

◆ Afterword

Antigone and Post-Secular Reason

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In her compelling introduction to the present volume, Jennifer Duprey asserts that an itinerary of the myriad Iberian, Caribbean, and Latin American Antigones confirms Roland Barthes' suspicion that myth possesses the proclivity to disavow its "sociohistorical mediations" ("Introduction"). In fact, re-parsing Barthes' words suggests that mythical discourse may even disavow socio-history altogether. Through its reduction of human acts to "the simplicity of essences" and consequent prohibition to go "back beyond what is immediately visible" (cited in "Introduction"), myth proffers immanent, monadic truth statements that, in a naturalized state, shine forth without passing through dialectical moments of contradiction, or what Hegel referred to as conceptual thinking via determinate negation. Having passed from history, moreover, Barthes puts forth that myths are stripped away of the adventitious contingency of human acts. In other words, myth, once it passes from history, is a locus that emits efflorescent values that transcend the time-space continuum. Therefore, as Duprey indicates, a constellational mosaic of Antigones deontologically coalesces into a primer of "politically constituted practices and institutions anchored on values of equality, freedom, and justice" ("Introduction"). Equality, freedom, and justice are, of course, the inviolable normative values that ideally direct the constituted political practices and institutions that belong to the province of history. As the essays contained in this volume have demonstrated, Antigone inevitably appears in the wake of those historical moments in which this constitutive political ideal runs aground.

In spite of its monadic reduction of human acts to the simplicity of essences, every iteration of a myth importunes the reader to divine meaning from the historical context woven into the fabric of the timeless aspects of the narrative. This volume unerringly proves this to be the case—in tracking the Antigone myth across Spain, the Hispanic

Caribbean, and Latin America, a cognizance of historical, political, and socioeconomic events is a desideratum. In another part of *Mythologies*, Barthes theorizes that the signifier of any particular iteration of a myth is composed of two parts: a full plenitude of meaning on one side and an empty form that invites the application of concepts on the other. It is in the latter component—the application of a concept—that the myth merges with a singular historical moment. As Barthes argues, “unlike the form, the concept is in no way abstract: it is filled with a situation. Through the concept, it is a whole new history which is implanted in the myth” (119). This marriage between form and concept also has deleterious effects, as previous significations of a myth are impoverished, and eventually discarded, by the arrival of a new “fully armed” symbolic concept: “when it becomes form, the meaning leaves its contingency behind; it empties itself, it becomes impoverished, history evaporates, only the letter remains” (118). Each historical moment fills the myth’s empty form with its own symbolic material, at once revitalizing the form and shielding from view the meaningful knowledge postulated by a previous historical moment. The principle function of the mythic concept is thus, in Barthes’s words, “to be *appropriated* . . . the concept closely corresponds to a function, it is defined as a tendency” (119, emphasis in the original). As a consequence of the periodic impoverishment of meaning wrought by the application of concepts, which are each specific to the tendencies of a particular situation, an absolute consciousness of a myth’s inner contradictions and tensions never arrives, occluding a transcendence that would forever mute the relevancy of a legend such as Antigone.

Apropos Antigone’s appropriation in Iberia, even the formal variation of the myth that the author chooses to fill with symbolic content speaks to sociopolitical context and forms a crucial aspect of the “fully armed” concept the writer targets at his or her present. As an example, the Catalan poet and playwright Salvador Espriu’s 1939 version of the play, analyzed in this volume by Jordi Ibañez-Fanés, Duprey, and Jordi Malé, adapts not Sophocles’ version of the tragedy but rather Aeschylus’ *Seven Against Thebes*. In lieu of commencing the story after the two brothers’ mutually destructive battle for the city, as does Sophocles, Espriu protagonizes Polyneices and Eteocles and dramatizes their civil war, thereby expanding the scope of the tragedy and reinforcing that Antigone’s propulsion toward both her own death and that of her family line is shared by the city itself, whose downward momentum toward more conflict and auto-destruction is equally immutable. Inarguably, the historical events of the year of the play’s writing, and the reasoning behind why it was not published until 1955, cast a sinister pallor over the telling of the myth.

Beyond simply speaking *to* historical context, the epochal moments in which Antigone returns to the forefront of critical consciousness tend to be marked by the kinds of human drives toward violence, repression, and injustice capable of producing the apertures through which thought

passes from history onto a depoliticized, naturalized plane. Indeed, George Steiner, in his expansive study of *Antigone*, argues, “since the fifth century BC, western sensibility has experienced decisive moments of its identity and history in reference to the Antigone legend and to the life in art and in arguments of this legend” (109). In the twentieth century, Steiner notes that the years 1943-1944 were a poignant moment of “Antigone fever” (108)—a telltale sign that at that moment the Western worldview was passing through a historical crevasse that would render insufficient previous identitary models. In light of the contributions in the present volume, a statistically significant number of nations within the Iberian, Caribbean, and Latin American ambit have also sorted through decisive moments of identity and history in reference to the myth.

The present volume particularly experiences the decisive moment of transatlanticism through different readings of Antigone. In particular, Duprey trenchantly notes that it is the “structural articulation of constellations and discontinuities in history” (“Introduction”) that constitutes the transatlantic field. Perhaps, one could assert that concrete historical realities appear discontinuous and as enclosed constellations because meaning aspires to appear, in Barthes’s parlance, “depoliticized” and “already naturalized.” In the normal chatter of the everyday, meaning tends to remain undisclosed, hidden behind the veil that society uses to obscure from view that which exists in a purely natural state. In moments of cataclysm, such as those pinpointed by Steiner, a light emerges, through the formal framework of a myth such as Antigone, which illuminates a historical moment and conjugally links it to a family of constellational resemblances rooted in other historical crises. This type of reaction cannot help but define, and at times expand, the outer shape of a field of study such as the transatlantic. It is here where one sees the great value of a volume dedicated to Hispanic Antigones—it sketches a line around a grouping of historical illuminations that previously, due to a lack of a concept, seemed nebulous and inconclusive. Taking a further step, one could argue that such constellational arrangements acknowledge eventual formations of Being. The philosopher Alain Badiou has argued that any situation that purports to possess a form of knowledge is only presentable “under the effect of structure, that is, under the form of the one and its composition in consistent multiplicities. The one is thereby not only the regime of structured presentation but also the regime of the possible of presentation itself” (52). A volume dedicated to a particular matrix of Antigones articulates the myth as an event composed of consistent multiplicities constellationally spread out over a non-linear map of history. That this maneuver is attached to the formation of a body of study—transatlanticism—is logical considering Badiou’s relation of a Being situation to forms of knowledge.

As Duprey suggests by way of Adorno and Benjamin’s thought, meaning never unfurls teleologically but rather in fits and starts. The

constellational meanings rendered visible by the conceptual frame of myth thus emerge far more dialectically than Barthes would have it. Each historical ‘present’ that produces its own Antigone does so in the wake of a profound negation that dissolves a certain temporal stage and its favored modalities of thinking. Against a classically Hegelian dialectics, however, these negations, at least in reference to the Antigone myth, never seem to arrive at syntheses that step forward toward an absolute totality of Spirit. As the iterations of *Antigone* accumulate and the myth’s rhizomatic family of resemblances grows, one never feels as though humankind is any closer to possessing the type of self-consciousness that would render the myth a relic of the past. The pending question is thus: Can the inner contradictions contained within the Antigone myth – such as the disjuncture between loyalty to the State and to one’s kin – be sublated or are they atemporal predicates of the human condition? In this volume, Juan Herrero-Senés gestures toward the latter possibility by citing a poignant observation made by María Zambrano, who considers Antigone to be “una figura de la aurora de la conciencia” (in present volume 141) (a figure at the dawn of consciousness). And indeed, what is it to be human if not in a constant state of transition between life and death; between the mercurial mandates of the gods, the homeland, and the State; between allegiance to the autonomous self and unfailing loyalty to the collective?

At the same time, the countless appearances made by Antigone within Western philosophic, aesthetic, and historical consciousness reminds one of Reinhart Koselleck’s assertion that the practice of historiography invariably involves coordinating the past not with the present but rather with the future. “Every human being and every human community has a space of experience out of which one acts, in which past things are present or can be remembered, and, on the other, one always acts with reference to specific horizons of expectation” (111). One could here launch into a Heideggerian treatise on the “thrownness” of Dasein, but without doing so it is nevertheless worth considering that it may be too facile to ascribe Antigone’s incessant reiterations to an always-already atemporality. Rather, the myth carves out a horizon of expectation for the behavior of political communities and therefore exists as a “permanently repeatable possibility” (Koselleck 146) that encourages a delimited prognosis of the future based on past returns. In this sense, Antigone’s entrance onto history’s stage at the dawn of consciousness indicates a stunted realization of the full breadth of humanism. In order to eschew one of Antigone’s central tensions, the dislocation between private lives dedicated to blood-kinship and a public existence under the mandate of the State, a new modality of thinking and existential frame of reference is required.

The present volume’s delineation of the “fully-armed concepts” that multiple sociohistoric contexts have brought to the myth in Iberian, Caribbean, and Latin American milieux helps one to better scan the taxonomy of meaning that tends to adhere to Antigone. As with any

constellational arrangement, the aura of the collective grouping is only perceptible on a macro level, and from a distance. As Badiou rightly surmises, there is no critical perspective within the event proper: “any situation, seized in its immanence, thus reverses the inaugural axiom of our entire procedure” (52). With a better grasp on the myth’s inner plenitude of meaning, the reader can locate more fruitfully future Antigones—that is to say, its future repeatable possibilities. In considering the possible directions toward which the debates in this volume might lead, I would like to suggest that for the twenty-first century, Antigone responds to core concerns of what has become known as post-secularism. I do so, of course, knowing that we may still be enmeshed in the immanence of the Event. Post-secularism often questions whether a civil society can reach a democratic consensus of opinion through a common cognizance of normative ideals or if a single hegemonic power must render decisions that are collectively binding when a consensus of opinion between multiple parties is unreachable. Jürgen Habermas, one of the more vocal proponents of a post-secular mindset, argues that his conception of the public sphere – the public site in which ideals, morals, and symbolic meaning is collectively negotiated through the common exercise of reason – has suffered by shutting out theologico-religious worldviews. “The liberal constitution itself must not ignore the contributions that religious groups can well make to the democratic process *within civil society*” (“The Political” 24, Habermas’s italics). That being the case, in a deliberative democracy religious discourses can only contribute “truths of faith” to the public sphere so long as they can be translated into “universally accessible discourses” (“An Awareness” 16).

Irrespective of which groupings are barred or given limited representation within liberal civil society, concerns regarding justice, equality, and other normative concepts persist as long as an asymmetrical division of power precludes an egalitarian integration between society and constitutive political processes. For Habermas, the political signifies the “symbolic representation and collective self-understanding of a community” (“The Political” 18). A Habermasian articulation of the political fetishizes rationality insofar as self-understanding and the production of identity symbolism are both the product of deliberation. Civil society’s self-understanding and symbolic identity ideally emerges from a consensus of opinion equally voiced by its members. This setup, which is not without its fair share of criticism, appears—much like John Rawls’s notion of justice being the result of democratic consensus—unabashedly utopian and impossibly naïve with respect to the dynamic of political power. As Talal Asad has argued, “the [Habermasian] public sphere is a space *necessarily* (not just contingently) articulated by power. And everyone who enters it must address power’s disposition of people and things, the dependence of some on the goodwill of others” (184). It is at this post-political juncture, what one might refer to as a crisis of post-Enlightenment

rational thought and the deliberative democratic paradigm, that Antigone's light again shines forth.

Indeed, the liberal public sphere, though a valid ideal to aim for, ends up resembling the model of sovereignty witnessed in Creon's court. In the Sophoclean version of the play, Antigone herself acknowledges Creon's disposition of power—"But this is one of kingship's many blessings—that it can both act and speak just as it wishes to" (53). In one gesture, Antigone references the injustice perpetrated by the public's absence of a consensual voice, whom she believes would support her in an open environment, and stresses the arbitrariness of Creon's judgment, diffusing the earlier assertions that his "close kinship with the dead" (41) and the "reverence that Zeus receives from me" (46) legitimate his actions. It is not until Creon's moment of *anagnorisis* at the end of the play that the tyrant sees that the idealism underlying his decrees are unsanctioned by both divine authority and the consensus of the populace, despite his effort to never let "evil men be held in higher honor than the just" (42). In *Antigone*, the veil of silence that falls over Thebes in the wake of Antigone's defiance of statist authority is a function of Creon's grasp on power, which effectively obliterates any semblance of civil society. As Antigone retorts to Creon just before the previously cited dialogue, "these people here would say my action pleases all of them, if fear did not lock up their tongues" (53). This disavowal of a Theban political community exerts a nefarious effect on an ethical ideal such as justice. As Habermas questions, "how can respect for the *inviolability* of human dignity and, more generally, a public awareness of the relevance of normative questions, be kept alive in the face of growing and disarming systematic strains on the social integration of our political communities?" (23, emphasis in the original). Antigone, like Habermas, instructs the reader to expect injustice in the event that governance operates at a remove from the social. In the denouement of the play, Antigone on two occasions laments that she is "unwept by friends" (69) and that "no friend laments my unwept destiny" (70), poignantly pairing the iniquity of her punishment with the imposed silence of the body politic. The question remains, however, whether the language of power, possessed by Creon, and that of justice, held by Antigone and Haemon, are compatible in the formation and maintenance of deliberative political practice.

The incongruence of two separate principles of conduct—one that idealizes the law of blood kinship and the other that of the polis – feeds the lack of consensus between Antigone and Creon. That much is obvious and has been well documented throughout this volume and by critical scholarship elsewhere, most famously by Hegel and Judith Butler. This neat division of Antigone and Creon's competing models of behavior obscures another dynamic, which is the contribution of the sacred to secular governance. Much of Creon's failure owes to a blithe indifference toward the possibility that Antigone's allegiance to the sacred sphere of the gods might contribute to more universal values

related to justice and equality before the law. Despite acknowledging the reverence he pays to Zeus, Creon legitimates his rule over the city in purely secular terms. Creon's possession of the throne and legitimation of power arrives "through my close bond of kinship with the perished dead" (41), meaning that the grace of Zeus and being chosen by the gods pales in importance compared to biological blood relation. In an encounter with Haemon, Creon leaves Zeus to Antigone—"let her chant to Zeus as god of blood-kinship"—and demands that his son follow him based only on his position as paterfamilias: "Just so, my child; that's how your heart should be disposed: to stand behind your father's judgment in all things" (60). Creon treats his pre-political household model of power as a microcosm for ruling Thebes, hence the need to not "falsify myself before the city" by letting Antigone's insubordination pass by unpunished. Recognition by the city, rather than by the gods, drives Creon's conduct, which the Chorus identifies as his fatal flaw at the end of the play: "when we deal with the gods we should never act with irreverence" (89). Antigone, on the other hand, obeys the mandate of Hades: "Hades longs to see these laws fulfilled" (54). Also, when presented before Creon after burying her brother, Antigone asserts the illegitimacy of Creon's secular law by arguing that "it was not Zeus who made this proclamation [not to bury Polyneices]; nor was it Justice dwelling with the gods below who set in place such laws as these for humankind" (52). In effect, Antigone critiques Creon's promotion of laws that do not correspond to an autonomous metaphysical sphere that exists independent of human interference.

Long after Sophocles' historical present, the arrival of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century signaled a shift from a divine cosmology backing human actions to a purported reality of metaphysical ideals, whose categorical force take the place of sacred commandments and form the basis for the social contracts binding together the body politic. These ideals and first principles, according to Immanuel Kant, are scientifically knowable and applicable to conduct through the faculty of practical reason. As with the autonomous sphere of the gods, Kant's metaphysics of morals removes from human deliberation the definition of ethical laws of conduct. Thinking of secular reason as a common language through which the absoluteness of ideals such as justice, equality, and the like is patently clear to all is hinted at in "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" (1784). For Kant, true enlightenment requires the freedom "to make *public use* of one's reason in all matters...The *public* use of man's freedom must always be free, and it alone can bring about enlightenment in men" (55, emphasis in the original). Only four years later would Kant publish the more abstract *Critique of Practical Reason* and unwrap his philosophy of the autonomous subject fluent in the grammar of a common secular language further. As Kant argues, a principle is a practical law when it holds for "the will of every rational being" (*Critique* 17). It is through the use of reason that the autonomous human subject discovers which

actions are categorically mandated, in opposition to the maxims that serve subjective inclinations. Reason is that “from which alone can arise any rule that is to contain necessity” (18). In negotiations with other rational agents, reason provides the common source code from which categorical laws are collectively decided. Following this rubric, murder would not be illegal in a democratic liberal society because the political community contingently decided it ought to be prohibited; rather, the autonomous subject’s inner sense of murder’s iniquity, picked up by the exercise of practical reason, leads him or her to agree with others in the same possession of an ethical consciousness to agree upon the baseness of murder.

Habermas’s thought also insists on the presence of a universal secular reason that assures the possibility of democratic consensus. This underlying precondition is necessary in order to maintain a neo-Kantian conception of ethics, which demands that moral truths be metaphysical and independent of the contingent agreements of finite human political animals. Echoing the sentiments described above, Habermas posits, “practical reason provides justifications for the universalistic and egalitarian concepts of morality and law which shape the freedom of the individual and interpersonal relations in a normatively plausible way” (“Awareness” 18).

The need to establish a common ground that centers the various forms of human languages is central to *Antigone*. In the introduction to this volume, Duprey executes a disarming critique of Judith Butler’s contention that Antigone speaks in a language that is inherently human, despite, as her name suggests, being not of this world. Duprey responds, “there is not only one form of human language. It is about both recuperating the power to speak another (human) language, and the power to act” (“Introduction”). What consensus can we reach critically through a deliberation of Antigone’s actions? There are multiple human languages but normative concepts such as justice and equality must span these discursive divides, as Kant well knew.

In a tempering of Habermas’s neo-Kantianism, Asad signals that post-secularist thought at times negates, in a dialectical fashion, the ideal of deliberative democracy based on universal access to secular reason. Or, to be context-specific, Asad problematizes the very existence of a common language that would merge the counteralliances that bring Antigone and Creon to loggerheads. The challenge to balance a respect for singularities—what we have referred to here as human languages—within a collective political fraternity is for the French philosopher Jacques Derrida an irreducible aporia within democracy. “There is no democracy without respect for irreducible singularity or alterity, but there is no democracy without the ‘community of friends...’ without the calculation of majorities, without identifiable, stabilizable, representable subjects, all equal. These two laws are irreducible one to the other” (22). For this reason, perhaps, Antigone, who, like Derrida, repeatedly informs her friends that there are no friends, stands as an existential

paradox. It is she who goes living to the tomb of death, unveiling the unwieldy balance between respecting the demand for singular alterity—she informs Ismene of Creon’s duty to leave to her what is her own—and the expectation that the political fraternity of Thebes ought to, if their wills were to be in possession of Kantian freedom, commiserate as a majority with her private plight. Returning to Badiou, Antigone places in doubt that the deliberative public sphere is a “count-as-one” structural regime comprised of consistent multiplicities. Clearly, this potential a-structuration challenges the very presentability of the post-Enlightenment political community as a singular Being.

Post-secularism alerts us to the possibility that those moments of crisis in which normative questions come into conflict and disallow political agreement reveal the difficulty of finding a metaphysical language that is common to all human actors. On a more positive note, a possible basis for this difficulty, if one can manage to look past Derrida’s framing of the problem as an irreducible logjam, is that the post-Enlightenment secular state has never fully integrated certain aspects of society into the public sphere. Habermas would argue that religious worldviews, and their possession of “sacred knowledge” [*Heilswissen*] (“Awareness” 16-17), are one such disenfranchised body of thought. Indeed, Sophocles’s tragedy unveils how Antigone’s duty to protect “what is mine” in defiance of unjust statist law, can serve as a portal through which an objective sense of justice and human rights might be attained.

This attachment of normative values to private experience returns to the civic structure a structural consistency shared by its constitutive parts, making political process once again presentable. All of this occurs in spite of Antigone being abandoned by friends and even exploited, to an extent, by family (Ismene’s attempt to share in Antigone’s deed). In so doing, the myth points toward the necessity of integrating more seamlessly social and political processes in order to preclude abuses of power and the passage of laws that do not correspond to a broadly understood conception of justice. Justice, as Haemon indicates in an encounter with Creon, does not require experience, stature, or power to be perceived. “Only in what is just” can a person without experience instruct his or her elder; “and even if I’m young, you should not look at someone’s age, but at his deeds” (63). Judging one’s deeds, returning to Kant, signals the extent to which an agent’s exercise of reason has accessed universal rules mandating a necessary course of conduct. In an atmosphere in which the exercise of reason is free and not constrained, enlightenment prevails, signaling the advent of a *Weltanschauung* that “throws” a political community toward a future in which the formal framework of the Antigone myth no longer invites the application of situation specific concepts because the legend’s central tensions have been resolved. Of course, this requires a modicum of post-secular faith—a blind credence in a universal reason that, when unencumbered, can translate into political practice the language of justice.

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