Rummaging in the Sewing Basket of the Gods: Sheila Watson's "Antigone"

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Jorge Luis Borges says that "poetry is a magical, mysterious, unexplainable—although not incomprehensible—event."[1] Sheila Watson's short story "Antigone", highly poetic, is, perhaps, too magical and mysterious to even discuss, let alone explain; however, the temptation to try to comprehend it is as irresistible as the call to wander in it, for Watson leaves space within her story for the reader to participate, to assemble the pieces and construct meaning. Watson's prose has a formal grace but is also, paradoxically, impish and rebellious—an appropriate vehicle for a statement about the manifestations of authority in our society and the defiance of them.

The curious tensions which structure "Antigone" call to mind May Sarton's essay on the writing of poetry in which she lists "some of the tensions I experience in the writing of a poem:

1. The tension between past and present,
2. between idea and image,
3. between music and meaning,
4. between particular and universal,
5. between creator and critic,
6. between silence and words."[2]

Sarton's list provides touchstones for understanding Watson's story, a story which, at first reading, seems chaotic, almost without form or meaning, put together as a collage of pieces from other texts set against her own writing. Some of Sarton's "tensions" are more central than others in a consideration of this piece, but all of them are suggestive.

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[1] "Poetry," *Twenty-four Conversations with Borges; Including a Selection of Poems.* Interviews by Roberto Alifano, 1981-1983 (Housatonic, Ma.: Lascaux, 1984) 37.

[2] *Writings on Writing* (Orono, Me.: Puckerbrush, 1980) 7.

1

The tension between *past* and *present* is immediate and vivid in "Antigone." The story is set in the recent past, in a place we take to be twentieth-century British Columbia, Canada, but its links to a much older past are presented as well, right at the outset, as the first-person narrator compares his father to the Biblical Moses, "simply trying to bring a stubborn and moody people under God's yoke." The father in the story is trying to rule "men who thought they were gods or, at very least, god-afflicted and god-pursued."[3] Both the gods and the god-afflicted people he tries to rule are inmates of an insane asylum, and another link to the distant past is provided by their all having the names of Greek gods.

The narrator's father does not really *rule* the inmates. He watches over them so that they will not trouble their society, doing his best to "maintain an atmosphere of sober common sense" (43) in his institution. He does not notice, however, that among the weeds he has let grow up in his own garden is Antigone, his defiant niece. She lives in the asylum with her sister, Ismene, and her cousin, the story's narrator. By virtue of these names and relationships out of history, we are invited to see the ruler of the asylum as Creon and his son as Haemon, although neither is actually named. Like other writers who have retold the tale of Antigone, Watson presents her version with the assumption that readers know the classic story of Antigone and her defiance of the King of Thebes, and will appreciate how the author changes it in giving it a contemporary setting.

On its very simplest level, this is a story a young man tells of being in love with his exasperating cousin and of watching her defy the authority of his father, the keeper of the insane asylum, by digging up the "public ground" of the asylum to hold a funeral for a dead bird. But we keep remembering the Antigone who defied her uncle to give burial rites to her brother, whom her uncle had left to lie dead in the sun, at the mercy of carrion birds and animals, as punishment for his act of rebellion. The classical Antigone was banished for her defiance and hanged herself in the cave to which she was exiled. Her lover, Haemon, killed himself to be with her. In the Greek play by Sophocles, Haemon has little to say, but this time Watson has him tell the story, thereby creating a special kind of pathos. The Antigone of Sophocles' play defies her uncle because of a greater loyalty—to a power of decency and natural order beyond his authority; Watson's Antigone has a similar motivation.

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[3] Sheila Watson, "Antigone," *Five Stories* (Toronto: Coach House, 1984) 43.

By suggesting these affinities between the past and the present, and by recalling the world of Greek myth and drama, Watson establishes a formalistic tone. She makes clear that we are dealing with *literature*, with sets of associations and stories, not with a "realistic" story of life in contemporary British Columbia. In addition to the immediately obvious Greek connections are references, all through the story, to the Old and New Testaments, in the language of the King James version. These quotations and references are intertwined with bits of narrative and description, so that the present is placed within the past, is shown to be inescapably part of it, and is to be understood in this context.

2

Idea is conveyed through *image*. Watson's story is full of ideas—indeed is a story of ideas—but they are not presented in a didactic way. Layers and clusters of images are gathered and left to have their own effects, without explanation. The images come from the present-day world of the story, Greek myth, the Hebrew and Greek scriptures, and the perceptions of the story's characters. The images work through juxtaposition, repetition, and asssociation with particular characters. They are not explained; they are presented, sometimes repeated, but never pointed at or analysed.

Out of the British Columbia setting and the characters' interactions with it come the powerful images of the two banks of the river. On the right bank is the ordered world where the asylum, convent, churches, cemetery, market, and penitentiary make up the "habitable world." On the left bank is the wilderness "of Alaska tea and bulrushes" (46). Between the two, runs the river, crossed by two bridges, one old and full of knotholes through which the narrator is afraid of falling, and one new, presumably safe. Ismene is suited to the world of the right bank, but Antigone is fascinated by stories of crossing the river, of escape to the world of the left bank.

On the new bridge, the narrator can stand and observe both banks. There, he thinks about the differences between Antigone and her sister Ismene. For Ismene, "the earth is an oblate spheroid."

> It's the head that counts, she said.

> In her own head she made diagrams to live by, cut and fashioned after the eternal patterns spied out by Plato as he rummaged about in the sewing basket of the gods. (48)

The narrator says more than once of Ismene that she sees the world in an ordered way. "Antigone, on the other hand, sees the world flat as I do and feels it tip beneath her feet." Ismene sees the world as a tangerine which can be divided into neat segments and enjoyed, one by one. Antigone "has walked in the market and seen the living animals penned and the dead hanging stiff on their hooks." Ismene would live "in some prefabricated and perfect chrysolite by some paradigm which made love round and whole. She would simply live and leave destruction in the purgatorial ditches outside her walled paradise" (48). Antigone asks repeatedly how often we can cross the same river. "I've known men who scorned any kind of bridge, Antigone says. Men have walked into the water, she says, or, impatient, have jumped from the bridge into the river below" (45-46). Such impetuosity is out of the question in Ismene's neatly ordered world in the carefully controlled asylum on the right bank of the river.

When the scene of the story shifts from the bridge to the lawn of the asylum, the narrator describes how Antigone and Ismene relate to flowers. Ismene sits in the monkey puzzle tree and slits daisies to

> make a chain for her neck and a crown for her hair. . . . Antigone reaches for a branch of the magnolia. It is almost beyond her grip. Buds flame above her. She stands on a small fire of daisies which smoulder in the roots of grass. (49)

The narrator drops a handful of loose daisies on the bird's stiff body. He also takes a bruised magnolia blossom from Antigone's hand and puts it into the box with the bird. So the three characters are defined for us by their differing connections to the setting of the story. Ismene, typically, shapes the daisies to a chain, to order; Antigone, as always, reaches for splendour almost beyond her reach; and the narrator, between the two, picks up the daisies which Ismene leaves out of her chain and rescues the magnolia which Antigone bruises. The flower imagery underscores characterization and some of the story's central themes.

Greek myth supplies images as well as names. In this story, the "gods" are the inmates of the insane asylum, who are watched over like the dethroned Titans: Atlas forgets the sky "while he sat eating the dirt which held him up" (44); Pan, the gardener, shifts "sprinklers with a hooked stick"; Kallisto, the bear, cries for the dead bird because it "has a bride's flower in its hand" (52). The narrator thinks of Inachos, Kephissos, and Lethaios, as he looks down into the river which flows between the two banks of his world, the river which he sees as dangerous. The clusters of Greek names evoke many-layered images which are beyond the setting and happenings of this story. It is Watson's particular genius that she trusts the effects of all these complex images and their associations and does not try to tie them down or limit them, so she extends the reaches of her story.

Biblical imagery has similar effects. The trumpets of Corinthians and of Revelations, which the narrator remembers while he watches Antigone bury the dead bird, carry associations of challenge and of judgement which reinforce the main theme of the story. In addition, they give it a dimension of splendour. The burial of the bird is surrounded with images of parties, weddings, and the judgement day, but Antigone insists that it is a funeral, not a wedding or a party—*her* funeral. The burial does anticipate a final judgement which is delivered by the father/uncle who, preceded by Pan, holding a "sprinkler hook like a spear," comes down the path to see what his charges are doing. He stops and raises his voice in judgement:

> This ground is public property, he says. No single person has any right to an inch of it.
>
> I've taken six inches, Antigone says. Will you dig the bird up again?
>
> If men live at all, my father said, it is because discipline saves their life for them. From Antigone he simply turned away. (54)

Antigone is, presumably, without discipline. She is certainly not a man. As far as he is concerned, it seems, she also has no life. In his dismissal of her, he pronounces Antigone dead, as Sophocles' Creon tried to pronounce Antigone dead when she defied him. Creon, in fact, did not have Antigone killed. His community did not allow his dictates to violate the natural order. This Antigone, also, cannot be killed by the tyrant who so frightens his son and all the others around him, but he can sentence her to a place outside her community. Antigone is isolated from the world of the right bank and condemned by its disciplinarian, who simply refuses to recognize her existence.

3

Passages from the burial service in the Book of Common Prayer and from Revelations set the scene for the judgement which the narrator's father metes out. His judgement, his pronouncement, is given weight by the ritual language which has preceded his coming. As the ideas are carried by images, *meaning* is conveyed by the *music* of the language. The emotion, which is always just under the surface, is heard in the repetition and juxtaposition of phrases; the language of the King James Bible and the Book of Common Prayer is juxtaposed with the everyday speech of the characters.

The most poignant "meaning" is the narrator's love for Antigone—so that the whole story seems to be a love poem, a celebration of her and a lament for her. His sigh, repeated, "I should have loved Ismene" (48), gives point to his descriptions of the two women, making each the antithesis of the other. Ismene thinks and conforms; Antigone dreams and challenges. She challenges the narrator as she defies his father, whom he fears. Neither of the men can withstand her. Repetition creates emphasis but also cadence:

> Yet he escaped the penitentiary, she says. He escaped from the guards walking round the walls or standing with their guns in the sentry boxes at the four corners of the enclosure. He escaped. (46)

And, then, a paragraph later: "He did escape, she persists, and lived forever on the far side of the river in the Alaska tea and bulrushes."

Words and phrases of the New Testament are twined through not only the narrator's phrasing, but also Antigone's matter-of-fact speech, and the voice of the madwoman, Kallisto, so that the narrative weaves together the splendid, the sacred, and the everyday.

> We shall rise again, I mutter, but we shall not all be changed.
>
> Antigone does not seem to hear me.
>
> Behold, I say in a voice she must hear, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, the trumpet shall sound.
>
> Ismene turns to Kallisto and throws the daisy chain about her neck.

> Shall a virgin forget her adorning or a bride the ornament of her breast?
>
> Kallisto is lifting her arms toward the tree.
>
> The bride groom has come, she says, white as a fall of snow. He stands above me in a great ring of fire.
>
> Antigone looks at me now.
>
> Let's cover the bird up, she says. Your father will punish us all for making a disturbance.
>
> He has on his garment, Kallisto says, and on his thigh is written King of Kings. (53)

4

By surrounding the very *particular*, very small story of the burial of a bird in a tiny plot of ground in British Columbia with the images and music of traditional literature, especially religious literature, Watson extends this local struggle into a *universal* one and makes significant a seemingly unimportant event. Her Antigone is messing up the neat order of the right bank, letting in a little chaos, a little disorder . . . "she defies what she sees with a defiance which is almost denial" (48), and her defiance has grandeur. The lawn of an insane asylum in contemporary British Columbia becomes a stage on which, once again, the conflicts of ancient Thebes play themselves out. A voice is raised in challenge against an arrogant ruler. This defiance has echoed through the ages, and, by juxtaposing two voices so distant in time from each other, Watson invites her readers to take a long view of history. We feel an ache of sympathy for Antigone in her struggle to free herself from a tyrannical uncle in order to reach out to life on the other side of the river, beyond the conventions of the right bank; Antigone arouses our sympathy for all creative, rebel, "Left Bank" figures.

The narrator is one young man, but his conflict is the conflict between the safe choice and the demanding, even dangerous, one: "I should have loved Ismene, but I didn't. It was Antigone I loved" (47). In choosing Antigone, he chooses rebellion over order, challenge over acquiescence. All the world, it seems, has sympathy for a lover, and this young man's difficult love draws affection from the reader. He is often, and understandably, irked by Antigone, by the very qualities which he loves; he takes on the attributes of the universal, troubled lover. The backdrop of his love is the long history of the world since a similar young man, Haemon, loved his cousin Antigone, in Thebes, and lost her to the will of the father he could not defy. By naming her characters as she does, Watson brings into the story the tragedy of those young lovers of Thebes, widening the particular story of the twentieth-century love affair into timelessness.

5

The world of literature from which Watson, as writer, draws characters and associations is accessible to her as critic, too. The internal tension between the *creator* and the *critic* is not something the reader can know about directly, but it is possible to see in the story the effects of this kind of tension. Watson's story is very "formed." Emotion is carefully controlled. The creator never indulges herself by letting the emotion of the story create its own rambling shape. Each piece seems pared and deliberately placed. The prevailing aesthetic of the story is classical rather than romantic. The dominant narrative is one of cool elegance towards the seething anger and rebellion of Antigone and the conflicting emotions of the young-man-in-love.

The tension between the creator and the critic is suggested not only in Watson's careful collage of images and tones, but also in the conflicts of the story itself. The narrator's father is the embodiment of the judge, the critic. His role is to rule "men who thought they were gods or, at very least, god-afflicted and god-pursued." Antigone is an artist-figure, a rebel who defies that authority, who is comfortable with the "gods" of the insane asylum, who, like them, suffers in the ordered life of the right bank of the river. The narrator sees the god-link in her, although he does not much like it:

> I know she's going to speak of her own misery and I won't listen. Only a god has the right to say: Look what I suffer. Only a god should say: What more ought I to have done for you that I have not done? (46)
>
> Like Atlas she tries to keep the vaulted sky from crushing the flat earth. Like Hermes she brings a message that there is life if one can escape to it in the brush and bulrushes of some dim Hades beyond the river. (48)

Like the Antigone of the ancient play, Watson's Antigone believes in an order which is beyond that of the tyrants and dictators of this world. In her simple insistence on burying a dead bird in public ground, in defiance of her uncle who "spends his life trying to tame people" (50), Watson's character repeats Antigone's act of defiance against Creon, King of Thebes, who set his rule above *dike*, the natural order which even the gods must obey.

6

Along with other tensions in this story, which works so much like a poem, the tension between *silence* and *words* is deftly managed. Watson herself, as artist/writer, chooses what is to be said and what is not to be said—and how it is to be said—or not said. She leaves unexplained gaps for us to be in alone. She trusts silences, silences full of the echoes from the words around them. Her silences are not just spaces on the page: they are processes through which the reader integrates ideas, images, music, particulars, and universals into meaning.

There are many different voices and silences, in various combinations of public and private language. The narrator, speaking private poetry to himself, speaks in a bittersweet voice which we all hear. Antigone, speaking publicly, and especially to her uncle, is heard by the reader, but not by her uncle. In the narrator's private telling of his story, his speech is often ritualistic: "The voice of a people comforts me" (52). Sometimes, the narrator thinks that he is speaking to himself, but Antigone "hears" him:

> I speak private poetry to myself: Between four trumpeting angels at the four corners of the earth a bride stands before the altar in a gown as white as snow.
>
> Yet I must have been speaking aloud because Antigone challenges me: You're mistaken. It's the winds the angels hold, the four winds of the earth. After the just are taken to paradise the winds will destroy the earth. It's a funeral, she says, not a wedding. (44)

Antigone's challenge to her cousin is a public one, and her words are her own.

Whereas Antigone speaks in defiance, and the narrator out of his love for her, Ismene creates patterns—patterns which are apprehended by the intellect. Through it all, father/uncle/Creon tries to keep order by following rules, in the belief that "a man must have order among his own if he is to keep order in the state" (51). Disorder, however, intrudes:

> Despite the care which my father took to maintain an atmosphere of sober common sense in his whole establishment, there were occasional outbursts of self-indulgence which he could not control. (43-44)

Antigone's burying the bird with public ceremony is one of those "outbursts of self-indulgence" which the narrator's father is unable to control, although she is well aware of the consequences of her actions. This is, finally, the story of a young man who loves the rebel/creator, who celebrates her passionate defiance and, through celebration, begins to find the courage to free himself from the tyranny of his father's rule. He is learning that, to find life, he must be willing to risk losing it. In the end, what we have is his poem for Antigone. His is a voice that we seldom hear in the Greek play; it provides another perspective: it is a silence given words.

Watson's writing of this story is also, perhaps, an outburst of self-indulgence; she appears to delight in the play of association, intellect, and compassion in this story which does not conform to the "rules" of short-story structure and development. We also have, wonderfully, *Watson's* act of defiance, a "rummage in the sewing baskets of the gods" in order to create a subtle story of her own pain in being "god-afflicted"—carefully aesthetically distanced, because "Things have to buried. . . . They can't be left lying around anyhow for people to see" (52). Watson's private pain is spoken in the polite, classical, public voice of her story, but even more eloquently in its spaces. Out of all sorts of snippets and pieces, carefully arranged around silences, Watson has created another bridge over the river, an allegory (an other speaking) demonstrating that "there is life if one can escape to it."

Be it short story/collage/allegory, or, according to Sarton's and Borges' descriptions, poetry, Watson's "Antigone" surely is "magical, mysterious, unexplainable—although not incomprehensible." The other stories in *Five Stories* share the elusiveness of this one; like it, and like Watson's novel, *The Double Hook*, they seem to be parables/allegories in which particular, small events in the lives of contemporary characters take on far deeper meaning: through image, association, and the haunting music of Sheila Watson's language.

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