

*PRESENTATION:* Aris Alexandrou's *Antigone* (1951): A Critique of the 'blank pages on which the revolution writes its instructions'

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*SUMMARY OF PRESENTATION:*

This paper focuses on some of the Brechtian themes of Aris Alexandrou's play *Antigone* and on the Greek author's capacity for self-critique: the author wrote an apparent review of his one and only play into the Civil War novel that brought him literary fame, *To Kivotio*, or *The Mission Box* (1974). Both Alexandrou's self-critique and the Brechtian foci of his *Antigone* illuminate the role of the committed play and, more broadly, deliver a speculative proposition on the role of the engaged—but isolated—writer vis-à-vis the dominant Greek political camps. Alexandrou's free adaptation of the Antigone motif emphasizes artistic as well as moral integrity, posits aesthetic resistance to political demands, and delivers the complex other side of the radical resistance that inspired postwar Greek politics and culture. The artist's self-reflection set an inspiring example in the aftermath of the Civil War through the Greek dictatorship of 1967-1974 and leaves a legacy of cultural criticism that has been ignored for too long. Alexandrou was well ahead of his time with his characteristic ideological reservations and constructive revisionism, which repeatedly worked to his own detriment.

The main thesis I will treat is that Alexandrou adopted and creatively adapted the Brechtian topics of a) self-critique and self-accusation, b) the investigative plot bound to uncover subversion, c) and the pivotal aspects of name-giving and its opposite, deliberate namelessness. Alexandrou took on, more specifically, the Brechtian Leitmotifs of masked or blotted-out faces and 'blank pages' (of Brecht) and made them into his own, poignant metaphors, to express his disenchantment with the Left's ideology and revolutionary fervor. It is in these important registers that he differed from Brecht and pushed leftist critical thinking further ahead.

The lead quotation is from Bertolt Brecht's *The Measures Taken* (1965:81-82), when the Leader is speaking, "Then you are yourselves no longer.... One and all of you are nameless and motherless, blank pages on which the revolution writes its instructions."

To illustrate how Alexandrou adopted and adapted the Brechtian topic of self-criticism, I have selected the following passage from *The Mission Box*. The passage articulates the author's critique, by way of his character's honest opinions, of a four-act play written by the young leftist Alekos, titled *I Siopi, The Silence*, which centers on the challenge to speak the truth while facing suspicion and even charges of disloyalty and betrayal. (refer to handout)

Related to the Brechtian topic of the investigative plot bound to uncover subversion, I suggest that inquiry is treated as plot, plot as inquiry and mistrust as muse. Alexandrou entered into an inquisitive dialogue with the works of Sophocles, Brecht, and Anouilh, all of whom exerted their influence on his thinking about the modern reality of his own *Antigone* and on the way in which his protagonist might convey critical messages not only for contemporary Greece but also for future generations. Antigone dies prematurely at the end of each of the two acts of Alexandrou's play; her death corresponds to the ultimate silence of Alekos's work. The two acts of the postwar *Antigone* relate to but also problematize one another, because frequent reversals create tension between the two parts, which are separated by a brief intermezzo. Brecht's short plays entitled *Der Jasager (He Who Says Yes)*, in two versions) and its antipode or inversion, *Der Neinsager (He Who Says No)*, might have served as models for Alexandrou's creation of the two mirroring acts. Both acts of the 1951 *Antigone* can stand autonomously as one-act plays, but together they deliver a double and shifting picture of the Greek guerrilla warfare of the 1940s, first of the resistance waged by the Left against the Germans during the Nazi Occupation and then of the Left against its right-wing opponents in the Civil War.

Alexandrou's Antigone of the Greek resistance and of the Civil War is a character that remains timelessly out of place. She thematizes the problem of civic dislocation, of the insidious dislocation of the citizen but also of the widespread dislocation of civility. As in Anouilh's work, Antigone's acts of burial do not settle much. However, they do prove that the heroine holds her ground against ideological bullying and does not sacrifice her individuality to the revolution. Alexandrou mobilized Antigone, however, not simply to perform forbidden burials of those unjustly killed by the Left, but to help his contemporaries cope with the oppressive weight of Greece's history of fratricidal strife: his heroine shows the path towards truth and trust.

Against the backdrop of coveted appearances and scorned realities, Alexandrou focuses on the hypocrisy of flaunting one's name and, conversely, of hiding one's true identity behind a mask or pretext. The playwright's recourse to masks closely resembles Brecht's emblematic use of masks in *The Measures Taken*: Brecht's scene with the ominous title of 'The Blotting Out' shows

how the communist leadership obliterates the revolutionaries' individuality and subjectivity by demanding that they wear masks, the masks of the Party, to blot out their faces.

Finally, Alexandrou's *Antigone* presented a penetrating, epic-theatre-style analysis of the Greek Civil War as an extension of the 'dark' side of the leftist Greek resistance against the Nazi Occupation. It showed up the endemic problem of an abusive communist leadership and unmasked those who eschewed the reality of the Civil War by returning to the 'glory days' of guerrilla warfare against the Nazis. Alexandrou's *Antigone* made a bold statement about the moral as well as the military defeat of the Greek leftist leadership long before such a view could be publicly discussed among the Left. However, Alexandrou refused to politicize his play on the narrow scale of party politics, and his Kafkaesque work is far from being confined by Greece of the 1940s. His *Antigone* represents the page on which a valuable script from the past has been written. It is this page, the product of a long process of transmission, reflection, and (self-) critique that motivates her to act differently. It was in her lonely activism, in her rewriting and filling the pages with valid content, that Alexandrou found the meaning of his play, even when he himself had been pushed into isolation. Despite the criticism and self-criticism, Antigone's mission is the play's most positive and most democratic message of all.

#### *DISCUSSION:*

Q: What engagements have there been with the play?

A: Very few, see the references on the handout. The play is first published in a periodical and doesn't get a lot of visibility. It's later published in a collection of essays. This doesn't give it prominence, or visibility. We have to wait until 2003, when Victor Arditto becomes interested in the play and turns it into a good production. But people reacted to the political debate negatively. People questioned whether, in 2003, one should still be talking about Civil War conflicts.

Q: Did Alexandrou want the play to be produced?

A: Yes.

Q: Is it theatrical? Did he know about it?

A: It's a complicated play but it is theatrical; it has a very colloquial language, very dialogic and dialectical. The character formation is complex.

Q: Due to the use of masks, the interlude, parable, the same play performed twice takes different positions.

A: I have been getting a lot of interest since I translated the play, from different scholars. It translates very nicely.

Q: The play is supposed to be a learning process through the performance of the two parts of the script, which reflects the interesting genesis of Brecht's *Jasager/Neinsager*. Brecht has to find a balance: central for him is the question of personal consent. Brecht is not in service of the party, but at times very much stresses the process of consenting to the party line, subjecting yourself to the party line (in ironic ways).

A: An interesting part is that Brecht doesn't stage the rebellion, except with the *Neinsager*. Alexandrou, on the other hand, stages a strong rebellion through his Antigone character.

Q: It's about saying yes, this is the right thing to do. Once you've come to the precedent of consent, party line, Leninist who lives in the party.

A: Brecht lays out a process of how to consent, but Alexandrou gives the idea that consent is not an option.

Q: At a different juncture, Brecht creates a play of exile and defeat. Brechtian plays of exile are very different. Alexandrou's play is not meant to ironize the demand of consent with the party.

A: Brecht's play is about educating the actors as well as the spectators. I think Alexandrou's *Antigone* could take actors through the same didactic process, but with a different end, of *not* consenting. Alexandrou's *Antigone* draws on some of Brecht's ideas but not on his voice of consent. Alexandrou was deeply involved in translating, and saw some of his translations go up on stage.

Q: I'd like to compare Alexandrou's *Antigone* to a play by Heiner Mueller, which is closer to the moment of this particular historical juncture, concerning the communist intellectual. There was an explicit reference to Brecht earlier.

A: Alexandrou spent many years in prison. If the first publication of the *Antigone* comes out in 1960, that means that he had only a few years of freedom to catch up on contemporary literature.

Q: He came out in '58.

A: Alexandrou's focus seems to be more on the earlier Brecht.

Q: Do we know if Alexandrou didn't get his hands on the later Brecht while in prison?

A: We know he had access to books but we don't know all the titles. People tried to send books in to relatives, etc. This was a time of censorship. Brecht was one of the first ones to fall under the censors' suspicion.

Q: We have to find out.

Q: About moral standing and being on a high moral ground, the fact is that, I'm not sure if Alexandrou wanted his play to be performed. This could have been a draft for *To Kivotio*, *The Mission Box*, it's an unanswerable question. Alexandrou typically did not put himself forward; his criticism of the party is not meant to gain followers. His critique is done through literature; his position is incredibly political, not necessarily moral. There is a distinction to be made: Alexandrou refused to sign any papers stating that he wasn't a communist; he was completely isolated as a critic of the Left. Yet, he didn't state his position to the right-wing government, just to his peers. He was fiercely anti-dogmatic, against submission to any authority structure, state, etc. I don't think there's a high moral ground here, he's a very strange, almost aesthetic personality. He's a troubled person and his interpretation is that Antigone is not a character to be seen in purely moral terms.

A: She has her flaws. She makes and re-makes decisions. Her development is one of individual growth.

Q: In this play Antigone is not a resistance figure or showing the moral high ground. Do you feel troubled by the fact that Antigone is always acting alone? (examples) that's constantly alone; that she acts alone.

A: And Antigone prides herself in her lonely status sometimes; that's very true. Alexandrou's existence is also a state of being alone. He has a huge admiration for Mayakovsky; he's more comfortable not belonging to a party or school yet finds ideological affinity with a foreign author whom he doesn't know or is close to personally. The idea of a solitary act is hugely prominent.

Q: His condition is a tragic position.

A: In Sophocles, too, Antigone is about being alone. If you're stuck on an island, that's also the condition you are in naturally: a state of exile and confinement. Antigone is richer in that battle than many in her surroundings

Q: There is no happy end, Alexandrou does take a high moral ground. He constantly places himself in a relentless position of questioning everything. His position toward the party is accusing it of not being truly communist, that the communists haven't gone far enough yet, that's the problem that we're struggling with.

A: Maybe we need to look for consistency in the author's actions to evaluate whether he is taking the higher moral ground. Oddly, there is a tiny footnote in Alexandrou's biography written by Dimitris Raftopoulos stating that Alexandrou did sign that he renounced the communist party on Makronisos, perhaps under conditions of torture. He later withdrew that statement.

Q: Back to the first passage on the handout, with the idea that Antigone might have failed the people, therefore she deserves to be alone. Signs of her distance from the people may be found in this dialogue between the heroine and an older woman, who calls Antigone guilty of snubbing her less educated counterparts. When seen from this perspective, Alexandrou not only misunderstood the leftists but takes responsibility for the fact that some felt alienated or far removed from the people.

A: Antigone indeed gets harassed by other women for being educated, for being an intellectual, raising the question what is education then and now? She functions as a nurse and she has a high school education. Consider the idea, what has the leftist intellectual done to stay close to the people?

Q: Thanks for the great presentation. I think it is a play with a moral fabric. Alexandrou had differences with the Party from 1945 on. That took real courage, he didn't get out of prison until '58. His novel *The Mission Box* is an example of his dispute with the KKE, he was a true believer and wanted the communists to build more of an ideologically sound communist movement. He did it in almost an aesthetic way of bearing witness, on Makronisos and in other locations of exile and imprisonment. Alexandrou fought the communist leaders but still bore witness. This leads later to talk in *The Mission Box* of sacrifice. It's a Tolstoyan thing of bearing witness, he was bearing witness to the emptiness of the communist movement by chronicling it. It's a lonely task. I don't know much about Alexandrou, but I'd contrast that with Brecht, who didn't demonstrate much morality in later life.

A: Alexandrou has a very keen sense that revolution starts with yourself. He's not proselytizing it, but he has a keen sense that revolution starts with the conscious individual.

Q: If Alexandrou didn't want to produce the play or put it on stage, why did he write a play? Why not write a novel? Or a poem? The answer has to do with finding an answer in the text. Is there a chorus?

A: Yes there is a chorus, of old women dressed in black... the voice that constantly keeps reiterating the cost of conflict and war. Another piece by Alexandrou, which is barely known, is a screenplay, entitled *Professor Truth*. In this screenplay, he experiments a lot with dialogic lines and stage directions. He has a representative of the extreme left and right in dialogue, speaking their rationale. They complement each other's lines. They meet each other to the extent that

Alexandrou's unmasking of their ideology is what drives the play. If you don't mind, what was your (seminar attendee Elektra) reaction to the *Antigone* production, when you saw it in 2003?

Q: We saw it when we were really young, my apolitical friends were bored, my political friends didn't like it. I was confused.

A: (tries to get more reaction)

Q: Was it a good production?

Q: Too loud, kind of experimental.

A: The women play a very self-effacing role.

Q: I am just thinking over the previous question about the generic justification of, interest for this generation, and when is a time for poetry and when is not. The public intellectual has so many outlets for expression. About theater, some things of the play revive themselves.

A: Another dimension we can add to our reading of the *Antigone* is that Alexandrou was in contact with Ritsos. Ritsos was very political and prolific for the Party (as Alexandrou defines him).

Q: Alexandrou accuses Ritsos of towing the Party line and says his poems are too propagandistic. Their friendship ends and comes back. I always think of Alexandrou as a poet, his language is poetic and so is the play. That's why there is no chorus. There are some songs. It is really a poetic sensibility that drives the writing, not a dramatic one, going back to the early poems, the threads that are throughout. *Kivotio* is the only novel he wrote.

A: The whole play may be summed in one line from a well-known poem by Alexandrou: "suspect always, like the truth."