Κλέος at the End of Tragedy:

Antigone Between Agony and the Impossible

By Joseph Richard

Antigone is not a tragic hero; Antigone is, in the last, not even a tragedy, but a play situated at the end of tragedy. The horror is done, finished--two brothers dead by the hand of the other, a kingdom in shambles, an incompetent despot on an ancient throne. 'Burying' her brother in an act of defiance, Antigone strikes us as something like a 'mimesis of some action that is serious, complete, and of a certain substance'[1]--but it isn't. Antigone would quite like us to believe that it is. She would like us to believe her action is 'serious'; she'd quite like us to believe she is doing what she's doing to some noble end (to set the time back into joint!) but the drama invites us to question the premise. From the conclusion of the first dialogue between Ismene and Antigone at the start of the play to the antipodal arguments Antigone arrays against Creon, a certain lack of clarity, a certain frivolity, undercuts Antigone's motivation. Her eros is Aristotle's impossibility. Hers is a longing for amechanon. Her eros is, in a word, quite the opposite of serious--and if we dare to call it serious, it is as serious as it is by virtue of how senseless it is. It is the seriousness of Zagreus, not Homer. The question for me isn't whether Antigone's myriad justifications for her action are serious (that is to say, communicating conviction), but what hides behind her play-acting--if Antigone isn't a tragic hero, but one abandoned at the end of tragedy, why does she feel the need to put on Achilles' armor?

If we're at the end of tragedy, then what defines the tragic action that precedes the fallout? Misologism, for a start. Brother against brother, countryman against countryman, mother marrying son--in a word, the necroticization of reality. The time coming out of joint. Family, state, they all crumble under the weight of the irrational riot of the real. There is no solid ground for life, not anymore, not intellectually, not conceptually--nothing ever will be, can ever be the same. But life does go on. The moon keeps on smiling down on the doomed royals, the same sycophants swarm the city, the seven gates stand. The city of Thebes becomes a monument to the

[1] Definition of tragedy in part VI of Aristotle's *Poetics*, taken from the Butcher translation

contradiction at the end of tragedy: the permanence of things set as counterpoint to the cantus firmus of their absurdity.

To be abandoned at the end of tragedy is to be confronted with tragic experience and left standing. Antigone is the exemplar of this position. Her brothers dead, her parents incestuous murderers, her homeland in ruins--she has seen amechana more than enough for one life. But she is still Antigone. She's the daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta, the sister of Polynices and Eteocles and Ismene, Haemon's fiance; Antigone is, in a word, *delimited*. There is in her nothing miraculous, nothing *unexpected*. She is who she is, and she will be who she will be, and domestic bliss with Haemon is all that such a woman could ever ask for. Do the gates of Thebes and Antigone cut a different figure in the eyes of the elders of the city? They're both *living monuments.* They're both stone.

But something has come undone. The time has been set out of joint. A contradiction emerges--fiance of Haemon, sister of Ismene, but victim of forces greater and grander than could be assuaged by any man. She has become a victim of tragic experience. And so, as the time comes out of joint, definition disappears in a thunderbolt. What once comforted, what once gave railing, makes way for groundlessness. The staircase has broken apart (if it was ever there to begin with). And Antigone is falling.

Confronted with her own powerlessness, Antigone does what anyone with heart would--she tries to take control. She tries to set the time back into joint. Confronted with hopelessness, confronted with the vanity of things, she is compelled to create meaning herself; Antigone is a quadraplegic thrown out her wheelchair and asked to create out of nothing.

Aided by Eros, so she will. She will bury her brother. She will 'honor the gods'. She will do what she *wants* to do--which is to say, what she *needs* to do--because she has to *do* something. There has to be some action that can set everything right. There has to be a way to find either a new life or something approaching the old. The cosmos needs a bonesetter.

But this is something she can only do by herself. Something she can only do with recourse to her own will. A person ever known by her subordination to her family, who was ever known by her *relation* to others, has been forced to stand alone. But she doesn't want to, because who would?

Antigone's exhortation to Ismene--she practically begs her sister--cements this position of hers: she has become the man of tragedy. Both sisters have known the same grief, the same loss, the same sorrow, but only one of them has the spirit necessary to truly internalize the ramifications of their shared experience. There is nothing crooked in the world for Ismene: women are by nature subservient, Creon is to be the ruler with little-to-no a-do, and one dare not do what one wishes with all one's being because one was told 'no'. Nothing has changed for Ismene, where the world screams and falls apart before Antigone's eyes.

ΑΝΤΙΓΟΝΗ

ὦ κοινὸν αὐτάδελφον Ἰσμήνης κάρα,

ἆρ' οἶσθ' ὅ τι Ζεὺς τῶν ἀπ' Οἰδίπου κακῶν

ὁποῖον οὐχὶ νῷν ἔτι ζώσαιν τελεῖ;[2]

Antigone's first words clue us in--clutching after her sister's dear head, blaming the misfortunes of her family on Oedipus (arguably as much a victim as she is), suffocating under the weight of her suffering while keeping on. She runs after Ismene as a deer to living water. She hopes to find in her sister, in her blood, something to hold on to. She hopes to find in her sister a common worker. A fellow fighter. But she doesn't, because she can't--she assumes her sufferings will lead Ismene to the same conclusions she has reached, the same groundlessness, the same mad longing for possibility, but she doesn't realize their experiences aren't commensurable. And so she's spurned.

We come at-last to the beginning of the end. We come to Antigone's attempt at *justifying* what she's doing. She tells her sister that she does what she does for their brother, that she does what she does for their family, for the gods, that she does what she does to please most those she ought please most--but Ismene, in a rare moment of clarity, sees past it. She tells Antigone squarely, one can imagine in a deadpan, the truth. Antigone has a longing for amechana--impossible things, yes, but things without a means to accomplish them *principally*.

[2] From *Antigone*, Lines 1-3

Antigone has a longing for things that can't be longed for precisely because the ability to accomplish them is beyond the strength of human will and beyond the limits of human rights.

ΑΝΤΙΓΟΝΗ

οὐκοῦν, ὅταν δὴ μὴ σθένω, πεπαύσομαι.

ΙΣΜΗΝΗ

ἀρχὴν δὲ θηρᾶν οὐ πρέπει τἀμήχανα.[3]

When all is lost, when all else fails, when the limits of the possible seize her by the neck like a noose, then Antigone shall 'make an end' (πεπαύσομαι). But not to that point. Contentment, peace, rest, these are not possible *until* such a time as one's might has exhausted itself--and for Antigone, perhaps not even then, for even in death Antigone fights the iron grip of fate (she may laud fate, but what is her conception of it?).

And so we creep up on death as it creeps up on us. Death, the one thing necessary. Death, the one place all σθένος heaves and gives up the spirit. So Antigone's struggle is a struggle *against death*--or, if we put it in the positive, a mad struggle for possibility (which is precisely a mad struggle for impossibility). Whatever pussy-footing the chorus might do by calling anthropoi the greatest of marvels then shifting to andres, Antigone exemplifies both figures to the bitter end--she is eros, sailing across the sea, and she is man, crafting ingenious solutions to ails that shouldn't--by all rights!--be cured. She is one face to face with the impossible daring to defy it.

But she isn't. Not at first glance, anyway. Antigone's eros is as much for death as it is for life, as much for death as it is for the impossible things. If life is freedom, then death is slavery--it is an *end* to all possibility. This is what logos tells us. This is what logos' incarnation in the play--Ismene--tells us. There can be no freedom in death, can be no defiance. One pleases none in it. Antigone knows this. She recognizes this. She longs for tamechana, but she keeps on, and she keeps on, and at last gets her wish.

[3] From *Antigone*, Lines 68-69

Antigone's eros for death is an expression of her eros for life. This is where we must begin. The world below is a word not marred by the irrational horror of life above. The world below is a world filled with family, friends, ruled and governed according to a certain logos, is a world in joint. When Antigone speaks of her longing for death, when she justifies herself along these lines to Creon, it is precisely because she sees life in death and death in life. She hears with Euripides the question all do at the end of tragedy (shall we think of poor old Job?),

> τίς δ' οἶδεν εἰ τὸ ζῆν μέν ἐστι κατθανεῖν,
>
> τὸ κατθανεῖν δὲ ζῆν κάτω νομίζεται;[4]

This gravity of Antigone's is a gravity found only at the end of tragedy. Her justifications are alogic, even misologic, and fundamentally incommunicable--why? Simple, because she has made logos her whipping boy. Logos serves that tyrant eros, not the other way around, and she has become a justification unto herself. She has passed through despair and deigned to make her own meaning. She has buried her brother and, in trying to set the time back into joint, pushed it out entire. Daring has reached its zenith.

Or so we would hope. But if Antigone is eros, is daring, why even give logous? Why try to give an account? Why all this talk of glory and piety? The answer to this question lie in the answer to the question of why Antigone tries to exhort Ismene at the start of the play: misery loves company. Antigone desperately wants to carry back the truth she has found to the people, desperately wants to preach and proclaim, but she is not able to recognize that the truth she's found is one accessible to her alone.

The preaching inevitably leads Antigone to a cave—though Antigone, unlike Christ, stays where put. Her life over, sealed, possibility vanquished, she exercises her will in one last sterling moment of defiance--and Antigone, the paragon of tolma, of daring, of eros, dies. Ordained to be slain so she might be the subject of song for future generations--follow your king, stay moderate, and always, always remember that the 'worst fate to befall a man is to become a hater of reason'.

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[4] From *Phrixus*, line 682

And so Antigone must die. She transgressed human limits, and she must be made an example of. Before she dies, her force and the weight of her experience must be nullified in preaching. She must become something palatable to the polis. She must become something less than human. She must give in.

Her last act is inaccessible because it is hid behind her preaching. Is it truly an act of defiance, or an expression of an irascible desire to *make a point* and bring back to light the truth she found in the night? Is Antigone's longing for impossible things sated, or did she stop short? If the daring of man leads us to an early grave, why should we laud it? If the submission of man leads to a world full of Ismenes and Creons, who can stomach it? These are illegitimate questions, but illegitimate questions are the questions one must ask at the end of tragedy: one *must* ask whether such things as Antigone saw can be communicated. One *must* ask whether longing for the impossible is itself impossible. One must ask whether it would even matter if our mad longing for impossible things should ever end in defeat. Antigone's struggle is, after all, a struggle against what we only know too well.

ΑΝΤΙΓΟΝΗ

σὺ μὲν τάδ᾽ ἂν προῦχοι᾽: ἐγὼ δὲ δὴ τάφον

χώσουσ᾽ ἀδελφῷ φιλτάτῳ πορεύσομαι.

ΙΣΜΗΝΗ

οἴμοι ταλαίνης, ὡς ὑπερδέδοικά σου.

ΑΝΤΙΓΟΝΗ

μὴ 'μοῦ προτάρβει: τὸν σὸν ἐξόρθου πότμον.

ΙΣΜΗΝΗ

ἀλλ᾽ οὖν προμηνύσῃς γε τοῦτο μηδενὶ

τοὔργον, κρυφῇ δὲ κεῦθε, σὺν δ᾽ αὔτως ἐγώ.

ΑΝΤΙΓΟΝΗ

οἴμοι, καταύδα: πολλὸν ἐχθίων ἔσει

σιγῶσ᾽, ἐὰν μὴ πᾶσι κηρύξῃς τάδε.

ΙΣΜΗΝΗ

θερμὴν ἐπὶ ψυχροῖσι καρδίαν ἔχεις.

ΑΝΤΙΓΟΝΗ

ἀλλ᾽ οἶδ᾽ ἀρέσκουσ᾽ οἷς μάλισθ᾽ ἁδεῖν με χρή.

ΙΣΜΗΝΗ

εἰ καὶ δυνήσει γ᾽: ἀλλ᾽ ἀμηχάνων ἐρᾷς.

ΑΝΤΙΓΟΝΗ

οὐκοῦν, ὅταν δὴ μὴ σθένω, πεπαύσομαι.

Antigone

Use whatever you like as a pretext [for your cowardice], but I'll go now and place our beloved brother in a tomb [without you].

Ismene

Oh, unhappy sister--how I fear for you!

Antigone

Don't fear for me: set your own lot right.

Ismene

At-least keep it a secret, before you do the deed. Hide it, as in a tomb, and so shall I.

Antigone

Oh, wretch--say what you mean! You will be hated more keeping your silence, if you don't proclaim these things to all.

Ismene

You've a hot heart for heartless deeds!

Antigone

But at-least I know that I am pleasing the ones I most ought to.

Ismene

Yes, if you have the strength--but you crave impossible things.

Antigone

Then, when all my strength goes slack, I will have finished.