

THE ENDLESS BURIAL OF POLYNICES IN JORGE EDUARDO EIELSON'S *ANTÍGONA*

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ABSTRACT

The political dimension of the mythical figure of Antigone could be structured around the topics of civil disobedience, the individual conflict between following divine law and human law, or the conflict between the weak and the strong, where the weak overpower the tyrant. However, Jorge Eduardo Eielson offers a reinterpretation of the play that doesn't seem to fit these possibilities. His Antigone is a nurse amidst a war zone where there are no Gods to call upon, no laws to be objected, no rights to be claimed, and no citizens to summon; there is just destruction, death, and suffering. To understand the political dimension of his poem, the domain of biopolitics offers a useful path of interpretation; in modern states an exception has become the rule (cf. Agamben) and its sovereign power allows the State to decide over the life of its citizens, creating a zone of non-distinction where life has no longer value (bare life). The law has become non-existent and it is necessary to think the political from a new set of categories that may overcome the split that originated bare life, a context where Eielson's Antigone and the thousands of anonymous dead soldiers can be visible again.

KEYWORDS

Poetry, Latin America, Posvanguardia, Eielson, Antigone, Biopolitics, Agamben, Rancière, State of exception, bare life, sisterhood.

RESUMÉ

La dimension politique de la figure mythologique d'Antigone pourrait se structurer autour des thèmes de la désobéissance civile, du conflit individuel entre la loi divine et la loi humaine, ou de l'affrontement entre les faibles et les forts, dans lequel les faibles vainquent le tyran. Cependant, Jorge Eduardo Eielson propose une version qui ne semble pas correspondre à ces possibilités. Son Antigone est infirmière ; elle se trouve au milieu d'une zone de guerre où il n'y a pas de dieux qui écoutent les prières, ni de lois contre lesquelles se prononcer, ni de droits à réclamer, ni de citoyens à convoquer. Dans cette zone de guerre, il ne reste que la destruction, la mort et la souffrance. Le domaine de la biopolitique offre une voie d'interprétation utile pour comprendre la dimension politique de son poème ; dans les états modernes, l'exception est devenue la règle (cf. Agamben) et son pouvoir souverain lui permet de décider de la vie des citoyens, en créant une zone d'indistinction où la vie n'a plus de valeur (vie nue). Il est nécessaire de considérer la politique depuis un nouvel ensemble de catégories, afin de surmonter la division qui a été à l'origine de la vie nue. Dans ce contexte, l'Antigone d'Eielson et les milliers de soldats et anonymes décédés peuvent redevenir visibles.

MOTS CLÉS

Poésie, Amérique latine, Posvanguardia, Eielson, Antigone, biopolitique, Agamben, Rancière, état d'exception, vie nue, sororité.

“Antigone [...] die schwesterlichste der Seelen”

Euphrosyne. Goethe.

Antigone, daughter of an incestuous couple and guide to her blind father whose tragedy fell upon her; Antigone, sister of the fallen traitor of the city and tireless protectress of the divine laws of the dead; Antigone, woman and bride who refuses injustice and takes the leading role in her own destiny. Without any doubt, her story stands as a timeless narrative that has opened the way to many reinterpretations that cut across the frontiers of time and space, allowing the myth to relocate and re-signify the questions posed by the original play. The contemporary literature in Latin America is no exception to this influence¹, where it is possible to find many Antigones with multifarious voices, women who pronounce themselves against violence, dictatorships, war, injustice and other scourges that oppress their society.

This is the case of a poem written by Peruvian artist Jorge Eduardo Eielson (1924 – 2006) under the name of *Antígona*² in 1945³. Eielson’s poetry has been a topic of analysis and interpretations in Latin America and Europe⁴, his rich artistic proposal can be approached from a literary, visual or intermedial perspective and his work offers abundant material, written and non-verbal, to reflect on the nature and reaches of aesthetical language, the dualistic comprehension of the body and the limits of poetical thought. However, among the

¹ One example of Latin American adaptations of the myth of Antigone can be found in the analysis made by Rómulo Pianacci, *Antígona: Una tragedia latinoamericana*, Irvine California, Gestos, 2008. Also in the dossier by Jennifer Duprey (ed.), *Hispanic issues on line: Whose voice is this? Iberian and Latin American Antigones*, University of Minnesota, nº 13, Fall 2013.

² Jorge Eduardo Eielson, *Poesía escrita*, Bogotá, Norma, 1998, p. 69 ss. All the verses quoted in this article come from this edition.

³ Even though the different editions of *Poesía Escrita* (1976-1989-1998-2013) mark 1945 as the date of writing, Castañeda states that some fragments of the poem appeared in 1944 in *La Prensa*, a Peruvian journal; the poem was first published in its final version in 1945 in *El Mercurio Peruano* (See Esther Castañeda Vielakamen, « Bajo la luna griega de Eielson: Una versión particular de *Antígona* », *La casa de cartón de OXY: revista de cultura*, no. 6, 1995, p. 40).

⁴ Two critical volumes : Martha Canfield (ed.), *Nudos y asedios críticos*, Madrid, Iberoamericana, 2002. Luis Rebaza Soraluz (ed.), *Ceremonia comentada: otros textos pertinentes (1948-2005)*, Lima, Lápix, 2013.

many interpretations that the critics have made of his heterogeneous work, there is not a comprehensive interpretation of his *Antígona*⁵.

This omission may be a result of many factors: first, it is an early text that only announces the main lines that will later ground and traverse his poetry; it could be fair to say that *Antígona* is outshined by other contemporary texts like the award-winning *Reinos*⁶ or the much-celebrated *Habitación en Roma*. Another reason could be that this poem is associated with a set of other poems that aim to construct modern reinterpretations of mythical figures, such as the Greek hero Ajax (*Ájax en el infierno*), the French hero Roland (*Canción y muerte de Rolando*) or Don Quixote (*En la mancha*)⁷; even if they were written and published separately, there are some generalized affirmations that aim to describe these poems as an ensemble⁸. Finally, one could point out the social political nuances that are present in *Antígona* but absent from most of his work, which could make it an odd example of his poetry and, in consequence, not a paradigmatic poem to study.

Nevertheless, Eielson's rewriting of the Greek myth allows interpreting the political dimension of the modern individual who finds him or herself on the margin, in this case, a zone of war; additionally, it also opens an interpretation that considers the bodies of the wounded and the fallen as *corpora* devoid of humanity and, therefore, not worthy of the respect and consideration of the funerary rites. In this line of thought, this article offers an analysis of Eielson's poem with multiple purposes: first, to recover this text from the corners of his work to widen the scope of critical studies of his poetry; second, to establish how the

⁵ The only critical text available is the short article by Castañeda, *op. cit.*

⁶ Ricardo Silva Santiesteban, "La poesía de Jorge Eduardo Eielson" in Ricardo Silva Santiesteban (ed.), *Poesía escrita*, Lima, Instituto nacional de cultura, 1976, p. 17.

⁷ All of these included in Eielson, *op. cit.*

⁸ See, for example: Martha Canfield, "Largo viaje del cuerpo hacia la luz", in Canfield (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 99. José Miguel Oviedo, "Jorge Eduardo Eielson o el abismo de la negación", *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos*, no. 417, p. 192. Silva, *op. cit.*, p. 18. James Higgins, *Hitos de la poesía peruana*, Lima, Milla Batres, 1993, p. 96.

political dimension in his poem is presented in relation to the place of the individual, as citizen and body, in modern society; lastly, to bring to light a Latin American reinterpretation of Antigone, one that can interact with other voices already incorporated in the critical readings of the myth.

<h3>Eielson and ‘the political’</h3>

Jorge Eduardo Eielson was born in Lima in 1924. He began his artistic career at the age of 19, when he published his first book of poems *Cuatro parábolas del amor divino* (Four Parables of Divine Love) in 1943 and became a celebrated author when he received the National Poetry Award in 1945 for his collection *Reinos* (Kingdoms). He was an active member of the cultural movement in Peru during these years before leaving for Paris in 1948, after being awarded a scholarship. He established himself between France and Italy and he died in Milan in 2006.

During these early years in his home country, Eielson edited and published an anthology of eight poets that were not yet included in the national canon, a work developed with contemporary writers Sebastián Salazar Bondy and Javier Solorguren, following the lead of plastic artist Fernando de Szyszlo. The anthology, published in 1946, was titled *La poesía contemporánea del Perú* (Contemporary Poetry of Peru) and it presented a selection of authors whose poetry was somewhat far from what had been established as the traditional lines of subject and style⁹; this decision showed the interest of this young generation to set new foundations for their art, ones that gave them a voice of their own and a ground to build

⁹ The poets included in this anthology are: José María Eguren, César Vallejo, Martín Adán, Emilio Adolfo Westphalen, Xavier Abril, Carlos Oquendo de Amat and brothers Enrique and Ricardo Peña Barrenechea. Instead of choosing Manuel González Prada or José Santos Chocano, Eielson and his peers decided to label as “contemporaries” authors with an eccentric place in the literary tradition. See Inmaculada Lergo Martín, “César Vallejo en las antologías poéticas peruanas (1921-1965)”, in *A través de la vanguardia hispanoamericana*, Manuel Fuentes and Paco Tovar (eds.), Tarragona, Publicaciones URV, 2011, p. 273.

their artistic proposal. With the same collaborative team and probably the same interest, Eielson also participated in the creation and first editions of *Las moradas* (The Abodes), a journal under the direction of poet Emilio Westphalen, which followed the renovation spirit of the avant-garde journals, aiming at “a renovation of the arts, new values, the importance of a ‘new sensibility’, the combat against the values of the past and the *status quo* imposed by academies”¹⁰.

This dialogue between tradition and the present, setting new foundations that were in tune with the context while still acknowledging the past, came from a common spirit in Eielson’s time and generation, not only in Peru but in Latin-America. At the beginning of the 20th c., the avant-garde movements had given artists and thinkers the energy to rebel against and break with the past in order to create new forms with a profound awareness of their techniques and their materials. They launched a project that sought to renew the arts and their language, with utopic goals such as creating new ways for a new literature, one that corresponded to a new society, or more apocalyptic objectives as taking the poetic word to its limits and annihilation¹¹. However, this ambitious project was stopped abruptly by the war and all that remained of its force was debris scattered as an image of the devastated cities. Eielson was a part of this post-war spirit, a part of this generation that inherited the belligerent avant-garde project, but also tied to the hopelessness and uncertainty of the social political context.

¹⁰ “[...] la renovación de las artes, los nuevos valores, la importancia de “la nueva sensibilidad”, el combate contra los valores del pasado y el *status quo* impuesto por las academias”. My translation (from now on, MT). Jorge Schwartz, “Introducción”, in *Las vanguardias latinoamericanas*, Jorge Schwartz (ed.), Madrid, Cátedra, 1991, p. 45.

¹¹ Saúl Yurkievich, “Los Avatares De La Vanguardia” *Revista Iberoamericana*, vol. 48, no. 118, 1982, p. 360, presents this idea of the two strategies of the avant-garde, one that he calls futuristic and another that he calls agonizing.

This generation has been called the *posvanguardia* (post-avant-garde), even though some of its members like Octavio Paz do not find the appellation very appropriate¹². The *posvanguardia* is not defined as a concrete literary movement but as a generation born at the beginning of the 20th c. that began their artistic career towards 1940¹³. They share existential concerns caused by the isolation and destruction of war and have to confront the task of building literary worlds with a language that was taken to its limits and, nevertheless, seems insufficient to cope with the bleak feeling of this time. The term *posvanguardia* implies an asynchrony, its members arrive *after* (*post*) an artistic movement of revolution; the worries, achievements and failures of the avant-garde movements are still there but as a past experience that was not fulfilled or that was outgrown. The *posvanguardia* meant a critic perspective of this heritage, of the social political context, of language and of art and life in general.

It was somehow a return to the avant-garde. But to a silent avant-garde, secret and disillusioned. A different avant-garde, one critic of itself, and in a solitary rebellion against the academy that had become the first avant-garde. [...] The ground that attracted these poets [posvanguardistas] was not inside or outside. It was this area where the outside and the inside converge: the area of language.¹⁴

The place where the reflections of these poets took place was not inside or outside, as Paz puts it. There was a tension between art and politics, which was already there in the avant-garde movements as a subjacent component of many artistic manifests. A tension that seemed to divide poetry between the committed artists and the pure artists; as Octavio Paz describes it, Hispanic poetry around 1945 was divided into “socialist realism” and “regretful avant-

¹² Octavio Paz, *Los hijos del limo: del romanticismo a la vanguardia*, Barcelona, Seix Barral, 1998, p. 210.

¹³ The term *posvanguardia* is established by the critics as a way to characterize the diffuse movement of writers after the avant-garde movements, which had a clear beginning but not a unanimous ending. About the concept and characteristics of the *posvanguardia*: Roberto Fernández Retamar, “Situación actual de la poesía hispanoamericana”, *Revista Hispánica Moderna*, vol. 24, no. 4, 1958 and Rodolfo Mata, “La vanguardia silenciosa”, *Revista Iberoamericana*, vol. LXXIV, no. 224, 2008.

¹⁴ “En cierto sentido fue un regreso a la vanguardia. Pero una vanguardia silenciosa, secreta, desengañada. Una vanguardia otra, crítica de sí misma y en rebelión solitaria contra la academia en que se había convertido la primera vanguardia. [...] El territorio que atraía a estos poetas no estaba afuera ni tampoco adentro. Era esa zona donde confluyen lo interior y lo exterior: la zona del lenguaje”. MT. Paz, *op. cit.*, p. 209.

gardists”¹⁵. This tension labeled as the aesthetical side and the social-political side¹⁶, the formalist line and the historic/realist line¹⁷ or between pure poets and social poets¹⁸, pervades the description of these transition from the historical avant-garde to the generation that came after, in Latin-American literature as in Peruvian literature. However, it is necessary to assume this contrast as a critical and analytical description instead of an absolute dichotomy or a definite limit between artists and their works. It is more meaningful in terms of a tension than of an exclusion, a tension between what arts could mean after the “technical” transgressions of the avant-garde and after the devastation of the war; somehow, the context reduced these aesthetical experiments to useless inventions, but at the same time this useless language was all the artist was left with. The artist must now follow a solitary road, a secret and disillusioned path like Paz states, trying to write on the brink of a small threshold created by tradition, avant-garde invention, social political devastation and their own existential questions.

This spirit *posvanguardista* of tension is present in Eielson’s *Generación del 50*¹⁹ in Peru; they were concerned by the search for a national identity, the instability of democracy²⁰ and the social concerns towards indigenous people and their rights and recognition. At the same

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ José Miguel Oviedo, *Historia de la literatura hispanoamericana. de Borges al presente*, vol. 4, Madrid, Alianza, 2001, p. 203.

¹⁷ Yurkievich, *op. cit.*, p. 359.

¹⁸ Higgins, *op. cit.*, p. 75 ss.

¹⁹ Some critics don’t use the concept of *Generation* to avoid the problems linked to this associative category, and speak rather of *Poesía de los años cincuenta* (Poetry of the 50’s). The list of members usually includes, besides Eielson, Blanca Varela, Carlos Germán Belli, Javier Sologuren, Sebastián Salazar Bondy and Fernando de Szyszlo, among others. Regarding this point: Peter Elmore, “El cauce y el caudal: Emilio Adolfo Westphalen y José María Arguedas en la cultura moderna del Perú”, *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana*, vol. 38, nº 75, 2012, p.231. Oviedo, *op. cit.*, p. 213. Camilo Fernández Cozman, “La poesía de los años cincuenta y un poema de Eielson”, *La casa de cartón de OXY*, nº 6, 1995, p. 12.

²⁰ Between 1945 and 1948, Peru was under the government of José Luis Bustamante who, with his predecessor Manuel Prado (1939-1945), set a democratic intermission from a sequence of military rule. After 20 years of the authoritarian government of Augusto Leguía (1919 – 1930), Luis Sánchez (1930 – 1933) and Óscar Benavides (1936 – 1939), the coming to power of Prado and Bustamante prepared the ground for a spirit of renewal and change that encouraged intellectuals to discuss and to promote free thinking, an attitude exemplified by Eielson’s participation in the anthology and journal. However, this spirit of renovation would be truncated by a *coup d’état* and the come to power of Manuel Arturo Odría (1948-1956).

time, they had all these aesthetical questions around poetic language and how to position themselves in front of tradition and the national canon. Again, it was not about a disjunctive choice: it was more a question of how to follow this diffuse path to consolidate their poetical voice, between poetry and politics. Sometimes, writers were categorized by the critics as being on one side or the other, and these labels had an effect on how their poetry was interpreted. For example, in Eielson's case, he was labeled by some as a "pure" poet²¹, as a poet "of suggestion" interested in the symbolic assimilation of French symbolism and avant-garde²², or was placed aside from this discussion about art and politics, declaring that he was not involved in this debate²³. It seemed that he was not interested in taking a stand or in making a declaration about what was happening in his country and in the world; in this line of thought, Higgins argues that his poetry is "completely detached from national reality"²⁴. However, it is possible to find a political component in some of his work²⁵, which shows that, as said earlier, for his generation the struggle with poetic language and the struggle to understand their reality have no clear line between them.

Eielson's *Antígona* shows this political/aesthetical concern and it constitutes a reflection of how the devastation of the war was an issue for the poets of his generation; it is a poem from his youth and one of the first texts he published before winning the National Poetry Prize. From the formal perspective, *Antígona* is a poetical text of 30 short fragments, with two to eight lines each. The fragments are designated by a roman number and are written in a prose-like style, without versification. It sets its scenario in a war zone, presenting a series of

²¹ See Higgins, *op. cit.*, p. 87 ss.

²² See Fernández Cozman, *op. cit.*

²³ See Marcos Martos, "Jorge Eduardo Eielson: la vitalidad agónica de la poesía", in *Libros & Artes*, no. 4, 2003, p. 8.

²⁴ "Porque la suya es una poesía completamente desvinculada de la realidad nacional". Higgins, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

²⁵ Although this political dimension has been pointed out in some of his collections, there are no studies on this matter. Besides the poetical text *Antígona*, that I present in this article, there are good examples of this political interest in the collection *Habitación en Roma* (Room in Rome) from 1952; also in his novel *Primera muerte de María* (First Death of Mary), started in 1959 and finished in 1980, where it is possible to analyze the tension between races in a mixed (*mestiza*) population in Lima.

landscapes where “only Death remains, the woods of Glory, where an arch of moldy canyons rises at its entrance” (I) ²⁶; the surroundings are described as filled with ruin, rust, moss and drought²⁷. There we find Antigone, a nurse who strives to tend the wounded, and mostly the dead, all by herself, as the poetic voice assures: “you, alone, remain there” (III)²⁸. Her actions seem fruitless and invisible in the loneliness of a bleak field; only the poetic *I* watches her and describes her deed of love.

<h3>Antigone and ‘the political’</h3>

To analyze Eielson’s Antigone under the scope of the political, it is necessary to establish how “the political” is to be defined. There is a large repertoire of analysis of the tragedy of Antigone from the political point of view; however, the way the “political” is understood transforms from one analysis to the other, showing the complexity of the original tragedy in the many possibilities of interpretation. To summarize these approaches and, thus, set the foundation to interpret Eielson’s poem, three paths could be outlined on how the political is understood regarding the play: first, as the execution of the law; second, as the conflict inherent to citizens’ freedom, and, third, as the effects of an individual’s ethical structure.

In this regard, the first approach considers the political as the correct execution of the law. The Vth c. democracy reform in Athens meant a change from *thesmos* to *nomos* and, as a result, laws created by humans could now have a positive status just as other unwritten laws

²⁶ “solo la Muerte ha que-/dado, el bosque puro de la Gloria, a cuya entrada un arco / de cañones se alza enmohecido”. I translated all the verses quoted for the purpose of this article; the original verses are included in italics as a footnote. Each verse quoted indicates the fragment from where it is taken.

²⁷ For example, “-abierto mausoleo- guardado por el ángel de la herrumbre” (-open mausoleum- guarded by the angel of rust) (III), “habéis visto a Antígona vagar por llanuras musgosas” (have you seen Antigone wander through mossy plains) (XV), “Sequía del alba, monumento y sol” (Drought of dawn, monument and sun) (XVII), “estos son los días de un planeta en ruina” (these are the days of a planet in ruin) (XXI) or “dedos con moho abren / el peral sangriento en la frontera enemiga” (moldy fingers open the bloody pear tree on the enemy’s border) (XXIII).

²⁸ “tú sola quedas allí”.

before them, divine laws, for example²⁹. However, this new *nomima* was not as incontestable as the previous unwritten mandates and they demanded the approval of the people to be accepted and included in the city³⁰. Following this perspective, the core problem of the tragedy lies in the way Creon has created and established the edict that prohibits Polynices' burial; Antigone does not abide by the law because it is not only unfair but also illegal³¹. Thus, what the antinomy portrayed in the tragedy shows is the lack of a juridical mechanism to control, filter and appeal these new written laws once they are issued³²; likewise, the lack of a mechanism to control and respond to civilian disobedience and objections of consciousness towards these new laws³³.

A second approach considers the political as the collision between the citizen and the state; in other words, the conflict between the individual freedom to choose and to resist what he or she believes to be unjust and the impositions of the state apparatus that sets arbitrary limits to this freedom, even becoming a tyrant³⁴. The political would lie in the transgression of the law due to ethical motives, which could resonate with modern individualism; here the tragedy is read from the paradigm of the weak against the strong³⁵ and the importance of the play's characters would not lie in their individual psychological situation but in their general figure

²⁹ See Philippe Gérard, "Les enjeux politiques d'Antigone", in L. Couloubaritsis and François Ost (eds), *Antigone et la résistance civile*, Bruxelles, Ousia, 2004.

³⁰ However, this does not imply that human law and divine law were two different instances; the law of the city, a key cultural value for the Athenian society, had its principles on the mandates laid by the Gods. See Edward Harris, "Sophocles and Athenian Law", in Kirk Ormand (ed.), *A Company to Sophocles*, Chichester, Blackwell, 2012, p. 289.

³¹ Granting the right of burial, even to enemies, was an Athenian law. See Harris, *Ibid.*, p. 289. Gérard, *op. cit.*, p. 189.

³² Gérard, *Ibid.*, p. 203.

³³ This focus on the correct execution of the law allows concluding that the tragedy doesn't arise from the conflict between Creon and Antigone, but it finds its origin in the haste of Antigone's decision to kill herself; if she had been more patient, the people would have come around in her defense because she was defending legality. See Harris, *op. cit.*, p. 291.

³⁴ For an overview of this approach in different European adaptations of the myth see Simone Fraisse, *Le mythe d'Antigone*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1974. Especially, chapter 3.

³⁵ This comprehension of the political is capital in Transatlantic Studies. See Jennifer Duprey, "Antigone and the Poliethical Life", in Duprey (ed.), *op. cit.* p. 1.

representing The Citizen and The Tyrant³⁶. From this perspective derives an additional possibility of analysis, a fourth one that I will not address here, that considers the political as the rise of the feminine figure that stands above the role and the frontiers that a patriarchal society has set for her; in this line of interpretation, it is not only the individual who fights against the state but a woman who resists a gender-fixed model that society has imposed.

Finally, the third path when analyzing the political in *Antigone* would be to distance the tragedy from the problem of law and resistance, focusing on the ethical struggle. This approach places the leading characters as concrete individuals³⁷ who don't represent their collectivity, whether it is family, state, citizens or women, but as human beings led by their own ambitions, dreams, and weaknesses. It is important to establish a relation between the ethical and the political, which are not two separate spheres but two dimensions interwoven³⁸; here the political is understood as a collective action where multiple individualities come together in language and, thus, dialogue. Regarded as individuals, *Antigone* and *Creon* develop their actions according to the forces of their own personalities; they go beyond their social roles motivated by their own desire to prevail over the other, falling into a hubristic behavior³⁹. They fail to moderate their words and their actions and that is why they cannot include themselves in the city or in their families because they are locked in their own autonomy⁴⁰.

³⁶ This definition of the political as the individual transgression of the law in the search for higher justice allows a comparison between the actions of *Antigone* and civil disobedience, even though her actions are closer to conscientious objection. See Gérard, *op. cit.*, p. 195 s.

³⁷ Sophie Klimis, "Antigone et Créon à la lumière du 'terrifiant/extraordinaire' (*deinotès*) de l'humanité tragique", in L. Couloubaritsis and François Ost (eds), *op. cit.*, p. 63 ss.

³⁸ See Duprey, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

³⁹ See Klimis, *op. cit.*, p. 65. Gérard, *op. cit.*, p. 198. Harris, *op. cit.*, p. 291.

⁴⁰ Understood as "thinking alone" without including others and falling into hubris. See Klimis, *ibid.*, p. 101.

<h3>A voice for the fallen</h3>

Having briefly presented this context that frames the relation between Antigone and the political, the question that arises is which of these perspectives is the most convenient to understand Eielson's poem; as it is almost always the case with art, the answer appears to be outside of the box demanding a new category. His Antigone has no interest in the way the law is executed because the war zone where she wanders is deserted, burnt and destroyed, it is a place where law does not seem to be present; the point of access to the text cannot be the legal procedure because there is no edict to be appealed and there are no laws to be applied. Furthermore, given that there is no other figure opposing Antigone, there is also no open conflict, no tyrant to fight against, no public speech to move the denizens into action.

The three outlined perspectives of the political imply a concrete dichotomy that cannot be resolved or fails to be resolved, a dichotomy that causes open confrontation between opposing characters, leading to the tragic outcome of sacrifice and death. Eielson's Antigone, on the contrary, does not appear to resist or collide; she just struggles all by herself to carry out her deed in an adverse and devastated land of indifference and silence. Fraisse says that there is no Antigone without an edict to transgress and no Antigone without Creon⁴¹; in other words, there would be no Antigone without a specific dichotomy. But this is precisely the case of Eielson's Antigone; in his poem, all the figures of contrast are absent, whether it is the Gods, Creon, the law or the citizens, while only "Death remains" (I). Then, how is it possible to read his Antigone under the scope of the political if the conditions that determine the political seem to be nonexistent?

⁴¹ Fraisse, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

Rather than describing Antigone's openly rise "against...", against the law, Creon or injustice, the poem shows Antigone silently covering with dust the bodies of soldiers, including the brave and the coward (III); she creates this "open mausoleum" (III)⁴² while her face is "stung by ivy and rust" (XI)⁴³. "After a world of ruin, truncated columns and fallen blocks, under shadows and cries, patches of anger over the green meadows. Butchery and glory" (XXX)⁴⁴. Here all that remains is Death, Butchery—both with capital letters—, and glory—with a lower case *g*—. She quietly keeps advancing because, in this zone of war, there are no Gods to call upon, no laws to be opposed, no rights to be claimed, and no citizens to summon; there is just destruction, death, and suffering. The battlefield constitutes an exception, using Agamben's⁴⁵ terminology, a threshold between normality and chaos where law withdraws to create a new sphere of the political, a sphere where human life loses its "dignity" and falls into a zone of non-distinction.

Eielson's *Antigone* cannot be read from the position of the citizen fighting against an unfair law or a tyrant because, in the exception that is the war zone, human life is not entitled to rise or to resist, it is only allowed to survive. According to Agamben, the modern State exerts a sovereign power that now includes natural life in its mechanisms of power (a life that the Greeks called *zoe*)⁴⁶, and this means that the bodies of the citizens become a nuclear part of the political. Therefore, the State acquires the possibility to determine which lives count, because they constitute a qualified life (what the Greek called *bios*), and which lives don't count. All the subjects on the margins, i.e. the refugees, political prisoners or the disappeared,

⁴² "sobre el héroe o / el cobarde, bañándolo en su polvo -abierto mausoleo—"

⁴³ "Yo adivino tu rostro entre esos arcos, mordido por la / yedra y el orín, velando sus heridas."

⁴⁴ "Tras un mundo en ruina, columnas trucas y caídos / bloques, bajo sombras y llanto, nieblas de cólera sobre los / verdes prados. Carnicería y gloria."

⁴⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1998 [1995].

⁴⁶ Agamben, *ibid.*, p. 151.

are “placed beyond recourse to law and yet still in a precarious relationship to law itself”⁴⁷; consequently, their life has left the sphere of the “citizen” and remains on the threshold where their death is neither homicide nor sacrifice⁴⁸. Here soldiers have a particular role because, on the one hand, they are an instrument of the State to exert this sovereign power over a subject on the margin; they represent the political force and consequently have the authority to inflict violence. On the other hand, as soon as they assume this role, they have to give up the value of their own life and acknowledge it as “bare life” as well, also becoming “bodies to be killed”. To put it differently, once they gain the power to exert sovereignty over other people’s bodies, they lose the right to claim justice over their own bodies and they lose their own voice.

With this biopolitical understanding of bare life, it becomes clearer why, even when there is no law, Creon or denizens to confront or resist in Eielson’s poem, the actions of his Antigone have a political dimension. She is trying to recover some of that humanity lost in each soldier; wandering through this world of ruin, she buries the bodies she comes across, as an attempt to give them their voice. “For each one she buries, thousands and thousands more fall” (VI)⁴⁹, and neither of them “will see the moon again” (X), they all “march to death, on salt, asphodel, and feces, on the slopes” (X)⁵⁰. All of them are anonymous soldiers, anonymous bodies that were “bodies to be killed”; nobody seems to care about them but her, the dead cry for Antigone and she invests all her energy despite loneliness and indifference: “tumors of fire –

⁴⁷ Anthony Downey, “Zones of Indistinction: Giorgio Agamben’s ‘Bare Life’ and the Politics of Aesthetics”, *Third Text*, no. 2, March 2009.

⁴⁸ This man whose specificity lies in the “the unpunishability of his killing and the ban on his sacrifice” is labeled as *homo sacer*. The concept of the *homo sacer* (sacred man) as the one whose life has lost its value, as Agamben presents it, goes back to Roman law. See Agamben, *op. cit.*, p. 48-52.

⁴⁹ “*Por cada cual que entierra miles y miles caen.*”

⁵⁰ “*Ellos ya no verán la luna. (...) marchan a la muerte, pisando sal, asfódelo y hez / en sus laderas.*”

her shoulders—, spill to the grave, where the dead cheep over the ruins of mortuary wheat” (VI)⁵¹.

The symbolic funerary rites carried out by Antigone are an attempt to return the humanity to those who didn’t seem to count, an effort to make visible those bodies that had disappeared in the state of exception by becoming bare life. Antigone’s actions are not a public display of resistance and they are not an open rise against the law because there is no prohibition to bury them, there is no law stating that their bodies should rot in open air. Nobody else cares because they just seem to belong there, their life was devoid of value from the moment they took on their role as soldiers and the law for citizens doesn’t seem to apply to them anymore. In the threshold that constitutes the state of exception, law has withdrawn and, consequently, the core of Antigone’s actions is not a conflict between following or resisting the law, between accepting or resisting tyranny, but the attempt to shake this accepted distribution of the bodies⁵², where some are supposed to count and others not.

Antigone’s political action intends to fracture this configuration of the sensible by displacing “a body from the place it has been assigned to”⁵³. The exposed bodies of the soldiers in the destroyed battlefield find themselves in the place that was given to them; by undertaking their role in the army they were marked as bare life and only a political action could try to make them visible and worthy again. Antigone’s “open mausoleum” in Eielson’s poem is an example of such action; she advances through the field equipped with “armor” (XX)⁵⁴, “spear

⁵¹ “*Tumores de fuego –sus hombros– derrámanse a las fosa, furgones / donde los muertos pían, sobre ruinas de mortuorio / trigo.*”

⁵² This could be understood as the distribution of the sensible defined by Rancière; the order of the police as the order established and the place given to each man inside a society: “Police is, in its essence, the law that, though generally implicit, defines the part or the lack of part of the parties” (“*La police est, en son essence, la loi, généralement, implicite, qui définit la part ou l’absence de part des parties*”). MT ; the original is included in italics). Jacques Rancière, *La mésentente : Politique et philosophie*, Paris, Galilée, 1995, p. 51.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 52. “[...] déplace un corps du lieu qui lui était assigné ou change la destination d’un lieu”.

⁵⁴ “*Antígona enterrada, con armadura y lanza, a la puerta del invierno*”.

and helmet” (XIII)⁵⁵, “lantern and radio” (XV)⁵⁶, “lamp and shovel” (XVI)⁵⁷, rifle and chamomile (XXII)⁵⁸, to fulfill her task as a warrior and gravedigger, a female soldier and healer. Antigone searches for the dead that claim her care (XXVI), each one of them is her brother, each of them “she bathes in the mist as she would wash an Ionian vase, lies with him in another dream, tired and sweet” (XVI)⁵⁹.

Antigone does not abandon her task even though men die by the thousands (VI) and she has to endlessly mourn her brother Polynices each of the hundred thousand times she buries a corpse (XXX)⁶⁰. “Because these are the days of a planet in ruins; [...] with miserable governments, kingdoms and republics at War [...] [who] populate the heavens with angry dead bodies, like stars” (XXI)⁶¹. In this scenario, which is the modern State of exception, Eielson’s Antigone does rise, but not to oppose the law, Creon or to call upon the Gods or the denizens; she tries to break the accepted distribution of the bodies and turn her symbolic burials into a way of recognizing the soldiers as subjects that count.

<h3>Breaking out of invisibility</h3>

Now, despite her efforts to break this distribution of the bodies and bury soldiers as subjects who have value, Antigone’s attempts seem to be fruitless because silence and indifference remain. Following Rancière’s arguments, the political action must be a process of subjectivation where one creates an instance of enunciation⁶²; those who are excluded “make themselves count and institute a community by placing in common an error that is nothing

⁵⁵ “Santa es Antígona sin hijos, con lanza y yelmo en la batalla”.

⁵⁶ “Cubierta de aluminio, linterna y radio verde en el perfil”.

⁵⁷ “Jardines augustos invade, lámpara y pala en la mano”.

⁵⁸ “El fusil alzado hacia el estío, mezclado a los efluvios rubios de la manzanilla”.

⁵⁹ “Ella a Polinices (...) lávalo en nieblas como a un vaso jonio, tiéndese con él en / otro sueño, agotada y dulce”.

⁶⁰ “Antígona augusta ¿habéis visto a Polinices cien mil veces, sin tregua, sepultado?”

⁶¹ “Porque éstos son los días de un planeta en ruina [...]; con miserables / gobiernos, reinos y repúblicas en Guerra [...] [que] pueblan el cielo de coléricos muertos, como estrellas.”

⁶² Rancière, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

more than this confrontation, the contradiction of two worlds in single one”⁶³. Thus, this instance of enunciation requires a community to be set where it can be possible to shake the established division through the “placing in common”, in other words, through confrontation. But in Eielson’s *Antigone* there is no community or “other parties” to confront; in the battlefield one can only find the wounded, the dead and Antigone, who cries “lost and sad” in her “meadow, fallen amidst the fruits of combat fire” (XIX)⁶⁴. It is possible to say that, in modern states, since the law has vanished and sovereign power has absolute control to decide over the bodies, the process of subjectivation is not viable because there is no longer a community that can sustain it.

That could be the reason why Antigone doesn’t have her own voice in the poem, she doesn’t speak or address anyone; there is no heroism attached to her actions, no self-recognition. It is the poetic voice, a distant and empathic “I”, who describes her loneliness and the devastation she witnesses: “Oh, sister of the shadows!” (II), “you alone remain there” (III), “you have seen [...] scorched athletes [...] [and] bone resorts bathed by sunlight” (IX)⁶⁵. There is no one to care for her, to help her in her endeavor or to assist her while she struggles; Antigone, just like the fallen, remains anonymous and silent. In a certain way, as a war nurse she also becomes a “body to be killed”, she has entered a zone of non-distinction, a threshold where the exception is the rule and there is no collectivity to validate or recognize her humanity.

Because Antigone’s actions have a political dimension and because she cannot fulfill her deed in the margin that constitutes the war zone, the poetic voice does not only describe her actions but makes pleas on her behalf. The poetic “I” implores attention, claims the attention of her

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 49. “[...] s’y font compter et instituent une communauté par le fait de mettre en commun le tort qui n’est rien d’autre que l’affrontement même, la contradiction de deux mondes logés en un seul”.

⁶⁴ “Pérdida y triste en tu / planicie, caída entre los frutos de fuego del combate, has / de llorar”.

⁶⁵ “¡Oh, hermana de las sombras!” “Tú sola quedas allí” “has visto [...] calcinados atletas [...] [y] balnearios de hueso bañados por el sol”.

father—equated with the natural god “father Sun”⁶⁶, nature⁶⁷, the ruins of the city⁶⁸ and, somehow, all the readers. The poetic voice addresses every possible “other party” that can recognize her actions in order to allow her to regain her voice by achieving subjectivation in a community. Again, there is no heroism in this Antigone, she doesn’t exemplify civil disobedience; the possibility to fulfill a political instance of enunciation is given but lacks the community that would recognize the error of the exclusion of these bodies. Antigone strives to give back humanity to each one of these soldiers by burying them, but in the margin of non-distinction, there is no possibility to find others with a voice who could see and understand the meaning of these rites, which would allow a community to be set and the political to achieve its goal.

From this perspective, the poem ends and silence remains. Alternatively, some considerations could be made to open further interpretations. For instance, in order to fracture the distribution of the bodies through Antigone’s action, the community could be understood outside the division of *zoe* and *bios*; it is possible to consider the outline of this new set of categories in a framework of fraternity rather than citizenship, which would imply another understanding of society as a collectivity and a restructuration of the commitments that the individuals have inside of it⁶⁹. It is also a plausible idea to think this alternate framework not as a fraternity but as a sorority⁷⁰, because brotherhood is tainted by the tensions within the hierarchies of a patrilineal household⁷¹, while sisterhood is not so charged with the rhetoric of

⁶⁶ “Dazzling Oedipus, father sun of the dead, help her” (VI) (“*Edipo fulgurante, padre sol de los muertos, ayudadla*”).

⁶⁷ “Oh clouds, spring martyr of war, leaned griffins and pines, see her [...]!” (“*!Oh nubes, primavera / mártir de la Guerra, grifos y pinos inclinados, vedla [...]*”) (V).

⁶⁸ “Oh, light of mercury, funeral cities, waves that throw marble fruits and horses to the ground, have you seen Antigone wandering the mossy meadows [...]?” (“*!Oh luz de mercurio, fúnebres ciudades, olas que / aventáis marmóreos frutos y caballos en la arena ¿habéis / visto a Antígona vagar por las llanuras musgosas [...]*?”)

⁶⁹ Goldhill, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

⁷⁰ George Steiner, *Antigones*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1984, p. 12.

⁷¹ Goldhill, *op. cit.*, p. 236

family loyalty⁷². This point of view would allow deepening the analysis of Eielson's poem by providing a better understanding of Antigone's political endeavor and her interest to tend all soldiers as if they were her own brother; what unites them in a fraternal link? What is "the common"⁷³ between them? How can this shared nature be defined? What is equal and between who⁷⁴? Furthermore, these questions about sorority could introduce the dimension of gender, which I left aside, in order to interpret other fragments of the poem related to the parallels between soldiers and children, and a sisterly/motherly behavior of Eielson's Antigone.

In conclusion, Eielson's Antigone has indeed a political dimension that responds to the interest that his generation had in the relation between art and the present, concretely, the aesthetical questions and the imperative need to reflect on the social political context. His poem can be analyzed in the light of biopolitics, which allows a better understanding of Antigone's silent task of symbolically burying soldiers in a war zone where civil law has vanished and only humanitarian rights appear to protect the bodies that were already marked as "bare life". But her actions remain unseen and unacknowledged; that is the reason why her political act of enunciation, in other words, her attempt to raise her voice to give back humanity to these bodies that did not count, is unsuccessful. Overall, in the case of this Antigone, open conflict between two concrete and opposed spheres isn't necessary for the political action to happen; however, the lack of a community that validates the symbolic gesture of the funerary rites leaves Antigone alone and invisible. The construction of such community could require a new definition of man and of the citizen that allows overcoming the split that originated bare life; sorority or sisterhood could provide a new framework to

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 237.

⁷³ *To koinon*. "Understanding *to koinon* is the most pressing imperative of its interrogation of family and politics". *Ibid.*, p. 246.

⁷⁴ "[...] de quelles choses y a-t-il et n'y a-t-il pas égalité entre quels et quels ?" Rancière, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

think these new categories, but this new path of analysis will remain open for future considerations.