



THE *POLIS* AS AN AGENT OF FICTION IN SOPHOCLES' *ANTIGONE*

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
<i>Polis</i> <i>Scenic space</i> <i>Tragic plot</i> <i>Antigone</i> <i>Sophocles</i> <i>City of Thebes</i> <i>Political space</i>	<i>The article examines how the city functions both as a fictional space and as a political space in Sophocles' Antigone. It starts from the premise that every narrative relies on a spatiotemporal structure that sustains the development of the plot. In Greek tragedy, the fixed scenic space intensifies this relationship. In Antigone, all the action unfolds before the palace of Thebes: the polis is not merely a backdrop, but a driving force behind both the plot and the motivations of Antigone and Creon. By analysing references to "city", "citizens" and "Thebes", the study demonstrates the fundamental role of political space in the play's communicative power.</i>

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1. Introduction: The Imagined City and the Represented City

In the realm of the imagination, the city can be understood in two ways: as a recipient of artistic expression and as a subject of representation. In the first sense, it is conceived not merely as a canvas on which representations of actual or imagined reality are inscribed; rather, the city itself becomes pure creation, an aesthetic configuration in which, through the imagination, urban planning and architecture spell out their own metropolitan love poem. In the second sense, the city is understood as represented in art through the imagination: the city as a fictional realm in which characters act and interact with other characters, and desire, dream, fear and even imagine.

Thus, many of the possible poetic worlds that unfold in cinema, literature, the visual arts or video games are structured around the city as a place that shelters and accommodates, as the spatial framework inhabited by possible individuals. This privileged fictional space enables the development of the fabula, which, as narrative, unfolds through the actions of characters within a particular period of time. Time and space structure and underpin the plot, allowing the narrative to progress. This spatiotemporal arrangement is applicable to any form of literary narrative, but becomes particularly significant in the theatrical genre, where fictional space is symbiotically intertwined with the physical space occupied by the characters on stage.

1.1. Objectives and Methodology

This article seeks to clarify the close relationship between fabula and space in tragedy, specifically by examining how the *polis* functions not merely as a narrative spatial referent, but as a genuine agent driving the plot. Our analysis focuses on Sophocles' *Antigone*, in which the entire fictional action takes place before the gates of the Palace of Thebes, a symbol of the city's civic power. Owing to technical constraints, the early theatrical stage did not allow for changes of location: the actors delivered their speeches in the performance space alongside the orchestra, where the chorus moved.

We therefore seek to go beyond studies that focus on the historical and political links between Greek tragedy and public consciousness and that primarily examine the actual historical circumstances of the author and his period. Our aim is to establish that, within the fictional realm of this tragedy, Thebes operates as a genuine catalyst for the progression of the plot and for the motivations of both protagonist and antagonist: a symbolic subject that drives the action, conditions the characters' decisions and structures the fabula itself.

To this end, we will review a range of concepts associated with the study of tragedy, combining perspectives from literary theory, political philosophy and classical studies in order to interpret the dramatic space of the *polis* as an active element within the narrative construction of the work. Once the conceptual foundations underpinning the elements relevant to the study have been established, we will analyse the linear text of Sophocles' work (2014), focusing on direct references to the terms "city", "citizens" and "Thebes".

The recurrence of these terms will be examined qualitatively through textual analysis and hermeneutic interpretation. To study the lexical density associated with the semantic field of the city and how it contributes to the narrative function within the dramatic structure, we selected all occurrences of the chosen terms in the stage directions, the characters' speeches and the interventions of the chorus, although repetitions occurring in close proximity and referring to the same context or interpretation will be excluded.

We understand that the references examined do not occur in isolation, but within a textual communicative context. Accordingly, the complete meaningful passage in which each reference appears will be extracted for analysis. In presenting them in the study, we will follow the order in which these terms appear in the play, since the temporal structure of fictional action in classical tragedies develops chronologically and causally. In this way, the analysis will progressively gain in density and depth, as the configuration of the *polis* as an active agent of the plot likewise evolves linearly in terms of dramatic complexity.

The text will be approached through several levels of analysis which, always taking into account the semiotic channels through which the fictional world is accessed, will address the most relevant elements present in each passage. We will therefore combine analysis at the semantic,

syntactic and/or pragmatic levels of the successive references, according to their greater or lesser significance from either a narratological perspective —when the spatial or dramatic elements of the action predominate— or a hermeneutic perspective —when the predominance of certain elements highlights the interrelationship between the fabula and the historical and political dimensions of tragedy—.

Following this terminological review, we will determine whether political space plays a fundamental role in the communicative effectiveness of this literary work of art, with particular attention to the symbolic and active projection of the almost invisible character of the *polis*.

2. The Poetics and Politics of Tragedy

In order to establish the conceptual foundations for understanding tragedy and, subsequently, the function of space within it, let us recall some of the key issues raised by Aristotle in his *Poetics* (2018)¹. First, following the Stagirite, we shall delimit what tragedy is in relation to epic, the other major narrative genre. The basis for this distinction lies not so much in the nature of the plots or in the modes of mimesis —to which Plato had already referred in the *Republic* (2020, 392d) when establishing what would later come to be known as natural genres— as in the elements that structure the development of the plot, in relation to the characteristic ambivalence of theatre, which is created both to be read and to be performed.

We shall also consider how the institution of tragedy in Ancient Greece transcends its artistic character by becoming a public spectacle, situated within a specific historical moment, and achieves the fullest force of the literary functions of *movere* and *docere* through *delectare*. In other words, the stage is transformed into a privileged space for moving the audience through mythological plot motifs, for conveying moral and civic teachings through the purgation of their passions, and through the wonder and defamiliarisation characteristic of poetic language.

2.1. The Narrative Dimension of Tragedy

One of the features that distinguishes tragedy from narrative epic is what later became known in dramatic theory as the unity of time. This is not an Aristotelian precept, as is often claimed, but merely a description of the duration of the story —what is told— as determined by the duration of the discourse —how it is told—. Aristotle notes that the duration of the fabula in tragedy is usually no more than a single day.

Epic poetry corresponded with tragedy only in so far as it was the imitation in verse of serious men and had a plot; but it differs from tragedy in having a single metre and being narrative in form. It also differs in length, since tragedy endeavours, as far as possible, to remain within a single revolution of the sun. (Aristóteles, 2018, 1449b 9-14)

As a genre distinct from the others, tragedy is characterised by its imitation of reality as it unfolds and therefore constitutes mimetic representation par excellence: the characters act and speak rather than events being mediated by a narrator. It is true that, on occasion, the chorus performed this narratorial function by contextualising the unfolding action, although we shall return to this issue shortly:

Tragedy, then, is the imitation of an action that is serious and complete, and of a certain magnitude, in embellished language, with each kind of embellishment used separately in the different parts, performed by characters acting rather than through narration, and effecting through pity and fear the purgation of such emotions. (Aristóteles, 2018, 1449b 24-28)

According to Aristotle, the fabula, the *mythos*, is the soul of tragedy. In other words, actions construct the story and the plot and are represented through the words of the characters and the songs of the chorus: "But the imitation of the action is the fabula, for by fabula I mean here the arrangement of the events, and by character that according to which we say that those who act are of a certain kind" (Aristóteles, 2018: 1450a 4-6). As noted above, the imitation of actions that

¹ For references to this ancient work, we use the classical Bekker citation system.

constitutes the fabula requires characters who act and think, and this development must take place within a space that sustains that fabula, a realm in which conflict becomes visible.

According to Aristotle, the time encompassed by the story did not exceed one revolution of the sun, but the submerged temporal dimension underpinning the events represented on stage is like the invisible part of an iceberg. It has also been noted that the vast majority of tragic plots are grounded in mythological narratives and, accordingly, all the prior events that precede and condition those represented on stage were already familiar to an audience for whom myths formed part of everyday knowledge, naturally acquired from childhood. Even so, the chorus is often responsible for contextualising what is about to be witnessed on stage and for recounting some of the narrative antecedents necessary to understand particular dramatic developments that will be resolved within a single day.

Although the narrativity of the dramatic genre has been a central subject of Byzantine debates throughout literary history, these theories have gained renewed momentum in recent years. From recent perspectives in dramatic narratology, theatre is understood as a specific form of performative *storytelling*. Along these lines, and challenging Gérard Genette himself, Christine Schwanecke (2022) proposes analysing drama as a narrative system in which fictional structures are placed at the service of the story. She further argues that works with a strong narrative dimension possess considerable performative power that extends beyond the stage, so that it could be said that the narrative dimension of tragedy not only reflects sociopolitical realities, but also shapes them.

2.2. Theatrical Space

The actions that constitute the plot or fabula unfold within a bounded fictional space that is sufficiently flexible to be accommodated by the scenographic resources available at the time. As with the unity of time, classical precept held that spatial unity should likewise serve as a guarantee of quality, although in ancient theatre it was, ultimately, more a technical necessity.

What we now call scenic space in Greek theatre was limited and fixed, consisting of the *orchestra* and the *skenē*. The former was a circular or semicircular space devoted to the performance of the chorus, whose members walked or danced together, commented in song on what was happening on stage and intervened directly in the action. The *skenē* was a long, narrow platform situated behind the *orchestra*, on the side opposite the seating area or *theatron*, where the actors performed. Over time, it was raised above the *orchestra*, supported by a colonnade, until it reached a height of three metres.

Similarly, the death of a character always occurred *ob skenē*, offstage, since it was considered improper to show slaughter explicitly before the spectators. The modern word "obscene" derives from this expression. From 465 BC onwards, playwrights began to use, in these specific cases, a curtain hanging behind the *skenē* to simulate scenery, which also allowed actors to conceal themselves behind it and change costume during the performance (Tubau, 2025, 80). Over time, this became a brick or stone wall known as the *paraskenia*. The part of the *skenē* visible to the audience came to be known as the *proskenion*.

Because of the technical limitations of the period, the scenic space did not change and there were no changes of setting. To the obscene actions just mentioned must therefore be added those occurring beyond the visible boundaries because they were scenographically difficult to stage. The tragedian's skill overcame this constraint through the figure of the messenger, who recounted on stage what had taken place outside the strict visible limits of the audience's field of view (De Pazzi, 2012, 631).

It should not be forgotten that the dramatic genre was conceived to be performed before an audience that would witness the action unfold through the words of the characters. The fact is that today, in most cases, we encounter these ancient works through reading, which may cause such devices to appear forced and artificial to us.

Contemporary studies of performative spatiality are particularly illuminating in this regard, especially those in which theatrical space is conceived as an event that produces dramatic meaning, as in the work of Dorita Hannah (2018). Her approach makes it possible to reconsider

the tragic *polis* not merely as a political framework, but as a spatial dispositif that articulates relations of power and dynamics of visibility within tragedy. Similarly, Garner (2018, 110-11), drawing on phenomenological approaches to the experience of movement as well as contributions from cognitive science, performance theory and linguistics, examines how movements inhabit scenic space and transform it into embodied space.

2.3. Tragedy and the Birth of Greek Political Consciousness

As the scenic space remains unchanged, so too does the dramatic space. This limitation produces a symbolic condensation: everything takes place in a single location, which ultimately acquires a dramatic and moral density associated with *pathos* and *ethos*. In *Antigone*, that location is the entrance to the palace of Thebes. It is a threshold that is neither inside nor outside, a boundary between the private and the public, between the household and the city, between conscience and law.

We may assume that the choice of this liminal space is not accidental, either in terms of what tragedy signifies in the fifth century BC in general or in terms of what this particular work presents. As Jean-Pierre Vernant (2002) aptly observed, tragedy dramatises the birth of Greek political consciousness, the transition from the ancient mythical order to the order of the *polis* in the context of democracy in an Athens victorious over the Persians and reaffirmed in its new values.

Tragedies are not myths. Yet it may also be maintained that the tragic genre emerged at the end of the sixth century, when the language of myth ceased to be connected with the political reality of the city. The tragic universe is situated between two worlds, and it is this dual reference, on the one hand to myth —henceforth conceived as belonging to a remote time, yet still present in people's consciousness— and, on the other, to the new values —developed so rapidly by the city of Peisistratus, Cleisthenes, Themistocles and Pericles— that constitutes one of its distinctive features and the very driving force of its action. In tragic conflict, the hero, king or tyrant still appears embedded in the heroic and mythical tradition, but the resolution of the drama escapes them: it is never the result of their action, but always the expression of the triumph of the collective values imposed by the new democratic city. (Vernant, 2002, pp. 11-12)

Tragic conflict is, to a considerable extent, and paradigmatically so in *Antigone*, a conflict between different ways of understanding reality. According to Ehrenberg (2001, 192), it reflects Sophocles' critical stance towards Pericles, although not necessarily in favour of oligarchic tendencies, but rather as an expression of fear and caution in the face of the excessive rationalism of the fifth century (Bañuls Oller, 2012, pp. 77-78). Regarding these concerns, Lesky (2001, 204) observes that, by the time *Antigone* was performed, a movement was already under way in which a transformation of everything that had seemed immutable and sanctified by tradition could be sensed.

Between the archaic worldview of myth and the newly established democracy: between the supremacy of domestic law and that of the law of the city, between the familial body and the political body. Hence, in Sophocles, the *polis* is not merely an architectural backdrop, but a mode of thought, an entity that thinks, judges and sanctions. "Tragedy presents individuals in situations that require them to act: it places them at the crossroads of a choice that commits them entirely; it shows them questioning themselves, on the threshold of a decision, as to how best to proceed" (Vernant, 2002, pp. 39-40).

To these major theorists of the relationship between tragedy and politics should be added a number of contemporary scholars who insist on understanding theatre as a dispositif for the production of public affairs, such as Alan Read (2015), who proposes an analysis of the complex relationships between law, ethics and theatre; or Ridout (2009), who explores the connection between the ethical purpose of the theatrical genre and its reception by the spectator, with the stage articulating forms of community and collective confrontation. From this perspective, the *polis* represented in tragedy can be understood not only as the public context of conflict, but also as a dramaturgical agency that structures the confrontation between law, citizenship and subjectivity and serves as a tool for study and creation grounded in systems that divide inter-

intra- and extrasubjective impulses and intra- and extrafictional axes that interact with one another (Ricken & Olinto, 2023, pp. 4-8).

2.4. Tragedy as a Civic Institution

It is also appropriate to consider the fact that tragedy should be understood as an institution within the context of civic activity. Greek tragedy should not be regarded solely as an artistic expression, but as a genuine social institution integrated into the civic life of the *polis*. Its establishment within the framework of tragic competitions, organised under the authority of the eponymous archon, placed it alongside the city's principal political and judicial structures (Vernant, 2002, 27). Performed at the heart of the urban space and subject to the same rules governing assemblies and courts, tragic performance became a collective civic act, open to all members of the community and administered by representatives of the different tribes.

More recently, Barbara Goff has emphasised the role of tragedy as a space for the critical interrogation of the political structures and civic imaginaries that sustained the Greek *polis* (Goff, 2024). From this perspective, tragedy may be regarded not only as a literary or theatrical genre, but as a cultural institution deeply rooted in the city's political practices, within which the Athenian community collectively confronted the ethical and legal dilemmas that defined its own existence.

In this way, the city theatricalises itself: it becomes simultaneously the subject and object of representation, displaying before its own audience the image —and the tensions— of its political identity. Yet tragedy does not function as a mere mirror of social reality, but as a critical dispositif that problematises it. By staging the internal ruptures of the *polis*, it reveals its contradictions and calls its ethical and political foundations into question (Yepes, 1993, 130).

Drama draws upon ancient heroic legends embodying the mythical past of the community. Although distant, this past acts as a point of contrast that makes it possible to perceive clearly the transition between the mythical universe and new forms of legal and political thought. At the same time, however, this distance does not eliminate the conflict: ancient values continue to resonate and clash painfully with the new ones.

What may perhaps essentially characterise tragedy in historical terms, however, is that the drama represented on stage unfolds simultaneously within the sphere of everyday existence: within a temporal flow on a human scale, composed of a succession of presents subject to the limits inherent in the lifespan of men and women. Yet it unfolds not only within the spectator's lived time, but also projects into a realm beyond earthly existence: into the omnipresent time of the gods, which encompasses the totality of events at every moment, sometimes concealing them and at other times revealing them, but never allowing anything to escape or fall into oblivion. "Through this constant conjunction and confrontation, throughout the plot, between the time of human beings and that of the gods, drama offers a manifest revelation of the divine within the very course of human actions" (Vernant, 2002, 39).

As Nestle (2010, 29) observes, tragedy emerges at the moment when myth begins to be viewed through the eyes of the citizen. Yet it is not only myth that is dismantled under this critical gaze: the world of the city itself is also called into question, opened to debate and subjected to scrutiny in its fundamental values through the language of theatre. This is precisely the case of the work analysed in this study.

3. Textual Analysis and Discussion: Thebes as a Dramatic Agent

Let us now turn to an analysis of the linear text of *Antigone* (2014), in the Gredos edition, with an introduction by José Lasso de la Vega and translation and notes by Assela Alamillo. The word "city" appears on 37 occasions, in most cases as a direct translation of *polis*. Likewise, "Thebes" appears 11 times and "citizens" seven times. This high density of terms referring to the semantic field of the city reinforces the central idea that the city has a presence extending beyond that of a mere spatial framework in which the fictional action unfolds.

This means that, from an aesthetic perspective, the *polis* functions as a structuring principle of the work. Political space delimits the action, but also produces meaning: the palace gates, the

subterranean tomb and the public scene of punishment —all emblems of the tension between inside and outside, between life and death, between the individual and the community— become liminal spaces. This threshold materialises the political and moral conflict: the law of the State versus familial piety. To substantiate this argument, we extract the passages in which these terms occur, following their order of appearance and avoiding unnecessary repetitions that would lead to similar interpretations.

The plot of *Antigone* begins precisely where that of Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes* (2024) ends: at the moment when the protagonist's two brothers appear on stage, each having died at the other's hand, and the Herald announces that the Council of the city of Cadmus, the ancient name for Thebes, has decided to bury Eteocles with honours and cast out Polynices' body as food for dogs and birds. In this case, the entire action unfolds in the Agora of Thebes, where the chorus of maidens, acting as suppliants, appeals in terror to the statues of the gods in this public space to protect them from the wrath of their enemies. In this work, which predates Sophocles' play, we likewise find a single performance space —and, as in *Antigone*, one that is politically significant, since it is the Agora— as well as the chorus functioning as a mediating device.

3.1. The City of *Antigone* and Creon

As already noted, all the action in Sophocles' *Antigone* (2014, 249) takes place in the same space: "(The scene takes place in front of the royal palace of Thebes. First light of dawn.)", reads the stage direction at the beginning of the text. Little more is needed to situate spatially and temporally the fabula we are about to witness: "I knew it well. And that is why I have brought you outside the palace gates, so that only you may hear me" (Sophocles, 2014, 249, pp. 18-20)². From the very first dialogue between Antigone and Ismene, daughters of the ill-fated Oedipus, the city is already present as both threat and destiny.

Antigone announces her intention —to bury her brother Polynices, defying Creon's prohibition— and declares: "And now, what is this edict that they say the general has just proclaimed to the whole city?" (pp. 6-8). "He does not consider the matter of little importance; rather, it has been decreed that whoever does any such thing shall be put to death by public stoning in the city" (pp. 35-38). Her sister, perplexed by this challenge to the civil authority newly assumed by their uncle, objects: "Do you intend to bury him, when this is forbidden to the city?" (pp. 43-44). Antigone's love for her brother —familial and sacred— confronts a law that belongs not to the gods but to human beings: the law of the city, the law of the ruler. And she is prepared to die in the city at the tyrant's hands rather than betray her *genos*.

Shortly afterwards, Creon appears, having summoned the chorus (on this occasion the elders of the city) to explain the reasons for his decree: "And whoever, when ruling an entire city, does not act in accordance with the best decisions, but keeps his mouth closed through fear, seems to me —and has always seemed to me— the worst of men" (pp. 178-182). In this way, he seeks to aggrandise the city by restoring the order of which it had repeatedly been deprived by the descendants of Laius. First by Oedipus, then by Polynices and now by preventing the burial of the man he considers a traitor to Thebes.

At this point, the *polis* appears as an agent of exclusion. Creon, who embodies political power, grounds his authority precisely in the defence of the city. In his very first intervention, he states, almost as a manifesto, that no one could be a worse enemy to him than one who destroys the city: "For I —let Zeus, who always sees all things, be my witness!— could not remain silent if I saw disaster approaching the citizens instead of prosperity" (pp. 184-186). "With these principles I intend to make the city great" (pp. 191-192). Likewise, in the opposite sense: "Rather, whoever proves a benefactor to this city shall receive honour from me, whether alive or dead" (210).

To this decision, the Coryphaeus, spokesperson for the chorus, replies: "That is what you have decided to do, son of Menoeceus, with regard to the one who was hostile and the one who was favourable to this city. You have the power to make use of every kind of law, both concerning the dead and all of us who are alive" (pp. 212-214). These words offer a glimpse of the position

² The notation used for references to Sophocles' text follows the traditional system used for classical theatre, whereby the line numbers cited are indicated.

occupied by the chorus, as representatives of the city's wise men, at least in the opening stages of the plot. We shall see that this position is not as clear-cut as it initially appears as the reversal unfolds.

Creon acts according to his conscience as a ruler, without regard for the unwritten norms governing respect for one's own lineage and the cult of the dead (Herreras, 2009, 11). His position of dominance over the other characters disregards the will of the princess of Thebes, as well as that of her betrothed: his son Haemon. In dialogue with him, he states: "The man whom the city appoints must be obeyed in small matters, in just matters and in their opposites" (pp. 666-667).

Likewise, in a rapid exchange of verses between father and son, we understand why: "*Creon*. — And is the city to tell me what I must do? [...] *Haemon*. — There is no city that belongs to one man alone. *Creon*. — Is not the city considered to belong to the one who governs it?" (pp. 734-737). In Creon's words, the *polis* thus becomes the supreme principle of moral legitimation for the ruler, while filial love, religious piety and family duty are subordinated to *raison d'état* and political order.

Antigone, however, responds from a different standpoint: from the conviction that there exists a law not proclaimed through edicts, a more ancient form of justice: "For never, not even if I had been the mother of children, nor if my dead husband had been lying there decaying, would I have taken this task upon myself against the will of the citizens" (pp. 905-908). She confronts not only the tyrant Creon, but the city itself, the collectivity that legitimises that law. Her rebellion is therefore radical in character and is not private, but civic; not domestic, but political:

O city of my fathers in the land of Thebes! O gods who founded our lineage! I am being led away and can delay no longer. Look upon me, you rulers of Thebes, the last remaining daughter of kings, and see how I suffer and at whose hands, because I have shown due reverence for piety. (pp. 938-943).

The circumstances of the rebel's close kinship and prominent aristocratic position put to the test from the outset the authenticity of the principles of government that the new leader of the *polis* has just formally proclaimed, particularly those advocating that no distinctions be made between individuals and that personal interests or affections should not be placed above the common good. Nevertheless, this only further confirms the tyrant in his decision and in the severity of a punishment commensurate with "the challenge to the polis posed by the social, familial and political status of the offender, in keeping with that of her traitorous brother. Spectators might feel uncomfortable when confronted with such an extreme case" (Barcia, 2022, 205). This is precisely the discomfort that the author seeks and expects to elicit through *pathos* in tragic performance.

3.2. The Elders as the Voice of the City: The Chorus and Tiresias

The chorus, for its part, represents the voice of the citizens of Thebes. It oscillates between obedience and compassion, between fear and admiration. Its ambiguity is that of the people themselves, since the *polis* is torn between punishing and admiring the person who defies it. This polarity can also be observed in tragic technique, between two elements through which the drama unfolds: on the one hand, the chorus, a collective and anonymous entity whose role is to express, through its fears, hopes and judgements, the feelings of the spectators who make up the civic community; and, on the other, the individualised character, whose action forms the centre of the tragedy and who, through the mask, personifies the hero of the past, removed from the ordinary condition of the citizen (Vernant, 2002, 18).

In this way, Thebes becomes an invisible character, a collective body that feels, fears and reacts. The *polis* —as an institution, as a body of norms, as a moral conscience— acts within the play, and the chorus, as the collective voice of the city, endorses the decree, condemns disobedience and witnesses the disaster. In a dialogue between the Chorus and Antigone, it tells her: "Piety is a certain form of respect, but under no circumstances may the authority of the person who wields power be transgressed. And, in your case, an impulsive passion has brought about your downfall" (pp. 872-876).

The result is that the tragic conflict does not occur "in the city", but between the city and the city: between two conceptions of the political, between two possible versions of Thebes: Creon's Thebes, founded on order and obedience; and Antigone's Thebes, founded on justice and piety. The *polis* observes, watches and decides. Antigone does not die out of love for her brother, but out of fidelity to an idea of the city that no longer exists: a just city in which divine and human law do not exclude one another:

O city! O wealthy men of the city! Ah, Dircean springs and sacred grove of Thebes of the beautiful chariots! I call upon you as witnesses to how, without lamentation from my own people and under what kind of laws, I make my way towards a confinement that is a burial mound, an excavated chamber of an unforeseen tomb (pp. 841-850).

After Antigone departs for the cave where she will undergo her punishment, it is Tiresias, the blind seer, who urges Creon to save the city, which his obstinacy has placed in jeopardy before the gods:

The city suffers these things because of your decision. Indeed, all our public and private altars have been polluted by the carrion brought by birds and dogs from the wretched son of Oedipus who lies dead. And for this reason, the gods no longer accept our prayers in sacrifice (pp. 1015-1020).

The ruler's zeal in enforcing the decree in order to save the *polis* is precisely what is placing it in danger. Tiresias also tells him that he will shortly suffer punishment through his own family in recompense for violating the laws of the gods of the dead (Pino Campos, 2003, 156):

For this reason, the destructive and avenging Erinyes of Hades and the gods will lie in wait for you, to ensnare you in these very misfortunes. Before long, the lamentations of men and women will be heard in your house. All the cities whose mangled corpses found burial in dogs or wild beasts, or in any winged bird that carries the impure stench to the city's altars, are united against you in a hostile alliance (pp. 1075-1084).

It is not until this moment that Creon understands the error of his obstinacy. The entire city will suffer the consequences of the death sentence imposed on Antigone. This is the climactic moment in which the tyrant acknowledges the authority of Tiresias, through whose mouth the gods speak and whose judgement he has never previously disregarded: "*Creon*. — Until now, indeed, I have never departed from your sound judgement. *Tiresias*. — And thus you have steered the helm of this city along the right course" (pp. 992-994). If he persists in his purpose, his family will be condemned to the worst of punishments inflicted by the vengeful Erinyes. Moreover, the city itself will turn against him, together with all those cities in which the divine law of burial has been violated: "...by keeping here, deprived of honours, unburied and desecrated, a dead man who belongs to the gods below. These matters concern neither you nor the gods above, whom you are thereby compelling" (pp. 1069-1074).

And it is finally the Coryphaeus, giving voice to the citizens of Thebes, who responds to Creon's question: "What must I do? Tell me. I shall obey you. *Coryphaeus*. — Go and release the girl from her subterranean dwelling. And raise a burial mound for the man who lies dead" (pp. 1099-1102). This constitutes a direct intervention by the city in the resolution of the plot, now acting against the civil law established by the ruler and subordinating it to the divine decrees that govern the fate of mortal human beings. In this anticipation of the final outcome, the chorus invokes Bacchus, god of the city, imploring his aid:

Thebes, which you honour above all cities, together with your mother, she who was destroyed by lightning. And now, when the whole city is plunged into violent affliction, come with expiatory step over the slopes of Parnassus or across the resounding strait (pp. 1136-1145).

The resolution of the tragedy is near. Shortly afterwards, the Messenger recounts before the gates of the palace of Thebes that Creon has buried Polynices with due honours, but has arrived too late at the cave, where he finds Antigone hanging by her own veil and his son Haemon, maddened by grief, shortly before plunging his sword into his own chest. After hearing the dreadful news, Eurydice, the king's wife and Haemon's mother, enters the palace and takes her own life.

The plot does not end well for Creon: although he remains in the world of the living and has emerged victorious from his political struggle, he has paid a high price (Scabuzzo, 2005, 137). The final lines of the play, spoken by the Coryphaeus, spokesperson for the council of elders, pronounce their judgement: "One must not commit acts of impiety in one's dealings with the gods. The arrogant words of those who boast excessively, after being repaid with mighty blows, teach them wisdom in old age" (pp. 1349-1353).

4. Conclusions

Something truly remarkable occurs at the lexical level in the theatrical performance of *Antigone*: what is confused in the communication between the fictional characters —the conceptual impasse to which each of them clings and the one-sidedness that prevents mutual understanding between the protagonist and her antagonist— is perfectly clear in the communication between author and spectator. The text is transparent in its reception, in all its polyvalence and ambiguity. Once understood, the tragic message conveys the opacity of the words exchanged by human beings and reveals, in a blinding light, the universe as conflict; with this new certainty, the spectator thereby acquires a tragic consciousness.

If we move towards a more symbolic reading, we may say that the Theban *polis* condenses the very idea of the political. It is a character that remains unseen, yet whose presence determines every word and every gesture. We might say that, in *Antigone*, the *polis* thinks. It is the *polis* that formulates the tragic question: what happens when the law that sustains the city ceases to be just? That question continues to resonate today, in any society confronted with the dilemma between law and justice, between tyranny and freedom, between order and conscience.

In *Antigone*, the *polis* is not merely a setting, but an agent of fiction that motivates the conflict by establishing itself as the supreme value; it defines the symbolic framework within which Creon and Antigone confront one another; and it acts as a collective conscience through the chorus of the city's elders and through Tiresias, passing judgement and recoiling before its own destruction. The tragedy thus becomes a reflection on the city as a mode of thought, on the price of politics and on the limits of law.

Sophocles shows us that every city, even the most just, contains within itself the possibility of fracture; that every *polis* can become tragic when it forgets that its law is founded upon the human. And perhaps this is why *Antigone* remains alive: because it reminds us that the city, that remarkable invention which human beings have created for themselves, can endure only if there is room within it for piety, justice and freedom.

On stage, Antigone departs for death defeated and reproaches the chorus —the city itself— and the impassive Creon, accusing them of leaving her with no one to mourn her, as she goes forth without lamentation and without friends. And although the powerful figures on stage remain unmoved by the fate of the unfortunate princess, how many tears are shed by the expectant citizens! Though Creon did not weep, audiences in every age will weep for Antigone, for they will always feel compassion for the pious young woman who freely goes to her death.

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