Out of measure

A reading of Sophocles' Antigone[1]

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Abstract – Sophocles' *Antigone* has been understood by many as the archetypal account of the eternal conflict between the universal value of natural laws and the contingency of law enacted by those in power. The present article challenges this rather widespread reading. Rather, it emphasizes that the tragic nature of the conflict between Antigone and Creon resides in the radical incommensurability of their discourses: both discourses are irreducible to a common sphere – be it that of law, ethics or politics.

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(i) The work of art is no natural product; it is brought about by human activity;
(ii) it is essentially made for man's apprehension, and in particular is drawn more or less from the sensuous field for apprehension by the senses;
(iii) it has an end and aim in itself. (Hegel 1975, v.1, p. 25)

1. Again (and always)

Since Hegel said it, perhaps we can believe it is so,

> Of all the masterpieces of the classical and the modern world – and I know nearly all of them and one should and can know it – the Antigone seems to me to be the most magnificent and satisfying work of art of this kind. (1975, v. 2., p. 1218).

We will try to understand later precisely what this reason is. In the meantime, this passage from Hegel is sufficient to justify the reason we should still (and always) bow before the work *Antigone*. Because it *is* a masterpiece. Perhaps even the greatest masterpiece that the human spirit has ever produced. It is a text in which there is everything, in fact. Or rather, to quote George Steiner, another to be trusted, "all the constant principles of conflict present in the human condition" (1986, p.

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231). We will also return to this statement. Still, there is (at least) one other reason that makes it almost inevitable to consider this text at a time when the studies of law and literature seem to be finally enjoying a measure of good fortune. A reason that concerns the conjunction – law *and* literature – between these two forms of discourse. This conjunction is in fact, for us, first of all a disjunction. It is a conjunction that does not take into account as a necessary presupposition the constitution of these two different objects of knowledge in their specific difference. On the one hand, law. On the other, literature. And then, only subsequently, a consideration of their relationship (Heritier 2014).

Well, the first thing to consider when we pick up a text like that by Sophocles – and in general when we are dealing with the thinking of the Ancient Greeks – is that this difference between law and literature is anything but original. It is necessary to say, even before we begin, and as clearly as possible that Sophocles – like Aeschylus and Euripides, and the same could be said for Plato and Aristotle, to mention just two more names – did not know law as we mean it and his work does not belong to that which for us is the field of pure and simple literature. When we speak of law, we are speaking the language of the Romans and not of the Greeks (Schiavone 2017 and Bretone & Talamanca 2015). The same is true for literature, when we speak of literature, we tend to use the categories of the modern novel and we speak, if anything, the language of Cervantes or of Defoe, and not that of Homer. An important detail. If only because it allows us to avoid, from the very start, a couple of misunderstandings. The first, fairly widespread misunderstanding is to believe that the clash between Creon and Antigone turns on the perennial question of the relationship between positive law and natural law, or even worse, between law and moral. The second, now decidedly pervasive, is that of thinking that going to the theatre for a Greek of the fifth-century B.C. was (only) an entertainment and that the texts of Aeschylus, Sophocles or Euripides were written to be *read* as we read them, today, in the context of a university classroom or perhaps, in solitude, in the silence of a room.

Here, of course, we intend in particular to demolish the first of these two misunderstandings. But it is from the second that we should take our cue, even at the cost of seeming didascalic, just to start by understanding – as far as possible – what we are talking about.

2. The city becomes theatre

As far as possible, we said. In effect something we must take into account, however obvious it may seem, is this: for many we are still Ancient Greeks – our roots are there, there can be no doubt: in Athens (and in Jerusalem we could add, with Leo Strauss) – but for many others we no longer belong, and not only because we are divided by two thousand five hundred years of history. All in all, despite the

appearances, understanding the Ancient Greeks is anything but easy. We'll say more, in some ways, it is even impossible; there is something in their world that has been irretrievably lost. And one of the most difficult things to understand is precisely the significance that they attributed to the tragedies and the role of the festivals during which they were performed. Obviously, we know a lot. We know when, how and where the tragic contests were held, because that is what they were, we know that the choice of the poets fell to the Archon Eponymos, who was chosen by sort (at least from 481 onwards), who selected the *choregoi* (the directors of the choir) and was responsible for the formation of the company. We know the complex method by which the jury was chosen and we also know how the winner was decided. What is lacking, however, is their experience: what is usually defined as the 'tragic aura'.

One thing is therefore certain: it would seem that in the fifth century BC Athens needed the tragedies, in the same way that all the other institutions of its burgeoning democracy, like the Assembly and the Council of the Five Hundred or *boule*, just to give a couple of examples. This need can be explained thus. The fifth century BC in Greece opened with the Persian Wars and ended with the Peloponnesian War. This is the great (and all things considered) brief season of the tragic poets. It was in this season that Athens became the Athens we know of today: no longer the relatively insignificant city, that it was in ancient times, but a city "fascinating, feared, admired; for many, certainly, a phenomenon difficult to comprehend." (Meier 1998, p. II) For many and above all, it is opportune to emphasise, for its own citizens. In fact, an entire horizon of meaning was thrown into disarray by Athens' rapid – not to say abrupt – explosion of power. New spaces and unheard-of possibilities for action and thought that in the past had not found their measure were suddenly thrown open. For the first time in the history of humanity, a city was in the hands of its citizens. Not just any city, but the most powerful in the Greek world; and power, as we know, is seductive, it disorients, also (if not above all) those who exercise it. Here lies the need to build a new 'nomological knowledge' to quote Max Weber, through the lenses of time, that of the mythical universe, certainly ever more distant, but not yet purely and simply the past.

Besides, it is true that the tragedy was born when they began to see the myths through the eyes of the citizen, to use an efficacious expression of Walter Nestle, picked up by Jean-Pierre Vernant (1972). But it is also true that we begin to look at the myth through the eyes of the citizen when the tragedies are born; in fact, it is precisely this perspective that the tragedies contribute to shaping. In the framework of the festivals it is the city itself that becomes a theatre, transfiguring publicly into an object of representation in its spaces and according to the rules of the assemblies and the people's tribunals, and thus facing up to its ghosts. First of all, that relating to the place of man in the cosmos: to his nature, his possibilities, his duties and the limits of his actions.

"Many things are tremendous (*deinà*) but none of them is more than man" (Sophocles 1994, p. 34), says the Chorus in the opening of the first stasimon of *Antigone.* And it is difficult to imagine a better way to introduce this ghost. Man is the most tremendous thing: *deinoteron.* He arouses amazement, wonder, admiration, but also fear and dismay. The *deinos* of the Greeks, an emblematic, polysemic term, contains all these sentiments.[3] Just like man, whose power arouses all this: wonder, certainly, but also fear. And the fact that Sophocles puts these words into the mouths of the Chorus is anything but casual. Here is the city that speaks and examines its conscience. Seeking precisely a new knowledge capable of framing this ambiguous power and giving a sense to its actions.

3. A woman and a sister

"A city without measure that gives the measure," briefly, this is Athens in the fifth century BC (Meier 1998, 12). And it is precisely the question of the "measure" that constitutes one of the privileged keys to the reading of *Antigone*, as is clear from the prologue onwards. Antigone has just informed her sister that she intends to bury Polynices, against the edict issued by Creon, here is Ismene's answer.

> "Why, we must remember that we are women, who cannot fight against men, and then that we are ruled by those whose power is greater, so that we must consent to this and to other things even more painful! So, I shall beg those beneath the earth to be understanding, since I act under constraint, but I shall obey those in authority; for there is no sense in actions that exceed our powers." (Sophocles 1994, p. 11)

This is the certainly the answer of a faint-hearted woman. However, it would be wrong to simply read Ismene in this way. Even before being a faint-hearted woman, Ismene is a woman. She is a woman who exhorts her sister to behave like a woman. Ismene is, above all, the voice of a measure, or rather of the measures introduced and questioned on the stage. A woman who must act as a woman. Not as a man, challenging other men. This is Ismene's measure. A measure in the light of which Antigone's intention must appear foolish, out of measure, as we said. Antigone wants that which is impossible, according to Ismene: she wants to ack like a man, this is her error and this is her fault.

> Ismene: If you have the strength! But you are in love with the impossible.
> Antigone: Then, when my strength fails, I shall be at rest.

3. Unforgettable the reading of the first chorus of Antigone offered by Martin Heidegger (1953, 154 *et seq.*) See also Cavalla (2017).

> Ismene: But to begin with it is wrong to hunt for what is impossible." (Sophocles 1994, p. 13)

The impossible, therefore. That is what Antigone wants, in her sister's eyes (Curi 2015, p. 16). Here lies her *hybris*: in wanting the impossible, infringing a measure, that of the gender difference. Already in the prologue we can see one of the stakes at play throughout the entire tragedy: it is a question of understanding what the right measure is. In fact, Antigone opposes to Ismene's measure, another, that of the *ghenos*, whose nature will be made even clearer by her notorious clash with Creon, revealing itself to be – but this we will see later – a structurally unmeasured measure. In the meantime, Antigone speaks to her sister in the verses that open the tragedy:

> Antigone: "My own sister Ismene, Linked to myself, are you aware that Zeus … ah, which of the evils that come from Oedipus is he not accomplishing while we still live?" (Sophocles 1994, p. 5)

She speaks to her sister, Antigone: to her own flesh and blood. And this is the measure to which she appeals: to that of blood and of family bonds. Even before being women, they are Polynices' sisters. This is the reason they must give his corpse a rightful burial. It does not matter that in order to do this they must act as men, disregarding the edict issued by a man. From the very start, there are two measures battling for precedence. And it is immediately clear that it will be difficult to choose one rather than the other; above all if we manage to set aside our modern-day sensibility, which is nothing other than a further measure, that leads us instinctively to take the part of Antigone at the expense of the timid Ismene. Ultimately, in fact, this is not (merely) a clash between a cowardly woman and a courageous woman, but that between a woman who revendicates her status as a woman and a woman who presents herself above all as a sister, even more than as a woman.

4. A king

A woman and a sister, therefore. And a king, Creon, who comes onto the stage with these words:

> Sirs, the gods have shaken the city's fortunes with a heavy shaking, but now they have set them right in safety. And I have summoned you out of all the people by emissaries, knowing well first that you have always reverenced the power of the throne of Laius, and second that when Oedipus guided the city <with my sister as his wife, you always served them faithfully,> and when he perished, you persisted in loyalty towards their children. So now that they have perished by twofold ruin

> on a single day, striking and being struck by the polluting violence of one another, I hold the power and the throne by reason of my kinship with the dead. (Sophocles 1994, p. 19)

Thus, Creon introduces himself to the city. The curse of Oedipus has been fulfilled: Eteocles and Polynices are dead, one by the hand of the other. And now, it is he, brother of Jocasta, who must take command. Legitimately "next of kin of the dead". Caution: these are not the words of an evil tyrant, nor even less those of a usurper. On the contrary, this is a king who is talking. A king who, first of all, justifies his power. He explains to the city why it is he who *must* now command. He explains, after all, to use Anouilh's words, why he must now play "the difficult hand of guiding men.":

> That robust, white-haired man, who ponders there beside his page, is Creon. He is the king. His face is lined, he is tired. He is playing the difficult hand of guiding men. Previously, in the time of Oedipus, when he was not the most important person at the court, he enjoyed music, fine book bindings, long strolls around the small antique dealers in Thebes. But now Oedipus and his sons are dead. He has left his books, his objet d'art, he has rolled up his sleeves and taken their place. Sometimes, in the evening, he is tired, and he wonders whether it is futile to guide men. Whether this is not a squalid task that should be left to others, who are coarser… And then, in the morning, precise problems arise, it is necessary to solve them, and he rises, calm, like a workman about to start his day. (2000, p. 64)

A short aside. Jean Anouilh wrote his *Antigone* in 1942, in France, during the German occupation, only managing to bring it to the stage a couple of years later. This version has been widely discussed. It is undoubtedly questionable, also given the setting, clearly modernized, and Anouilh has taken many liberties with respect to Sophocles' text, above all on the plane of the reconstruction of the various characters. Yet, despite the liberties taken, or perhaps thanks to them, this version sounds rather archaic. In particular, Anouilh manages more than others to render homage to the figure of Creon. Let's repeat: we are not in the presence of an evil tyrant, but of a man who finds himself occupying a position, that of king, and who is trying to fulfil as well as he can this thankless task handed to him by fate: leading his city. At least, at first, we could add. Because, in effect, there will come a moment in which Creon does become the evil tyrant he is traditionally seen to be, losing the measure of his actions. Still, it is too soon to speak of this. For the moment we will simply notice this: Creon's figure, unlike others, is a figure in movement.[4] All the others, including Antigone, will leave the scene as they entered it. That of Creon, no. End of the aside.

Returning to the original text, this is how the first discourse of the king of the city continues:

> Creon: There is no way of getting to know a man's spirit and thought and judgment, until he has been seen to be versed in government and in the laws. Yes, to me anyone who while guiding the whole city fails to set his hand to the best counsels, but keeps his mouth shut by reason of some fear seems now and has always seemed the worst of men; and him who rates a dear one [*philos*] higher than his native land, him I put nowhere. (Sophocles 1994, p. 21)

There is all the *fragility in play* in these words, to use one of Bruno Montanari's expressions (2013 and 1993). Stripped bare by power is, above all, he who exercises it. It is on these occasions that a man shows himself for what he really is, exposing himself to the judgement of the city. It is, therefore, a question of assuming and conforming to the "best counsels". To understand which they are needs a sort of measure. That, for Creon, means the city. Not that of a woman, nor that of a sister (or of a brother or of an uncle) but that of a king.

> I would never be silent, may Zeus who sees all things for ever know it, when I saw ruin coming upon the citizens instead of safety, nor would I make a friend of the enemy of my country, knowing that this is the ship that preserves us, and that this is the ship on which we sail and only while she prospers can we make our friends. (Sophocles 1994, p. 21)

After having justified his power, Creon presents – we could say – his manifesto: to make the city great. A third measure thus comes onto the stage. A measure immediately *political* this time, which the tragedy immediately begins to shape, at the same time as it subjects it to a radical interrogation. It would be Aristotle who, a hundred years later, illustrated what occurred:

> Thus also the city-state is prior in nature to the household and to each of us individually. For the whole must necessarily be prior to the part; since when the whole body is destroyed, foot or hand will not exist except in an equivocal sense, like the sense in which one speaks of a hand sculptured in stone as a hand; because a hand in those circum-

4. As magnificently emphasised by E. Ripepe, in fact: "In the light of modern sensibility [...] the reviled, and in more than one respect (though not in all respects) contemptible Creon is a much more complex figure and, from the dramaturgic standpoint, more interesting than the eponymous heroine of *Antigone*, whose unshakeable belief in her convictions would risk translating her into an one-dimensionality an irremediably mono-chord character, if it were not for Sophocles' mastery in giving her human dimensions, attributing to her, if not a rethinking, at least some anguished bewilderment." To the extent where we could even think, Ripepe adds in this elegant work, "with only minimal strain due more to a need for synthesis than love of the thesis, that *Antigone*, is really the tragedy of Creon." (2001, 677-8).

> stances will be a hand spoiled, and all things are defined by their function and capacity, so that when they are no longer such as to perform their function they must not be said to be the same things, but to bear their names in an equivocal sense. It is clear therefore that the state is also prior by nature to the individual; for if each individual when separate is not self-sufficient, he must be related to the whole state as other parts are to their whole, while a man who is incapable of entering into partnership, or who is so self-sufficing that he has no need to do so, is no part of a state, so that he must be either a lower animal or a god. (1932, p. 11)

Two points must be emphasized. First: the city-state is a natural institution, because the communities that compose it and of which it is the destiny are natural, that is to say the family and the villages. Second: the city precedes the citizens, because the whole necessarily precedes the parts. With regard to the difficulty of entering the world of the Greeks that we mentioned at the beginning, here is proof. In fact, for us, the children of Thomas Hobbes (and of René Descartes) the contrary is true: it is not the whole that precedes the parts, but the parts that precede the whole. First comes Man, in a word, then the State, created moreover in the image and likeness of its artificers. The political order is a purely artificial product. That is what the modern political science to be found in Hobbes, one of its principal inventors teaches us. Well, nothing could be further from the Aristotelian *Politics.* In this framework, we repeat, the city is a natural institution that precedes – axiologically, if not chronologically – the citizens because only within a well-organised *polis* is it possible to live well and be happy. Only within a well-organised polis, in fact, can a man truly develop his potential: that of being by nature a *politikon zôon* inasmuch as he is a *zôon logon echon* (Berti 2012 and Zanetti 1993a and 1993b). And it is within this conceptual architecture – where moreover nature is to be seen as a *goal* and not as a *given*, as Aristotle teaches us (1932, p. 9, Riedel 1975 and Bien 1985) – that we understand Creon's measure. It is necessary to protect the city first of all, because the city is more important than the individual citizens, whether brothers or sisters, it is no matter.

The city is like a ship says Creon, on which the citizens have embarked. And it is the duty of a good king to govern it well, not to run it aground. This is the basis for his decision. Rightful burial shall be given to Eteocles who defended the city. Polynices, who endangered it, shall be left unburied. The measure, precisely, is the salvation of the *polis*. And the Chorus, at least at first, supports the king. Not Antigone, however, who has chosen another measure: she will act as a sister, following the order of the *oikos*, and not that of the *polis.*

5. The family and the city

Oikos and *polis*. Here are the two measures that face up to each other in the clash between Antigone and Creon, which in many ways is the fulcrum of the tragedy. At least if we still intend to listen to the great Hegelian lesson. A clash, we said, not a dialogue. Seen clearly, in fact, the great absentee in the whole of *Antigone* is precisely dialogue, at least if we see it in terms of an action aimed at agreement (Habermas 1981 and 1983). That which takes place between Antigone and Creon is not a dialogue, just as the exchange between the two sisters at the beginning of the play is not a dialogue and nor is – we will see later – the talk between Creon and his son Haemon which prepares for the ending. What is lacking is the reciprocal willingness to understand the reasons of the other. And, much more radically, a common measure. A third measure compared to those that from time to time contend the entire field. In other words, there is no single *logos* across which the different positions develop (*dia-*) but rather different interpretations of what the *logos* is. Above all, what is the 'real' *nomos*, the right measure. Incidentally, in the absence of any kind of mediation resides the authentically *tragic* nature of the events:

> Tragedy means above all that the problem is really such, that there is no pre-established solution: that man, even knowing that there is an objective measure of justice, does not know what to do here and now and yet he is forced to act in the face of the imperative need for a situation in which even the refusal to decide would be a valid choice (not to act) and would call him to responsibility, because he too would not remain without consequences. Even more deeply, the tragic element is all here: we don't know what the order is there, but we know that the order is there, and we know it because the consequences of the act we choose to perform, whatever it may be, will be inexorable (Magri 2012, p. 71).

After all, it is known that there is no *logos* without *polemos.* And no one explains this better than Sophocles. Antigone therefore ignores Creon's edict, securing a respectable burial for the corpse of her brother Polynices. She does so openly, in the light of midday. She is led before the king. This is how Creon receives her, after having listened to the watchman who caught her in the act, on whom, moreover, the first suspicions weighed.

> Creon: You there, you that are bowing down your head towards the ground, do you admit, or do you deny, that you have done this?
> Antigone: I say that I did it and I do not deny it.
> Creon (to guard): You may take yourself to wherever you please, free from the heavy charge.

> (Exit guard.) (to Antigone) But do you tell me, not at length, but briefly: did you know of the proclamation forbidding this?
> Antigone: I knew it; of course I knew it. It was known to all.
> Creon: And yet you dared to transgress these laws? (Sophocles, 1994, p. 43)

Let's stop for a moment. Creon is a king who has just issued a decree saying that anyone who dares to infringe it will be ruthlessly put to death. And here, standing before him is Antigone, his niece, his sister's daughter. Not a minor complication. An uncle is forced to judge his own niece. And it is as an uncle, rather than as a king that Creon first seems to receive Antigone. After her first confession, in fact, Creon sends the watchman away, almost as if he wanted to find a solution without indiscreet ears hearing what he says. This is an uncle extending a hand to a niece, perhaps hoping that she will take a step back. But Antigone disdainfully refuses, proudly and caustically boasting of her gesture. The opposition (*anti-*) is written in her very name. And she has decided to remain faithful to her fate to the end. In fact, here is her answer:

> Antigone: Yes, for it was not Zeus who made this proclamation, nor was it Justice who lives with the gods below that established such laws among men, nor did I think your proclamations strong enough to have power to overrule, mortal as they were, the unwritten and unfailing ordinances of the gods. For these have life, not simply today and yesterday, but for ever, and no one knows how long ago they were revealed. For this I did not intend to pay the penalty among the gods for fear of any man's pride. I knew that I would die, of course I knew, even if you had made no proclamation. But if I die before my time, I account that gain. For does not whoever lives among many troubles, as I do, gain by death? So it is in no way painful for me to meet with this death; if I had endured that the son of my own mother should die and remain unburied, that would have given me pain, but this gives me none. And if you think my actions foolish, that amounts to a charge of folly by a fool! (Sophocles 1994, p. 45)

The niece opposes the unwritten laws of the gods to those of her uncle. These are verses on which western thinking has continually reflected ever since. And it is certainly not here that we will run through the innumerable interpretations that have been offered (Zagrebelsky 2006). Here the intention is much more modest. As we said at the beginning, it is merely a question of avoiding a fairly widespread ambiguity. Many, in fact, have seen (and continue to see) in this clash nothing more than the exhibition, in the archetypal form, of the eternal conflict between the universal value of the laws of nature and the contingent validity of the law

posed by the one who holds power. On the one hand moral, on the other the law. In other words: on the one hand natural law and on the other, positive law. On the one hand a young woman who has the courage to rebel against the constituted power, on the other an elderly king who intends to assert his will, if not his own brute will. This is how the clash usually has been read (Ascarelli 1959, Fasso 1966 and Magri 2012).

Yet, we feel that a couple of points must be made. The first is this: the figure of Creon does not represent the State, a pure and simple artificial construction based on the will of the men who constitute it through the social contract, but the *polis*, which, as we have seen, for a Greek in the fifth century BC was in all and for all a natural institution that axiologically precedes the individual men who compose it. This means that the basis of Creon's decree, which assumes as its measure the safety of the *polis*, does not lie in pure and simple will, or even in the caprice of a despot, so much as in the very nature of the *polis*, thus resulting natural just as the unwritten laws invoked by Antigone are natural.

What is in play in this clash, therefore, is not the contraposition of Creon's positive law and Antigone's natural law, but rather the contraposition of two ways of interpreting natural law. Or better: between two measures – that of the *polis* and that of the *oikos* – equally natural and objective (Zagrebelsky 2008, p. 67).[5] And it is precisely this, moreover, that makes the conflict authentically tragic, since it is literally undecidable. After all, as Karl Jaspers teaches: "Tragic is that conflict in which the forces fighting each other are all right, each from their own standpoint. The multiplicity of truth, its non-unity, is the fundamental discovery of the tragic conscience." (1952, p. 39, see also Curi 1991).

The second is the following: the unwritten laws of the gods invoked by Antigone are not those of an individual moral conscience, but the traditional ones of the lineage, of the family bonds or the *ghenos*, or whatever you wish to call it. There is no trace of autonomy, in these unwritten laws, but rather the trace of a past that is not yet purely and simply such in a moment in which a city is discovering how wonderful and tremendous the ambition of a political action that intends to distance itself from this past can be.

All in all, for these and for other reasons to which we will return, we must not read the clash between Antigone and Creon either through Hobbes' eyes, nor through those of Kant. As we said at the beginning, the world of Greek tragedy is our world because we come from there, there can be no doubt, but at the same time it is also a world that is very distant from ours. It would be wise not to forget this, ever. And Creon's answer is further proof:

5. With regard to Zagrebelsky's criticism of Ascarelli, see Punzi 2009, pp. 157-171.

Chorus: It is clear! The nature of the girl is savage, like her father's, and she does not know how to bend before her troubles.

Creon: Why, know that over-stubborn wills are the most apt to fall, and the toughest iron, baked in the fire till it is hard, is most often, you will see, cracked and shattered! I know that spirited horses are controlled by a small bridle; for pride is impossible for anyone who is another's slave. This girl knew well how to be insolent then, transgressing the established laws; and after her action, this was a second insolence, to exult in this and to laugh at the thought of having done it. Indeed, now I am no man, but she is a man, if she is to enjoy such power as this with impunity. But whether she is my sister's child or closer in affinity than our whole family linked by Zeus of the hearth, she and her sister shall not escape a dreadful death! Yes, I hold her equally guilty of having planned this burial! Call her! I saw her lately in the house raving, having lost control of her wits. The mind is often detected in deceit beforehand, when people are planning nefarious deeds in darkness; but I hate also those who are caught out in evil deeds and then try to gloss them over. (Sophocles 1994, pp. 45-7)

Ismene will avoid the accusation, she will be absolved. Her fate, like that of Creon, is to live, or rather to survive and not to die. But this is not the point, now. It is, rather, interesting to note how, in these verses, the uncle definitively gives way to the king. Antigone's pride arouses that of Creon. The opposition takes shape. No mediation is possible. A king cannot cede his position. Much less to a woman. Here the echo of Ismene resounds. Antigone is a woman, she is also young, and as such she should have behaved. Creon is a man and he cannot act as a man. This is his role, in addition to that of king. He is a father.

6. A father and a son

In addition to being the king of Thebes and uncle to Oedipus' children, Creon is also the father of Antigone's betrothed. And the clash between father and son is perhaps the most subtle and complex in the entire tragedy. It is introduced, as always, by the Chorus:

Chorus: Here is Haemon, the latest born among your sons! Is he angry at the fate of his affianced one, Antigone, grieving at the baffled hope of marriage? [Enter Haemon]
Creon: We shall soon have better knowledge than prophets could have given us. My son, now that you have heard the valid decision

> against your destined bride, are you here in rage against your father, or are we dear to you, no matter what we do?
> Haemon: Father, I belong to you, and you keep me straight with your good judgments, which I shall follow. Yes, in my eyes no marriage shall be more highly valued than your right guidance. (Sophocles 1994, pp. 61-3)

A father and a son, therefore. One before the other. Just like a father and a son. At least at first, in fact, Creon addresses his son and Haemon answers his father. After all, it is with these words that the son comes on stage: "Father, I am yours." Like a son. Devoted. Even though it is perhaps a strategic move. In effect Haemon's aim is clear: he is there to save Antigone. And it is as if he knew that to do so, it would be useless to blatantly oppose his father's will. It is necessary to seduce him. Useless to behave like a rebel. Only a good son can have any hope of convincing a good father to change his mind. And it is to the good father that Haemon speaks, declaring that he is ready to follow the "good judgements" and the "noble lead". And Creon clearly appreciates this attitude:

> Yes, my son, that is how your mind should be, thinking that all things rank second to your father's judgment. This is why men pray that they may beget and keep in their houses obedient offspring, so that they may requite the enemy with evil and honour the friend as they honour their father. But as for the man who fathers children who give him no help, what can you say that he begets but trouble for himself, and much delight for his enemies? Never let go your good sense, my son, for sake of the pleasure that a woman gives, knowing that this thing is an armful that grows cold, an evil woman sharing your bed in your house. For what wound could be deeper than a dear one who is evil? So spit this girl out as an enemy and allow her to marry someone in Hades! (Sophocles 1994, pp. 63-5)

These are, once again, the words of a father. It is difficult to say whether they are also the words of a good father. Certainly, they are (or at least seem to be) the words of a father who is concerned above all for his son, begging him "Do not ever throw out good sense, boy, over pleasure for [an evil] woman's sake." But here the father is also a king. And a king must answer not only to his son, but to the entire city. And in fact, this is how the speech continues:

> For since I caught her openly disobeying, alone out of all the city, I shall not show myself false to the city, but I shall kill her! In the face of that let her keep invoking the Zeus of kindred! If those of my own family whom I keep are to show no discipline, how much more will those outside my family! The man who acts rightly in family matters

> will be seen to be righteous in the city also. [But whoever transgresses or does violence to the laws, or is minded to dictate to those in power, that man shall never receive praise from me. One must obey the man whom the city sets up in power in small things and in justice and in its opposite.] This is the man whom I would trust to be a good ruler and a good subject, and when assigned his post in the storm of battle to prove a true and noble comrade in the fight. But there is no worse evil than insubordination! This it is that ruins cities, this it is that destroys houses, this it is that shatters and puts to flight the warriors on its own side! But what saves the lives of most of those that go straight is obedience! In this way we have to protect discipline, and we must never allow a woman to vanquish us. If we must perish, it is better to do so by the hand of a man, and then we cannot be called inferior to women. (Sophocles 1994, p. 65)

Now it is the king who is speaking again, not just the father. A king who is still trying to be a good king, or at least to appear such. The measure is always the *polis*. And to guarantee order it is necessary to obey the person in power. Always and at any cost, says Creon, "Whomever the city may appoint, one should obey in small concerns and just, and in their opposites." It is here that we begin to see, however, the first trace of what will soon become his madness. A first symptom of a power that will soon claim its own absoluteness, losing its sense of measure. After all, it is clear, that this discussion between Creon and Haemon is the only genuinely political one in the entire tragedy. Or rather, it is the only discussion that turns directly on the meaning of political action, on its conditions and its limits, and on what it means to govern (well) a city state. In fact, this is how the son replies to his father and, at first, his speech is applauded by the Chorus.

> Chorus: To us, if we are not led astray by our old age, you seem to speak sensibly about the things you speak of.
> Haemon: Father, it is the gods who give men intelligence, the most precious of all possessions, and I could never say, and may I never know how to say, that what you say is wrong. [But a different view might be correct.] But it is not in your nature to foresee people's words or actions or the objects of their censure; for your countenance is alarming to a subject when he speaks words that give you no pleasure. But for me it is possible to hear under cover this, how the city is lamenting for this girl, saying that no woman ever deserved it less, but that she is to perish miserably for actions that are glorious, she who did not allow her own brother who had fallen in the slaughter to remain unburied or to be destroyed by savage dogs or birds. Does not

she deserve, they ask, to be honoured with a golden prize? Such is the dark saying that is silently advancing. (Sophocles 1994, p. 67)

What extraordinary rhetorical elegance. After presenting himself as a devout son, ready to follow always and in any circumstances the good guidance of a good father, Haemon takes another step. Although he continues not to oppose his father, he cautiously begins to distance himself, insinuating doubt. Then he warns him; careful, the city fears you. And this is not a good sign for one who wants to be a good king, who can certainly not simply govern through fear. And finally, he presents himself as one who can help him: only I, who am your son, can tell you what the city really thinks, not the Chorus, who only represent the official voice of the city, and moreover, the voice of the Theban Elders. While the Chorus just approved your actions, well, we tell you that in fact, the city thinks you are wrong. "Such is the dark saying that is silently advancing." Having said this, he fears that he has gone too far and the good son returns to his subtle seduction:

> Haemon: For me, father, nothing is more precious than your good fortune. (Sophocles 1994, p. 67)

There follows a wonderful hymn to the virtue of flexibility.

> For whoever think that they themselves alone have sense, or have a power of speech or an intelligence that no other has, these people when they are laid open are found to be empty. It is not shameful for a man, even if he is wise, often to learn things and not to resist too much. You see how when rivers are swollen in winter those trees that yield to the flood retain their branches, but those that offer resistance perish, trunk and all. Just so whoever in command of a ship keeps the sheet taut, and never slackens it, is overturned and thereafter sails with his oarsmen's benches upside down. No, retreat from your anger and allow yourself to change; for if I too, young as I am, have some judgment, I say that it is best by far if a man is altogether full of knowledge; but that, since things are not accustomed to go that way, it is also good to learn from those who give good counsel. (Sophocles 1994, p. 69)

A king cannot contradict himself before the city, Creon had said. And the city must always and in any circumstance, obey he who governs it. And here is Haemon's answer: there is nothing *shameful* in changing your mind. On the contrary, it is precisely because the safety of the *polis* constitutes the measure of good government that a good king must know how to listen to those who speak *competently*. Precisely because the measure of political action is the city. Not the will or, worse still, the arbitrariness of he who governs it. In fact, there is no man,

however wise, born filled with wisdom. Not even a king. Unless he is mad. And, at this point, Creon truly becomes insane.

> Chorus: King, it is proper, if he says anything that is to the point, that you should learn from him, and you, Haemon, from Creon; for true things have been said on both sides.
> Creon: So men of my age are to be taught sense by a man of your age?
> Haemon: Nothing but what is right! If I am young, one must not consider my age rather than my merits.
> Creon: Is it a merit to show regard for those who cause disorder?
> Haemon: It is not that I would ask you to show regard for evildoers.
> Creon: Is not she afflicted with this malady?
> Haemon: This people of Thebes that shares our city does not say so.
> Creon: Is the city to tell me what orders I shall give?
> Haemon: Do you notice that what you have said is spoken like a very young man?
> Creon: Must I rule this land for another and not for myself?
> Haemon: Yes, there is no city that belongs to a single man!
> Creon: Is not the city thought to belong to its ruler?
> Haemon: You would be a fine ruler over a deserted city!
> Creon: This man, it seems, is fighting on the woman's side.
> Haemon: If you are a woman; because it is you for whom I feel concern. (Sophocles 1994, pp. 69-71)

The change of step is clear. The good father and the good king have given way to the tyrant. Only a tyrant, in fact, and certainly not a good father, could think that his son was not worth listening to, since he does not want to be taught by a man of his age. Only a tyrant and certainly not a good king could think that the city is not worth listening to, because he sees no reason to rule for anyone other than himself. And only a tyrant, and certainly not a good father or a good king, could think that he was alone and could act as if he were ruling "over a deserted city". This is the insanity of absolute power. The insanity, we could say, that modernity tends to remove, identifying in absoluteness one of the constitutive traits of sovereign power. But here we are still in the Greece of the fifth century BC and one of the great lessons of the Greeks is precisely this: in the framework of the *polis*, (legitimate) power is not given without measure. A king is part of that same order that he must preserve. And it is when he forgets this, losing his sense of being a part of the whole that he becomes a tyrant (Montanari 1993, p. 54). Mad. Like Creon. An old man who reasons like a youth: "Do you notice that what you have said is spoken like a very young man". A man who finds himself in the place of a woman: "[…] if you are a woman; because it is you for whom I feel concern ". Every measure has disappeared. This is madness:

Haemon: If you were not my father, I would say you had no sense.
Creon: Slave of a woman that you are, do not try to cajole me!
Haemon: Do you wish to speak but not to listen to him you speak to?
(Sophocles 1994, p. 75)

Ismene, the sister already said this at the start of the tragedy: acting beyond measure is madness. And now it is the son who says this to the father. A mad father. Like Antigone. And, like her, alone. But the measure of Haemon, more than a measure, is a method. It is a disposition of the soul. The method is the dialogue. And the disposition is listening.

7. The blindness of power

The king, therefore, does not listen to the city. And the father does not listen to the son, who in fact will not manage to make him change his mind. Another will manage to do this, although it will be too late: Tiresias, the blind seer. Like Haemon, he plays on the same ground as Creon, that of the *polis*. Like Haemon, at first, he tries to make him reason, for his own good and for that of the *polis*. Thus:

"[…] And it is your will that has put this plague upon the city; for our altars and our braziers, one and all, are filled with carrion brought by birds and dogs from the unhappy son of Oedipus who fell. And the gods are no longer accepting the prayers that accompany sacrifice or the flame that consumes the thigh bones, and the cries screamed out by the birds no longer give me signs . . . for they have eaten fat compounded with a dead man's blood.
Think upon this, my son! All men are liable to make mistakes; and when a man does this, he who after getting into trouble tries to repair the damage and does not remain immovable is not foolish or miserable. Obstinacy lays you open to the charge of blundering. Give way to the dead man, and do not continue to stab him as he lies dead! What is the bravery of killing a dead man over again? I am well disposed to you, and my advice is good; and it is a pleasure to learn from a good adviser, if his advice brings profit. (Sophocles 1994, p. 97)

Now it is Creon who is treated like a son. Like a son who has erred, but who can still make good his error. Politics and wisdom, this is once again the playing field. We find the same arguments used by Haemon, though they are presented with a different tone, authoritative and no longer familiar. But Creon is by now blinded by power. He is the blindman; not Tiresias. In fact, he does not give way, just as he did not give way to his son, accusing the seer of having sold out, just as he

previously accused his son of being a slave to a woman. But Tiresias, at this point, plays another card. That of a tremendous prophecy:

> Consider whether I tell you this because I have been bribed! For after no long lapse of time there shall be lamentations of men and women in your house; and all the cities are stirred up by enmity . . . (corpses) of which fragments have been consecrated by dogs or beasts, or some winged bird, carrying the unholy scent to the city with its hearths. These are the arrows which like an archer, since you provoke me, I have shot in anger at your heart, sure arrows, whose sting you will not escape. (Sophocles 1994, p. 103)

A threat, therefore. This is the card played by Tiresias. A decisive card. Deaf to the power of reason, Creon has made the reason of power the principle of his government. And it is to this reason without reason that Tiresias finally appeals. Successfully. Now it is the king – rather, the tyrant – who is afraid. And it is fear that makes him give way. Even the Chorus, at this point, advise him to set things to rights. It is necessary to bury Polynices' corpse and rush to free Antigone, before it is too late. But it is now really too late. What happens when Creon arrives at the cavern where he has had Antigone imprisoned, condemned to be buried alive, is told by a Messenger to his wife Eurydice.

> Messenger: "[...] at the bottom of the tomb we saw her hanging by the neck, caught in the woven noose of a piece of linen, and him lying near, his arms about her waist, lamenting for the ruin of his bride in the world below and the actions of his father and his miserable marriage. But when Creon saw him, with a dreadful groan he came inside towards him, and with wailing accents called on him: "Wretch, what a thing you have done! What was in your mind? At what point of disaster did you lose your reason? Come out, my son, I beg you as a suppliant!" But his son glared at him with furious eyes, spat in his face, and returning no answer drew his two-edged sword. As his father darted back to escape him, he missed him; then the unhappy man, furious with himself, just as he was, pressed himself against the sword and drove it, half its length, into his side. Still living, he clasped the maiden in the bend of his feeble arm, and shooting forth a sharp jet of blood, he stained her white cheek. He lay, a corpse holding a corpse, having achieved his marriage rites, poor fellow, in the house of Hades, having shown by how much the worst evil among mortals is bad counsel. (Sophocles 1994, pp. 115-7)

It is a terrible story, that heard by Eurydice, who without saying a word, goes into the house and kills herself. Thus, the Tiresias' prophecy is fulfilled. Antigone is

dead, just like Creon's last son and his wife. But Creon is alive. He will not die, just as Ismene will not die. They will both be condemned to survive this terrible disaster. Ismene for ever a subject. And Creon as a madman, destroyed by pain, deprived of his loved ones, of his power and his sanity. Like a king who has nothing left. Nothing other than a madman, in fact (Sophocles 1994, p. 127). Finally, aware that he is so. But, of course, too late.

At the end, only the city remains on the scene, in fact the last verses are entrusted to the Chorus of Theban Elders:

> Chorus: Good sense [*to phronein*] is by far the chief part of happiness; and we must not be impious towards the gods. The great words of boasters are always punished with great blows, and as they grow old teach them wisdom [*to phronein*]. (Sophocles 1994, p. 127)

8. A lesson in morals

If *Antigone* were a fable, this then would be the moral. It is wisdom and not power, nor fortune, nor wealth, the greatest good and the first condition of a happy life. And wisdom lies above all in the opening of a dialogue, in the recognition of one's own limits and the structural fallibility of ever practical knowledge, without which catastrophe is inevitable. Haemon had already said this to his father and Tiresias had repeated it to the king: in human affairs there is no man who is born possessing perfect wisdom and for this reason it is necessary to be ready to listen to the reasons of others, learning from those who say the right things. Creon spoke (and acted) without listening. This was his error. So did Antigone, in effect. They were both deaf to the reasons of the other. They were both alone. Closed in their personalities. And prisoners of their own reason seen as the only right measure of human actions. As Aristotle would explain about a hundred years after Sophocles, in fact: on the plane of the *praxis*, which is that of ethics and politics, and more generally of history, there is no need for the necessity belonging to the mathematical or physical sciences. No *ethica more geometrico demonstrata* is given, as it is for Hobbes or Spinoza. Nor a scientifically determinable story, such as those demanded by Hegel or Marx, just to mention a few names. And no models are provided for application to a social reality seen as a sort of architectural construction, as Plato, whose reduction of the *praxis* to the *poiesis* not by chance went hand in hand with the celebrated condemnation of the tragedies as pure and simple imitation of the human actions, believed (Berti 2012, p. 243).

In the human vicissitudes, then, it is not a question of asking what the true measure of the actions will be, rather than how the inevitable conflicts between the various reasons will be managed. And this is where the *phronesis* comes into play, seen as a specifically practical virtue, and not theoretical. As masterfully em-

phasized by Jacques Taminiaux, in fact: "This tragic plot is instructive, because it attests to the impossibility of reducing the action, which is always interaction and at the same time interlocution, to the technical application of acquired knowledge or to the implementation of obvious models" (1995, p. 55).

When we deal with the contingency of the *praxis*, expressed in other terms, there is no 'true' measure: a measure given once and for all, that it would be sufficient to know and subsequently to apply according to the canons of a purely and simply deductive logic. A necessary measure, certainly. But it is necessary to carve it out case by case, patiently settling down to listen and to dialectic discussion between the various reasons in play. A discussion that must always take into account the possibility of conflict. And all things considered, it is precisely the challenge of this form of government, which the Greeks were inventing in that period, and which is still called: democracy.

Besides, just a few years after the first performance of *Antigone* and hardly a year after the start of the Peloponnese war, in 430 BC, Pericles would pronounce a eulogy destined to become a genuine manifest for Athenian democracy:

> For we are lovers of beauty yet with no extravagance and lovers of wisdom yet without weakness. Wealth we employ rather as an opportunity for action than as a subject for boasting. (Thucydides 1919, p. 327)

Here is one of the things that makes his Athens great, according to Pericles: the conviction that discussion does not harm action, but rather that only through discussion is it possible to take the best decisions. Clearly, Sophocles *docet*. In the fifth century BC Athens was a city forced to decide its own fate. A city without measure that, to take up the expression previously mentioned used by Christian Meier, it found itself required to give a measure and to give it quite suddenly, reasoning on a past that was not completely over, in view of a future still in many ways already present. Man is the most tremendous thing that can exist: *deinoteron,* says the Chorus. He is a part that tends to forget this fact, thinking of himself as a whole. In this consists his *hybris*. And in this lies the error of both Antigone and of Creon. Not so much in the infringement of who knows what measure already given, but rather in the pretension to possess once and for all and to be able to do without the confrontation with the other parts. Autonomy, this is the problem: the capacity to give oneself a right measure. Man can do anything, that is true, but it is also true that he *must not* do just anything. There is no autonomy, in fact, without self-limitation. And there is not self-limitation without dialogue. And without *phronesis.* This, ultimately, is the great lesson of political pedagogy that Sophocles gives to his city (and to ours).

9. An immanent contradiction

Antigone, however, is not just this. It is not just a fable with a moral, like any self-respecting fable, a play that enacts a learning curve or better, to return to Martha Nussbaum, "a play on the practical reason and on the way in which practical reason orders and sees the world" (1986, p. 134). It is (and we are tempted to add: above all) a *tragic* play. And to explain what this means it may be opportune to briefly recall the reading of *Antigone* offered by Hegel and in particular, as promised at the start, to return to that 'aspect' which, in his opinion, makes this play the most excellent work of art amongst all the masterpieces of the ancient and modern world.

It is not easy, if only because Hegel's approach to the Greek tragedies and in particular precisely to Sophocles accompanies the entire development of his thinking. Which means that to speak of his reading of *Antigone* it would be necessary to retrace his entire conceptual edifice, in the various phases of its construction, lingering in particular on the absolutely central role played by this text within *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1980, 277-299 and 449-455).[6] But my intention here is much more modest. we simply want to recall a couple of passages from *Aesthetics*, beginning with this one:

> But in considering all these tragic conflicts we must above reject the false idea that they have anything to do with guilt or innocence. The tragic heroes are just as much innocent as guilty. On the presupposition that a man is only guilty if alternatives are open to him and he decides arbitrarily on what he does, the Greek plastic figures are innocent: they act out of this character of theirs, on this 'pathos', because this character, this 'pathos' is precisely what they are: their act is not preceded by either hesitation or choice. It is just the strength of the great characters that they do not choose but throughout, from start to finish, are what they will and accomplish. They are what they are, and never anything else, and this is their greatness. (1975, vol. 2, p. 1214)

A precious suggestion: in the clash between Antigone and Creon the first error to avoid is that of asking who is right and who is wrong. Both Antigone and Creon are perfectly moral individuals, because they simply remain faithful to the end to their own character or *ethos*, if you wish. Both are innocent because *they are* what they *must naturally be.* Antigone, as a woman, rightly defends family interests and equally rightly Creon, as a man, cares about the salvation of the political community. They both play their parts well. But only partially. And this is their fault. A

6. For an overall picture of the Hegelian reading of *Antigone* see Vinci 2001 and Ciaramelli 2017, in particular 121 *et seq.* This is a very recent text, to which I am greatly indebted, not only with regard to this part.

necessary fault, however. An *objective* fault, and not *subjective*, which leads them to exhibit a breakdown within the expected harmony of Greek ethical totality, which is thus traversed by an ontological scission between the private law of the *oikos* and the public law of the *polis*, destined moreover, as Fabio Ciaramelli reminds us, to "give way to the looming advent of the Roman empire and Christianity" (2017, 130).

Obviously, Hegel reads Antigone through the eyes of Plato, and not those of Aristotle. In fact, giving priority to the characters means attributing the field of human actions to that of behaviour that conforms to the rules, neglecting the specific nature of practical reason, irreducible as much to the knowledge of universal laws proper to theoretical reason as to the implementation of models already seen as proper to the *poiesis.* In short, the Hegelian reading is a truly ontological reading of Antigone, and not praxeological. A reading, however, that calls directly into question the strength of his philosophy of history, which was, in the twentieth century (and not only), subject to countless criticisms. And on this there would be much to say (and much has been said, after all), but this path would lead us astray, especially since, according to Hegel, the aspect that makes Antigone the most excellent work of art ever produced by human spirit is actually another. It concerns, rather, the exemplary performance of something that human action can never shirk. In fact, this is what Hegel writes a few pages later:

> […] Antigone lives under the political authority of Creon [the present King]; she is herself the daughter of a King [Oedipus] and the fiancée of Haemon [Creon's son], so that she ought to pay obedience to the royal command. But Creon too, as father and husband, should have respected the sacred tie of blood and not ordered anything against its pious observance. So, there is immanent in both Antigone and Creon something that in their own way they attack, so that they are gripped and shattered by something intrinsic to their own actual being. Antigone suffers death before enjoying the bridal dance, but Creon too is punished by the voluntary deaths of his son and his wife, incurred, the one on account of Antigone's fate, the other because of Haemon's death. (1975, vol. 2, 1217-8)

This is the point that we wish to emphasise. What *Antigone* shows in a sublime manner is the structural trait of each action: the immanence of the contradiction. The conflict between Antigone and Creon is not a contrast between two distinct and separate parts, but also (and above all) a contrast that traverses both the parts taken in their individuality, thus challenging the form of human conscience itself. Antigone is not merely Polynices sister, she is also the daughter of Oedipus and the betrothed of Haemon and, as such, she is part of that same order of the *polis* that she infringes invoking the measure of the *genos.* Creon is not only a king, but

he is also a father and a husband (and an uncle) thus resulting part of the same order of *genos* that he infringes by invoking the measure of the *polis.* Hence, both appear to be "in the power of what they are fighting" (Hegel, 1975, vol. 2, 1217). They both infringe that which, in accordance with their existence, they should honour (ibid.). Antigone, acting as a sister, infringes her belonging to the royal dynasty and to the *polis*. And Creon, acting as the king, infringes his family bonds and causes the death of all his dearest relatives. This is what makes their actions tragic. They both do what they must do. They are both what they must be. They have no choice. However, in doing so they inevitably sacrifice that 'other' which constitutionally inhabits their characters: the 'other' that they are. In an exemplary manner.

10. The constants of the conflict

In addition to the name of Hegel, at the beginning we also leant on that of George Steiner. In effect, if there is a text that risks rendering vain any further attempt to add even a comma to the (endless) critical literature dedicated to *Antigone*, this is precisely *Antigones: How the Antigone Legend Has Endured in Western Literature, Art, and Thought* by Steiner. And it is precisely here that, as we recalled, Steiner emphasizes how in *Antigone* (and only in *Antigone*) it is possible to find "all the principal constants present in the human condition" (1986, p. 231). What these constants are is soon declared: men and women, old and young, society and individuals, living and dead, men and divinities. Five oppositions, therefore. Where every pole is defined in relation to the others. And which, with all due respect to every practical wisdom, give rise to non-negotiable and for this reason, truly tragic conflicts. In the clash between Antigone and Creon we indisputably find them all, it is true: on the one hand, in fact, stands a young woman who, alone, appeals to the universal laws of the gods of the underworld, on the other hand, an elderly man who, in the name of saving the *polis,* appeals to the respect owed to the human laws of the living. *Voilà*, we could add. But perhaps the most interesting thing is what Steiner says later:

> Men and women, old and young, the individual and the community or state, the quick and the dead, mortals and immortals, define themselves in the conflictual process of defining each other. Self-definition and the agonistic recognition of 'otherness' (of I'autre) across the threatened boundaries of self, are indissociable. The polarities of masculinity and of femininity, of ageing and of youth, of private autonomy and of social collectivity, of existence and mortality, of the human and the divine, can be crystallized only in adversative terms (whatever the many shades of accommodation between them). To ar-

> rive at oneself — the primordial journey — is to come up, polemically, against 'the other'. The boundary-conditions of the human person are those set by gender, by age, by community, by the cut between life and death, and by the potentials of accepted or denied encounter between the existential and the transcendent. (1986, pp. 231-2)

A great lesson: we are always 'polemically' defined, there is nothing to be done. It is also in this sense that the conflict between Antigone and Creon assumes an exemplary value. Both are defined in contrast to the other. Antigone is Antigone *because she is not Creon*, and Creon is Creon *because he is not Antigone*. After all, if it is true, as Steiner notes, that the germ of the entire tragedy lies in the meeting between a man and a woman and that "when man and woman meet, they stand against each other as they stand close" (1986, p. 232), it is also true that this meeting is always translated, for every human being, also into "a civil war within their own hybrid self" (1986, p. 234). The same could be said for all the other polarities just mentioned. We are always in the presence of a dialectic tension between closeness and opposition. This means: necessity of the relationship and, at the same time, inevitable conflict. Also, and perhaps above all, as Hegel taught us, with that 'other' which each of us, inevitably, is.

We thus understand the centrality, in the economy of Sophocles' text, of the clash between Antigone and Creon. Only Antigone and Creon are, in fact, as lucidly emphasized by Massimo Cacciari, "absolutely necessary one to the other" (2007, p. vi). Only their dialogue incarnates the essence of the tragic dialogue and "becomes the purest *polemos*" (ibid.). The relationship between Antigone and Haemon, (or that with her sister Ismene) is not necessary, but purely contingent. And equally contingent is the relationship between Creon and his son, or that with Tiresias. Only the figures of Antigone and Creon are absolutely inseparable. Each is defined in opposition to the other. Their relationship is the only one that results *necessary*, and at the same time *impossible,* being both "destined to be powerless to listen" (ibid.). A point on which it is worth spending a few more words.

11. An excruciating desire

With all the necessary precautions, in fact, considering the many interpretations that could be (and have been) proposed regarding *Antigone*, it is possible to state that if there is an error that should be carefully avoided it is that of attributing the dispute between Antigone and Creon to a single order of the discourse. Certainly, to subsume it in a discipline and its truth procedures would be one way of understanding it. Or, at least, of carving out a common area for discussion that would make it possible to say that one or the other was right, to understand whether the laws of the family or the laws of the *polis* should prevail, the laws of the dead or

those of the living, and so on. Yet, on closer inspection, its meaning lies elsewhere. It is precisely in the absence of a common ground: in the incommensurability of their discourse, to be precise. Again, Cacciari emphasizes this aspect in his precious introduction: "Antigone does not oppose the logos of Creon, no matter how "unreasonable" it seems. We could also without difficulty think that she has even understood the "reason". But this "reason" would in any case, in her eyes, be totally extraneous and powerless. If we interpret the conflict between the pair as intrinsic to the law or the ethic or the politics, we completely miss the point. Sophocles perceives this "with fear and trembling": Antigone does not seek to "reform" Creon's power, to make it more obsequious to the traditions, she does not seek compromises more or less "elevated" between the positive law of the State and the domestic *pietas.* She does not claim a new right, nor a new political order. The word of Antigone manifests a radical otherness with respect to these dimensions of the logos. In this lies her "being out of measure", as the Chorus promptly observes." (2007, pp. viii-ix).

Out of measure, therefore. Here is the cipher of the paradoxical measure of Antigone. Unlike the others called upon during the play, whether they are the gender differences invoked by Ismene, or of the polis to which Creon refers at first, Antigone's measure is *a structurally disproportionate measure*. We are not far, after all, from the splendid reading of Lacan during his seminar of 1959-60, dedicated to the ethics of psychoanalysis. According to Lacan, in fact, the entire play turns on a term repeated twenty times in the text, "but it makes enough noise for forty" (1986, p. 332). This term is *áte*: an "irreplaceable" word that "identifies the limit that the human life cannot transcend for long" (ibid.). And it is precisely towards the transcendence of this limit that the desire to be that "inhuman being" that is Antigone, "at the end of her tether" like all Sophocles' heroes (except perhaps for Oedipus) standing that is between life and death. Antigone thus incarnates a literally "excruciating" desire: apart from the *áte*, of course. And Lacan writes this quite clearly: "Antigone carries to the limit the fulfilment of that which we could call pure desire, the pure and simple desire for death as such. This desire she embodies" (1986, p. 356).

12. The spectre of Antigone

Lacan, in brief, tried (and managed) to find in *Antigone* "something other than a moral lesson" (1986, p. 317). And this something else is precisely the *mise en scene* of a desire that refers to that death drive which constitutes perhaps the most scandalous of Sigmund Freud's discoveries (1940). It is a reading that would clearly deserve more exploration (Ciaramelli 2017, pp. 165-213, Luchetti 2001 and Romano 2009, pp. 21-34). Just as all the other works we have had occasion to quote here would deserve further consideration. Not to mention the many others that

it has not even been possible to include. The problem is that a reading of Sophocles' *Antigone* is not only difficult to begin, but above all it is almost impossible to conclude, if not by deciding (more or less arbitrarily) to stop. And it is precisely in order to place a full stop that, in closing, we want to lean upon (I hope not in an excessively arbitrary manner) a last name: that of Jacques Derrida.

Of *Antigone* – or rather: the reading of *Antigone* offered by Hegel and his "law of the family" – Derrida dedicated one of the two columns (without a start and without an ending, concerning the difficulty of concluding a text…) which constituted one of his finest works. It is called *Glas* and it is a text published in 1974 composed of two parallel columns "chopped off at top and bottom and trimmed at the sides" (p. 39)[7]: one dedicated to Hegel, as we said, the other to Jean Genet. And here it may be sufficient to reflect on this curious structure, which already has much to say regarding the relationship between poetry and philosophy or better, between *mythos* and *logos.* As Derrida immediately points out, in fact, a first reading of *Glas* "may be done as if two texts, leaning one against the other or one without the other, did not communicate" (ibid.). Yet, precisely in the "heterogeneity", the two parts of the work are "indiscernible in their effects"(ibid.). The two parts of *Glas* take shape in this way, a heterogeneous rapport without opposition. A heterogeneity without opposition that marks, moreover, the same relationship between the logic of the tragic performance and the logic of the philosophical discourse and which in many (or rather very many) other texts Derrida has shown at work also on all the other conceptual dichotomies that have made the history of western thought. Just as there is no *logos* without *mythos*, in fact, so there is no word without writing, no soul without body, no meaning without signifier, no presentation without representation and the list could and should go on. In these dichotomies each term stems from its 'other', thus taking the form of a reciprocal co-implication, which gives rise, in fact, to a relationship of "heterogeneity without opposition". In short, these are all necessary, and at the same time impossible, relationships. Just like the one between Antigone and Creon, we might add at this point. Or like that between the future of justice and the present of the law in point. Or like that between the future of justice and the present of the law, to whose patient work of destruction Derrida dedicated some of his latest texts (1994).[8]

Incidentally, to conclude by speaking of the relationship between law and justice, there is at least one lesson from Derrida that a jurist would do well to remember at all times; and it is this: that the law is never purely and simply the law. In the law, in fact, there is a place where the system does not close. A place that is,

7. An excellent introduction to this double text, presented moreover in counterpoint with the analysis of another magnificent reading of *Antigone*, that of Paul Ricoeur (1990) is offered by Ferrario 2001.
8. See also Derrida & Duformantelle 1997 and Andronico 2006.

precisely, that of justice, seen in terms of the future of the other in the heart of the same. Exactly like a "spectre", in fact, the justice of which Derrida speaks is not present, nor presentable, it is neither a value, nor an idea or a concept, being rather the promise of an "unpresentable presentation", which presupposes a sort of anachronism in the heart itself of the present (1993, p. 39). Justice is *other to law*, certainly. But it is also *other in law*. It is that "remnant" which contaminates it, and has always done so, the presumed purity. And which ensures, after all, that law is never purely and simply "present".

Just as the present of which Hamlet speaks, the present of law (and of the *polis*) is structurally *out of joint*. The spectre of justice always runs through it, inevitably, in its presenting itself as "given". And perhaps it is precisely this spectre that could be called, again and always Antigone. Providing we see it and preserve it as such. As a spectre, to be precise. As Davide Susanetti writes, in fact:

> Although she survives the unfortunate family, Antigone no longer belongs to life. She is the portrait of death and, as such her presence is the carrier of a contamination much more serious than that represented by the unburied body around which she moves. She is a sort of revenant, a restless ghost that prevents a new configuration of memory and political identity. It is the return to the repressed that cannot be neutralized or contained. (2011, p. 153).

And not as another presence, purely and simply opposed to that of Creon. Like a question, after all, to return to – in order to silence any *Aufhebung* – that mentioned by Hegel and quoted in the epigraph. And not as an (albeit other) answer.

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