

Theatre and the Dispersal of the Agon

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At the start of *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, Bonnie Honig tells us something about the kind of reader she is, or probably more accurately used to be. “As a child” she tells us “I used to read the last page of mystery novels first”. She then outlines the benefits and costs of such a reading strategy. While being more open to “appreciating its details [and] getting to know its characters” she was, she tells us, “less vulnerable to the text” (2003, 1). The autobiographical aperçu, ostensibly about the paradox of writing introductions, in fact foreshadows a much wider interest of Honig’s in narrative or what one might call a politics of form. Honig’s attention to stories and the particular form these stories takes is part of what makes her work in political theory so innovative and explains to some extent her broad and deep impact on the fields of literary studies and the humanities more generally. On re-reading this book I was struck by the extent to which narrative is repeatedly foregrounded. From the start, Honig chooses to characterize what others might see as philosophical tracts or political manifestos as fables and stories. There are in fact, no less than 8 references to fables in the index. The discussion of Kant starts with a reading of his ‘Speculative Beginnings’ and the fable returns in her accounts of Arendt’s, Derrida’s and Rawls’ “fabulist” renderings of the American Revolution and founding.

And it is a fable, perhaps the grandest of fables –Homer’s *Iliad* - which gives Honig her central term, the term we are discussing here: the *Agon*. For the term *agon* first appears in Honig’s book in the discussion of Nietzsche’s essay ‘Homer’s Contest’. It is through Nietzsche’s appreciative reading of the dynamics of epic combat that the term *agonism* first takes shape. It is in part thanks to Honig’s analyses that Nietzsche’s status as a political writer, indeed as a writer who has a place in the theorization of democratic politics, has been recognised. Yet, one potential legacy of this Homeric notion of *agonism* could be that by focusing on the heroic and sometimes savage struggles of a band of aristocratic warriors, *agonism*’s ability to sustain a model of democratic politics is strained. Indeed, this element of *agonism* is carried over into Arendt’s discussion of the *polis* which she sees in profound continuity rather than rupture with Homeric society. “Speaking metaphorically and theoretically,” she memorably writes “it is as though, the men who returned from the Trojan War had wished to make permanent the space of action which had arisen from their deeds and sufferings, to prevent its perishing...The *polis* properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together”. (HC, 198) When Arendt speaks of the *polis* as not a place but as a structure of political organization, she elides the differences between different *poleis* and erases the historical relationship to democracy.

One curious feature of Nietzsche’s essay, however, and one that animates Honig’s commentary, is that despite foregrounding Homer in its title, much of it centers around the dynamics of competition in democratic Athens. Honig makes this evident in her discussion of ostracism, an Athenian institution which was often

seen as a way of curtailing precisely the kinds of contests between aristocratic heroes which held the demos to ransom. But Nietzsche offers an alternative interpretation: “The original sense of this peculiar institution however is not a safety valve but that of a stimulant. [...] That is the kernel of the Hellenic competition-conception: it abominates autocracy, and fears its dangers; it desires the preventative against the genius – a second genius”. Honig has recourse to Nietzsche’s discussion of ostracism as an illustration of his “reverence of institutions” – but one could go further noting his critique of autocracy and perhaps even underline his openness to specifically *democratic* institutions. Despite the virtuosic model implied by the attention to Homer, the essay actually advocates a more collective oriented agonism. Nietzsche writes: “To the Ancients [...] the aim of the agonistic education was the welfare of the whole, of the civic society. Every Athenian, for instance, was to cultivate his ego in competition, so far that it should be of the highest service to Athens and should do the least harm.” Nietzsche does not see democracy as a bar to the agonistic spirit but as a stimulant. Individual *kleos* and democratic flourishing are working hand in hand. As Christa Davis Acampora writes: “It is the *community* and not any great individual competitor that founds [the agon]” (17).

Nevertheless, one might worry that Nietzsche’s unexpected portrayal of Athens directs our attention away from the institution which supports the competition for excellence in both Homeric and democratic arenas: the institution of slavery. Contemporaneously with ‘Homer’s Contest’, Nietzsche would write an essay called the ‘Greek State’ which, with its forthright denunciation of the “dignity of labour”, also casts a shadow over Arendt’s later formulations. The core of the

essay is a plea to organize society in such a way as to maximize the creation of art: “Be it then pronounced that war is just as much a necessity for the state as the slave is for society, and who can avoid this verdict if he honestly asks himself about the causes of the never-equalled Greek art-perfection?”. Nietzsche’s Greeks teach us this fable: “We must accept this cruel sounding truth, that slavery is of the essence of Culture. [...] The misery of toiling men must still increase in order to make the production of the world of art possible to a small number of Olympian men”. There has been a consensus amongst scholars to treat Nietzsche’s statements about slavery as metaphorical and to hold him at a distance from the debates about abolitionism which preoccupied his contemporaries. But as a notebook entry on Harriet Beecher Stowe and her debt to Rousseau suggests, there is evidence that Nietzsche’s was himself well aware of the continuities between his arguments about ancient slavery and the emancipation movements of the nineteenth century.

The fabulous world of epic, then, may ground Honig’s discussion of the agon – but its features depart in various ways from their Nietzschean genealogy. In particular, while the vocabulary of fables and epics does not disappear from Honig’s book, a different genre of narrative takes on greater prominence. The agon in Greek culture simultaneously denotes military, sporting, musical, philosophical, legal, political and medical contests. In 5th century BCE Athens, the term agon increasingly described a formal element of Greek drama, a set piece of opposing speeches by protagonist and antagonist or protagonist and chorus. The formulaic nature of these verbal encounters as well as their specific vocabulary have been read by many literary critics as a reference to the emerging institution

of the law court. Thus debates about the nature of justice or the question of human accountability conducted on stage specifically referenced the incipient terminology of legal battles. Yet, the direction of travel – legal metaphor in drama or dramatic metaphor in the law court is difficult to establish. While one of Honig’s concerns in her book is the reduction of politics to law, the porosity of theatre and the law in Athens is a reminder of how politics, law and literature remain interarticulated. In classical Athens the law is not the stabilizing discourse which keeps the disruptive force of tragedy in check – law and tragedy irrupt simultaneously to *agonize* the category of the human.

But what interests me here is how what one might call Honig’s ‘performative turn’ in the book suggests a different form for agonism. In a brilliant move, Honig brings Arendt’s discussion of the question of founding and the American Revolution into dialogue with Derrida’s critique of J.L. Austin’s theory of performativity. On Honig’s Derridean reading, Arendt’s theory of action becomes “a non-sovereign performance that works to reconstitute communities and inaugurate new realities” (*A,I*, 43-4). This performative action is crucial to the model of agonism which Honig goes on to develop in *Antigone, Interrupted*. The frame of democratic institutions, the involvement of the chorus, the arguments, interruptions and conspiracies between the protagonists: all of these aspects of tragedy make it a privileged place to explore the collective dimension of agonism. But it is also by tracking the genre of tragedy that Honig can specifically make good on the promise of her first book: “the same impulse can motivate the application of performativity to Arendt’s public-private distinction”. Honig needs an agonism grounded in tragedy – not Homeric epic – to fulfill her

promise. For theatre is precisely the sphere where the boundaries between public and private – the very question of what is political – ‘how far down does the political go?’ – are so insistently debated.

Nevertheless, in *A, I*, Honig shows how reading these plays *tragically* may ultimately blunt their political promise. She argues that the politics of tragedy can all too easily morph into the tragedy of politics. By revealing the covert workings of a mortalist humanism in some of the most politically minded readings of the *Antigone* she uncovers again a insidious displacement of politics. As she does in her first book, Honig calls on us to examine and rethink our reading practices. By proposing to read the *Antigone* as melodrama rather than tragedy, she keeps the agon in play. If the epic agonism of Nietzsche should be rejected because its of anti-emanicipatory politics, a tragic agonism, Honig suggests, must ultimately also be rejected because of its emanicipation from politics. *A, I* thus shows how we might have to give up on “the tragic” but not on tragedy as drama. In her reading of *Antigone*, Honig’s agonism has found, if not strictly its genre, then its stage. Perhaps this explains why Honig is sticking with drama and offering us as her next project *theatres of refusal*. It is a cliché of Greek tragedy that the audience, familiar with the mythic stories, already knew how the plays would end before they saw them staged. Perhaps the child Honig was destined to give up mystery novels in order to discover Greek tragedy.