Holderlin's Anigone: Retelling the Axioms of Tragic Life and Death

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Abstract:
Convicted of his defiance to the king of Thebes, Creon, Polyneices is condemned to lay unburied in the barren field outside the city. That the defiance must meet with toughest punishment is endorsed by the law of the state. Antigone, by the call of her conscientious love of blood-relation, proceeds in her resolution to give burial to her brother. For her overstepping the dictate of the king, she is sent to a vault for dying gradually and slowly. Creon's own son, Haemon, the lover and whose would-be bride Antigone was, follows to accompany Antigone in her last hours and he too finds his way to vault. To Creon, the realization of error occurs, but it is late and he loses not only his son but also his wife. The prophetic words of the old wise man Tiresias turn out to be true and it is towards the end of the drama that Creon confesses that his error led to the death of two innocent souls, Antigone, the bride of his son and his own son too. This drama is the unfolding of the excesses of law, the call of conscience, the recognition of error and the fate, a distinct event for the wrong-doer and the tragic protagonists. When reason does not listen to reason, the fall out is such. Tragedy unfolds even the frailty of state's law posed against the law of god and that of conscience.

Keywords: *Law, Love, Error, Fate*

Classicism and romanticism in Germany was steeped in the enduring reverence and recourse to the Greek culture and thought. Gottsched, a German aesthetician of the eighteenth century took recourse to the Aristetolian principles of drama to put forward his ideas on the construction of the comic and tragic play. In his enterprise, the principles of Aristotle's Poesie delivered him the guidelines of his thoughts and theoretical moorings. The foremost among the German writers of the eighteenth century in Germany, Lessing borrowed heavily from the Greek aesthetic principles of drama and its functional aspects. In his dramatic works, he sought to build into the model of Katharsis, a key concept in the Greek notion of tragedy. He albeit actualized this notion, in that with the help of the idea of Katharsis he uniquely attempted to mould the enlightenment drama to interpret the social-political reality of his own time in Germany. His dramas, for example Emilia Galotti and Minna von Barlhem, retain their high validity of this endeavour of Lessing. Schiller's classic tract on aesthetic education finds in discursive traces to the analysis of the Greek conceptualization of the cultivation of the aesthetic sensibility in human being. Out of this discussion emerges the dialectics of naïve and sentimental education in this seminal book of Schiller. He investigates the conceptualization of the barbaric and the cultured also in his extrapolation of the Greek culture and civilizational mores. In some of the prominent works of Goethe, for example in Willkommen und Abschied, the Greek mythical motifs reverberate.

Friedrich Hölderlin, a friend to Schiller, Hegel and Schelling, immersed fully in the studies of the Greek literature and his best works exhibit this intense inclination of Hoelderlin as manifest in his own writings and in the translations, which he made from Greek into German. Hoelderlin's Antigone is also a translation from the original work of Sophocles, a Greek writer from fifth century B.C. This work by

Hölderlin brings the notions of human conditions to the attention of the readers in Germany at that time. Broader issues, which he harps on relate to the sanctity/ refusal of the authorities of Law, Truth and Destiny. The drama ends in a tragedy, rendering a similarity with Sophocles' original work Antigone.

The first scene of the Act I in Hölderlin's Antigone sets about with a talk between Antigone and Ismene, two sisters, about the incomprehensible and uncalled for commencement of misfortune on love. The centrality of this misfortune takes its cue from the suddenness of the unexpected declarations of the king Creon. Antigone's gesture of asking her sister Ismene having known the edicts of the King evokes the sustained and untainted love that propitiates them towards the 'love' of their brothers fallen in war. This schematic opening of the drama casts albeit a solemn verge between 'war and love', a theme that perpetuates candidly through the framework of the play. This opening equally invokes a deliberation on the potentiality of 'power' to make decisions on the essential instinctual disposition of the human beings. Love, War and Power constitute the triangle which demands justification through this play about human enigma.

The immediate pathos in the initiating scene is that of the situation of not being able to differ. In other words, it is a situation, in which the overlaying of the personal misery makes it impossible to put into the words one's own reaction to the situation. Ismene confesses to Antigone, that she has grown into a person indifferent to fortune or misfortune ever since the war unsparingly meant the death of both of their brothers in the fight for and against the state Thebes, the King of the state being Creon. This indifference does not last long in the play, for the very task of laying the brother Polyneices in grave moves both the sisters, instilling them with the passion to react for action.

In further unfolding of the narrative, the state and love are posed as the competent contestants. Creon releases edicts summoning the rewards and punishments. These rewards and punishments put touchstones, on which the credibility for the patriotism can be tested. And, out of any reason, even with the reason of love, the state cannot bend its say and pronouncements. In his speech in public, Creon lays down the parameters of the rewards emphasizing that the absolute faithfulness to the state and king will benefit beyond any doubt every citizen of the state. The peculiar parameters of citizenship are laid down.

In his dialog with Antigone, Creon insinuates her to reflect upon the consequences of indulging in behaving to run against the law in practice in the Polis. (p.752) The law here called on exemplifies the assertion of the might and will of the authoritative power. This power derives its justification of ruling precisely on the pretext that the power is honourable and irreproachable. In the long dialogue between Haemon and Creon, the question of true ruling emerges. On the insistence of Creon to know as to who is just ruler of the city, his son Haemon replies aiming though not the indignation of his 'father' that if Creon believes himself to be a just ruler, his assumed justness on the pretext of a law which flows from his self-framed and eulogized justness can be upheld only in the wilderness, not in the peace-loving arena of the 'speaking good and learning good.' The law of the polis encounters the wisdom of the common man's understanding and defining of reason and wisdom in the same polis. The "autochtony in the Antigone focuses on the primary opposition between the authoritative powers of the Polis and the negative ground on which the Polis rests."

In the dialog between Creon and Haemon, the issue of the justness of the governance in the reference to prudence is taken up. This dialog revolves around the perception of human relations in order to start a substantiation of justness of ruling and punishment in case of adherence to and defiance to the rule of the state. (759) Disobedience of the state-law in the ancient Greece was taken to be the ostensibly legitimate ground for punishment[i]. The punishment wrested its authenticity from the prudence of the state. The power that meted out punishment for disobedience supplanted the idea of welfare based on

prudence. These nuances of state law figured up well-defined in the dialog between Creon and Haemon in the 1st scene of the 3rd act of this play by Hölderlin. Creon attributes the untrustworthiness to Antigone. Antigone, as he would proclaim, is the liar. He considers her as a person having least respect for the prescribed norms of the city in which she lives. Creon says about her that she would not be acquiring a word of praise if she breaks the convention of the city. The prudence of the governance endorses it that she be punished for she disobeys the conventions. This prudence is reflected in the wisdom of the assessment of her dare. In the 1st scene of the 2nd act, in his dialogue with Antigone, Creon infuriates over Antigone:

"Die aber findet eine Lust aus, damit,
Daß sie die vorgesschriebenen Gesetze trüb macht."[ii]

In the same dialogue, however, Antigone shows her respect as well as a critical repudiation to the law of the state when she answers in return:

"Das Königtum ist aber überall
Geistreich und tut und sagt, was ihm beliebet."[iii]

In reply, Creon asserts that in his state Good and Bad cannot be simultaneously endorsed.

It would imply that the righteousness of the law cannot be rebuffed and the sequel to any reproaching of law would be the punishment as ordained by the law of the state.

In Antigone the law of the heaven is pitted against the law of the state. Antigone brings the law of the heaven to justify her act to bury her brother who though left outside on the outskirts was not given any burial. Her insistence on doing so strengthens Creon's justification of punishment against her. In Hoelderlin's Antigone, in the 1st scene of the 2nd act, in her dialogue with Creon, Antigone declares:

"Noch hier im Haus das Recht der Todesgötter,
Die unter Menschen das Gesetz begrenzt;"[iv]

The city, where Creon rules, says Antigone does uphold a law that is even not chalked out among men themselves. These laws are the stamps which the gods of the world of death have fastened on the destiny of men in the city of Creon. In other words, these laws are not by men for men. In realization of this truth, to substantiate her duty of burying her brother, she invokes the law of the heaven. In continuation of her dialogue with Creon in the same scene, she tells him:

"Daß eins, das sterben muß, die ungeschriebenen drüber,
Die festen satzungen im Himmel brechen sollte." [v]

It has to be taken in account that the person, who is referring the law of the heaven, is someone who stands guilty as per the legalities of the law of the state. It is one of the crucial themes of the play that the dissonance between the law of the state and the law of the heaven encounter each other.

The law made by men and the law of heaven differ. The law of the state is coded for righteousness of awards and punishments, the violation of which would amount to crime, leading to a place in jail. The law of heaven is not a code, rather commandment, judgement. They are by nature holy.

Antigone, in her ardent commitment for giving a burial to the dead brother is guided by the commandment of conscience to do good, beyond any injunction of the earthly laws. Her few words:

"Ich aber gehe,
Ein Grab dem liebsten Bruder aufzuwerfen." (1st Act, 1st Scene)[vi]

The indifferent and stern law of state ruled by Creon, the king swayed unopposed on the living and dead. Creon held the disobedience of Polyneices in the battle commensurate with nothing less than a plain treason, worthy of being subjugated to the exemplary punishment. Going by the law of rule he promulgated that the dead body of Polyneices must be left unburied to be lynched by the prey-animals. Antigone's resolve to proceed to give burial to the abandoned corpse of her brother invoked a love, which she herself term 'the most passionate love', nourished by the innermost impulse for her 'most beloved brother'. The sanctity and holiness of this passionate purpose, though running counter to state, flourished on the fortitude of her conscience and it was in accordance with this fortuitous faith that drives her to give her brother the lasting peace and love. She insists on her wavering sister Isemene that it would foster blessedness on her extant live after putting Polyneices to peaceful rest. She, in this act of hers, finds herself not only conscientiously righteous but is inwardly convinced of the holiness of her action.[vii] This holiness of her act is based on her conviction that neither she treats herself to be so sensitive or afraid of the state law like Isemene and nor the thought of an inauspicious death imbues her soul.[viii] As she says, in following the laws of holiness, she enlists her soul against the evil.[ix]

The moment of 'error' is a constitutive aspect of the play. This error is entangled with the 'evil' deed. The old, blind wise-man Tiresias stands as a person making Creon aware of the error and the concomitant evil. On the altars in his abode, Tiresias notes the wrath of the Gods, as the flames do not catch up. In front of his house, he sees the birds' fierce noises and the dogs' running-around. Stale fleshes and dry stains of blood appear to him as a foreboding of something gone wrong around. Doubtful, he approaches Creon's court. He insists on him that under his order, something wrong has taken place in the city. He refers to Polyneices in inference. He invokes in him a guilt whether it is a sign of kingly strength and nobility, that the dead should be murdered. He asks Creon:

"Welche Kraft ist das, Zu toeten Tote?"[x] At the moment, Creon was unable to make out and taken aback.

Tiresias alludes to the death of Polyneices and the misfortunate state of the dead body of Poyneices, which remains on the waste land in the open fallen prey to the dogs and birds. Tiresias makes Creon to consider that he had sent down the soul of a man below earth and not given him due final bid on the grave. For the error done in the camouflage of the power, Creon will be brought to be judged by the judges of Gods. And Creon will be facing the rage of the Gods of the world of death. Not only this, Tiresias prophesises that for the dishonour of the dead body of Polyneices, will dead bodies litter all around in the palace of Creon. "It is still time", with these words Tiresias retreats and thereupon begins the reflection on his 'error' by Creon. The 'error' which Tiresias had pointed to; i.e. leaving the dead body of Polyneices unburied in the wastes, recoiled on the fate of Creon. A chain of dead bodies proliferated before and around him. He was witness to the death of his own son, Haemom, his dead body hanging on the waist of dead Antigone. The moment awakened in him a consciousness of the crassest 'error'. He was talking to no else than himself:

"Der ich
Dich, Kind, doch gerne nicht, getoetet, sie auch, sie;
Ich armer Weiss nicht, wen ich ansehn soll"[xi]

The question of the fate is implicitly constituent trope of this drama. As Antigone, the chief protagonist of this drama ends into a tragedy; the question of fate becomes the genuine aspect of discussion on the text. 'Did Antigone choose her death?'-this is the lingering question left to the reader. This question can be answered in two differing perspectives. Was one to favour the argument that she on her own took the initial steps for her tragic end, one may call into attention her preliminary discussion with her sister Isemene at the beginning of the drama. Isemene implicitly made her aware of the fact that if she would go ahead with her resolution to give a burial to her brother Polyneices, she would unwittingly invite the rage and rancour of the law of the state impersonated in Creon, and the punishment would be

harsh to conciliate with. Antigone decided for burial, and this act on her part in due course of the unfolding of the events led to the apotheosis of tragedy. Judged from this perspective, she can be convincingly seen as a character having chosen her tragic end by endorsing on her the 'fated' consequences of her own decision.

In his notes on this drama, Hoelderlin has emphasized that the tragedy unfolding in this drama should be seen and judged from the 'end' towards the 'beginning'. He writes in his notes to this drama; namely in Anmerkungen zur Antigonä, that "eben weil die zweite Hälfte ursprünglich rapider ist und schwer zu wiegen scheint, der entgegenwirkenden Zäsur wegen, mehr von hinten her b) sich gegen den Anfang c) neiget."[xii]

Viewed from this perspective, the end becomes tragedy in a succession of events toward the beginning; i.e. in the beginning the end was not predestined. It was the 'nobility of purpose', which is anchored in the beginning. By deciding to proceed for the burial of her dead forlorn brother, she pays an implied reverence to the commandment of the heaven. At the same time, in blood-relationship, she undertakes the duty to give burial to her brother. And she fulfils the glory of the noble purpose by the noble deed. However, this act led to the ominous law of punishment and she was put to the dark vault where her life gradually ended up. Read from this perspective, she had not chosen for tragic end by deciding to pursue her task, instead she had opted for the performance of the noble duty. The tragedy of the drama, seen in this perspective, tells on the institutions of punishment and less on the trajectory of fate.

Conclusion

Prudence is an inalienable organ of the statecraft. The state law derives its sanctity by virtue of certain prudential apparatus in the state. Reward and punishment follow from this law of the state. The prudence yet has to have an ear for reasonable enrichment with the dialoguing reason coming from the side of the citizens. In the absence of this feature, the prudence loses its empathetic gesture to the conscientious call of the individual. The case of Antigone illustrates the contradiction between the law of the state and the call of the conscience. Human relationships, seen from the perspective of the humanistic understanding of the purpose of the action, do not preclude the commitment to the human attachments. This commitment requires a steadfastness of the resolution for the passionate love for one's own as well as for the other. Antigone tried to be human and compassionately true to her blood-relation, i.e. to her dead brother Polyneices, in that she did not swerve from her human duty to give him a burial. This play illustrates that the absence of the attention to the conscience and reason coming from the other side, i.e. from the rational argument from the citizen finally can lead to a complexity of happenings, in which the human being, even if the ruler, cannot easily conciliate with his error. Not the least, the tragic end of Antigone points to the fact that while judging the tragedy the appreciation of the principle of the nobility of action must not be side lined.

ENDNOTES

[i] The disobedience and subsequent wrath of the state law is exemplified historically in the tragic story of Socrates, the philosopher in ancient Athens.

"The Laws then provided for his upbringing and education, ensuring that he received adequate training in music and gymnastics. From this, the Laws suggest that their relationship with Socrates is similar to that of father with his son, or of a master with his slave. The Laws go even further to suggest that one's ties to one's country are even stronger than one's ties to one's family…Just as one should be willing to suffer and die for one's country in battle rather than flee to save oneself, one should be willing to suffer and die according to the Laws rather than to destroy them by trying to save oneself."
www.sparknotes.com/philosophy/crito/section5.rhtml

[ii] "She finds it a fun, with that, That she makes the prescribed laws clouded" [Trans.: Mine]

[iii] "The Empire is but all over Righteous and does and says, what pleases it" [Trans.: Mine]
[iv] "Still here in the house of the law of the Gods of death, Which limits the law among people" [Trans.: Mine]
[v] "That one, who must die, should he, the unwritten above, The certain statutes in the heaven break" [Trans.: Mine]
[vi] 'But I go, To prepare a grave for the most beloved brother" [Trans.: Mine]
[vii] Hölderlin: Antigonä, p.739
[viii] P.740 In the biblical psalm too, holiness is assigned to the act of burial. One of the psalms in the Bible says: "Then David slept with his fathers and was buried in the city of David."biblehub.com/1_kings/1-21.htm
[ix] Hölderlin: Antigonä, P.752
[x] "Which feat is that, to kill the dead?" Hölderlin: Antigonä, P.772
[xi] "It is me,Who killed you, not knowing, also her'I, the poor, know not, whom should I look forward to" Hölderlin: Antigonä, p.782
[xii] Hölderlin, Werke und Briefe. Edited by Friedrich Beißner and Jochen Schmidt, Frankfurt/ Main: Insel Verlag 1969, p.783
"precisely because the second half is originally more rapid and appears to be weighing emphatic, because of the opposing caesura, tends more from back to the beginning." (Trans.: Mine)

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