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*Antigone today: a time to die.
Some thoughts*

Abstract

Recently in Italy a highly publicized and debated case of euthanasia (Eluana Englaro's case – 2009) has inspired a far different, provocative and very innovative adaptation: *Antigone* by Valeria Parrella (2012). Resting upon Parrella's play, and 'appropriating' her reading, the current paper discusses a case of contemporary American society (Brittany Maynard's case – 2014), which presents some similarities with the Italian case surrounding Parrella's source of inspiration, *i.e.*, the right to opt for euthanasia when one cannot anymore access to a 'dignified and decent life'. In both cases, Italian and American, after about 2,500 years Antigone proves to be relevant to our contemporary society as she provides a forum for debates and reflections which, touching on existential questions, are everlastingly essential to human kind.

Di recente in Italia un caso di eutanasia che ha fatto molto scalpore (il caso di Eluana Englaro, nel 2009) ha ispirato un nuova 'versione' dell'*Antigone* di Sofocle, differente dalle altre e particolarmente provocatoria: l'*Antigone* di Valeria Parrella (2012). Basandosi sull'opera della Parrella, e facendo propria la sua lettura, il presente articolo esamina e discute il caso americano di Brittany Maynard (2014) che presenta alcuni aspetti simili e paralleli al caso italiano che ha ispirato la Parrella, cioè il diritto di optare per l'eutanasia quando non si ha più alcuna possibilità di condurre una vita autonoma, 'una vita dignitosa e decente'. In entrambe le vicende, quella italiana e quella americana, pur a distanza di 2500 anni circa, Antigone e la sua lotta dimostrano di essere rilevanti per la nostra società contemporanea in quanto capaci di fornire un forum per dibattiti e riflessioni su questioni esistenziali ed essenziali per il genere umano.

*To all the 'Antigones',
of the past, present, and future,
from all over the world.*

1. *Introduction: Antigone and her 'clones'*

It is a challenge to one's stamina to follow the traces of this 2,500-year-young Theban princess, who looks younger every day. (Fradinger [2010, 15])

No better epitome could mirror the current state of the reception history of Sophocles' *Antigone* as a flood of adaptations, remaking, revision¹, performances, and interpre-

¹ For the terminology see, *e.g.*, HARDWICK (2003, 9-10); MEE – FOLEY (2011, 6-10, with a concise analysis of key terms, such as "translating", "adapting", "remaking", and "remixing"), and FOSTER (2012, 2-3, with a focus on the terms "adaption" and "revision"). All translations from Greek into English are my own.

tations has been occurring ever since the fifth century BC, thus submerging our studies². Most of the revivals, it not all of them, echo the stark polarities that «this play of two points of view»³ has so far allowed the readers to identify. The two main characters, Antigone and Creon, with their different agenda, have in fact been thought of, and been represented, as signifiers of opposite principles: *oikos* vs *polis* – to start with the perhaps most influential reading of Hegel⁴ – freedom vs abusive power/tyranny, conscience vs coercion, individual (and individual free choice) vs collectivity (and vs the ensuing mass pressure), moral vs political law, religion vs blasphemy, woman vs man⁵, and *plain* right vs *undeniable* wrong⁶. As known, the scales generally tip in favor of Antigone, and “how could it not?” is the obvious, and fairly embraceable, question which one would ask her/himself⁷. Standing against iniquities perpetrated in the name of the state, claiming the

² And it was ‘just’ thirty years ago when, in his work about the different manifestations of *Antigone* over the ages, STEINER (1984, 194) remarked that the “iterations” of this tragedy in theater, opera, art, and other media were too vast to itemize, which, *a maiore* today, is a significant indicator both of the prolific *Nachleben* of the play itself and, in consequence, of the uncountable related studies. To enumerate even only the scholarship working as landmarks in the still, and rapidly, evolving reception studies of antiquity with a focus on *Antigone* would take a (long) paper *per se*, as not only has the tragedy been revived in a varied range of media over the ages, but also – above all the 20th and 21st centuries – it has been appropriated and re-adapted all around the world, ‘landing’ in countries that originally were not informed by the so-called Western civilization (e.g., MEE-FOLEY [2011, 3-6], talk in fact of *Antigone* as “ubiquitous” play). A synthetic, yet well representative, overview of this state is in FRADINGER (2010); SÖFFNER (2010); MEE – FOLEY (2011, 1-10, with nn. 1, 2, 3); FLETCHER (2013, 1268-1270). For further bibliographic references, see below.

³ CARTER (2012, 119): the scholar provides a concise review of this quite traditional reading (116-20), and adds to it by discussing other «helpful pairs of opposite» (120-28). Regarding this, see also below, n. 6.

⁴ HEGEL (1807) VI.a, on which see, e.g., PAOLUCCI (1962, esp. 320-25); IANELLI (2006, esp. 32-36); FORNARO (2012, 107-14). See, also, below n. 14.

⁵ As known, this specific perspective has prompted a ‘feministic’ – and often provocative – reading of the tragedy. SÖDERBÄCK (2010) offers a good collection of interesting and thought-provoking examples of feministic interpretations of the character of Antigone, and her relevance in contemporary debates about the role of women in our society. For a critique of feminist tradition of reading of Sophocles’ *Antigone*, in particular against the background of political theory in response to Hegel’s interpretation, see GOLDHILL (2012, 231-48).

⁶ Similar set was already discussed by WOODHARD (1966, 64) who listed the following antinomies: «Divine versus human law, individual versus state, religious versus secular, private versus public morality».

⁷ A different approach to this tragedy, and in particular to the character of Antigone, has been recently proposed by HONIG (2013). To confine myself to her different interpretation of the political core of this tragedy by applying a new ‘method’ of reading (which she calls ‘Interruption’), and by dismantling some iconic features of Sophocles’ *Antigone*, in particular Antigone’s association with mourning and familial *pietas*, Honig presents the heroine as an exponent of life-affirming – rather than life-denying – and activism (with Arendt’s philosophy in the background). Honig’s work is as much interesting as controversial. In the 2014 national Convention of the American Philological Association (now renamed «Society for Classical Studies») a panel was devoted to Honig’s work and served as a forum among distinguished scholars: see LEONARD – PORTER *et al.* (2014). On Honig’s work, see, also, more recently HARDWICK (2015). Without denying some values of Honig’s reading, I would agree with some concerns that surfaced in the forum. Honig’s reinterpretation is often convoluted, and the reader sometimes has the impression that her reading strives for re-shaping *Antigone* in a way that would rather fit her own pre-formed political project. For similar concerns, see also HANNAWAY (2013), and WEDDERBURN (2014). In my present work, independently –

priority of those “*per se*-justified” moral norms existing independently of legal enactment – norms that we call “human rights”⁸ –, and thus championing their superiority over the laws set by the state, Antigone has become the *par excellence*-icon of both a freedom fighter⁹ and a crusader for the defense of human rights¹⁰, such as (but not exclusively) the right to a proper burial, which happens to be denied – or, in some way, prevented – by some civic authority¹¹. She timely re-appears wherever and whenever human rights are endangered due to some sort of political, and often military, abusive power, *i.e.*, wherever and whenever Creon re-appears in new disguises¹². Indeed, «ad alcune tragedie si torna, ma altre, come *Antigone*, sembrano tornare», as Rossanda fairly noted¹³.

Undoubtedly Antigone’s cry for justice, whatever human right is at stake, and Creon’s overbearing power lead the reader to frame them in a black-and-white picture, with

and, to several degrees, differently – from Honig (and from her new reading-methodology and philosophical background), my analysis of Antigone’s character and story is also one which looks at the heroine as a life-affirmation fighter, for last, but not least, she would represent the hope and possibility of ‘political’ change (which can result from activism), and new beginnings: regarding this, see below, n. 57.

⁸ For a good definition and history, see NICKEL (2013).

⁹ Just to mention a very few examples confined to the last decades of the 20th and 21st centuries, Antigone appears in this guise in France with Jean Anouilh, 1943/1944 (see, *e.g.*, FLEMING [2006]; FORNARO [2012, 128-30]) and Charlotte Delbo, 1979 (see, *e.g.*, GOLDFARB [1980, esp. 1-5]); in Germany with, *e.g.*, Bertold Brecht, 1945 (see, *e.g.*, FORTE [2008]; BAJAMA GRIGA [2008]; FORNARO [2012a, 19-42]) and Heinrich Böll, 1978 (see, *e.g.*, FORNARO [2012a, 141-51]), during World War II, the Nazism “domain”, and its aftermath; in the former Soviet Union with Tengiz Abuladze, 1984 (see, *e.g.*, ANDERSON [2012, 616-17]), during a retrospective prosecution of Stalinist totalitarianism; in South Africa, in the ’70s, during apartheid, with Athol Fugard, 1973 (see, *e.g.*, FUGARD [2002]; GOFF-SIMPSON [2007a, 271-320]; FORNARO [2010, 34-36]), and in British colonial Nigeria with Femi Osofisan, 1994 (see, *e.g.*, GOFF-SIMPSON [2007b, 321-64]); in Argentina with Griselda Gambaro, 1986, in the aftermath of the military dictatorship and the “Dirty War”, 1976-1983 (see, *e.g.*, FLEMING [1999]; LANE [2007]; NELLI [2009]). See also below, n. 12.

¹⁰ «Sophocles has probably shown us in *Antigone the first civil rights resistor*» (McDonald [2012, 642]; the italics is mine). For her advocacy for the defense of human rights, Antigone has been at times equated to the so-called *conscientious objector*: see below, n. 31.

¹¹ Most of the times, in fact, as in her original time and place, the spark of the “Antigones”’s fight is a corpse (or corpses) of a family member (either the “biological” family, or the “national” one, *i.e.*, the whole civic community) whose death deserves to be properly mourned and treated with dignity, and whose memory deserves to be honored, all of which is achievable by being granted the right to a burial. With reference to this, perhaps one of the most famous “reincarnations” of Antigone and her fight occurred in Argentina which «has probably ‘cannibalized’ Antigone more often than any other country in South America» as FRADINGER (2011, 67) says, claiming *Antigone*’s Argentine presence as a “national tradition”. On the footsteps of Gambaro’s *Antigona Furiosa* (see above, n. 9) Antigone has usually been equated to “The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo” who openly opposed the military Junta in their attempt to recover the bodies of their *vanished* beloved.

¹² In addition to the brief sample given above (see n. 9), it is worthy to mention a recent production of the play in Beirut (December, 2014), entitled *Antigone of Syria*, by a group of Syrian refugee women who reimaged the ancient drama, and created a new version, by interlacing their own stories of insurrection against the authority and of the ensuing suffering with those of the ancient characters. For a full description, quotations of some passages and pictures of the production, see ROSS (2014).

¹³ ROSSANDA (1987, 3), on which, see, BAILONE (2008); FORNARO (2012, 170-71).

Antigone all righteousness and Creon complete taint (*pace* Hegel)¹⁴. And, again undoubtedly, one is meant to take Antigone's side.

Without any intention of undercutting the grandeur and nobility of the heroine and her action – in her ancient and modern appearances –, on the contrary, still personally standing for her, this paper aims at presenting a specific case in which the propensity to take Antigone's side seems to be not as much unconditional and automatic as it has been almost all the times, which thus frustrates and obstructs, once again, Antigone's new plea for individual freedom and justice, *i.e.*, for the respect of human rights which, in some circumstances, may transcend legal systems.

The case that I intend to discuss refers to contemporary American society, and – a further proof of the “recurrence” of Antigone's tragedy – presents some kind of similarities with a recent event of contemporary Italian society. My discussion rests upon a 2012-original adaptation of Sophocles' play by the Italian writer Valeria Parrella¹⁵, which I intend to apply to the American counterpart. This case addresses an ethical, social issue that is new compared to the ones which Antigone has so far denounced, and that constitutes a “dubious” (for some) human right: the right to choose to die, with euthanasia/aid-in-dying being the matter at issue.

There is not a text, a new version, or an adaptation of the ancient drama which has been inspired to the American case I shall discuss, and which, in consequence, constitutes a new case of reception of Sophocles' play. It is my “reading”, and thinking, of that story which constitutes a form of reception as I apply some aspects of Sophocles' *Antigone* (the source) to the “protagonist” of that American story through the medium of an actual adaptation of the ancient tragedy, *i.e.*, the play *Antigone* by Parrella. We are thus in presence of layers of reception, and, in this very case, the “source” is double: Sophocles and Parrella¹⁶.

Through her “clones” this 2,500-years-young Theban princess, once again, speaks to us by questioning us on what is right and what is wrong, claiming respect for her choice, and paving – or trying to pave – the path for change and new beginnings.

2. *A time to die: the choice of Brittany Maynard and Parrella's Antigone.*

To die is not the worst thing, it is rather when one longs to die, but does not have the power to realize it. (Sophocles, *Electra* 1008-1009)

¹⁴ As hinted at above (n. 5), Hegel read the play as devolving on a fundamental antithesis between the city (*polis*) and the family (*oikos*). For the German philosopher, Sophocles' *Antigone* is emblematic of tragedy's “fondness” for moral dilemma where both parties are right to some degree, and yet guilty of some kind of transgression. For him, both Antigone's and Creon's position are thus defensible, and both err in some way.

¹⁵ Valeria Parrella (1973-) is a contemporary, eclectic Italian writer. Written in prose, her *Antigone* premiered in September 25, 2012 in Naples (Teatro Mercadante). It went on other, successful Italian tour in Spring 2013. My observations pertaining to Parrella's adaptation are here drawn on a previous paper of mine: LAURIOLA (2014) which provides a full analysis of the play. A different, yet valuable, reading is provided by FORNARO (2012b). All quotations of Parrella's *Antigone* are from the text published in 2012.

¹⁶ According to a technical, working term for reception studies, this would constitute an ‘analogue’: for definition and discussion, see below, n. 26.

Ending My life My Way is the title of one of the numerous articles that ever since October 2014 magazines – both printed and online¹⁷ – have devoted to the case of an American terminally ill woman who courageously decided “to go public”, strongly believing that “death with dignity” should be an option, or, better say, a right accessible to terminal patients. Diagnosed with the deadliest form of brain cancer (Glioblastoma Multiforme) in late spring 2014, told by the doctors hers was one of the largest tumor they had ever seen, and given approximately six month to live, the almost 30-years-old Brittany Maynard decided to end her life on her own terms with dignity, opting for euthanasia/aid-in-dying practice¹⁸. It was not certainly her first choice as she underwent surgery and vainly fought a cancer that kept degenerating, and, in consequence, was transforming and depleting her person.

I don't want to die, but I am dying... My [cancer] is going to kill me, and it's terrible, terrible way to die. So to be able to die with my family, *to have control of my own mind*, which I would stand to lose- to go with dignity is less terrifying. When I look into both options I have to die, I feel this is *far more humane*. (Brittany Maynard, October 27, 2014)¹⁹

Maynard and her family had to transfer from their hometown in California to Oregon, the first state where a right-to-die law, *i.e.* “Death With Dignity Act”, was passed, precisely in 1997²⁰. The amount of efforts, sacrifices and changes that she and her family had to face to have legal access to Death With Dignity, *i.e.*, changing residence, finding a new place to live and establishing a new team of doctors – not to mention the emotional distress of being “uprooted” –, inspired Brittany Maynard to ‘go public’, to advocate the freedom and the right, for every terminally ill, to have her same option. «Right now it's

¹⁷ EGAN (2014). The above narrative and reflections concerning Brittany Maynard's case can't but depend on not-academic sources. I mainly built on the interviews – and comments – conducted by EGAN (2014 [cfr. with 2014a] 2014b, 2015), on the story delivered by Brittany Maynard herself at CNN.com (see, MAYNARD 2014), and on the documentations accessible on the website ‘The Brittany Maynard Fund Organization’ at www.thebrittanyfund.org. I indeed consulted several other magazines' articles (*e.g.*, SŁOTNIK [2014]; WALLACE [2014]); they all are similar to each other, and to the ones I then selected as ‘main’ source. It is however difficult to account for all the media sources as Google.com searches for ‘Brittany Maynard’ in early April 2005 turned up about 1,540,000 hits.

¹⁸ The related terminology is an-often object of controversy as many indiscriminately apply the label “suicide”, too, to those practices. There is indeed a difference, as slight as it might seem, given that “suicide” inevitably carries some kind of judgmental connotations. Brittany Maynard emphasized her preference to avoid the term “suicide”: «For people to argue against this choice for sick people really seems evil to me [...] They try to mix it up with suicide and that's is really unfair, because there's not a single part of me that wants to die. But I am dying» (EGAN [2014b]). For an overview on the terminology – along with good reflection on the issue from both a legal and ethical perspective – see KNAPP VAN BOGAERT – OGUMBAJO (2010).

¹⁹ EGAN (2014, 66-67). The italics is my own.

²⁰ I am referring to the “Death with Dignity Act, on which see: public.health.oregon.gov/ProviderPartnerResources/EvaluationResearch/DeathwithDignityAct/Pages/index.aspx. Later, four other states (Washington, Montana, Vermont, and Mexico) authorized aid in dying. As for the situation in the other states of the U.S. and in Europe, see below, nn. 39, 59.

a choice that's only available to some Americans, which is really *unethical*», Maynard said in her very first interview²¹, acknowledging that not all who might wish to have that choice have the finances or any other means that are necessary for doing what she and her family could do.

Standing against this *iniquity* produced, in some way, by *the state's law* – for the majority of the nation's states do not authorize euthanasia –, Brittany Maynard approached the U.S. leading end-of-life choice advocacy non-profit organization, “Compassion&Choice”²², offering to use her story to campaign for political action, in California and across the nation, with an equitable extension of the End-of-Life Law (*alias* “Death with Dignity Act”) being the objective.

Agreeing to be interviewed on film about her story and decision²³, she has soon become the national symbol of the right-to-die movement, of course (!) not without sparking controversy of both a political and a religious nature, such a controversy that usually does not take into any account the dictates of conscience. These ‘dictates’, although informed by the political and religious environment to which a person belongs, are however individual. As long as these dictates do not endanger anyone else's life, nor do they result in denying anyone else's rights, following them is a right, a human right, that the individual should be granted. To a closer analysis, it borders on the so-called “freedom of conscience”, which is included in the “individual liberties” guaranteed by the International Human Rights Law²⁴.

I would not tell anyone else they should choose death with dignity. *My question is, Who thinks they have the right to tell me that I don't deserve this choice?* That I deserve to suffer for weeks or months in a tremendous amounts of physical and emotional pain? (Brittany Maynard, October 27, 2014)²⁵

Brittany Maynard's fair reaction to criticism poses the right question: it is a question of right (*pace* the wordplay); in this case specifically, the right to be free to choose about one's own life and death according to the dictates of one's own conscience, and without harming anybody else, although this might mean to go against *conventional* norms.

What does Brittany Maynard, and all of this, have to do with Parrella's *Antigone* and, consequently, with her prototype, *i.e.*, Sophocles' *Antigone*?

²¹ EGAN (2014a). The italics is mine.

²² See: www.compassionandchoices.org

²³ Now posted on “The Brittany Maynard Fund Organization” website (see above, n. 17), about 9 millions of people watched it at its first release. Brittany Maynard has left behind another video, which has been shown posthumously, according to her willing, to continue to prompt action in favor of the extension of the right to “Death with Dignity”: see below, n. 59.

²⁴ ‘Freedom of conscience’, which is often, alternatively, called ‘freedom of thought’, is regarded as precursor of other individual liberties, including freedom of religion, and it is listed under the art. 18 of *The International Covenant on Civic and Political Rights* – ICCPR (see: www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx), which is a part of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. On the freedom of conscience and the ICCPR, see PARTSCH (1981).

²⁵ EGAN (2014, 67). The italics is mine.

Per se the withholding of individual right and freedom, as the ones described above, whether by laws or a lack of protecting laws, whether by mass pressure or by an overweening belief system, would make Maynard's case an "analogue"²⁶ of Sophocles' *Antigone* as both fight in defense of individual rights, specifically centering on death and dignity. For the ancient Antigone, it is her brother's death to which dignity must be restored; for Maynard-fresh Antigone²⁷ her own – and the one of those who are in a similar situation and long for the right to access to her same choice – is the death to which dignity must be granted²⁸.

Calling on Parrella's *Antigone*, which, to my eyes, mediates between the case of Brittany Maynard and the story of Sophocles, one may see far more than this analogue.

Providing a form of "death with dignity" regardless of what law demands is, as known, the core of Sophocles' story²⁹. The form is different, yet the purpose is similar to the one that Maynard and – we will see – Parrella's Antigone champion, *i.e.*, dignity. Granting a dead a proper burial is the different form which the ancient, and peculiar, "death with dignity" action takes. The story of Sophocles' Antigone is in fact the story of a sister who dares "question" and defy the civic authority's law by giving burial to her brother's corpse, which the law has forbidden. Following the dictates of her conscience – which are under the aegis of the unwritten laws of Zeus (Sophocles, *Antigone* 450-56) – Antigone fights to let her brother Polynices rest in peace and reach the realm of death. She thus chooses freedom of conscience – which takes a religious nuance³⁰ – over lawful conduct³¹.

Similarly, a corpse, or, better say, a *quasi* corpse, is the center of the adaptation of Sophocles' story by Valeria Parrella (*Antigone*, 2012). Her Antigone, too, claims the right of her brother to be consigned to the realm of death to which he belongs. Differently from Sophocles, this Antigone's brother is not actually dead, or, rather, not biologically dead.

²⁶ I use the term according to Hardwick's definition: «A comparable aspect of source and reception» (2003, 9). It can also be labeled as 'equivalent', which Hardwick defines as «fulfilling an analogous role in source and reception but not necessarily identical in form or content» (2003, 9). As mentioned in my introduction above, in this very case the 'reception' is my 'reading' of the case.

²⁷ I shall further clarify the possibility to apply such a label to Brittany Maynard (see below). One reason, however, is already clear as described above: Maynard, too, as all the Antigones, is a freedom fighter.

²⁸ This means that Brittany Maynard comprises, in a way, both Polynices, for whose death's dignity Antigone fights, and Antigone herself as "his" champion.

²⁹ To put it very simply. I am aware of the complexity of Sophocles' tragedy *per se*, and, if not foremost, of its heroine Antigone. As for the latter, not by chance, in fact, she is seen as «impossible to label, to define» (SÖDERBÄCK [2010, 1]), almost as an enigmatic figure: *Antigone, volti di un enigma* (roughly translatable as "Antigone, a multifaceted-enigmatic figure") is, for instance, the title of one of the recent collections of studies devoted to her in Italy (ALONGE [2008]). For my reading I shall highlight some "selective" aspects of this complex figure, the ones that are suitable for the realities that I shall discuss. This is, in the end, a way in which reception works: an ancient story is re-proposed in a way that fits the current situation, to which one aims to call attention, and to which the receiving society/audience may relate.

³⁰ Regarding this, see below, nn. 34, 51.

³¹ Antigone has indeed been seen as a precursor of the so-called "conscientious objector", in its broad meaning, *i.e.* as «la figura antesignana dell'obiezione di coscienza, nella sua manifestazione più alta e più nobile, che giunge sino al sacrificio supremo della vita, in nome della fedeltà custodita a quella legge che l'uomo trova riposta nella propria coscienza»: TURCHI (2010, 2), who significantly entitles his book on "objection of conscience" after Antigone. See, also, McDONALD (2009, 12), and above, n. 10.

Paralyzed in a cold bed, with tubes feeding him and ‘breathing’ for him, Polynices, or, rather, his body, has been in an irreversible coma for thirteen years following a fatal accident. There is nothing left of the person that this Polynices once was; *it* is only a shadow of her brother being kept in a vegetative state what Antigone sees and cannot stand to see any more³². To her *it* is only a phantom with a resemblance to her brother. The one who was Polynices is no longer alive. He should be granted the freedom to rest, to go where he belongs, and thus win the right to a burial, ending with dignity a life, which, for a long time, he has neither really lived nor has any hope of really living. But as Polynices’ corpse in Sophocles, so Polynices’ “phantom” in Parrella is obstinately kept ‘in the upper world’ because of a decree, which is the result of an abusive act by the current ruler³³: King Creon, in Sophocles, and Il Legislatore (The Legislator), in Parrella. If Creon’s decree is meant to «keep up on the earth a corpse belonging to the gods below» (Sophocles, *Antigone* 1069-70), Il Legislatore literally demands to keep alive a *quasi* dead Polynices. Antigone stands for her brother’s right and freedom to go with dignity. Allowing him to die is not a crime, it is an action “made out of pity”³⁴, a choice prompted by compassion, a choice which Parrella’s Antigone bravely embraces by removing the feeding and breathing tubes that were keeping her brother’s body stuck to a faked life, thus preventing him from finally being buried.

Ho dato *dignità* di sepoltura a mio fratello³⁵.

By these words, similarly to her ancient model, Parrella’s Antigone defends and stands for her action, for which she will pay with her life. As in Sophocles, the punishment that she will suffer for her “*conscientious* objection” is “to be entombed alive”; this time, not in a cave, but in a similarly uninhabitable environment, *i.e.*, in a prison³⁶, where, reenacting the gesture of the ancient heroine, she will not let herself have such a debasing end. She in fact will freely end her life in dignity, dying “on her own terms”³⁷.

³² PARRELLA (2012, 8).

³³ As I hinted at above, there is nothing left of the person Polynices in the body that bears his name. Her brother is in fact referred to as “semi-dead”, “almost-corpse” (21; cfr. 23); and Antigone herself firmly declares that her brother is dead (31).

³⁴ Although built on Sophocles’ *Antigone* 74, well-known for its oxymoronic phrase “holy crime/crime of piety”, in Parrella pity is the label by which Haemon and Tiresias refer to Antigone’s action: PARRELLA (2012, 49, 52, 70). They thus deprive the term of any religious connotations (which is implied in Sophocles) in accordance with the secular nature of the action of Parrella’s Antigone. See, also, below, n. 51.

³⁵ PARRELLA (2012, 38); cfr. p. 79.

³⁶ PARRELLA (2012, 49). See, also, below, n. 37.

³⁷ I intentionally adopted and adapted the words of Maynard as the reaction of Parrella’s Antigone to her punishment, *i.e.*, to be ‘entombed’ alive in a prison, seems to be also meant to denounce the dehumanizing condition of life in jail – which is a crucial issue in Italy (on this aspect of Parrella’s play, see LAURIOLA [2014, 50-51 with nn. 35 and 38). Once in jail, Antigone feels as if she is no more a person, but just ‘a body’ without any hope of life: «Imprigionata in un corpo, sono, senza speranza di vita»: PARRELLA (2012, 81). She feels like her brother Polynices, imprisoned in a body which was kept obstinately alive by machine, but having nothing to do with life, and with living with dignity. Therefore, she prefers to end her life ‘her way’, *i.e.*, to die with dignity, for her imprisonment will not leave anything of the person she was, as Maynard’s cancer would have just transformed, and finally consumed, her person.

Re-using the tragedy of Sophocles, of his heroine's fight in defense of natural-human rights against man-made laws, and of the individual freedom against the state, Parrella appropriates³⁸ the ancient figure to address a burning issue, euthanasia/aid-in-dying, which is the object of contemporary controversy in several countries, Italy included³⁹.

Indeed, Parrella's work is likely a response to a recent 'death ends coma' case which, while putting an end to an old-standing right-to-die controversy pertaining to an individual case, has reopened the question of euthanasia in Italy⁴⁰. In February 2009, a 37 year old woman, Eluana Englaro, died after the removal of her feeding and breathing tube on the request of her father who for years had fought for his daughter's right to die, standing for respecting her daughter's will regardless of the laws. Suffering what doctors determined to be irreversible brain damage in a car accident in 1992, when she was 20 years old, Eluana entered a permanent vegetative state requiring artificial respiration, nutrition and hydration. She had been in this state for seventeen years, until her father finally freed her from what we might call the prison of that artificial life⁴¹.

Come persona Eluana è morta 16 anni fa.

This comment by Prof. Umberto Veronesi⁴², an internationally renowned Italian oncologist, is eloquent enough to understand the act of compassion and pity of Eluana's father, a male Antigone who has granted his "Polynices" the right to end with dignity the life of a being no more identifiable with, neither any more perceived as, his own person.

3. *By way of conclusion: some thoughts*

While hitting the mark on the peculiar nuance of the battle of Parrella's Antigone, Veronesi's very same comment helps shed some light on the possible connection between

³⁸ I use the term according to the definition provided by HARDWICK, *i.e.*, as «taking an ancient image or text and using it to sanction subsequent ideas or practices» (2003, 9).

³⁹ In Italy, as in the majority of western countries, euthanasia and aid in dying are illegal. In Europe euthanasia is legally practiced only in Belgium and the Netherlands, while aid in dying (*alias* "assisted suicide" for the terminology issue, see above, n. 18) is permitted in Switzerland. Both practices, however, always invite heated debates.

⁴⁰ Parrella has only once mentioned the case that I discuss above, *i.e.*, Eluana Englaro's case, as one of the sources of inspiration for her re-elaboration of Antigone's story (see CALLIGARO [2010]). The author might have been influenced by both this case and the related high-pitched debate that has involved medical, political and religious institutions, and has divided an entire nation. Indeed, Eluana Englaro's case became the most frequent headline in Italian newspapers and magazines for months. For a detailed account of the case see *Panorama* 2008 at italia.panorama.it/Eluana-Englaro-tutte-le-tappe-della-vicenda, and *Il Post* 2014 at www.ilpost.it/2014/02/09/eluana-englaro. It had some resonance in international media, too: see, *e.g.*, DONADIO (2009), who recalls the parallel case of Terri Schiavo that had occurred in the U.S. in 2005. As for ethical reconsideration of the question by medical professionals, prompted by Englaro's story, see, LUCCHETTI (2010); MORATTI (2010).

⁴¹ As a matter of fact, in an interview (PORTELLI [2012]), Eluana's father referred to his decision with the words: «Ho liberato mia figlia».

⁴² VERONESI (2008). See, also, below, n. 61.

the latter and Brittany Maynard-fresh Antigone⁴³. Both of them refer back to Sophocles' Antigone for they all are "freedom fighters": in all the three stories, there is in fact some sort of authority who is deaf to conscience, and each woman "plays" as a reminder of rights (human, individual and universal rights) that must not be abdicated in the face of that authority, but must be bravely defended.

But the condition of Parrella's Polynices, *quasi*-dead rather than actually dead, adds a further layer of meaning to Antigone's action, which, to my eyes, bridges some differences however existing between the story of Parrella's Antigone and that of Brittany Maynard.

In Parrella, the heroine's action does not simply challenge civic authority over the dead⁴⁴. By sealing a death with dignity, her action champions life, a life that is something more than a biological state. As said by the cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, «la prosecuzione della vita umana *fisica* non è di per sé il principio primo e assoluto. Sopra di esso sta quello della *dignità umana*»⁴⁵. It is this principle, indeed, the driving force of action of Parrella's Antigone, Brittany Maynard, and all terminally ill persons who «long to die, but do not have the power to». Human dignity encompasses both life and death; both are worthy not simply of honor and respect, but also of one's own perception of honor and respect, which no law should deny.

Vita e morte sono *degne* quando possono essere condotte *autonomamente*.⁴⁶

This is the explanation that Parrella's Antigone provides to "her" Creon (Il Legislatore) when he asks her what she has meant by giving her brother the «dignity of being buried». Her definition of dignity conveys concepts that actually echo claims which terminally ill persons often make when asking for aid-in-dying/euthanasia⁴⁷. Living *autonomously* and *freely*, *i.e.*, with *self-consciousness*, *under one's own control*, and *free* by the

⁴³ On this label for MAYNARD, see also above, n. 27.

⁴⁴ Nor is it also in defense of a religious law: see above, n. 34; also, below, n. 51.

⁴⁵ MAGISTER (2007). The quotation belongs to a long comment by the cardinal on another case which in late 2006 and early 2007 ignites, once again, heated debates on euthanasia issue: the case of Piergiorgio Welby who consciously asked for the interruption of the therapies that were keeping him unwillingly 'alive'. Well-known for his liberal and progressive views on issues such as priest celibacy, condom use and even abortion (see PIANIGIANI [2012]), the cardinal Martini wrote a public letter to express his support for that patient's right to die, asking the Vatican to reconsider respecting the request of terminally ill patients who "in all lucidity" ask for the withdrawal of life-prolonging assistance (a full account of the story is in MAGISTER [2007]). As Sophocles' Antigone, Parrella's Antigone and Brittany Maynard-fresh Antigone, the cardinal Martini was asking the religious and political leaders to see the issue – and accordingly act – from a perspective other than strict law and faith. Ironically, in a way, on the occasion of Welby's death by euthanasia, the Church, *i.e.*, a religious institution, behaved like Sophocles' Creon, *i.e.*, the civic authority, in that it denied religious burial rite to the dead!

⁴⁶ PARRELLA (2012, 38). The italics is mine.

⁴⁷ Indeed, according to some data (HALLENBECK [2013]), loss of autonomy, and the ensuing inability to perform some elementary actions, such as eating, walking, even breathing etc., is the most often-cited reason for patients who opt for 'Death with Dignity'. «The conversations – the president of the 'Compassion&Choice' organization (see above, n. 22) said – have more to do with peace of mind and *quality of life* than a desire to die» (HALLENBECK [2013]; the italics is mine).

limitations, the disabilities and excruciating pains that a lethal disease, in its last stages, provokes, is what defines both human life as a life that can be lived with dignity, and human beings as persons rather than as biological entities or “nuda vita” (“bare life”)⁴⁸.

Death with dignity seems to correlate with life with dignity: the quality of life is behind the claim to the right to choose to die, by thus stopping to prolong a life which cannot be enjoyed, and risks to become an unbearable, senseless burden. The right to be free to die based on one’s own *personal* perception of the quality of life should be unconditionally protected and equally granted⁴⁹. Denying such a right might be legal, since in agreement with the laws in force, but it is unethical as it violates human rights, such as the freedom of conscience⁵⁰. Most of all it is “inhumane”: an action made “out of pity” is what Parrella’s Antigone has performed⁵¹; “far more humane” is how Brittany Maynard describes her choice to die; and “a choice of compassion” is what the above mentioned advocacy organization “Compassion&Choice” claims to provide.

There is more.

On the footsteps of Sophocles’ Antigone, the claims and actions of these newly reincarnated Antigones (Brittany Maynard and Parrella’s Antigone) do not simply challenge both the authority’s and/or mass pressure’s right to judge and make a decision over life and death, and the righteousness of those judgments and decisions. Their actions also, if not foremost, call into question the ‘humanity’ of the decision. Explicitly (in the case of Parrella) and implicitly (in the other case) they raise questions about the definition of human being. What is it that defines life, and what is it that defines a human being, which laws or common sense of justice can *undoubtedly* claim the right to take uncontested decisions over it⁵²?

⁴⁸ I borrow the label ‘nuda vita/‘bare life’ (namely, ζωή, vs βίος, *i.e.*, ‘qualified life’, ‘manner of life’) from the Italian philosopher AGAMBEN (1995), who has investigated the concept of bio-power, analyzing – and questioning – “the sovereign power” as a form of bio-power, *i.e.*, as an extension of state power over man’s life. By virtue of this extension, the state grants itself the right to have the use of man as a mere biological entity, that is, as a “bare life”, as if lacking a conscious brain and a soul. For a more detailed discussion with reference to its application to Parrella’s Antigone, see LAURIOLA (2014, 50 with n. 32).

⁴⁹ See, *e.g.*, Dax’s case in KLIEVER (1989) and KNAPP VAN BOGAERT – OGUMBAJO (2010).

⁵⁰ About this dichotomy between legality and ethics, a crucial issue which often surfaces in debates pertaining euthanasia/right-to-die matter, beside the references mentioned above, nn. 40, 49; see also below, n. 55.

⁵¹ I would think that Parrella’s phrase is built on Sophocles’ *Antigone* 74, where the heroine labels her action as “crime of piety/holy crimes” (ὄσια πανουργήσασ’: see, also, above, n. 30). There is no religious connotation in the intention and action of the people I mentioned above (on this ‘secular’ nuance, see also below), while in Sophocles, as it is well known, Antigone’s choice is in accordance with laws sanctioned by gods (ὄσια). As discussed above, it remains the fact that Sophocles’ Antigone, too, follows the dictates of her conscience by following those religious norms. On the other hand, to a certain degree, sympathetic feelings, care and concern for her brother’s misfortune (in a way, “compassion”) were also a driving force of action.

⁵² In Parrella, “doubt” is a recurrent key word whose purpose – as it seems to me – is twofold: (1) to emphasize the rigid self-confidence of Creon (*alias*, of sovereignty) that he is uncontestedly right, and (2) to consequently raise questions, and shake people’s opinion with doubts. For further discussion on this key word in Parrella, see LAURIOLA (2014, 50-52).

What all these Antigones ask is in fact to reconsider the appropriateness of legal denial to such a “human” and “humane” matter which, as Tiresias in Parrella’s play says: «Solo con la pietà può essere compreso, e quindi giudicato»⁵³. Indeed, the battle of these Antigones is about «una questione dolorosamente umana»⁵⁴, *i.e.*, a matter that cannot be managed exclusively through cold and strict regulations and laws. Their battle is meant to re-open the questions about justice, laws (and their limitations), state power, personal-ethical choices vs impersonal-legal norms⁵⁵, sense of humanity, compassion, individual freedom... Their battle is meant to shake our certainties – as the ancient Antigone dared shake Creon’s unquestionable persuasion of being right.

E non vale la pena di provare almeno un gesto che riapra la questione?⁵⁶

With this rhetorical question Parrella’s Antigone significantly defends her gesture, *i.e.*, her resolution to give her brother “death with dignity” and, thus, to make a point on life with dignity. Meant to re-open a discussion on the right-to-die and right-to-live issues – *i.e.*, essential matters of human life – the question of Parrella’s Antigone contributes to raising doubts about the rightness of the related laws and conventional thinking. But, what is more, this question implicitly calls attention to the need of “action”. Since the time of Antigone’s archetypal action in a street of her hometown Thebes, through the centuries, across the world, in each specific guise that she has taken, and in each specific scenario in which she re-appears, there is the need of an extreme action for the attempt to obtain some form of justice. The Antigones’ questions and actions challenge the shortsighted-narrow-mindedness of the “Creon of the day”, and by repeating themselves – although in different guises – their questions and actions represent the possibility of change and new beginnings⁵⁷.

The action of Brittany Maynard – who comprises both Polynices and Antigone⁵⁸ – has indeed partially succeeded: by ‘re-opening the question’ first in her own state, *i.e.*,

⁵³ PARRELLA (2012, 70).

⁵⁴ PARRELLA (2012, 44).

⁵⁵ «What is legal may not be ethical, and what is ethical may not be legal» as an old adage goes. This is, indeed, one of the questions with which Antigone, in her different guises, has been presenting us. It is an open-ended question – exactly like, at least to some scholars, Sophocles’ play is a «baffling open-endedness» (GRIFFITH [1999, 45]). Flexibility in applying law, by considering the individual circumstances from different points of view, is the ideal solution, the one for which all the three Antigones, I discussed above, fight. Difficult as it is to administer the subsequent broad liberty in applying law, when it comes to the possibility of actual choice between life and death, in specific circumstances – as in case of terminal illness –, the law should be flexible, and the individual should be granted the right to make her/his own personal-ethical choice.

⁵⁶ PARRELLA (2012, 6).

⁵⁷ An interpretation of the Sophoclean Antigone as embodying the possibility of change, above all when the institution fails, is in ROSE (1996). Regarding this specific and significant facet of Antigone, it might be worthy to mention the existence of a Canadian non-profit organization named “The Antigone Foundation” whose mission is «to help young women and girls *change* the world» (antigonefoundation.wordpress.com; the italics is mine).

⁵⁸ See above, n. 28.

California, it promoted a reconsideration of the legislation pertaining the right-to-die issue. Indeed, on January 20, 2015, ‘Death with Dignity’ Bill (“Senate Bill 128”) was introduced by California lawmakers:

How each of us spends the end of our lives is a deeply personal decision and that decision should remain with the individual as *a matter of personal freedom and liberty*, without criminalizing those who help to honor our wishes and ease our suffering. This law will honor that freedom with appropriate protections to prevent any abuse⁵⁹.

The bill overcame its first hurdle when the California state senate health committee approved it. This bill is next going before the Senate Judiciary committee on April 7, 2015.

Although Brittany Maynard-fresh Antigone has fought for extending, equally and everywhere (not only in California), the right and freedom to access to ‘Death with Dignity’, her battle well embodies the hope and possibility of change and new beginnings for which, as said above, the various and numerous Antigones have been striving. But not always do these Antigones succeed, which explain their everlasting reappearance. For the sake of not straying from the subject, not only did Parella’s Antigone, in the fiction, pay her action with death⁶⁰ – as indeed Sophocles’ Antigone – but her battle, her action, and her re-opening the question, *i.e.*, beyond the curtains, the real battle and action of Eluana’s father-Antigone, has soon vanished as the suicide of the renown Italian director Mario Monicelli, whose repeated requests to be granted the freedom and right to die were denied, sadly proves. It occurred just one year after (2010) the courageous action, and all the related ‘hot’ debates it re-opened, of Eluana’s father-Antigone.

[A]l povero Monicelli, che aveva chiesto ripetutamente in ospedale una puntura letale per un trapasso dolce, è stata negata e si è buttato dalla finestra⁶¹.

On November 29, 2010, the 95-years old Italian director jumped from a fifth-floor balcony of the San Giovanni Hospital, where he was being treated for prostate cancer. He was one of those terminally ill persons who would have liked to have the right to be free to choose over his own life and death, and thus to access to a “death with dignity”. The repeated denial of that right drove him to suicide, which is emblematic of the deep despair that some patients might feel.

[...] Sadly, the clock has not yet chimed Antigone’s last hour⁶².

⁵⁹ In this way Senator Lois Wolk, D-Davis introduced the bill during a news conference at the Capitol: ROSENHALL (2015). Information about this bill and its *iter* are from ROSENHALL (2015) and EGAN (2015).

⁶⁰ See above, n. 37.

⁶¹ Veronesi on Monicelli’s suicide. The quotation is from: www.repubblica.it/salute/medicina/2014/11/24/news/veronesi_molti_medici_fanno_eutanasia-101307249/.

⁶² I built this metaphor on some related expressions by FORNARO (2012a, esp. 15-16, 140), on which see LAURIOLA (2012).

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