



PERFORMANCE  
PHILOSOPHY

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## RHYTHM AND STRUCTURE: BRECHT'S *ANTIGONE* IN PERFORMANCE

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Brecht's adaptation of Sophocles' *Antigone* in 1948 was openly a political gesture that aspired to the complete rationalization of Greek Tragedy. From the beginning, Brecht made it his task to wrench ancient tragic poetry out of its 'ideological haze', and proceeded to dismantle and eliminate what he named the 'element of fate', the crucial substance of tragic myth itself. However, his encounter with Hölderlin's unorthodox translation of *Antigone*, the main source for his appropriation and rewriting of the play, led him to engage in a radical experiment in theatrical practice. From the isolated first performance of *Antigone*, a model was created—the *Antigonemodell*—that demanded a direct confrontation with the many obstacles brought about by the foreign *structure* of Greek tragedy as a whole. In turn, such difficulties brought to light the problem of *rhythm* in its relation to Brecht's own ideas of how to perform ancient poetry in a modern setting, as exemplified by the originally alienating figure of the tragic chorus. More importantly, such obstacles put into question his ideas of performance in general, as well as the way they can still resonate in our own understanding of what performance is or might be in a broader sense.

### 1947–1948: Swabian inflections

It is known that upon returning from his American exile, at the end of 1947, Bertolt Brecht began to work on *Antigone*, the tragic poem by Sophocles. Brecht's own *Antigone* premiered in the Swiss city of Chur on February 1948. This event is widely documented (Hecht 1988, Wüthrich 2015, Wüthrich 2003, De Ponte 2006), and, owing to the radical experiment that it was or was claimed to

be, as well as to the relevance it had for Brecht's subsequent involvement with theatre, it eventually became a milestone of theatre history.

In a note from December 1947 referring directly to his adaptation of *Antigone* (which he had just finished, he says, in less than two weeks), Brecht recounts that, on the advice of his friend and collaborator the scenographer Caspar Neher, he had decided to make use of:

the Hölderlinian translation, which is rarely or never performed, since it is considered to be too obscure. I detect Swabian intonations and grammar school Latin constructions, and I feel at home. There's also something Hegelian about it. It's probably the return to the German language space that compels me in this undertaking. (BFA 27:225)

In a reference to Swabia, the region where Hölderlin was born and raised, Brecht speaks of '*schwäbische Tonfälle*', a word one can translate as intonations, but also as inflections, or, more properly speaking, cadences—to all effects a property of rhythm. The 'Hegelian' element, on the other hand, may seem somewhat less evident, but is no less vivid. On the one hand, it invokes a concrete biographical background—Hegel, a close friend and fellow student of Hölderlin at the *Stift* in Tübingen, was himself originally from Swabia, just like Brecht. On the other hand, the Hegelian tone anticipates Brecht's vision of history and dialectical materialism as heir to countless prominent readers of Hegel through Marx.

In a way, the physical space (the homesickness of language in the aftermath of World War II) introduces the political as constricted by time (the regenerative force of language in the face of destruction). The social function brought about by artistic consciousness would be expected to do the rest.<sup>1</sup> However, Brecht will admit from the start that the 'analogies to the present' (BFA 24:350), no matter how evident they appear, can only be exploited to a certain degree. His change of mind on how the play was to begin somehow clarifies this issue. In its first version, Brecht's *Antigone* starts off with a Prelude [*Vorspiel*] that takes place at the end of the war, in April 1945 in Berlin, presenting as the main cast two sisters, their brother as a deserter, and an officer of the SS (BFA 8:195–199). For the production at Greiz in 1951, Brecht removed this overture and replaced it with a New Prologue [*Prolog*] in which Tiresias, the seer, addresses the audience in a didactic tone, presenting the characters standing beside him, Antigone and Creon, along with a brief narrative of the action. This speech is key to understanding what it means to deal with form through content. Tiresias starts by warning the audience that the 'elevated language' of the poem they are about to hear may be 'unfamiliar' [*ungewohnt*] to them. Their ignorance of the plot, in turn, justifies the need to introduce them to the characters: 'Unknown / to you is the subject of the poem which was / intimately familiar to its former listeners.' After which the plot is summarized in a few lines: Creon, the 'tyrant of the city of Thebes', engages in a 'predatory war against the remote Argos [...] But his war, now called inhuman / causes him to succumb.' Hence the plea to the audience: 'We ask you / To look into your souls for similar deeds / In the recent past or for the absence / Of similar deeds' (BFA 8:242).

In the Remarks to the adaptation, Brecht will once more highlight the contrast between the 'representation of the Ancients' [*Vorstellung der Alten*], that is, their very own perception of man as subjected to the laws of fate, and the conviction, based on a 'practical knowledge of humankind and political experience', according to which 'the fate of man is man himself' (BFA 24:350). Thus the greatness of *Antigone* as a poem is not to be accepted in its own terms, but rather raises the question 'if it is still understandable to an audience who today lives with completely different beliefs [*in ganz anderen Vorstellungen*]' (BFA 24:350). Noticeably, the word *Vorstellung*, here used in the sense of the notion, the idea or the conception one might have of a given reality, is often rendered as representation, in a philosophical context, or as performance, in the sense of a theatrical performance. This many-sided concept stalls Brecht's propensity to overestimate the correlation between 'the fall of the ruling house of Oedipus' and the 'gruesome ravenous war' (BFA 24:350) led by Creon on the one hand, and 'the role of the use of violence in the downfall of the head of state' (BFA 25:74) and the fall of the Nazi regime led by Hitler, on the other—so that, following the battle, 'Argos becomes today's Stalingrad'. Brecht's intentions were clear: 'war between Thebes and Argos is presented realistically' (BFA 24:350–351). But in order to arrive at this 'objective depiction' of the events and draw on the 'elements of the epic kind' recognizable in the 'ancient play', a concession had to be made with regards to the 'subjective problem' (BFA 25:74–75) of representation, in its passive (a mental image or picture of the play) as well as in its dynamic (a real process or a scene) state.

In his rewriting and staging of *Antigone*, Brecht was faced with the intricate and perplexing *structure* of Greek tragedy as a whole. Moreover, such difficulties were highlighted by the emphasis put on the question of *rhythm* in its relation to Brecht's own ideas of how to perform ancient poetry in a modern framework, as exemplified by the originally alienating figure of the tragic chorus. It is only fair to say that all of these aspects inevitably have a resonance in his ideas of performance in general, and play a significant role in our own understanding of what performance is or might be in a much broader sense.

### Hölderlin's 'language of *Antigone*'

Friedrich Hölderlin published his translations of Sophocles' *Antigone* and *King Oedipus* in 1804, not without some hope that they would eventually be accepted at the Weimar Theater. Instead, they became the object of a heated controversy among poets, scholars and literary critics. Accused of philological inaccuracy and seen as severely flawed in terms of their understanding of Greek prosody and metrics, they were ultimately judged incomprehensible. This level of critical derision was then fueled by the association of these works with Hölderlin's retreat into the state of isolation and apathy that was to characterize the second half of his life. The myth of the mad poet both overshadowed and tarnished the translations of Sophocles as the mere symptoms of the inevitable downfall of poetic genius. In time, however, this logic became inverted: the tendency to romantic subjectivity and psychological narrative was overrun by the objective body of the text. That being said, it was only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the recognition of the aesthetic value and inner autonomy

of these translations fully came to light—and it is no coincidence that this mostly happened on stage, as the question of their performance became central.

This late recognition notwithstanding, it remains a curious fact that the initial response to Hölderlin's translations somehow still resonates today as a complex side effect within a more academic environment. Next to the experts in Ancient Studies and Greek Tragedy, who maintain that Hölderlin made unforgivable mistakes as a translator of Sophocles, stands the highly institutionalized realm of Hölderlin scholarship, intent on justifying and redeeming Hölderlin's errors by seeing in them a deliberate action that would be impossible to differentiate from his own creative path as a lyric poet. Both have to critically bow before the authority that the name 'Hölderlin' has become in world literature. Accordingly, they tend to act with extreme caution. Whilst admitting that the poet might well have erred as a translator, they suggest that he did so for his own legitimate reasons, aiming at the reconstruction of Greek prosody in ways that undermine every conventional understanding of what the translation of ancient dramatic poetry is or should be. From here onwards, all variations are possible.<sup>2</sup>

Brecht's position in regard to Hölderlin was a peculiar one. He seems to have sensed immediately the physical violence of the latter's translations. In a letter from late December 1947, not far from the premiere of the play, he writes: 'Hölderlin's language of Antigone [*'Antigone'-Sprache*] would be worthy of a deeper study than the one I was able to devote to it. It is of an astounding radical nature' (BFA 27:258). A devoted analysis of the materiality of Hölderlin's language was therefore postponed, or rather cast aside in favor of what was seen as a more urgent task: its performability. Whereas Hölderlin's major ambition as a translator was deeply rooted in achieving an ancient modern form of tragic poetry within the conflation of the historical and the metaphysical, Brecht's adaptation was effectively based on a deliberate disregard for the original Greek (Sophocles) as much as on a fully conscious and meticulous desecration of the original German (Hölderlin). Neither the original nor its translation were among his concerns when handling tragedy as raw material.

As the receiver of the foreign Greek original in the form of a foreign German translation, Brecht cuts through the text as if it was originally a spontaneous unity of some kind. His revision of Sophocles' play through Hölderlin's rendering of it displays a process of formal reduction that necessarily brings about the distortion of meaning. In this respect, the title 'The Antigone of Sophocles according to Hölderlin's transposition, adapted to the stage' is as long and descriptive as it was insidious and artful. These would presumably be the premises for the practice of *Nachdichtung*—commonly rendered by the term 'free adaptation', but actually embodying an obscured second chamber in the making of poetry through extreme compression. Brecht's functionalist conception of tragic form as a whole reveals itself as much more complex than it may seem at first sight. In the face of the 'material and spiritual collapse' of post-war Germany, he asks himself how it is still possible to 'make progressive art [...] in a period of reconstruction' (BFA 25:73–74). It is significant that he justifies his decision to replay Antigone by bluntly equating form with content:

The *Antigone* drama was chosen for the present theatrical undertaking because it could attain a certain present relevance from the standpoint of content, and because formally it sets interesting tasks. (BFA 25:74)

Tragedy is a spatial form that can only be acknowledged as such through the experience of time. Brecht was well aware of this, and acted accordingly. In the best tradition of a Marxist critique of tragic heroism and the humanist tradition, he was determined to show Greek tragedy as immune and hostile to all sense of transcendence. In order to detach *Antigone* from its original mythical foundation, the substance of which tragic poetry itself is made of, the linguistic texture of tragic form had to be intertwined with the semantic progression woven by history. The complete and utter rationalizing of tragedy—'*Durchrationalisierung*' (BFA 25:74; see also Barner 1987)—was the first and major step to arrive at such a process of eradication.

A truly secularized view of tragedy will not seek to modify or correct the supposed misconceptions of its content, but rather begin by dismantling and suppressing its core. Brecht's adaptation of *Antigone* was built on an understanding of dramaturgy that is not identical with the simple transposition of the mythical into the political. It relates more directly to their abrupt clash in a single act of coarse effacement. If the formal task of adapting the tragic poem is performed correctly in this sense, it will bring its object to a state of self-corrosion where the one thing that matters is the effect itself of the text in anticipation of its performance, regardless of the defacing of everything it stood for. In Brecht's own words:

As to the dramaturgic, 'fate' eliminates itself by itself, so to speak, as it goes along. Of all the gods, only the local saint of the people remains, the god of joy. Step by step, with the progressive adaptation of the scenes, the supremely realistic popular legend emerges out of the ideological haze. (BFA 27:255)

There is nothing surprising in such rhetoric of secular (or individualized) godliness against the mere acceptance of pure (plural) deification. The image of realism—the folk-tale coupled with its main character, the people—emerging from the ground by way of the strict demolition of ideology that itself moves ideologically can be seen as a general feature of Brecht's discourse overall. In fact though, the dramatic action which he is attempting to describe here, as utterly self-determined, still depended on a tense interaction with text as matter. In order to instrumentalize tragedy, one first needs to get close to it.

As so often proved to be the case, Brecht resorted to the strategic manipulation of material to retain and revive ambivalence. His art of crafting tragic poetry anew with the aim of setting forth his own political stance constantly plays with the need for historical or dialectical materialism to exert pressure on ancient matter. But at the same time, it takes pride in not letting itself be reduced to such key-words, remains wary of definitive programmatic methodologies, or at least engages in such procedures only provisionally, without ever relinquishing its mastery of ambiguity. Even the alleged shaping of modern tragedy under the sign of epic theatre should not be viewed in straightforward terms. The contention that he would presumably be looking for the 'epic moment' in the composition of the tragic poem ought to be read with much caution. With such density of

dissimulation, one is forced to ask how all of this reflects on the handling of *Antigone* in performance.

### A performance model

Not long after the event at Chur, Brecht published a theoretical and practical treatise, titled the *Antigonemodell*, intended to serve as a manual of sorts in stage direction. Brecht himself described it as a 'mandatory performance model [...] made visible through a collection of photographs alongside explanatory instructions', something that must be shown or demonstrated in order for it to be 'successfully imitated', so that whenever it is put to good use it becomes 'a mixture of the exemplary and the unparalleled' (BFA 25:75). Such a beneficial usage of the model essentially depended upon two things: a 'collective creative process' delineating 'a continuum of a dialectical kind', and the ability of the actor to 'come up with modifications to the model, such that the image of reality it has to offer will be made more faithful to truth and more insightful, or artistically more satisfactory'. If such demands are to be met fittingly, Brecht continues, they will themselves acquire an 'exemplary character', and, as a consequence, 'the learner turns into the teacher, the model modifies itself.' For the model is not immovable, but rather grounded on evolution and progression: 'it is to be considered as unfinished from the very start' (BFA 25:76–77).

It is sometimes noted that one of the reasons Brecht chose Hölderlin's translation of *Antigone*—the model before the model, so to speak—was the latter's implicit resistance to a classicist view of tragedy. This might not be untrue to some degree, but does not do justice to that which at once separates and brings together these two authors. By contrast to Hölderlin's reading and translation of *Antigone*, which were the result of a lifelong process of rethinking the scission between the Ancient and the Modern, Brecht's dilemma—to what extent or in what way could *Antigone* be made 'understandable' to a modern audience—chiefly consisted of trying to deal with the possibility or impossibility of overcoming a given 'representation of the Ancients' (BFA 24:350) on stage. Hence the insistence on the political by way of a demythologisation of tragedy based on the historicisation of myth.

To be sure, Brecht's look from a distance over Antiquity and Greek civilization was anything but non-reflective. It simply relied too heavily on politics to acknowledge the autonomy of its object in its completeness. As always, he was more than eager to explain himself in advance:

It can no longer be about highlighting culture within Hellenism, as if it was the highest measure; that which the classics of the bourgeoisie accomplished is only aesthetically of some interest. (Even in democracy only aesthetically of interest). The whole *Antigone* belongs to the barbarian horse skull shrine. (BFA 27:265)

In this particular utterance, historical insight, in the form of a rash judgement, provides the means for theatrical practice. The horse skull shrine alludes to a fundamental device used in the 1948 staging of the play, namely four sticks, with a horse skull standing on top of each of them. The entrances and movements of the actors were then determined according to the position they came

to occupy in relation to these four marks on the stage. The 'whole *Antigone*' thus refers not to the classical world, in the sense of a theological-political geometry of Antiquity, but to something that has yet to be understood and explained in its particular terms. In the Prelude to the *Antigonemodell*, Brecht noted:

Incidentally, the point is not in any way to 'summon the spirit of the Ancients'—for instance through the *Antigone* drama, or in favor of that same drama—philological interests could not be served. Even if one felt obligated to do something for a work such as *Antigone*, we would only be able to do that by letting the work do something for us. (BFA 25:75)

In between the pedagogical and manipulative quality of Brecht's model, the first of all talents appears to be that of a rather twisted logic: 'even if' one was compelled to bring *Antigone* to life, for instance by reworking a given translation, such an endeavor would 'only' be made possible by inquiring if the already existing work could be of some use to us, prior even to any intention to adapt it, or additionally presenting itself as the requirement for such an intention. Every (philological) desire for accuracy in reconstructing the Ancient—and every (spiritual) expression of reverence for it as well—have to be put aside in order to respond to the urgency of the present. Conversely, in the name of what appears to be a recognition of the work's self-activity, causing its instrumentalization to become imminent or necessary, political interests alone are to be served, safeguarded as that 'something' which the work will potentially 'do' for us, once we learn how to make use of it.

### The caesura: rhythm and structure

Side by side with its assemblage of photographic documentation, the *Antigonemodell* uses a recurrent device that reflects on the performance of Greek tragedy in practical dialogical terms. The book is punctuated by segments where Brecht creates an exchange between two nameless characters, something one could easily interpret as a conversation piece of sorts between the author and his head dramaturg, who take turns in incorporating question and answer. In one of those occurrences, the dialogue reads as follows:

Question: How were the verses spoken?

Answer: Above all else, the deplorable habit was avoided according to which the actors, when standing before larger units of verse, overinflate themselves, so to speak, with an emotion that roughly covers up the whole. There should be no 'fervor' before or after speaking and agitating. The pacing happens from verse to verse, and each of them is brought out of the *Gestus* of the figure.

Question: How about the technical?

Answer: There should be a caesura at the point where the verse lines come to an end, or an accentuation of the next beginning of each verse should then take place.

Question: How is the rhythm to be dealt with?

Answer: Through the use of the syncope in Jazz, through which something contradictory will come about in the flow of verse, and the regularity will prevail over that which is irregular. (BFA 25:124)

It is more than likely that the word 'caesura', commonly described as a pause or an interruption in metrical succession—was here brought to mind through Hölderlin, who emphasizes this same term in his *Remarks on Oedipus* and the *Remarks on Antigone* that accompanied the publication of his translations of both tragedies. Near the beginning of the *Remarks on Oedipus*, Hölderlin describes in detail how he conceives of tragic poetry as the reciprocity of its strict formal laws as a genre and its individual specific content. He comes to consider the relation between what he names the 'calculable law' or the 'lawful calculation' of poetry, on the one hand, and its 'living meaning, which cannot be calculated', on the other. The key concept guiding these considerations is rhythm.

The law, the calculation [...] is, in the tragic, more a balance than mere sequence. [...] Thus, in the rhythmic sequence of representations, wherein transport presents itself, that which in poetic meter is called caesura, the pure word, the counter-rhythmic interruption, becomes necessary; namely in order to meet the raging alternation of representations, at its summit, in such a way that thereupon—what appears it is no longer the alternation of the representation, but the representation itself. [...] Thereby the sequence of the calculation and the rhythm are divided, and in its two halves refer to one another in such a manner that they appear of equal weight. (Hölderlin 1992, 309–310)

This same law is then to be applied to each of the tragedies, *Oedipus* and *Antigone*, in accordance with what Hölderlin saw as the relation between the 'specific content' (related to each tragic cycle) of each tragedy and the 'general calculation'. The 'calculable law' of tragic poetry is founded upon the dynamics of what Hölderlin calls 'the rhythm of the representation'. Depending on the pace determining the action of each play, and on the length of each of the two halves it consists of, the caesura acts as the 'counterrhythmic rupture' or the 'counteracting' figure in the course of the action. It will appear in different time frames, at different moments, thereby determining the structure of the whole.<sup>3</sup>

Unsurprisingly, Brecht did not care to delve into the complexity of Hölderlin's understanding of rhythm, which stands at the core of his poetics.<sup>4</sup> Brecht's appropriation of the word 'caesura' was as plain and literal as could be. Prompted by a need for immediacy in the process of eliminating, dividing or cutting entire verses and strophes, his rudimentary practice of calculated caesura did not contemplate the need to articulate the metaphysical with the physical slopes within language that configure Hölderlin's conception of a 'poetic logic'. To Brecht, the balance or imbalance between form and meaning were subordinated to the underlying induction process that was to guide much of his theatrical writing in the time to come. In reading tragedy through a logic of political causality that eschews every ahistorical element from the start, he had only to enforce its measure on Hölderlin's text to arrive at the demonstration of such a causal nexus within the text and beyond it. Only so could the contradiction implied in the reference to the syncopated rhythm



as the allegory of Jazz music be equated with a 'regularity' able to overcome every potentially uneven pattern 'in the flow of verse'.

Hölderlin's considerations of rhythm were bound not to resonate with Brecht's abrupt examination and treatment of *Antigone*. By stressing the full-scale reciprocity between rhythm and the structure of the play, Hölderlin was in search of the general laws of the construction of an individual poetic work. This would allow him to arrive at a sound general definition of 'tragic presentation'. His commentary stood alongside his translation as the pivotal point sustaining his treatment of language. Similarly, Brecht's *Antigonemodell* contained a commentary to *Antigone*, with the significant difference that it now revolved around the *performance* of language. This becomes particularly clear when one considers more closely Brecht's handling of the chorus.

### 'Riddles that demand solutions': the chorus

Recalling the 'Hegelian' tone of Hölderlin's translation, Brecht insists on seeing in the latter a 'swabian popular gesture', to which he adds the following: 'the "people's grammar" goes as far as the highly artistic choruses!' In the same letter to Stefan Brecht, from December 1947, he writes:

The changes that forced me to write whole new passages are made with the aim of cutting out the greek 'moira' (the element of fate); which means that I am trying to push forward the underlying popular legend. You can best appreciate the experiment when you see what has been done with the choruses. (BFA 29:440)

What has in fact been done with the choruses? Brecht's verdict on this much discussed and long-standing issue surrounding Greek Tragedy—the reconstitution of what the original 'Greek chorus' was or might have been—was seemingly devoid of any hesitation, and as programmatic as one might expect it to be:

These choruses, just like many other passages of the poem, can barely be entirely understood by listening to them one single time. Parts of the choruses sound like riddles that demand solutions. But the exquisite thing about them is that, once they start to be analyzed for a while, they bring out more and more things of beauty. The adaptation didn't want to simply get rid of this difficulty, the overcoming of which is the source of so much joy—all the more considering that the work 'Antigone' had the bliss to have as its translator one of the greatest masters of the German language, Hölderlin. (BFA 24:115)

Brecht starts by paying tribute to Hölderlin as the superior maker or sculptor [*Gestalter*] of the German language, thereby revising or at least polishing his earlier judgement where Hölderlin was portrayed as the representative of the 'entirely pontifical line' of German literature, in contrast with the 'entirely profane line' led by Heine, and following the decay of the 'beautiful contradictory unity' that had taken place 'after Goethe' (BFA 26:416).

It is certainly not without irony to notice how Brecht comes to discover the beauty of his own language in a language that was not meant to be spoken, but rather sung—and whose tone was often none other than pontifical, in the sense of a word that had its roots in an ancient divinatory world, with all its religious ritualistic overtones. In many ways, the mention of a ‘contradictory unity’ that would have come first in the line of descent of German poetry represents Brecht’s inadvertent recognition of all that which he didn’t care—or simply was not prepared—to explore.

As a translator, Hölderlin spoke of the chorus in extremely visceral terms, seeing in it the ‘*suffering organs* of the divinely struggling body’ (Hölderlin 1992, 374). This body exudes the body to body experience with the Greek text by Sophocles. As for Brecht, he limited himself to retrieving Hölderlin’s German Greek, molding its matter in line with his own purposes. As far as Brecht was concerned, the ‘language of *Antigone*’ was indeed Hölderlin’s, that is, a language *a priori* alienated of Hölderlin’s confrontation with the language of Sophocles. This limitation was not only left unrecognized by Brecht’s crudity in approaching his object, but protracted as something to take advantage of. To him, the recognition of the chorus as something that constitutes an obstacle to any modern theatrical dimension immediately demands the suppression of the said obstacle as such. This is the reasoning behind the image of ‘riddles that demand solutions’, and the stringent imperative to go beyond (or below) the merely beautiful character of language by working through it. In Brecht’s view, something had to be done in order to re-master the ‘highly artistic’ character of the choruses: the answer to their incomprehensibility and obscurity could only be delayed for so long.

The need to pause for a moment, as if struck by the awareness of the artistry of the German language, also marks the point where a supposed classicism had to come to terms with realism in its many forms and shapes. The lyric element within tragedy only brings out this limitation that shapes the radical approach to epic intentness. Likewise, Brecht’s hasty condemnation of Greek culture through Greek tragedy was politically founded upon a confusing refusal of what he believed to be the origins of barbarism and ideology. Furthermore, his lack of knowledge of the Greek language placed him in a position where he could only sense the double nature of Greek tragedy and diction by means of his own homemade antinomy of the artistic vs. the realistic, which did include the possibility of their fleeting encounter, but never that of their actual coalescence. All of this is shown in the warping and wavering of the choruses, by way of a processual reduction, variation, or mutation.

### Music and acrobatics

Significantly, the awareness of the theatrical imperative that occupied Brecht seems to have been directed, at least in part, to the emergence of music and the treatment of sound. Admitting to not having found an effective ‘aesthetic solution’ that would allow him to show ‘the instrument in the middle of the background’ (BFA 25:120), Brecht nonetheless goes to great lengths to recount what would have been his conception of music within the play. He describes in detail the way the music was created and executed at Chur, partly by transcribing the part of the musical score that

determines the 'rhythm' to be achieved, partly by naming the instruments and objects used in the process, the intensity of the sound level, what each player was expected to do, and so on.

Brecht's version of the song to Eros that composes the third stasimon is made in stark contrast to Hölderlin's. As Antigone is taken away to a remote place where she is to be buried alive under a rockbed, following the King's decree, Creon doesn't simply exit the scene: he heads 'towards the city' to reestablish his power. The Elders then speak of a city that, in its thirst for joy and oblivion, chooses to reject the mourning for its sons and 'hastens to the orgy of Bacchus, in the search of exhaustion' (vv. 723–731). After which '*The Elders grab the sticks of Bacchus*' from the stage floor 'and place themselves in the middle of the acting space' (BFA 25:120), ready to speak their lines.

Spirit of the pleasures of the flesh, and yet always  
Triumphant, in conflict! He throws even those related by blood  
amongst themselves, the one who mightily pleads.  
Never will he be wrecked, and he  
Who partakes in it is not at one with himself. (BFA 8:224)

A passage in the *Antigonemodell* book explicitly refers to this hymn in a very precise manner. The verses are placed like captions under the photographs taken by Ruth Berlau of the production at Chur. The chorus consists of four figures in long vestures, each holding a stick with a square-shaped mask hiding their faces, eyes and mouth carved upon each mask as in archaic fashion. The instructions as to the disposition and division (see BFA 25:96,121) of the lines spoken are clear: to each member of the chorus is attributed a set of two verses; accordingly, they speak in line, individually, in undisturbed succession. The directions can be seen on the left side:

As they speak the chorus song 'Spirit of the pleasures of the flesh', the Elders beat their sticks quietly against the ground, in time with the music. While speaking, each of them shows his face, and at the start of the respective first verses he spins the crook in such a way that the red side of it becomes visible. (BFA 25:120)

At the sight of Antigone's suffering as she walks toward her grave, the chorus is brought to a state of great affliction. The difference in formulating the identification becomes apparent at the very beginning of the strophe. Whereas Hölderlin stresses Antigone's tragic fault by bringing together the language of Right and that of the Gods, Brecht chooses the objectified over the metaphorical. In Hölderlin: 'But now I myself step / outside of the law' (Hölderlin 1992, 830–831). In Brecht: 'But now I myself am / out of step' (BFA 8:224). The law of men embroidered within the law of the Gods becomes, in Brecht's adaptation, a matter of non-synchronicity. The Elders no longer react intensely to transgression, but rather lose their sense of time and rhythm: they get out of step, *aus dem Takt*. The choice of words clearly reflects the terminology—the demands—of performance.

A few moments before the fifth chorus, the *Elders* are said to hear 'the music of the roundel of Bacchus as it begins' (BFA 25:120). And in yet another reference to that same chorus, Brecht writes:

After verse 1192, one of the Elders goes toward the alarm panel and beats against it with his flat hand during the chorus song 'Spirit of Joy, you who from the waters'. / The music of the roundel of Bacchus comes to an end. (BFA 25:152)

This instantly recalls the instructions in the *Modell*, as described above, regarding the third stasimon: a rhythmic instance of performance is introduced that in many ways contradicts Brecht's one-sided interpretation of the 'ancient form of theatre' (BFA 25:110). With its archaic connotations, the beating of the stick against the ground cannot help but collide with the purpose of a realistic actualization of the play.

After such insistence on music and sound as evident sources of rhythm, one would be justified in expecting any sort of recognition of the chorus as a primary instance of song merging with movement, as established by most studies dealing with the reconstruction of Greek tragedy. And yet, again there is no mention of singing and dancing in Brecht's adaptation, but only of speaking. The words of the Elders are spoken, not sung. The actors are instructed to speak and move in a certain way, instructions are given as to the tone of their pronouncements (BFA 25:112) as well as their placement on stage interweaved with the acoustics of the theatrical space, but nothing explicit is said about the performance of song and dance.

This is all the more intriguing when one thinks of how Brecht notes that, exactly because of its 'immense subject-matter', *Antigone* demands not so much a 'more ponderous presentation', but rather the 'lightest' one of all. The answer to the overwhelming character of Greek tragedy, to the vastness of its theme, would then be its opposite: the loosening of the heavy disposition, its dissolution in poise and levity. The *Darstellung* 'as a whole', he says, 'should have something of a flight', and continues: 'The actors should display some of the effortlessness that is acquired through great effort by acrobats. It's precisely the separation of the parts that can cause the action to keep on moving further' (BFA 25:130).

As with the individual characters, who are expected to maintain the 'flow of the presentation' (BFA 25:92), the members of the chorus also have strict orders to follow concerning their movement in space. The mental disposition of the Elders is treated as the correlate of their posture, and the latter functions as the *analogon* to the position they come to occupy on stage. The stirrings and oscillations of the chorus are turned into the technical positioning of its physical body, in such a way that a specific articulation of its pacing within the stage produces what Brecht calls the regular, planned or scheduled 'position for the chorus song' (BFA 25:94).

### The commentator and the performer as one

It comes as no surprise that the choruses pose the major obstacle and the greatest difficulty to every attempt at a modern adaptation of Greek tragedy. Since they presuppose and embody the indeterminate space between dramatic and lyric poetry, between the universal and the particular, they are bound to stand at the heels of the self-appointed and multi-layered modern poet, dramaturg and stage director. Given the inseparable nature of history and myth in ancient tragic

poetry, the choruses of *Antigone* are historical figures in their own right, necessarily unaware or unconsciously disdainful, one might say, of any adaptation bent on their historicization through a revised scaffolding of the socio-political approach. This was clearly and knowingly overlooked by Brecht, whose first measure was to dismiss Greek culture and art as being the 'highest measure' of all, by tearing down the idea of its greatness and excellence and replacing it with the theatrical syllogism of modern rationality: analysis, demonstration, showing.

This being said, the main question lies not so much in how the Greek choruses come to confirm or contradict Brecht's 'model' of tragic poetry on stage, or in the way they relate to his varying notion of 'epic style' (BFA 25:152), but rather, in a broader sense, in their identification as 'riddles that demand solutions' (BFA 24:115). If nothing else, the fact that their pronouncements as riddles need to be clarified and thoroughly rationalized at all is enough to qualify the chorus, in its singularity, as a riddle by definition, a cryptogram of magnified proportions.

As the *Bearbeiter*, in this particular case the one who adapts a translation that he could only behold and approach as an original work, and is therefore forced to adapt himself to the origin he so recklessly wanted to destroy, Brecht had to be as unrelenting with the choruses of *Antigone* as he was inexorable in his handling of the play as a whole. In this context, his comments on the ambivalent function of the Greek chorus, who acts simultaneously as the interpreter and the performer of the action, are worthy of some attention.

One must not make a big fuss about the double function of the chorus (commentator and performer). One can think that the chorus simply lends itself to the presentation of the Theban Greats in the action. But this is not even something one needs to think about, since wisdom in knowledge and baseness in conduct are commonly found together. —For that matter, one has renounced to show the Elders as old men, since neither wisdom nor poetry are predominantly to be found in old men, and given that in order to make war, one does not need to be old, but rather belong to the dominant class. (BFA 25:102)

For something that is said to be not worth much thinking about, this seems to have occupied Brecht's cogitations considerably. In itself, his dismissal of the question follows the same line of reasoning as before. It goes without saying that the chorus is as contradictory a figure as can be: being identical with the Elders of Thebes, it seems obvious that its faltering behavior and judgement goes from one extreme to the other in very little time. One is therefore left with the problem of their presentation [*Darstellung*]. This is rapidly solved by the tactics of estrangement: to present the Elders as elderly men imbued with the wisdom of old age would signify an effort to be truthful to the image of the Ancients as the source of such wisdom and nobleness of character. Brecht's contention seems to be that there is no need for such concessions. In fact, as he explicitly points out, one needn't think too much about these matters: political reason teaches us that both virtues and flaws are socially determined. Ergo, the Elders have good expectations to grow young before they appear on stage.

There is yet another way to read Brecht's note. On the one hand, the final version of *Antigone* has the chorus stand effectively in the midst of the action, a fact no political rhetoric would be able to erase. On the other hand, the chorus resonates throughout the whole play as Brecht's own mouthpiece, commenting upon the events, and acting as the mirror image of the stage director, who not only is caught overseeing or overruling the action, but actually performing its conception and realization—as shown in the *Antigonemodell*. And this is something one needs to think about, since sagacity in theory and corruption in practice are commonly found together.

Referring to the 'last chorus' of the play, Brecht clarifies its division: it shall be separated in four parts, each spoken by a member of the group. Only then comes the dramaturgical inference: 'After speaking his verses, each of the Elders walks away' (BFA 25:158). It is worthy of note that just a few pages before he had returned to his invocation of acrobatics as the way to counter the metaphysical weight and thickness of Greek drama:

In the last scene, it is especially important that the performers will approach the limits of the acting space in a loose posture, at the spot where they form the planned group, and that, when leaving the acting space, they exit in a loose posture. (BFA 25:154)

Reading these instructions from the *Antigonemodell*, the performer who might have been chosen to form part of the chorus will know precisely how he is expected to proceed. At which point though, one could ask, is the writer of this model supposed to exit his own acting space? If Brecht, the eternal dramaturg and director of his own plays, demanded acrobatic skills from the performers of *Antigone*, skinned of its solemn tone and deprived of its poetic and cultural authority, it is not inopportune to ask if that same dramaturg and stage director isn't himself, after a certain time, the subject of the performance he sought to accomplish.

### Ideas on performance

Somewhat unwillingly, the expression 'Greek Tragedy in action' (Taplin 1978) or 'on stage' marks the point where Greek Drama ultimately has to come to terms not only with the way it is to be performed, in a traditional, scholarly or 'theatrical' understanding of the term, but rather with the ever-changing and not as easily tamable concept of performance. Brecht did violence to a text that was not his own—Hölderlin's translation—by moving and redistributing its parts, using it largely to his own ends and causing the deflection of its core. This act of breaking in, however, came at the price of its gradual disappearance.

There is nothing extraordinary or unexpected in the will to historicize tragedy by making it fiercely political. All things considered, Brecht's *Antigone*-experiment, conceived as a deliberately invasive adaptation of an 'ancient form of theatre' with the aim of formulating a performance model for the future, achieved little more than a political statement, while the object of its appropriation was surprisingly left intact. Other 'models' were still to emerge in a more convincing way, such as *Life of Galileo* (also from 1947–1948), *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1949–1951) or the *Katzgraben Notes*

1953, but the *Antigonemodell* quickly subsided and fell into stagnation. Brecht himself saw *Antigone* as routine work or an experimental preamble to that which was yet to come in the years after. Its relevance within Brecht's body of work is anything but clear. One can always speak of 'modernist Hellenism', the role of experimentation and critique, or wish for the 'efficacy of tragedy in modernity' (Taxidou 2008, 256–257), but the fact remains that soon enough Brecht abandoned any plans to restage the play. After the small-scale symbolic production at Chur, *Antigone* would be staged only twice during Brecht's lifetime, in Zurich in March 1948 and in Greiz in November 1951. That, by itself, should be telling enough. Brecht's depiction of fate as something that immediately becomes self-destructive, once it is confronted with its methodical rationalization, seems appropriate to characterize his own endeavors with *Antigone*. And yet, it is *Antigone* that, despite all its encumbrances and inconsistencies, challenges more profoundly the notion itself of performance.

Brecht's idea of performance was inevitably tied to his manifold ways of exploring the innumerable implications of theatrical practice by way of its fusion with theory. While it may seem more than likely that the intersection of philosophy and performance eventually crossed his mind at one point or another, it is not clear to what extent he regarded it as a problematic or pressing issue. This does not mean, however, that he disregarded such a connection altogether. When he did try to consider that relation in a more immediate manner, it prompted him—as in the *Messingkauf* texts (1939–1955)—to devise a dialogical and figurative script where one character (the philosopher) is keen to confront its estranged double (the dramaturg), not forgetting of course the omnipresence of the actor and the director pertaining to the endless discussion on the subject of proximity or distance: from actor to spectator, from the audience to the play-text.

Throughout the 1950s up until his death in 1956, Brecht scrutinized and reignited this question in every possible way, both in theory and in practice. This ensured him a large following of both disciples and detractors, and a continuing dissemination of his work either through repudiation or enthusiasm, so that, in accordance with the shifting wind between revolutionary procedures and dubious indoctrination that is so typical of the preparation of his plays, controversy about his theories and working methods has been kept very much alive to this day.

In spite of all its complexity and its many contradictions, the by now traditional dichotomies associated with Brecht's teachings fueled the need for their constant reexamination in such a way that, however outdated its background might appear, such inquiry continues to thrive and renew itself. One need only look at their almost organic unfolding, via the balance (or the lack thereof) between the performer and his role, the actor and his character: the epic vs. the naturalistic, the socio-political vs. the psychological, objectivity vs. subjective involvement, analysis vs. identification, distance vs. empathy, observation vs. pathos, dispassion vs. warmth.

One could argue that the impact of Brecht's work and thought is grounded first and foremost in its ambiguity and all the loose ends it left behind, rather than in the consistency that it spells out so assertively. As a playwright who himself deliberately acted as a dramaturg, and a dramaturg who was adamant about playing his role as the stage director, Brecht was harsh but masterful when it

came to reflecting and acting upon the performance of his plays. In this sense, even though his role as a theatre practitioner by far overshadows all others, he may be seen as a philosopher of sorts as regards the concept of performance, understood as the staging or enactment of a play, but equally in the free fall condition of the performing mind, meticulously premeditated while apparently devoid of a score or a script. This is why, more often than not, he can be said to have stolen the performance altogether—again, both in theory and in practice.

Surely, what one might call Brecht's 'ideas on performance' cannot claim to be something distinct from 'Brecht's ideas about the business of acting'—both join hands from the beginning as 'Brecht's ideas on the function of theatre and dramatic performance' (Eddershaw 2002, 8, 36, 1). One can certainly alienate the text, but not the context: here, the performer still equals the actor, acting equals playing a role, and playing a role equals theatrical art. The latter, however, is not that which precedes performance as a somewhat ill-defined notion, but the persistent questioning of its realization. Moreover, for Brecht as an author who so strongly emphasized the role of thinking, and was so demanding of the performer in terms of his or her ability to be conscious of the act of performance itself, surely philosophy, seen as an indefinite or loose notion, would seem to be only a step away from the never-ending, inexhaustible concept of performance. Nonetheless, given that such linearity remains faint and unconfirmed, one is left with tentative conclusions such as these: 'Brecht himself, even in the late stages of his career, was still trying to find an effective formulation of the immediacy of performance, on the one hand, and the achieving of an objective understanding on the part of the spectator on the other' (Eddershaw 2002, 17). In turn, it is no doubt legitimate to discuss Brecht's work and legacy as a whole in terms of the 'possibilities of performing theory', or to digress on the 'many different forms of performative writing' (Barnett 2015, 40, 51) that it entails. However, that still won't be enough to conceal the fact that philosophy remains unseen or unheard of as a substantive category of performance, just as the self-awareness of philosophy as performance cannot be equated with that which it stood for in Western philosophy at large, despite the several historically proven resemblances between the two.

In light of this, it is not surprising that Brecht's brief encounter with ancient tragic poetry comes to partially subsume the shortcomings of his plan for a theatre practice based on models. Such a project simply falls short of its ambition as soon as it is faced with that which no modern subjective or objective consciousness can truly assimilate: Greek Tragedy, as incorporated by the Greek chorus, shrouded in the mystery of its performance through song and dance. Just as Brecht had sensed the 'historical other-worldliness' of Sophocles' *Antigone*—'the ancient play', so he calls it—as the obstacle to every possible 'identification with the main figure', he was the first to recognize that the several 'incisions for the chorus' as alienating instances proper to the 'Hellenic dramaturgy' (BFA 25:75), were ultimately impervious to a modern audience. The chorus therefore tends to appear in the guise of a pre-existing *Verfremdungseffekt*, something that, rather than being caused by the will to rationalize and push Greek drama to its limits, is really the first and the last hurdle of performance in itself. One example would suffice to make this clear: in the English translation of the Foreword to the *Antigonemodell*, 'performance' is the word chosen to translate Brecht's German term *Spielweise*, literally the way or the mode of acting or playing a role (Brecht 2014, 165,167; see



also BFA 25:73, 75) However, rather than criticizing such choices on account of their inaccuracy, one could instead see them as the point of departure toward something else.

The stumbling of the Brechtian concept of theatre at the very beginning of the performing arts as such was perhaps a misadventure and a false step, but not a barren one. As it comes to a halt, *Antigone* points to that interim space where all seems possible. As a self-sufficient entity, the poem that by definition encapsulates both tragedy as philosophy and a philosophy of tragedy of its own, it breaks new ground by positing a different view on how to approach tragic drama in performance. As a failed attempt at wrenching a new model (a modern Organon) out of the master model (Ancient Tragic Poetry), it summons the 'aesthetics of interruption' (Brecht 2014, xii) and change that many are tempted to see as Brecht's most significant contribution to keep thinking about performance by keeping track of its many ramifications, its recurring deflection, or its constant displacement.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a political and historical overview of the adaptation, see Philipsen (1998), Rehbein (1962), Bunge (1957).

<sup>2</sup> See as examples: Binder (1992), Beaufret (1965), Benn (1959), Harrison (1975), Beissner ([1933] 1961), Schadewalt (1960), Berman (1987), Bernofsky (2001), Böschenstein (2004), Louth (1998).

<sup>3</sup> Hölderlin's 'poetics of tragedy' have been the subject of numerous essays. See for instance Kasper (2000), Fynsk (1999), Häny (1946), Farrell Krell (2004), Kurz (1988), Lacoue-Labarthe (1986).

<sup>4</sup> The majority of studies on the connection between Brecht and Hölderlin tend to interpret form through content. See for example: Flashar (1988), Doering (2010–2011), Weisstein (1973).

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