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Antigone: Natalty, Theatricality and Violence

Antigone's claim that she was born 'to share in love' not hate is echoed and shadowed throughout the play by her marriage to death. This vitalist natalty has its double in the thanatoerotic force that also drives her. In this sense natalist humanism is structurally linked to discourses of death and mourning, and this bind is constitutive of both the tragic forms that she enacts and the receptions that she has incited, inspired, helped to generate within Modernity. Bonnie Honig's project of unhinging natalist humanism from the politics of lamentation, a mortalist humanism that may all too comfortably translate into an absence of politics per se, opens valuable new avenues for our understanding of the play, but may itself in some ways be throwing out too much in its attempt to revitalise the political. Like Laura Slatkin, who sees these discourses as mirroring each other (like Antigone and Creon) throughout the play, and in accordance with Vasuki Nesiah who urges us not to read sovereignty in opposition to lamentation, I would like to problematize this binary further by approaching the play-text through the prism of theatricality, as this is set into motion through what I propose to call 'the Mother-machine'ⁱ.

Honig's reading very usefully sets up an interval between natalism and maternity, one I would like to explore further. As her name suggests, Antigone, refuses to occupy the position of the mother, indeed she has been read as embodying anti-generation itself, in a gesture that I believe enacts that very interval between natalism and maternity. Indeed it is an interval that can help to deconstruct a series of binaries (reproduction/reproducibility, example/paradigm, techne/mechane, mourning/melancholia, tragedy as spectacle/as speculation amongst others), all formative of our reception of this play as both a philosophical reflection on the limits of the law *and* as a vehicle for performance. I am particularly interested in the ways the conventions of tragedy help to create presence, how they bridge the gap between the literary and the literalⁱⁱ, how the tragic word becomes flesh, and thus has the ability to be born again in every single interpretation or performance of the play-text. As Hölderlin claims, 'The Greek-tragic word is deadly-factual, for the body which it seizes truly kills'ⁱⁱⁱ. From Hölderlin I am also borrowing the notion of *mechane*, when in his notes on Oedipus and Antigone he calls for a return to the Greeks not solely in terms of ideas, but in terms that Philippe Lacoue-Labathe has interpreted as a quest 'for the ground of theatricality'^{iv}. I would claim that these grounds are linked, and have as their pre-requisite the activation of what I propose to call the Mother-trope or Mother-machine. I would like to look at how this trope helps us to think through but also embody some of the concepts about the transition from literality to figuration. I am interested in addressing the relationships in tragedy between the word and the body, between ideas and their enactment, between the ways we experience the tragic event as an act of reading, of spectatorship, of affect and of critique. Antigone is crucial in this context for in enacting her name she sets in motion the gap between natalism and mortalism, and presents us with an instance in the history of theatre where this Mother-trope is at once deconstructed but also capable of generating endless interpretations and presences.

The impurity and the mingling of genres is significant in this context and I fully agree with Bonnie Honig's claim that there are indeed ways in which the play can be read as a melodrama. However, why melodrama and not gothic, for instance? For we have the haunted house, the curse (as Brooke Holmes stresses), the secret (the burial place of Oedipus), the fear of incest, and equally we could list a number of other literary tropes that would overlap with other genres. So my response would be a Brechtian 'yes, but' or 'yes, and', claiming that what *allows* us to exercise this kind of generic

impurity is the principle of theatricality itself. And this is a principle that from Plato onwards has been at the crux of the anti-theatricality debate (the ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy). For it is this very confusion of forms ('possessed by a frantic and unhallowed lust for pleasure, they contaminated laments with hymns and paeans with dithyrambs') that Plato finds alarming and politically troubling, as it gives rise 'to an evil sovereignty of the audience, a *theatrocracy*'. This fear of teatrocracy, of the spectacularisation (aesthetisation) of the real, especially of the real in politics, has plagued the reception of theatricality from Plato to Guy DeBord. In many ways, however, I believe that Plato is right to fear the power of theatricality and its interface with the political^{vi}. The recent performative turn in cultural and political theory fully engages with the politics of this fear. Antigone is, of course, central in these arguments from Hegel to Judith Butler to Bonnie Honig. What allows her to be endlessly re-interpreted and re-imagined, I would claim is the fact that she is constituted as a dramatic trope, indeed one that is structurally linked to the Mother-machine.

Still, why Antigone and not any other of the female roles from Greek tragedy that could be read as equally subversive, particularly in the context of a radical feminist project? Clytemnestra, Medea or even Agave set in motion this Mother-machine, where the natal and maternal functions are analysed and sometimes conflated. They do not, however, exert the same attraction. This might be due to the fact that the violence that these roles perpetrate is not always against themselves but against others, sometimes even against their own children, making these roles less alluring, especially for a humanist sensibility and for a hopeful politics that is suspicious of negativity. Perhaps it could be that these roles are too enmeshed in negativity (both philosophically and theatrically). However, just as we have no psyche 'without a bent for melancholia'^{vii}, I would claim that we can have no tragedy (or art even) without negativity. In turn a radical politics premised solely on natalism without also encompassing mourning and negativity might not be able to account for the so-called 'democratic paradox' (Rancière) or indeed the democratic deficit, and the violence this entails.

The representation of violence is crucial in tragedy and the play-text is immersed in it, not only state violence and the violence of the law, but also linguistic and aesthetic violence. This kind of 'sweet violence' that tragedy foregrounds, between pleasure and pain, blindness and insight, I would like to read in conjunction with Walter Benjamin's idea of Divine Violence, a non-instrumental violence that is not a means to an end (a new law for example), but purely the sign of injustice in the world or there to exhibit that 'there is something rotten in the law' itself^{viii}. One of its main qualities is its spectacular dimension, as it is always staged and theatricalised. And I believe that tragic form bears the signs of this Divine Violence. Much has been made of Antigone's claims to a politics and a kinship of sorority. The term used throughout the play is, of course *philia* (the male-to-male friendship that Antigone mimics and enacts), marking the gender politics of the term itself as specifically a discourse of fraternity rather than sorority. As Derrida has shown in *The Politics of Friendship* (1997) this Enlightenment narrative of fraternity is in turn not without its own exclusions and violence as he unravels the difficult but structural relationships between *philia*, fraternity, homosociality, virility and autochthony. The cave scene (1219-1244), Antigone's death/bridal chamber can be read as one of the ways that this Divine Violence displays itself in theatrical terms. Antigone, is described as hanging on the nose, Haemon hanging onto her, with Creon watching, for both hers and Haemon's marriage to death need a witness-audience and the messenger tells us that Haemon beams a look at his father before he plunges the sword into his side, and his blood splashes across Antigone's white

cheeks. This final climax is narrated to Haemon's mother, Eurydice, the only mother figure in the play, who merits much closer analysis^{ix}. Of course, there are elements of melodrama here, but there are also elements of the gothic and romance, spectacularly exhibiting both the literariness and the physicality of tragic violence. And through Eurydice as witness to the speech we could claim that this 'cave scene' also conceptualises the politics of spectatorship. It might not be coincidental that the 'cave' becomes the *topos* for Plato later to explore through allegory the political and ethical efficacy of mimesis itself. This *topos* might also be structurally linked with the Mother-machine (as the condition of possibility of representation). Interestingly, in theorising his concept of Divine Violence, I would claim that Benjamin also activates this Mother- trope through his reference to the myth of Niobe, a myth that also appears in *Antigone*. Unlike Antigone, Niobe is punished for excessive motherhood.

Bonnie Honig draws very helpful parallels between tragedy and Walter Benjamin's notion of the *Trauerspiel* (parallels that I too have drawn in previous work), with attention to the tropes of 'the Tyrant, the Martyr and the Plotter'. To this triptych of modes I would also like to add the trope of 'the Criminal' from Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence'. Our fascination with the function of the criminal is that it lays bare the violence and the contradictions at the core of the legal system itself. These tropes are not, of course, anthropomorphic with agency, character and motivation. They are, as Brooke Holmes claims of Antigone, vehicles that allow us to examine and embody complex and contradictory ideas. They are masks, and the play-text of Antigone sets into motion all of the above tropes, not in an either/or opposition, but in ways that allow for their interchangeability, helping to formulate and embody theatrical conventions in the process. Part of Antigone's attraction could perhaps reside in the ways that the play text allows us to conceptualise, embody but also critique ideas and actions that are so fundamental to our understanding of sovereignty, agency (individual and collective) lawfulness and unlawfulness within a democratic tradition (always agonistic). Another part of this attraction surely derives from the fact that the play-text is not simply a philosophical or legal document but a work of art; a theatrical work of art that this endlessly adaptable (this adaptability, Benjamin calls 'translatability'), mixing genres and generating interpretations. Just as Walter Benjamin claims in the 'Critique of Violence' and Jacques Derrida agrees in 'The Force of Law' justice as a concept is 'yet to come', every interpretation of *Antigone* and every performance will at once reveal a truth but will also inevitably point towards an Antigone that is yet to come.

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ⁱ For an elaboration of this function see Elissa Marder, *The Mother in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012). She claims that from the Greeks onwards in the sphere of cultural production 'we discover traces of an anxiety that appears to stem from the unacknowledged, uncomfortable proximity between childbearing and the *principles of reproducibility* more generally...This is so, I suggest, in part because the very concept of the "Mother" (as bearer of human birth), is haunted, from the beginning, by a radical confusion concerning the possibility of discerning between birth and death, and between presence and absence.' 3-4. Also see Andrew Parker, *The Theorist's Mother* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012).

ⁱⁱ For an analysis of the complex relationships between empiricism and its transcendence (in language, philosophy, literature) and its links to mourning and trauma see Cathy Caruth, *Empirical Truths and Critical*

Fictions: Locke, Wordsworth, Kant, Freud (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991). Here Caruth also proposes the figure of the mother as the 'prop' that enables the transition from experience to figuration.

ⁱⁱⁱ Friedrich Hölderlin, *Essays and Letters on Theory*, trans. Thomas Pfau, 'Remarks on "Antigone"', 1988, 113.

^{iv} Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, 'Hölderlin's Theatre', in Miguel de Beistegui and Simon Sparks, *Philosophy and Tragedy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 117-136.

^v Plato, *Laws*, 70 a-b, trans. E. H. Taylor.

^{vi} For a recent discussion of this relationship see Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).

^{vii} See Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 5.

^{viii} See Walter Benjamin, 'Critique of Violence' [1921], in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings* (New York: Harcourt Bruce Jovanovich Inc., 1978), 277-301. Also see Jacques Derrida's comments on this crucial essay in 'Force of Law', *Cardozo Law Review*, Vol. 11:919; and Slavoj Žižek's in *Violence* (London: Profile Books Ltd, 2009).

^{ix} Interestingly Eurydice has received very little critical attention. Within the context of the Mother-trope and space permitting I would propose to examine her as a witness to the violence of the messenger's speech. In a recent re-working of the play by Anne Carson, *Antigo Nick* (Bloodaxe Books Ltd., 2012), Eurydice is given a very important speech as critical witness, where she announces echoing Giorgio Agamben that, 'A STATE OF EXCEPTION MARKS THE LIMIT OF THE LAW THIS VIOLENT THING THIS FRAGILE THING'.