

Antigone's Long Shadow: Myth, Politics, and Memory in Democratic Spain

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It is not easy to imagine how a myth can be applied in politics or placed in some kind of political rationality without producing a cliché or a monster. Myth, and even more if it is the plot of a tragedy, always has something of an excess from which politics had better take shelter. But we can distinguish a myth represented as the bare image of an idea (since the most complex narrative can be reduced to an idea, as if it were the emblem of madness, jealousy, love, friendship, greed, etc.) from a myth specifically identified with the singularity and complexity of a text. When Roland Barthes investigated a new concept of “mythology” in the mass culture in the second half of the fifties (his book *Mythologies* was first published in 1957), he clearly showed how a sign deprived of precise signification but with a broad diffusion can articulate ideology and social imagination with a peculiar efficacy. Barthes offered a list of examples of cultural and political clichés functioning as reduced ideas with a vague significance and intense presence in the media. He analyzed them and marked a territory in which false simplicity, dense visuality, and comfortable meaning produce the basis for a hegemonic ideology without texts. We can think that myths as products of a mass culture are the opposite to texts, insofar as texts still demand a relation based on the effort of analysis, the experience of singularity, solitude, or conversation, and preserve a world of privacy and reflection. But we must insist on the textual and literary nature of myths in order to understand the strength of ancient myths surviving in the context of mass culture and political rationality.¹

Antigone's myth, for instance, can be reduced to an idea of piety and compassion, and by extension to reconciliation and forgiveness. But it can also be interpreted as a representation of rebellion against tyranny. Its meaning depends on which text or which version of the myth we

have in mind. In Spanish theater after 1939, for instance, there are quite a few Antigones, which are too diverse to be encapsulated in a single idea. As soon as we investigate them we have to be confronted with its reality as a text, let's say from Sophocles to Salvador Espriu, from Hölderlin to Jean Anouilh, Bertolt Brecht or María Zambrano, from the very peculiar Antigone that José María Pemán wrote in 1946 for the victorious "new" Spain of Franco to the exiled Antigone of José Martín Elizondo or the modern *Antígona . . . ¡cerda!* by Luis Riaza, written in the Spain of the democratic transition.²

Even if we try to use the myth in its more general meaning (as a Barthesian example of "mythology," since it is not so rare to find in Spanish newspaper articles allusions to Oedipus's daughter's tragedy), we risk that the complexity of the matter would make us say more than we want.³ We could feel, of course, that we have enough reasons to think that Antigone "means" only, or primarily, the sister who shows piety for a defeated and therefore unburied brother after a fratricidal war, and that it may be translated into some general and vague idea of piety for the defeated or even of reconciliation after a war. Yet it is very difficult to stay at this level of imprecision, for in some way we need to know more, we need a text, and also a context, and then we discover that Antigone's piety is indistinguishable from her rebellion and hardness against Creon, or against tyranny in general. And does Antigone's pitiless search for piety in some texts, like the Sophoclean, for instance, not have the scent of some kind of tyrannical necrophilia? In Oedipus' daughter, piety—a sense of duty and love (as Eros)—seems to be mixed with a complex desire unable to recognize itself in an object. She is seen at least by the chorus in Sophocles' tragedy, when the voices of the men of the *polis* complain about her for having changed the bridal chamber for a place "with the dead to share" (Sophocles 377), and when in the same place they invoke Eros in a sense that can only mean that the divinity of life will take revenge on them who, like Antigone, show too much longing for death. This ambiguity of Oedipus' daughter will be reinforced in the nineteenth century, from Friedrich Schlegel to Søren Kierkegaard, who make her one of their feminine heroines, calling her a heroine for the *symparankromenoi*, a very recherché fashion of saying "bride of death," or "she who embraces death" (Kierkegaard 152). The proliferation of modern Antigones has introduced other changes and new variations, depending on what is intended or experienced with the renewal of the myth in a given political moment. Anouilh's Creon does not have so much in common with Zambrano's already repentant tyrant. And Espriu's more mature and motherly Antigone can hardly be compared with the young, cynical, and intellectual lady that we will meet in Riaza's play.⁴ So we can hardly speak of Antigone without referring to a text. By alluding to her in a too general and vague sense we just produce a myth in the way of Barthes' meaning: an empty sign whose real ideological and social function appears aesthetically inverted.

But if Antigone means piety, and only piety, then we have good reasons to consider in what sense are we talking of piety here, and whether this piety has something to do with justice, or whether revolt can easily be separated from it. And since piety is always piety for somebody, a concrete suffering being, or a dead one, it is hard to speak of piety in a vague sense. For how could we accept, for instance, that piety or forgiveness sound equal in the voice of Manuel Azaña, the president of the Spanish Republic during the Civil War, in his famous speech in Barcelona City Hall on July 18, 1938, ending with the dramatic exhortation to “peace, pity, and forgiveness,” and in the speech delivered by General Juan Yagüe in Toledo on April 19, 1938, on the occasion of the first anniversary of the only party accepted by Franco in his regime, and where the Falangist general also spoke about forgiveness and piety for the vanquished? (qtd. in Garriga 147). If piety is hardly reduced to a simple moral idea in the complexity and tensions of history, then the myth of Antigone as the representation of piety needs to mean more, and something more concrete, than whatever piety may be in a general sense. Since Antigone is always subject to a narrative process, with relevant details that can be changed or modulated, she has also to be thought as a historical figure with a precise context and very specific political implications. But it is also a story that has always to be explained, a tale to be told, a play to be performed, an action to be represented and reflected on.

A myth (as a text) does not allow the stiffness that frequently ends up affecting museums and monuments. It is always inseparable from a living process of reading or hearing or communicating or interpreting something. Therefore, if we consider the criticism that some historians, social thinkers, or philosophers have advanced in the sense of what Todorov called the “abuses of memory” (1995), then it seems clear, or at least acceptable, that myth allows a reflective relationship with memory (and mourning) which will hardly end on any kind of musealization.⁵ Myth can be forgotten, but it will never become invisible as a part of an everyday landscape in the public space. And since public politics is not always truly dealing with an active process of reflection and critical elaboration of memories, but rather with a more or less opportunistic appeasement of the action of remembering, it is not surprising that rather than the complexity of certain myths, like Antigone’s, pragmatic politicians seek the mere visibility of monuments in order to symbolize both the representation of the very power that commissioned and erected them, and the function of neutralization of what has to be represented as a memory. And even Antigone can appear in a context of appeasement, although reduced, as we will see below, to a blatant cliché.

Aestheticization is a good means of appeasement. Monuments, for instance, tend to fix, or even petrify, the past. They offer a visual experience of what Maurice Halbwachs called collective memory. His theories about the spontaneous production of collective identity based on the experience of shared memories date back to the 1920s. His book *Les*

cadres sociaux de la mémoire was first published in 1925, just before the monstrous use of political propaganda that began in the 1930s in Europe with the rise of totalitarian regimes and the extended use of new mass media, like radio and cinema. Thus, despite the classical formulation of Halbwachs, it is hard to distinguish this peculiar kind of genuine collective memory from a top-down political action which seeks, if not to manipulate the past, at least to establish and guarantee an official history at the service of some idea of identity, stability, or national self-esteem. Even if it may sound like a platitude, it is important to separate the task of history and historians from that of politics and politicians.⁶ The confusion of these (a too politicized history, or a political action weighed down by an extreme fear of the past) would make difficult or even impossible the twofold task of guaranteeing the free search of the truth of the past, and the construction of a collective, democratic identity based on this truth. And since we are talking here about Spain, we have to take into account how historical narratives for public representations are still in this country expected to change with every new government.⁷ It is important to recall once again how the politics of memory in present-day Spain has a close dependency on partisan politics. The political vacillation diffracts the possibility of a consolidation of collective identity in two contradictory tendencies: the political convenience of forgetting takes turns with the moral imperative of remembering. The possibility of a shared memory is missed. In its place, the perpetuation of a divided nation between offenders and victims seems to be the unique alternative to a definitive oblivion. This partly explains, too, the survival of a militant history still working for a militant memory, in a society whose representation of the past is becoming more and more ghostly.

Here it must be remembered (once again, I am afraid) that the Spanish transition to democracy shows ambiguous characteristics that cast a shadow on its supposedly exemplary status. Democracy is not only a system of laws and rights, but a practice and a habit (a “democratic culture,” as it is frequently said in Spain, meaning a very precise sensibility, morality and social imagination). It is not so easy to say at which exact moment post-Franco Spain finally became a democracy (legally, as early as in 1977). For some authors, the Spanish Transition is still in progress and its sanctioned narrative needs a permanent revision. This idea inspired the exhibition *En transición* (In Transition), shown in Barcelona and Madrid in winter and spring 2008. But the exhibition's narrative was itself confusing enough to make some visitors think, as happened to a group of American students guided by a colleague of mine, that the assassination of Carrero Blanco in 1973 was in fact the assassination of the dictator, since the historical fact that Franco died in bed (in 1975), retrospectively ominous for quite a few people, was duly concealed. It is also true that the literature critical of the Spanish transition has become a genre in itself. And if most people still praise the ability of the different parties to build the necessary

consensus to overcome the Franco regime, many regret the high price that should be paid: forgetting of the past, concealed truth, and transitional justice. But even if we think that the true transitional justice in Spain was to make possible a relative peaceful transition, the case of Judge Baltasar Garzón shows how dark and fragile the foundations of Spanish democracy are, at least from a moral point of view.⁸ It is truly significant that Garzón has been prosecuted in one case related to corruption and another related to the historical past. Both corruption and oblivion are the gloomiest faces of public morality in contemporary Spain. And their exacerbation can be felt in the increasing and shocking tolerance with political corruption, and the increasingly shameless way of despising the wounds of the past.

The ambiguity of the Spanish Transition consists in the difficulties of appreciating the extent to which the idea of a publicly unspoken agreement to forget or to keep silence about the past could have affected in some way the quality of the new democracy set up in 1977. The anomaly itself would be that, despite this agreement on silence and the neglect of the past, the Spanish transition has been a success after all, or it has been a success even thanks to this generous and strenuous act of active forgetting, reconciliation and consensus. The idea of “turning the page,” or what the historian Santos Juliá called “echar al olvido” (leave in oblivion), are typical of this attitude, shared by the majority of the principal actors of the political transition, from the communist Carrillo to an ancient Franco minister like Fraga Iribarne.⁹

Nevertheless, this general agreement changed at some point. It is interesting to read carefully the first section of the long interview that Juan Luis Cebrián, a former editor-in-chief of *El País*, conducted with Prime Minister Felipe González in 2001, when González was no longer in office and Aznar was beginning his second term, this time with an overall majority. González’s insistence on what he calls the return of “grudge politics” and his mild regret (“I feel responsible but not guilty”) for not having done anything during his years in government to heal, publicly and with honor, the wounds of the past in the young Spanish democracy, is something worthy of being read carefully (qtd. in Cebrián 31–39). Even if González had promoted laws recognizing private rights to resolve glaring cases of discrimination of ancient veterans of the Republican army or their widows (as Suárez did before him, and after him Aznar, since the Spanish parliament has been gradually considering legislation), the truth is that he had carefully avoided any public gesture concerning the victims of civil war and dictatorship.¹⁰ In the interview with Cebrián, what seems to be his major concern is not having promoted a democratic interpretation of the Francoist regime that is adequate for a modern Spain, and this more in order to produce a balanced democratic identity than coming to terms with an unjust past.

If González’s mild justification seems an answer to Aznar’s arrogance during his second term, one has to recall two things. The first is that when President Rodríguez Zapatero finally tried to rectify the

transitional amnesic politics held by his predecessors, the answer was no longer how a modern and democratic Spain could critically assume Franco's regime, but an impetuous claim to the Republican past. In a very calculated way, González avoided demanding an interpretation of the Civil War, and presumably he saw the Republic as a closed (even if imperfect) past. For him, the question was how to deal with Franco's regime and the undeniable, but very peculiar, modernization of the country carried out by the technocrats of Opus Dei. This process began at the end of the fifties and would partly set the strong guidelines for the economic development in the democratic Spain as well. Development was based principally on heavy industry, intensive agriculture, real estate, and tourism, which entails a deep and quick change in the landscape, and which must be taken on account if one is to understand present-day Spain's difficulties with memory. Never have the famous lines of Baudelaire's *Le cygne* been more fitting than for modern Spain: the country changed, *hélas*, faster than the heart of its citizens. And even if in some aspects the change was obviously for the better, from the point of view of an emotional consistency of memory it was also devastating.

For González, the Spanish Civil War was no longer a political question but a matter for historians. For him, as a politician, only the inheritance of Franco's regime had some relevance in the construction of a democratic identity. And here comes the second thing to be said: Jorge Semprún recalls, in his memories from the years he was secretary of culture in González's government, how one day, being taken to La Moncloa in his official car, he suddenly noticed the triumph arch Franco built at the point his troops reached on November 1937, fighting for Madrid. The arch is still there, and surely will remain there for a long time. Suddenly Semprún felt deeply offended by it, and once he arrived in La Moncloa he shared his impression with González. In his book he says that the president listened to him attentively, but showed little empathy for his sentiments. Semprún adds: "He understands me, certainly, but he cannot put himself in my place. He belongs to another territory of memory. Better said, for him the Ides of March 1936 are no longer memory, they are history" (234). González was a postwar child. But how could this explain that on this point Zapatero, who was fifteen years old when Franco died, seemed closer in this point to Semprún than to González? And not only Zapatero. The vast movement of spontaneous exhumation of bodies from common graves that began around the same time as González was having his interview with Cebrián, was done by the grandchildren of the dead, not by their children. But this generational perspective must also be explained from two singular experiences: the ignorance of fear, since we are talking of people who have not suffered the oppressive climate under Franco's regime, and the critical relativization of the virtues of the Spanish transition.

In his conversation with Cebrián, González remembers a piece of advice from General Gutiérrez Mellado (the hero against the failed coup of February 23, 1981, and a crucial figure in the transition), when he was Secretary of Defense in the Suárez government and González the Opposition Chief. Mellado told González that when he became prime minister, as it would presumably happen soon, he should handle carefully the “things of the past,” for “there is still fire burning under the embers” (35). González, of course, remembers this as “friendly” advice, not as a threat. Knowing the importance of General Gutiérrez Mellado for Spanish democracy, it is easy to understand him. He could have omitted this kind of indiscreet remark in the interview, since it was a private conversation impossible to document. Yet the necessity of saying something like that is interesting enough. Obviously González is not trying to harm Mellado’s reputation. He only wants to be understood in his peculiar “innocent responsibility” and to recall how difficult it was to navigate through the powerful remains of the past, especially in the Army, without being shipwrecked.

Nevertheless, the fact is that, seen with perspective, this kind of advice has something of a threat, even if it is indirectly expressed. It is true that too much memory in Spain would have been an obstacle for the success of the transition from dictatorship to democracy, and that too much memory would hardly have stopped its demands for truth and justice. If the mandarins of the regime had felt threatened, they would never have renounced to power, or at least not so easily. The result of this is that in the Spanish transition it is appropriate to speak of a transitional process devoid of transitional justice. Or, as I have already suggested, the justice of the process could be seen simply in its success in a mere pragmatic sense. Avoiding concrete retributive justice may have had fruitful consequences for a more distributive extension of rights. The political forces that took part in the constituent process of 1978, from the communist to the ancient Francoist leaders and now reformists, like Fraga, saw it this way, as the parliamentary minutes show. In any case, and in the same way that a threat could sound like friendly advice, a repressive past became a repressed past.

And since this is a matter of repressed experiences, of trauma and spontaneous and protective amnesia, but sometimes also of forced forgetting, we can say that we enter the specific terrain in which myth, with the incommensurability of its narrative and interpretative dimension, with its strength and capacity to represent the darkest dimension of human condition, plays a singular productive role. Antigone is certainly the myth that best expresses the conflict embedded in the Spanish transition and democracy. After all, the Spanish Civil War has been frequently described as a war of fratricide, a mystification that embellishes the fact that it was a war between rich and poor, or between conservatives and liberals, or between reaction and revolution. There were indeed several wars in the Spanish Civil War. The fratricidal cliché was already used in the film *Raza* (1941), whose scriptwriter was,

as it is well known, General Franco himself. That alone should make us more cautious with the abuse of the meanings of Antigone's myth and the idea of a "fratricidal" war.

But the attraction of the myth, as well as its adequacy to the Spanish recent history, is very strong. It was therefore quite predictable that Polyneices' sister appeared in 2007 in the Spanish Parliament during the debates about the "Historical Memory Law" (Law 52/2007).¹¹ A Socialist speaker in the Spanish Parliament mentioned the tragic heroine alluding to an "old history" with some characteristics in common with "our recent history." He then offered this interpretation of the myth:

Antigone was against the war, and she was not in favor of either of her brothers. She only wanted to fulfill her duty giving both of them a respectable burial. Unfortunately, in Spain we have a similar history. Seventy years ago the Spanish were confronted in a civil war. Some of them were buried with honors, and the others were thrown in anonymous common graves. Seventy years after the military rebellion of 1936, most Spaniards think that the victims of the war have suffered too much oblivion and that it is time to repair that . . . (qtd. in Ibáñez 316)

Extraordinarily simple and clear, and yet, so strange and terrible too. For despite these words, Law 52/2007 was not really conceived for resolving the shameful drama of thousands of human remains lying around the country, in common graves and ditches, sometimes in cemeteries, but no less frequently in fields in the countryside. Something strange, almost cynical, rang in the words of this socialist representative too. For what kind of memory of the war Zapatero's government was trying to produce in order to make acceptable that, what had to be done, would not be done despite all appearances? Was it not a peculiar moment of sincerity to say, or implicitly to affirm, that, like Antigone, who "was not in favor of either of her brothers," *we*, the grandchildren of the people who fought and suffered and died in the war, are not really concerned anymore with that kind of experiences, but rather with the memory of those experiences, which remained safely encapsulated in books, films and monuments, as if they were fiction, or an old nightmare dreamed by another?

The long, painful, and confused debate in the Spanish Parliament and in the media about this Law 52/2007 showed how hard it is, in present-day Spain, to engage in a process of deep reflection, not only on how to act regarding the painful past of the Civil War and of the Franco dictatorship, but also on how to take responsibility for it. The shameful prosecution of Judge Baltasar Garzón, whose attempt to investigate the crimes during and after the war failed and provoked an accusation for having exceeded his judicial powers, indicates how sensitive some issues in present-day Spain still are. Even if the man who prosecutes Garzón, Judge Luciano Varela, is not suspected of being nostalgic for

Franco's regime and, as some people believe, motivated by opportunism, professional jealousy, and personal enmity, the fact is that as soon as Garzón began to investigate the case of missing people in the war and the postwar, an average reader of Spanish newspapers could become aware that a general media attack was launched against him. Of course, the fact that at the same time Garzón was also investigating a couple of important cases of political corruption, or that he still had powerful enemies for his prosecution in the 1990s a case of state terrorism against ETA, facilitated a possible case of judicial lynching. This claim may sound too strong. But the whole case is deeply embarrassing for the Spanish democracy and it is difficult to see it otherwise. The theoretical separation of powers in the state has neither protected the independence of the judge from outside attacks, nor avoided the hostility of his peers.

Garzón's case is in some way a consequence of the failure of Law 52/2007 in what was the most burning question to be resolved: the thousands of human remains in common graves, anonymously and illegally buried during the war and in the first years of the postwar. Most of those common graves are located in perfectly known places, but they are also a taboo subject in villages or small towns where the wounds of the war and the long postwar still bleed. The question was what to do with all that, since an official investigation, exhumation of remains, and a process of dignifying the sites would hardly have prevented further juridical actions. And it is not unthinkable that the government and other institutions wanted to stop the proliferation of legal actions at all costs (remember General Gutiérrez Mellado's "advice" to González). As is well known by historians and assumed by most people, the implications of the truth and the horrors of the war are not limited to the brutalities of one side, and it is apparently not true that there are still only "forgotten" common graves with victims of the Francoist troops or the Falangists. For some historians and politicians the problem of the graves was a Pandora's box that should not be opened. However, in 2000 a small group of relatives took the initiative of investigating some of these graves and a slow, timid campaign of exhumations began. This campaign has increased with the years. But the process of the retrieval of information and exhumation of remains had in fact already begun in 1979, after the first democratic local elections, with some official coverage offered by local administrations.¹² It was interrupted after the experience of the failed, yet frightening coup d'état of February 23, 1981. We must understand the "friendly" warning of General Gutiérrez Mellado to Felipe González in this context.

And when the government of Rodríguez Zapatero wanted to promote (or felt in some way forced to do so) a law capable of dealing with the problem of the graves and the symbolic contents of the past that previous democratic Spanish governments had carefully avoided, there was such a confusion of concepts, ends, and means, that even Amnesty International announced that the socialist government might be

promoting a dead-end law.¹³ But the worse was that the expectation of resolving the problem of the graves and the missing people were frustrated by an astonishing mix of “private recognition” of “democratic rights” by the public Administration (Ibáñez 293–97).

Political reality is usually more hard-bitten and complex than moral principles and good wishes. Mixing both sometimes yields frustration and, as it happened with Law 52/2007, juridical nonsense. But it is also true that there are moral responsibilities that affect politics as well, or moral dimensions (democratic ideals, public virtues) that could inspire politics to go beyond the mere calculation of gains or the simple red lines regarded by a pusillanimous point of view. The whole Spanish nation should be ashamed for its past, and indeed it is. But there are other feelings too: resentment, and a residue of fear and hate that easily rekindles, are present in private discussions, in newspaper articles, and in political public life. Spain is a passionate country that perhaps could be a more compassionate nation. Education, politics, and justice should help to change it. And it is the job of politics to do something in this sense, for a shared national identity (as plural as it may be), as well as social cohesion and future stability, depend on it.

Thus with Garzón having been sidelined, and Law 52/2007 having spread confusion or only timidly begun to do what should be done with magnanimity and coherence, the question remains still open: What to do with the common graves and human remains marking the Spanish landscapes with the invisible, but present signs of shame, sorrow, and brutality? When killers are as dead as their victims, the time of human justice seems to have finished. This fact should simplify things, but it seems rather to impoverish the sense of duty with the dramatic complexity from the past. This does not help Spain to be so generous and so democratic as the nation aspires to. Maybe it is unnecessary to add that I do not believe that memory should be any moral imperative in whatever circumstance, and I have difficulties believing in a spontaneous collective memory. But memory can never be a repressed possibility. The voice of victims must be respected like the function of the state in the public representation of the past must be recognized, and, when necessary, criticized.

When we complain about a lack of public recognition of the sorrows of recent history in Spain, we are not only denouncing the forgetting of this sorrow as a grievance made to the victims or to the truth. Such a reproach, nevertheless, would not be completely fair with the Spanish legislation about this subject, for as early as 1977 the Parliament has been gradually legislating the recognition of the rights of victims and regulating various ways of compensation, as I have already said. Yet there is a difference between legislating about rights and legislating about symbols, the representations of memory, and the making of a public, shared memory of what was, and sometimes still seems to be, a divided and a dividing experience of the war and the postwar. In order to understand the above mentioned self-criticism of Felipe González in the

long interview with Cebrián, or the reasons for a scandalized Semprún with the survival of a Francoist triumph arch in Madrid, we must consider that even if the rights of disabled servicemen of the Republican army (or their widows, or of people tortured and imprisoned for political reasons during the Dictatorship) were already recognized, the signs of symbolic and public respect for the victims were so rare that they can be considered almost inexistent or limited to very important personalities of the second Republic, as for example the visit, in 1978, of King Juan Carlos to the widow of the former republican president, Manuel Azaña, in the Spanish Embassy in Mexico. The lack of public recognition of Franco's victims has been rather a case of embarrassing indelicacy, or perhaps a case of indelicate embarrassment in the excessively self-satisfied Spanish transition.

Despite the compulsory and partly unrealizable mandates of Law 52/2007, the confusing, if not inexistent, policy of monuments or mnemonic places is more than a symptom of some dysfunction: it is the proof that the memory of the recent past is still an embarrassing sentiment in Spain. As Tony Judt said in his book about postwar Europe, it is easier in Spain to remember the glorious Golden Age than what happened in the country just over half a century ago (769). The hesitating policies for public monuments in remembrance of the victims is only comparable to the dubious, incoherent, and iconoclastic tendencies of the Spanish democracy towards the monuments of Franco regime. What Semprún felt was an obvious case of *regard blessé*, to use a classical expression from the times of the French Revolution. But even if the enforcement of Law 52/2007 should entail the withdrawal of those "offensive" symbols or monuments, the simple truth is that in many cases this is an impossible mission. One need only visit the blatant Macarena Church in Sevilla, or the much more silent, now ambiguous monument to the fallen defenders of the Cuartel de la Montaña in Madrid. The monument, under the steps that lead to the astonishing Debod Temple (a piece of ancient Egypt offered by Nasser to Franco), cannot go unnoticed when entering in the Parque del Cuartel de la Montaña. But if one looks for an explanation of what the monument means, one will find nothing: no words, no title, no indication at all. One may think that this is homage to an unknown warrior: but fallen in what war, fighting against what enemy, or in defense of what? Like in the Spanish national anthem, words seem here to be particularly meaningful through their absence, or through their impossibility. This silent monument was open in 1972 by the mayor of Madrid, Carlos Arias Navarro, in remembrance not of the defenders of Madrid, but of the soldiers who fought in this Cuartel de la Montaña on the side of the rebels and against the Republic. Now the lying warrior against a sandbag barricade is ambiguous enough to mean nothing, or even the opposite of the originally intended meaning.

Contrast this example of a silent or ambiguous monument with the Macarena Church, where General Queipo de Llano, the military leader

who “freed” Seville and then martyred the city, is buried next to his wife, only a few meters away from the place where so many people were killed upon his command, at the feet of the ancient Seville walls. Thousands of tourists cross the old Macarena Gate without being aware of the dramatic historical density of the site. And why should they feel concerned with all that drama, when even the people of Seville seem to have forgotten it? But to ignore something is not exactly the same as to have forgotten it. Everybody in Seville knows who is buried in the Macarena, but not so many want to remember what happened on its walls in the summer of 1936. It was not until 2009 that Queipo’s victims could be remembered with a monolith and a very carefully worded inscription that on the one hand evokes the memory of the victims and on the other hand preserves the honor of the killers. Such a calculated equanimity is not surprising. This discrete homage has already been attacked several times with graffiti and urine.

Similar to the Macarena, but in another dimension, is the case of the Valle de los Caídos, with Franco's tomb as the epicenter of an almost intractable problem. Even if the possibility of moving Franco's remains to another cemetery does not seem so extravagant (and the family of the dictator appears open to negotiating it), much courage is required to free the cloister from the spirit of his builder and overcome the symbolism of victory and humiliation of the vanquished. It seems unthinkable that this monastery—for it is, in fact, a monastery with a community of Benedictines—could ever function as a place of reconciliation. But time might change things, and what is now unthinkable could one day become real.¹⁴

The excess of symbolism implicit or explicit in many monuments and places that have survived the figure of Franco and its regime, and are more or less incorporated into the everyday landscape in many towns and cities in Spain, contrasts with the lack of eloquence, minimalism, or even invisibility of monuments and mnemonic places that function to recall the victims of Franco. Nevertheless, this contrast may change depending on what region of Spain we are thinking of. Seville cannot be compared with Valencia, Santander, or Madrid, for instance. In some places, like Barcelona, the disproportion of unbalanced memories can offer examples in a contrary sense: the victims in the Republican rearguard (killed by the revolutionary violence in the rearguard) are in some way silenced in favor of the victims of Francoist repression. A blatant case is the Fossar de la Pedrera, in Montjuïc, Barcelona, where not only the victims of the repression after January 1939 are buried. The most famous of them is the Catalan President Lluís Companys, executed in October 1940 after a summary war council and after having been delivered by the Gestapo in France to Franco agents. Companys was first buried in the Montjuïc cemetery, but in 1985 his remains were transferred to this large common grave, marking the site with the greatest honors of a place of memory and political pilgrimage. Yet in this place presumably also lie the remains of many victims of

revolutionary violence in the rearguard, a fact that, in words of the Catalan President Pasqual Maragall in 2004, one day should be remembered too, “though this requires more time and that emotions calm down,” as he astonishingly said, or at least was so quoted by the newspaper *El Mundo* on October 15, 2004).¹⁵

The expression of a need for calming emotions about events that happened long ago in the Civil War, and the beginning of the postwar, casts an ambiguous shadow over the supposed success of the Spanish transition. These words, added to the many examples of uncomfortable or hideous monuments of the past, or to the lack of monuments representing a new Spanish spirit and the idea of a “democratic memory” (as it is called in the prologue of Law 52/2007), imply a failure in the capacity to produce some moral idea able to go further, or to express something more, than the simple practice of forgetting. For discretion and agreement about what has to be forgotten and silenced is more identified with democratic good manners in Spain than the contrary: memory, recognition, and compassion. Maragall’s words also show a serious hesitation in offering equanimity to the victims of the war, who suffered brutality, repression, and injustice. It is as if the fear of appearing as too equidistant between Republicans and military rebels (and as if it were so easy to distinguish only two sides in the war) led the public powers to a kind of inhibition when it comes to producing a generous, magnanimous, compassionate, and really democratic representation of the past in present-day Spain. The perception of such a disparity of memories and representations of the past in different cases, situations and regions of Spain (too much preservation of old signs and monuments against too much iconoclasm, for instance, or too much discretion with the victims of one side, or too much one-sided piety) is not an expression of plurality, but of a failure to construct a national identity for a truly democratic Spain. Avoiding the ghosts of the past might have helped in the transition to democracy after Franco’s death, but a persistently repressed memory, or an unbalanced and confusing way of recovering the past, seems both to be going in the wrong direction when this democratic identity (which was one of the goals of the Spanish transition, and is still mentioned in the preface of Law 52/2007) is, or could be, at stake. Even when not everything depends on this identity, it would be an error to dismiss the importance of being generous with the past in a way that only a truly democratic, shared memory could assume.

Memory need not be obsessive in order to be a part of a democratic identity, but it must be clear enough. Seville is, of course, only one example among others, and not the least “antigonic.” The proximity of butchers and victims, or of “good” and “bad” brothers, is relatively common in the Spanish subsoil. The most recent memory policies have shown a trend to forget one in favor of the other. And if Franco’s regime was sectarian and vengeful vis-à-vis its victims, a democratic Spain should be able to overcome the temptation of answering with the same

partisan attitudes. I am suggesting this not in order to confound the legitimacy of the adversaries in war in a kind of opportunistic or pusillanimous equidistance, or in some moral inhibition about the complexity of the past (which is not so rare in the Spanish public sphere of today). I merely want to emphasize that democracy and right will always be above any authoritarian or totalitarian regime; that discrimination and injustice debilitates democracy, but generosity and compassion reinforce it. What is right, and what is fair, have on its side the infinite strength of reason, while injustice and despotism will always signalize the weakness of a power that needs brutality to survive.

Could the myth of Antigone contribute to some kind of civil imagination and courage in order to appease a still divided and disturbing memory and to reinforce a democratic identity? Could it offer this sense of depth that is implicit in the consistence and density of the conflict that Antigone represents and becomes explicit in the texts in which she becomes a renewed language and meaning for an always-renewed world of readers? It seems clear that the Antigone invoked in the debates about Law 52/2007 rather oscillated between the reductionism of a common place and the uncontrollable power of myth and tragedy, lacking of the ground that a literary text can offer. She was more a myth in the sense of Barthes's *Mythologies* than an experience of the depth and the richness that a literary text can offer.

Monuments, as I have said above, may become a form of petrified history, and museums not only musealize, which is somehow obvious, but can also aestheticize memory. Yet they are also able to embed it in everyday life, in an emotional landscape, producing living forms of memory that may change or transform the sensibility of a nation. In other words: they satisfy a necessary function of representation, conservation and evocation. But myths as literary texts, films and plays, like Antigone's, overflow this stony way of evoking the past. Every performance in theatre, every reading of a text, or every interpretation, raises renewed possibilities of experiencing the ancestral and dark truth of the myth, the density of the text, and the complexity of the present.

Antigone is a beautiful, radical, and courageous indication of how to resist tyranny. But since she is unthinkable without tyranny (as an answer may be unthinkable without a previous question), some ambivalences of her character and her tragedy must be mentioned in a democratic context. I will conclude with a short commentary on these ambiguities and with a final allusion to the way in which Luis Riaza ends his version of Antigone, written in 1982.

Antigone's shadow is the darkness that a girl (or a woman) casts over an authoritarian but transparent *raison d'état*. She acts in the name of piety against positive law in the name of an ancient law, the law "from above," from the gods and the dead. We can call that "natural" law. Hegel's classical interpretation of the myth in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* as a conflict between traditional family laws, with their respect to ancestral ties and their endogamous principles, on the one hand, and

the modern submission to the general laws of the State and the political community, on the other, is a kind of opposition that can be explained very schematically as the difference between a hypothetical primitive or “natural” law and a more modern and positive law produced by rationality and politics. If we speak here of tragedy, we are talking about a conflict between opposite senses of legitimacy. This conflict implies a dilemma that cannot be resolved without death and destruction. Some kind of excess (the *hubris*) may explain how the figures of the drama are involved in the fatality of such a dilemma. But once they are trapped in the unsolvable alternative, the only lesson they can receive comes from the experience of catastrophe. In the case of Oedipus’ daughter, only Creon will learn something for the benefit of the living. Antigone, by contrast, will die. Her sacrifice only makes sense for us, the readers or the audience, for the chorus and for a devastated survivor, Creon himself—the tyrant. Her sacrifice changes obstinacy into politics. But even if the conflict between the private and the public spheres play an important role in Antigone’s tragedy, it should be understood not only as a conflict between a feminine world of private feelings of familial piety and a virile public world connected with other values and attitudes, like pride, sense of honor, or fortitude. Rather, the tragedy is only possible as a plot through an exchange of roles. The courageous stubbornness of Antigone clashes with the blind rigidity of Creon, and where the male tyrant could seem revolutionary (at least in a Hegelian sense): he acts, in fact, with a very weak inflexibility that is eventually shattered by the untimely lesson of death. And where the outraged virgin and sister could seem reactionary (for she revolts against a merciless and impious political novelty attempting the duties of piety), she acts with a revolutionary effect, for she challenges and hurts absolute power. Yet, both are overwhelmed by an excess of death. What remains disturbing in Hegel’s interpretation is this revolutionary effect of an ancestral duty formulated in the context of a conflict between a private and a public economy of death, which in fact is what the conflict about pity and impious *raison d’état* here means, that is to say, the question of whom the dead belong to: the gods, the state, the family, or the public sphere. The Hegelian analysis is so significant, because it signals very eloquently the irreducibility of myth as a mere rationalization of a conflict.

We may reflect on what Antigone means as a character, as a text, as a piece of dramatic action; but she always represents more than what we are able to talk about, because “Antigone” will always be said as a text to be read or to be performed on stage. Every time that she comes onto the stage, the text is spoken, its pleasure (in the sense of what the Barthesian “*plaisir du texte*” means), its density and meaning are shared by an audience. But in a private reading, in silence, the effect is potentially the same. The strangest lucidity of madness and the dazzling clearness of a desperate way of being reasonable, speak to us. The bottomless density of Antigone, as a text and a character, shows some

similarities with a realist or pragmatic understanding of how moral decisions are taken, or how moral dilemmas are approached. For what Antigone does is to represent the extent to which morality and moral arguments are determined by, or even are indistinguishable from, emotions, beliefs, institutions, and tradition. This is a very Hegelian point of view. If it is so difficult to separate a moral principle or an idea from a moral world (what Hegel named *Sittlichkeit*), then it is also clear that the myth offers a kind of irreducibility of whatever the dilemma between morality and law may be, or of the different dimensions of the disagreement between the private or the public spheres, piety or justice, natural (or sentimental, and intuitive) law, and positive (or political, and rational) law.¹⁶ There is no logical explanation that can resolve a conflict produced not so much by a strong disturbing decision (to leave unburied the body of the enemy and humiliate him beyond the limits of death and defeat) as by the no less unbalanced impulse to give more importance to the dead than to the living, or to prefer obeying the “dark law of above” rather than the rights of hope and renewal of life (the love of poor Haemon apparently does not mean very much to Antigone). In such a case of shared madness (and many critics have underlined that Creon’s insanity needs Antigone’s insanity, and vice versa, so that we could speak of a singular case of *délire à deux* with tragic consequences), it is also difficult to distinguish between gender-established roles. That Antigone herself is a singular and peculiar feminine representation of what in the world represented by the myth could appear as virile values, needs to be read as a mark of the superseding of structures, without which every understanding fails to comprehend the singularity of the drama as, primarily, a conflict between singularities. There may be an interpretation or even an acceptance of the tragic complexity, but never the feeling that there is a remedy or a solution to be provided in any case. We always need Antigone and Creon, or *an* Antigone and *a* Creon, in order to experience once again the situation and its meaning. Both are confronted either in the confusing reversal of roles, or in the conflict of extreme stubbornness, or in both. Tragic drama as an action open to death, destruction and perplexity, is tensed by a horizon of fatality, and could never be understood without this singularity of characters brought into play.

How, then, can all that thickened plot of characters, singularities, and obstinacies be translated into something like the logic or rationality of political action? The only thing I feel here able to suggest is that what Antigone, as a myth and a text, has to offer to politics, is precisely what political rationality usually tries to avoid: the possibility of going beyond a political calculation of profits and losses, or of individual and partisan survival, victory and defeat in a context of permanent confrontation. Antigone is defiance and abyss, truth and mirror against falsehood.

Reading, for instance, Luis Riaza’s *Antígona . . . ¡cerda!* (1982), one cannot help imagining it as an answer to the Spanish transition to

democracy, a complicated but significant (and in some way *dignifying*) answer to a never clearly formulated question: how to forget the past without relinquishing the dignity of the present and the hopes for a meaningful future? Besides, the moment when the piece was written seems to signal an instant of suspension and expectation in this period of Spanish recent history; it is difficult not to remember the year of 1982 as an “instant” between the political end of Adolfo Suárez, the failed *coup d'état* by Antonio Tejero in winter 1981, and the arrival of González and the Socialist Party to power in autumn 1982. In this general context of fear and expectations, Riaza's Antigone might sound more infuriated than rebel, more analytical and critical, more cynical or skeptical (at least as an intellectual could be) than stubborn or rigid as her old-fashioned sense of duty conveys. While reading Riaza's play, or imagining it performed on stage, it is hard not to remember the surprising comparison that Tony Judt makes in his book *Postwar*, when he qualifies the German terrorists of the RAF group, such as Ulrike Meinhof, as “modern Antigones” trying to arouse the conscience of an amnesic nation (472). I think that there is no better example of Antigone's complexity than this comparison, and there cannot be the slightest doubt that Judt is not justifying the ferocious insanity of these terrorists, whose alleged suicide in jail was, and remains, a gloomy affair in German democracy. Riaza's Antigone breathes the same air of revolution, but the violence she invokes is no longer an action against society or against people in an indiscriminate way: it is private violence, familial violence, a family quarrel disguised as political discussion, and vice versa.¹⁷

The fact that the same actor is playing simultaneously the threefold figure of Creon, Ismene, and Haemon underlines the multiplicity of roles in a family. In the central discussion of the play between Antigone and the “Ismene-Haemon-Creon” character we perceive the density of levels and nuances in a common family quarrel, the repressed expression of hidden desires and hates, and the latent presence of taboos like incest or parricide. Antigone is quarreling with her mother's brother, who is at the same time her sister and her lover. This multiplicity of roles is a sign of her complexity. She is fighting with her fears and her longings for living another life, and with her deepest desires as well. In the background of such a density it is not difficult to perceive the shadow of her father, Oedipus, in the presence of this old, clever, and paternal “uncle” Creon. The whole scene is nothing else but a kind of typical discussion between a daughter full of ideals and a father full of experiences. But if we still had a doubt of the presence of the father, this doubt vanishes when we hear Antigone's answer to the invitation of the threefold figure to the wedding dinner: “Sí, rey Edipo, cenemos” (Riaza 274) (Yes, King Oedipus, let us dine). But not only Oedipus is sitting here, for Antigone will answer to the next observation about how exquisite is the bread with a surprising “sí, rey Polinices” (Riaza 274) (yes, King Polyneices). After that she says: “Sí, rey Creón, brindemos” (Riaza 275) (Yes, King Creon,

let us toast). And when the king, transformed in a triple “Ismene-Hemón-Creón,” observes: “Antígona, mi reina, ¿no sientes como algo mágico que flotara sobre nuestro amor?” (Antigone, my queen, do you not sense something magical floating above our love?) she will answer (and Riaza’s play ends with these words): “Sí, rey Hemón, como una peste” (Riaza 276) (Yes, King Haemon, like the stinking air of a plague).

Like in the Spanish Law 52/2007 of historical memory, the public devours the private, and the private becomes an alibi for the public inhibition of duties. Both spheres are confounded and produce the impression that there is really nothing to be done, just walk straight past in front of the insoluble and unforgettable past. I think that this is also the deep reason behind why Riaza twists tragedy into comedy at the end of his play, letting Antigone marry Creón (or Hemón, or her father), which is, at the same time, a formidable irony about her classical condition of being the bride of death. The sudden evolution experienced, from a tragic past into a comedy present (or at least into a tragicomically idea of present), has a sharp resemblance with the exchange of too much memory for too much forgetting, paid in order to enter in the dreamland of the Spanish transition and its new (rich and democratic, but now getting more and more impoverished) way of life.

Riaza’s Antigone seems to speak like the conscience of a nation, but her speeches lack any kind of heroism; they are rather formulated in a defiant, anarchical sense of power refutation mixed with cynical resignation. Antigone speaks as a young nonconformist who is quarreling with the established power and with spineless nonconformism as well, reasoning like an intellectual who already knows that her ideas have little to do with reality, that only decisions may become real and produce reality, and that a decision may be perfectly incoherent with an idea. Even if a private decision may have political meaning, this never implies commitment. The wonderful and astonishing moment in Riaza’s play when the chorus recites an adaptation of the famous Sophoclean text—“Many wonders there be, but naught more wondrous than man . . .” (Sophocles 341) – while Antigone offers herself naked as a present or a sacrifice to her uncle Creon, is definitive and moving evidence of the intensity of her gesture and its depth, as well as that of the Sophoclean reference, all of which have the power of making deeper (and tragic) what is trivial, namely the decision of a revolutionary young lady to marry an established, middle-aged, powerful man in order to resolve her own insoluble and hopeless dilemmas in a practical and more or less comfortable way.

Is all that not a very elliptical answer to a non-formulated question about the Spanish modern fatalities prevailing over the old ones? Is it not an ironical way of twisting tragic heaviness into the lightness of comedy? Thinking about this, one can only regret that Riaza’s Antigone has not been played more frequently in Spain, or that this Antigone has not become the true public monument in order to reflect on Spanish

democracy. *She* has a truth to tell us about present-day Spain that might make rigid, mute, or remote whatever old Sophocles, old Salvador Espriu and María Zambrano had to say. Yet in this truth one can imagine some pieces of these old texts and voices embedded into it, as if they were windows opened to the complexity and greatness of the past, a landscape of heroism, desolation and brutality. This modern Antigone has no answer about what to do with a traumatic past, a present of difficulties and an uncertain future. But the absence of an answer helps us to think in a more precise and accurate way about what has yet to be done. She is our school of the impossible, where the more realistic politics can be learned. The complexity of literary texts—and the density of ancient myths—makes easier what in politics seems to be quite complex or even unable to be reach. Only the perception of how complex some politics of memory are, allows us to begin to think about nuanced, and moving monuments in a landscape marked by complex identities, shared values and democratic imagination.

Notes

1. I will speak of “text” without forgetting the difference that Roland Barthes suggested in his well-known essay “From Work to Text.” For Barthes, the opposition between text and work implies more a kind of differentiated relations with objects potentially identical than a distinction between different classes of objects. Thus, the same novel by Balzac can be used as a text or considered as a work. The text-relation is based on an accepted game of complexity, reciprocity, and openness, while the work-relation seeks to establish a relation based on authority, fascination, and submission. This basic difference between being the user of a text and the consumer (or the servant) of a work indicates in what sense I will speak here of myth as text and of myth as cliché, and partially explains the problems I have with museum and monumental representations of the past, which are also affected by the idea of “myth” in the mass culture. See Barthes.
2. George Steiner’s book about the diversity of Antigones in Western history remains very useful. Essays like those by María Francisca Vilches de Frutos, Verónica Azcue, José María Camacho Rojo, or Andrés Pociña and Aurora López, are a good complement to Steiner’s essay with regard to contemporary Spanish theater.
3. See Suso de Toro and Manuel Vicent.
4. For a reading of the complexities and ambiguities of the myth, at least in its Sophoclean version, see Jean Bollack. There is, of course, a large body of essays and interpretations of the myth, from Hegel or Schopenhauer to the twentieth-century philologists, philosophers, and critics, like Karl Reinhardt, Walter Kaufmann, Pierre Vidal-Naquet, Jean-Pierre Vernant or, more recently, Judith Butler. The reading by Martha Nussbaum in her book *The Fragility of Goodness* is essential to understanding how Antigone’s rebellion cannot be distinguished from a world of values already in crisis in Sophocles’ time. For the romantic reception of the myth, George Steiner’s above-mentioned book *Antigones* is a good starting point. And for an actualization of ancient elements of the myth in the case of a modern Antigone, see Jennifer Duprey’s beautiful

essay about Salvador Espriu's *Antígona* and the problem of anagnórisis and political recognition.

5. See also Andreas Huyssen, David Berliner, or Santos Juliá.
6. In France, for instance, an interesting polemic took place in 2005 when the state tried to dictate how exactly the colonial past of the Republic should be explained in the *lycées*. Historians reacted against such a pretension and defended their own terrain and responsibilities. For a fuller discussion, see Claude Liauzu. In Spain, the discussion has been focused on the differences among the historians themselves and how they understand politically their work. For a debate in the special issue of *Hispania Nova* about Franco's repression, see Carlos Barros, Santos Juliá, Francisco Espinosa, Pedro Ruiz, Julio Aróstegui, and Esteban Canales.
7. One only has to see how in Catalonia in 2004 the Left, shortly after entering into government, closed down the Centre d'Història Contemporània de Catalunya; an institution identified with President Pujol, and created the Memorial Democràtic. Now, at the moment of writing these lines, with the government newly in the hands of the Catalan nationalists, the Memorial is presumably going to be closed. What they will put in its place is still an enigma. The historian Josep Benet, the former director of the Centre d'Història Contemporània, described the Memorial in the first volume of his memoirs as an "Orwellian organism, totalitarian, surely in a trifling way, as no one can be found in a democratic country" (qtd. in Ibáñez 368). Benet's words might sound exaggerated, but the truth is that the memory of the Memorial will vanish with the memory of the government that created it.
8. I say relative because there were numerous cases of far-right terrorism, presumably tolerated by the intelligence services and police forces shortly after Franco's death. For a fuller discussion see, Mariano Sánchez Soler. This is, by the way, the subject of Ignacio Martínez de Pisón's most recent novel, *El día de mañana* (2011).
9. See Santos Juliá.
10. See Paloma Aguilar Fernández and Alicia Gil Gil.
11. See the bibliography BOE-A-2007-22296.
12. See Silva and Macías, as well as the following websites: www.foroporlamemoria.es, www.memoriahistorica.org.es, and www.todoslosnombres.es.
13. The document by Amnesty International, "Victimas de la guerra civil y el franquismo: no hay derecho," published in November 2006, when the Spanish Parliament was still discussing the law, can still be consulted in www.es.amnesty.org. For an analysis of the political context, the debates in the Spanish Parliament, and the subsequent reactions, see Ibáñez (263–313). A more constructive perspective may be read in the abovementioned book by Aguilar and, especially, in the articles included in Martín Pallín and Escudero Alday.
14. On May 27, 2011, the Spanish Government finally created a "comisión de expertos" (commission of experts) in order to propose solutions "in five months." This astonishing temporal precision has a very simple explanation: it was the time that the former president Zapatero still had before dissolving the chambers and beginning the process of general elections foreseen for March 2012. This "commission" had to deal, among other problems, with a recommendation "for international condemnation of the Franco regime" of 2006 by the European Council. It was recommended "a permanent exhibition in the underground basilica at the *Valle de los Caídos* . . . explaining how it was built by the republican prisoners." The Recommendation number 1736, also known as Rapport Brincat, was finally presented to the new Government, already presided by Mariano Rajoy in November 2011. For a fuller discussion

- see, www.memoriahistorica.gob.es/NR/ronlyres/0F532FC5-FE23-4B8D-AA3A-06ED4BFAFC49/184261/InformeComisinExpertosValleCados.pdf
15. It was information passed by Europa Press with this title: “Maragall propone que también se reconozcan las víctimas de los fusilamientos republicanos” (Maragall proposes to also recognize the victims of the Republicans firing squads).
 16. For an excellent and useful interpretation of Hegel’s moral thought, see Robert B. Pippin.
 17. See the whole discussion in Riaza about politics between Antigone and Creon, with the interventions of the chorus introducing a sort of public voice in the private sphere (267–273).

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