

BEYOND STEINER'S *ANTIGONES*: MYTHREWRITING AS VISITATION OF THE IMMEMORIAL

PARA LÁ DAS *ANTÍGONAS* DE GEORGE STEINER:
A REESCRITA DO MITO COMO VISITAÇÃO DO IMEMORÁVEL

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the interrelations between myth, mythical character and rewriting. Faced with myth as an epistemological challenge, hermeneutics often is torn between two reductionist temptations: either to ontologize its object or to dissolve it into a kind of original nothingness. We will here first and mainly focus on George Steiner's *Antigones*, considered as a milestone in literary mythography due to its anti-reductionist approach, characterized by attention to plurality and emphasis on the complexity inherent in myth. Secondly, and in a much more tentative manner, we will endeavor to propose a new conception of myth, supposedly capable of satisfying the so far identified primordial demands it faces us with. We end up proposing a conception of rewriting as visitation and of myth as a face (*visage*) in Lévinas' sense, thereby ourselves revisiting notions like memory and transcendence. As memory of the immemorial, myth rewriting thus reveals itself paradoxically as a future-oriented, meaning making and hope inspiring task.

Keywords: literary theory, translation, philosophy, myth reception, transcendence

RESUMO

Este artigo tem como enfoque as inter-relações entre mito, personagem mítico e reescrita. Encarando o mito como um desafio epistemológico, a hermenêutica

vê-se, muitas vezes, dividida entre duas tentações reducionistas: tornar o seu objeto ontológico ou dissolvê-lo numa espécie de original sem sentido. Iremos, primeiro, e sobretudo, concentrar-nos nas *Antígonas* de George Steiner, consideradas uma pedra angular na mitografia literária em resultado da sua abordagem anti-reducionista, que se pauta pela atenção à pluralidade e pela ênfase na complexidade inerente ao mito. Em segundo lugar, e com um propósito muito mais exploratório, visaremos propor uma nova conceção do mito, uma que seja capaz de satisfazer as principais exigências até agora identificadas quando o abordamos. Por fim, iremos propor um entendimento do conceito de reescrita enquanto visitaç o e do mito enquanto face (*visage*), na perspectiva de Lévinas, o que nos fará revisitar noções como memória e transcendência. Como memória do imemorable, a reescrita do mito irá, assim, e paradoxalmente, revelar-se como uma tarefa orientada para o futuro, produtora de sentido e, desejavelmente, inspiradora.

Palavras-chave: teoria literária, tradução, filosofia, receção do mito, transcendência

This article focuses on the interrelations between myth, mythical character and rewriting intended in a broad sense, i.e. as encompassing not only literary rewriting, translations, but also transpositions into other types of discourse.¹ Its aim is to convey an interpretation of this multifold process. Such an interpretation pretends to be responsible to the inherently productive ambivalence that has always characterized myth. Indeed, within the notion of myth, a fundamental dialogical force is always at work: between unity and diversity, unicity and multiplicity, the singular and the plural. Myth is therefore always an epistemological challenge for hermeneutics, which is torn between two reductionist temptations: either to ontologize its object or to

¹ Although we here limit ourselves to transpositions into philosophy, the approach can be extended to plenty of other types of discourse and media, such as the pictorial, the cinematographical, the psychoanalytical, etc.

dissolve it into a kind of original nothingness. We will here first and mainly focus on George Steiner's *Antigones* considered as a milestone in literary mythography because of its anti-reductionist approach, characterized by attention to plurality and emphasis on the complexity inherent in myth. Secondly, and in a much more tentative manner, we will endeavor to propose a new conception of myth, supposedly capable of satisfying the primordial demands it faces us with.

Against the first temptation, approaching myth through the angle of rewriting and memory appears as a necessary task to avoid an essentialist and universalist conception of it. The continually increasing amount of myth rewritings should not lead the critic to look for the "real, definite or original version" of a specific myth but rather to situate each version in the stream of meaning which it incorporates through parenthood while simultaneously pushing it forward through difference. Plurality is an undeniable fact in mythography and the challenge for the critic is to deal with it instead of putting it aside. This concern is at the core of Ute Heidmann's dialogical and differential method of comparison (Heidmann, 2015: 16): "Parler de (*l'*)écriture de *mythes* au lieu de parler de *mythe* tout court doit aussi traduire le fait que notre objet d'étude n'est pas le mythe 'en tant que tel', mais justement son écriture et ses réécritures." In order to do this, we require an approach that is sensitive to the enunciation inherent in each myth rewriting (Heidmann, 2017: 43): "Le fait de considérer le phénomène des mythes à partir de leur énonciation (qui est donc toujours déjà une ré-énonciation) permet de quitter le rapport hiérarchique dans lequel on place communément leurs représentations anciennes et modernes." Through a discursive approach and an acute attention to enunciation, an authentically comparative approach to myth can be attained and justice be made to plurality. Nevertheless, the danger of original nothingness is thus not

avoided. Therefore, notwithstanding the fact that I subscribe to the importance of conceiving each myth version as a rewriting, I deem important to situate the process of rewriting within what I would call an oral frame. Such a frame is unobservable and unobjectifiable in its totality; yet it leaves traces, hints and guesses of incarnation, to use T. S. Eliot's words.² Conceiving rewritings as traces of an oral call situates us in a dimension beyond the dichotomy *parole/écriture*. Indeed, once considered as resulting from a primordial dialogical call, myth transcends any of the binary oppositions we have been mentioning so far. As we will see this primordial call is a call for a presence that is not an original one; on the contrary, it is necessarily co-presence, since we will put forward the idea that it realizes itself through the event of visitation. Through the experience of visitation, dialogical relations between different literary entities emerge: between authors, interpreters, characters and receivers. All those are thereby made (co)present.

This paper therefore aims at a definition of myth that primarily takes into account the undeniable fact of rewriting while postulating a sort of identity in translation/rewriting or identity as translation/rewriting. We will consider myth through the pattern of re-enunciation: as a response to a summons coming from the past or even beyond. Myth can thus be envisaged as the result of an act of remembrance: as memory in action. Indeed, although their objects are situated in the past, memory differs from history. Whereas the latter assigns events to the past and can only make interpretative assumptions about the present and the future, the former relates past events to the present time. Although memory's objects belong

² I quote freely from verses 212 to 215 of *Dry Salvages* (Eliot, 2010: 140): "These are only hints and guesses, / Hints followed by guesses; and the rest/ Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action. / The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation."

to the past, its constitutive process happens in the present. It is a contemplation that acts on the present and can potentially inhabit it; it is a present action and event. While history also functions, through historiography, as a present activity, it nonetheless situates its objects in the past. Memory, on the other hand, calls distant, almost absent objects from the past to take part in the present. The former aims at objectivity, while the latter founds subjectivity.

GEORGE STEINER'S *ANTIGONES*: PLURALITY AND UNIVERSALITY

It is a striking fact that the title of George Steiner's three most important books from the end of the 20th century bear the plural: *Antigones*, *Real Presences* and *Grammars of Creation*. For him the concern with plurality, before its theorization in *After Babel*, in the field of translation, is rooted in his childhood and, particularly, when he experienced the most intimate relationship between singularity and infinity while observing a pictorial collection of coats of arms. As he recalls in the opening short autobiographical story of *Errata* entitled "Rain",

that armorial primer overwhelmed me with a sense of the numberless specificity, of the minutiae, of the manifold singularity of the substance and forms of the world. Each coat of arms differed from every other. Each had its symbolic organization, motto, history, locale, and date wholly proper, wholly integral to itself. It "heralded" a unique, ultimately intractable fact of being. (...) How was any human being to see, to master this plurality? (...) I grew possessed by an intuition of the particular, of diversities so numerous that no labor of classification and enumeration could exhaust them. (Steiner, 1997: 2-3)

Here, memory is associated to a sense of untamable plurality; childhood, to the discovery of the feeling of infinity. What

Steiner says about coats of arms is also true about myths and their uncountable literary rewritings and mediatic transpositions. And it makes sense to conceive *Antigones* as the result of two contrasting or conflictive tendencies within its author. First, of the consciousness of infinite diversity; second, of the desire to somehow master this overwhelming plurality or, at least, to render it sayable according to certain patterns.

In *Antigones*, George Steiner faces the challenge on the grounds of the connatural affinity with the inherent multiplicity of meaning he developed through his exhaustive study of translation in the 1970's, culminating with *After Babel*. Focusing on the figure of Antigone, he shows that translation when practiced as transfiguration cannot be distinguished from rewriting. In other words, translation is not a technique or a method to serve rewriting but a revelatory and almost sacramental practice through which rewriting completes itself in the achievement of a new incarnation. This is particularly striking in his pages on Hölderlin's translation of Sophocles, but also of his interpretation of Hegel's and Kierkegaard's *Antigones*, which he presents as translations or displacements of the mythical character both to the language of philosophy and –almost simultaneously in the late Hegel and in Kierkegaard– to the most intimate dimension of personal autobiography.

PHILOSOPHICAL ANTIGONES: HEGEL AND KIERKEGAARD

In the first chapter of *Antigones*, Steiner scarcely considers literary rewritings of the Antigone myth. Rather, he focuses on the presence of its heroine in the work of two main philosophers, Hegel and Kierkegaard, and one translator (who is also an immense poet): Hölderlin. Together with them, Goethe's *Iphigeny* is evoked as an indirect transposition of the Greek heroine. Nonetheless, Steiner demonstrates that Antigone does not appear as a philosophical

object neither in Hegel nor in Kierkegaard, nor as an imitation of Sophocles' character in Hölderlin. Theirs are not representations of a previous Antigone but rewritings or re-enunciations whose discursive strategies concur to make her present as rewritten. In other words, it is not Sophocles' heroine that is re-actualized in these precise cases, but Antigone the person who is made present as a self beyond herself, as a self continually exceeding herself.

In order to understand the kind of presence at stake here, the category of intertextuality is relevant but only to the extent that it reveals an immanent semantic relationship between different versions. Yet the existence of such a relationship might point to a transcending process. The temporal meaningful link between, say, Hölderlin and Sophocles does not correspond to a temporal segment limited to their extremities but to an infinite line. The line in question has no measurable beginning and no conceivable end. Therefore, the fact of rendering Antigone present through rewriting signifies her as an immemorial being: present yet coming from beyond the past and thrusting us towards the future. Rewriting *Antigone*, i.e., implies making memory of the immemorial. Responding to a call beyond measurable time, yet, thus doing, fostering time.

Such a response can even take place several times within an author's lifework. Only in Hegel, Steiner points to the presence of at least three Antigones. Indeed, after having distinguished three different periods in Hegel's theoretical and personal sensibility towards the character and the eponymic tragedy, Steiner writes:

Thus we find in Hegel's successive and, at decisive points, internally contrasting interpretations of the *Antigone* of Sophocles one of the high moments in the history of reading. Here 'response' to a classic text engages 'responsibility' ('answerability') of the most vivid moral and intellectual order. The Hegelian Antigone(s) stand towards Sophocles'

heroine in a relation of transforming echo. It is this relation, with its paradox of fidelity to the source and autonomous counter-statement, which constitutes the vitality of interpretation. On this rare level one can, without irony, compare the hermeneutic with the poetic act. (Steiner, 1984: 42)

In such a case, interpretation and creation, reading and writing, receiving and inventing are organically linked in the hermeneutic act. Although Hegel uses philosophical discourse, he nonetheless achieves the formalization of an Antigone that can “stand towards Sophocles’ heroine” on its own. And the reason for that is that through the character that Hegel shapes, a personal Antigone shines through. She stands as a person both as different and significantly related character to Sophocles’ one. Not in the sense that a character is a person, but rather in that it is a carrier of personhood intended as incarnation potential. Indeed, it is not our intention to fall in the character/person dichotomy but to transcend it through the notion of presence as a third term within and beyond the theoretical dichotomy.

A character is the result of mimesis and, as such, a merely linguistic set of words. Yet it inevitably entails potential personhood, which manifests itself in different degrees in different works, different representations of a given work and in its almost infinite potential receptions. The character’s never objected yet always potential personhood causes its plural diffractions in multiple interpretations. When one of those multiple diffractions is intercepted and objected in some way, a new incarnation takes place. This capacity of the character to generate new versions transcends –which does not mean that it escapes it, on the contrary: it passes through it– the mimetic and properly belongs to the ecstatic. In Kierkegaard’s case, Steiner shows how out of his personal crisis the Danish philosopher

has constructed a metaphysical argument of the widest range. In another brilliant piece of "Old Criticism"³, Steiner demonstrates that Kierkegaard, for instance, reinvents Antigone in order to let his inner self talk through her, to reach his inner secret. Thus, we can assume that he has managed to insert a highly subjective matter in a thoroughly objective context. Without any doubt it is through the contrived character of Antigone acting as an interface that personal subjectivity translates into objective personhood, i.e. that it becomes potentially knowable, shareable and can be experienced as such. As a being of meaning, as the support of new intentions, as renewed and reincarnated intentionality, Antigone as a 'living dead' survives her death as a character by persisting as a person, i.e. as an occasion for renewed relations, for different interpretations. Kierkegaard's Antigone is a fiction, an invention which creates its own reference, and whose constitution rests on an inner differential dialogue with Sophocles, Hegel and with Kierkegaard himself. She stands out: her individual objective ecstaticity, her singularity, derives from dialogical mimesis whose achievement might be that of the real presence. She is also a highly relational figure at the centre of familiar, dramatic and literary relationships. A polyphonic figure through which we can hear the voices of different authors, interpreters and characters.

HÖLDERLIN AND THE QUESTION OF TRANSLATION

The last three chapters of part I of *Antigones* deal with Hölderlin's translation of Sophocles' *Antigone*. Yet one may wonder if we are to talk about a translation or if Hölderlin's *Antigonä* is not a play of its own, a rewriting. First of all, because Hölderlin turned back

³ The expression is an echo of the subtitle of Steiner's first book: *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky. An Essay in the Old Criticism* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press), 2nd ed., 1996 (1st ed. 1959).

to his translated texts of *Oedipus der Tyrann* and *Antigonä* at each change of stylistic orientation, reworking on them according to the adopted new paradigm. The results are palimpsests in which distinct equilibria between faithfulness to the original and semantic innovation coexist. Steiner briefly sums up the three stages in Hölderlin's poetics of translation: in the first one, that of 'classic idealism', Hölderlin seeks to convey the Greek original 'faithfully but also freely', in an intent to transmit the sense of the original without subverting the conventions of the German language; the second stage is characterized by an intransigent literalism, an almost absolute word-for-word equivalence, which violates most of the norms of the destination language; the third stage is a most metaphysical, both theo- and teleological stage in which translation becomes collaboration in the revelation of the original in its actual presentness, which includes the original yet in a new context, revealing in turn implicit supplementary semantic possibilities. The original is thus made "really present" in its full potentiality. As Steiner formulates it, through this kind of prophetic task, Hölderlin "will be truer to Sophocles than Sophocles himself has been." (Steiner, 1984: 80)

In the case of *Antigone*, the result of these juxtaposed layers of translation poetics produce a character of strong pregnancy and immediacy:

Antigone's persona and her deed can make manifest, in final form, the *mysterium tremendum* of the agonistic unison between God and man, between the 'organic' in the natural world and the 'aorgic' in the individual (...) This manifestation is enacted in the polemic collision and coercive fusion between language and meaning which we call translation. It is from a 'translation of Sophocles' *Antigone*, from a transmutation of the Greek original into its 'wholeness', that is to

emerge, in a well-known phrase of Salvatore Quasimodo, whose context is also one of entombment and resurrection, 'the image of the world'. (Steiner, 1984: 82)

The Antigone of *Antigonä* enacts this transfiguration of language. Hölderlin works at the point where language and being meet: her presence comes to the fore –stands out as in ecstasy– as an excess of meaning. Through her configuration in Hölderlin's poetics we can apprehend the question of life in a character, since she "embodies 'das Unförmliche', the 'formless', with all its implications of primal infinity, of undifferentiated generative energies" (Steiner, 1984: 82): being so full of presence, she dies of a "surfeit of transcendence": being "granted 'too large a portion' of the divine presence [she] 'becomes more of a portion of this presence' than can be contained" (Steiner, 1984: 83). Form implodes under the pressure of content: "In almost every instance, Hölderlin concretizes, gives a heightened physical tenor to the more neutral, abstract Greek verb. His Antigone, [is] a vehement bodily presence." (Steiner, 1984: 87) What Steiner intuitively underlines is that this physical presence is a linguistic construct: "Hölderlin is seeking to break open the classic surface in Sophocles' art, the 'poetic' aura and indistinction of his adjective. He is gambling, as it were, on the archaic resource of a more immediate bodily condition of human utterance." (Steiner, 1984: 83) Thus, Hölderlin's character constantly exceeds Sophocles' in gained immediacy: through details of translation (possessive articles, lexical choices, changes of register from a higher to a more familiar and regional one) she is rendered a most vivid, actual, near and real presence. She is made utterly present. Her resistance to Creon's law is also the expression of a powerful desire to break free from the written word whose finality is to characterize her by assigning her a role not only within a socio-political context, but

also within a literary intertextual tradition. Through translation and rewriting she breaks free from her enslavement in the written past, be it that of the Law, of the language (the German tongue that needs to be enforced in order to be renewed, in Hölderlin's opinion) or of her precedent literary, critical and philosophical versions. We may then say that along with the ethical substance (in Hegel), she embodies the dramatic freedom of characters to the highest degree and up to its most extreme consequences. A freedom that is response-ability to an immemorial oral call.

Hegel and Kierkegaard might have chosen some other tragic play to test their philosophic principles, yet some autobiographical pulsion (implicitly in Hegel, textually more explicit in Kierkegaard) led them to concern themselves with Antigone almost as if she were a person. Thus doing they have expressed latent possibilities of Sophocles' text and creature. Nonetheless, the generic context of philosophic discourse mitigates the 'real presence' of Antigone: being caught in a theoretical discourse, she cannot be fully dramatized. Her existence is strongly dependent on the "I" of the author. On the other hand, Hölderlin's version shows extreme awareness of the fact that "the dialectical openness of relation between text and enacted sense is peculiarly heightened in drama" (Steiner, 1984: 104). What is more, through his peculiar poetics of translation, Hölderlin achieves a further dramatization that concedes his character the mystery of autonomous life. Antigone, once more, stands out as the epigone of Hölderlin's poetics of translation: she enacts and transfigures it as an epiphenomenon. As a result, the "consequences of Hölderlin's hermeneutic metamorphosis of Sophocles are, necessarily, reciprocal. We read, we experience Sophocles differently after Hölderlin." (Steiner, 1984: 105) In other words, once we have read we cannot come back to the Antigone of Sophocles without projecting on her features of Hölderlin's. When a character-person

becomes a real presence, chronological time and its logic suffer the irruption of *kairos*: time converts into duration. Our understanding of the identity of Antigone the person cannot make abstraction of *Antigonä*. As a differential interpretation she constitutes an essential part and contribution to our ontologizing and personalizing of Antigone. Rewriting, translation and philosophical interpretation can therefore be intended as modalities of the real presence of the literary/mythical character:

It may well be that there is in the oral elaboration and mnemonic transmission of myths a postulate of 'real presence', a suspension of temporality in favour of an always-renewed immediacy such as we find in the language and gestures of the sacraments. Whatever his origins in one place and time, the Saviour is epiphanically present 'here and now'. (Steiner, 1984: 113)

In one of his first uses of the concept of real presence, before the eponymic conference of 1985 and his famous book of 1989, Steiner already points to the oral and memorial dimensions that characterize the semantic process of myth rewriting. As the Eucharist, with which he makes a most polemical and suggestive analogy, myth rewriting is not intended as a representation of an original scene but rather in a sacramental sense: as an event which makes present the act that it reenacts. Therefore, myth ceaselessly reproduces itself, always differently, in search of ever renewed immediacy.

MYTH AND SURVIVANCE: THE FLOW OF SIGNIFICANCE AND THE QUESTION OF THE ORIGIN

Chapter II of *Antigones* is an extensive meditation on the closing allusion to the eternal return or "fundamental constancy of homecoming, the backbone of theme and variation in western

sensibility. The Antigone myth reaches unwavering across more than two millennia. Why should this be?” (Steiner, 1984: 106) The chapter focuses more on the central and uninterrupted role of myth in general, and of the Antigone myth in particular, in the humanities. In this chapter, Steiner is eager to relate myth to language rather than to character. Dwelling as we said on the relationship between myth and language, Steiner underlines the centrality to western sensibility of the myth of Antigone and of the analytic and descriptive study of myth in general to modern psychology, anthropology, literary theory and religious exegesis. Myth has become a “conceptual common denominator in our present readings of collective psychology and social structure, (...) it animates our understanding of narrative and symbolic codes” (Steiner, 1984: 110). Yet we still do not know how myths originate, are elaborated, transmitted, selected: why Antigone and not another? “It could be that any sensible definition of ‘myth’ entails the fact of survivance. (...) How are we to make intelligible the fact that our psychological and cultural condition is, at signal points, one of uninterrupted reference to a handful of antique stories?” (Steiner, 1984: 110) And in our special case: how are we to understand that this reiterated reference is almost exclusively personal, namely that our reference to myth (to a plot or a story) is always a personally mediated reference: the myth of Oedipus, of Antigone, of Hamlet? Is there a correlation between the endurance of these mythical figures and the survivance of the myth? Does the myth survive and persist through the person or viceversa? Is the irruption of the person, of the character as a person, not also the revelation of the immemorial? Chapter III of *Antigones* relates the enduring quality of the Antigone myth to the story of its interpretative comprehensions. Interpretation is a gift of life –according to Steiner– that can realize itself through different practices. Among these, the most important ones are: reading, translation, commentary (exegesis) and

(re)writing. Through all these, myths are reenacted, recontextualized, and therefore give way to new meanings which we attribute to them. Plurality is therefore the mode of survivance of myths.

The question that arises now is the following: is there a focal unity in diversity or is it a process of dispersive dissemination?² If there is a focal unity, it is in the person of Antigone that we will find it enacted. Indeed, Antigone has an unquenchable thirst for unity in diversity: beyond man and woman, the young and the aged, the human and the divine, the private and the public, life and death. She incarnates a singularity who in her innermost cherishes a claim to encompass all binary oppositions. Yet, as all of us, she is tragically embodied as an individual. Steiner is aware of all these aspects already present in existing criticism yet what he adds to the interpretative story of Antigone is a most particular and personal insight. His vision of Antigone emerges in the context of his Christianizing turn of the 1980's, whose questions overlap with his main topics of the 1970's, namely Heidegger and translation.

According to Steiner, Antigone represents and embodies the original unity of myth and grammar. By making this assumption, he follows Heidegger, according to whom in myths, and especially in Greek myths in their original Greek version, one can get a glimpse of language as the 'house of Being'. In other words, myths present us situations in which language means being and truly speaks it. Steiner's point is particularly convincing when he comments the first line of the play putting special emphasis on the grammatic use of the dual mode⁴ by Antigone, as she addresses her

⁴ The dual is "a grammatical marker, in common colloquial use, (...) for the ending of such verbs, nouns, and adjectives used only where two subjects are acting, are being designed, or are being qualified. We are unable to reproduce this particular linguistic instrument." (Steiner, 1984: 210)

sister Ismene. Indeed, in the Sophoclean text, the above-mentioned conflict between individuality and community bonds finds “an exact syntactic form. When Antigone invokes the afflictions which Zeus is unleashing and will unleash upon ‘us both’, she uses the dual.” (Steiner, 1984: 210) Yet this linguistic tool is no longer available to us. It is nonetheless of immense relevance to the understanding of the text. It suggests fusion in duality, a quality with which the play begins but that is instantly broken up by Ismene’s initial refusal to help bury Polyneices, after which Antigone does not resort again to the dual form. It symptomatically expresses her utopic pulsion: what she demands is the “welding, the seamless meshing, of individuals—Antigone-Ismene, Antigone-Ismene-Polyneices— into an organic oneness.” (Steiner, 1984: 212) Antigone’s person is characterized by an untamable personal drive beyond individualization:

Striving to draw Ismene’s ‘shared’ head into her own being, Antigone comes as close as ‘modern’ speech is able to a consciousness, to a rearticulation, of those osmotic tides which can, at moments, negate individuality, dissolve the first person singular, and let human beings ‘floe into one another’. (...) But Antigone (...) must endure after Ismene’s refusal to be ‘one with her’, to enact the grammar of the dual. She, in whom palpable, if indefinable, impulses towards human interfusion are so intense, is, by virtue of Ismene’s monitory realism (...) made the most solitary, individual, anarchically egotistical of agents. (Steiner, 1984: 213)

Thus, she incarnates a force operating within literature conceived as a flow of significance or as a stream of personhood. In her, personhood and relatability, individuality and universality, unicity and multiplicity, coalesce, which make of her the mythical hero(in) *par excellence*. Being such a synthesis always in process and hence inevitably unstable, she is also continually ungraspable,

unobjectifiable, and unattainable. Her paradoxical ontology acts as a summons to new encounters, powered by a kind of nostalgia for the origin or for the “original version”:

The question is this: to what extent is one's personal experience of Sophocles' *Antigone* a product of the palimpsest of commentaries and judgements which now overlie the 'original', to which, indeed, we owe what personal access we have to this 'original'? Is there any way of going upstream to the source? (Steiner, 1984: 294)

Yet there is no return to the original. Our understanding of Sophocles' *Antigone* cannot be immediate. Nevertheless, it is fairly reasonable to affirm that, through any of the almost infinite versions in which she has materialized herself or “her-selves”, we can have an immediate experience of Antigone as a person. Be it only for the fact that there would be absolutely no point in rewriting *Antigones* if this were not the case. Through the palimpsest a living presence irrupts. When this happens, this presence is necessarily individualized yet she bears within her the radical personal claim to brother- and sisterhood that our culture inevitably associates with the Antigone myth. In this sense, Antigone tragically embodies the relational condition of person. As a character and as a myth; as a person and as a play. If there is such a thing as symbolic reality, she is its epitome. Although she comes from the past, she cannot be retrieved from it but can only be made present again and again. There is no original Antigone but an always longed for iconic real presence of herself.

REWRITING AS VISITATION: THE MYTH AS FACE AND THIRD-PERSON

As we have attempted to show, *Antigones* commits itself with the rage for plurality and multiplicity that is inherent in myth in general and in the myth of Antigone within Western culture in particular. What it

does not convey is a tentative theory of myth. Steiner indeed rejects the idea and practice of theory within the field of literary studies. In *Errata*, in the same book in which he narrated his discovery of plurality and his nascent feeling of infinity, he also affirms that as a critic and reader he can only aspire to write “narratives of intuition”. This is the reason why in *Antigones*, e.g., he never applies schemes on a certain rewriting but tries to respond to each single text. Now that we have tentatively and partially outlined what his plural responses to the myth of Antigone can tell us about the act of myth rewriting in relation to memory and presence, let us attempt to make assumptions on the concept of myth that is herewith implied. At this stage, the question to answer becomes: can we define such a thing as myth even considering that it is always subject to rewriting?

I propose to consider myth as a concretion of “heness”, by which I mean a third person in the sense of Lévinas’ *illéité*. Lévinas coins this concept in concomitance with the elaboration of his phenomenology of the face. It seems intended to compensate a lack in Buber’s alternative between the two primary words: the I-Thou relationship and the I-it mode of experience. In Buber’s model the third person is only present as an “it” in the I-it primary word. Through the image of the face and the concept of *illéité*, Lévinas designates a living third person which oscillates between the Thou of the I-Thou relationship and the it of the I-it experience. The relationship of such a “person” towards us is dual, since we can both be tempted to objectify it as well as feel that we are personally addressed by it.⁵

⁵ I therefore retain that Lévinas’ philosophy of the face as infinite “heness” does not contradict Buber’s main thesis, but rather complements it. Moreover, it is based on it. The visitation of the face happens as an I-Thou relationship which discloses the implicit presence of an infinite “He” within this relation. This infinite “He” is clearly identified as God by Lévinas and therefore corresponds to the absolute “Thou” of Buber.

According to this interpretation, the mythical character is an embodiment of the third person as that which both potentially encloses and continually escapes the fundamental I-Thou relationship described by Buber. He or she (Antigone, e.g.) are names, i.e. symbolic mediations of infinite “heness” or otherness. Each version, each (re)writing of a myth aims at staging and showing the actual and authentic mythical character’s face. Yet, as it happens with Lévinas’ notion of *visage*, the presence experienced as such inevitably inspires a feeling of potential absence or of evanescent transcendence. The urgent undergoing demand is that of the need for the myth’s “real presence”, since former versions are felt as fictive, literate and somehow distant from reality. In other words, an oral urge determines myth rewriting. To use Buber’s terms, the myth –through the mythical person– ceaselessly affirms its desire to escape the I-it reduction, reification or unrealisation. And it can do so because “heness” always implies otherness and therefore, resistance to reduction:

L’illéité de cet Il, n’est pas le cela de la chose qui est à notre disposition et à qui Buber et Gabriel Marcel ont eu raison de préférer le Toi pour décrire la rencontre humaine. Le mouvement de la rencontre ne s’ajoute pas au visage immobile. Il est dans ce visage même. Le visage est, par lui-même, visitation et transcendance. Mais le visage, tout ouvert, peut, à la fois, être en lui-même, parce qu’il est dans la trace de l’illéité. L’illéité est l’origine de l’altérité de l’être à laquelle l’en soi de l’objectivité participe en le trahissant. (Lévinas, 1972: 69)

Any myth is determined by the desire (the oral call) to exist as an I-Thou fundamental word (*Grundwort*), i.e. as a relationship, hence the pulsion to rewriting and reenactment; yet, such a process is also

inherently tragic, since it inevitably entails the possibility for myth to end up (as a written trace) as the object of an I-It world.

To understand the coexistence and integrate the second and third person (as a he or a she, not as an it) potentialities of myth within one semantic process, we need to consider its pragmatic dimension. Through it, we become aware of the presence of a first person, the receiver, addressed by the imperative call within myth, which thereby reaches its embodied limit. In Roland Barthes' suggestive wording: "le mythe est une parole définie par son intention (...) beaucoup plus que par sa lettre (...). Le mythe a un caractère impératif, interpellatoire: parti d'un concept historique, surgi directement de la contingence (...), c'est *moi* qu'il vient chercher." (Barthes, 1993: 694) What happens is an event that can thus properly be termed a visitation.

The myth visits us: its reception is a visitation and therefore an event of meaning. Yet at the same time, it continually eludes us. It happens as a present fact, which is not a reproduction of the past but a response to its felt questioning. Its re-enunciation is not a memorial, i.e. a celebration of the past, but the irruption of the immemorial within our present. Within his project about the deconstruction of Christianity, Jean-Luc Nancy dedicates a short book to the notion of Visitation in Christian painting. From it he infers that all art experience can become a visitation and therefore an experience of the immemorial:

Jamais l'art ne commémore. (...) Si l'art, en général, a un rapport avec la mémoire, c'est avec l'étrange mémoire de ce qui ne s'est jamais déposé dans un souvenir (...) et qui cependant ne nous quitte pas: (...) « la splendeur du vrai » (...). Aucune anamnèse ne remonte à lui, mais chaque geste de l'art est tendu vers son irruption (...). L'immemorial est par excellence ce qui précède la naissance: l'absent

de tout souvenir vers qui remonte sans fin une mémoire infinie, hypermémoire ou plutôt *immémoire*. En deçà ou au-delà du mémorial, c'est-à-dire au-delà et en deçà du soi et du subjectivable: l'outre-monde (la mort, en ce sens), non pas hors du monde mais présent ici même. (Nancy, 2001: 9-10)

Each incarnation of a mythical character thus could be seen as the evocation or irruption of someone who is beyond memory. A most convincing philosophical approach to this process as we have interpreted it is a phenomenological one, such as Emmanuel Lévinas has developed through the concept of face (*visage*):

Le visage est précisément l'unique ouverture où la signifiante du transcendant [sic.] n'annule pas la transcendance pour la faire entrer dans un ordre immanent, mais où, au contraire la trans-cendance [sic.] se refuse à l'immanence précisément en tant que transcendance toujours *révolue* du transcendant. La relation entre signifié et signification est, dans la trace, non pas corrélation, mais l'irrectitude même. La relation prétendument médiate et indirecte de signe à signifié, est de l'ordre de la corrélation et, par conséquent, encore rectitude et ainsi dévoilement qui neutralise la trans-cendance. La relation entre signifié et signification est, dans la trace (...). La signifiante de la trace nous met en une relation « latérale » (...) et qui répond à un passé irréversible. Aucune mémoire ne saurait suivre ce passé à la trace. C'est un passé immémorial et (...) l'éternité dont la signifiante rejette obstinément vers le passé. (Lévinas, 1972: 64)

Lévinas' concept of *visage* is a symbol for the presence of the Other. Yet this presence is not a presumption but a phenomenon whose happening he terms a visitation: "le *phénomène* qu'est l'apparition d'Autrui est aussi *visage*; ou encore ainsi (...):

l'épiphanie du visage est *visitation*." (Lévinas, 1972: 47)⁶ Such a conception bears relevant consequences on the temporality implied in the act of rewriting. Once considered as visitation, rewriting not only irrupts into the present as a trace of an irreversible past, but also orients us towards the future as the ever-unachieved recovering of the immemorial; once perceived as fundamentally –against all odds– future-oriented, it gives a sense of time out of which hope can arise: thus, the poetics of myth rewriting belongs to the “grammars of creation” (Steiner, 2001) that custody the hope inherent in future tenses by translating and realizing them into ever-new enouncements. Visitation is the occasion for transcendence: its circumstances are immanent but it signifies an event of transcendence. Or rather: it is an event in which transcendence is made present and leaves a trace.

We can then view the act of rewriting in its two modalities –creation and reception–as a visitation. Each actual piece of rewriting, i.e. each version of *Antigone* for example, is a trace of visitation: “La trace est la présence de ce qui, à proprement parler, n’a jamais été là, de ce qui est toujours passé.” (Lévinas, 1972: 68) As such, it proffers a summons for a presence and therefore calls for infinite rewriting, translation and interpretation thereby suggesting and hermeneutically implying the possibility of eternity. Indeed, Jean-Luc Marion, situates the face among what he defines as saturated phenomena, i.e. those in which intuition always exceeds signification: “Le visage d’autrui m’impose de croire en ma propre éternité, comme un besoin de la raison ou, ce qui revient au même, comme la condition de son herméneutique infinie.” (Marion, 2001:

⁶ Significatively, the same passage is quoted by Nancy (2001: 52) as the conclusion of *Visitation (de la peinture chrétienne)*.

159) By myth and the mythical character, by the irruption of his or her face and the trace that it leaves, we are inevitably solicited (etymologically 'moved, excited or disturbed in our entirety') and summoned to enter into a temporality that hints at eternity, without asserting or presupposing it.

Such a phenomenological approach deserves being further developed⁷ since it cannot be associated to the metaphysics of presence. Notwithstanding, it still entails the possibility that what lurks behind the immemorial might be the presence of God always both unconsciously desired and constantly deferred by the diverse manifestations of myth. Conceiving myth as an oral summons to be answered could provide us with hints of incarnation and situate us on God's path. Such an idea is the thesis of Steiner's *Real Presences*, for whom "any coherent account of the capacity of human speech to communicate meaning and feeling is, in the final analysis, underwritten by the assumption of God's presence." (Steiner, 1989: 3) It is also involved by Lévinas' approach, to whom "ce n'est pas à partir d'une idée économique de Dieu que l'on pourrait décrire le sens; c'est l'analyse du sens qui doit livrer la notion de Dieu que le sens recèle." (Lévinas, 1972: 41) Finally, the idea is assumed as a founding principle of a Thomist or Christian poetics by Thomas-Olivier Venard: "Découvrir, au fondement de toute démarche herméneutique, une question en attente de réponse, cela *pourrait* donc être, au bout de bien des discours et à travers eux, retrouver Dieu à l'origine du langage." (2009: 37) The transcendence and resulting presence associated to myth is a third-person one; on the other hand, religion puts us before the presence of a living Thou, usually referred to as God. The mythical third person as face cannot

⁷ In a much more rigorous and exhaustive manner than what I have broadly sketched here.

be defined as a Self: encompassing the Infinite of the absolute Other it escapes ontology and therefore can eventually allude to God. Yet not to a God who addresses us as a Thou. Thus, concluding momentarily on the complementarity of Buber and Lévinas' approaches, we have verified that the latter is more suited to understand myth as an aesthetic experience intrinsically characterized by ceaseless rewriting, whereas the former expresses more appropriately what happens within a religious relationship.

Coming back to literary ground: starting from Steiner's *Antigones* we have here proposed a conception of rewriting and memory as fundamentally oral and dialogical processes; as paradoxically future-enabling activities and therefore as fundamentally creative processes: against all odds, rewriting and memory have revealed themselves as future oriented, present creating as much as past beholding activities. In this happening of presence, we have interpreted the irruption of myth as a face and as a Thou in Buber's term; yet we have also observed that once visitation is over, it remains as a trace and therefore threatens to become an It. This threat in turn becomes a summon for a new creation (or shall we call it a generation?). What such a conception implies in the case of the Antigone myth, e.g. is that her person always differs from her plural characters; those defer her ultimate coming. She is not an essence, but not merely a *différance*: rather transcendence as a process which sometimes materializes and thereby intersects immanence. As an always unfulfilled completion, each myth grants us the experience of the face which is for us an occasion to be a person –as opposed to a self– and a real presence through relation. Let us then be visited, in order to be and to persist in hope.

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