (too) heavily on Hegel and other critical interpreters of Antigone’s gesture, maintains that both Creon’s and Antigone’s acts are products of “a ruthless simplification of the world of value, which effectively eliminates conflicting obligations.” Paul Ricoeur’s interpretation is very close to that.²⁸ Nussbaum is right, of course, when she ascribes Creon’s insistence on the ban on Polyneices’s burial to his concern for the state: according to the Greek law, which grades the culpability of a traitor above the culpability of a foe, the traitor could not be buried within the outer bounds of the city state, as this would have credited them with a dignity they did not deserve following their offense. But Creon, on the other hand, although as a ruler he wished to ensure the welfare of the state and thus be fair, was not under any obligation to ban the burial as such—which could translate as interment outside

the city boundaries and concurrent commitment to a burial organised by the victim's family (part of which includes himself; in this consists his tragedy). Creon undoubtedly took a bold and ruthless stand against the gods—albeit in the defence of the polis. Nussbaum, on the other hand, ascribes to Antigone—based also on her famous words in which she ranks her love for her brother above her love for a husband or child—“a strangely ruthless simplification of duties, corresponding not so much to any known religious law as to the exigencies of her own practical imagination.”²⁹ So even if Nussbaum does not wish to appeal to the unwritten law according to which it would have been necessary to at least protect the exposed body of Antigone's brother, in the interpretation of Danae's suffering and reading of the fourth choral ode she nevertheless writes the following statement that puts her interpretation of Antigone in question:

In a world, where fathers, seeking safety and control, imprison daughters and attempt to prevent the birth of their grandchildren, salvation would have to come from an extra-human source.³⁰

Luce Irigaray understood Antigone precisely in connection to unwritten religious or ethical laws and family genealogies, which comprise not only relations between parents and children, but also between siblings. At first glance, Antigone may indeed be focused on darkness and death and, as Ismene also believes, is closer to the dead than to the living; but Antigone carries inside herself something very much alive, something she will not allow to be taken from her (or to be relinquished to the world) at any cost—only this can be her “madness” and at the same time her close link with Jesus: Antigone stands beyond the ontology of life and/or death, light and/or darkness, good and/or evil, and she cannot be reduced to a dichotomy or the sphere of family—and/or state. Her fundamental message is that of the exuberance of the demand for love, its excess and singularity precisely because of this incomprehension. Her demand—despite the appearance of unyielding obstinacy or unreasonable insistence—is an ethical demand made by *a daughter* and *a sister*. We shall see, later on, the interesting parallels that we can draw between Antigone and the Indian divine-heroic figure of Savitri.

Antigone's famous words, “It is my nature to join in love, not hate,”³¹ represent the peak of the tragedy. Not only Hegel but also Irigaray

thinks that her mission might even be higher than that of Christ. Again, Antigone's problem stays at "the turning point in the ethical thinking of our time,"³² being in the closest vicinity of the place of *hospitality*, perhaps the central topic of all today's ethics. *Hospitality, clearly, is justice.* Hospitality is closely related to the problem of Antigone: within ancient Greek, ancient Near Eastern, Vedic, etc. contexts, hospitality clearly played a prominent role. Philosophically, hospitality first means that we are willing to acknowledge the other in his or her autonomy, without appropriating his or her subjectivity to our place, our interiority; this is what Derrida understood by unconditional hospitality. We also know that already for Levinas, the very essence of language *was* hospitality, but Irigaray, being heavily influenced by the teachings of Buddha and Yoga, will say that this place can only be secured from the *silence*.³³ Now, for Derrida, Antigone clearly had to transgress written laws "in order to offer her brothers the hospitality of the land and of burial."³⁴ This offering of an ultimate hospitality is furthermore accompanied with the possibility of its radicalization through what Anne Dufourmantelle has called in her commentary to Derrida's text *hospitality toward death*, which means, a hospitality offered to the dead one (as a burial), an act that of course can never be reciprocated. This act—hospitality toward death—testifies how closely tied Antigone was to the gods of the netherworld. This is also the essence of Patočka's reading of Antigone.³⁵ But it is not the night and death, which is feared by Creon, it is principally Antigone's mode of silence, her language, and her values that he cannot understand or, ultimately, bear.

Savitri

Then Savitri made her husband sit close to her, and sat down on the ground herself, taking him in her arms, and laying his head in her lap.

—*The Story of Sāvitrī*³⁶

We now wish to move into the sphere of ancient Indian ethics and religiosity and ponder the meaning of Antigone's world through the perspective of the legend of Savitri (Sāvitrī), from the *Mahabharata*. Although the tale of Savitri is part of ancient Indian epics, it describes events from the Vedic cycle. All the gods and all the sacrifices in it, therefore, are

Vedic. The legend about Savitri is the following: Ashwapati, king of the Madra Kingdom (in the present Pakistani Punjab), is a lover of truth and peace. With his life in truth and ascetic devotion, he is a symbol of the ideal sovereign who rules with justice and love. Notwithstanding that, king Ashwapati is childless. In the hope of issue, he worships the goddess Savitri through sacred “Savitri” verses for several years, asking her for a son. The Savitri mantra (also known as the “Gayatri” strophe) is the most revered verse from the Vedas, dedicated to the sun deity Savitar, and can be found in the third book of the *Rigveda* (RV III,62,10).³⁷ Finally, King Ashwapati has a child—a daughter granted to him by the god Brahma and his spouse, goddess Savitri, after whom the girl receives her (divine) name. Savitri grows up to be a splendid woman of every virtue (knowledge, devotion to asceticism, honesty, truthfulness, . . .), but the father is unable to marry her off. Savitri is given permission by her father to find a husband for herself. She sets out on a journey and visits the ascetics living in the forests of the neighboring kingdom. This kingdom used to be ruled by King Dyumatsena before he was afflicted by two calamities: he went blind and lost his kingdom. But the king has no inkling of the third and greatest tragedy that awaits him. His son Satyavan (whose name means “One who speaks truth” or “Devoted to truth”), it has been predicted, has only one year of life left. After meeting Satyavan, Savitri decides he will be her husband. Although the sage Narada tells Savitri that her noble husband is destined to die one year from that day, Savitri marries him. She calculates the date of his expected death based on the prediction, and three days before its arrival takes on a strenuous ascetic or yogic fast involving meditation, vigil, and continuous standing. When the day of her husband’s death—known only to Savitri, her father, and Narada—arrives, Savitri accompanies Satyavan into the forest, where he goes to gather fruit and collect brushwood. While gathering and splitting wood, Satyavan is struck with a terrible headache. Savitri appears next to him and Satyavan, in agony, lays his head in her lap. At that moment, Yama, the god of Death, comes and with his *pasha* (a sort of lasso, originally linked to the branches of a fig tree) pulls the breath out of the man, and he dies. Yama carries him toward the realm of the dead, but Savitri follows him. Her perseverance—Yama promises her various boons, from restored eyesight and a kingdom to a hundred sons for her father-in-law and a hundred brave sons for herself and Satyavan—eventually convinces Yama to allow her husband to return to life, as without him the *dharma* of her family life cannot not be fulfilled.³⁸

The Story of Savitri features at the point of departure for the works of the Vedic symbolic cycle, but much of its content dates back to even earlier periods of ancient Indus Valley civilization (Harappa, Mohenjo-daro) and its contacts reaching all the way to Mesopotamia. The gods and people in it are still part of the process of creating and preserving life as a broader cosmic principle of reciprocity and interconnection through sacrifice, while death (and the related knowledge about immortality) in the context of this late-Vedic period (the time when the key *Upanishads* were formed, as well as the *Mahabharata* and the Samkhya-Yoga school), slowly transformed into a fundamental philosophical and theological/eschatological problem.³⁹ Gradually, the first elements of the later Hindu (mono)theistic religiosity, which would bring gods such as Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva to the forefront, also take shape. But *The Story of Savitri* is still set at the margins between these two periods (Vedic poly- or henotheistic Brahmanism and subsequent theistic Hinduism) when, for the first time in the history of Indian philosophy and religion, there also emerges the ethical principle of karma as the scale of the afterlife based on the positive or negative consequences of acts. Owing to the difficult time of transition, the roles of the gods in the story are not clearly defined (in later Hindu religion, the goddess Savitri is the partner or spouse of the supreme god Brahma, but in our narration she is probably still the daughter of the Sun deity Savitar; nevertheless, in this tale, the goddess Savitri appeals to the mercy or grace of the heavenly father), so the legend should be taken as part of the early cosmological Vedic cycle despite the presence of certain later elements in it.

The crucial passage in *The Story of Savitri* is the point where Satyavan, after leaving for the abode of the dead (i.e., when he actually dies), returns among the living through the intervention of his wife. Savitri expresses that with the following words, which clearly convey what we wish to be understood in this book under the term *matrixial logic of love*:

You have indeed slept for a long time on my lap, noble sir. And the blessed god Yama, the constrainer of mankind, has gone.

Satyavan, who is unaware of what occurred that evening, responds:

I came out with you, graceful lady, to collect fruits, and then while I was chopping wood, a pain arose in my head. . . . I

fell asleep in your lap—this is all I remember. And while I was embraced by you, my mind was stolen away by sleep.⁴⁰

The expressions that *The Story of Savitri* has put before us are here manifestly connected to the feminine logic of the lap, embrace, and care for the other, which shifts the logic of heroism from the sphere of war and violence into the firmament of love and tenderness. In her dialogue with Yama, the god of the dead, Savitri speaks about love, mercy, trust, selflessness, justice, and kindness in a language of a radical and superhuman/divine ethical perseverance-for-the-other and thereby supreme *hope*. Yama thus brings Satyavan back from the realm of death and returns him to Savitri, divinizing them both, as he predicts both will live until the age of four hundred years. While *The Story of Savitri* and the motif of resurrection (not only the motifs of rebirth/reincarnation or redemption in death) represent a unique Indian version of the gospel story of Lazarus, its ethical precept about the superiority of love over vengeance and hate stands side by side with Jesus's New Testament teachings about the predominance of love and compassion over the language of hatred, violence, and revenge. In his reading, the Indian interpreter Deshpande sees in Savitri an avatar of the homonymous goddess, who came into the world to save *dharma*. At the same time, Vlasta Pacheiner-Klander, a Slovene Sanskrit expert, recognizes in the so-called truth sayings from *The Story of Savitri* that which decisively defines a righteous or virtuous man (*sat purusha*): this is the highest Indian ethical teaching (which is only present in this form in Buddhism and Jainism) of *ahimsa*—non-harming or nonviolence in relation to any creature, compassion for one's enemy, and, ultimately, acting without any thought of reward.⁴¹

But let us return to the key question in this story: Why did Savitri need to bring her husband back into life? Why was it not possible for Satyavan, in his own death—the death of a righteous man threatened by no karmic punishment in the afterlife since he was, as a mortal, unblemished—to be left in the realm of the dead?

In his explanation of *The Story of Savitri*, the Indian interpreter Subhash Anand may perhaps have gone a step farther than some of his colleagues: to him, Savitri's action is simply, yet extremely subtly, an expression of *the love that conquers death*.⁴² This is no doubt a powerful thought: How is it possible for a conception like that to emerge in the midst of ancient Indian religiosity, which has always been (but for a few

bright exceptions, such as Gargi Vachaknavi's role of wise arbitress in the *brahmodyas*, theological discussions, in the early *Upanishads*) dominated by Brahmanic masculine logic? The answer is concealed in the hidden matrixial logic of *The Story of Savitri*, and we believe that its message transcends its time and reveals to us even today in a singular version of the old myth from the pre-Vedic as well as Vedic cosmic cycles. The myth guided by Savitri is a unique act of a mortal/immortal (Savitri in both her roles; it seems, and numerous interpreters have emphasized this, that Savitri is at the same time a mortal and an incarnation of the Goddess), who wants to establish, once and for all, a cosmic order based on justice, love, and peace. Only Savitri as a woman can understand this cosmic constellation and put it into effect, thanks to her exceptional insight into and perception of the hidden logic of the link between life and death *in love*. Only love in its abundance or excess can bestow immortality (Skt. *amrita*) on people.

To understand this special and singular role of Savitri as a heroine and a savior, it is necessary to set her act into a somewhat broader cosmic/mythological context. But let us return to the initial question: Why was it necessary to bring Satyavan back into life? Satyavan and Savitri are a couple living a life of complete commitment, mutual respect, and affection, of the *dharma* fulfilled in a man-woman relationship. The prophecy that allots Satyavan, the one who is devoted to truth, only one further year of life is unjust, and Savitri cannot accept it. As Deshpande finds, "This cannot be accepted as the eternal fact of existence."⁴³ It seems that Savitri was born (or reincarnated on the Earth) to transcend suffering and grief and reveal a path of hope. In this, her role is close to that of Jesus, or Joshua, if you wish, as the one who was able to show people the superiority of love and hope over hatred and who could also convey the promise of immortality. In a somewhat more symbolic reading, which is frequent among Indian interpreters, Savitri, as a member of the Sun genealogy (with the Vedic gods Surya and Savitar in the forefront) is that light of the spirit that can conquer the darkness of ignorance, falseness, and related eternal suffering, misery, even hatred among people. In this account, Savitri is associated with the power of *knowledge* and the related faith, which only can lead the way toward overcoming ignorance. Her cosmic genealogy and mission were described by Sri Aurobindo in his famous poem with the following glorifying words that place her, in a unique way, in the sphere of the divine-maternal. Aurobindo's charac-

terization of Savitri comprises all the aforementioned elements, linking them with a deep philosophical, cosmological and theological meaning that is difficult to match, even in the Indian tradition itself:

Calm was her face and courage kept her mute.
 Yet only her outward self suffered and strove;
 Even her humanity was half divine;
 Her spirit opened to the Spirit in all,
 Her nature felt all Nature as its own.
 Apart, living within, all lives she bore;
 Aloof, she carried in herself the world.
 Her dread was one with the great cosmic dread,
 Her strength was founded on the cosmic might;
 The universal Mother's love was hers.
 Against the evil at life's afflicted roots,
 Her own calamity its private sign. . . .⁴⁴

In this exceptional excerpt from his poem, Aurobindo knew precisely that Savitri—now already in her divine-human likeness—was the bearer of the earliest genealogical order, that is, of the ancient or archaic ontology of love, which derives from the very germ of primeval being that was there even before the split into being and nonbeing, good and evil, life and death, and even divine and human. Savitri, who feels all Nature inside her, was sent into this world to found a new lineage of people existing out of this germ of primeval love, and this is exactly what makes up her love, which our Indian poet calls the love of the universal Mother. This is an original thought that cannot be recalled to pre-Vedic, Vedic, or post-Vedic periods (for example, Samkhya-Yoga), as, in it Savitri is understood and presented as the deliverer of justice and hope into this world.

It is important to take into account two other significant aspects of this story. First, that what Luce Irigaray designates with sexual difference and (divine) couples, is in the ancient Indian religions already represented in the form of divine couples, among them Brahma and Savitri (Yama and Yami are also in close relation to this). It seems that Indian religiosity of the earliest age (including the pre-Vedic cults and Shaktist traditions, regardless of the concurrent Brahmanic ideology and its masculine genealogies) is closely associated with the task of gaining sexually

defined identity through religion and is thus in the very proximity of the ideal of justice. Second, it is also important to take into account that after king Ashwapati had wished for a child and worshipped the goddess Savitri with a poem about her, he was granted a *daughter*. Luce Irigaray believes that daughters play a special role in cosmic and generational orders: they are women born from women and, as such, bearers of a different type of genealogy compared to men, a genealogy that is not accessible to men.⁴⁵ The princess/goddess Savitri undoubtedly represents this genealogical element. And then there are other genealogies, the kind that are presented within the rules of kinship that Savitri abided by (some of these worked analogously to Antigone and were stigmatized as incestuous relationships);⁴⁶ nevertheless, the autonomy of her acts links her to the autonomy of the argument of key Upanishadic women, such as Gargi Vachaknavi from the Upanishadic theological tradition, or *brahmodyas*.⁴⁷ And ultimately—this will be our next point—the Savitri legend is characterized by similar cosmic relationships or cosmic symbols to those from the religious background of *Antigone*. This makes it possible to go a step farther: according to Asko Parpola, Savitri as a goddess and daughter of the Sun (the god Savitar) is connected to “the first dawn.” She is called *prasavitri*—for her roles of “procreatrix, mother, bestowing progeny.”⁴⁸ As such, she inhabits the threshold between night and day, between not-yet-life and life, between death and creation/resurrection, with femininity and masculinity represented in their different roles, but undoubtedly with a powerful message of cooperation or interplay between the sexes in this cosmic game of creating and preserving life.⁴⁹

In her role, Savitri as a person will now come closer to what Luce Irigaray anticipates as the future task of philosophy—not the one presented in the works of male philosophers (Irigaray mentions Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and Levinas), in which the woman is reduced to a certain state of passivity and the man (or at least philosopher) to activity. In her role, Savitri represents the ancient cosmic generational and sexual orders, cognate with the elements of female action that Luce Irigaray propounds in her interpretation of *Antigone*, and, especially, in her work *The Mystery of Mary*. Irigaray’s interpretation of Mary will later be highlighted; suffice it to say that extremely interesting parallels are already outlined here with Savitri, particularly if we take into account that in her work, Irigaray frequently makes direct references to Indian spirituality, including ancient traditions of the pre-Vedic proto-Shaktism, which come to the fore in reading Savitri.⁵⁰

Irigaray's Mary is a completely new cosmic/theological savior figure. As we shall see—and here we are only referring to her in the context of a contemplation about Savitri—she can be comprehended in broader terms than those proposed by current dogmatic explications, although even these contain a wide range of possible interpretations and reinterpretations of her veiled ontological edifice. Irigaray's interpretation opens with the following words:

The angel reminds Mary of the fact that she will be unable to give birth to a divine child, and in particular a son, without committing herself to being faithful to the virginity of her own breath: a reserve of soul capable of receiving and of sharing with the other, and of respecting its difference, as such, without betraying her own spiritual life.⁵¹

In Irigaray, Mary is closely connected to breath: as we know from the Old Testament texts already, God creates with his breath. Due to the precedence that the spiritual/metaphysical principle held over corporeality in Western Christian tradition (and, consequently, with masculine genealogies firmly *immobilizing* breath into stable spiritual categories, beginning with Plato and then all through Hegel and Husserl), breath has been allotted relatively little space. The exception that deserves to be mentioned here is the case of Christian Hesychasts, among them primarily St. Gregory Palamas. His mystical physiology (cf. Indian chakras) and the theory of breathing (cf. yoga) are most certainly a well of spirituality too often neglected or forgotten in the course of history. One chakra is located in the thorax, and it is the focal point also mentioned by Irigaray in her Mary—as she, with her hands folded on her chest (and her closed lips expressing silence, contemplation, and concentration), according to Irigaray's interpretation, preserves and protects her vital breath and thereby her autonomy.⁵² For this reason, as Irigaray perspicaciously finds, some icons depict the Infant Jesus in this very spot. Breathing in Mary is what connects her with the entire cosmos; her breathing “unites, without rupture, the most subtle aspects of the cosmos and body with that which is most spiritual in the soul.”⁵³ Thus, even in the Christian context, the holding of breath can signify that this breath that inside our body transforms into love can be shared with others—and Mary's virginity (now understood as a protected place of spiritual autonomy of a young woman) is to Irigaray the original code of this process. The sacred possibility of breathing may also be found

in Saint Teresa of Avila, who cultivated special methods of calming the rhythm of breathing. There is another thinker close to the sacred breath who knew this—Paul Claudel, who described it in his poem about Saint Teresa of Avila:

To illuminate the clay and make it capable of heaven and
 hell,
 God joined to it, outside time and place in itself,
 yet in a primordial relationship with our flesh,
 that knowledgeable soul in us that makes of our body an
 instrument of desire,
 constantly busy breathing so as not to die . . .
 Thus, once odorous vapour and now the sun of our night,
 Therese is resplendent in the breath of the Holy Spirit!⁵⁴

Like Savitri and Mary, Saint Teresa of Avila is here linked with breath as well as with light and the highest spiritual realization. In Savitri, who led an ascetic life and before her act performed a difficult yogic meditative fast with nocturnal vigil, which later became known under the term *vata-savitri-vrata*, the focus was on the meditative breath, and precisely because she kept a reserve of this vital breath in her, she could, at the moment of Satyavan's death (when Yama, with his lasso, extracted breath from Satyavan's body), recover his soul (breath) and give him his life back—her essential mission.

Let us, in conclusion, return to Savitri one last time: justice can only be established where care and compassion exist in the world. This has nothing to do with the *sati* ritual or a heroic death, as it is understood later in Hinduism through the act of the wife's departure into death together with her husband (that is why the ritual is also called *sahagamana*, lit. "departing/going (away) with"). In this ritual, the ancient cosmic respect for sexual difference is already lost. Deshpande is therefore right to present the message of the legend in the sense of incarnation of the goddess Savitri, who enters this world with the purpose of saving *dharma*. In Deshpande's eyes, Savitri is a symbol of Mother Nature (*prakriti*), which has to be understood not through some philosophical explanation (such as, for example, the ontology of the mentioned Samkhya-Yoga school), but rather in a more primary, cosmic/ethical way, as caring for life, the different generational orders, their issue and