

**Resistance and Truth-Telling:  
Antigone in Twentieth Century's Literature**

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## Abstract

Throughout the Western literary tradition, Antigone maintains a place of honour in the narration of power struggles. In recent times, her strenuous opposition to Creon's absolute power inevitably recalls the role of resistance within the twentieth century's totalitarian context. However, the heroin's juxtaposition to Creon undergoes a significant change in contemporary, literary versions of typical Antigonean acts. In particular, Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Wolf's *Cassandra* show a situation similar to the polarized setting on Sophocles' scene, but with a very different formulation of the dynamics between the parts. In the light of Michel Foucault's analysis of power structures, this new relationship can be read as an attempt, on the resistant's part, at re-subjectification. One of the fundamental practices of this process is that of truth-telling, analyzed by the late Foucault in its classical formulation of *parrhesia*. By applying the philosopher's breakdown of this concept to the endeavour performed by the novels' protagonists, the political value of *parrhesia* emerges as both a form of resistance and a requirement for any anti-totalitarian settings. However, the pervasiveness of power binds truth-telling with a necessary process of "care of the self" leading to self-knowledge: a process that only seems to be available for elite groups. In the aftermath of last century's totalitarianism, these Antigones descend to their death in order to deliver a powerful message of resistance, which is deeply personal and political, external and internal. Their main question to us remains, what kind of Antigones do we want for our society?

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## Introduction

### The polis and the truth-teller Antigone.

One of the most renowned passages of Sophocles' *Antigone* is contained in the first stasimon; the chorus is about to praise the human being as the tamer of nature, and begins by singing

*Pollà tà deinà kouden anthrōpou deinōteron pélei* ("Numberless wonders/ terrible wonders walk the world but none the match for man – / that great wonder" Sophocles, trans. Fagles: 74)

The translation of this verse, and especially the adjective *deinos*, has represented an arduous challenge in the history of Western literature and philosophy. In his remarkable work on this Sophoclean tragedy, *Antigones*, George Steiner analyses the tradition around the stasimon. He opens it by showing appreciation to Martin Heidegger's statement that this choral song<sup>1</sup>, can be considered the foundation of Western metaphysics (Steiner : 100). The term *deinos* covers a vast array of meanings, deeply, and sometimes surprisingly connected to each other. Terror, excess, violence, but also power, uncanny ability to shape reality, greatness: all of this is the human being, to the maximum possible degree allowed by nature. Hölderlin translates it with "gewaltig" thus maintaining the connection between prominence and violence, between abstract and physical; later on, however, he changes it in "Ungeheuer", the formidable but above all the monstrous<sup>2</sup>. Hölderlin then brings Sophocles in a way "back to himself" by pushing him towards the contradiction, the "irreconcilability of opposites, the extreme that constitutes opposites as *the problem*" which is "typical of tragedy" (Cavarero in Söderbäck: 46). This place of limit, of unsolvable crisis, is the setting of *Antigone*; and it is exposed by the daughter of Oedipus as the contradiction on which the entire *polis* was erected. The soil that she pours on her brother's dead body is the same over which laid their foundations the walls that, in Creon's vision, keep him out of human society. Antigone has come to represent, over the centuries, the conflict of "divine versus human law, individual versus state, religious versus

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<sup>1</sup> and Hölderlin's translation of it.

<sup>2</sup> Steiner explains how this change can be considered part of a more general approach developed by the late Hölderlin towards a "correction" of Sophocles, whose expressive force was thought by the German poet to have been held back to please the polis.

secular, private versus public morality.” (Segal: 47). In more recent times, she has embodied the clash of nature and culture, kinship and politics, blood and reason, revolution and conservation, feminine and masculine. The death of the main character of the eponymous tragedy, as the continuous returning of her figure on the cultural and political stage testifies<sup>3</sup>, is far from conclusive.

The Hegelian interpretation of the tragedy, responsible for countless later re-elaborations of the Sophoclean text, does not consider the death of Antigone problematic: instead, the philosopher sees it as a necessary outcome in the logic of tragic resolution (*Lösung*).

However justified the tragic character and his aim, however necessary the tragic collision, the third thing required is the tragic resolution of this conflict. By this means eternal justice is exercised on individuals and their aims in the sense that it restores the substance and unity of ethical life with the downfall of the individual who has disturbed its peace. For although the characters have a purpose which is valid in itself, they can carry it out in tragedy only by pursuing it one-sidedly and so contradicting and infringing someone else's purpose. The truly substantial thing which has to be actualized, however, is not the battle between particular aims or characters, although this too has its essential ground in the nature of the real world and human action, but the reconciliation in which the specific individuals and their aims work together harmoniously without opposition and without infringing on one another. Therefore what is superseded in the tragic denouement is only the one-sided particular which had not been able to adapt itself to this harmony, and now (and this is the tragic thing in its action), unable to renounce itself and its intention, finds itself condemned to total destruction, or, at the very least, forced to abandon, if it can, the accomplishment of its aim. (Hegel Trans. Miller: pos. 1197)

Antigone's death and Creon's family horror are therefore essential to the harmonisation of their opposition: their reciprocal stubbornness and incapacity to comply with the other is what condemns them both. In Butler's words "Antigone figures the threshold between kinship and the state, a transition in the *Phenomenology* that is not precisely an *Aufhebung*, for Antigone is

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<sup>3</sup> The latest telling example has been Alexis Tsipras who on July 8<sup>th</sup> 2015, at the end of his speech at the European Parliament during the debate following the Greek referendum on the austerity measures, invoked the Antigone archetype: "But one of the most important Greek tragedies was Sophocles, who wrote Antigone, and he taught us there are times when the greatest law of all human laws is justice for the human being. That's something we have to remember." (Reuters, 8<sup>th</sup> July 2015)

surpassed without ever being preserved when ethical order emerges.” (Butler, *Antigone’s Claim*: 5) But if she is a threshold, what kind of space is left behind her? Cavarero argues that the whole play’s insistence on the theme of the body<sup>4</sup>, that of Polynices replicated by the many cadavers crowding the final scenes, represents a problematization of exactly that difference between the human race and the natural world chanted by the choir in the first stasimon. If Creon rejects Polynices’s corpse, it is because he insists in calling it an enemy, an element that needs to be excluded from the political community in order to shape its identity and limits. Polynices cannot be admitted within the walls of Thebes, i.e. the humankind: he will be rejected and left to the birds and dogs, thus dismembered into a being that is not a man anymore. Creon’s “highly structured and aggressive view of the world” (Segal: 51) relies on categories of superior and inferior, to the point that he cannot formulate the idea of humanness without one of tameness: he then reduces the difference between human being and animal in terms of mere availability to obedience. Antigone, on the other hand, opposes this logic and subverts its foundational exclusion: “Her womanly ‘nature’, centered on ‘sharing in love’ opposes Creon’s attitude of domination which stands apart from the otherness both of men and nature and looks upon them as a potential ‘enemy’ to be subjugated” (ivi: 54). By introducing the horror of death into the court, she shows to Creon what a dead body is, regardless of its labels. She does not let Creon wallow freely in that *deinos*, because the polymorph, uncanny character of the human being, as much as it allows for the development of skills and the detachment from nature, can as well bring destruction and misery if misused, that is, if the sense of measure is lost. Antigone’s defense of a different system of values is meant to show to Creon how he is indeed in a state of *hubris*.

This strong stance taken by Antigone greatly resonates with the recent history of Europe: in no other period than in this past century it has been more clear that a systematic application of a rhetoric of exclusion, as much as it can be functional for political and economic purposes, turns out to be disastrous from an ethical point of view. The dominant ideologies of the twentieth century, even when universalistic rather than exclusivist, only gave life to systems where

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<sup>4</sup> “A body that, strangely enough, seems not to be tied to any metaphysical entity”(“”) (Cavarero in Söderbäck: 44)

uniformity was expected from the members of the society. Whoever was not responding to the required features of the prototypical human profile was therefore considered a lesser being; and in most cases, this diversity was seen as a threat to the rest of the community, thus justifying his/her elimination. Antigone's "grammar of the body" (Cavarero in Söderbäck: 59), her insistence in conducting her line of reasoning in corporeal, physical terms, brings her close to our political language: as Foucault in particular clarifies, the body is often the center of the political discourse:

In fact nothing is more material, physical, corporal, than the exercise of power. What mode of investment of the body is necessary and adequate for the functioning of a capitalist society like ours? From the eighteenth century to the early twentieth century I think it was believed that the investment of the body by power had to be heavy, ponderous, meticulous and constant. (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*: 57-58)

Antigone's descent into the cave becomes a move on the political chessboard: she denies her body<sup>5</sup> and her brother's to the city's administration, while verbalizing her reasons<sup>6</sup>. Unlike Ismene, she refuses to become what Creon wants to impose upon her: someone who will call her dead brother a traitor of the city, and who will become a wife and a mother within the terms of that same city; "a worthless woman" and "an enemy" (Sophocles: 93) when she refuses that role; finally, an anguished prisoner who will "keep the entire city free of defilement" by not dying (Sophocles: 100). She chooses her own role countering those definitions with her adamant, complete and public opposition to a much more powerful person at the cost of her own life. She chooses the role of the truth-teller, of the *parrhesiastes*.

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<sup>5</sup> "Not only does Antigone as a woman stand up to the authority of her guardian Creon, but her decision to die also denies generational continuity through her marriage to Haemon." (Leonard "Lacan, Irigaray, and Beyond" in Zajko, Leonard: 130).

<sup>6</sup> "She challenges human law with an absolute which she backs up with the resolve of her own death, for this is the fullest assertion she can make of the intensity of her moral convictions. She can assert what she is only by staking her entire being, her life." (Segal: 48)



### The polis and truth-telling: *parrhesia*

The transformation of a restrictive condition into one of resistance requires a courageous attitude and an equally courageous act. In a totalitarian context, the acts of truth-seeking and truth-telling are particularly relevant: within a regime of censorship dictated by an oppressive power, giving voice to what is forbidden is already a rupture. Moreover, the truth told by the protagonists is of a very peculiar kind: it stems from the deep conscience of an individual, it comes from a precise, often laborious harmonization of the deep self of a person with her or his spoken expression. Antigone declares: “I know I please where I must please the most.” (Sophocles: 64), while discussing with her sister Ismene, who in the same position chooses to “submit to this, and things still worse” because, as she says “I’m forced, I have no choice -I must obey the ones who stand in power.” (ibid: 61). The “Must” uttered by Antigone is impersonal and with an a-temporal character in Greek (*chré*); hence, it contrasts with Ismene’s answer: “yes, if you can” (ibid: 64) where the verb is conjugated in the future tense and in the second person. Even the language they use betrays the different attitudes of the two sisters: Antigone thinking of this task as her duty, regardless of any context, while Ismene refers her verb to a specific person, in a specific time, which is also the most hypothetical of all. The juxtaposition of the two sisters’ choices highlights the stubborn courage of Antigone (that Ismene calls “madness”), but it also shows her willingness and her necessity, at once, to defy Creon’s law. These elements, courage to critique, willingness and necessity, are exactly those found in Foucault’s description of the *parrhesiastes* figure.

Who is a *parrhesiastes*, and how does Antigone relate to this figure? In his 1983 course at the University of Berkeley and in his 1983-1984 course at the College de France, Foucault, who at the time was dealing with the problem of truth-telling, described different ways of being the bearer of truth within an organized society, each of them associated with different social and political roles. In 1983 in particular, Foucault dealt with the definition of *parrhesia* and its relationship to the political sphere; starting with his 1983 Paris lectures, published under the title *The Government of Self and Others*, he individuates several characteristics of the classical *parrhesiastes*. In his lectures delivered at Berkeley in the same year, he specifies the elements

of difference between this figure and other “truth-tellers” of the public sphere. In both cases, we can see the French philosopher describing the peculiarities of *parrhesia* by contrasting it to similar experiences: the divergences that will emerge are then collected to prove and give shape this concept.

After an introductory lecture about Kant’s *Was ist Aufklärung?*, Foucault analyzes several Greek texts dealing with *parrhesia*, and gives us a first hint on the direction he is taking:

So we can say that *parresia*<sup>7</sup> is a way of telling the truth, but what defines it is not the content of the truth as such. *Parresia* is a particular way of telling the truth. (Foucault, *Government*: pos. 1083)

He then proceeds to identify some fundamental traits of this “way of telling the truth” and he starts by contrasting it to several other practices; only at the end of this process *parrhesia* will be defined in terms of its difference. The first of these practices is flattery, whose opposition to *parrhesia* is total. There is nothing as far from this truth-telling as the act of prioritizing the audience’s reaction; the truth speech cannot be adapted in order to please the hearers, whereas the flatterer does it even when it results in a lie or a concealment of what s/he really thinks. Furthermore, *parrhesia* is not ascribable to the strategy of demonstration: although *parrhesia* can make use of it, the demonstration itself is not enough to ensure truth-telling. Persuasion is also not its field, at least in a rhetorical way: in fact, it is not the brilliance and seductiveness of the message that will win the audience, quite the opposite. *Parrhesia* is recorded among the rhetorical figures of thought (in Quintilian, as quoted by Foucault), and it is characterized by the absence of rhetorical means: when the construction of speech is straightforward, as basic as it can be and avoiding all figures, then we have *parrhesia*. This does not mean that *parrhesia* will not use any kind of rhetorical methods, but persuasion is “not necessarily the objective and purpose of *parrhesia*” (ibid. Pos. 1119). Foucault also excludes teaching as a reference (an objective?) for this practice, because of its “rough, violent, abrupt aspect ... which is completely different from a pedagogical approach.” The utterance of truth-telling does not coincide with the harmonious relationship of a master with his pupil (and

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<sup>7</sup> The transliteration here is different from most of the texts I know, where it is found in the “*parrhesia*” version I am using for this work.

especially not with the Socratic irony). Lastly, he argues that it is also not a form of eristic, because, if it is true that there is an agonistic character in *parrhesia*, it is not aimed at winning a debate: the two sides involved are not in a position of equality, as one side has the urgency to tell the truth, whereas the other side reacts –often not in a dialogic way.

As we can see, *parrhesia* seems to be a very volatile concept, with applications in many fields and a very variable form. By contrast with what it is *not*, we can recognize it as an act of saying what one really thinks, in the plainest, clearest possible way; it is thus focused on the message and not on the reaction that the message might generate. *Parrhesia* is also agonistic to the point where it can be violent and create conflict, but does not follow the rules of logical argumentation and of the prevalence of the most capable orator. The clash it often originates goes well beyond a verbal discussion, hence configuring itself as risky. A sincerely felt and clearly expressed truth that can turn into a danger for the speaker: this is Foucault's first attempt at framing the concept.

Foucault's following lectures develop the concept further with the explanation of a variety of aspects that characterize this truth-teller: such individual is not a professional debater (although there is a *techné* for this kind of activity) and his or her modality of truth-telling is deeply political. In fact, we are here specifically talking of that kind of truth that has an impact on the community<sup>8</sup>; furthermore, it should involve those in power, and is unsettling to the point that the mere expression of such truth is dangerous for the bearer of the message. *Parrhesia*, from Greek *pan* and *rhema*, literally means “the act of saying everything”. In these terms, it refers to the precise relationship between the speaker and what he or she says, which is “everything”. This means that nothing of what s/he says remains secret, but not in the sense of an intimate confession<sup>9</sup>, rather, as a statement that is relevant for the common life of the city, or for the specific situation identified as problematic:

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<sup>8</sup> The deep bond linking *parrhesia* and democracy is the topic of a large portion of the *Government of Self and Others*, but as it is less relevant here, given the constraint of my current work, I can only focus on the relationship of *parrhesia* with democracy when it is relevant to my analysis.

<sup>9</sup> Although *parrhesia* also mean speaking too much, being annoyingly petulant; but here we will focus on the other acceptance of this word.

The commitment involved in parrhesia is linked to a certain social situation, to a difference of status between the speaker and his audience, to the fact that the parrhesiastes says something which is dangerous to himself and thus involves a risk (Foucault, *Discourse and Truth*; 3)<sup>10</sup>

The *parrhesiastes* is exactly that person who faces this kind of danger in order to open someone's eyes to a very specific truth about their situation. His or her ability is that of seeing beyond the surface and to point out patterns whose structure remains undetectable to most people. His or her mission is therefore that of disclosing said patterns to those who cannot recognize them on their own even when - and especially when - such unveiling act threatens the political stability: in the end, the most important task of the *parrhesiastes* is that of ensuring that power does not remain unchallenged because of fear.

The *parrhesia* process requires some elements in order to exist, as Foucault points out in his Paris and Berkeley seminars: first of all, as we just saw, what is being said must be true. And what ensures this absolute truth is the integrity and certainty of the teller: he or she "says what he knows to be true", thus establishing an "exact coincidence between belief and truth" (ibid: 3). We are not speaking here of "factual" truth, but rather of a very "personal" one: it is (it stems from?) an ensemble of moral qualities that guarantee a person access to the truth, thus making him or her a *parrhesiastes*. Therefore, in a political context, the good form of *parrhesia* will always be exercised by the best citizens, Pericles being the most excellent example; whereas those citizens who do not possess moral and intellectual qualities will only be able to perform "bad *parrhesia*". This last one - says Foucault - corresponds to conformity, or worse, to a message uttered only to please the majority. This nullifies the value of *parrhesia* within a democratic society, thus breaking the virtuous cycle between truth-telling and democratic organization, showing the paradox of their reciprocal necessity, on the one hand, that entails, on the other hand, their reciprocal annihilation. (Foucault, *Government*: pos. 3557).

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<sup>10</sup> Although with "status" here Foucault is talking of the *difference* in status between the *parrhesiastes* and the listener(s). He states very clearly that otherwise, the only links between status and *parrhesia* are citizenship (those who are not fully citizens cannot speak freely, as Ion knows too well) and personal merit (because it will win the truth-teller a special ascendant on the assembly). Otherwise, there is no economic or social criterion that must be met in order to use practice *parrhesia*, in theory.

Even when the context is not strictly political, the act of speaking out is necessary. In fact, Foucault reports how in Greece *parrhesia* was not a mere mental experience, but a verbal activity: it is a game in which the one who knows the truth must convey it to the others, for the ultimate proof of the validity of the truth-speech is in the courage required to voice it. The amount of risk required for a speech to be considered *parrhesia* rules out the use of it on the part of tyrants: close to no courage is needed to say something from a position of power, whereas the consequences implied by the action of raising one's head to speak out loud from a lower position is remarkable, and it contains the political value of such action:

*Parrhesia* is a form of criticism, either towards another or towards oneself, but always in a situation where the speaker or confessor is in a position of inferiority with respect to the interlocutor. The *parrhesiastes* is always less powerful than the one with whom he or she speaks. (Foucault, *Discourse and Truth*: 5)

This risk exists because, most times, adding on to the difference in power, the truth that will be uncovered is unpleasant: *parrhesia*, as we just read, is criticism, it means highlighting the existing problems while someone, or everyone else, is ignoring them, or outright blind to them. In extreme cases, when the message is particularly inflammatory, what is at stake becomes one's life. And yet, a true *parrhesiastes* will not cover: for truth-telling for her or him is a duty, and it is connected at once with the obligation to speak and the freedom of doing it. It is not the same, in fact, if this duty is performed unwillingly, because of torture or insistence, for example<sup>11</sup>. This duty comes from an existential commitment to the message that is spoken: the *parrhesiastes* binds him or herself "to the statement of the truth and to the act of stating the truth" (Foucault, *Government*, 83: pos.1356). Such statement is, in turn, is *dramatic*, in the sense that the words have an effect on reality, but not in a performative way: the effect that this action will have on reality is unpredictable, not institutionalized in any way. This is a choice, one of identity: the act of speaking has a retroactive effect on the speaker, on his or her identity, making him or her "the one who spoke this truth".

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<sup>11</sup> "When, on the other hand, someone is compelled to tell the truth (as, for example, under duress of torture), then his discourse is not a parrhesiastic utterance. A criminal who is forced by his judges to confess his crime does not use parrhesia. But if he voluntarily confesses his crime to someone else out of a sense of moral obligation, then he performs a parrhesiastic act ..." (Foucault, *Discourse and Truth*: 5); we will explore this aspect later on, especially by going back to Foucault's analysis of Creusa's speech to Apollo in Euripides's *Ion*.

The characteristics of being dangerous, a form of criticism, and a duty, deeply differentiate this form of truth-telling from other figures of the public sphere. In his lectures at Berkeley, Foucault individuates three more modalities of truth telling (one is - again - the teacher) that have some traits in common with, but meaningfully differ from the *parrhesiastes's*. The first one he takes into account is that of the prophet; the truth told by him or her is the result of a mediation between the Gods and the human beings. Prophets are not voicing their own ideas; rather, they are expressing the will of a divinity that chooses to speak through them. As the ancient poets used to say of their relationships with the Muses, they are merely a container for the Gods' message. This message, expressed in an obscure, enigmatic way, concerns the future: coming from a non-human entity, it does not have to respond to a logical structure or to an intelligible line of reasoning, nor does its content have to be in agreement with our temporal limits. The second modality of truth-telling is that of the wise woman, or man, who, like the prophet, tends to speak through enigmas, but in this case it is his or her own thoughts that are being expressed, and not those of a divine being. Hence, the responsibility of what is being said falls on the speaker. The matter of the "wise truth" revolves around absolute beings and the inner essence of the world; it is not concerned with particular situations and singular individuals, but rather with something essential: the world, life, freedom, etc. However, it is quite rare to hear the wise message spoken aloud: another characteristic of this way of truth-telling, in fact, is that the wise ones only speak when they really want to, even if solicited; their words come from the depths of their conscience and knowledge, but they are not necessarily meant to be communicated. Wisdom exists and is developed for its own sake, not with a political purpose. The third truth-teller is a teaching figure: a professor, an expert, a technician. Her or his knowledge is both theoretical and practical (it is made of *mathesis*, and *askesis*) and it is not innate, it derives from a learning process, and the transmission of his or her truth passes through a special relationship that should be established with the pupils.

We can now try to define *parrhesia* in light of these contrasting figures: first of all, it is quite the opposite of prophecy (which, as we will see, will be very relevant when talking about *Cassandra*) in that prophecy does not require an identification between the speaker and the message, which would mean eliminating the responsibility at the core of the *parrhesia* concept.

Furthermore, this prophetic message is enigmatic and regards the future, as we said before, whereas the *parrhesiastic* truth is delivered in the clearest possible way; moreover, it always deals with a particular problem, with present circumstances, and is meant to illuminate them so that people will see them for what they really are. Similarly, the wise man or woman will depart from these aspects of truth-telling by expressing themselves in an obscure way and by talking about general, fundamental conditions. Also, wisdom tends not to have a public role, and to retreat into the private sphere: s/he has no obligation to express an opinion. Lastly, the professor or technician takes no risks in passing on his truth, which in turn he apprehends from somebody else, as opposed to receiving it from the depths of the self.

To sum up, Foucault connects each truth-telling modality with an area of human knowledge and narration. Prophecy is then linked to destiny and speaks the language of a truth that is fatal, out of the human realm; wisdom concerns philosophical entities, universal laws and human life in its macro-dimensions; education deals with the *techné*, with the process of learning in theory and practice how things and life work. Finally, *parrhesia's* uncovering of truths is a process that falls into the category of ethics. This confers a deeply political meaning to it in ancient Athens, and not only there: as Foucault proceeds in his analysis, we learn that this concept will evolve outside of the *polis's* democratic environment to adapt to other political forms, taking a prince/counsellor configuration rather than the orator/assembly one. Plato's Seventh Letter, in which he describes his attempt at truth-telling to Dionysius of Syracuse signals, in Foucault's analysis, a move towards this model, thus highlighting one of the great political questions of the ancient world, that on the preferable form of government between the multitude and the prince. There is, however, also another form of evolution of the *parrhesia* concept, one that points towards the inner world, in the form of a practice of truth-telling of the self: either in a confessional modality, or in a philosophical one.

The first can be traced down to a moment in Foucault's analysis of Euripides's *Ion*, in which Creusa, Ion's mother and queen of Athens, denounced Apollo's rape and his silence about it, only to repeat the same story right afterwards in the form of confession to an old *pedagogen*. The tone of the two moments of truth-telling is strikingly different: fierce and desperate in her

denunciation, where she is using *parrhesia* to protest against the injustice of an all-powerful being; and self-accusatory, for the exposure of her child and for her weakness in the second one, where she lets the old man guide her to a solution of her problem. This distinction is bound to grow stronger as the discourse on truth becomes more and more connected with that of confession, and of guidance, as we will see.

*Parrhesia's* philosophical modality emerges when democratic structures disappear, and takes on a complex relationship with politics. Foucault points out how ancient philosophy was not just an activity, it was a life choice and continuous existential practice; moreover, it never stopped addressing those in power, even if in very different ways, from sarcasm and satire to symbolic acts. Foucault then draws a line that connects philosophy and *parrhesia* also in modern European philosophy: he highlights the emergence of the latter one as counterpart the Christian pastoral<sup>12</sup>, publicly claiming a different truth for the betterment of a collectivity. It is stated in the first person and it is felt like a moral duty. Kant's definition of modernity, ultimately, formulates the wish of choosing a life of constant criticism, and of rejecting a state of immaturity which is characterized by a lack of independence of thought in the public sphere. Moreover, Kant's formulation of public sphere, observes Foucault, perfectly describes the act of writing, which Kant ascribes to the private life, there including one's financial and material issues, but it is directed at a universal, rational humanity.

These different mutations and forms of *parrhesia* will all appear in the analysis of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's Antigones: that there is a connection between Kant's statement of purpose and the determination shown by the characters in facing death while still voicing their dissident thoughts. In fact, as we will see, an analysis of power structures triggered by twentieth century's totalitarianism has brought to light how such structures are inevitably omnipervasive and their mechanisms of control are often interiorized. Therefore, paying attention, dissectioning and analysing them, thus having a critical attitude, is a highly political act ; which,

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<sup>12</sup> "If we see the way in which modern philosophy actually emerged in the sixteenth century from discussions which for the most part revolved around the nature of the Christian pastoral, its effects, structures of authority, and the relationship to the Word, to the Text, to Scripture it imposed, and if we want to look upon philosophy's emergence in the sixteenth century as criticism of these pastoral practices, then I think that we can consider that it was as *parresia* that it actually asserted itself anew." (Foucault, *Government*: 6694)



in situations of extreme censorships like those experienced by the protagonists of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Cassandra*, necessarily becomes an act of *parrhesia*. Interestingly, truth-telling in these contexts cannot happen without a process of re-subjectification allowing them to see the power at play within themselves, because that same power had shaped them into subjects incapable of such critique. This, in turn, poses the question about the nature of a system in which this passage is, if necessary, at least available or even encouraged.

### 20<sup>th</sup> century Antigones: *parrhesia* within the power structure

The figure of the brave *parrhesiastes*, used and analysed by Michel Foucault in his later studies, can be found multiple times across literature. It is particularly interesting how its political value, when combined with the Antigone's archetype of resistance to authority, "reacts" with the contemporary world, especially in the dark light of the totalitarian experience. The balance of relations internal to the myth is shifted and rewritten by contemporary history while the tragedy of resistance is played on our contemporary stages.

In the "extended *polis*" of our democracies, often times the public space of discussion is transposed in printed paper form, or its virtual counterparts. Philosophers, journalists, politicians, researchers and artists exercise their analytical skills challenging the power structures they are more or less consciously part of. What happens then, when intellectuals who openly supported a political ideology or system turn their critical tools towards those same systems and expose their flaws? What happens when political disillusion needs to be codified in narrative sense? When there is no theory able to express what is happening? The interesting phenomenon that sees literature trying to make sense of the political world was extremely visible among socialist writers. These last ones, in fact, were particularly affected in that they not only witnessed the horrors of totalitarian Fascist regimes taking over Europe; they also had to witness how the same horrors manifested themselves from within the ideology they had trusted, the one they thought was set to free the humankind. Some of these writers started from a Marxist narrative describing oppression and invoking an overthrow, to one of complete social and cultural reform, leading to a new era of socio-political and cultural optimism, but

ultimately ended up disappointed and horrified by the outcomes of the ideology in which they believed. To their loss of faith corresponded a movement of re-appropriation of reality expressed in fictional writing: the act of writing, linked by a Foucauldian reading of Kant to the difficult, but noble choice of activating the “process that releases us from the status of ‘immaturity’” (Foucault, *Reader*: 34) , leads then to a necessary, genealogical criticism in a literary form<sup>13</sup>.

Through the eyes of those writers who witnessed or welcomed the rise and the fall of the Soviet Union, who expressed their concerns about both moments, we can try to draw a line between European (and especially intellectual) recent history of totalitarianism, and Foucault’s account of our civilization’s tropes. These include fundamental concepts like liberty, oppression, self-expression, and their interaction in the dynamics of contraposition between oppressors and oppressed as expressed in the rhetoric of resistance. The conditions and the modalities that shaped said ideas, together with the practices connected to them, are linked by Foucault to their roots. This shows how intimate and interdependent they are, even when they seem to stem from completely different seeds.

Particularly worthy of attention in this perspective are two very popular truth-tellers, Winston Smith of Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) and Cassandra of Wolf’s eponymous novel (1983). In fact, they live a similar story: that of an external, oppressing power entity threatening the protagonist, who gradually recognizes her or his affiliation with said entity, acknowledges

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<sup>13</sup> Opposing the idea of necessary progress of humanity through history, Foucault in fact advocates for a different kind of critique that “consists of analyzing and reflecting upon limits.” (Foucault, *Reader*: 45) This does not mean, though, that such a critique cannot be productive. It is the range of its effectiveness and the expectations we grow that need to be downsized and moved to a different level. In fact, “The point, in brief, is to transform the critique conducted in the form of a necessary limitation into a practical critique that takes the form of a possible transgression”. (Foucault, *Reader*: 46) This stance is an important step in the path walked by the French philosopher while investigating Western culture and history. His anti-humanistic position eventually found an incisive formulation through his archaeological and genealogical methods, which brought him to an original analysis of Western civilization. His exploration of power dynamics and technologies, in particular, appears to be relevant for the purpose of this dissertation

her or his identity as part of it, coming from it, being validated by its moral framework. In this gradual recognition, however, we can see the birth of a new determination in the protagonists to resist this power structure from within themselves: a form of resistance that requires, and is cultivated through, a process of self-knowledge expressed in truth-telling. Therefore, these novels are not only an ideal ground on which to analyze how *parrhesia* interacts with the power dynamics; the novels can in fact be seen as acts of *parrhesia*, in the sense that they put a remarkable effort in exposing the power structures of the worlds they depict. These worlds, moreover, although they do not directly describe ours, clearly hint at our time's conflicts and issues: Orwell's dystopia is not the detached world of a science-fiction novel, and Wolf's Troy is not the setting for an escapist novel using history or myth as a mere source for narrative material. Both of these novels refer to their context of origin and explore different worlds to interpret theirs. Therefore, their interpretation is extremely engaging for us, and especially in those pattern that they seem to share: that of an "Antigonean" role of opposition to absolute power in the realm of values, and especially the ones regarding individuals vis-à-vis society; that of truth and defiance as weapons against this authority; that of the final death of the protagonist. The differences and similarities with the Antigone-model will be crucial within the contemporary discourse of power.

Both novels follow a long process of awakening on their author's part: 1984 is Orwell's last work, after a lifetime of left-wing activism including his first-person involvement in the Spanish Civil War. Wolf writes Cassandra after years of reflections over the cultural presupposes of Western culture, especially regarding the value attributed to war and violence. Both novels explore the theme of an individual of the intellectual type (Winston has a rather creative task, Cassandra is a priestess), who tries to find ways to oppose an overwhelmingly oppressive power. In both cases, the weapon of choice of these characters is that of seeing and exposing *the truth* at all cost: that is, a critical analysis of a reality constantly distorted and adapted by the official public narrative. In so doing, both Winston and Cassandra put their lives at stake, and both will eventually meet a tragic destiny: persecution, torture and even death, as a consequence of their courage to form a consistent, honest idea of the situation, and to voice it

thereafter. Their profile shows strikingly similar traits to that of the *parrhesiastes*, but their position is different from the one of the rightful being facing an unjust authority, because they emerge from the 20<sup>th</sup> century's awareness of the pervasiveness of power: Antigone's purity, in the post-totalitarian conscience, cannot exist, because we are all immersed in the power structure. When Winston and Cassandra come to their *parrhesiastic* role, it is after years of more or less conscious connivance with the authority they are opposing.

Their gradual acquisition of knowledge about the system goes hand in hand with the recognition of their contribution to it. In fact, they both work for it without questioning it, at least initially, thanks to the effectiveness of "methods, which made possible the meticulous control of the operations of the body, which assured the constant subjection of its forces and imposed upon them a relation of docility-utility" (Foucault 1995: 2294): those disciplines encompass them as a whole, starting from the body. In Cassandra, the progressive militarization of Troy under a regime of war, with its mechanism of control, through body and language administration, only makes clear that the germs of this destructive mindset were dormant, or already dominant, even before Eumelos took charge of the administration of the city. The political problem of war, as recounted by Wolf, is rooted in culture and in its patriarchal turn, which can be seen in many elements: the progressive removal of the female authority (Hecuba) from the throne and her confinement into domestic space; the ritual defloration of girls; the extremes to which Polyxena and Penthesilea are driven in order to affirm themselves as subjects. This turning to the myth signals a critical attitude towards Western culture in its own foundations: as long as the logic of violence will be left unchallenged, no change in the organisation of the power structure will be really essential. Cassandra explains this by disqualifying both the alternative of a return to the matriarchal system, that she illustrates in its necessarily temporary existence, and that of a new civilization to be founded by Aeneas, that she declares doomed to repeat the same patriarchal mistakes. In 1984's London, now Airstrip One, Winston struggles with the new regimen of Big Brother and its Party, an all-controlling entity able to exercise a constant surveillance over the bodies *and* minds of Oceania's inhabitants; or at least, of that part of them whose mind is considered to be

of any use. Tellingly, the way to define this segment of population is “the Party”, thus encouraging identification with the obligatory one-mindedness that must be internalized. Memories of a different life “from before” hunt Winston together with the feeling that this kind of life is not acceptable. However, he is brought to doubting his own mind by the powerful apparatus that continuously erases and rewrites history (and of which he is an active part), all the while taking care of the elimination of every form of dissidence. He is made to realise that even resistance is orchestrated by the Party, at least in its official profile. After a lengthy process of torture and indoctrination, he is finally coerced into another identity, but his strenuous defense of a kernel of dissidence fills pages and pages of a story of struggle against that surrender.

Both Winston Smith and Cassandra undertake a comparable mode of resistance. They oppose their assigned role in society through a series of small acts of rebellion that have the double task of empowering them as dissidents, thus helping them shape a different identity from the one dictated by authorities, and of opening the way to their self-exploration. Winston's diary, his relationship with Julia, his multiple memory-building acts, parallel Cassandra's exploration of Troy's secret web of relationships together with that of her own voice. Their analysis of those same mechanism that silence them is given to us in the form of a tentative affirmation of individuality, always contrasted by dispositives that make them uncertain of their own words. But it is exactly their choice of constituting an alternative self that is unsettling to the system, while their speaking up and public exposure of the truth will be instantly codified as madness, as a deviance from a proper functioning of the human person and a proper role as citizens. Cassandra is labeled as crazy and taken away from the community, while Winston is set to be “cured” in the depths of the Ministry of Love. In a typically totalitarian fashion, the system is perfectly capable of taking care of isolated truth-tellers who resort to verbal means in the public space. What the system cannot assimilate, however, is their performed self-narration as truth-tellers. The acquired consciousness of their role within the power structure brings them to choose their destiny: Cassandra refuses to follow Aeneias, and Winston explains how “to die

hating them, that was freedom”<sup>14</sup> (Orwell: 4228). Even if Winston does not accomplish that, the very fact that he tries to do so, and his ability to elaborate this thought, is already a remarkable result. The path leading to such consciousness is difficult and painful: it involves loss, deceit, torture, even death. But through it the characters come to know and recognize the mechanism within which they are held: an understanding that is both unconventional and productive, in that it subverts the cardinal rules of knowledge formation of the system and, in so doing, it creates new paradigms of reference. Even more importantly, they manage to create the possibility for the existence of different paradigms.

Their persistence in analysing and exposing such power structures at the expense of their own safety is therefore Cassandraa strong choice of identity that echoes the project of “constant criticism” outlined by Kant. These characters, however, cannot draw a line between a public and a private sphere in defining their political role, because of the nature of that power bought to its most extreme version by totalitarianism. Disappointed by the delusional socialist project of a universalist, classless, conflict-free society, they denounce the essential permanence of a violent, destructive character within the human organisation. They displace their disenchantment in opposite directions: in order to narrate the present problems, they need to transpose them into scenarios where their terms can be presented more clearly. Orwell chooses the future, giving shape to the imagined (?) extreme consequences that would follow if the system did not change. Wolf instead goes back into the origins of Western culture and operates on the myth, highlighting the causal implications between concepts often taken for granted and their devastating translation into reality. Tellingly, the direction indicated in these novels is not described as a road to salvation. The teleology of ideological absoluteness has been ruled out by decades of horror, so that no secure or even just collective formula can be proposed safely. The only real transformation will be possible starting at a level deeper than that of the macro structure, thus conferring a high political value to the knowledge of one’s self, and operating in an extremely cautious way, without promises of a bright future, but having to

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<sup>14</sup> “Hatred would fill him like an enormous roaring flame. And almost in the same instant bang! would go the bullet, too late, or too early. They would have blown his brain to pieces before they could reclaim it. The heretical thought would be unpunished, unrepented., out of their reach for ever. They would have blown a hole in their own perfection.” (Orwell: 4228)

be built on constant, scrupulous criticism. And even in that case, it may not be enough to save us; however, it is worth the effort. It is not another absolute truth that will be meaningful in opposing the tyrant's ideological coercion. Because of the easiness with which Creontic regimens are crafted, the painstakingly difficult path of safeguarding a place for critique on the political scene is crucial. Hence, the stories of Winston and Cassandra document the realization of this importance: they fight and die to conquer a spot from where to voice a different opinion, opposing the dominant one. Their struggles show the necessity of such a place to us readers, especially when it is denied. The self sacrifice of Antigone is a decisive act of refusal of a political reality demanding total one-sidedness. She denies her existence as citizen of a *polis* that does not want to problematize nonconformity. She does so while speaking her mind, loudly, and making sure that her protest, both physical and verbal, be memorable. So do the protagonists of the novels, whose whose immortal voices, thanks to their literary nature, have become icons of resistance, thanks to their literary nature. As a consequence of the Greek heroine's death, Creon will be forced to take her message into serious account: the institutionalized knowledge of Tiresias does not have the same force of Antigone's act. In fact, what Creon decides after having consulted the prophet is provoked by his niece's violent performance; whereas his change needs to be much deeper and to include a re-thinking of his ruling guidelines. Orwell and Wolf, too, set their characters on the path to a cruel destiny; the scene following the protagonists' disappearance, even if not recounted in the novel, refers to us directly. Creon, like Oedipus, is left alive, and he

Comes to act out the equally tragic process of becoming fully human. With Antigone's death there comes, through the blindness and helplessness of the seer, the rebirth of Creon's humanity, until he too is plunged amid loss and suffering into his own experience of the "unwritten laws" which all men must face as mortal beings who sometime encounter the unknown and unknowable. And in his encounter he passes from his communal position as head of state to a loneliness and isolation perhaps more terrible than Antigone's. (Segan: 64)

Regardless of the authors' faith in an achievable betterment of the power structure they so deeply criticize, the call to Creon and his *polis* remains sounding: what kind of power structure would ensure that enough Antigones reach the political scene with their unique and different

requests? What kind of social order would enable us to receive her message, even to encourage it? What would it take to build a system in which Antigone does not need to die in order to influence the authority's decisions? A closer analysis of these narrations of post-ideological disillusion will provide us with some answers.



## Chapter 1

### George Orwell's 1984: resistance in dystopia

Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; ... the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers. (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*: pos 3452).

If these same words were to be attributed to Emmanuel Goldstein and read out by Winston Smith to a less than interested Julia, not much of them would seem out of place. The Big Brother system described by Orwell in his *Nineteen Eighty-Four* falls definitely into the mechanics of what Foucault, in his 1975 work *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*, defines as the *disciplines*: "These methods, which made possible the meticulous control of the operations of the body, which assured the constant subjection of its forces and imposed upon them a relation of docility-utility" (Ibid. Pos 2293). *Nineteen Eighty-Four's* nightmarish surveillance society could be defined as a literary realisation of Bentham's Panopticon (Stub, 1989; Padden, 2015; Lyon, 1992; Tyner, 2004), as read by Foucault in terms that go beyond the realm of idealised model, reaching that of reality; nevertheless, the dystopian character of the novel, when reacting with the stringently historical analysis of the French philosopher, understandably generates anxieties regarding the double implication of surveillance and fascism, where the first of these terms is widely displayed in our societies in the form of increasingly developing technology. It is true that Huxley, at least in regards to Western post-war societies, seems to be more on point than Orwell in his vision: by describing a society where control is ensured by chemically-induced happiness (*Soma*) and distractive entertainment, he provided a less bloody (although equally horrifying) distortion of a possible future; one that seems to fit our world more than its Orwellian counterpart (Lyon, 1992; Gottlieb, 1992). When Lyon points out that "much less coercive forms of control have emerged since Orwell's time, perhaps lessening the relevance of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*" (Lyon: 12), he is stating the victory of consumerism over repression for the control of the collective mind; but also the peculiar characteristic of invisibility that today's technology can have, as well as its

employment with aims not necessarily related to surveillance. However, the overtly violent, repressed existence of Winston Smith in Oceania still speaks to our imagination and solicits some very specific fears. Since I choose to be guided by Antigone in this interpretation, I will then let her lead the way in shaping my path: therefore, my first focus will be on the reaction, on the resistance to the absolute power of Big Brother.

### Finding the subject of resistance

As Tyner rightly observes, Winston's resistance does not begin when we first meet him: throughout his whole existence under the Party's grip, he has been enacting a whole array of small movements, attitudes and strategies in order to preserve what is ultimately forbidden, that is, independent and different thought. "He adjusts, spatially and temporally, his behaviour and physical persona to challenge the apparent omnipotence of the Party through the use of telescreens" (Tyner:15), for example, by giving his back to the screen for as long as possible, by using a hidden space in his apartment to write the diary, by controlling his gestures and facial expressions, by avoiding the Community Center. At the beginning of the novel, he is just about to start a new act of defiance, that of writing on the diary he bought on the black market. Later on, he will start a relationship with Julia, join the clandestine organization called the Brotherhood and allegedly guided by the traitor Goldstein, he will resist torture in order to prove his point against the Party. Likewise, Julia is an expert at deceiving the controlling power: she fakes a burning enthusiasm for the Party personalized in the institution of Big Brother, she is perfectly playing the role of an ardent supporter of the same regime she then affirms to hate<sup>15</sup>; she seduces "comrades" that she correctly identifies as unfaithful to the obligatory doctrine, and she orchestrates ingenious plans to have illegal sexual encounters with them. Her identification as a "rebel from the waist downwards" (Orwell: 163) from an exasperated Winston refers to the fact that, even though her mode of resistance is extremely dangerous and requires an outstanding set of skills, none of the actions that she chooses have anything to do

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<sup>15</sup> "I'm good at games. I was a troop-leader in the Spies. I do voluntary work three evenings a week for the Junior Anti-Sex League. Hours and hours I've spent pasting their bloody rot all over London. I always carry one end of a banner in the processions. I always look cheerful and I never shirk anything. Always yell with the crowd, that's what I say. It's the only way to be safe" (Orwell: 128) but then "...the Party, and above all the Inner Party, about whom she talked with an open jeering hatred which made Winston feel uneasy..."(ivi).

with the “next generation” and everything to do with “US” (ivi; capitals in original). Julia does not deal with anything that is not the “here and now”: she is therefore declared un-political and so are her acts of rebellion. Regardless of the fact that she engages in a very dangerous relationship with him, and that she devotes herself to the Brotherhood, she is not taken into account as a “real” rebel, ergo, a revolutionary. Her choice is clearly not approved by Winston nor by the narrator, who describes this woman mostly as a childlike character<sup>16</sup>, a person whose mental capacity is insufficient.

This distinction is very interesting for different reasons. In spite of the undeniably political character of their union and actions (from cursing the Party to having sexual encounters<sup>17</sup>), and what is more, in spite of the substantial coincidence of many of those acts, Winston and Julia have a completely different approach to resistance. The approach is narrated by Orwell as being fundamental in determining whether an act is really political; and the difference seems to be in the thoughts given about the “future generations”, in a moral drive to change what is seen as unjust or even inhuman. Part of this rigid division<sup>18</sup> is surely ascribable to a certain amount of misogyny shown by Orwell at least in the character of Winston<sup>19</sup>; in part it is the fact that, as argued by Sunstein (2005) and Patai (1982), Julia is not Winston’s real partner in the novel, she is not the one with which he has a real romantic relationship: it is O’Brien. O’Brien is the person whom Winston literally dreams about, it is him with whom he hopes to have a meaningful exchange, it is him he thinks as the recipient of his thoughts: ultimately, it is him that Winston considers his equal, whereas Julia is not much more than that “political act”. In fact, his initial hatred for her is motivated by the impossibility to possess her; later on, when they are

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<sup>16</sup> “Whenever he began to talk (...) she became bored and confused and said that she never paid attention to that kind of things. (...) She knew when to cheer and when to boo, and that was all that one needed. If he persisted in talking of such subjects, she had a disconcerting habit of falling asleep.” (Orwell: 163). Winston goes on observing that people like her remained sane “by lack of understanding” (ivi); she is referred to as “the girl” despite her being in her late 20s (more or less like Mrs Parsons).

<sup>17</sup> “Their embrace had been a battle, the climax a victory. It was a blow struck against the Party. It was a political act.” (ibid. 133)

<sup>18</sup> Which will be at its clearest when under torture: while Winston is “a difficult case” (ibid, 287), Julia betrayed him “immediately –unreservedly. (...) a textbook case.” (ibid. 271).

<sup>19</sup> “He disliked nearly all women, especially the young and pretty ones. It was always the women and above all the young ones, who were the most bigoted adherents of the Party, the swallows of slogans, the amateur spies and nosers-out of unorthodoxy” (ibid. 12). Patai also makes clear how this attitude towards women can be found in Orwell too.

together for the first time, he is not able to feel anything but surprise; when they are required to pledge to the Brotherhood, it is Julia, not Winston, who protests against the possibility of their separation (Sunstein: 234): he, on the other hand, is too absorbed by O'Brien and his promises to be able to hesitate, even when asked if he would be prepared to throw acid at children or loose Julia. It is rather strange when considering that, in the Room 101, their love will be the testing ground for Winston's humanity. Following Patai's argument, the battlefield is another one, that of a game where the two players, Winston and O'Brien, engage each other in a courting ritual dominated by the rhetoric of war and domination, in a stereotypically male fashion: it is a competition over masculinity. Patai (867) observes that it is Orwell who sponsors these ideas in his views on manhood as expressed throughout his oeuvre. Julia is not only excluded from this game, she is not even taken into account. Her status is so modest that she does not even have a surname, while O'Brien, on top of the hierarchy, only has that (ibid. 866)<sup>20</sup>. All in all, Julia seems to be not much more than an "adolescent male fantasy" (Sunstein, 234). Her modality of rebellion, one that does not move along the lines of domination, is not considered an account of heroism. Once again, the feminine principle is excluded from the political. Hegel upheld the same distinction in his interpretation of Antigone, but awarding the heroine enough credit as to face Creon in a dialectic clash of values. Here, the role of Antigone is played by Winston, thus taking her back into the political --and excluding Julia. But since kinship and devotion to the Gods is not what he is after, what is the Polyneices for this Antigone? What kind of ritual is he trying to preserve from Creon's destructive law? I believe Winston is the champion of truth, and through that he is trying to save an idea of humanity. But in order to fully understand Winston's tormented and urgent relationship with truth, we should take into consideration another possible interpretation of this difference between him and Julia, one that, if it is not devoid of misogyny, focuses on another detail of his being "political" in comparison with her: that of their different social role. While they both work at the Ministry of Truth, their tasks are, in fact, completely different, since Julia is a mechanic of some sort, and conversely, the only machines that Winston touches are tools for writing, reading, and destroying documents. Accordingly, they approach rebellion in very different

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<sup>20</sup> Winston's neighbor, Mrs Parsons, is also referred to just by surname: but it is not hers. Even the title "Mrs", "discountenanced" by the Party, came "instinctively" with "some women" (Orwell: 22)

ways. We already said how Julia's rebellion consists of very "physical" acts: most of them are sexual in nature, or fall into the category of pleasure, like good food or nice views. Her everyday deceit of the Party is to present them with a complete lie: a perfectly designed mask that she, without much moral effort, can wear at all times. Winston's style is totally different: he too trained himself to deceive spontaneously, but it is a great effort for him to fake enthusiasm or transport, which he only does when he has no other options<sup>21</sup>. He would much rather hide than pretend. At the same time, his most meaningful acts of rebellion are connected with a refusal of altering his perceived reality, be it external or internal: the writing of a diary, the memory of a photograph, the purchase of a decorated paperweight, the rental of a room, the resistance under torture. These are, notably, acts that Winston chooses, plans and somehow seems to need, unlike the meetings with Julia, which ultimately originate from her initiative, and the joining of the Brotherhood, which is O'Brien's trap for him. It is true that he does not refuse these other deeds, quite the opposite; but when it comes to his own political activity, his immediate necessity seems to be more linked to a combination of privacy, private property, and self-expression. Better yet, the first two factors are elements of the third: privacy and property are the space and tools, the preconditions of his freedom. I would argue that, rather than a straightforwardly "liberal" necessity, here a compensation is at play: in the totalitarian political situation, the conditions of "negative liberty" as defined by Berlin are completely missing<sup>22</sup>. Therefore, the desire for property is mostly connected to an anti-totalitarian statement. This is especially true when we consider what Winston chooses to possess: the diary, the pen, the paperweight, the printed view of London, all have some traits in common, notably, their aesthetic value, which pairs with their superfluity (at least in a survival perspective); and their connection to the past, their value as proofs of a long foregone world that the Party wants to erase.

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<sup>21</sup> This is evident in many parts of the text, but I find it particularly striking in the conversation with Syme, the linguist. In fact, although Syme's eyes seem to "search your face closely while he was speaking to you" and he is reported to be "venomously orthodox" (Orwell: 52), and although in speaking with him Winston fears his insight ("I know you' the eyes seemed to say, 'I see through you. I know very well why you didn't go to see those prisoners hanged', ivi), nevertheless he makes very little effort to compensate the impression that the dangerous Syme can have of him. He barely puts on a smile, hoping that it will suffice as a proof of sympathy and fails to show any further interest, above all verbally, "not trusting himself to speak" (ibid, 55).

<sup>22</sup> "The area within which the subject — a person or group of persons — is or should be left to do or be what he is able to do or be, without interference by other persons." (Berlin, *Liberty*: 169)

Of course, participation in a guerrilla-like secret revolution gives Winston's his life a meaning that he has been yearning for; and his relationship with Julia surely makes his day-to-day survival much more bearable; but whenever faced with the brutality of the Party, the first of Winston's wishes is not that of suicidal frontal attack, or that of a pleasurable distraction. What he instantly looks for is, on the one hand, self-expression, the possibility to share his thoughts; and on the other hand, by doing that he is trying to meet another necessity, that of countering the reality as described by the Party.

In fact, his continuous problematisation and analysis of the practice of Doublethink goes hand in hand with his urgency to find ways of contradicting its results, in a sometimes panic-driven uncertainty of his own mind's strength:

He might be *alone* in holding that belief, and if alone, then a lunatic. But the thought of being a lunatic did not greatly trouble him: the horror was that he might also be wrong. (...) What was terrifying was not that they would kill you for thinking otherwise, but that they might be right. (...) But no! His courage seemed suddenly to stiffen of its own accord. (...) Truisms are true, hold on to that! The solid world exists, its laws do not change. Stones are hard, water is wet, objects unsupported fall towards the earth's centre. (ibid. 84)

Winston might not be able to articulate complex argumentations of his beliefs, but he is sure that they are not in agreement with what the Party wants him to do and think. His need to express his diversity is even more urgent than that of finding kindred spirits to share it with. This trait of him should not surprise us, if we take into account that his job at the *Minitrue* is that of actually modifying the recounting of reality in order to control the past. This exposes two aspects of Winston's personality that are intimately linked with this need for truth-seeking. One is that, even if he wanted, he could not get distracted from the manipulation of truth, since he has to deal with this dilemma every day. Secondly, he is employed in a position that requires rational and inventive skills: "there were also jobs so difficult and intricate that you could lose yourself in them as in the depths of a mathematical problem (...) Winston was good at this kind of thing. " (ibid. 46). Winston is not the everyday man, he is part of a very precise category of individuals: that of the intellectuals.

The population of Oceania, as we learn, is divided into three classes: the vast majority is composed of *Proles*, an impoverished, neglected mass of people in semi-slavery conditions, whose sole purpose is that of keeping the production machine on the run. They are not considered as human beings and therefore they do not receive an education, let alone a political one: police patrols control them through occasional violence, while mass entertainment<sup>23</sup> takes care of their humors. They do not need *Telescreens* monitoring them, because their orthodoxy is not among the goals of the Party:

All that was required of them was a primitive patriotism which could be appealed to whenever it was necessary to make them accept longer working-hours or shorter rations (...) their discontent led nowhere, because being without general ideas, they could only focus on petty specific grievances. (Ibid. 92).

The Party instead is formed of a minority of the population, retaining the leading and administrative roles: employed in very different positions, these “comrades” share a uniformed life regulated by the infinite, unwritten laws of the Party’s doctrine and by the constant orders coming from *Telescreens*. Some members at the top of the hierarchy have the privilege of being sometimes exempt from the monitoring, but, except for that, the regime of surveillance is basically total. These people receive an education, although a completely ideological one, and are employed in the various Ministries, from mechanical to highly creative jobs. Their superiority to the *Proles* lies in the fact that they are considered people: as such, they are expected to follow the path of “sane” citizenship. Which, in this system, corresponds with a path of perfectionism: in fact, even the smallest mistake in the appliance of orthodoxy can mean death, and there is very little chance to escape from the uninterrupted control.

Of course the *Telescreens* have solicited a parallelism with Foucault’s conceptualization of Bentham’s Panopticon; and indeed there is a striking similarity between the English philosopher’s architectural structure and these inverted mirrors. The constant knowledge of being watched without the possibility to know exactly when, or by whom, gives this “possible gaze” a considerable power: that of making people change their selves. But in the light of what

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<sup>23</sup> “films, football, beer, and above all, gambling.”, filled up the horizon of their minds” “It was probable that there were some millions of proles for whom the Lottery was the principal if not the only reason for remaining alive” (ibid. 91 and 109); “

we just saw about Winston's status and tasks, there is another model of society described by Foucault that closely resembles *Nineteen Eighty-Four's*: that of the monastery.

### Perfection is not for everyone

In his Louvain course in the first half of 1981, Foucault analyses the role of the avowal as it gets established in the Western jurisprudence. He argues that this role be interesting because of its position at the intersection of penal practices (that he classifies among the "government techniques") and practices of veridiction (truth-telling). He states that he wants to trace a "practical history of veridiction", one that will illuminate the main frictions that occurred between these two areas, and their consequences on our culture. These lectures follow the same direction of Foucault's research, during the years that preceded his death in 1984, around the theme of truth-telling. Central subject of this work is that of confession: this practice, argues Foucault, came to have an increasing role in our society and expressly within the mechanism of justice. This method of producing the truth is regarded as one of the technologies of the subject, that is, techniques able to make the subject change its relationship with itself. The first example that Foucault brings about of such technique is that of a man forced to confess his mental illness<sup>24</sup>. This confession required on his part is not performative, in the sense that it is not the declaration itself that renders him mad: but by stating his own madness, the man subscribes a contract, the "madhouse contract": that means, he accepts to submit to the language and to the power structures of a structure, that of the madhouse:

The reason is that avowal is not simply an observation about oneself. It is a sort of engagement of a particular type. It does not obligate one to do such and such a thing. It implies that he who speaks promises to be what he affirms himself to be, precisely because he is just that. (...) He says what he had not wanted to say, but in saying it, he gives himself over to the power the doctor sought to exercise over him. He accepts it. He submits. (Ibid. Pos. 297).

We can see here what can mean confession as technology of the subject. One of the main changes that Foucault analyses is that of the approach to truth from Ancient Greece to the early Christian age. In a particular moment in history, that he establishes as previous to the

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<sup>24</sup> The Leuret doctor in the episode narrated by Foucault on April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1981 "posed as an essential question for his therapy the relationship of knowledge that the patient had with himself." (Foucault, 2013: pos 248)



11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century, and mostly beginning around the 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century, a completely new form of veridiction is elaborated and takes the shape of the monastic life.

This way of life is at the meeting point of a philosophical existence and penance: meaning that, in Foucault's words, it "has an ambiguous relationship to ascetism" (ibid. Pos.1973). On the one hand side, it is part of the "broader ascetic movement which (...) spread throughout and stirred the Christian world from the middle or the end of the third century to the beginning of the fifth century." (Ivi). On the other hand it was a way to institutionalise those ascetic practices that arose progressively with the establishing of Christianity as a popular and leading religion. The monks would re-elaborate the relationship of the individual with truth into a hermeneutic of the subject that Foucault regards as completely new and in competing contrast with that of the Scripture, of the Text. Hence, this hermeneutics gives birth to a kind of subject very difficult to assimilate into the jurisdictional system and its texts: within the friction of this "subject of spiritual veridiction" with the juridical subject the practice of avowal will find its place. But how confession and veridiction are tied together in the monastery context is particularly interesting for us, because it closely resembles the way of living of Orwell's Party.

Of course, the dystopic totalitarianism in Airstrip One cannot constitute a downright parallel to the nuanced, complex organisation of medieval monastic life, especially in its presupposes: the fictional world we are talking about is not founded on a choice (that of joining the monastic community) but on coercion, and its worshipped entity is not a divinity but openly a human creation. This references last century's regimes trying to "purify" the population in the name of an "ideal state" of the human being; but in its collective nature and in the lack of a transcendental perspective of the individual, it differs deeply from the monastic pursue of perfection. However, the tools and the concepts elaborated within the religious communities are efficiently used by Orwell to highlight the dangerously fanatical turn of many ideologies.

The first aspect of the formation of the new subject is the radical change from the ancient way to the knowledge of one's self<sup>25</sup>. In the ancient world the common practice was that of seeking

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<sup>25</sup> the theories and practices of the self in the Greek and Roman cultures does not pertain this work, and as Foucault dedicated a great amount of energy and time to this subject, I do not even try to render his immense treatise of it. However, some hints of it will be useful to understand his line of reasoning.

a guide when facing a problem, or in order to learn the philosophical way of life. In any case, the path towards a deeper understanding of one's self and of reality passed through a phase of guidance that had a beginning and an end: this latter one occurred when the learner had completed his or her formation. The kind of master that one sought was relevant to the problem that needed to be solved, i.e. the guide had to be an expert in the field where the problem emerged. Finally, the learning experience consisted largely in the acquisition of a series of "life rules", that one eventually came to master. The Christian monastic culture, instead, developed a completely different system where the guidance had to be permanent, and so had the learner's confession. There is no such thing as a concluded route before one's death, in this system: one's whole life consisted in a continual probation, better yet, in the need of a continuous probation, towards an unreachable truth. The guide, the master, is not teaching any techniques in this situation: actually, he or she is not teaching anything at all<sup>26</sup>, as her or his role is not that of passing knowledge, but rather that of testing one's obedience.

Obedience, in fact, comes to be a central theme: the line of reasoning follows an arch that starts with the substitution of focus from actions to thoughts, and ends with the necessity of the monk's self-annihilation. Hence, individual will must not only be suppressed, but feared, in favour of a complete devotion to an external guide. Here we can already see the parallelism with the principles that Winston finds insufferable. However, let us proceed with order. The first, important similitude is what I would call an elitism of this experience of truth-seeking: if "not all types of existence led to truth, and those who sought the truth needed to pursue a particular way of life" and only "the monk would be entitled to have access to truth", this means that the vast majority of people will never have access to truth. In fact, truth-seeking implies "to live a life akin to death that, precisely because it was like death in this world, ensured access to the other life –and, on the other hand, tied to this renunciation and mortification, knowledge of the self (1999)". Similar things can be said of the Orwellian Party: its members live a life of renunciation and mortification, and, if part of these is shared with the rest of the population rather than being exclusive, it is also true that some restrictions, and very significant ones, only regard the Party: for example, the prohibitions around sex, free

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<sup>26</sup> "There was a *depedagogicalization* of this relationship of mastery that, I believe, made up one of the essential and characteristic traits of monastic practice." (ibid. 2125)

expression, and privacy. What the Party gets in exchange is the status of human being, gained through a strenuous observance of the doctrine (truth, education), through constant discipline and purity. The construction of an ascetic elite with a privileged role in managing the cultural industry in the name of orthodoxy seems to be a model of interpretation that works both in the case of the monastery and in that of the Party.

The absolute relevance acquired by thoughts over actions is definitely a common point. “Obviously it does not mean that the problem of actions did not arise in monastic life. (...) But this was not the key question in the examination of conscience.” (ibid. 2370) In fact, it was a question of *cogitatio*, or *logismos*, terms related with an activity of the mind and whose meaning shifts from rather positive to negative in the Christian age. The absolute centrality of thought in this system is dictated by its own nature:

The objective of monastic life was contemplation. ... all of one’s contemplative thoughts were to be unified toward this object and by this object that thought attained and that was God; ... You understand clearly that under these conditions, if the monk’s objective was to unify and immobilize his thoughts by looking toward God, then the obstacle, the enemy, what needed to be defeated and thrown aside was the ... internal agitation of one’s thought. (ivi.)

The real enemy, for a monk, is his own internal agitation, the *cogitations* or *logismoi*, the “constantly moving reality of thought that, at that precise moment, one was beginning to learn to mistrust as one would an internal and incessant danger.” (ibid. 2514). By way of its chaotic layout, and for an inner misled nature, the mass of *logismoi* prevents the monk from proper contemplation. As opposed to the agitation brought about by external agents, against which the ancient societies developed their techniques, the element to counter in this kind of life is internal, it is one’s own mind. The component of danger connected to the act of thinking itself is explained by the virtual impossibility of knowing the truthfulness of said thought: there is always the chance that what I believe, and maybe even deeply feel as true, is nothing but an illusion sent by the devil. It is not a matter of being adherent to reality or not, of corresponding to things or not: truthfulness is not measured this way.

It was not a question of knowing if one’s thoughts were true or false, if one’s opinions were well-founded or not. Nor was it a question of measuring up one’s thoughts to a moral law. It was a question (...) of knowing if one’s thoughts were

not presenting themselves as something other than what they were –that is to say, if they were not bearing illusions. (ibid. Pos. 2528).

The only way to do this, in fact, is by exposing all of one's thoughts to a constant scrutiny, which is entirely included in a relationship with the other: even when the scrutiny is performed by one's self, it has to be carried on as if alterity was involved<sup>27</sup>. The truth we are looking for here does not exist in relationship with "external" things; rather, it is an internal quality. When we question the truthfulness of a thought, we do not mean to compare it to a rule, to a standard, to an empirical finding, to a disciplinary practice: we are trying to examine the origin of this thought, to see if there is something hidden behind it that may come from demoniac sources; it is a "question of knowing where what was happening within oneself came from" (ivi). The constant examination (*discrimen*) resulting from this conceptualization of truth is also problematic, in that its own principles prevents it from being an effective technique if performed on one's self. The *discrimen* hence takes the features of the avowal:

We needed to examine ourselves at all times, but what was going to assure us that we did not trick ourselves in our examination (...) what would reassure us of this was *to never stop talking* –that is, if we said the things, if we said what happened in our minds as and when the thoughts appeared to our mind. (ibid. Pos. 2456, my italics)

The benefits of a practice of constant confession lie surely in the expected answer from the recipient of the avowal, with all the suggestions, the reference to the sacred text etc. But more than that, we can see an effectiveness inherent in the act of verbalizing one's thoughts, that really makes the avowal a sort of *discrimen*: by voicing out one's thoughts, one will measure their goodness through the very action of speaking, that is, against the reaction they provoke when expressed. It is always more difficult to confess something bad: the good deeds meet no resistance when spoken out, whereas the bad ones, coming from a dark place, want to remain in the dark and they oppose any light being shed on them.

The difference with the ancient world as outlined by Foucault is here dramatic: there is no such thing as a sufficient level of self-mastery to be reached, only a constant strive against one's own thoughts, always doubting their origin and, therefore, doubting the self. Independence of the

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<sup>27</sup> "it was n ever-present and permanent relationship: a sort of vertical relationship through which one exmined oneself and constantly examined one's own thought." (ibid. Pos. 2414)

subject is not contemplated: instead, it is its complete dependence that constitutes the primary target. This concept is referred to by Foucault as *oboedentia*: an attitude of complete and continual submission whose main goal is that of being obedient (thus constantly becoming it as well): all contextual elements are completely subsidiary, the practice is “indefinite” and primarily relative to itself (“formal”). The concept of *oboedentia* incorporates, and is composed of, three sub-concepts: *humilitas*, meaning the willingness and readiness to abandon one’s initiative whenever faced with the Other, thus recognizing his or her otherness as an authority in itself; *patientia*, which is the completely lack of resistance towards orders; and *subditio*, which is the act of submission of one’s self not in the name of any set of rules, but for the sake of submission itself. *Oboedentia* and permanent avowal, that Foucault calls *exagoreusis*, go therefore hand in hand in defining this monastic frame of mind where thoughts are not to be trusted because they are very likely to bring about illusions; so does memory, that, in fact, ceases to be the powerful dispositive of knowledge and truth it used to be among the Greeks and the Romans<sup>28</sup>.

All this requires a drastic reduction of the individual seen as an independent, creative entity. “It was a question of destroying and renouncing oneself (...) I must renounce all autonomous will, all will that might be my. I must submit myself to another, and give as pledge (...) the fact that I am telling him my every thought.” (ibid. pos. 2543) The ultimate goal of this lifestyle is to be open to God ad pure enough to embrace His will, which should eventually replace the individual’s. The process is difficult, laborious, requires perfect self-control and can only be performed by an elite: the main difference with *Nineteen Eighty-Four’s* Party lies in nature of the transcendental being that is worshipped. In fact, the practice of *exagoreusis* (paralleled by that of *exomologeusis*, the penitent act, outside the monastery) tried to connect the realm of jurisdiction, of the hermeneutic of the Text, with that of the self, the realm of the spiritual. What happens in Orwell’s dystopia is the substitution of the Text with an ever-shifting material that is only coherent in one point: its effort at controlling the bodies, its way of structuring

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<sup>28</sup> “The examination of oneself did not take the form of memorization, but rather the form of a permanent control, the form of a sort of a vertical relationship of self to self that allowed one to watch over oneself and to see, to verify, to test everything that entered into one’s conscience at a given moment. In other words, one was one’s own censor.” (Ibid. Pos.2528)

power, its biopolitics. This is not possible in the internal/spiritual way of the monk, but needs the aid of technologies to mediate between the ideologies of the party and its members, that is, to force the internalisation of the Party's values.

This is why the connection between the two realms becomes so important: on the one hand, we have an unwritten, eternally contradictory, but supremely authoritative text; on the other hand, a subject that is continuously objectified in favour of a complete identification with the values of the Party. In between these entities, we find the vast array of dispositives invented (or adapted) by Orwell to keep together a system in need of constant avowal, different in nature and goals from the religious one, but recreating its tools in a distorted way. The most obvious one of these is the *Telescreen*: the members of the Party are forced to a continuous, automatic confession that is extorted via constant observation and the scrupulous analysis of the *Thought Police*. All of what they think and do undergoes a relentless control that aims at becoming internalized: in fact, in a perfect realisation of the Party's scopes, *there will be no need for Telescreens*. Once again the focus is on thoughts, much more than it is on deeds, seen as a mere consequence: "The Party is not interested in the overt act: the thought is all we care about" (Orwell: 265), will declare O'Brien in explaining to Winston why he needs to be tortured until he reaches the state of "sanity". *Thoughtcrime* is the one and only sin within the Inner Party<sup>29</sup> and it consists of a failure at *Doublethink*. In her analysis of this last instance, Gottlieb defines Orwell's creation as a systematisation of mental cheating, or else intellectual dishonesty (Gottlieb: 120). She observes that the English author primary polemical target seems to be the Western intellectual, those whom he, during the Second World War and Cold War, condemns for lack of consistency. For ideological reasons, these people (an especially the "leftist intelligentsia") were able to overlook horrible crimes and acts of betrayal, thus defending their ideals in the face of a reality that contradicted them. This was made, in his opinion, in agreement with a vision of the world that justifies dishonesty by calling it realism: instead, he would rather maintain that it is insane "to deny the moral dimension of our actions, private or

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<sup>29</sup> 'What are you in for?'

'To tell you the truth—' He sat down awkwardly on the bench opposite Winston. 'There is only one offence, is there not?' he said.

'And have you committed it?'

'Apparently, I have,' (Orwell: 242)

public" (ibid.: 120). His loath for his colleagues' deed seems to be largely transported into the description of the various practices summoned under the label of *Doublethink*, for example *Goodthinking* (naturalised orthodoxy), *Crimestop* ("the faculty of stopping short, as thought by instinct, at the threshold of any dangerous thought" Orwell: 220), and above all *Blackwhite*: "A loyal willingness to say that black is white when Party discipline demands this. But it means also the ability to *believe* that black is white, and more, to *know* that black is white, and to forget that one has ever believed the contrary" (ibid. 221, original italics). Gottlieb observes how this mechanism resembles what Arendt called the "iron logic" with which the predictions provided by an ideological explanation of the world must be applied, in a totalitarian context, to a self-fulfilling-prophecy kind of present. This obviously occurs together with a denial of reality, in order to manufacture a reliable prediction of the future. This technique is brought to obsessive perfection in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, so much that it can be viewed as a main focus of the novel; moreover, its putting the thought at the conceptual center of a community organisation continues the parallelism with the monastery as described by Foucault. We can actually recognize numerous traits of the monastic relationship to truth in several *Doublethink* practices: the condemnation of memory as inherently deceptive and as an obstacle on the way to purity; the diktat of blind obedience; the modification of reality required as an internalised mechanism, in which the subject simultaneously renounces his or her view on reality in favour of the orthodox one, not questioning this latter one's consistency with his or her perceived reality, but only considering its source (God, the Party) as sufficient for it to be called reality. In *Room 101*, O'Brien, while torturing Winston, tells him what follows:

"That is what brought you here. You are here because you have failed in humility, in self-discipline. You would not make the act of submission which is the price of sanity." (Orwell: 261) By mentioning humility and submission, we can easily connect this sentence with the monastic practices, as we recall *oboedentia* to entail very similar components (*humilitas*, *subitio*). Even the way the permanent confession via *Telescreen* occurs recalls the monks' one: *Thoughtcrime* is identified through a number of clues (accelerated heartbeat, facial expression -*Facecrime*, etc) that closely resemble those used in the practice of confession as a way to operate the *discrimen*. However, there is a great difference between a monastic cell and *Room 101*, and the

sanctity promised by God at the end of a lifetime devoted to contemplation is significantly different from the sanity promised by O'Brien at the end of a torturing session.

The main distinction can be traced across an imaginary Creon/Antigone graph, starting with the Creon part of it: the monastic institution (based on an elective way of life regulated by a Rule, which in turn is inspired by principles of ascetism) in Orwell becomes a distopian-ly oppressive Party whose discipline is only that of oppression, and whose lack of a future vision of beatitude brings the discourse of salvation entirely to an earthly and human perspective. This confers the jurisdictional system a responsibility, that of conversion. Thus, this Creon is not just trying to suppress Antigone's truth: he wants her to surrender to his version of the truth, and he will do everything he can to force his view onto her. The Ministry of Love's main task, Goldstein's book tells us, is that of torture. And torture, as we learn with Winston, is performed not to extort information, but for other aims:

“And why do you imagine that we bring people to this place?”

“to make them confess.”

“No, that is not the reason. Try again.”

“To punish them.”

“No!” exclaimed O'Brien (...) “To cure you! To make you sane!” (Orwell: 265)

It is then transformation that the Party is after, and the uniformity of the individual mind with the collective goal: a promise of perfection that can only be reached through a violent elimination of differences and an equally violent indoctrination of minds, outlined after the ones of last century's totalitarian systems. In fact, as he proceeds to describe the curing process we clearly see the cruelty required by this “cure”: “We shall squeeze you empty, and then we shall fill you with ourselves.” (ibid.: 269). The violence of this process, and its unavoidability in Orwell's imagination, are bound to produce a different kind of resistance: therefore, we should expect a very different Antigone from that of the myth.



### Truth-telling until death

The whole third part of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* takes place in the Ministry of Love, describing the ways Winston is tortured. Well into the process, Winston is being lectured by O'Brien on the Party's methods and reasons; while the speech goes into a detailed account on how Winston will be turned into nothing and therefore his existence does not matter, the question naturally arises: why do they bother to interrogate and torment him, if ultimately they will just eliminate him? The explanation is promptly given: "We are not content with negative obedience, not even with the most abject submission. When finally you surrender to us, it must be of your own free will. We do not destroy the heretic because he resists us: so long as he resists us we never destroy him. We convert him, we capture his inner mind, we reshape him. We burn all evil and all illusions out of him (...) we make him one of ourselves before we kill him." (ibid. 267) This, in a nutshell, is what distinguishes the Party from any other apparatus: the fact that its requirement is that of a sincere avowal. "(...) in the strictest sense, an avowal is necessarily free." (Foucault, *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*. Pos. 245) Once again, it is not the action that counts, but the thought. Dr. Leuret inflicts more and more ice-cold showers to the patient until he recognizes "in full liberty" his mental illness; similarly, O'Brien electroshocks Winston until he really cannot distinguish the number of fingers shown to him, and he traumatizes him until he sincerely loves Big Brother. This brings out a very relevant aspect of the avowal as described by Foucault: the cost of enunciation. The French philosopher refers to the "passing from the untold to the told, given that the untold had a precise meaning, a particular motive, a great value. (...) It is an avowal if this declaration runs the risk of being costly". The definition of this trait of risk is strikingly similar to that contained in the concept of *parrhesia*. Both are acts of verbalization of a statement; both entail the acceptance of hazard, kindled by the act of speaking; both should say some kind of truth about the speaker. Their effect, however, at least in a political context, is antipodal: while the avowal is the voluntary act of submission to a power structure, signaling the acceptance of its internal rules, *parrhesia* is the announcement of a disassociation from a power structure, in some aspects or in its totality. They both establish a bond between the speaker and the content of the message: but the first easily brings to objectification, whereas the second one is always subjectifying. The Party in

*Nineteen Eighty-Four* wants to annul the distance between these two, bringing every statement of truth into the sphere of the avowal to Big Brother. The ultimate fight against such a system, that is, Winston and Julia's fight, is one against a mechanism of objectification, and they choose different techniques to assert their selves against it. We could say that, since the power structure they are part of is one that allows one of the actors to try and make them give up themselves<sup>30</sup>, their way to resist this actor is that of finding a way to reinforce their self. In Foucault's definition, this "care of the self" (*epimeleia heautou*) involves a series of techniques, namely,

'those reflective and voluntary practices by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make of their life into an oeuvre that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria' (Foucault *Use of Pleasure*: 10-11)

The philosopher explores such techniques in several works, from the *History of Sexuality* until his death: this research is developed in great detail throughout his works lectures of the years 1981-1984; particularly significant are the courses at the *College de France*, published under the titles *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* (1981-82), *The Government of Self and Others* (1982-83) and *The Courage of the Truth* (1983-84). Of the practices described here, we can see how Winston, in particular, seems to recuperate some that are typical of the ancient world, and that are common during the pre-Christian time. In fact, similarly to what happened with *parrhesia*, Foucault identifies a moment of radical, though progressive change during the 1st-2nd century in what he calls technologies of the self: a moment in which the principle of *gnothi seauton* (the Delphic maxim "know thyself") really comes to entail, and eventually make redundant, the "care of the self". This can be seen in the fact that *epimeleia heautou* changes its focus, to the point where the entire perspective of the self-care is exhausted by the constant effort to see the truth about oneself: in other words, the knowledge of one's truth comes to be central in the philosophical discourse, completely replacing the knowledge of truth. This movement, in Foucault's analysis, had started already with Plato: in his dialogue *Alcibiades*, the Greek

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<sup>30</sup> Of course, the power structure encompasses the and their rebellion; but the kind of relationship between the different agents in this configuration is such that some of them are constantly trying to move the balance towards themselves and are able to establish pretty successful practices.

philosopher formulated the importance of taking care of one's self for a right approach to governing; at the same time though he connects the practice of *epimeleia heautou* with that of the *gnothi seauton*, therefore establishing a relationship between the two (whose legacy would have a very healthy life thereafter). In fact, the knowledge of the self means that of the soul: therefore, exploring the self means trying to contemplate the hyperuranian ideas, which in turn brings the individual to distinguish good from bad; hence the fitness to govern. In Foucault's reading, this re-conceptualisation is the first step towards the shift of focus mentioned before, which will be completed under the Christian hegemony of the Middle Ages<sup>31</sup>. Conversely, in the Classical thought, expressed by Socrates's maieutics, the knowledge of one's self was merely a tool to use along the path towards wisdom and truth. In fact, unlike the Christian model of the confession-avowal, the Greek and Roman practice of the self did not require the learner to participate actively in his or her master's speech, and if it was so, the only goal of this intermission was to stimulate the learner's consciousness about his or her advancement along that same path. These techniques, despite requiring the use of words, were not, in fact, a way to get to know one's intimate thoughts or to expose one's soul in an exploration of one's true self: rather, they were measurements, or travel notes, helping the individual in evaluating her or his progression in the process of tuning one's life with one's principles<sup>32</sup>. In fact, as Frédéric Gros writes in his *Notes to 1981's course The Hermeneutics of the Subject*<sup>33</sup>, the subject of the ancient world used to be a subject of truth, one able to harmonize his or her deeds and thoughts (rational thoughts, in agreement with the *logos*); one whose main goal was that of performing the right action. The post-Christian subject instead, looks for the knowledge of his- or herself, "the correspondence between who I am and who I believe I am", the so-called "true knowledge".

Significantly, Winston seems to come back to a series of techniques of memorization, self-analysis and writing that establish a relationship between him and the truth that is more similar to the one found in the ancient world. In fact, we can briefly analyze his resistance and notice how, even if he is evidently trying to establish a subjectivity for himself, only rarely his efforts

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<sup>31</sup> Foucault, *Government*: 60-63

<sup>32</sup> Foucault, *Ermeneutica del Soggetto*: 320

<sup>33</sup> Foucault *Ermeneutica del Soggetto*: 470-471

go in the direction of something that we could define as his “true self”: his greatest preoccupation seems to be the testing of his own feelings, conjectures and memories against a notion of truth that, even if vague<sup>34</sup>, is undoubtedly not identifiable with the truth about himself<sup>35</sup>. An example of this can be found in part 1, chapter 4 (?): Winston is writing on his diary and recounts an episode of his recent past, in which he had a meeting with a *prole* sex worker. Just like foreseen by the mechanism of confession, his effort in writing is noticeable; Winston is undoubtedly trying to alleviate his shock and disgust, he is trying to understand something about himself. But his feelings about the episode remain in his head, and what ends up on the page is a very sober, somehow idealised version: it can be said that, rather than opening his soul, he is here establishing what he should be thinking; hence, the rift between his extreme discomfort at the memory and the meaning he wants to attribute to it produces the effect of making him feel, almost physically, how far he is from his principle. Actually, when it happens that he is telling the truth about himself it is mostly under torture, while O’Brien is trying to make him coincide with the Party’s notion of truth, thus eliminating any need for a care of the self going beyond the *gnothi seauton* (“What were his true feelings towards Big Brother? Orwell: 295”<sup>36</sup>). In fact, the Party’s goal is that of a full identification of the member with the collective, transcendental entity, as clarified by O’Brien: “The command of the old despotism was ‘Thou shalt not’. The command of the totalitarianism was ‘Thou shalt’. Our command is ‘*thou art*.’” (Orwell: 267)”. In Foucauldian terms, this form of power, one that is exercised in everyday life, that classifies, designates the individuals and in so making fixates them in their identity, is capable of imposing a *law of truth* to be recognized by the individuals within themselves: this way, this particular form of power, that Foucault individuates in the 20<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>“Winston thinks that there are substantive principles of truth that are worth defending. He seems to believe—although much of this remains implicit—that truth is the way our statements correspond with the world; sometimes it is the way our beliefs cohere; at other points truth is a set of statements that can be properly verified. However, the novel suggests that none of these criteria are sufficient and when cast as wholesale theories of truth they all seem to fail.” (David Dwan, “Truth and Freedom in Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four” in *Philosophy and Literature*. Dearborn: Oct 2010. Vol. 34, Iss. 2; pg. 381-394)

<sup>35</sup> “And yet he knew, *he knew*, that he was in the right. The belief that nothing exists outside our own mind—surely there must be some way of demonstrating that it was false?” (Orwell: 279)

<sup>36</sup> Notice that here Winston is in a phase where his paranoid fear of his thoughts being “heard” by the Party, a motif that we can find from the very beginning of the novel, finally seems to come true: but what actually happens is that O’Brien asks exactly the questions he is asking to himself, thus echoing the process of identification between him and the Party.

century's power structures<sup>37</sup>, can turn individuals in subjects. The kind of subject wanted by the Party is obtained through a series of biopolitical dispositives and other means. These include the organisation of a resistance: this last initiative is absolutely necessary to the survival of the Party, as O'Brien specifies. As long as there will be an opposition, there will be the opportunity for the Party to convert it publicly, all over again, thus alimending its own myth of infallibleness. Therefore, in a very Foucauldian fashion, resistance is not only an active part of the same structure it seeks to destroy, but what is more, it is fundamental in such a power relationship. So important indeed, that even when Winston asks about its existence, the answer will be denied to him: he will never know, even after being released and "cured", if that infinitesimal hope of his was real. On the one hand, his conversion will have to be so total, that he will have to perform it despite that hope; on the other hand, the Brotherhood has a very important meaning in this specific power structure that involves the protagonist. Its centrality with respect to Winston's position is so crucial, that the possibility of its existence will remain open even to us readers. The total ease with which the Party made the rebellion plausible is highlighted by this ambiguity: whether the Brotherhood is an invention or not, by the end of the novel is kind of secondary. Indeed, Winston's readiness to join the fight brought him to the same level of O'Brien, severely undermining his feeling of superiority and his sense of self. Even if it was real, the Brotherhood, as long as it uses the same means of the Party, would still be the best weapon against a real change of power structure. The moment in which Winston learns that the revolutionary organisation, at least as he knows it, is nothing but a lie, he also realises that his connivance with the mentality he hates is not limited to the behaviour they were able to drill into his habit, nor to the false ideas and feelings he fears to have internalized (to the point where he cannot trust himself): the depth of this affinity is much higher than he thought, reaching the most essential parts of his identity and only leaving him with a self who is "rotting away":

"You did it! sobbed Winston. "You reduced me to this state."

'No, Winston, you reduced yourself to it. This is what you accepted when you set yourself up against the Party. It was all contained in that first act. Nothing has happened that you did not foresee.' (Orwell. 285)

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<sup>37</sup> Foucault, *Ermeneutica del Soggetto*: 490.

However, Winston is quick to react: contrarily to what we would expect, he keeps challenging O'Brien: at this point seems that of collecting as much information about the inner mechanisms of the Party as he can. O'Brien seems to sense the importance of this operation when he denies him the piece of information about the real existence of the Brotherhood ("That, Winston, you will never know", *ibid.* 272) but nonetheless is willing to explain. From his point of view, the exposure of the all-mighty power of the Party can only bring to Winston the knowledge of how futile his resistance is. But because Winston is a fictional character in a dystopian world, what he knows is highly informative for the readers; and because he is a truth-teller, it is also highly significant. His priority, in other words, is not the defense of humanity in the face of O'Brien anymore, but within himself (and, in so doing, on the political scene of his readership). Like Antigone, who defeats the role called on her by Creon and stays truthful to herself by choosing death, Winston refuses to surrender to the meaningfulness O'Brien sanctions his resistance with. Instead, he embraces that part of himself that brought him to protest against this system, despite his being part of it. He starts fighting for purely ethical reasons, and in so doing he finds a way to political agency. Every step further in the interrogation, Winston forces the Party to show its madness to us while he proceeds to his death for doing it: even if he cannot claim Antigone's purity, he shows a similar attitude. His quest for truth is at the same time a quest for his own self in terms that are acceptable to him. The fact that in this performance of Antigone's act the heroism is downplayed in favour of the truth-telling is very important: Winston can be a coward; he can be convoluted in and conniving to this totalitarian extremism; nevertheless, he keeps trying to voice his dissent using every inch of free thought and expression he can gain, even then it is dangerous. Through his interrogation, he becomes familiar to the ways the Party functions, and rearranges his resistance accordingly. Every time he sees the space for self-expression reduced, he adapts his resistance until he only keeps a glimpse of hate, a highly significant one, to be delivered at the very end of his life, thus using his death as a tool, like Antigone. And like the Greek hero's, his act is not only significant in itself, but it is also meant to have an audience, for which it is ultimately performed, thus acquiring a specific political value.

If Foucault was often accused to theorize a world with no possible space for free will and political action<sup>38</sup>, his works of the 80s clarify the prominent and critical role he attributed to resistance. His analysis of the approach to the self and the problem of truth attest to his research of an ethical horizon. After all, as he said in the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*<sup>39</sup>, there will always be room for resistance. In fact, the pervasiveness of the power relationships means that it is impossible to call oneself out of them: what is possible though, is to modify them. His work then can be seen as an investigation that is necessary for resistance itself: it is only by properly understanding the forces in action that it will be possible to push them out of balance. Winston is not blind to this mechanism: every act of defiance from him, and above all those enacted during the torture sessions, is an example of this. His desperate and quite systematic analysis of the Party's dispositives allow him to explore with rebellion every niche where the power is not expressed (at least apparently) in the form of total control, and to occupy it with the exercise of his power. The spot of his apartment that is hidden from the *Telescreens* and where he writes his diary is a perfect example of it, quite a physical metaphor. As Gottlieb remarks<sup>40</sup>, Winston does enact a series of micro-resistance acts, and every time he readjusts to the space he has left for them, according to the structure he comes to know: in his apartment, in his office, even in the Ministry of Love, he is always trying to test the limits of the control over him, he is always vigilant not only to evade, but also to use those spaces for self-expression.

Apart from the myriad of physical acts he and Julia perform (hiding objects and thoughts, going to places he is not supposed to, buying things at the black market, etc), and apart from their relationship, whose controversial nature is not the focus of this analysis, there are some acts of resistance that are specific of Winston. They are particularly visible because they mark the distinction between him and Julia, just like the "courage of the truth" marks that between Antigone and Ismene: the diary, the memory exercises/the interest for the past and the

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<sup>38</sup> Foucault, *Ermeneutica del Soggetto*: 484.

<sup>39</sup> "Instead there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case: resistances that are possible, necessary, improbable; others that are spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted, rampant, or violent; still others that are quick to compromise, interested, or sacrificial; by definition, they can only exist in the strategic field of power relations. But this does not mean that they are only a reaction or rebound (...)" (Foucault, *An Introduction*: 96)

<sup>40</sup> "Everyman against Totalitarianism" pp. 188-201 in *The Orwell Conundrum*.

resistance under torture. All three of them figure, as said before, within the techniques of the self practiced in the ancient world, as presented by Foucault in years-long analysis. To be more specific, the diary has a precedent in the practice of the *hypomnemata*, a meditative form of writing used to note down thoughts and reflections for both a personal use and a shared one. as Foucault writes, these writings could be persona, but they were very often shared with friends, pupils and learners in general. And indeed Winston tackles the problem of his audience quite early, right after having started to write. If he begins to write down “the interminable restless monologue that had been running inside his head” (Orwell: 9)<sup>41</sup>, after a few pages he is already asking himself “for whom he was writing the diary” (Orwell: 29) and his answer is initially “To the future or to the past, to a time when thought is free” (ivi), but in a short while it becomes O’Brien. The relationship with of O’Brien, whose akin spirit promises to provide a fruitful conversation, not to mention a personal bond, closely resembles that of the master with his pupil in Greece, or the correspondence between an older philosopher and a young apprentice in Rome, like that of Seneca with Lucilius. the second space of resistance developed by Winston, that of exercising his memory, is also very important in the classical world: Foucault points out how it was fundamental for the Pitagorean groups, but the exercise of memory was universally recognized as crucial in any form of *epimeleia heautou*<sup>42</sup>. Winston tries to revive and remember a remarkable amount of traces of a past that the Party wants to erase, therefore of a reality that he recognises as his and is denied by his oppressors: from the reconstruction of the facts concerning the war (who is allied with whom, who is fighting against whom), to that of music and landscapes, to the very risky interviews to people old enough to have witnessed another time of history, to the proof, impossible to preserve in its physical form, of the alteration of memory enacted by the Party (the photo of the three former members of the Party etc). Thirdly, he chooses to resist torture.

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<sup>41</sup> And here again, it is not in the sense of intimate confession, as we will see when he starts writing. Rather, it is more in line with what Foucault identifies as the content of the typical *hypomnemata*: important readings, ideas met during the day, personal reflections (Foucault, *Ermeneutica del Soggetto*: 321)

<sup>42</sup> With very different applications and meanings, as the Pitagoreans used it as part of the examination of conscience., as a preparation process to access the sacred realm of dreams, whereas for the stoics It was crucial in the elaboration of one’s progression record on the path of detachment from the world and to reaffirm one’s principles over oneself (Foucault, *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling* from pos. 1431 on).



Given the amount of danger he takes onto himself every time he decides to speak the truth; given his deep engagement with the thoughts he expresses –that he feels are constituting his identity also because he expresses them<sup>43</sup>–; given his necessity to manifest his view, even if he knows that he could as well keep quiet and avoid the pain; given his position of absolute weakness while talking to the all-powerful O’Brien (who masters both his body and rhetoric<sup>44</sup>); we can easily identify his action of resistance as *parrhesia*. The search for the truth is then another way in which Winston tries to deconstruct the subject that the Party wants him to become a different one, it wants him to perform this act on himself: it is a movement of de-subjectification and re-subjectification. Winston does this through a series of acts and techniques peculiar of a time and of a culture in which the idea of truth seeking was a philosophical task with an ethical value. Meaningfully, he opposes these techniques to the ones of the Party, who in turn wants the opposite thing, namely, a hetero-directed institutionalization, bringing to a docile subject. Winston strongly opposes the imperative to only question himself without ever doubting the given truth coming from the Party; he resists the transformation into a subject whose main problem is not “what is truth?” but “am I being untrue to the self I should be? Not only he resists, but he fights back, and his weapon of choice is *parrhesia*.

Contrarily to what Darius Rejali writes in his essay “Whom Do You Trust? Whom Can You Count On?”<sup>45</sup>, in fact, the resistance operated by Winston under torture appears to be quite effective and, most importantly, very political. Following Gottlieb again, it is unfair to focus uniquely on the betrayal, when Winston puts up with so much in order to resist. Even in very extreme conditions, he does not surrender: he learns how to survive, he finds ways to maintain his beliefs and to express them. For example, when he discovers his most essential identification with the Party’s idea of human being, he begins to plot his ultimate, desperate, but still

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<sup>43</sup> This is visible in his being different from Julia: he does not surrender, therefore he is the one who dares to speak; he does not identify with a betrayer of his truth, in fact the final act of betrayal breaks him completely. Also, when O’Brien questions his identity, he does it in terms of truth-teller. (“Are you considering yourself morally superior to us, with our lies and our cruelty?” Orwell: 283)

<sup>44</sup> Here too, the complete lack of rhetorical means and the emphasis on his “spontaneity” (exclamations, uncontrollable physical reactions accompanying his words) add on to the parallel with the figure of the *parrhesiastes* as the “un-rhetorical” speaker.

<sup>45</sup> In this essay, the author argues that Winston’s resistance to torture was not well performed, to the point that it can be seen as a renunciation to fight from the very start. Rejali quotes a number of alternative ways in which prisoners have resisted their torture and analyses them in contrast with that of Winston.

significant rebellion, that of dying while still hating the Party. This is extremely meaningful if we remember that this is a character in a novel: when Rejali suggests other, more effective ways the protagonist could have resisted, he forgets that unlike real human beings, whose survival and heroism are enacted in the physical world, Winston is primarily the story of Winston. We can read his thoughts, so even if he decides to keep silent in front of O'Brien, his *parrhesia* is still working for us: we are his audience. He is still subversive, only his strategy had to adapt to the conditions he found himself in. Like Antigone, he is playing a part where the strength of his message is tied to his death; actually, his death is part of the message, it is the dramatic effect of it that communicates efficiently the political weight of Winston's thoughts. In this sense, Antigone's choice to die comes as a necessary element in the tragedy: as O'Brien explains to Winston, the Party needs to absorb in itself every sparkle of difference: "It is intolerable to us that an erroneous thought should exist anywhere in the world, however secret and powerless it may be. In the old days the heretic walked to the stake still a heretic, proclaiming his heresy, exulting in it." (Orwell: 267). Therefore, the goal is to erase the "martyr", or the civic hero, whose role is necessarily sealed by death because death is the sign of the injustice she or he is opposing. It is too late for Creon to go back: Antigone nails him to his responsibility. And this act of public declaration, an act of *parrhesia* that verbalises the entire body and existence of an individual, comes to entail the death which is also the element of risk necessary to call it *parrhesia*. This makes the act void of tension, by denying the openness of the risk itself; on the other hand, death comes to be the ultimate act of courage, a jump into nothingness and into the unknown, whose significance is to be found on the other side of the stage, into the work's posterity, out of the character's story. We see Winston succumb to the will of the Party, but after that passage the emotional tie that made the identification (empathy) possible is rescinded –while under torture, Winston was still legible, whereas his trauma made him into an alien creature. Sure there is no hope for him, but this is dystopia: an exaggeration, a distortion. Winston has not succeeded in resisting the Party to the end of his life, but for as long as he could, he resisted this mutation. He struggled enough for us to see and hear the Party's strategy in its full extension and horror, even beyond the character's conscious possibilities: the dangers

of totalitarianism are now exposed for us. His suicide mission was one of truth-seeking: we can consider him successful.

## Chapter 2:

### Christa Wolf's Cassandra: truth-telling on the Western myth

If Orwell's projection portrayed a hypothetical, highly negative future, Wolf's choice engages with the past. Her retelling of the fall of Troy, however, even though supported by an impressive effort in contextualizing the narrated facts, is in no way historical. Wolf studies the archaeological and anthropological coordinates in which Homer's war (allegedly) took place, and gives indeed a version of the event that is not only alternative and opposed to the traditional one, but also extremely detailed and well documented. Despite the undeniable will on Wolf's part to expose the *Iliad's* biased vision, her version is not more realistic or accurate, but rather re-tells the Homeric tale from another point of view. The narration, with its modes and effects, is central to this literary, political and experimental operation. Christa Wolf's selection is, indeed, extremely pondered: the *Iliad* as foundation myth of Western society reflects her will to explore human nature and its links with war, but also, and together with, the correlation between narrative and normalization within our culture. Where does "the truth" originate from, and how, in our society? What is the role of literature in this mechanism? If it has a building power, can it be used to subvert one truth and affirm another? Or even, and this is the ultimate challenge she faces, to subvert the ruling truth and prevent the installment of another one-sided story to replace it?

The historical context in which this novel was written is substantive to Christa Wolf's analysis. In the wake of 20<sup>th</sup> century's totalitarian era, while fearing and remembering the devastating power of atomic fusion, she deals with a question of origin: where does this self annihilating tendency come from? The urgency to individuate a destructive principle, however, does not result in a codification of human nature as intrinsically driven to violence and death. Wolf, in fact, approaches the problem from a cultural and social point of view, rather than from an ontological and anthropological one. During a trip to Greece in the Spring of 1980, Cassandra, writes Wolf, "takes possession of me and takes on her provisional incarnation"<sup>46</sup> (CCON: 2133).

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<sup>46</sup> "Cassandra. I saw her at once. She, the captive, took me captive; herself made an object by others, she took possession of me." (CCON2132)

It becomes more and more the “key word” (CCON: 2119) around which she organizes her reflection on Western culture and civilization. The characteristics that make Cassandra suitable for this project are many, but they are mostly related with her being a Trojan, a woman and a prophetess. Firstly, her identification with the defeated side of the renowned war offers a chance for the most pressing question to be asked: why does our culture, and especially our political culture, allow for a system based on reciprocal violence to be considered acceptable? To accept it so deeply indeed, that the heirs of the Greek civilization have found themselves killing both soldiers and civilians by the millions, and living in constant threat of the complete annihilation of entire countries, if not of the entire species. Wolf answers by exposing the process by which Troy, a city-state based on trade and maritime space control, turns to a highly militarized disciplinary society. The retrospective recognition of this progressive transformation starts from a polarization that sees the Trojans as opposed to the Greeks. These latter ones are the bearers of war and of its barbarism, from the glorification of violence to the celebration of heroes –a practice that allows for a removal from the human realm of both the victim and the hero, but in opposite directions: dehumanized and irrelevant the first, while the second is considered superior to humanity and therefore does not owe ethical treatment to anybody. But the same symptoms appear in Troy: Eumelos, the “police chief” of Priamus, starts calling Menelaus an enemy (C: 823), and soon the rhetoric of war is so deeply installed, that it turns Priam away from his daughter. Her reaction to the discovery is a lacerating refusal to comply to the system anymore: and the consequence to this (partially) denied collaboration is constituted by a long reclusion in the “graves of the heroes”, inside a wickerwork prison.

This highly symbolic place refers to another polarized interpretation that Cassandra comes to individuate and that is particularly present in the three lessons (collected under the title “Conditions for a Narrative”) accompanying the novel: that of patriarchy and matriarchy. In fact, the grave Cassandra is secluded in is a reference to that glorification of heroism that requires the war mentality in the name of which she is being punished; but at the same time, the willow branches are traditionally connected with death, but also with birth, united in the cult of matriarchal deities (Schmid: 36-37; Adam: 465). To the point of dreaming the clash of the two systems and her uneasiness in being called to judge between them, the prophetess is

caught in this dualism. All through *Cassandra*, Wolf recounts the story of Troy's last years as a former matriarchal or egalitarian political organization devoted to a feminine cult: as readers, we see things change down a path undertaken long before. Significantly, what makes this run accelerate in the decisive direction of patriarchy is Eumelos's systematical introduction of a warfare mentality. While the Greeks are said to behave terribly towards women from the very start, it is only gradually that we see the Trojans distancing their female population from any remaining form of institutionalized power that was left to them. The identity of Cassandra as one of those women who have a share of such power is here very important to understand how exceptional this role is –and how easily, arbitrarily and inarguably she is later deprived of it because she is a woman. Even more slowly, we come to know of a largely secret community organized according to distinctly anti-patriarchal principles, walking in the steps of a previous supposedly matriarchal society. Within this dualism, it is possible to individuate the origin of the main traits of Western culture, including the ones relative to the war, to heroism and to violent domination in general. Therefore, the patriarchalization of Troy and its militarization go hand in hand, constituting that value system that, normalized and institutionalized, will be passed down the centuries in form of literature, philosophy, politics and cultural practices. Cassandra, in her womb-like prison, dies to that self who is loyal to her father and to her city to the point of being disloyal to her feelings, and is re-born a being with a new attitude towards her political agency.

Unlike Antigone, in fact, Cassandra does not walk to her cave adamantly and fearlessly: confronted with an authority who wants her to comply and threatens to silence her otherwise, she too takes the way of affirming her belief defying the risky consequences. She, too, is condemned to a strict, lugubrious imprisonment resembling a burial in a highly evocative way. Of them, however, only Antigone dies in her grave, and it is a choice: she does not want to live according to Creon's terms. Cassandra instead shows another attitude, at least for the moment: later on, she will enact the Antigonean refusal on Aeneas's proposal, but she will need to analyze things from a different point of view before she gets there. During her time in the cave, she finally comes to realize her position vis-à-vis Troy and starts acting accordingly: in a death-rebirth fashion, she emerges from the tomb/womb denying herself the heroic status of those she was buried with, thus renouncing the rhetoric of resistance: she is not the pure Antigone. In

fact, and most importantly, this choice is made in agreement with what she understood of herself: she has been colluding with the destructive mentality that brought Troy to disaster; she has been resisting her ethical sense in order to align with Priam's expectations. The system she thought she was resisting is really part of herself: hence, she will have to change her resistance strategy.

The attention given by Cassandra to the power of language in her retelling Troy's fall is remarkable: she grants a great deal of influence to vocabulary, to the control of language and to the choice and diffusion of messages. And it is through language, a very specific kind of language, that she comes to understand her flawed evaluation of herself and of "the palace": a voice that makes its way through her, obliging her to take it into consideration. Cassandra postpones her confrontation with herself, she allows herself moments of blindness<sup>47</sup>, but with a growing consciousness of the problem, and in the face of yet another injunction to force her feeling and her ethical sense in favor of "the city", she cannot conceal her voice anymore: her "no" condemns her, but marks the start of a new path of resistance, one that has language at its very center. The prophetess is not speaking with the mysterious, oracular voice of a god; she is not rendering divine the politically charged instructions commissioned by "the palace", like her brother Helenus ; she is not telling to the authority what they want to hear, like the Greek priest Pantheus; she is indeed using her voice to speak the truth. She is still a seeress, but rather than a prophetess she is now a truth-teller. And if her way of doing it is initially confrontational towards the authority, she also elaborates another way, a narrative one; one which is identifiable with Wolf's program of deconstruction of the myth as Western institution that affirms and normalizes privilege and violence. The truth-teller talks, preferring oral language to the easily institutionalized written one of the scribes: she wants to be heard, her message is a long recounting of the facts of Troy from the point of view of the "other" normally excluded from the usual narration: the defeated, the woman. Her language also defies usual structures based on causal connection and chronological order, giving shape to a "newly found language" possibly able to express diversity and grant it a place in the chronicles of culture. In

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<sup>47</sup> "My wish held a contradiction. I gave myself some time before i noticed it. I have always granted myself these times of partial blindness. To become seeing all of a sudden, that would have destroyed me". (C: 590)

the hope that “in the future there might be people who know how to turn victory into life” (C: 1752), she is conscious that this “turn” cannot happen outside the borders of cultural elaboration.

### The lie ruling over the city: the discourse of war

*What kind of place was I living in, then?* (C: 731) is one of the most recurrent expressions of Cassandra’s surprised horror at her own city. Her reversal of myth is at work in her portrayal of the insurgence of war within the walls of the city: in a chronicle articulated over the departure of the *three ships*, we follow Cassandra’s retroactive analysis of the political and social facts around the most famous war of Western mythology. Her feelings and reactions are alternated with those of the court and of “her people”: the autobiographical fictional setting allows her to reinterpret her and other people’s past uneasiness and pain in terms of reactions to the effects of flawed presupposes; and at the same time allows her to analyse her missed opportunities, her lack of response, her inability to notice the dispositive of power at work.

We assist to the change of Troy from a position of antipodal difference to one of identity with the Greeks’ culture and its values (“We are all alike. The difference lies in whether we know it” C: 199): but we do so from a very different point of view from the one we are familiar with, and with a completely different outcome. Cassandra (a woman of Troy) describes the Greeks in a way that is strongly polemical with the traditional one and that aims at undermining its pillars. The Greek heroes are downgraded to regular mortals by the sharp tongue of the prophetess, who regards their divine ascendancy as merely metaphorical (C: 845) and spares no account of their flaws. Wolf’s reversal of the myth is here more than evident: Odysseus, despite knowing people “and to a certain point himself as well (which is rare)”, “literally drags” Achilles to the war, not to serve some godly plan, but rather because, having tried to avoid the recruitment himself, the hero of the Odyssey “would not allow another man to get off when he had to bleed” (C:1246); Agamemnon is described as an “imbecile” (c: 624) and a coward who tries to mask his impotence (physical and psychological, C:143) by pretending to be a leader instead of “a weakling who lacked self-esteem” (C:785); but above all, Achilles, the main hero and



narrative engine of the *Iliad*, is portrayed as something *less* than human, as opposed to his expected superiority. Cassandra calls him “das Vieh” (the brute), thus suggesting feral stupidity and brutality, violence connected to dumb instincts, a machine or an animal (“das”) powered by forces originated below the threshold of conscience. The splendidly talented, god-born youngster described by Homer becomes here the epitome of everything hateful and destructive: from narcissistic need of fame and approval (C:1241, 1250), to complete disrespect of human life, to a wicked deep pleasure connected to the performance of violence. Achilles remains a polemical target and an extreme compared to which especially Trojan men stand out as different (Aeneias and Hector particularly) and toward whose values Troy is inexorably dragged: “we could not become like Achilles, just to save ourselves” (C:1534) a still fearful Cassandra thinks, without finding the courage to stand for this though in front of Eumelos. This character, military chief and counsellor of Priam, emerges with, and in causal relationship with, the war. Defined by Anchises, Aeneas’s father, as the perfect counterpart of Achilles, Eumelos provides Troy with a new ideological framework that he proceeds to install into the city until the war is not only inevitable, but necessary to the new equilibrium (C: 1586). This proceeding towards a warfare-driven society similar to the Greeks’ happens in subtle, progressive steps that closely resemble Foucault’s description of the dispositives of modern disciplinary societies. In fact, Eumelos aims at control through the interiorization of norms; in doing so, his way of dealing with the public opinion through propaganda and regulations is masterful. His humble origins allow him a connection with the people of the city, a profoundly linguistic one, that Cassandra initially mocks and then learns to fear (C: 833). He uses language as a powerful tool for his purposes: the very idea of war starts when he, still rather unknown, labels Menelaus as “enemy”. By way of changing his title from friend and host to a hostile one, Eumelos also changes the public perception of him. Moreover, he elevates Priam by encouraging a series of epithets that, being untrue, detach the king from humanity (C: 973). He creates parties and divisions within the city, dictating a climate in which one can only be “pro or against” the ruling power. He encourages hate and diffidence towards generalized groups of people. He promotes and imposes surveillance measures so strict, that Cassandra finds herself comparing Troy and the Greeks, and that the second ones are less obsessive with control (C: 1536): when she has to

undergo procedures of identification to enter her own city (C: 1262), she understands the extreme that they have reached. It is clear to her that the ridiculously scrupulous measures, the curfews, the terror, has nothing to do with security and all to do with power management: the fear of the population is enhanced, allowing for manipulative slogans to become law. But even more worryingly, the surveillance gestures are made to become normal, to the point where the entire city-system reorganises around new values and fear (C: 1535), and the terror they produce. We see this happening in a myriad of everyday details: the exclusion of Pantheus because he is a Greek; the hidden protection provided by the royal couple to the newly-suspected Birseis (whose father Calchas is now labeled as “traitor”), in spite of their royal power to rule the city; the infiltration of soldiers (“Eumelos’s guards”) everywhere, to the point where they are seen replacing the regular population during public events: as a result, people are frightened by those same soldiers who are allegedly there to protect them (C: 1554).

The grip of Eumelos over the city is maintained through the systematic distortion or even the creation of information, in verbal and nonverbal form. He is omnipresent, inventing slogans, dictating rules, suggesting to Priam what to say and who to trust, using people’s feelings against them to get to his goals. His motivations for doing so are unclear: Anchises attempts an interpretation<sup>48</sup> but his most precious insight is the one opening the path of self-recognition to Cassandra, the one connecting Eumelos to Priam (C: 1378). Yes, Priam might be different, as a person, from his commander-in-chief. He could be better and above all, he is Cassandra’s beloved father. But he is also the one who allows Eumelos most of his power. In the end, the old king is totally detached from his initial values and becomes the persecutor of his own daughter, thus embodying the very Greek attitude denounced by Cassandra when talking about Briseis's need to rejoin her father: the unnatural inversion of priorities between kinship and war logic.

Troy seems too fertile a ground for Eumelos’s rhetoric to be really that different, in its core, from the Greeks. Not only Priam, but most of its inhabitants welcome the logic of hate and fear: from the very start, when Eumelos is still just a “capable” man (C: 749), he is able to divide the

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<sup>48</sup> “He only wants to get back where he had it good once: under your skirts. You won’t let him in. so he takes revenge, it’s so simple as that.”(C: 1367)

court in friends and enemies; he gets a hold on Paris rightly detecting his weaknesses, and easily makes a hero out of him, through the control of language (prohibition to mock and laugh<sup>49</sup>), of symbols (banned the poach, replaced by the she-bear, C: 850) and of history (Paris's divine paternity C: 843). His control over the royal couple is fast to come and firm: Priam is encouraging it because he is seduced by the mantra "we will win" (C: 1056). The centers of power, the palace, the army and the temple, are at Eumelos's disposal. The quick transformation, however, comes in the form of small changes, sometimes difficult to detect, and often overlooked. When they are scandalous, it is rare to see them opposed: Cassandra often allows herself to be "blind" in order not to face the conflict that would derivate from her public awareness, both in the political space and in her identity. Her first attempts at *parrhesia* are pervaded with fear, denial, resentment, and not really conscious. They are also very little incisive, as they are instantly classified as madness and surrounded by long periods of complete subservient attitude on her part, contributing to the war mechanism. Therefore, the recognition of a similar status of connivance in Priam and in herself will be the first real step towards a reflection on resistance and its enacting<sup>50</sup>.

In showing how even people like Cassandra, who opposes Eumelos at heart, are trapped in a chain of action that makes them collaborate to their own destruction, Wolf gives us an interpretation of war. The Greeks can seem different from the Trojans, but maybe it is just a matter of time; enough decades of exposure to Eumelos' set of values through Priam's power apparatus, Hecuba's silence and Cassandra's cowardice, would turn Troy in just another Homeric tale. Rather than theorizing a human being whose nature is more or less inclined towards violence though, the author shows us how the problem originates at another level: it is not a matter of raw material, as the person will more or less adapt to the conditions he or she lives in. Those conditions, cultural and social, are the real variable of the equation: a set of values will be internalized, if channeled in an effective way, and come to mimic a natural state:

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<sup>49</sup> Hecuba had earlier observed about Priam's pointless stubbornness: "Why should it hurt him that they laugh at him when they think they are superior?" (C: 610)

<sup>50</sup> When I really go to know Troy, my centre, I understood what he [Pantheus] meant. It was not curiosity that would have driven me away, but horror. (C: 502)

it is only by maintaining a critical eye and by making a remarkable effort that we can recognize the historical, rather than metaphysical or ontological, origin of such dispositifs.

Portrayed in this way, not only the war loses any poetic and mythical connotations, but it is shown in its most horrible aspects: both the dreadful ones on the more personal side (mourning, loss, trauma) and the shocking ones that constitute its deep hypocrisy. As a tool, war is depicted as almost completely useless, since everything that it accomplishes could be bloodlessly and easily reached with diplomacy and a willingness to cooperate, as she discovers when discussing with Priam: “So negotiate terms!” I suggested. “That’s all we need. To negotiate over our inalienable property and rights!” To which Priam answers: “You must be out of your mind, child ... Don’t you understand anything any more? The honour of our house is at stake.” (C: 1054). What causes war is then greed, cruel detachment, vain glory, the childish need to compensate for personal insecurities, cowardice and a remarkable amount of ignorance and engrained blindness. What justifies it is a system of values perpetuated through everyday acts, especially language<sup>51</sup>. The pain, the energies, the lives war requires to society could be spared, if only we were aware of the mechanisms used to perpetrate it and we had the courage to go beyond them, but it is difficult to do so, because war is sustained by a specific narration. Helen does not exist, as everyone realises: still, her ghost is a lie everyone holds on to, willingly, rather than calling the war into question.<sup>52</sup> What makes war into a beautiful story of heroism is a century-old disposition to disguise reality for political and personal reasons, together with a lack of investigation and exposure of this lie. What Wolf tries to do then is exactly to expose such lie in one of its most revered form, that of the culturally sacred foundation myth. Through the recounting of the story of Troy in its all-too-human manipulative construction, in its not at all divine and heroic war situation, the writer shows us that, once deprived of its traditional poetic narrative, the *Iliad* becomes nothing but “the glorification of a war of piracy” (CCON: 2355)

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<sup>51</sup> “We were not allowed to call it ‘war’. Linguistic regulations prescribed that, correctly speaking, it be called a ‘surprise attack.’” (C: 1062). And also ““Since when did an officer decide the use of words?” (C: 823)

<sup>52</sup> ““Notice that they chose a woman. A man could have provided the image of glory and riches just as well. But of beauty? A people who are fighting for beauty!” says Anchises, while the origin of the war gets more and more flimsy. (C: 1023)

### The lie as absolute: the language of myth and power.

The rise of Eumelos is paralleled by the decline of Hecuba: once equal to her husband, if not superior she is now less and less present on the political scene, and will be definitely thrown out of it, to which she protests, even though feebly and only in private. Publicly, she adapts to the shrinking role assigned to her, trying to influence at least the lives of those she loves through sideways tracks. The moon of Artemis and Cybele, symbol of matriarchal society, retires beyond the horizon, lingering at its edge in the form of transversal, subterranean networks, clandestine or semi-secret affiliations. Pushing the moon more and more underground, the patriarchal sun shines over Troy: a condition that was necessary for the installment of Eumelos's brutal social system. Although she is obviously an accomplice in this, it is Priam, and not Hecuba, the one who is seduced by Eumelos's rhetoric (C: 837). It is patriarchy, with its "Prinzipien von Konkurrenz, Leistung und Effizienz, Gigantismus und Herrschaftsdenken" (Schmidt: 54)<sup>53</sup> that makes war possible, from Troy to the atomic bomb<sup>54</sup>.

The insistence on the portrayal of war-related activities at the hands of men is of course historically accurate, in that it reflects the distribution of tasks in a male-dominated society; but it also reflects the will on Wolf's part to both expose and counter what she regards as dangerously ingrained ideas constituting the patriarchal skeleton of our society. Thus the parallel with the Greeks is even more sound: the first thing the people of Achilles are said to have in common with those of Priam is the cult of Apollo, the sun god who replaces Cybele and is the emblem of patriarchy. His presence in the novel is considerable: not only Cassandra is her priestess, but she is invested by him with the gift of prophecy -tellingly, this last one comes with an attempted rape during a highly symbolic dream. The god is venerated through a largely formalized cult whose political exploitation is made clear again and again, in a perpetual

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<sup>53</sup> "Principles of competition, of achievement, efficiency; feeling of greatness and hierarchical set of mind"

<sup>54</sup> 'To learn through suffering' – this seems to be the law of the new gods, and likewise the way of masculine thought. This way does not seek to love Mother Nature but to fathom her secrets in order to dominate her, and to erect the astounding structure of a world of mind remote from nature, from which women are henceforth excluded. (...) The gain of culture by the loss of nature. Progress through pain. The formulae which underlie Western culture spelled out four hundred years before our era. (CCFN. 3258)

production of false prophecies fuelling the lies behind the “three ships” missions. Within his temple, hierarchy is everything: between Pantheus and Cassandra, and later between her and the younger priests, submission and dominance pervade every possible exchange. Moreover, Apollo is the one to whom Hecuba and Polyxena pray, instead of Athena, for an abortion, a requests so “unnatural that they could not make it to a goddess but only to a male god. “ (C: 1615). Athena, in turn, “motherless” “powerful and cold” (CCFN: 2400), is the goddess whose temple is used for the ritual deflowering of girls in Troy, a practice described in gruesome words by Wolf as the official beginning of female submission. Its normalization (“hadn’t everything followed its predetermined course?” C:235) is only one of the many way patriarchy is already over Troy even before the rise of Eumelos.

Traditionally condemned to a perpetual disbelief in her words, Wolf shows us a well-reasoning Cassandra whose utterance is ignored because of Apollo’s divine punishment: patriarchy. She is caught in a narrative –the war narrative- that does not allow her voice to be heard: the voice of the woman, the voice of the prophetess, is removed from the myth. Like many other women before and after her, she is made silent: the compliant poets and scribes of “the palace” will tell another story than what she sees, and the Greeks will tell yet another:

The recorded and interpreted record of the past of the human race is only a partial record, in that it omits the past of half of the humankind, and it is distorted, in that it tells the story from the viewpoint of the male half of humanity only (Lerner, 1986: 4)

As for myth, Wolf observes the same phenomenon: Cassandra is barely present in the *Iliad* and even when she speaks in Aeschylus, she is portrayed in a very peculiar way. “The male poet” she writes, chooses to see Clytemnestra and Cassandra as “vindictive, jealous, petty towards each other” (CCFN 2715), whereas her description of their encounter presents two different attitudes: if not obviously friendly to each other, they understand the other and establish a bond. What Wolf does to Aeschylus, to Homer, is an attempt of restoring a female version of the facts recounted by them. But it is also much more than this, because this systematic exclusion of the defeated and of the first absolute defeated, the woman, from Western narration, is made to be perceived as normal, as neutral. By showing the partisan nature of

mythical narration, Wolf criticizes another aspect of Western society that, she believes, prepares the ground for patriarchal absolutism: the pretence of objectivity covering a logic of exclusion. Cassandra with her voice of difference makes clear that for every story being told, many others are omitted, or even silenced.

The political value of this unveiling, of this change of perspective, can be seen as an Antigonean act of resistance. The power of language in shaping the world, made obvious through the deconstruction of the myth and through the figure of Eumelos, gives literature a remarkable responsibility: because myth is created by one winning faction and encapsulates its values, and because it does it in such a way that makes them seem neutral and natural, its repetition will, in turn, spread those same values with their pretence of essentiality, of obviousness. The cultural product produces culture: Wolf, with *Cassandra* and later with *Medea*, engages in a challenge with this re-production. This is similar to what Butler sees as the main trait of Antigone: the capacity of countering our expectations, thus making us realise the artificiality of the ideas we take for granted:

In her act, she transgresses both gender and kinship norms (...) she exposes the socially contingent character of kinship, only to become the repeated occasion in the critical literature for a rewriting of that contingency as immutable necessity (Butler, 2011: 6)

Antigone's transgression is, as we saw, a complete transgression: the effect that her act has on the *polis* is impressive and unforgettable, but she can only accomplish this by using the language of power in a subversive way. Forced in the corner of the political space, she uses her remaining chance of publicity to share her stance. First of all, she uses the ritual space of the trial and overturns it: she steps into a place of public condemnation and uses it to declare her motivations more sacred than the ones condemning her, thus putting these latter ones on trial. Hence, she subverts her avowal, binding her identity to an accusation rather than to a confession<sup>55</sup>. Secondly, by killing herself she nails Creon to his responsibility through that same

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<sup>55</sup> The effectiveness of her deed can be seen in the reaction of the chorus and of the people ("But it's for me to catch the murmurs in the dark,/ the way the city mourns for this young girl. 'No woman,' they say, 'ever deserved

death sentence that he was too cowardly to call for her. Rather than being excluded from the political, she stretches its borders and makes it broader; it is a conscious movement, one that requires a deep understanding of the game of politics, of power and its rules. Facing a figure of authority who, unlike her father, will not listen to the voice of the powerless, Antigone has to re-shape the *parrhesiastic* act so that it will be effective. Therefore, instead of limiting herself to the verbal sphere, she fashions her resistance otherwise, using her entire self to make the truth emerge.

Just like Antigone, Cassandra is asked to withdraw from her positions and to support the decisions taken by the authority: the refusal to do so causes a situation in which both mythical figures are called mad and finally sentenced to a kind of imprisonment that closely resembles death. But while for Antigone the suicide conveys her message against Creon, Cassandra has here just begun to recognize her Creon: her Antigonean refusal of connivance, her political act of denial of herself, will come later; in the graves of the heroes, it is too early for her to die. She has just admitted to herself her belonging to that same system that she wanted to oppose: she recognizes its pervasiveness and she recognizes her own reluctance in distancing herself from it. She also understands that the mechanism is so advanced, that her voice will be distorted or silenced by it: thus, her death at this point would be incorporated in the knowledge produced by the power structure, as she is already buried in the graves of the heroes. Her resistance needs to be different: she decides to change her reference system, the womb instead of the tomb. Holding on to Cybele's willow branches, she starts her new experiment.

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death less,/ and such a brutal death for such a glorious action.'" will say Haemon in Sophocles's play, p. 95). Butler uses the Antigone example to undermine Foucault's argument of necessary and one-way transition into the realm of identity once an avowal takes place: in fact, she observes "What if it does the opposite, one avows the crime because one is proud of it?" And she explains that "In such a case, the speech act cannot be separated from its instrumentalisation for contrary purposes", Butler 2014, min 41' 20".



### Resistance: pulling out strands from the wickerwork

The process of self-knowledge, of *Selbsterkennung*, is fundamental for Wolf in giving shape to resistance: there could be no recognition of the system enveloping us, without a recognition of it within ourselves<sup>56</sup>. Similarly to Winston, Cassandra needs a series of acts of re-subjectification in order to learn her role, her limits and her possibilities. This is what Adam calls the “fight at the micro-level” (*Kampf auf der Mikroebene*: 2003: 30) as opposed to the Macro-level of the social institutions: it is her internal fight that comes to the center of the stage, which opens the possibility of “the change of individual bricks to modify the system” (“die Veränderung des einzelnen Bausteins zum Wandel des Systems”, *ivi.*). She provides herself access to authority and to its mechanisms; she investigates Troy’s secrets; she develops connections with alternative thinkers and takes part in their debate; she lets go of her voice and faces the crisis that follows, coming out of it even if every time less willing to return to a system she is increasingly critical of; she engages in acts of defiance and of counter-culture, i.e. of micro-resistance, using her authority to counter Eumelos, Pantheus and Priam both verbally and non-verbally. A major act of re-subjectification, however, is her participation in the community at Mount Ida, a group of people (mostly women, but with some men too) who put in practice the anti-patriarchal values and worship Cybele by the river Scamander.

This “Scamander-paradise” has been read by many scholars either as a practicable hypothesis (Maisch, Roser) or as an unrealistic one, described through means that are typical of the utopian genre, from lexicon to symbolism and the metaphors being used (Viergutz, Holweg: 2007: 35-38)<sup>57</sup>. In any case, it is a model for a different social organisation, in the meeting point of various ideals:

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<sup>56</sup> It occurs to me that secretly I am tracking the story of my fear. Or more precisely, the story of its unbridling: more precisely still, of its setting free. Yes, it’s true, fear too can be set free, and that shows that it belongs with everything and everyone who is oppressed. The king’s daughter is not afraid, for fear is weakness and weakness can be amended by iron discipline. The madwoman is afraid, she is mad with fear. The captive is supposed to be afraid. The free woman learns to lay aside her unimportant fears and not to fear the one big important fear because she is no longer too proud to share it with others. Formulas, granted. (C: 517)

<sup>57</sup>“Das ‘Paradies’ am Skamander, wie es Christa Wolf beschreibt, zeichnet sich durch die üblichen ‘kindlich-naiven’ Vorstellungen von ‘Unberührtheit’ und ‘Reinheit’ aus, wie sie uns aus der biblischen Beschreibung des Paradieses und den Paradiesebeschreibungen anderer religiöser und mythologischer Überlieferungen bekannt

“Die Gemeinschaft selbst bildet sowohl eine Verkörperung des vergangenen matriarchalischen Urkommunismus als auch der kommunistischen Gesellschaft, die der künftige, der ‘neue’ Mensch am Ende aller Geschichte mit absoluter Gewissheit errichtet wird.“ (Viergutz, Holweg, 2007: 45)<sup>58</sup>

However, Viergutz and Holweg observe, Wolf’s alternative Mount Ida society is not convincing as a “third step” beyond the matriarchy-patriarchy opposition<sup>59</sup>. Even if Wolf takes her distance from the matriarchal utopian discourse<sup>60</sup>, and even if she lets one of Mount Ida’s main characters, Arisbe, argue insistently against dualistic oppositions in political practices<sup>61</sup>, here the female principle is portrayed as the origin of everything human (ibid. 103). This ultimately makes the process of development of a new society more similar to one of straight coming back to matriarchy (ivi). Adam too recognizes how Cassandra, in finding this collectivity of reference, limits her exploration: if it is true that she then expands her “we” to include a much bigger part of the human society than that living on Mount Ida, Achilles is resolutely left out of it, patriarchy is excluded. This “we” is readable in terms of opposition to a “they”, thus re-proposing the division of the world in opposite factions, that Wolf herself individuates as problematic in the current Western mindset and a typical patriarchal trait<sup>62</sup>. And since Cassandra’s critique of

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sind.“ (Viergutz, Holweg, 2007: 38) (“The paradise at the Scamander, as described by Christa Wolf, is characterised by the usual ,childish-naïf’ representation as pristine and pure, that we know from the description of heaven in the Bible and in other mythological or religious traditions”.)

<sup>58</sup> “This community itself represent an embodiment of a long gone matriarchal ‘original’ communism, but also of the communist society that the future, the ‘new’ human being at the end of all history would have most surely reached.”

<sup>59</sup> „Ziel hier es nicht, in eine matriarchale Frühzeit zurückzukehren, sondern die Möglichkeiten dieser Existenzform in eine ‘moderne’ Gesellschaft zu transformieren. Ganz im Sinne Bachofens wird das Matriarchat zu eine Durchgangsstation, allerdings nicht zu einer, die es gänzlich abzulegen gilt. Vielmehr soll es zu einer These werden, die zusammen mit ihrer Antithese Patriarchat in einer lebberen Synthese münden soll.“ (Adam, 2003: 25) (“The goal is not that of going back to a matriarchal golden age, but rather that of conveying the possibilities offered by this form of life in a ‘modern’ society. In line with Bachofen, matriarchy becomes a transitional state, in any case not a complete one. Much rather, it should be considered a thesis that together with its antithesis (patriarchy), should lead to a viable synthesis.”)

<sup>60</sup> Both in the Conditions of a Narrative and in the depiction of Cybele’s devotees performing human sacrifice in ancient times.

<sup>61</sup> In her dialogue with Penthesilea at C: 1773-74 in particular, and in her many Socratic exchanges with Cassandra, she argues against a refusal of patriarchy that results in a transition towards its symmetrical opposite.

<sup>62</sup> “for the Greeks there is no alternative but either truth or lies, right or wrong, victory or defeat, friend or enemy, life or death. They think differently than we do” (C: 4777)

the system, as we will see, is ultimately her main tool for resistance, her political agency suffers a limitation if confined to those river banks.

However, it is hard to describe the Scamander experience as more than a temporary utopian one: Wolf makes clear that this community will not survive the war and that it probably would not even exist without it, at least in these terms. At the same time, it is hard to think of it as merely escapist, as Cassandra learns, through the performance of different values, the depth of the patriarchal ones. Her personal, physical experience, makes her understand the personal, physical force of the power structure in Troy, the one that still has a powerful hold on her in the person of Priam. Finally, it shows her (and us) how the hierarchies and ideas we take for granted are just the product of our system of values, and not of nature: another way of life, even if just temporary, is indeed possible, there is not one only way to live in communities. If we cannot imagine another system is because we're too convoluted in a one-way narration.

That is therefore Cassandra's choice of resistance. From her position of prophetess, she understands her importance as narrator: rather than countering the power structures, something that has proved not to be very effective, she will defy what justifies them, holds them in place and perpetuates them. She will challenge traditional myth with her version, the willingly forgotten one, the voice of difference. Her act of parrhesia is one with her story-telling. "According to Wolf literature is an archaeological work, a search for the truth and the blind spots of personal history as well as those of society." (Koskinas in Losada-Goya, Guirao Ochoa, 2012: 195). Truth is then to be found exactly in those "blind spots of personal history" that Wolf chooses as the very structure of her work. It is there that the power structure reveals itself and it is exactly because those spots are blind, personal, ignored in the typically Western narration of important macro-events, that the structure fails to show its mechanisms.

Who will find a voice again, and when?

It will be one whose skull is split by a pain. And until then, until his coming, nothing will be heard but bellows and commands and whimpers and the 'yes, sirs' of those who obey. The helplessness of the victors who silently prowl around the vehicle, passing each other my name. Old men, women, children. Their helplessness at the atrocity of the victory." (C: 264).

Conversely, it is not by merely trying to include the excluded voices in the narration that we will make it more true, and ultimately “the truth”<sup>63</sup>. The voice Cassandra wishes for, like the voice Wolf confers to her, is qualified not because of its completeness or for a measurable adherence to facts, but because of its being grounded in the physical existence of the speaker, in his or her peculiar difference, and not transcended into a pretension of “neutral” universality.

Thus, restoring the female perspective as narrative voice is not just a matter of balancing a century-old injustice, it also means giving way to a whole different structuring of ideas and perceptions, a way that is competing with the male-centered counterpart and opposite to it:

For women, for historical and biological reasons, experience a different reality than men. Experience a different reality and express it. To the extent that women belong not to the rulers but to the ruled, and have done so for centuries. To the extent that they are the objects of objects (...) to the extent that, writing and living, they aim at autonomy. (CCON: 3497).

The expression of this female point of view then becomes a politically and culturally subversive act, proposing a different set of values articulated through different means<sup>64</sup>, thus creating new knowledge.

It is the search for a “Weibliches Schreiben ” (a female writing) that Wolf elects as her weapon to oppose the dominant culture: “For women, writing is a medium which they place between themselves and the world of men.” Writing is therefore an act of creative resistance: it has a very distinctive anti-patriarchal character, in that it is grounded in values opposing the dominant culture, therefore organising the material in a different way, both in form and content. As a result, this kind of writing will show a different possibility in approaching reality, hence undermine the institutionalised mindset and its alleged inherent nature. In fact, Cassandra’s memories will be expressed in a form that mimics the oral language, with its relational connotation, as opposed to the institutionalised practice of writing: “Send me a scribe, or better yet a young slave woman with a keen memory and a powerful voice.” (C:

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<sup>63</sup> “The literature of the West (I read) is the white man’s reflection on himself. So should it be supplemented by the white woman’s reflection on herself? And nothing more?” (CCON: 3427)

<sup>64</sup> “Ihr Programm beinhaltet sowohl die inhaltliche als auch die sprachliche Revision des mythischen Stoffes.“ (Adam: 26) (“Her program includes a revision of the mythical material, both in content and in language”)

1227)<sup>65</sup>. The chronological, linear narration will leave place to a net of associative thoughts, paralleling the relevance given to corporality instead of abstract thought as main ground for the narrated events: all this reflects the resolution to deconstruct the classic absoluteness of the hero-narrative. In fact, it is not about transcendent entities and universal calls; rather, “personal experience and dismay constitute the reason behind artistic expression” (“Persönliche Erfahrung und Betroffenheit bilden das Movers künstlerischen Ausdrucks”, Adam, 2003: 19).

The adopted technique, that Thomas Epple calls “ambivalente Verzeitlichung” (ambivalent temporalization), allows Christa Wolf to describe the aspects normally overlooked by history and epic alike, through a double movement: “On The one hand, she makes the mythological figures, as well as the Trojan war’s scenario, more contemporary, thanks to the use of modern knowledge of socio- and individual psychology, and to the pragmatic grounding of the represented material. On the other hand, she attaches importance to the movement of retracing “the path out of the myth, into its (supposed) social and historical coordinates’, thus historicising the figures and the events.” (“Einerseits aktualisiert sie die mythologische Figur wie auch das Szenario des Trojanischen Krieges durch die Anwendung moderner sozio- und individualpsychologischer Erkenntnisse wie auch durch die paradigmatische Grundierung des Dargestellten. Auf der anderen Seite legt sie Wert auf die ‘Rückführung aus dem Mythos in die (gedachten) sozialen und historischen Koordinaten’ (VEK 111), historisiert also Figur und Geschehen.“, Epple: 283). With this operation of “coupling of a conscious movement of making actual with one of making paradigmatic” (“Dopplung aus bewußter Aktualisierung und Paradigmatisierung”, *ivi.*), Wolf completely bypasses the ontological claims often taking place in the passage from myth and history, thus hoping in a different reality as an outcome of this “revised” myth.

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<sup>65</sup> This figure is particularly symbolic, in that she is a slave, thus will always been among the defeated, and she is a woman. Her “powerful voice” and “good memory” call to mind Plato’s *Fedro* and the opposition to writing as manipulation of knowledge and orality as a more “truthful” way of expression. In Wolf’s case, this opposition follows the same line as the one between abstractness and body, objective truth and personal one.

This is why the second alternative system present in the novel, that of Aeneas, is not viable for Cassandra: it will surely recreate the same structures she is trying to subvert by making Aeneas into a hero. Because “the aesthetic of resistance to it all has yet to be developed” (CCON 3570), she chooses not to participate in a society in which she cannot be the subject she chose to be: her contribution to the formation of the future world is her refusal. Once again, where she sees no viable alternatives, her answer is “no”: however, this is not a blunt denial of reality, as her suicidal choice might appear. In fact, its significance is made clear to us by her monologue, so that not only we can read her gesture in ~~the~~ light of her political program, but we also get the chance to be changed by it through the experience of a different kind of language. This narration, in other words, is meant to be productive - as myth is supposed to be - through the choice of a different point of view, and through the use of a clearly personal voice substituting the pretense of universality. In this way, Wolf does not aim at replacing one absolute truth with another: rather, she is trying to solicit a greater awareness in her readers. Constant research, self-consciousness and cultural critique are irreplaceable tools allowing us to better understand the reality we live in, especially from a political point of view. To activate a process of re-subjectification means necessarily to recognize the subject the present structure has shaped us into: thus, *Selbsterkenntnis* comes to be fundamental, and the attention to the stories we are told and the ones we tell acquires a highly political value.

If we go back to Foucault’s Berkeley lectures, we can see how he distinguishes the prophet from the *parrhesiastes*: the prophet talks on behalf of the god, does not claim the prophecy as his or her own; moreover, the truth that she or he speaks is expressed in obscure terms and concerns future events. Conversely, the *parrhesiastes* speaks as clearly as possible of present, concrete facts, and claims the words as his or hers, no matter the risk. The movement of Cassandra from prophecy to *parrhesia* corresponds to her profession of identity, to her Antigonean avowal to her truth: she recognizes the voice erupting from her as her real voice, and she commits to it. This counters the tendency of a city where prophets are made to be part of the system, where they speak the indisputably absolute word of artificially fashioned gods and even unwanted prophecies are disqualified as acts of madness. Cassandra’s path of recognizing and claiming her own voice and acts has a distinct political value: as Wolf inscribes it in a critique of the

Western traditional mythology, the *parrhesiastes*'s first-person critique of the system through acts and language challenges our interpretation of reality, thus affecting the way we create it. Rather than choosing one symbolic system, tomb or womb, sun or moon, Cassandra refuses the imposition of this choice, even when it presents itself in the form of the only possible escape from death. "The most important thing" says Arisbe "was that faced with a completely perverted question, you nevertheless tried to find an answer." (C: 1314). Her movement of "trying" is similar to the continuous, almost obsessive untangling of the strand from the wickerwork that imprisons her, and from the throne-like chair that carries her to death<sup>66</sup>: trapped by an absolute system<sup>67</sup>her reaction is that of incessantly trying to undo it by singling out its smallest parts.

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<sup>66</sup> It is interesting to notice that the two structures recall her different situation: she is under other people's control, but while in the grave of the heroes she was not conscious of her limits, in Mycenae she is, and she has chosen to be there, so the branches that used to imprison her now form her support towards her chosen destiny.

<sup>67</sup> Since the wicker refers to the Scamander and to matriarchy too, this is not necessarily a symbol for the patriarchal, actual system; notice that it is also the same material that, according to Oenone, should leave her void of desire for Aeneas.

## Conclusions

In the 1950's Isaiah Berlin developed his renowned formulation of liberty as distinguishable in the “negative” and the “positive”: while the latter one was affirmative, but prone to ideological exploitation, the first one defined a circle of protective rights around the individual whose boundaries should never be crossed by any kind of power:

The first of these political senses of freedom or liberty (I shall use both words to mean the same), which (following much precedent) I shall call the ‘negative’ sense, is involved in the answer to the question ‘What is the area within which the subject — a person or group of persons — is or should be left to do or be what he is able to do or be, without interference by other persons?’ The second, which I shall call the ‘positive’ sense, is involved in the answer to the question ‘What, or who, is the source of control or interference that can determine someone to do, or be, this rather than that?’ The two questions are clearly different, even though the answers to them may overlap. (Berlin, 2002: 169)

This theory derives from his reflections on his present time in political terms, which also brought him to the formulation (initially conceived as an erudite joke, but ultimately proving to be quite useful) of “fox/hedgehog” types, especially regarding political philosophers<sup>68</sup>. Many of the most influential political theories from the French Revolution onwards, he says, mirror the “hedgehog” attitude, which he will later call “monist”. In Berlinian terms, the monist way of organizing reality is the one in which its elements are made to orbit around one central principle, in relation to which every movement within the system is explained. When this reading is applied to social realities, it takes the form of a perfect explanation, able to fully encompass the totality of human interactions in their causes, dynamics and ends. Such a theory will also be able to predict which way those interactions will go, but above all, it will describe the way they should go: in fact, if there is a common principle governing everything that exists, it is silly and counter-productive to oppose it, whereas a wise administration of the human society ought to be organized according to this “natural law”. Once this is accomplished, things will automatically start to work smoothly, as the only reason for conflict, injustice and lack of

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<sup>68</sup> Tellingly, the formulation of this theory started within the literary field, where the distinction between monists and pluralists is more easily operated in terms of narration; its application to the philosophical realm therefore requires an approach to philosophy as to different narratives of reality, which is typically pluralist.



progress in the present society can be ascribed to a misunderstanding of such underlying laws. Berlin displays his understanding of monism at work in his 1952 radio lectures entitled “Freedom and Its Betrayal: Six Enemies of Human Liberty”; in the series he explains for the BBC how six eminent philosophers actually promoted a world vision whose political derivation can ultimately be traced down to the same mechanisms giving shape to the dictatorships of his time;

What is genuinely typical of our time is a new concept of society, the values of which are analysable not in terms of the desires or the moral sense which inspire the view of its ultimate ends held by a group or an individual, but from some factual hypothesis or metaphysical dogma about history, or race, or national character, in terms of which the answers to the question what is good, right, required, desirable, fitting can be ‘scientifically’ deduced, or intuited, or expressed in this or that kind of behaviour. (ibid, 2002: 85)

This is especially visible in his at times exaggerated description of Saint-Simon’s utopia, whose authoritarian character was completely justified by the overall happiness that it promised: since society works according to scientific-like laws, once they are decoded, the one way to prosperity will be discovered. Accordingly, those who do not approve of this are the ones who cannot see the true structure of reality. Contrarily to other contributors to the monist thought, Saint-Simon does not, says Berlin, wish for a global understanding of such structure: it is indeed inherent to human happiness that only some people will be able to grasp the complexity of the system, thus being able to rule, while the others will simply be content to be ruled over if this is done in a harmonious way within a true system. However, even Saint-Simon’s system is all but repressive: in the utopias elaborated by these thinkers, the human being is always free, because the concept of freedom, that which Berlin calls “positive freedom”, derives from knowledge. To be truly free, indeed, means to understand the general rules of existence and to make one’s desire agree with them: any other kind of desire is nonsensical, ultimately ascribable to ignorance<sup>69</sup>. This kind of mindset is extremely dangerous, Berlin warns, because it

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<sup>69</sup> This renders it easy for me to conceive of myself as coercing others for their own sake, in their, not my, interest. I am then claiming that I know what they truly need better than they know it themselves. What, at most, this entails is that they would not resist me if they were rational and as wise as I and understood their interests as I do. But I may go on to claim a good deal more than this. I may declare that they are actually aiming at what in their

only takes one-way solutions into consideration, as a necessary consequence of installing a one true epistemological principle at the cosmological center of one's theory. This often translates into an elaboration of dogmatic dualisms, where truth is always on one side making it legitimate to act in its name; even when this means repression, the monist will always call it freedom. In modern times in particular we see that "the notion of unconscious and irrational influences which outweigh the forces of reason" therefore implies that "answers to problems exist not in rational solutions, but in the removal of the problems themselves by means other than thought and argument." (Berlin, 2002: 59). In other words, the notion that power was internal to the system, that it was part of its elements' physical and psychic lives rather than being their appendix or attribute, brought about the elaboration of theories that aimed at a change within the people, a change that had to be operated at the same subterranean level where problems took place. All of this was necessarily motivated by the fact that such change was the only way for a betterment of society.

This process is very similar to the one described by Foucault as the installment of surveillance in the place of sovereignty. In his account, in fact, in the passage from the attribution of power as deriving from the body of the King to its bourgeoisie-driven counterpart, parliamentary democracy, we witness the birth of a complex structure working together with the new system of rights, that of disciplinary power: "This new mechanism of power is more dependent upon bodies and what they do than upon the Earth and its products . . . it presupposes a tightly knit grid of material coercions rather than the physical existence of a sovereign." (Foucault, 1980: 104). This kind of "non-sovereign power" (ibid, 105), however, saw sovereignty persisting "as an ideology and an organising principle" (ivi.) of its major legal codes; this is because, Foucault continues, the democratisation of such principle, thus its re-codification into a collective one, could only happen through a simultaneous rise of "mechanisms of disciplinary coercion" (ivi).

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benighted state they consciously resist, because there exists within them an occult entity — their latent rational will, or their 'true' purpose — and that this entity, although it is belied by all that they overtly feel and do and say, is their 'real' self, of which the poor empirical self in space and time may know nothing or little; and that this inner spirit is the only self that deserves to have its wishes taken into account. Once I take this view, I am in a position to ignore the actual wishes of men or societies, to bully, oppress, torture them in the name, and on behalf, of their 'real' selves, in the secure knowledge that whatever is the true goal of man (happiness, performance of duty, wisdom, a just society, self-fulfilment) must be identical with his freedom — the free choice of his 'true', albeit often submerged and inarticulate, self. (Berlin, 2002: 179-180)

Such mechanisms, in fact, owe their striking effectiveness to an essentially hidden nature, concealed as they are by the narration of collective sovereignty. These two elements, collective sovereignty and, behind it, a systematic surveillance mechanism, are actually incompatible: the second one, leading to disciplinary normalisation, is constantly trying to colonise the juridical system of the first one; therefore, a third, “neutral” force had to be called into play to arbitrate the conflict, a force that could give shape to a “sanctifying” discourse, a discourse of truth. If this mediation was operated by science and its discourse in the first place, as Berlin also observes<sup>70</sup>, with the 20th century totalitarianisms the structuring dispositive of control takes other, equally ideological ways to justify its presence in society. In fact, as the logos ceases to be the starting point of every reasoning about human nature, it is an array of less “rational” concepts that will be employed to enforce the surveillance machine: race and class will embrace science and encompass it, thus forming a union of those absolute ideas, the logocentric ones of the Enlightenment and the irrationalistic ones of the Counter-Enlightenment, which Berlin calls monist.

The experience of totalitarianism brought this type of power organisation to its extreme, exposing at once its controlling nature, its way of effacing that capillary control through collective empowerment, and the means through which the masses are engaged and coerced into the mechanism. In a way, the dramatic development the extreme of monist ideologies had the effect of breaking a spell, of making their potentially dangerous traits clear, thus leaving the world with no possible delusion about their unreliability. The novels considered in this dissertation try to deal with this hermeneutical crisis. They describe systems requiring their human components to surrender to the leading ideology completely, but they are not content with the narration of a tale of oppression: Creon and Antigone are not ascribable to the master-slave dialectic or to the rhetoric of repression<sup>71</sup> anymore, the criteria of truth they obey are

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<sup>70</sup> The scientific determinists of the eighteenth century supposed that the study of the sciences of nature, and the creation of sciences of society on the same model, would make the operation of such causes transparently clear, and thus enable individuals to recognise their own part in the working of a rational world, frustrating only when misunderstood. (Berlin, 202: 188-189)

<sup>71</sup> “Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. They are not only its net or consenting target; they are always also the elements of its articulation. In other words, individuals

not to be found outside their power relation: much rather, they are the very product of such interaction. Within the boundaries of the all-too-human power, the antagonistic game between the two mythical figures rewrites the modes of resistance: when Butler writes that Antigone's political relevance is indubitable and lies in her capacity for unsettling the coordinates of what is readable in the political discourse<sup>72</sup>, she is giving an account of what Foucault described as "a new form of right, one which must indeed be anti-disciplinarian, but at the same time liberated from the principle of sovereignty" (Foucault, 1980: 108).

This kind of resistance is one that tries to subvert the normalizing action of the surveillance apparatus by showing its violent nature; hence, it brings into question the need for such structures at least in the current terms. But it goes beyond this by also unveiling how the justification for coercion, internalized through the codification of knowledge, is actually a construct: "The exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and, conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power." (ibid. 52). Rather than opposing one model of power structure to another, resistance can then be made of a constant critique aiming at building awareness of the inevitable micro-physics of power. Foucault explains how he did this by researching in the field of the disqualified knowledges: a term that he uses to indicate at once the "products of meticulous, erudite, exact historical knowledge" and "local and specific knowledge... disqualified from the hierarchy of knowledges and sciences". Both of these, in fact, are concerned with the "memory of hostile encounters" (the "historical knowledge of struggles") which "have been confined to the margin of knowledge." (ibid. 82-83).

Antigone's message resonates in the echo of the cave that she left empty of her life. As Steiner in his fundamental study underlines<sup>73</sup>, an impressive array of events occur in the absence of this Greek heroine in the tragedy named after her. Her silence, her deserting of the scene, is as

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are the vehicles of power, not its points of application." "The individual, that is, in not the vis-à-vis of power; it is, I believe, one of its prime effects." (Foucault, 1980: 98)

<sup>72</sup> "What sort of political speech is this that transgresses the very boundaries of the political, which sets into scandalous motion the boundary by which her speech ought to be contained?" (Butler, 2000:4) In Butler's reading we can see Antigone bridging over the dualisms theorized by Lévi-Strauss as constitutive of the human mind: instead of embodying one of the two opposite terms (the young against the old, kinship against state, feminine against masculine, chthonic against human, cfr Steiner, 1990: 148), Antigone disturbs the term of dualist distinction from within the dualism.

<sup>73</sup> Steiner, 1990: 198-206

important as her speaking presence: indeed, it is an integral part of her legacy. When, in the famous speech right before her execution, she gives an account of her choice to stand for her brother's right as she would never have done for anyone else, she specifies that

Never, I tell you,  
If I had been the mother of children  
Or if my husband died, exposed and rotting –  
I'd never have taken this ordeal upon myself,  
Never defied our people's will. What law,  
You ask, do I satisfy with what I say?  
A husband dead, there might have been another.  
A child by another too, if I had lost the first.  
But mother and father both lost in the halls of Death,  
No brother could ever spring to light again.  
For this law alone I held you first in honor. (Sophocles, 1984: 105)

There have been many readings of this obscure passage, and two of them represent, so to say, the extremes of this interpretative continuum: on the one hand, Richard Wagner follows the traditional school in refusing any kind of sexual implications in the heroine's interest for Polyneices, but gives it a twist in an even more abstract direction: in his *Oper und Drama* (1852), he states that Antigone chooses her brother not because of kinship-related, sexual or hierarchical ties to him, but exactly because he is the defeated one:

Antigone verstand nichts von der Politik: — sie liebte. — Suchte sie den Polyneikes zu vertheidigen? ... — Nein; — sie liebte ihn. — Liebte sie ihn, weil ihr Bruder war? — War nicht Eteokles auch ihr Bruder, — waren nicht Oidipus und Iokaste ihre Eltern? (...) Nein, sie liebte Polyneikes, weil er unglücklich war, und nur die höchste Kraft der Liebe ihn von seinem Fluche befreien konnte. Was nun war diese Liebe, die nicht Geschlechtsliebe, nicht Aeltern- und Kindesliebe, nicht Geschwisterliebe war?— Sie war die höchste Blüthe von allen. (Wagner, 1852: 121-122)<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Antigone understood nothing of politics: she loved. Was she trying to defend Polynices? No, she loved him. Did she love him because he was her brother? Was not Eteocles then also her brother, were not Oedipus and Jocasta

She can therefore exercise her love for him in the most gratuitous way, specifically because loving him requires an investment that functions as a political manifesto (“Konnte sie nach den furchtbaren Erlebnissen anders als mit Entsetzen an ihre Familienbande denken?” *ivi.*). Antigone’s love for her brother is then “pure love”, and it is in the name of this absolute love, for the fact that being ab-solutus is revolutionary, that she opposes Creon’s traditional, structured society. On the other hand, Judith Butler proposes a reading of this love as the exact opposite of pure<sup>75</sup>, as she sees the clear sign of incestuous desire in it: but the revolutionary potential of this desire is just as incendiary as that described by Wagner, in that it challenges society’s definition of kinship, normally taken for granted as natural.

Without trying to establish a new reading of Antigone’s suicide, it would be interesting to observe that, specifically because of her long absence from the scene, our focus as spectators will be driven towards what is left after her, and how it has been altered by her passage. Her need to perform a ritual for her brother’s death is not just an act of love and devotion, but calls the political structure of the city into question by challenging its constitutive truth. This mourning and its religious implications need to be taken into serious account, so serious that they must override the language of order (winners/defeated, loyal/traitor). Antigone would not have done it for another: not for a husband, not for a son. But for this brother, the defeated, the traitor, the one undergoing a process of *damnatio memoriae* through language and performance (in the “theatrical” sense explained by Foucault), she is willing to put her life at stake. A husband, a son, are replaceable: they would be part of the normalized narration, they are not *unheimlich* to society the way she and her brother are<sup>76</sup>: the one gender-shifting,

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their parents? ... No, she loved Polynices because he was miserable, and only the most powerful love would could free him from his curse. What was then this kind of love, that was not bound to gender, that was not the one between partents and children, not even sisterly love? It was the highest blossom of them all.” My translation.

<sup>75</sup> “Antigone emerges in her criminality to speak in the name of politics and the law: she absorbs the very language of the state against which she rebels, and hers becomes a politics not of oppositional purity but of the scandalously impure.” (Butler, 2000: 5)

<sup>76</sup> “Though entangled in the terms of kinship, she is at the same time outside those norms. Her crime is confounded by the fact that the kinship line from which she descends, and which she transmits, is derived from a paternal position that is already confounded by the manifestly incestuous act that is the condition of her own existence, which makes her brother her father, which begins a narrative in which she occupies, linguistically, every kin position except “mother” and occupies them at the expense of the coherence of kinship and gender.” (*ivi*: 72)

virginally pure and born of the maximum impurity, self-sacrificing and boldly protesting against her sacrifice; the other one carrying the authority to rule in the same blood as the one who condemns him to damnation, labeled as a traitor because he moved against a brother who betrayed him. It is their disturbing history, their irreducible individuality that Thebes cannot assimilate without being deeply unsettled. And it is precisely this disturbing history that Antigone cannot allow to be erased or modified by the power mechanism in its knowledge-producing process. Therefore, her action is sharp: she establishes a colour for her action and does not let nuances to be derived from it. Second thoughts are not an option: opening to assimilation means changing at a deep level, and she shows it clearly by taking every choice to its extreme consequences, therefore making the people around her conscious of their responsibility. Ismene chooses a position for herself, and Antigone does not let her modify it, especially not out of love for her as opposed to a political stance. Creon decides to eliminate conflicted elements from his political scene, and will be forced to see the consequences of his simplification of terms. The parrhesiastes here is criticizing authority, and she is doing it in the most spectacular, uncompromising way exactly because, in a Foucauldian and Berlinian style, she is already compromised, she is already in the discourse: her body, her family ties and history are being administered by the power structure, made “impure” (Butler, 2000: 5). Her voice is the one that is supposed to disappear, to be assimilated into the labels of a system that already refused the complexity of her brother: the only way that she can show the process in its making is by letting it reject her as well, by exposing its mechanism of interpretation and consequent coercion. She tells a story of difference from a tomb that, Creon wants us to believe, she chose for herself; however, her narration is so powerful that we are made to doubt this reading of the situation, even in the light of Creon’s final conversion. If this man who condemned her was wrong, and if it was also him that decided that Polynices was a traitor, how can he be trusted? How do we decide who we call a traitor, a martyr<sup>77</sup>, a mad person, a criminal? Maybe Antigone is not the embodiment of “pure love”, but surely her standing for the

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<sup>77</sup>She seems to be escaping this definition as well, as she goes to die mourning her own life and the life she would have given, and at the same time calling death on herself with an insistence that goes beyond a religiously loving act towards her brothers: her desire to save her brothers from their fate is overwhelmed, it seems, by her desire to join them in their fate. (Butler, 2000:60), which in this context can also be read as a rejection of Thebes overriding her will to guarantee the access to Hades to Polynices.

defeated brother, her defense of the systematically condemned in the official narration<sup>78</sup>, in a parrhesiastic fashion that advocates for public truth, seems to resonate with both the Foucauldian research for disqualified knowledges and the Berlinian call for pluralism.

The literary Antigones of the 20th century analyzed in this dissertation thus show us how a possible reading of a different resistance is enacted in the light of the overwhelming discovery that truth, knowledge and power are not only reciprocal in their generation, but that individuals are also a product of their interactions. Winston and Cassandra's realization of their belonging to the same narration they are fighting, however, does not erase the meaning of such fighting. They may be incapable of finding a way out of a system described as inescapable, as inevitable; they may surrender to the awareness that there is really no possible "outside"; they may even surrender their fight, eventually, after having tried to carry on with it through different means; but the path that brought them to wake up to consciousness, that allowed them to formulate the problem, and that made them persist in performing a parrhesiastic role, is integral to their resistance.

Unveiling the mechanisms and systematically resisting them seems to be pointless if they cannot be stopped. This, however, does not take into adequate consideration the nature of such resistance: in fact, both of these literary characters are worried most about the disappearance of their version of things: Winston feels that he speaks on behalf of the human race about to be annihilated in its very essence, and Cassandra leads us through a long way of recognition of the systematic silencing of the defeated, of the woman, of the dissident. Their acknowledgment of the capacity of power to give shape to reality through language and storytelling translates into a centrality given to the possibility to counter the "official" reality with at least one variant of it. The relentless fight they undergo is then one for what could be labeled as the freedom of speech, but is much more than just that: it is in fact the ability to interfere with the creative discourse of power. Truth-telling then is an expression of the necessity of spreading awareness and, in this way, of opening the way to a more essential change. A 20th century parrhesiastes struggles with the semantics of truth in the sense that he or she

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<sup>78</sup> As opposed to simply the miserable, because in that case, Antigone would have defended her sister as well: this is a problem of knowledge formation.



acknowledges the responsibility of the speaker, even (and especially) at the level of language, in opening the doors to difference, diversity, crisis, and ultimately creating the path to the difficult and laborious yet fundamental constant change. Hence, the choice of telling a story, of writing a novel about this struggle in itself constitutes an act of truth-telling.

Furthermore, both works see the light during a moment of political disillusionment, in the mist of totalitarian aftermaths or derives. They are the result of witnessing the collective character of the phenomenon of dictatorship, as well as the power of media and political propaganda in using language (of any kind) to support, reinforce and create destruction. War is a constant presence, functional and indispensable to the system. Winston cannot oppose the overwhelming coercion of the Party over him, and Cassandra chooses not to collaborate with a system that she sees as unchangeable at the present time. But they nevertheless both leave us with an account of their painful choice to know, to explore a knowledge that is different from the institutional one. That involves taking into account one's body and the involvement of one's self as a whole. Both characters choose to try and become different subjects than the ones crafted by the power relations they are in: their partial success leaves us with two possible positive outcomes. The first is that even in desperate conditions it is still possible to explore difference, but to do so that it is necessary to know the exact nature of the power within one's self. This is only possible through a patient, painful and difficult work of self-awareness that can take the form of various actions (writing, meditating, remembering, studying the past, testing one's limits, dialogue, truth-telling) of *hepimeleia heautou*.

The second outcome is that both these characters are isolated in their approach to reality: they may be helped by other kindred spirits, but they are ultimately left alone in their devastating awareness. This awareness, and their urge to communicate it can be both traced down to their belonging to what could be defined as an intellectual position. These characters are truth-tellers because they have a status and a job that allows them to see better how the mechanism works, which makes them familiar with its verbal and creative expression, while leaving them enough free time to think and enough resources to explore these thoughts. Their isolation and their awareness are somehow linked and painfully so, especially for writers like Orwell and

Wolf, whose ideological position provided a harsh critique of this kind of privilege. It can be argued that their isolation and their failure are somehow linked too: on the one hand, we see Syme, Julia, Polyxena, Arisbe, Penthesilea, and we tend to underestimate their fundamental importance in shaping our main character's mind. On the other hand, there is little we know of all those people who had close to no freedom to explore their selves and even less to express it through words. Berlin's negative liberty did not take equality into account, fearing the incursion of socialist monism in his designated "safe space": but is liberalism really so distant from monistic positions, when we take Foucauldian readings into account? Therefore, the question remains, what political models can we develop for the future? Political responsibility implies awareness, but our present day situation requires us to take into account the complex research and the time needed to develop this awareness. As Foucault once again shows, and the novels we just analyzed confirm, it takes at least some privilege to perform acts of care of the self, hence the ability to develop self-consciousness as political beings. The proles are Winston's only hope, but at the same time they will never fulfill his upper-class expectations, as they only care about their own survival and, of course, the lottery. The women of the Scamander community could only elaborate a utopian, temporary alternative to a system that inevitably crushed them, while only its organisers seem to be fully conscious of their bitter destiny. This situation is not a new one, as Butler observes, but goes back to the often idealized Athenian democracy:

The slaves, women, and children, all those who were not property-holding males were not permitted into the public sphere in which the human was constituted through its linguistic deeds. Kinship and slavery thus condition the public sphere of the human and remain outside its terms. But is that the end of the story?" (Butler, 2000: 82).

Foucault spent the last years of his life carefully dissecting the practices of care of the self in the ancient world and their interpreting their meaning, exposing and problematizing their too often elitist nature. Unlike Antigone, these 20th century characters "crying out in the desert" are not presented in terms of plain heroism: they are flawed, weak, and often act cowardly. Their

exceptionality, more than essential, is incidental: they are not the daughters of a divine-bound, cursed family; even when they seem to be given “transcendental” traits (Cassandra is blessed and cursed by Apollo, she is part of a mythical royal family; Winston seems to be the only one able to really “see” things), their story ultimately shows otherwise. There is a human source for this difference: Apollo’s voice is really Cassandra’s; Helen and Aphrodite’s promise concerning her are really the struggle over the Dardanelles; Winston’s unrest is grounded in his memory of a different past, in his access to the media machine, in his subconscious: it is foreseen by the Party, so much so that it is crafted by the Party; his benevolent contempt towards the proles’ unconscious “natural state” sounds to us as obsolete as Rousseau’s *bon sauvage*. Truth-telling is therefore linked to a status of privilege only by contingency; what is more, it seems to have lost the solemn role of mediation that many intellectuals attributed to it and hence to themselves (among others, Gramsci, Sartre, Pasolini and Wolf herself). In fact, relying on some intellectuals to be our truth-tellers seems to condemn them to certain death and condemns society to repetition: the challenge of these contemporary Antigones then becomes the challenge of a political community able to treasure their message by taking responsibility for their failure, instead of seeking a justification in it.

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