



column door Loek Zonneveld, voorgedragen tijdens HALf6 op dinsdag 14 april 2015

Antigones

'Archives of grief I see falling upon this house'.

It is the choir in *Antigone* speaking.

Their story of grief is of course the story of not-knowing, the story of Antigone's unlucky father Oidipous, his search for his identity and after that, his death-march to Kolonnos, hand-in-hand with his daughter Antigone.

Their story of grief is also the story of the civil-war in the city of Thebe, between the brothers.

And in the end it is the story of the state-funeral for Antigone's brother Eteokles and the story of the unburied corpse of the other brother, Polyneikes.

One of the last stages in the archives of grief is that of the unwilling, stubborn and obstinate young girl Antigone, who refuses to go down on her knees for the orders and the rules of King Creon.

How many images of *Antigone* are there?

Many! And most of them seem to be the rebellious ones, the images of mutinous thoughts. Of saying NO.

For years in one of my textbooks of *Antigone* I kept two small articles from papers in the seventies of the last century. The military regime in Turkey and the dictatorship of the colonels led by Mister Papadopoulos in Greece, put a ban on the play *Antigone* by Sophocles, during the seventies, some forty years ago now. The production of the play was simply forbidden.

Antigone could not be played in these countries during those years. The newspaper-articles in my textbook are full of furious stripes and angry question-marks. I probably was politically naïve in those days. Or perhaps I underestimated the power of the play. Or the impact of the character of Antigone.

How many images of Antigone are there?

And how deeply is her story involved in the history of Europe.

In the history of us.

In our lives.

In our memory.

In our collective memory perhaps?

I would like to mention here *three* snapshots of *Antigone* in our European history.

In 1948, the year I was born, Bertolt Brecht, just returned from exile from the United States to Switzerland, rewrote the *Antigone*-material and created a new Prologue for the piece, a prelude, an overture, playing in Berlin, April 1945.

Two sisters come out of an underground bombshelter and find the backpack of their brother, filled with bread and bacon. Greedy and starved they begin to eat. Then two men of the Waffen SS come in and tell the sisters, that their brother is a deserter and a traitor and that he is hanged on a meathook next to the front door of the building. It is strictly forbidden to take his corpse down. The elder sister stays calm, takes the corpse of her brother down. And is shot.

The second *Antigone*-snapshot is a scene from the mosaic film *Deutschland im Herbst, Fall in Germany, 1978*, about the Rote Armee Fraktion-terrorists in postwar Germany. The writer Heinrich Böll wrote a short story wherein a theatre director is sharply censured in his direction of a production of ... *Antigone* by Sophocles. The German authorities fear that the Antigone-character can be seen as a direct appeal for violent and terrorist acts against the state.

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By the way, the first *Antigone* I ever saw was in that year, 1978. And it was not the *Antigone* of Sophocles but that of the French playwright *Jean Anouilh*. I remember how Antigone said to Creon (and I quote by heart, not having the text at hand): *'I liked you much better when you were not yet the ruler of this city. In those days you still read poetry and listened to music. Sadly enough you don't do that any more.'*

My third and last *Antigone*-snapshot is here, in Amsterdam, in the Beethovenstraat. It is about Grete Weil – as a girl her familyname was Dispeker. She was a German writer who fled for the nazi's to Amsterdam in 1935, with her husband Edgar Weil. They lived in the Beethovenstreet. Edgar Weil eventually died in the German concentration camp of Mauthausen in 1941. Grete Weil's deep care for her mother and for the other Jewish refugees, brought her to go work for the so-called Amsterdam Jewish Council, between 1941 and 1943. That Council was a Jewish organisation which coöperated with the German occupator. When the complete Jewish Council herself was deported to Camp Westerbork, Grete Weil went underground till the end of the war. For the rest of her life she was in deep doubt about the choices she made. She went back to Germany – 'I must live amongst the murderers of my man' she always said, with that beautiful and mysterious smile of hers – and she wrote several books about her terrifying years in Amsterdam. She was and stayed NOT proud of herself. She always looked at her imaginary sister, who fiercely said NO to the nazi's, while she, Grete Weil, kept saying ... well ... perhaps ... when we do this & that ... we'll survive. The title of her moving book about this all is ... *Mijn zuster Antigone ... My sister Antigone...*

How many images of *Antigone* are there? Many! Still!

The covering of the body with a little bit of earth is like an everlasting image of grief, of deep mourning, again and again and again. It also is a strong image of ... refuse to hate. As Romain Rolland wrote in his text about *Antigone*:

*'Soyez la paix vivante au milieu de la guerre –
Antigone éternelle
qui refuse à la haine
et qui
lorsqu'ils souffrent
ne sait plus distinguer entre ses frères ennemies'*

*'Be a living peace in the midst of war –
everlasting Antigone
who does not yield herself to hatred
who when they suffer
no longer wants to distinguish between the rival brothers'.*