

# A DAY ABOUT DUST: ANNE CARSON'S *ANTIGONICK*

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Anne Carson's *ANTIGONICK* is a handsome object, almost four-square in shape, cool to the eye, heavy in the hand. Inside, the text is interspersed with thick transparencies bearing Bianca Stone's illustrations; the areas outlined in black ink are sometimes suffused with colour or with tight hatching and sometimes they are blank, so that the text on the following page appears partly occluded, partly legible like a palimpsest. A reader hoping to refer to these illustrations as a way of easing herself into the play is thrown back by enigmatic images of deserted places and featureless figures.

The layout of the play itself also confounds our expectations; instead of orthodox lineation there are blocks of text where one element of dialogue runs into the next, recorded in handwritten capital letters which vary slightly in size and density. Punctuation is extremely sparse: full stops are usually absent, though breaks between thoughts are often indicated by minimally wider white spacing. For a page or two this text seems resistant to our eyes, but we gradually read into the intensity of the capital letters as we would into an ancient inscription, gratified to find ourselves recognising rhythms of communication.

This process begins with the punning title itself, *ANTIGONICK*: has this version been stolen from the Greek original or teased out from the surface with a knife? And to what end does this *NICK* become the silent character who, we are told, is always onstage and who "measures things"? The impression grows that this translation intends to offer us words with their remoteness and strangeness still upon them.

In such a manner Carson advances, with compressions and elisions of the original text, with references to modern thought, with diction which slides into contemporary usage and out of it again, with page layouts capable of slowing movement to a single phrase and with the counter-balance of mysterious illustrations. There is a sense that considerable forces have been marshalled for an assault on an intractable object.



From the very first interchange between the two sisters, Antigone and Ismene, it is apparent that this is no straightforward translation. Antigone quotes from Beckett, in an echo of Hegel:

WE  
BEGIN IN THE DARK AND BIRTH IS THE DEATH OF  
US

Carson sets up in our minds the idea that these characters in crisis are mouthpieces for anguish. No play could begin at a higher pitch than Sophokles's original *Antigone*: after the death of Oidipous, his two sons engage in a civil war in which they are both killed. Their uncle Kreon, the new ruler of Thebes, issues an edict that the corpse of the brother who rebelled against the city, Polyneikes, should be left unburied. His memory will be disgraced, factionalism discouraged and the living law of the city state exalted. As the play begins, Polyneikes's sister, Antigone,

determines to perform a simple ritual of burial over his corpse, invoking the unwritten laws of the ancient gods and the bonds of family piety. She tries to persuade her more timorous sister Ismene to join her.

For an audience of fifth century Athenians, the situation would have crystallised conflicts of which they were only too aware, such as the clash of ethics in a developing city state between adhering to family loyalties and acknowledging civic duty, or the question of who is your true friend (the Greek word *philo*i denotes allies as well as loved ones), who is your real enemy. The imaginative potential

would arise of a female subjectivity which searches for its own valid laws rather than conforming to a role assigned it by a male hierarchy. The play does not seek to resolve these knots; instead, the characters fulfil their individual destinies in the force field such conflicts create.

Carson responds to the urgency of the opening scene with lines which promise lyrical power, drawing upon the incantatory. The element missing from her interpretation of the scene, and present in Sophokles, is the vehemence of Antigone's switch from love of her sister to aversion, the hardening of the ego which she needs as she prepares for her isolated path. In Carson's version it feels as though all were determined long before the action of the play began.

After her joltingly compressed first chorus, in which the Elders seem still to be infected with the rhythms of combat, Kreon enters. Here it becomes apparent that Carson intends to reshape Sophokles's original play in which there are two distinct poles, Kreon the despot and Antigone the rebel, who separate from each other in a counterbalancing movement. On his first appearance, even as he asserts his superiority, Sophokles's Kreon reveals how many threats he perceives to his authority. The flavour of the man is already there. Carson's Kreon, however, is a cipher: in place of the speeches of an anxious self-justifier, there is a page of KREON'S VERBS FOR TODAY and KREON'S NOUNS. Single words are widely spaced along the margins, holding down all quarters of the page. These are words barked out, with no history. If there is any suggestion of an individual consciousness behind them, it is one stretched very thin: the authoritarian ruler is known only through his desperate strategies.

There is a similarly staccato encounter between Kreon and the Guard, who has drawn the short straw and must report Antigone's act of piety – then into this attenuated atmosphere bursts one of the most famous choruses of the entire canon – the hymn of praise to man's resourcefulness. Carson's is a bravura performance, sweeping aside some of Sophokles's complexity but catching the lightness of his verse in glittering alliteration, striking reversals and in darts into contemporary life.

There is no easy equivalent for the adjective *deinos* which Sophokles uses to convey man's great skill. The word possesses a range of significances, from a positive cluster meaning 'clever', 'expert', to a negative cluster meaning 'terrible', 'dangerous'. \* Even at its most positive, there needs to be a hint of darker possibilities. In Hölderlin's translation of this chorus, he chooses 'ungeheuer' (monstrous) to convey man's abilities and his domination of nature, while Heidegger chooses 'unheimlich' (uncanny). Carson goes another way: with a sidestep, men become TERRIBLY QUIET CUSTOMERS, with connotations both of the mysteriously adroit and of those who are able to pick their time in order to snaffle up what they want. We find ourselves slipping into an admiring collusion with these clever creatures who so skilfully observe the 'customs' of their universe, at once pastoral and technological:

THE SNOWY COLD HE KNOWS TO FLEE  
AND  
EVERY HUMAN EXIGENCY CRACKLES AS HE PLUGS IT IN

In Carson's chorus the shadows of irony are more perfunctory than in Sophokles's, as though they have all been compressed into that phrase descriptive of man, while the glorification of his accomplishments is sharper and brighter.

The next scene contains the great ethical debate during which Antigone and Kreon separate from each other as they pin their individual colours on to the terms 'piety', 'gods', 'friends', 'enemies'. Whilst cleaving to the central argument, Carson works this scene at great speed; the only pauses she permits are those used to speculate on the nature of Antigone's drive. Carson's Kreon fantasises in rage on the

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\* Interestingly, at the moment in the play when Kreon begins to recognise that his rigidity has brought destruction, he too uses the term *deinos*, in this instance in its negative sense: 'To yield is terrible'

theme of her autonomic, sealed off nature; Antigone plays with her own suggestion that she does not wholly know her motives, even though she is such an ardent believer in the instinctive sources of action. Here, glancingly, Carson allows for the fascination of Antigone as a figure whose momentum is away from socialised female identity and towards death.

The centre of Sophokles's play is Antigone's last appearance before she is immured. First she engages with the Chorus in exchanges known as *kommos* (beating the breast), then in her final confrontation with Kreon she restates her devotion to her brother and, describing herself as the bride of Hades who has received no wedding celebration, takes leave of Thebes and of the gods who seem to have abandoned her. She reaches a moment of tragic understanding of her human condition. Carson's Antigone is given much less space; her anger seems nearer the surface. There is no fall into doubt; she seems an agitated, trapped figure, already gripped by claustrophobia on this side of the tomb.

The dualistic structure of the original play is such that when Antigone is led away, our deepest compassion and fears go with her, while the reversal of fortune crucial to this form of tragedy is about to happen to another – Kreon. Many commentators have found this latter part of the play less satisfying than the dynamic which leads to Antigone's entombment. This imbalance is even more evident in Carson's version, where Kreon is given no chance to display his world of illusion – rather, he succumbs readily to the authority of the prophet Teiresias, who is the voice of the gods. After the briefest of attempts at resistance, he admits his fault and rushes off in order to mend the situation, as he hopes, by releasing Antigone and appeasing his son, her lover. His change of heart has transpired with fairy tale swiftness.

Now it becomes clearer why Carson has infused this scene with such momentum: she wants to pull us up short at that one moment of time which will bring either salvation or doom. Fifth century Athenian audiences would know that Kreon has come to self-knowledge too late – that even before the Elders complete their final hymn to Dionysus, saviour of Thebes, Antigone is already dead by her own hand. Carson explicitly signals this irony. Instead of encountering an expansive hymn of praise, her readers find themselves thrown onward into a constriction, like the narrow waist of an hour glass – a conjuration of that presence who has been silent throughout the play: NICK, now revealing himself as A NICK OF TIME.

This chorus resembles a singing game; chains of sound reach out, twist around and return upon themselves.

HERE WE ARE  
IN A SONG ABOUT JOY  
HERE WE ARE IN A DAY ABOUT DUST  
THE DUST IT TAKES TO HOUSE ENEMIES  
THE HOUSE IT TAKES TO DUST JUSTICE

While the action on stage pauses so that this nick of time may be chanted into existence, the unseen action offstage reaches its climax.

This is Carson at her wittiest and it throws light on the intention behind her translation; she gathers up the threads of her version tightly in order to make an equivalent of Sophokles's drama – equivalent not in emotional power but in mental energy. The means she has employed, her compression, her self-determining Antigone, her reduced Kreon, her urgent choruses, conjure up the Greek original, so that from a great distance it slowly swings first one face, then another towards us.

*ANTIGONICK*, Anne Carson, Bloodaxe Books, 2012 £15 (HB), ISBN 1-852249-39-0.