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Winter Term 2013

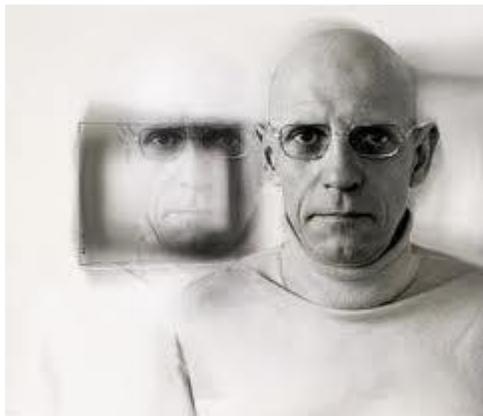
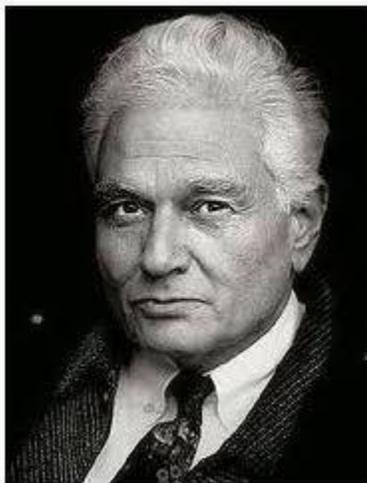
**Department of English and Cultural Studies
McMaster University**

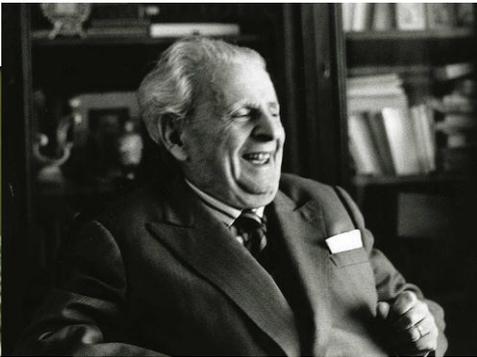
**English and Cultural Studies 3QQ3
Cultural Studies and Critical Theory 3QQ3**

Contemporary Critical Theory: Knowledge, Power, Precarity

Instructor: Dr. David L. Clark
T.A.: Dr. Ailsa Kay

Study Questions and Course Blog







Photographs: Jacques Derrida, Judith Butler, Henry Giroux
 Michel Foucault, Susan Searls Giroux
 Deborah Britzman, Primo Levi
 Shoshana Felman, Giorgio Agamben, Roger Simon
 Claudia Eppert, Dori Laub, Emmanuel Levinas
 Dominick LaCapra



Quelle: Bredekamp, H. 1999: Thomas Hobbes. Visuelle Strategien.

Frontispiece to Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*

How to Use the Study Questions and Course Blog Document

The purpose of this document is to help you understand and consolidate some of the key elements of this course. This document is *not* a summary of the lectures and is not designed to

replace your careful reading of the course material or the notes that you are taking in class. It is rather a series of questions designed to help you connect your understanding of the assigned reading materials to those notes. The document also includes sections--blogs--where I return to points that I made in class, reiterating and expanding upon those points to assist you in keeping on track in the course.

This document is dynamic, i.e., all sections—not just the last section--are updated and revised as the course unfolds.

After each lecture, my suggestion is return to the assigned reading materials and to your lecture notes, and ensure that you are able to answer the study questions listed here. If not, take the time to track down the answers to these questions by going back to the assigned texts. The objective is fourfold:

- 1) To confirm that you are consistently able to anchor the large concerns of each theorist in specific details, arguments, and illustrations in their work;
- 2) To help you to learn how take better notes, i.e., notes that are robust enough to yield strong answers to the questions that are posed here.
- 3) To help you better knit together the lectures, the assigned readings, and your understanding of the assigned readings.
- 4) To help you move *from* thinking of the course material in terms of broad generalizations *to* addressing the course material in much more specific ways, i.e., rooted in the specific details, arguments, illustrations, and questions that quicken the assigned readings. The midterm, essay, and the final examination will call upon you to discuss the course materials at just such a level of detail.

I have complete confidence that you can do this...if you put your back into it! These Study Questions and Blog entries are best used as the course unfolds, i.e., on a week-by-week basis, to ensure that you have the best possible grasp of the materials and questions and problems at hand. In other words, the Study Questions and Blog entries are best used while the lectures and the readings are freshest in your mind. Therefore, I strongly encourage you *not* to leave wrestling with this document until just prior to the midterm or just prior to the final examination.

McMaster University crest and motto

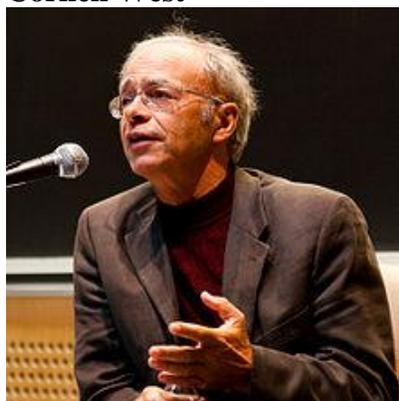


Motto: ΤΑ ΠΑΝΤΑ · ΕΝ · ΧΡΙΣΤΩΙ ·
ΣΥΝΕΣΤΗΚΕΝ

Motto in English: All things cohere in Christ



Cornell West



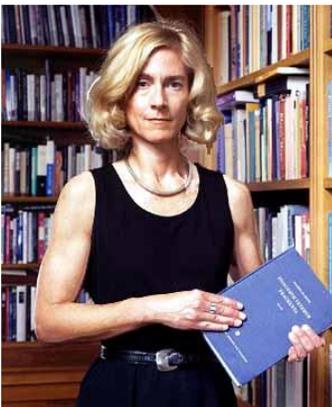
Peter Singer



Avital Ronell



Michael Hardt



Martha Nussbaum



Slavoj Žižek



Judith Butler



Kwame Anthony Appiah



Astra Taylor



Sunaura Taylor

Astra Taylor

Explain Peter Singer's argument against the exploitation and killing of non-human animals.

In what ways is Singer a "utilitarian"?

Astra Taylor disagrees sharply with certain elements of Singer's argument. What is the source of their disagreement? For Taylor, the bedrock principle is "the sanctity of human life," but for Singer, describing or addressing the sanctity of human life means not only calculating or judging a person's quality of life but calculating or determining how maintaining the quality of the life of one person has implications for the quality of life for other persons. For Singer, thinking of each human life solely in terms of its intrinsic sanctity, while in and of itself important, atomizes human lives, isolating them one from the other, as if one life had no impact on other lives. As a utilitarian, Singer insists on looking at individual human lives in their informing contexts, and for him that means carefully weighing and comparing and contrasting what he calls "interests," a kind of thinking that makes many people very uncomfortable. The interests of the individual are for him not the only interests, and not necessarily even the most important interests. Singer argues that we cannot speak of the sanctity of human life or of any sentient life in the abstract. Instead, how that life is lived is the most pressing question for him, and what determines—or should determine—our moral actions. He asks: *How are we to live? What makes our life most meaningful, most fulfilling?*

Distinguish Kwame Anthony Appiah's idea of cosmopolitanism from existing models of cosmopolitanism. How is it different from "global government"? From "universalism"?

Explain Martha Nussbaum's argument against "traditional social contract theory."

Name all ten of the "central capabilities" that she says are essential to the flourishing of life on the planet.

Michael Hardt's work is an impetus for revolution that is also a rigorous critique of existing ideas of revolution. Distinguish Hardt's notion of revolution from those existing ideas. In what ways does he complicate the distinction between the means and ends of revolution? What is the meaning of "democracy" for him?

What does Hardt mean by "immaterial production and affective labor"? How are these things at once the source of oppression and the source of resistance?

What does Slavoj Žižek mean by "true ecology"? Explain the difference between his notion of ecological thinking and more conventional notions of ecological thinking. After the great British-born American theorist, Timothy Morton, Žižek calls for the development of an "ecology with nature." What is that? Why is "trash" important to his theoretical work?

What does Cornell West mean when he says that we should *enact paideia*?

What does West mean when he says that “philosophy must go to school with the poets”?

Explain what West means but the “fiduciary dimension of being human...the fiduciary dimension of human existence in which we all need some degree of trustworthiness in order to go on in some way.”

Towards the end of her remarks, Avital Ronell turns to a lesson that the great 18th-century philosopher, Immanuel Kant, teaches her about the importance of speaking up and speaking out. What precisely is that lesson?

For Ronell, what are the political and ethical dangers of embracing “clarity or transparency”?

In what way do each of the conversations making up *Examined Life* return us to the question of the *situatedness* of theoretical thinking? In what different ways are we invited to consider the ways in which theoretical thinking happens in a particular time and place?

Judith Butler

In conversation with Sunaura Taylor, Butler argues that “We’re all radically dependent, and if we’re not cared for by others, if we can’t rely on that care we cannot thrive, and even what we call our self-sufficiency...can’t come into being without a certain kind of well-met dependency...” Explain.

Butler tells us that there’s a particular idea she finds to be generative from the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, who is in turn reading the 17th-century Dutch philosopher, Spinoza: “What can a body do? [T]he question is supposed to challenge the traditional ways in which we think about bodies. We usually ask what is a body or what is the ideal form of a body or what’s the difference between the body and the soul and that kind of thing. But what can a body do is a different question. ...It isolates a set of capacities and a set of instrumentalities or actions, and we are assemblages of those things. And I liked this idea because it’s not like there’s an essence and there’s an ideal form, but there are just different kinds of assemblages.” How precisely does the idea of embodied life that Butler outlines here (drawing from Deleuze and Spinoza) unsettle more conventional notions of embodied life?

Why is Butler’s argument about the interdependence of human lives in a complex relationship with “feminism”?

How does Butler “re-value” or unsettle the normative values that are conventionally associated with “grief” and “mourning”? Explain the generative political and ethical possibilities that she derives from grief, grievability, and mourning.

To what uses have “feminism,” or a certain “feminism,” been put to justify the war in

Afghanistan?

Name eight specific examples of subjects being “de-realized” in Butler’s three essays. How do these individual examples differ from each other?

Name at least two major ways in which, for Butler, we are not simply autonomous but dependent creatures?

Name five specific ways that the Guantanamo “detainees” are rendered less than human?

At what point is Butler’s argument the most radical, i.e., the most deeply counter-intuitive and unconventional?

From which philosopher does Butler derive her concept of “recognition”? Note how she revises what “recognition” means. How so?

Upon what other thinkers is Butler’s work dependent? How so?

What two specific historical circumstances activate Butler’s essays?

In her “Explanation and Exoneration” essay, Butler sends us 21 numbered missives or telegrams or dispatches from the front, i.e, from the war on terror. Each dispatch points to a specific way in which courageous theoretical *thinking* can break open the existing frames that determine who is worthy of life, what is a liveable life, who is grievable and ungrievable, and what we are able to hear and not hear. Describe at least ten of those dispatches.

Jacques Derrida

Explain what “hospitality” means in Derrida, using Derrida’s own words, examples, and arguments. What are the central paradoxes at the heart of hospitality?

Why does contemporary critical theory say that it is important to explore new ways of thinking about obligation in excess of kinship and the nation-state?

Derrida points us to particular scenes from two of Plato’s dialogues, including *The Sophist* and the *The Statesman*. He also discusses Plato’s *Apology for Socrates*, the account of the trial of his mentor. What exactly happens in each these scenes? What specifically interests Derrida in each of these scenes? How does each scene—differently—serve Derrida’s argument about the complexities and paradoxes characterizing hospitality?

Derrida also discusses several scenes from Sophocles’ *Oedipus at Colonus*. What precisely happens in these scenes? How do these scenes serve Derrida’s argument about hospitality?

There are four—probably *five*—overlapping “difficulties” characterizing Derrida’s *Of*

Hospitality. What are these “difficulties”? Why does Derrida invite us to tarry with these difficulties, and to demonstrate hospitality towards them, rather than rush to “solve” them?

Describe and explain the significance of three or four of the contemporary cultural and political contexts that make themselves felt in Derrida’s remarks?

What is the difference between “unconditional” and “conditional” hospitality? What is the difference between “the Law of hospitality” and “the laws of hospitality.” Explain how they are connected to each other, at once different from each other but also inseparable.

What is the significance of the extraordinarily troublesome story of Lot and his daughters for Derrida’s argument?

Several times Derrida’s argument turns to the question of the telecommunicatively rich present in which he is living and teaching and writing. What does the instensification of communicative technologies mean to him? What problems does it present? How do these technologies unsettle the question of hospitality....or rather, bring out, as never before, problems that have *always* unsettled hospitality.

I’ve been thinking a lot about Derrida’s meditation on *Oedipus at Colonus*, and in particular on the scenes in which Oedipus’s dutiful daughter, Antigone, the one who had led her blind father to Colonus, as a stranger, responds to her father’s injunction to be buried in a place that she cannot know and cannot see. Return to the passages in which Derrida slows his argument down, using Sophocles’ play as a place to ask some difficult questions and wager some difficult theses. Oedipus will die and lie in a crypt that is itself encrypted, hidden from view, or hidden from everyone’s view but the King of Colonus and all subsequent kings of the land. It is the secret that they must bear, and Oedipus tells the King that the safety of the land depends on keeping that secret. I don’t know why this scene and the emphasis that Derrida gives it, moves me so. Let me begin to offer some thoughts and pose some questions, in the hope that you will think with me about this super-charged moment in both Sophocles’ ancient tragedy and in Derrida’s contemporary seminar: --To be denied knowledge of where a loved one is buried. --To be buried as a stranger in a strange land. What do these things mean? How do they give us a way to think about the question of hospitality more generally, in a time and place far, far from the days of Sophocles? To be admitted hospitably as a stranger is always understood against the horizon of the possibility that, once admitted, you may suffer and die in that strange land, far from home. No stranger could be welcomed unless he or she or it was in some sense mortal, exposed, and vulnerable to this possibility. --So, no welcome or succour except to those who can die and who will die. Perhaps that is why the gods, the immortals, the ones who cannot die, simply come and go at will, whereas the thing that makes you and I legibly human is that we arrive on the shores of the other and expect—hope?—for hospitality. Before we say a word, we arrive as mortal and vulnerable creatures....or hope to arrive as these creatures, for everything depends on whether the host sees us as legibly human, as living a life, as Butler says, that is *grievable*.

Now, Antigone weeps, as Derrida is careful to note, not so much for the loss of her father, which is sorrowful enough, but for not having a grave-site where she might honour his memory. Is part of what is being evoked here the haunting spectre of something that is worse than death, assuming that there is anything worse than death, i.e., the loss of *loss*. Without a burial site to inhabit and to *see*, Antigone fears losing loss, being deprived of grief, or a certain kind of grief. How does Butler's remarks on ungrieved and grieved lives help us understand what is happening here. (And it is worth saying here that Butler has written a wonderful book about Sophocles' play, *Antigone*.)

One of the things Derrida does here, as a teacher, is to leave his students—you and I, as well as those who were listening to him on that day in Paris in January 1996—to wrestle with the question of sight and blindness in these scenes in the play. Oedipus is blind, literally embodying his inability to fathom or “see” the degree to which his life has been one peculiarly and violently overwritten by fate, a fate that saw his fall from power, the destruction of his home and most of his family, and his being expelled as an outlaw and stranger. When he dies he will not see any longer, blindness layered upon another kind of blindness. Now his daughter is “blind” in the sense of being unable to see where her father is, now that he is dead. Her blindness is vividly figured forth, made visible, by her tears. Paradoxically, Antigone pleads for her dead father “to see her tears.” She wants her father to see that she no longer has a view to seeing, not now. Look at *this*, she seems to say. But at what? Can one see, grasp, understand mourning and grief? I address you without the two of us being in each other's line of sight, without us being fully legible to each other. It is as if, stripped of the familiar notion of two people encountering each other, standing face-to-face, another kind of encounter suddenly becomes palpable, an address that is rooted in vulnerability. Before I say “Where are you?” I say something else: “I grieve.” “The tears,” Derrida says so memorably, “say that the eyes are not made primarily for seeing but for crying” (115). Antigone and her father are invisible to each other...and yet Antigone remains bound to Oedipus, answerable to him or rather to his memory, so much so that she pleads for him to see her, and specifically to see that she cannot see—she cannot see him, she cannot see for the tears. Her eyes do not see, yet they say something: they “speak.” What do they say? They implore, they express suffering, grief, and loss. They speak, but without words. Her tears say: in my grief, I suffer. What makes me legibly human is that before seeing something, grasping it and understanding it, I am mortal, vulnerable, grieving, and grievable. I am not only one who sees; I am also one who grieves, even if, as Butler says, we do not understand—“see”—exactly what grief is or, as important, where grief will take us. Even and especially in the midst of this uncertainty, we are asked to listen and to respond, to be hospitable to the other's agony, but without ever knowing ahead of time where this will all take us. And all of this happens in the presence of the dead, who do not respond and who do not grieve. Marx had said “Let the dead bury the dead.” Derrida says, after Sophocles, something very different, in direct opposition to Marx's strange valediction forbidding mourning: “Only the living can bury the dead.” To be alive and legibly human means, at some fundamental level, to be burying the dead.

Oedipus is dead. His burial crypt is not known. At first this invisibility seems confined to him, the last strange thing to happen to a man—the quintessential Stranger—who has known many

strange things in his life. But is it so strange? Is part of what Sophocles is saying to us is this: that the dead are *always* somewhere else, that in their death, they withdraw from sight and from knowledge? Even when we know where a body is buried, do we know where the dead *are*. Shakespeare said that the dead inhabit “an undiscovered country,” a homeland that has never been seen and that may not be anyone’s home. The dead make the very notion of hospitality tremble because they arrive, they haunt the living, as strangers from an undiscovered country. They do not answer my queries of them, beginning with “What is your name? Where do you come from?” If they answer, I am the one that must carry the heavy burden of making them answer, because I act *as if* they could answer, *as if* they could speak to me...knowing that they speak and answer only in my memory, and yours. These strangers, the dead, they feel very close to hand, never closer, never more proximate or intimate, because all that they are is what they are in my memory, and yours. And yet they also come from very far away, the farthest distance imaginable. They are the strangest of strangers, while also being the most intimate of intimates. My obligations to them are therefore very complicated. For what are the laws of hospitality to the dead? In distancing the Stranger while at the same time embracing the Stranger, do the laws of hospitality resemble our relationships with the dead? Or is Sophocles’ and Derrida’s point the reverse: that our relationships with the dead model the laws of hospitality in its “purest” form? I must think about this question more.



Jean-Antoine-Theodore Giroust, *Oedipus at Colonus* (1788)

Fourteen telegrams about the question of the stranger

1. The question of the stranger: to ask questions about the idea of the stranger (and thus about hospitality....to name the stranger “the stranger” is already to have classified the approaching other, already to have put into place *conditions* regulating that approach; to query the stranger (to ask first, for her or his *name, place of birth*...but why these things, why always these kinds of questions, family and nativity?); to be questioned *by* the stranger, to let the strangeness of the stranger interrogate me, the stranger’s question....

2. We are standing with the Athenian philosophers in Plato's *Statesman*. There's Theodorus and Theaetetus, and there is the inestimable Socrates. And then another arrives, the Foreigner bearing the *intolerable question*. He asks, hesitant at first to speak up in a place that is not his: Can something both *be* and *not be* at the same time? Surely not. Only ghosts and spectres possess that quality, and we all know—don't we?—that there is no such thing as ghosts. The Foreigner wonders out loud: does that make me a parricide, will I be mistaken for a parricide, a murderer of the father, the truth? *Logos*: truth, father, they are said with the same word in ancient Greek. The Christians will use the word as one of the names of God. To kill the truth, or a certain notion of what constitutes the truth. What a crime to commit! But another story of a man who murders his father is coming, a story from ancient Greece that will all but overtake Derrida's seminars.
3. We are listening in to the trial of Socrates. His life, his *examined life*, is at stake. And holy crap he's still teaching, still encouraging others to tarry with difficulty and to be hospitable to difficulty. Remarkable. He's one of us, but he says that he isn't one of us today, that he doesn't speak our language, the language of the courts, the language of one who has been indicted according to the law and who is at this moment being addressed by the Law. He says he is a foreigner, but if he is, then he is a foreigner who is also us. What lesson is he teaching us at this moment, when his life hangs in the balance? The lesson is that the *question of hospitality begins* here: we ask the stranger to speak our language when we welcome him or her into our country.
4. Hospitality is no simple matter. It is cleft, redoubled, but in the oddest way. Every form of hospitality is conditioned, i.e., it only always happens in the midst of conventions, frames, codes. No hospitality is unconditioned. And yet even to consider condition of hospitality we are already imagining the approach of something foreign, namely *absolute hospitality*, a hospitality without any conditions whatsoever. Absolute hospitality is the horizon that orients my thinking about hospitality but cannot itself be thought.
5. I said that another story of a man who murders his father was coming. And it does, in the form of the story of Oedipus, as told by Sophocles. Oedipus arrives as a stranger (he is named "the stranger" by the Chorus, who represent the values of the homeland) and the first person he and his daughter meet is a figure named "the Stranger." Then the Chorus queries him, wanting to know what he had done with his mother and his father...and not wanting to know at the same time.
6. Yesterday, in ancient Greece, and today, in modern Europe, the question of hospitality is also the question about whether it is possible rigorously to delimit *thresholds or frontiers: between the familial and the non-familial, between the foreign and non-foreign, the citizen and non-citizen, but first of all between the private and the public*. So many borders to consider, administer, police, and worry. A *mutation* has happened, huge tele-communicative advances, email, the internet, etc.. Do these technologies not make the

thresholds or frontiers tremble, exposing the inside to the outside, the private world to the public one? Is the intensification of communicative technologies one source of the increased anxiety about *my sovereignty*? More communicative technologies is a mixed phenomenon: with *the democratization of information* (the free movement of information, or perhaps the appearance of the free movement of information) comes something else, namely the capacity to be policed, administered, and subject to surveillance: *The blessing of visibility and daylight is also what the police and politics demands*. In a world in which the boundaries are being crossed by telecommunications, *How can we distinguish between a guest and a parasite?* But this problem was always the case: *There is no house or interior without a door or windows*.

7. Imagine absolute hospitality. *Let us say yes to who or what turns up, before any determination, before any anticipation, before any identification, whether or not it has to do with a foreigner, an immigrant, an invited guest, or an unexpected visitor, whether or not the new arrival is the citizen of another country, a human, animal, or divine creature, a living or dead thing, male or female*. Derrida invites us to welcome the other unconditionally but this welcome must remain a welcome, a gesture of openness that cannot in fact take place. Or to be much more precise, it can take place only in its violation or perversion; unconditional hospitality appears only in the form of its disappearance in all the myriad forms of *conditional hospitality* with which we think we are familiar.
8. Another question of the foreigner: *it concerns what happens at death and when the traveller is laid to rest in a foreign land*. Oedipus and his daughter, Antigone, come to Derrida's mind: *Antigone whose blind father, at the end of Oedipus at Colonus, again illustrates this strange experience of hospitality transgressed," i.e., when you die abroad, and not always at all as you would have wanted*.
9. The guest is the host of the host. And the host is the guest of the guest. How is that possible? Aren't you either a guest or a host? How can you be both something and not something at the same instant? The question of the foreigner.
10. Far from home, who could blame *exiles, the deported, the expelled, the rootless, the stateless, lawless nomads, absolute foreigners* for longing for home, and thinking of home precisely as the place where their kin are buried. Home is where the grave is. But even if far from home, the exile can keep something of the homeland with them, in the form of his or her *mother-tongue*. Hannah Arendt, the great political theorist of the twentieth-century, exiled from her homeland, Germany, by the violence and atrocities of Nazism, claimed as much. *She no longer felt German except in language*. But is language a homeland? If it is, it is a strange home, for language carries us out of ourselves and subjects us to *irreducible expropriation*. *What is called the 'mother' tongue is already 'the other's language'*. Derrida said many times: *I have a language, but it is not mine*. We are exiles of and in our own homes.

11. *What happens at the end of Oedipus at Colonus?* Derrida's question activates so much of the second seminar. No easy answer appears. Whatever answer there is cannot be paraphrased, certainly not in a course blog. To paraphrase what Derrida does here would be like paraphrasing a play by Shakespeare or an Ode by Keats. But how not to paraphrase? How else to proceed? We must be hospitable to Derrida, tarry with his difficulty...*and* be inhospitable, compel his words, the rhythms of his thinking, to become legible to us. You are a guest, Monsieur Derrida, but you must be *my* guest.
12. Oedipus is a stranger, and so too is his daughter, Antigone. He obliges Theseus, himself once a stranger, now king of the city, to keep a secret, namely the location of Oedipus' death and burial. Antigone is bereft, but in a quite particular way: her tears are for the fact that her father dies *without a grave, without a tomb, without a determinable place...a localizable and circumscribed place of mourning*. Antigone is deprived of conventional or legible forms of mourning. So she mourns, but she mourns mourning. But insofar as no mourning is complete, don't we always mourn mourning? In these centrally important sentences in his seminar, Derrida circles about the unbearable question: how to be hospitable to death? To respect you, the beloved one who is now dead, I must keep you and preserve you, be your guardian. But truly to respect you, the beloved one who is now dead, I must let you be, I must not compel you to be *my* memory of you and only my memory of you. I must let you remain unseen, unlocalizable, you who now are no longer you. I must locate you and I must not locate you. To be hospitable to you, I must be inhospitable. To be inhospitable, I must be hospitable. This is unbearable. Tears must take the place of deciding one or the other.
13. It is too much, those tears, that thought that tears remind us that eyes are for so much more than seeing. Too much. So Derrida turns to another archive, this one biblical. We'll see him do this in his lecture on the animal gaze, returning to the status of animals in the Book of Genesis. The strange and estranging story of Lot and his daughters surfaces. But we've been here before. Another story of incestuous violence. This one a story of hospitality woven through with violence. Lot protects his guests, pays homage to them, but at enormous cost, exposing his own daughters to violence. And this story recalls another, from the Book of Judges. Again, the story of a father/logos/host sacrificing his daughter to protect his guest. These scenes make brutally vivid a question that has haunted Derrida from the very opening lines of the first seminar: the ways in which hospitality and violence are secret sharers, bound up with each other, rather than antitheses. *Are we heirs to this tradition of hospitality?* Derrida asks. *What is the foreigner? What would a foreign woman be?*
14. *Xenos*: stranger, foreigner, barbarian, non-Greek. *Hostis*: guest, enemy. *L'etranger*: stranger and foreigner. *Hote*: guest, host.



Fulcran-Jean Harriet, *Oedipus at Colonus* (1798)