

## No Longer Lost for Words

### Antigone's Afterlife

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#### Why Revisit Classics Like Antigone?

Sophocles' dramatic depiction of the myth of Antigone (441 BC) has undergone a range of theatrical reincarnations over the centuries, from the tellingly entitled *Antigone ou le pieté* by Robert Garnier (1580) to versions and free translations by Vittorio Alfieri (1783), Friedrich Hölderlin (1804), Johann Wolfgang Goethe (1808), Walter Hasenclaver (1917), Jean Cocteau (1922), Jean Anouilh (1943), Bertolt Brecht (1948, an adaptation that was to be further re-adapted by Judith Malina in 1967), Tom Paulin (1984), Athol Fugard (1974), Miro Gavran (1990) and Seamus Heaney (2004) – to name just a few. It is the contention of this analysis that dramatic reinterpretations of Sophocles' *Antigone* have fallen into two very distinct phases; firstly those comprising predominantly reverential appropriations of the ancient classic which tap into the source text's cultural cachet to bolster the cultural, religious and political aims of the society in which it was currently being performed; and secondly, the post 1945 appropriations. It is the second phase that will provide the particular focus for this discussion.

During the twentieth century and in particular since the Second World War, *Antigone* was to be the subject of a marked interpretative transformation. This transformation was in the guise of adaptations and re-workings which attempted to liberate the source text from what was increasingly

deemed to be centuries of interpretative distortion, containment and stasis in the service of the ideological and moral beliefs at the centre of the Western liberal humanist tradition. Following a brief overview of the way in which *Antigone* was to experience an unrelenting campaign of appropriative christianization, particularly during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this article will focus upon two key but contrasting examples of post-war adaptations that contest the earlier canonical reading practices which sought to train and thus constrain Antigone's "voice." The two post-war adaptations to be focused on are Brecht's inspired and contemplative "model" warning against totalitarianism past, present and future and Athol Fugard's anti-Apartheid protest drama, *The Island*.

### Adapting and Reinterpreting The Classics

Jonathan Miller has commented upon the "afterlife" of works of art, and how this mark of endurance cannot always be best nourished by later (and indeed often unrealisable) slavish reconstruction as "there comes a point in the life of any cultural artefact, whether a play or a painting, when the continued existence of the physical token that represents it does not necessarily mean that the original identity of the work survives."<sup>1</sup> In this respect, Miller is equating adaptation and creative appropriation to a type of performative re-reading, a process whereby certain aspects of the artwork may be highlighted or obscured according to the concerns of the interpretative community which scrutinizes them. Similarly, Roland Barthes urgently endorses this kind of interpretative practice, particularly for a world that he perceives to be increasingly media saturated and in which the acceleration of information even extends to our "message" gathering reception of those texts at the very centre of the Western canon:

Rereading, an operation contrary to the commercial and ideological habits of our society which would have us "throw away" the story once it has been consumed ("devoured") so that we can then move onto another story, buy another book.<sup>2</sup>

Classics, like *Antigone*, are so implicated in our cultural tradition and history that very often they provide eminently suitable sites for not only aesthetic but also socio-cultural re-investigation and re-reading. Indeed, processes of adaptation and re-interpretation in relation to such eminent texts are at the very root of Hans-Georg Gadamer's espousal of "effective history" through which our traditions, our past, might reveal something to ourselves of our present predicament.<sup>3</sup> Walter Benjamin, years earlier, also highlighted the necessity for a dialogic encounter between past and present:

It is not a question of presenting written works in the context of their time but of articulating the time, which grasps them – namely ours – in the time in which they originated.<sup>4</sup>

In this respect, classics like *Antigone*, are more than a mere text; they are the textual manifestations of tradition which, whether we read the texts or not, have shaped and formed our cultural situation and which thus represent an inescapably strong and irresistible pull on our cultural consciousness in the present. Arguably, our hermeneutic responsibility is to engage in dialogue with these classics, and thereby to initiate a conversation between the past and the present. Great texts/artworks are not the cultural artefacts that espouse eternal verities; rather, they are those in which subsequent generations are able to find a living significance for themselves. By way of performatively re-reading or creatively appropriating such canonical works emergent and hitherto untapped meanings in such classics are elicited. As Joel Weinsheimer astutely suggests, “the full process of interpreting the classic consists in a reciprocal questioning, a dialogue whereby the interpreter too becomes interpreted.”<sup>5</sup> Appropriations of a work like *Antigone* are reflective of a hermeneutic responsibility on the part of the dramatist, and by extension the audience/reader, to recognize his or her own situated and contingent historical interpretative position. Once such an interpretative responsibility is assumed, the classic is liberated from past historical associations and evaluations for a different and, most importantly, significant understanding in the present. As Jonathan Miller points out, “it is not the meaning of the text that changes with the passage of time but its significance. The mere fact that a modern reader can recognize implications which would have been unrecognizable to the original author does not imply that the meaning has altered.”<sup>6</sup>

A further dimension to take into account when discussing our reception of later reinterpretations of Sophocles’ *Antigone* is the source text’s mythical origins, which provide a suitably vague sense of creation that potentially liberates our ability to re-interpret the work. This is a point raised by Isabel Capeloa Gil: “myths describe a meaningful collectively important reality and are multi-significant. In Levy-Strauss’ opinion, this feature not only enables but also causes new readings of old myths in ever changing time/space coordinates.”<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Michael J. Walton also observes the polysemic power of myth, which, he states, “becomes personal by virtue of its universality, inviting decodings tied to each new occasion or circumstance. Myth can reveal you to yourself.”<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Hans Blumenberg has suggested how the mythical foundations of plays like *Antigone* provide us with a symbolic framework within which current issues may be examined along philosophical, literary, historical, economical and social lines.<sup>9</sup> Such

reworking, Blumenberg suggests, may take the form of two opposing interpretative strategies – affirmative or subversive. Gil refines this distinction by identifying the former strategy as one that views mythical narratives as truthful and she cites the major exponents of such an approach as Wagner, Nietzsche and Hubner. The latter subversive approach is, according to Gil, characterised by interpretation that brings mythical stories to immanence by denying their truthful basis as defined by Weber's concepts of *Entzauberung*. Although this analysis of the way in which reinterpretations of the Antigonal myth fall into two antithetical categories is quite convincing, the very clear chronological divide between the re-interpretations of Sophocles' play cannot be dismissed. Such a historically interpretative chasm between pre-twentieth century and post-twentieth century appropriations, and most notably, those written post 1945, further illustrates a distinction between affirmative or subversive readings. However, in addition, a chronological awareness of adaptations' production highlights the way those written during the twentieth century and later were often oppositional negotiations with the earlier re-interpretations which sought to expose their constraining effect upon the source text. These re-appropriations are often acutely intertextual with a critical edge and none more so than those which focus upon Sophocles' *Antigone*.

Following the crisis of conscience that followed the end of the war and the horrifying realisation of the unimaginable, the Holocaust, the West's hitherto uncontested philosophical, social, political and cultural values were to undergo a rigorous intellectual interrogation at all levels. Many artists strove for new modes of articulation and new forms of expression. Ironically, one way in which many dramatists sought to understand the world was to revisit the ancients, to embark upon a creative return to the classics that contested the received, often reified interpretations and hermeneutic stasis that had contained such works during the many centuries prior to the horrors of the Second World War. Such a post-bellum hermeneutic return was no less apparent than with Sophocles' *Antigone*. This resurgence of interest in the play was partly due to its central concern with post-war strife and reprisal, but also because it captured the nightmarish imaginings of a world that had lost its sense of moral anchorage, a post-Holocaust existence that was compelled to reassess its once unquestioned certainties and faith in progress.

The unseen but highly complex social dynamic that operates behind cultural evaluation, and the way in which a certain work, like Sophocles' *Antigone*, might possess an uncanny significance for an audience or readership centuries later is noteworthy. Herrnstein Smith observes such a process as being "in accord with the changing interests and other values of

a community, various potential meanings of a work will become more or less visible (or 'realisable') and the visibility – and hence value – of the work for that community will change accordingly."<sup>10</sup> Post war, it would seem, the significance of *Antigone* was to resonate loud and clear.

### **Antigone as Christian Martyr**

Although *homage*, in the form of rewriting or adapting the cultural cornerstones of the Western dramatic canon, has long been practised and exercised, it is what George Steiner identifies as the peculiarly and "radically transformative" nature of the re-interpretations of *Antigone* that make an investigation into the play and indeed the leading protagonist's after-life so very compelling.<sup>11</sup> Unlike *Medea* or *Electra*, not only has this particular ancient play been re-contextualised, modernised and creatively allegorised – it has become subject to hermeneutic manipulation and even bowdlerization in the service of the Manichean cosmology of the Judea-Christian tradition. Examples of such an ideological superimposition upon the play are manifold, such as Percy Bysshe Shelley's reference to the "godlike" Antigone in a letter to John Gisborne in 1812, and De Quincey's exclamatory praise for the central protagonist as, "Holy heathen! ... idolatrous yet Christian lady, that in the spirit of martyrdom trodst alone the yawning billows of the grave."<sup>12</sup> Indeed, by the time of the French Revolution, the figure of Antigone became "talismanic to the European spirit," as she was re-cast in a role that confirmed her Promethean status as the ceaselessly oppressed rebel, the ever struggling underdog and the unrelenting champion of the powerless – an uncompromisingly sympathetic, but nonetheless eternally suffering characterisation.<sup>13</sup> Subsequently, *Antigone*, the play, has been instrumental in propounding and disseminating ethical precepts and moral values that were not known at the times of its material production in the fifth century BC. As a result, the play has often been reinterpreted in the service of ideologies far removed from the philosophical context of ancient Greece:

Why did Barthelemy choose just this tragedy for seminal reference? Why did Shelley, Hegel, Hebbel see in the mythical persona of Antigone the 'highest presence' to have entered the world of men? What intention attaches to the repeated hints (in de Quincey, in Kierkegaard, they are more than hints) that Antigone is understood as a counterpart to Christ, as God's child and messenger before Revelation?<sup>14</sup>

The almost casual hermeneutic elision of the tortuously ambiguous struggle between conscience and state in the source text into a later iconographic

representation of Christian martyrdom was still to be in evidence well into the twentieth century and was reflected in the writings of critics and philosophers alike:

Among the Greek poets, Sophocles is the one whose quality of inspiration is the most visibly Christian and perhaps the most pure (he is, to my knowledge, much more Christian than any other tragic poet of the last twenty centuries. This Christian quality is generally recognised in the tragedy of *Antigone*, which might be an illustration of the saying: We ought to obey God, rather than men.<sup>15</sup>

However, as Charles W. Oudemans observes, it is unlikely that the Greeks would have “recognized the essentially romantic problem of the individual in revolt against the state.”<sup>16</sup> The ancients’ response to the outspoken woman depicted in Sophocles’ play would have been far more complicated and shaped by current philosophical concepts, including that of the *pharmakon*. The concept of the *pharmakon*, that is, the expulsion of poison to elicit a cure, was closely linked to the practice of ostracism in fifth century Athens, whereby the very crimes which are ultimately held against the ostracised were at the same time born of the very superior qualities which raised him or her above “the common herd.” The *pharmakon* highlights the intrinsic ambiguity at the centre of Greek thought, wholly devoid of reductively conditioned notions of good and evil, and very much of topical concern at the time the play was first performed. At that time, Athens was experiencing a time of tumultuous change, resulting in a marked clash between the ancient forms of religious thought and the new ideas relating to the development of the law and new political practices. This conflict was played out at the ancient dramatic festivals, through plays such as Sophocles’ *Antigone*, and it is the centrality of concepts such as the *pharmakon* in the source text that have been subject to subsequent distortion and omission with later christianised appropriations. The complexities of character embodied in the original play have often been reinterpreted in such a way that only the “remedy” of idealistic Christian utopianism is fore-grounded and the representation of the power of the spirit of good to overcome evil through suffering is artificially emphasized. However, as Jaques Derrida observes, this ill-balanced interpretation totally distorts the original ancient concept and its meaning:

The common translation of *pharmakon* by remedy – a beneficent drug – is not of course accurate. Not only can *pharmakon* really mean remedy and thus erase, on a certain surface of its functioning, the ambiguity of its meaning. ... Its translation by “remedy” nonetheless erases, in going outside the Greek language, the other pole re-

served in the word *pharmakon*. It cancels out the resources of ambiguity and makes more difficult, if not impossible, an understanding of the context.<sup>17</sup>

For Derrida, the *pharmakon* has been devalued and misrepresented by subsequent interpretations. Indeed, it is clear to see how translations have overlooked the ambiguity of this central concept in Greek culture and art, in preference for interpretative closure and hermeneutic resolution, contributed to the ease of its disappearance from later christianising interpretations. However, the text does not permit us to see Antigone in such simplistic terms, merely as a noble heroine who acts righteously and dies for her beliefs. Instead, it clearly confronts and focuses on the dilemma presented by the seemingly irreconcilable conflicting loyalties to the state and to the family, *polis* and *oikos*, presented in the play. The struggle of evenly matched principles which lies at the very heart of the concept of the *pharmakon* was central to the ancient Athenian experience, and, as such, was far removed from what was to become little more than the dramaturgical reaffirmation of pre-ordained moralistic tenets about good and evil.

Certainly, popular ideas about women would have influenced ancient opinion about *Antigone* and it is highly likely that the unmarried protagonist would have been viewed by the all-male audience as conforming to the stereotype of emotional, irrational female virgin and that she might even have been considered a histrionic “menace to society.”<sup>18</sup> Just as the eponymous heroine’s unmarried status may have depicted her in a particular light to the spectators at the theatre, similarly her name – *Anti-gone* or “anti-generation” – could have immediately suggested something unnatural or perverse to an Athenian all-male audience. However, the rich polyvalence of Antigone’s name cannot be underestimated, for not only does “anti” suggest “in opposition to” but also “in compensation of.” Critics such as Stathis Gourgouris, see the etymological polyphony of the name as further emphasizing the irreconcilable battle at the heart of the play, for it seems to suggest that Antigone could be in opposition to progeny simultaneous to her being a “replacement” mother for her dead brother and her incestuously created, disintegrating family. Indeed, it has been suggested that the best way to summon up the contradictory nature of Antigone’s name is by way of the phrase, “generated in place of another” or “born to oppose.” However, over and above the intriguing and ongoing debate about the meaning of Antigone’s name, the conflict between state and family becomes all the more complex, for we are presented with a betrothed, much loved and fiercely principled young woman who in order to honour her ties of kinship denies herself husband, family life, future progeny and generational continuity for her noble line. In her strict, pious devotion to the

gods of death and burial, and indeed at the risk of her own life, Antigone is simultaneously refusing to acknowledge the equally important facets of those same gods: birth and renewal. This dichotomy makes it far less easy to see Antigone as purely a victim to patriarchal tyranny, and it makes us recognise that “the fact that she has much of the right on her side does not mean she has all the right.”<sup>19</sup> Whether loyalty to the state superseded the rigid adherence to the family was very much a live issue of debate for fifth century Athenians. Increasingly, as David Wiles points out, the establishment of Athenian democracy rested in part on breaking down allegiance to the *oikos*, in favour of unstinting support for the *polis*, and “in Greek democratic society ties of the family have to be subordinated to those socially constructed ties which constitute the political system.”<sup>20</sup>

Reflective of the changing nature of society at that time, Sophocles seems to critique the developing Athenian civic ideology that was often so forcibly represented in the pre-play ceremonies that took place in the theatre of the day. Such ritual at the dramatic competitions was used to boast of the wealth, power and civilized laws of Athens, and to encourage the citizens to endorse the democratic ideals that lay behind daily city operations. Conversely, however, ancient theatre was a debating forum *par excellence*, and it would be fair to surmise that Sophocles took advantage of this as “theatre was both an act of worship of a god and a kind of surrogate political assembly, it was in its nature to explore this middle ground between ritual, family and politics.”<sup>21</sup>

With the onset of the Second World War, followed by the myriad horrors thrown up by a divided Europe and the aftermath of the Holocaust, re-interpretations of *Antigone* were to assume a less overtly tendentious and oversimplified slant than those appropriations previously outlined, that had predominated since the French Revolution. *Antigone* as little more than a basic Christian triumphalist narrative, that piously celebrated the laudable constancy of human suffering for the “good,” no longer filled the spiritual and ethical vacuum left by *l’univers concentrationnaire*. Thus, post-war appropriations of *Antigone* sought to recapture the philosophical conundrum of the *pharmakon* at the core of Sophocles’ play, but for very topical issues in the present. The compelling ambiguity of the source text was in tune with the *zeitgeist* of a post-Holocaust world confronted by the unrepresentable, the inarticulable, the unimaginable. This, I would argue, would be the second and long-awaited phase of Antigone’s “afterlife” – one that reinvested the classic with its original ambiguity, liberating it from the teleological certainties of redemptive narratives which Phillip Cohen characterizes as those with the propensity to:

Ease the pain of lived contradictions, furnishing missing links be-

tween origins and destinies, stitching together scattered histories into a singular totalising consciousness.<sup>22</sup>

Consequently, the character that had provided such an eloquently affirmative mouthpiece for the moralising tenets of a prevailing and dominant ideology, once again became as belligerent, as irrepressibly subversive and dangerously radical as the day she defied Creon's unyielding edict. The often hazardous and certainly never-ending struggle of conscience, represented by both the play and character of *Antigone*, had re-entered the stage.

### **“The Model” and Brecht’s *Antigone***

Bertolt Brecht's re-incarnation of *Antigone* was very much motivated by the situation that he found himself in at that time – amidst the aftermath of global conflict and confronted by the seemingly insurmountable challenges of a post-war defeated Germany. Although written post-war, in 1948, the action of the play commences three years earlier, during the death throes of the war and just as Antigone and Ismene discover their brother Polynices has been summarily executed as a traitor. Immediately, Brecht re-invests the Sophoclean play with the ethical complexities about treachery, partisanship, loyalty and recrimination often thrown up by international conflict and in so doing the war which led to the argument over Polynices' burial rites is emphasised far more so than in the source text. As the manipulative but desperate Creon attempts to delude his own people into believing in the war with promises of booty and reward, despite the fact that crucial battles are still taking place and remain far from resolved, our attention is focused upon the human cost of war, rather than issues surrounding victory and defeat. The play emphasises the way in which the young are sacrificed to satisfy the misguided principles or dangerous apathy of the aged. This theme is not only reinforced by the early death of Antigone, but also the needless death of two sons, the defiant Haemon and the compliant Megareus, which in turn serves as a reminder of the earlier fatal demise of two contrasting brothers, Eteokles and Polynikes. The repetitive emphasis on the sibling pairs in Brecht's drama – Antigone and Ismene, Haemon and Megereus, Eteocles and Polynikes – serves to diminish the christianizing message of right and wrong that has been symbolized for so long by the ostensible conflict between Antigone and Creon. Past, present and future are summoned up in this reworking as Brecht looks rather gingerly to a future that was being shaped daily by the menacingly rigid and intransigent competing ideologies of the Cold War and, by extension, the increasing threat of a resultant nuclear catastrophe. Indeed, the

play probes into the way in which future generations can be destroyed by persuasive dogma, political sophistry and oral tradition (a quite different slant on the power of speech in the play). This is clearly suggested by the increasingly embattled leader's manipulative attempts to drown out any sound of perceived dissent be it from messengers (25), the Elders (32), Haemon, his son (42), Tiresias, the prophet (50) or indeed Antigone (28).<sup>23</sup> Brecht suggests that, in Thebes, negotiation based upon understanding is discouraged in place of clear-cut and easily labelled ideological stances that consolidate self-perpetuating division and conflict. Thus, as opposed to simply regurgitating the moralistically inspired notion of the struggle between clear cut good (Antigone) and evil (Creon), Brecht provides a far more subtle warning against the failure to negotiate, to compromise, and to openly discuss different standpoints and beliefs.

Over and above redrafting Sophocles' masterpiece to forewarn of the excesses of political dogma in the present and for the future, Brecht's overt acknowledgment to war and its aftermath is a focus of the play not only on a thematic level but also with respect to his dramaturgical method and form. Indeed, it was in response to the cultural disarray in post-war Germany that he formulated his concept of "The Dramatic Model" and his decision to return to the ancient dramas for inspiration. Brecht was also adamant that post-war art of all kinds be used to purify language and culture from nazi heritage. The concept of *Sprachswaschung* or washing Germany's immediate "cultural" past away, lies at the root of Brecht's return to ancient models and myth – such as that provided by *Antigone* – the myth and Sophocles' play. Indeed, the dramatist commented upon the urgency he felt to return to ancient models to articulate post-bellum confusion, as opposed to utilising the source text to propose any celebratory but quite artificial divide between victory and defeat, the past and future, tradition and novelty. The confusion of post-war Germany, a nation trying to retrieve some sense out of the destructive impact of a tyrannical leadership, is central to this re-interpretation, as opposed to being an invocation of the Sophoclean tragedy through which to enunciate a reductively victorious tone about the destruction of the nazi regime. The detection of a sober reconciliatory tone in the play is borne out by Brecht's own, albeit rather ambiguously phrased, words:

The great character of the resister in the old play does not represent the German resistance fighters who necessarily seem most important to us. It was not the occasion for a poetic tribute to them.<sup>24</sup>

Brecht's concept of "the model" encapsulates his view that instead of feverishly embracing anything of novelty in an effort to discard the wretched past

that created nazism, those working towards a new post war cultural life in Germany would be “well advised not to rely blindly on the assurance that new ideas are welcome.”<sup>25</sup> Undoubtedly, the dramatist believed there was room to create new ideas, but new ideas that resulted from negotiating with past models in a productive and radical way. Antigone’s warning to Ismene “when we forget the past the past returns,”<sup>26</sup> dramatically emphasizes this view. Brecht’s approach to what he termed the “masterful treatment of a model” was not reconstruction, but a productive archaeological exploration that aimed to make something in the present from the fragmentary detritus of the past. Benjamin’s analogy of the past, including past cultural works, as being at its potentially most productive when in a state of ruin is echoed here. In a similar vein, Brecht considered “the model” as the aesthetic equivalent to “the architect’s plans [which despite the destruction of a house or site] it seems, never get lost,” and to which we can make imaginative and productive reference following a time of cultural dislocation.<sup>27</sup>

Typically, Brecht’s Antigone is depicted as an average person caught up in the terrifying maelstrom that swept across Nazi Germany – not a hero, not extraordinary, not exemplary – just an individual with enough courage to confront Creon’s dictatorship, but whose defiant gestures are tragically unsuccessful. The eponymous heroine is introduced as “The Second” of two sisters hiding in an air-raid shelter in Berlin, 1945, who unwittingly hear the murder of their brother. The play emphasises the ordinary, the commonplace and the humanity of Antigone, and, somewhat ironically with respect to Brecht’s oft-stated dramatic aims, this permits a greater degree of empathy for Antigone on the part of an average audience member. The anonymous label, “The Second,” reinforces a sense of the average and the typical at the most extreme of times and in the midst of war – the great leveller. Also, we are left uncertain whether Antigone and Ismene are sisters of a German soldier fighting the allies, or whether he was a partisan fighting with the allies, an uncertainty that pales into insignificance as the play’s polemical stance unfolds. In the light of the increasingly apparent ideological rift between East and West at the time of writing, it is hardly a surprise that the diminution of true democratic debate, past, present and future, is the central object of Brecht’s critique in his re-appropriation. Indeed, the play’s resounding emphasis upon the pit-falls of political rigidity, fuelled by the power-crazed leaders who we permit to rule, is compellingly encapsulated by Antigone’s warning that “he who seeks power is drinking salt water. He cannot keep it down, yet has to drink more. I am not the first sacrifice, nor the last.”<sup>28</sup> Also, this caveat is summed up by Haemon’s poetic plea against the unnatural rigidity of dictatorship:

HAEMON: Look, when the rain-swollen brook gushes

Past the trees, how all those that bend  
 Are spared, but the unyielding are broken. Or when a laden ship  
 Spreads out her sails and won't slacken,  
 Bending back from the rower's bench,  
 How it must end in shipwreck.<sup>29</sup>

Such hauntingly expressive words refocuses our attention away from the specific conflict between Creon and Antigone to the wider ramifications, past and future, of undiluted power and war-mongering, and how our unnatural acquiescence to such political situations is little less than infanticide. The maniacal leadership that was to result in the deaths of so many millions under a range of artificially constructed precepts and exuberantly verbose justifications during the Second World War reverberates throughout a play that steadfastly refuses to attribute any particular guilt or innocence to those caught up in the conflict. As Creon turns his increasingly uncontained wrath upon Antigone, Ismene, Tiresias, the Messenger and Haemon, the many sections of society that were to be labelled and added to the ever-increasing number of casualties and victims of the Nazi regime are symbolically recalled and the horrifying roll-call of persecution and murder is highlighted. Celebration or retrospective triumphalism is not conjured up by Brecht in this play which presents the pathos filled demise of the house of Labdacus, as Creon exits "holding nothing more in his hands than a bloodstained cloth," from the body of his own dead son. Self-consciously and sheep-like "the Elders" admit that "we follow him still, and it's all downhill."<sup>30</sup> The Elders' exit serves as a chilling dramaturgical testimony to the way in which the young are so often sacrificed for the sins of their fathers and their silent followers who in an act of true self-immolation sublimate not only their voice but also their mind to the state.

In Sophocles' play, Creon learns, to his own devastating cost, that the laws of kinship that he respects with regard to his own civic power, he neglects with regard to his own house. Acting as the authoritarian chief of the family, he violates the sanctity of that larger *oikos* of which Antigone is a part, by denying her marriage to Haemon and thus, future family life. However, it is important to note that Sophocles, and Brecht afterwards, do not allow us to comfortably assert that either Creon or Antigone is completely justified in their actions. Each encounters "laws" and justice that destroy his or her own cherished and exclusive view. Creon's refusal of the rights of the household and family culminate in his loss of both, and thus he comes to realise their importance to civic life. For Antigone, she is condemned to death by the very civic laws she disregards and she too is forced to acknowledge their value. By her death, Antigone, whom Ismene warns is "too strict,"<sup>31</sup> is ensuring the extinction of the *oikos* to which she so devotedly

shows allegiance, and thus she returns to her dead parents “cursed to lodge without a husband.”<sup>32</sup> In a perverse distortion of her designated role in Athenian society, she marries herself only to death, and therefore puts a stop to the continuation of the family line. This complex philosophical aporia, this moral gridlock, created just as much by Antigone as it is by Creon, is articulated by the unheeded words of the prophet Teiresias, in Sophocles’ version, “self-will can turn out to be foolishness.”<sup>33</sup> Brecht re-focuses us away from the interpretative stasis that has for so long painted Antigone as innocent martyr sacrificed to satisfy the bloodlust of a brutal regime. Instead of utilising the source text to compose a modern day paean to his own personal and political ideal of a just and righteous cause, Brecht advocates the need to respect and thus to vigilantly protect the necessary struggle at the heart of democracy. Regardless of political persuasion, Brecht asserts, this necessary struggle must never be suppressed by dogma, raw might or unwieldy power. Such a call to be ever alert to the diminution of basic rights, for comrade and enemy alike, is made all the more poignant if we consider how Brecht had been summoned to the HUAC interrogations held in America, immediately prior to the composition of his own version of *Antigone*. In many respects, it is reasonable to suggest that, above all else, it was this harrowing experience of “democracy” in action, in a post-war United States gripped by anti-communist hysteria, that was to be the defining inspiration for his highly philosophical, as opposed to triumphalist, post-war treatment of Sophocles’ classic.

Thus, in keeping with the polemical knot at the centre of the source text, Brecht replaces any reductive apportioning of blame in his play, with a compellingly clear advocacy for freedom of thought and expression at all times, and in all contexts. Brecht’s *Antigone*, like the source text, is a plea for voice par excellence. However, the play is not only advocating for the voice of an iconographic “good” character called Antigone, but rather for all who are denied expression of thought and expression by a crushingly dominant ideology that seeks to silence alterity, difference and potential dialogue.

### **Apartheid, Antigone and “Life Art”**

*The Island* (a play initially devised in 1973 by Athol Fugard, John Kani and Winston Ntshona during the Apartheid regime) is an example of what Walter Benjamin identified as “revolutionary nostalgia.”<sup>34</sup> In accordance with Benjamin’s thesis, *The Island* marks a return to the Western liberal humanist literary tradition in order to articulate a critique of dominant conceptual and ideological notions about the “tradition of the oppressed” which

had subsumed and rationalised *Antigone* over the centuries. Benjamin warned against hermeneutic stasis, which anaesthetises against real life suffering and can misleadingly result in responding to “the tradition of the oppressed,” as the norm, and which thus no longer prompts action, but rather perpetuates inaction.<sup>35</sup> Benjamin recognised that when reading becomes ritualised, as is the case with many of the classics, including *Antigone*, the suffering depicted in such works becomes aestheticised, and thus distanced from the realities of daily praxis. In this way, the experience of, for example, Sophocles’ play is supplanted by a ritualised reception of an iconographic and perversely romanticised representation of the interminable, and by extension, *accepted* struggle of the oppressed. The audience/reader thus becomes strangely inured and comfortable with this aestheticized depiction of suffering. Over the centuries, “Antigone” has come to assume an iconographic status as the martyred champion of the oppressed, and, by transplanting this image of Western liberal humanism to an Apartheid-riven South Africa, Fugard questions the way the reception of the classics can often degenerate into a tacit cultural endorsement of suffering and injustice under the euphemistic guise of a textual “tradition” of the oppressed. In this way, Fugard returns to one of the most well-known plays in the Western canon, but more importantly he revisits the christianised interpretation that had been superimposed upon the reception of that play with an acutely critical voice – in order to highlight the moral flaws and ethical insubstantiality of such canonised reading practices for and in an Apartheid-riven South Africa. How, ask Fugard, Kani and Ntshona, could a black South African version of Antigone’s suffering be deemed saintly, noble and thus “acceptable” when thousands upon thousands were incarcerated, beaten, humiliated and murdered purely on the basis of their skin-colour?

*The Island* exposes the finite nature of redemptive and triumphalist narratives as well as revealing the way in which racism operates by a process of the projection of values by those in power upon those who are powerless, often in the guise of virtue. As Philip Cohen points out:

Every time a literary critic claims a universal ethical, moral or emotional instance in a piece of English literature, he or she colludes in the violence of the colonial legacy in which the European value or truth is defined as a universal one.<sup>36</sup>

Indeed, Bhekizizwe Petersen has commented upon the process of cultural projection onto the indigenous population in South Africa during the early years of the separatist and Apartheid regime:

The pedagogic appeal of performance for missionaries and liberal

whites was that it seemed amenable to the transmission of Christian 'civilized' ideals and values. Furthermore, theatre could be locked into their political and social projects. The stock themes of Theatre-in-Education in mission schools were those of repentance, character training, habits of industry, diligence, thrift and obedience.<sup>37</sup>

In this respect, *The Island's* return to the ancient play by Sophocles is a strategy to critique all shades of imperialism, be it born of brute conquest or resulting from distortedly misguided and overarching cultural paternalism. The re-invocation of a play, which had become synonymous with martyrdom and the skewed piety behind the tradition of the oppressed, in order to recount the very real situation of black South African political prisoners, demands a hermeneutic reassessment on our part. In this way, we are compelled to recognize the way in which the very foundations of our cultural heritage have often been implicated and used as justification for atrocity and persecution. Fugard draws our attention to the missionary quality with which imperialist educators introduced christian interpretative stasis, such as their appropriation of *Antigone*, to South Africa, and how they thereby indirectly provided an interpretative justification for what was to evolve into Apartheid – adding weight to Jean Paul Sartre's sobering view that often "humanism is the counterpart of racism: it is a practice of exclusion."<sup>38</sup> Thus, active remembrance of the archetypal and iconographical "tradition of the oppressed," which had come to be represented by *Antigone*, is situated in violent opposition to the political present experienced in South Africa under Apartheid in this play. The result of such a defiant juxtaposition is to actively deconstruct one of the grand recits enshrined in the Western liberal humanist tradition in order to draw our attention to the limits of such narratives. In a sense, one could say that *The Island* dramaturgically imposes upon a Western euro-centric audience a process that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has described as "unlearning privileged discourse."<sup>39</sup>

The voice of Antigone, the character, reverberates throughout the narrative structure of *The Island*, on a number of levels. Firstly, the play posits that there are countless Antigones by suggesting she represents all the black political prisoners who were incarcerated for speaking out against the State during Apartheid. However, on another level the play centres around two fictional characters – "John" and "Winston" – who besides suffering the daily humiliations and torture of prison life in the notorious detention centre Robben Island, are forced to entertain their unseen captors with a make-shift production of *Antigone*. This meta-theatric dimension to the play, which later transforms us from mere spectators into the very captors who demand to see the play, is a central device through which the audience are compelled to re-consider not only *Antigone*, but also the canonised reading

practices that have been superimposed upon the play and unquestioningly perpetuated over the centuries. The third way in which Antigone is re-invoked is through the actors and co-devisers of the play, John Kani and Winston Ntshona. Both actor/devisers are presented as almost indistinguishable from their characters “John” and “Winston,” not only through the repetition of names, but also as black actors who were forced to work in secret for fear of imprisonment, and who had experienced first hand the brutality of a regime that imprisoned fellow actors for performing *Antigone* to audiences in the culturally excluded black townships. Their suffering at the hands of the State is inextricably linked to and represented through the degradation suffered by the characters they play, and it is such a very firm autobiographical link that makes this version of *Antigone* much more than a politically inspired representation of injustice – it is “life art.” In the context of the play’s original performance, Kani and Ntshona present their lives on stage, unscripted, as black men who are at that very moment, politically and culturally oppressed. This is most movingly suggested in the mimed but physically demanding opening sequence of the play that depicts John and Winston carrying out spirit-crushing tasks in the prison courtyard. The script does not designate a set time for this sequence, leaving John Kani and Winston Ntshona with the decision as to how long the audience will be subjected to watching a deafeningly silent parody of not only their characters’ Sisyphean punishment, but a symbolic re-enactment of their own seemingly never ending, often hopeless and frequently unacknowledged struggle against Apartheid. In this way, Fugard et al utilise the power of drama to make us feel uncomfortable, uneasy and even guilty.

The reception history of the play (and by play, I am referring to the source text as well as the adaptation) is part of the subsequent dramaturgical effect of *The Island*. The play has literally broken free of the silence imposed by not only the South African censorship laws, but also more importantly the constraints of the piously framed canonised reading practices with which we cast Antigone as the “noble” embodiment of the “tradition of the oppressed.” In this respect, the close intertwining of an ancient dramatic protagonist who dies for speaking out and the real life experiences of those like Kani and Ntshona, as suggested in *The Island*, re-invests our experience of the play not only with the authentically tragic proportions of the source text, but also with the identifiably realist effect of a play that makes us reassess our ethical and hermeneutic standpoint in and for the present. Such “life art” is imbued with authentic and real voices, and by extension, it reinvigorates Antigone, the character, with the terrifying and exhilarating power with which she once challenged authority.

Ultimately, *The Island* far exceeds the considerable rigours of adapting

an ancient play for a modern day audience, for it is a revivification. Fugard, Kani and Ntshona present us with the reclamation of “life” on a number of levels, textual, cultural and political, by repossessing *Antigone* for and as their own story. As Shoshona Felman and Dori Laub point out, with respect to the articulation of trauma:

Repossessing one’s life story through giving testimony is itself a form of action, of change, which one has to actually pass through, in order to continue and complete the process of survival after liberation. The event must be reclaimed because even if successfully repressed, it nevertheless invariably plays a decisive formative role in who one comes to be and how one comes to live one’s life.<sup>40</sup>

True to the testimonial spirit of *The Island*, voice and speaking are given particular prominence throughout the play, alluding not only to Creon’s silencing tactics in the source text, but also directly referring to the policy of denying all black South Africans any political and cultural expression during the Apartheid years. One example of the way in which the struggle that John and Winston undergo to find a “voice” is the telephone game they devise, and through which they enjoy imaginary conversations with their families when locked up in their cell. Conversely, the oratorical “voice” of John’s staged ‘Creon’ is utilised to parody political sophistry. The effect of such parody is to emphasise the way in which the most abhorrent and heinous of ideas can be made to sound appealing and even attractive through the adept manipulation of words and voice. John’s parodic rendition of Creon’s oratory is one that demotes the misguided but often eloquent patriot of the source text to being on a par with an unsophisticated and patronising touring evangelist. The finely tuned polemical balance between Antigone and Creon in the source text, is now, with close reference to the intertextual christianisation of the play, thus shown to be of little consequence when applied to the horrific injustice of Apartheid.

Sophocles’ “play” as presented by John and Winston is not an exemplum of the nobility of suffering, for such an interpretation is exposed as a sham, and most powerfully so when Winston reassumes his own rejuvenated sense of identity at the end of the play within the play:

[Tearing off his wig and confronting the audience as Winston, not Antigone.]

WINSTON: Gods of our Fathers! My Land! My Home! Time waits no longer. I go now to my living death, because I honoured those things to which honour belongs.<sup>41</sup>

A potent irony in *The Island* is that Winston’s journey toward a new found

self-awareness of his own subjectivity is shaped as a result of his short relationship with the character of “Antigone.” In an ingenious reworking of one of the central concerns of the source text – the denial of future progeny – Fugard utilises the source text in his play as the impetus for a new born sense of self-determination on the part of the black South African political prisoner who has been cast in the role of “Antigone.” This moment of epiphany for Winston takes place as he glances into his water bucket, only to see and be disgusted by his image – an emasculated, wig-donning caricature:

[He is now at the cell door. He listens, then moves over to the wig on the floor and circles it. He finally picks it up. Moves back to the cell door to make sure no one is coming. The water bucket gives him an idea. He puts on the wig and after some difficulty manages to see his reflection in the water. A good laugh, which he cuts off abruptly. He moves around the cell trying out a few of Antigone’s poses. None of them work. He feels a fool. He finally tears off the wig and throws it down on the floor with disgust.]<sup>42</sup>

Winston’s disgust and abjection at the “Antigone” confronting him implicitly suggests the birth of independent subjectivity as defined by Julia Kristeva’s abjection theory. Unlike Lacan’s mirror-stage, Kristeva identifies a primal repression of undifferentiated being called the *chora*, prior to the mirror stage. Before abjection, when the child is immersed in the *chora*, being is undifferentiated, and it is only through a process of abjection, that is, expelling the mother’s body from its own self, that the child begins to form personal boundaries and then can experience mirror identification with alien images:

If it be true that the abject simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject, one can understand that it is experienced at the peak of its strength when that subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very being, that is none other than the abject.<sup>43</sup>

Similarly, Winston’s sense of abjection is so great when he sees his reflection, he rejects the disguise offered to him by the “nanny” state and discards the mantle indicative of the teleology of the oppressed. Just as this rejection represents a burgeoning sense of subjectivity and self-hood on the part of Winston, it also symbolically represents the nascent free South Africa in evolution. In effect, the disguise of Antigone is understood for what it is by Winston, to such an extent that his newly discovered sense

of identity is revealed to us by his failure to “play” the part at the end of the play. In this respect, the self-effacement represented by the mirror image in the cell water bucket has reasserted in Winston a new sense of self-hood. This process is almost like rebirth in the face of imminent disappearance through assimilation, for as Gadamer states:

The ideal copy would be a mirror image, for its being really does disappear; it exists only for someone looking into the mirror, and is nothing beyond its appearance. But in fact it is not a picture or a copy at all, for it has not separate existence.<sup>44</sup>

However, by the end of his performance, Winston’s claim for a “separate existence” releases the double edged *pharmakon* of the source text’s Antigone, who, as opposed to assuming the role of martyr promulgated by Christian interpretative stasis, re-emerges and gives voice to the liberated Antigone that Winston has become. It is the *pharmakon*, as represented by Antigone, which subsequently provides the psychological poison to elicit the cure of a sense of self-hood and identity in Winston. It is the *pharmakon* that facilitates his recognition that he is the “Antigone” that will not be silenced, that will not be immured by the frames of reference of an unjust interpretative stasis.

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The christianised interpretative tradition that was constructed around our reception of *Antigone* for so many centuries, eventually crumbled under the weight of the horrifyingly momentous experiences of the twentieth century and beyond. Once again, our own uncertainties, doubts and fears in the present have led us to listen to the complexities of the source text. The celebratory pious depiction of the Sophoclean character, so beloved by the Romantics, no longer resonates for a world in which racism, persecution, terrorism, freedom fighting, state murder and genocide continues to take place, often in the name of religion. During the twentieth century and particularly since 1945, Antigone’s vocal range has once again tested our resolve to listen. Her many cadences, be they healing, accusatory or be-reaved, are testimony to the enduring allure of Sophocles’ *Antigone* for dramatists today, and indeed they provide reaffirmation that after centuries of interpretative stasis, Antigone is now most certainly not lost for words. Maurice Blanchot’s evocative description of the potential of the classics to engage our imagination today provides a particularly apposite conclusion to this discussion of *Antigone* past, present and future: “What makes them seductive is ... the future of what they say. Their fascination is due not to their current song but to what it promises to be.”<sup>45</sup>

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NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Jonathan Miller, *Subsequent Performances* (New York: Viking, 1986), p. 28.
- <sup>2</sup> Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Millar (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), p. 15.
- <sup>3</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer (London: Sheed and Ward, 1989), p. 15.
- <sup>4</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Thesis on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970) p. 219.
- <sup>5</sup> Joel Weinsheimer, *Gadamer's Hermeneutics: A Reading of Gadamer's Truth and Method* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1985), p. 129.
- <sup>6</sup> Miller, *Subsequent Performances*, p. 71.
- <sup>7</sup> Isabel Capeloa Gil, "Antigone and Cassandra: Gender and Nationalism in German Literature," *Orbis Litterarum*, 55/2 (2000), p. 119.
- <sup>8</sup> Michael J. Walton, "Hit or Myth: The Greeks and Irish Drama," *Amid our Troubles: Irish Versions of Greek Tragedy*, eds. Marianne Macdonald and Michael J. Walton (London: Methuen, 2002), p. 4.
- <sup>9</sup> Hans Blumenberg, *Arbeit am Mythos* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), p. 10.
- <sup>10</sup> Barbara Hernstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1988), p. 10.
- <sup>11</sup> George Steiner, *Antigones: The Antigone Myth in Western Literature, Art and Thought* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989), p. 139.
- <sup>12</sup> Thomas De Quincey, *De Quincey's Works* (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1863), p. 65.
- <sup>13</sup> Steiner, *Antigones*, p. 7.
- <sup>14</sup> Steiner, *Antigones*, p. 19.
- <sup>15</sup> Simone Weil, *Intimations of Christianity Amongst the Ancient Greeks*, trans. E C Geissbuhler (New York: Beacon Press, 1958), p. 9.
- <sup>16</sup> Charles W. Oudemans, *Tragic Ambiguity: Anthropology, Philosophy and Sophocles' Antigone* (Leiden and New York: E. J. Brill, 1987), p. 3.
- <sup>17</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: Athlone Press, 1981), p. 97.
- <sup>18</sup> Paul Cartledge, "Deep Plays: Theatre as Process in Greek Civic Life," *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, ed. P. E. Easterling (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997), p. 30.
- <sup>19</sup> Charles Segal, *Tragedy and Civilization: An Interpretation of Sophocles* (Oklahoma: Oklahoma UP, 1999), p. 168.
- <sup>20</sup> David Wiles, *An Introduction to Greek Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP,

- 1992), p. 67.
- <sup>21</sup> Wiles, *An Introduction to Greek Theatre*, p. 77.
- <sup>22</sup> Phillip Cohen, "It's Racism what Dunit – Hidden Narratives in Theories of Racism," in *Race, Culture and "difference,"* eds. James Donald and Ali Rattansi (London: Sage, 1992), p. 74.
- <sup>23</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Antigone*, trans. Judith Malina (New York: First Applause, 1990), pp. 25, 32, 42, 50, and 28 respectively.
- <sup>24</sup> Brecht, "Masterful Treatment of The Model," *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. John Willett (London: Methuen, 1994), p. 210.
- <sup>25</sup> Brecht, "Masterful Treatment of the Model," p. 209.
- <sup>26</sup> Brecht, *Antigone*, p. 18.
- <sup>27</sup> Brecht, "Masterful Treatment of the Model", p. 209.
- <sup>28</sup> Brecht, *Antigone*, p. 3.
- <sup>29</sup> Brecht, *Antigone*, p. 42.
- <sup>30</sup> Brecht, *Antigone*, p. 64.
- <sup>31</sup> Brecht, *Antigone*, p. 36.
- <sup>32</sup> Brecht, *Antigone*, p. 47.
- <sup>33</sup> Sophocles, *The Theban Plays*, trans. A. L. Brown (London: Penguin, 1997), p. 74.
- <sup>34</sup> Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 2.
- <sup>35</sup> Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 211.
- <sup>36</sup> Cohen, *Race, Culture and "difference,"* p. 248.
- <sup>37</sup> Bhekizwe Petersen, "Apartheid and the Political Imagination in Black South African Theatre," *Politics, Power and Performance: Theatre, Poetry and Song in South Africa*, ed. Liz Gunner (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1994), p. 36.
- <sup>38</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason I: Theory of Practical Ensembles*, trans. Alan Sheridan Smith (London: New Left Books, 1976), p. 762.
- <sup>39</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Criticism, Feminism and The Institution," *The Post-colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, ed. Sarah Harsym (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 9.
- <sup>40</sup> Shoshona Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: Routledge 1992), p. 85.
- <sup>41</sup> Athol Fugard, *The Township Plays* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993), p. 226.
- <sup>42</sup> Athol Fugard, *The Township Plays*, p. 211.
- <sup>43</sup> Julia Kristva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay in Abjection* (New York: Columbia UP, 1982), p. 5.
- <sup>44</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 138.
- <sup>45</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1993), p. 41.