"Sublime Mockery"

Carson's Translations of Sophocles's *Antigone*

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Translation as Experiment

In the narrow sense of the word, an experiment is a scientific attempt to discover, confirm, or show something.[1] In a broader sense, it describes a daring, uncertain undertaking with an exploratory character. Speaking of experimental translation (which is not an established term) in the field of (literary) translation suggests two things: First, that there is such a thing as non-experimental translation (i.e., translation that is not daring, that finds itself on supposedly solid ground, that does not provide any new insights—neither in relation to the translated original nor concerning the activity of translation itself). However, used in this way, it becomes apparent that, second, every translation—at least every literary translation—is per se an experiment: a transversing of manifold difficulties, an adventure that leads to discoveries. Translation means constantly uncovering new insights, namely through the act of conveying a text from one language into another. Thus, if translation is in almost all cases an experiment with epistemic character, then it should also be acknowledged as an independent scholarly and/or artistic activity—which still happens far too seldom.

It is not really possible to gauge how daring, exploratory, and experimental a translation is by comparing it with the original; the best way to make such a determination is by comparing it with other translations of the same work. This kind of question can be asked, and this kind of investigation carried out,

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where broad corpora of translations of one and the same work already exist. This is primarily the case when it comes to older, canonized texts, which, thanks to their intensive reception, have remained topical: Homer's ancient epics; Sophocles's tragedies; Dante's *Commedia*; Shakespeare's dramas and sonnets. Intensive hermeneutical engagement implies more rigorous translation work and vice versa. My thesis is that the degree of risk involved with the experiment increases when the translation takes leave of the compromises that it is initially bound by and sets its own emphases—for instance, by modernizing a work's vocabulary, by creating archaisms, or by favoring prosodic over semantic aspects. All of this has consequences for how we view a work ethically, politically, and aesthetically.

Anne Carson and Sophocles's *Antigone*

One of the most important contemporary actors in the field of "experimental translation"—though she is still rather less well-known in the German-speaking realm—is Canadian author, classical philologist, and translator Anne Carson. As a classical philologist, Carson is primarily concerned with ancient texts. For example, her translation and edition of the fragments of Sappho (*If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho*, 2002) did not just paint a completely new picture of Sappho but also launched a new Sappho sound and a new understanding of the history of her transmission as a history of destruction. In addition, under the title *Grief Lessons* (2006), Carson published her translation of four lesser-known tragedies by Euripides, while in *Bakkhai* (2017), she presented a new, unconventional translation of Euripides's mysterious tragedy.

Her experimental efforts should be viewed against the backdrop of the long history of editing and translation practice that she challenges. She adds something to the plurality of existing translations without blending in. Rather, her translations represent an interruption to tradition. This becomes particularly evident in her attempts to translate Sophocles's *Antigone* (2012 and 2015), which are the focus of this chapter.

It is widely known that the status of an "original" ancient Greek text is highly questionable. What has been transmitted to us through a reception history that has lasted thousands of years has been pervaded by gaps, variants, and mistakes, often resulting from manipulation by philologists and editors.

And, in relation to Sophocles's *Antigone*, too, it can be said that "[t]he history of the Ancient Greek and Latin canons is a history of appropriation

and transposition of stories, determined and accidental preservation, distortion, pastiche, parody, and staged intertextuality" (Coles 178). Thus, when it comes to translating ancient texts, we are always "beyond the original." While most translations conceal this aspect, Carson's translations demonstrate the fragility and instability of the source material to a contemporary reading audience and raise their awareness of it. So far, her work, that of a philologist and translator working in the largely male-dominated field of ancient text translation, stands alone.

Carson's work on Sophocles's *Antigone* has manifested in three publications to date. 2012 saw the publication of *Antigonick*: as an artistic comic book (referred to in the following as version A) and as an unillustrated reading text (referred to in the following as version B; accompanied by a preface by the translator that is absent in version A). Three years later, she published another translation, *Antigone* (version C), which she produced at the request of Belgian theater director Ivo van Hove. Version C formed the basis of a successful staging of the play, with Juliette Binoche cast in the main role. Version C is accompanied by a new translator's preface.

With this plurality of *Antigone* versions, Carson has made her mark on a field that has been shaped by an almost overwhelming reception and translation history, above all in Europe. *Antigone* has drawn more philosophical interest than most other literary works in the modern age, from Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger to Žižek, Butler, Irigaray, and Cavarero, to name but a few.

Comparatist George Steiner provided a clear overview and critical commentary on this broad field of reception in his extensive monograph *Antigones: The Antigone Myth in Western Literature, Art and Thought* (1984). He did so in the awareness that all he could provide was a provisional stocktake. The final sentences in his book read: "All I can be certain of is this: what I have tried to say is already in need of addition. New 'Antigones' are being imagined, thought, lived now; and will be tomorrow" (304). A few pages earlier, he even concedes that "[a] comic-strip *Antigone* can exist" (295).

This is where Carson's version A of *Antigonick* seems to pick up. Let us begin by considering some of the paratextual elements of this version—such as the cover design (which was retained in version B).[2] Everything is slightly offset: The title of Sophocles's tragedy—*Antigone*—changed to *Antigonick* (I will ad-

2 For the visualization of the text-image design of version A, see, for example, https://nonsuchbook.typepad.com/nonsuch_book/2012/05/antigonick-by-sophokles-translated-by-anne-carson-illustrated-by-bianca-stone.html (Evangelista).

dress the suffix "nick" in more detail below). The author of the original—Sophocles—can be found lower down in parentheses. In the bottom left-hand corner of the cover, the name of the translator is noted together with that of the illustrator, artist Bianca Stone. It is still somewhat unusual to name the translator on the cover. But here it is about more than a question of institutional politics, for the special arrangement of the names quite fundamentally raises the question of the relationship between the translator and the author. Who is the author here if the author we believe to be the author has been put in parentheses? And what is the relationship of the translation to the original if the translation announces itself with an altered title—which is in principle an untranslatable proper name?

It is not just the drawings by Bianca Stone, but also the text's graphic design that points to the fact that this is a comic book: a hand-printed text in squeaky chalk font resembles chalk handwriting on a blackboard. The font is another comic signal, but also a signal that here (even if it is a print we have before us) something has been written down provisionally, and that we possibly even have to acoustically imagine the writing process as "squeaky."

The text and drawing form palimpsests, before being separated out and set in opposition to each other on the following page. I read this game of overlapping image and text, followed by their separation, as one that reflects on the legibility of the ancient text, which constitutes a kind of palimpsest.[3] However, these illustrations do not illustrate the text (from *illustrare*: enlighten, clarify); rather, they tend to obscure it. If there is any kind of semantic interaction—indeed, translation—between image and text, then it is deeply disturbing and defamiliarizing (one might think here of Brechtian *Verfremdung*). This process defamiliarizes not least the comic genre itself, which is conventionally based on a text-image semantics rooted in mutual reinforcement and equivalence.

3 Steiner on this aspect: "The play is, unavoidably, embedded in the long history of its transmission and reception. Because this history is so extensive, because variants and adaptations have been both so numerous and of significant quality, Sophocles' text runs the danger of receding into context. It can only be by a deliberate and, more or less, fictive exercise of purification, not unlike that of a restorer moving levels of varnish and previous restorations from a canvas, that one can attempt to isolate the Sophoclean play from the interpretations and uses made of it"—Steiner then goes on to immediately interrupt himself: "The analogy with the restorer is, moreover, deceptive. It is quite often possible to bring the original design and coloration back into view. But no *Ur-Antigone* can exist for us" (*Antigones* 296).

Though they have a book in contemporary English before them, the readers of this edition are confronted with a foreign language that they have yet to learn.

The unillustrated reading version, version B, which was published in parallel, makes another suggestion, set in Traditional Arabic Regular Font. The text is exactly the same. However, divested of its striking graphic and typographic elements, it makes a different impact and becomes legible in a different way—indeed, perhaps at all legible in the first place. The translator's preface that has been added to version B can be viewed as reading instructions. Let us start by turning to this preface. It is titled "The Task of the Translator of Antigone," a clear allusion to Benjamin's essay "The Task of the Translator." But here, the accent is now on the singular act of *this* translation: "of Antigone."

Does "Antigone" refer to the title of Sophocles's tragedy (which was defamiliarized on the cover of *Antigonick*) or the protagonist of the play? Because "Antigone" is not set in italics, as per the convention for naming titles, we cannot exclude that it denotes the name of the protagonist. And, in fact, the preface begins by addressing Antigone directly. The protagonist is thereby called onto the stage, as it were, and the preface itself becomes that stage. Thus, nothing that is said here can be read in a purely propositional sense; it must be read performatively. Even the preface is theater:

> dear Antigone:
> your name in Greek means something like "against birth" or "instead of being born" (B, 3)

The playful address even opens itself up to a philological question: the question of the meaning of the name, that is, of the name that has been changed and defamiliarized on the cover to "Antigonick." Is the translation intended, and is it trying, to change something about the omen of the protagonist? The question of birth inscribed into and laid bare in the name alludes to the curse under which the Labdacides have toiled for generations—with Antigone a member of the final generation. At the same time, further questions are raised. To what extent is the philological search for etymological roots not just a doomed yearning for origins and ultimate truths?

The preface—taking the name at its word, hearing in it a call—turns against the question of birth and thus against the question of origin as well:

> What is there instead of being born?
> It's not that we want to understand everything

Or even to understand anything
We want to understand *something else* (B, 3)

To me, it seems like the "something else" set in italics is to be interpreted not just as another or a new interpretation of the tragedy, but as a fundamentally different approach to the text, an approach that understands it differently. This would imply that the text must also be translated differently. Where are the starting points for this kind of endeavor? In the preface, the translator makes reference above all to Brecht:

I keep returning to Brecht
Who made you do the whole play with a door strapped to your back (B, 3)

Here she alludes to Bertolt Brecht's 1948 production of *Antigone*. Returning from American exile to Switzerland, this was one of his first theater productions after World War II. Brecht's staging was based on Hölderlin's translation; the protagonist is equipped with a supplement, a door strapped to her back. Carson writes:

A door can have diverse meanings
I stand outside your door
the odd thing is, you stand outside your door too (B, 3)

In Brecht, the door, weighing heavily on the protagonist's back, points to what is unattainable. And if we apply the measure of etymology here, we go from "door" to *dhwer*, and from there to the meanings *foreclose*, *foreign*, *forensic*.[4]

that door has no inside
or if it has an inside, you are the one person who cannot enter it
for the family who lives there, things have gone irretrievably wrong
to have a father who is also your brother
means having a mother who is your grandmother

a sister who is both your niece and your aunt
and another brother you love so much you want to lie down with him
"thigh to thigh in the grave" (B, 3)

4 See: https://www.etymonline.com/word/*dhwer-. Accessed 22 Nov. 2024.

In just a few lines, the conflict at the center of the tragedy is brought into focus: the incestuous backstory, the unburied brother, Antigone's insistence on a burial, exhibited here as the continuation of incestuous desire, Antigone's ostracization from the community of the *polis*.

With Hegel, Carson addresses Antigone as the "eternal irony of the community"—even this she does ironically. Just as ironically, she cites further attributions and allegorizations that have been made by Butler, Lacan, George Eliot, and Anouilh, concluding with an imagined "eye roll" from Antigone:

> I don't know what color your eyes were
> but I can imagine you rolling them now (B, 4)

With womanly solidarity and shared irony, Carson, over the course of just one page, sets the protagonist apart from the most important moments in her reception, adaptation, and appropriation since Hegel. Carson's Antigone is someone who is aware of this history of appropriation and will always reflect it. The opening dialogue between the two sisters begins accordingly:

> [enter Antigone and Ismene]
> Antigone: we begin in the dark
> And birth is the death of us
> Ismene: who said that
> Antigone: Hegel
> Ismene: sounds more like Beckett
> Antigone: he was paraphrasing Hegel (B, 9)

Antigone's discursive appropriation, which achieved "a rarely equalled force" in Hegel and has had an enduring impact on our understanding of tragedy (Steiner, *Antigones* 28), is thus immediately enfolded into and exhibited within the play itself—and therefore both integrated and isolated, called up and suspended. In contrast to allegorical interpretation, Carson's translation is clearly about what seems to be a more simple, namely translational problem:

> to get you and your problem
> across into English from ancient Greek (B, 4)

She derives her method from Beckett and John Cage. For Carson, drawing on the former, it is about penetrating deep into language in order to lay bare an

"other organization […] that lies just beneath what we see or what we say" (B, 5). Translation can accordingly be understood as an act of peeling away layers of meaning.

> what happens
> when everything normal/musical/careful/conventional or pious is taken away. (B, 6)

Some dominant attitudes to translation and the interpretations they imply can be identified in this series of attributes. In Antigone's autonomy, Carson discovers not "freedom" but a radical grief that, according to her, ultimately goes unarticulated. This state of grief is made up of many "pieces of silence," she writes, thereby taking up a concept from John Cage. Applied to translation, making silence audible means precisely not translating "artistically," but making fragments, voids, ruptures legible. For Carson, "pieces of silence" also refers to what cannot be translated, what remains untranslated, which she explains in her essay "Variations on the Right to Remain Silent," specifically by looking at the example of Hölderlin's *Antigone* (20–24). For Carson, subjecting translation to its impossibility means allowing something else to be heard—making "silence" audible. When the preface ends with a summary of the task of the translator as the "task to forbid that you should ever lose your screams" (B, 6), it means that screams and silence must be thought of together. They are only ostensible opposites: the two meet where they point to what is unarticulated and what cannot be articulated, which persists just as silently as it does loudly in language, in words, and between the lines, perhaps between languages too—and forces any conclusive political, ethical, or aesthetic judgments rendered on the protagonist of the play to burst open again.

Carson is therefore concerned with stripping back the layers of interpretative glue that have become stuck to the play in the act of translation and opening the character back up to her unarticulated core. This core is touched upon in Sophocles's tragedy itself when the chorus makes the following comment after Eurydices's desperate lament, shortly before her suicide:

> Chorus:
> οὐκ οἶδ'· ἐμοὶ δ' οὖν ἥ τ' ἄγαν σιγὴ βαρὺ
> δοκεῖ προσεῖναι χὴ μάτην πολλὴ βοή. (1251–52)

> I do not know; but to me both excessive silence and loud crying to no end seem grievous. (trans. Lloyd-Jones)

In Carson, the chorus itself exhibits a tendency for silence when it says:

> too big a silence (B, 41)

This translational reduction plainly shows that Carson is less interested in striking a semantic balance in the linguistic or symbolic field than she is in exploring the transition to what is no longer language: silence and scream. The translation therefore explicitly throws itself off balance: it exposes itself to the extreme ends of language. Here, the fundamental problem of understanding and translating Ancient Greek texts, especially those as dense as Sophocles's *Antigone*—the problem Steiner is referring to when he writes that "to 'understand' […] is to oscillate between poles of immediacy and of inaccessibility" (*Antigones* 201)—becomes the actual engine, the method of translation.[5]

So, when Carson addresses Antigone seemingly directly—"dear Antigone"—she is always addressing a mask over which other masks have already been laid. The effect is that her Antigone gives voice to these masks. Even if Carson removes some layers, there is no "right" Antigone in the "wrong one." This is the grief that is expressed in Carson's "sublime mockery." With "sublime mockery," I am adopting one of the paradox formulations that Hölderlin used to characterize Antigone's attitude.[6] To me, it seems that—even in its reversal, the ridiculing of the tragi-sublime—this can be applied to describe Carson's translational gesture and her ethical and political impulse.

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5 Carson thereby openly embraces *Antigone's* untranslatability, which is also the starting point for Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's deliberations on Hölderlin's translation, which he categorizes as a deconstruction of tragedy. "*Antigone* incarne l'essence même de la tragédie, s'il est vrai que la tragédie est à tout jamais un genre spécifiquement grec et, à ce titre, 'irreconstituable,' sinon tout à fait intransposable. […] c'est aussi pourquoi […] la traduction doit être d'autant plus violente et transformatrice qu'elle concerne un texte plus proprement grec" (Lacoue-Labarthe 52).

6 In German, "erhabener Spott" (Hölderlin, "Anmerkungen zur Antigonä" 414).

Carson's Translational Subterfuges

German classical philologist and translator Wolfgang Schadewaldt writes that there have been four main types of Sophocles translation since the beginning of the nineteenth century: the balanced, classicist translation (with its tendency to beautify the seriousness of the tragedy); the didactic, conscientious translation (which all too often comes off as excessively bourgeois and old-fashioned); the eloquent, nuanced translation (which runs the risk of sounding pretentious); and the "fresh," updated translation (which can tip over into the mundane) (316). Hölderlin occupies a special place for Schadewaldt: "far removed from the pathos of lofty words and contrived or inflated ideas," Hölderlin prefers "the simple word, from which he nevertheless […] draws the full force of expression" ("fern vom Pathos hoher Worte und geschraubter oder geschwollener Vorstellungen"; "das einfache Wort, dem er indessen […] die volle Kraft des Sagens abgewinnt"; 322).[7] Hölderlin commented on his extremely literal, and therefore frequently distorting translation in his notes. He talked about how the Greek world can only be understood from a "clumsy perspective" (Hölderlin writes: "nur vom linkischen Gesichtspunct kann gefaßt werden"; "Anmerkungen" 421)—that is, one that is necessarily awkward and bumbling, but also sinister: dark and foreboding.

There is no way that Carson's translation can be described as balanced or equivalent, which have long been the translation studies ideal. However, her insistence that it is a translation, not a postmodern adaptation or rewriting must be noted.[8] It seems to me that she continues Hölderlin's gesture of translation, pursuing it under twenty-first-century conditions of reception. In the following, I would like to take a closer look at how she does this.

Citation and Meta-Reflection

The opening verses of *Antigonick* that I have already quoted and commented on make a strong impression. The characters that appear in Carson reflect on their reception by ironically citing moments from it and weaving them into their speech. They thereby illustrate, as Butler writes, "that our only access to this

7 Unless noted otherwise, translations into English are made by the author.

8 Zawacki, on the other hand, steps away from considering it an act of translation in the course of his reading and describes the work bluntly as a "postmodern adaptation" (160).

play is through this present time," while "showing that this time is still bound to that classical one." The meta-reflexive citations indirectly question the authority through which interpretations are brought forth, repeated, and stabilized. Who, we might ask, is the "Kreon" of philology, theory, and philosophy? Who says what the correct understanding is? Ismene's question "Who said that?" is a question that resounds throughout the text. As Coles writes, "*Antigonick* presents an Antigone transfigured: not by changing the story, but by importing into its present tense a long and complex history of appropriation" (179). It must be added that the characters, too, resist this history of appropriation, distancing themselves from it in the act of citation. This citational method reveals that reception history consists of layers of interpretation that have been glued over the text. These kinds of meta-critical speech acts inscribe a distancing, even ironic, ridiculing tone into the tragic events, not least by means of their comic, desublimating effect.

Linguistic Hybridization

Carson operates at the extreme margins of the translation tradition by blending archaizing and modernizing gestures of translation. Thus, verses like

> Ismene: Your heart is hot, thou sister
> Antigone: O one and only head of my sister … (B, 11)

stand alongside verses in which the everyday register of contemporary English openly breaks through.[9] For example, when Kreon asks her whether she was the one who buried Polyneikes's body, Antigone simply replies with "Bingo" (B, 18).

Carson—like Hölderlin—illuminates the etymological depths of language, but she also plays with homophonic assonances. For example, from Antigone's name she draws not just the etymon *against birth* but also the key term *to go*. Again and again, puns and wordplay interrupt the allure of accessing a layer of original meaning through roots.

Like Hölderlin, Carson too comes up with neologisms. She deploys these above all in the passage in which the guard reports on Antigone bent over the body of Polyneikes, grieving. This passage has been damaged in the various

9 In Hölderlin, Swabian dialect breaks through in some places. See Steiner, *Antigones* (87).

surviving versions of the Greek text; there are a number of competing interpretations.[10]

In Lloyd-Jones's translation, the verse reads as follows. The contentious word is the final πικρῶς.

> ἡ παῖς ὁρᾶται κἀνακωκύει πικρῶς. (423)

Steiner comments:

> Where Jebb and Mazon read *πικρᾶς* where Bothe and Bruhn emend to *πικρῶς*, Dawe, in his edition and commentary proposes *πικρά*. The distinction is, in fact, far-reaching: in the one case, "bitterness" is a moral-psychological trait […]. Müller's analysis and Dawe's emendation, on the other hand, make of the word an adjective pertaining strictly to the bird-like quality of the cry, to its specific avian shrillness and sharpness. It is this latter reading which would underwrite the recent Bernard Knox-Robert Fagles version: "And she cried out a sharp, piercing cry." (*Antigones* 224–25)

Carson, I would argue, aligns herself with the latter reading and translates the no-longer-human bird's screech into neologisms:

> Childreftgravecry
> Birdgrief the bird (B, 18)

The words here lose the distinctiveness that usually maintains them as separate units of meaning; the signifiers are so compressed that they essentially sound: one long cry.

Parataxis and Reduction

Schadewaldt has pointed out that only paratactic reduction, without any unnecessary filler words, can come anywhere near to the "clear, hard language of Sophocles" (279). Carson's translation style pushes this principle to its limits: "The lines often stand alone, as if broken off from the original text, stricken

10 Steiner discusses these readings explicitly in relation to verses 423–24. He points to the paratactic construction in the Greek and to the onomatopoeia, which allows it to extend far out over its proportional content—into language that is no longer human. See Steiner, *Antigones* (223–24).

monuments. Stanzas comprising twenty or thirty lines in the original are distilled into single words and staccato exclamations" (Butler). At its most extreme, this can be seen in Kreon's first appearance. Kreon re-cites himself, but only in keywords:

> Kreon: Here are Kreon's verbs for today
> Adjudicate
> Legislate
> Scandalize
> Capitalize
> Here are Kreon's nouns
> Men
> Reason
> Treason
> Death
> Ship of State
> Mine (B, 14)

Here, Carson quite consciously shatters every rationale, every antithetical construction, exhibiting the skeleton of Kreon's speech and ideology.

In another passage, she intensifies the reduction to the point of sheer omission. For example, the verbal sparring between Kreon (who reacts with defensive aggression) and Teiresias after his prophecy is presented in such a way that the latter's responses are left as nothing but blank lines:

> Kreon: you fake
> Teiresias:
> Kreon: you profiteer
> Teiresias:
> Kreon: you entrepreneur
> Teiresias:
> Kreon: you are too quiet (B, 35)

This broken dialogue, in turn, can be read, or rather heard, on three levels: substantively as an indirect comment on Kreon's deafness; philologically as an allusion to the corruption of the transmitted text (Steiner, *Antigones* 206–08); and, in terms of translation theory, as a spelling-out of the virtual interlinear translation that Benjamin, in connection with Hölderlin, references at the end of his essay as the unattainable ideal of every translation. Accordingly, in Carson's

politics of translation, it is also another variant of the paradox of screaming silence or the unheard scream.

Carson's Approach to Notorious Translation Problems

Even though Carson, as it seems to me, builds on Hölderlin's translation poetics in order to take it further, it is still striking that she tends to avoid him in the most-widely discussed passages of his translation. Hölderlin extracted his extravagant neologism "Gemeinsamschwesterliches!" (literally: "that which is commonsisterly"; 319) from the very first verse of the drama;[11] Carson, on the other hand, translates the passage simply and almost monosyllabically:

> Antigone: we begin from the dark (B, 9)

The adjective "dark," in turn, can be read on both a diegetic and a metadiegetic, i.e., philological and translational level, as the siblings' dark origin, as the text's dark background, on which we must always reflect.

Hölderlin translated Ismene's question

> τί δ᾽ ἔστι; δηλοῖς γάρ τι καλχαίνουσ᾽ ἔπος. (20)

as

> Was ist's, du scheinst ein rothes Wort zu färben? (Hölderlin's translation 319)
>
> [Literally: "What is it, you seem to dye a word red?"][12]

The etymological literalness he applies here made him an object of much ridicule from his contemporaries.[13] Carson, on the other hand, exits the realm of colorful imagery prompted by καλχαίνειν completely, instead positing

11 David Constantine, who translated Hölderlin's translation of Sophocles's *Antigone* into English, translates Hölderlin's "Gemeinsamschwesterliches! o Ismenes Haupt!" as "O common sisterly Ismene's head" (Hölderlin, "Sophocles' Antigone" 438).

12 Constantine translates this passage as "What is it? You seem to dye your words with red" (Hölderlin, "Sophocles' Antigone" 439).

13 Carson addresses Hölderlin's translation of this passage in detail in her essay "Variations of the Right to Remain Silent"; see also Hamilton.

an acoustic paradox that allows her to tackle the task she set herself in the beginning, namely of making scream and silence audible in this play:

> Ismene: What's the matter
> you have your thunder look (B, 9)[14]

One of the most controversial passages for understanding and translating is verses 331–32, with which the first stasimon begins, where the chorus makes a statement about the essence of humanity:

> πολλὰ τὰ δεινὰ κοὐδὲν ἀν-
> θρώπου δεινότερον πέλει (331–32)

The first question concerns the meaning of τὰ δεινὰ. Examining different translations reveals that there is an enormous diversity here. In his discussion of Hölderlin's translation, Koppenfels shows how Hölderlin, at various stages of his translation, tends to shatter the syntactic tension in the Ancient Greek text into parataxis (353).[15]

In order to determine how Carson approaches this passage, it is helpful to look at versions B and C. In B she translates it as:

> many terribly quiet customers exist but none more
> terribly quiet than Man (B, 15)

Here, so it seems to me, she is targeting silence, "Man's" expressionlessness. In version C, which she finished three years later, she nonetheless fans out the semantics of the word, leaves the translation undecided, and thereby allows the untranslatable to reach full volume:

> Chorus: many things strange
> terrible
> clever

14 There is a possibility that Carson is also referring to Murray's English translation of *Antigone* here: "What is it? Some dark cloud is o'er thy thought." However, in Carson, the dark cloud explodes.

15 Hölderlin translates the verse in question as "Ungeheuer ist viel. Doch nichts / Ungeheurer, als der Mensch"; Constantine translates Hölderlin's translation as "Monstrous, a lot. But nothing / More monstrous than man" (Hölderlin, "Sophocles' Antigone" 457).

wondrous
marvellous
dreadful
awful
and
weird
there are in the world
but none more
strange
terrible
clever
uncanny
wondrous
monstrous
marvellous
dreadful
awful
and
weird
than Man (C, 23)[16]

Nick: Carson's Translational Invention

Carson derives "Nick"—this supplement, linguistic suffix, and silent presence on the stage, which is said to remain at the end once the few surviving characters have left, in order to continue "measuring"—from her translation of the Greek word τύχη. Kreon is the first to speak the word. The verse

τί δ' ἔστι; ποίᾳ ξύμμετρος προὔβην τύχῃ (387)

is translated by Hölderlin as "welch gemeßner Fall geht vor?" (literally: "which measured case occurs?"; 332),[17] while Lloyd-Jones translates it as "What is the

16 Is Carson taking a swipe at men when she writes "Man"—with a capital M—where Sophocles refers to man, as in humanity? Does it mean vindication for Antigone? But how "womanly" is Antigone? In any case, Carson's translation brings forth gender questions that tend to remain concealed in the classical text.

17 Constantine translates this passage as "What thing and I occur together here?" (Hölderlin, "Sophocles' Antigone" 459).

matter? What is the event that makes my coming opportune?" Carson reduces the passage to:

> Kreon: here's Kreon
> nick of time (B, 17)

τύχη does not just denote the right moment; *tyché* is not *kairos*. Rather, it is the right moment as one that has always been missed, one that has never been realized. The word opens up the temporal perspective of retrospectivity.[18]

Carson's use of "nick" and, in particular, the specific way that it develops dynamically in her translation, raises a series of questions relating to (1) the semantic spectrum of "nick"; (2) the *krasis* of "Antigo…" and "nick," the title of the play; and (3) the fact that Carson derives from the word "nick" a supplementary character in the play named Nick.

Regarding (1): The happy moment, "in the nick of time," the certainty of victory (after the Greek goddess of victory, Nike), proves to be a "nick," i.e., "a notch," "a gap," "a crack." Further signifieds are invoked: "nick" as slang for "prison"; the British "to nick," a colloquialism meaning "to steal." "Nick" is a knot in which the tragedy's unresolved ethical questions converge with questions relating to the poetics of translation.

Regarding (2): "Nick" might also call to mind the masculine first name Nick (would Nick then be a name for the unconscious Other *in* Antigone herself?) as well as the word "nickname." If that is what *Antigonick* is, then it is the nickname that does not just *tease* (the German for *tease* is *necken*), but the one that inscribes into the name of the play the traumatic dimension of the right moment as one that has always passed, thereby emphasizing time as a central topic. However, in my opinion, there is another important element at play here, namely the paronomastic shift to "neck" that Carson employs—the "neck" by which Antigone hangs herself. Whereas the messenger's words in Hölderlin's final act read

> Am Nacken hängend, sie, am Gürtelbande (363)
> [Literally: "By her neck hanging she, on the belt strap"][19]

18 Lacan reads *tyché* as the real, the trauma (53–66).

19 Constantine translates this passage as "hanging / Her, by the neck, by the belt of her linen dress" (Hölderlin, "Sophocles' Antigone" 504).

in Carson, they become

> the girl hanging (B, 41)

But before that, the chorus makes the following quip, which is decisive for Carson's translation poetics:

> a now
> a nick
> a neck (B, 37)

Carson transforms the tragic internal inversion of *tyché* into a linguistic disaster, a shibboleth: Antigone's death results from the mere slip of a letter. In relation to *Antigone*, Hölderlin spoke of the "tödlichfactische(n) Wort" (literally: "fatalfactual word"; "Anmerkungen" 418); the tragedy reveals the performative side of language, a speaking that kills. Carson reduces the violence of language to one vowel. "A nick / a neck"—we hear the cracking of the cervical vertebrae on the rope.

Regarding (3): Nick, the silent character in the play, comes from the cover, from the kink in language. The fact that it is this character that remains on stage at the end, measuring, demonstrates the shock of realizing that the right moment is one that has always already passed. At this point, I cannot but think of the silent, "umnachteten" ("shrouded in night") Hölderlin who did not stop looking for "the measure on Earth," even though he knew: the measure is always missing ("In lieblicher Bläue" 1011–12).[20]

Consequences

Antigonick premiered at the Sorbonne in Paris in 2014 as a "Philo-Performance": its cast included Judith Butler—who had herself written an important essay about Antigone and who is mentioned in Carson's play—in the role of Kreon and literary theorist Avital Ronell in the role of Antigone.[21] Even the casting

20 I am referring here to verse 26, "Giebt es auf Erden ein Maaß? Es giebt keines" ("Is there a measure on Earth? There is none").

21 The performance was curated by Ben Hjorth and held on 26 June 2014 at the University of Paris-Sorbonne in collaboration with the University of Paris-Diderot, Paris-Ouest, the University of Avignon, the Laboratory of the Arts and Philosophies of the Stage

shows this was a matter of academic self-reflection—and Carson's translational meta-recalibration was especially well-suited to this purpose. Steiner, on the other hand, rejected Carson's offer with a rather scathing review of *Antigonick*. He accused Carson of taking a contingent, vulgar approach to the original and the highly ethical and political questions it addresses:

> Translation should embody an act of thanks to the original. It should celebrate its own dependence on its source. It concentrates scruple and trust, however recreative or anarchic its instincts. It is an informing craft which, sometimes enigmatically, reveals within or adds to the original what was already there—particularly where the text has been translated, imitated, adapted a hundred-fold. Anne Carson has often achieved this exigent ideal. But not this time. (Steiner, "Marrow Versus Merrow" 8–9)[22]

Avant-garde Belgian theater director Ivo van Hove was not a fan of *Antigonick* either. It was at his urging that Carson translated the play once more, resulting in version C, which adopts important elements from B but, on the whole, proceeds in a more linear, narrative fashion.[23]

(Labo LAPS), and the International Performance Philosophy Network. The performance can be viewed online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ygeQDu-4EU (accessed 30 June 2024).

22 Steiner is writing about the comic edition (version A).

23 In an interview, Carson addresses the circumstances in which the new version came about. "Carson: Perhaps I should say why I translated the play twice, because that's confusing for people. *Antigonick* was meant to be a comic book, and not scrupulously faithful to the original text. Bianca Stone did the illustrations. After it was published, I met Ivo van Hove. He said he wanted to do a production of *Antigone*. I said, great, I have one. I'll just send it. But he didn't like it. He wanted a new one. I was enraged, and then thought about it, and it seemed worth trying. A neat, defeating thing to try. So I did it again. Seeing the new piece performed was quite the revelation. Because I frankly thought I would hate it. I've seen lots of Greek plays and various versions of my own translations, and most of them were awful. This one wasn't *awful*. […] One thing Ivo specified when asking me to translate the play again—he said the Kreon role in Antigonick is too spare, almost symbolic. At the time, I think I was trying to do the translation kind of the way John Cage makes his mesostics—he always said he was trying to 'demilitarize language.' Maybe the difference between Ivo and me is that he wants to remilitarize language. He wants it fleshed out for conventional audience expectations and conventional capacities of an actor. I didn't appreciate that until I was translating the work again. The Kreon I had originally given him wouldn't have worked on stage—demilitarized grieving wouldn't work as a theatrical experience. Patrick O'Kane, who plays

After analyzing Carson's method, it is worthwhile to reflect back on the most important statements that she makes in her preface "The Task of the Translator of Antigone" to see whether she manages to accomplish the task she sets herself: "to forbid that you should ever lose your screams" (B, 6). This idea was inspired by a late poem written by Ingeborg Bachmann, in which the Austrian author laments this very loss of self.[24] No longer screaming means resignation and consenting to existing power relations, be they Kreon's, contemporary sociopolitical relations, or even the philological and academic laws of translation that Carson poetically rebels against.

Thus, the task of the translator here is to uncover what is irreparable and scandalous in the tragedy, to perpetuate Antigone's grief, and to silence rationalizing interpretations in order to allow a suppressed scream to become audible. This scream—if we follow Carson's poetics—can no longer be perceived in the tragic register; rather, it must be revealed by "decreating" the tragic, by perforating it, inserting voids and defamiliarizations that, again and again, reveal strange effects. Desublimated, the untransformable scream becomes even shriller.

Significantly, Carson's *Antigonick* (version B)—as a translation—has become so independent that it has itself become a starting point for further translations, an honor that, as far as I can see, had only been bestowed on Hölderlin's translation before it.[25] In 2019, a French translation was published by writer Édouard Louis. The cover positions Anne Carson as the author of *Antigonick*. In parentheses below Carson's name, we read: "(d'après *Antigone* de Sophocle)," and, beneath that, "Traduit par Édouard Louis." The cover carries out a clear recoding, blunting Carson's intervention by framing it not as a

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Kreon, is amazing. After Antigone leaves the stage. It becomes his tragedy, and he fills the space. You almost forget Antigone. […] Lack of balance was what he objected to in *Antigonick*" (O'Neill-Butler).

24 "Meine Schreie verlier ich / wie ein anderer sein Geld / verliert, seine Moneten, / sein Herz, meine großen / Schreie verlier ich in / Rom, überall, in / Berlin, ich verlier auf / den Straßen Schreie, / wahrhaftige, bis / mein Hirn blutrot anläuft / innen, ich verlier alles, / ich verlier nur nicht / das Entsetzen, daß / man seine Schreie verlieren / kann jeden Tag und / überall" (Bachmann 145). To clarify: Carson does not cite the poem, she merely alludes to it.

25 Lacoue-Labarthe translated Hölderlin's *Antigone* into French in 1998 (Hölderlin, *L'Antigone de Sophocle*). As already mentioned, Constantine translated Hölderlin's *Antigonä* into English (Hölderlin, "Sophocles' Antigone").

translation, but as a liberal adaptation. Louis's translation is itself conventional; at no point does he pursue Carson's experiments. For example, he could have translated the English "nick" into French as "niquer" ("to fuck"), but he did not.

I was wondering how a German translation of Carson's translation would and could sound. In terms of continuing Carson's experiment, my own idea would have been to develop Carson's title into *Antigenick*, thereby literally conveying her wordplay into German while also shifting it by one letter. Moreover, I thought it would have been worthwhile to bring out some of Carson's latent nods to Hölderlin's translation, which I have drawn out here, in a more pronounced, palimpsestic manner—perhaps by translating the English Hölderlin translation into an estranged idiom that sounds only faintly German.

To my surprise, a German translation was published right in the moment when I was about to finish this article. Just as Édouard Louis does, Marcus Coelen, the German translator, puts Anne Carson in the position of the author and treats *Antigonick* as a primary text. One of Coelen's surprising moves is his translation of the title as *An Antigone* (*To Antigone*). Coelen does not pick up on the wordplay of "Nick," "nick of time," and "Genick," but he succeeds in two respects: not only does he emphasize the appellative quality of Carson's rewriting, but he also inscribes Anne Carson's first name into Antigone's name: *An Antigone* reads also *Anne Antigone*.

Translated from German by Lydia White

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