

IMPROVISATIONAL SOLIDARITY: IN CONVERSATION WITH JUDITH BUTLER

Mario Telò

Mario Telò: Maybe we can just talk about your general thoughts and your general impressions of seeing this performance of ...(*Iphigenia*).

Judith Butler: First of all, let me say that I very much like the text that you sent me that you have written.¹ Debarati also sent me hers, which was really lovely and surprising.² And I saw that in both of your texts you were attuned to this repetitive collapse of structure, and also, I think, in hers there was a way in which sounds of anguish become a kind of pure vocalization that allows for an improvisational move on the part of *esperanza spalding*, and I thought that was extremely important. There's a plot that's going on in a somewhat predictable and repetitive way, but there are these sounds that are emitted that seem to undercut the structure or signify its collapse in some way. And I also felt that in your piece you were attentive to the open tense, something that happens in both of your pieces, and also this idea that some kind of structure is collapsing time and again; it repeatedly collapses and that's part of what we see. And it's a question for me, how does Greek tragedy or tragedy more broadly give us a way to think about collapsing social structure—a social structure that doesn't just collapse once but that is collapsing all the time?

I, of course, was really taken by the Wayne Shorter–*esperanza spalding* version of *Iphigenia*, although it was always unclear to me whether this is only *Iphigenia at Aulis* or also *Iphigenia among the Taurians*—or whether we could even meaningfully distinguish between the two. Maybe we have released *Iphigenia* from both plays. Maybe she's now circulating in another domain outside of those plays but also outside of that genre. And, of course, we know that this is an opera rather than a tragedy, so we have already left tragedy to some degree or we've brought tragedy into opera, but we have also brought tragedy into improvisation. So we're skipping through several centuries as we watch this play, and something

1. See Telò's article.
2. See Sanyal's article.

in us either has to accept that and go with it or overcome our revolt. I saw the production with some classicists who were offended: ‘Why does Greek tragedy need to be transposed into other genres that are modern or contemporary or both? And what’s so insufficient about the play to speak to the present such that it must be converted into improvisational jazz, for instance?’ So we know that.

I’ll tell you one thing that I felt, and maybe this puts me in a minority view, which is that, as spalding herself remarks, the men, the military men, the men who belong to Agamemnon, are satirical in a way. They grunt, they march, they repeat their sounds in a monotonal way. They always repeat the same sounds. They seem to be monosyllabic. They remind me of some of the athletes that used to sit in the back of my classes and weren’t able to complete sentences. They are kind of a caricature of masculinity; they represent a kind of principle of identity. ‘I am I am I am. I march I march I march. I grunt I grunt I grunt.’ There’s not much variation among the men. And it occurred to me that there’s potentially infinite variation in the various Iphigenias that we see. That part of the story varies and varies, and many potential stories, many potential performances, are produced at the site of the feminine. But the masculine is relegated to a kind of principle of repetitive identity. And, frankly, that worried me. Why aren’t we subjecting the masculine to a set of variations? Why shouldn’t that also be potentially variable? The way it plays, of course, is very important for feminism because how many times has Iphigenia been sacrificed? How many Iphigenias are there in the world who have been sacrificed? How many women have been killed? How many women have been raped or abandoned? We can transpose Iphigenia into many different contexts and see, for instance, the horrific character of femicide or sacrifice. And we can also reimagine the scene so that she barely escapes, so that she stands up, she refuses or deflects the sacrifice. We can draw out of the scene a series of potential strategies of resistance or subversion—there’s no question about that. And in a way we’re dumbfounded and horrified by the repetitive character of all these sacrifices. How often is this happening? Where is this happening? Is this happening in every place in the world? Yes, this is happening in nearly every place in the world.

So that’s the social structure that repeats; it also collapses precisely because it repeats. Iphigenia is never definitively sacrificed. And indeed in the version of the play that I know, there’s a report to Clytemnestra. ‘Oh, by the way, she disappeared at the last moment. Nobody knows where she went.’ So, *what?* She was *not* killed? How do we know? What’s the status of that report? Well, that report is the beginning of the subjunctive in a way. What if she did escape? What if she did somehow elude that killing? What if some substitution were made at the last moment and she was released? And that produces a possibility of

imagining a potentially infinite number of alternative endings. And that's something the play itself does. It leaves us unknowing. Do we believe that report that Clytemnestra received, or do we understand that report as a subjunctive linguistic act that opens up the possibility of another ending? Is the subjunctive itself that other ending? Is there some switch of modalities such that we don't know whether that is a report or a wish? An act of consolation? A fantasy? We don't know. This unknowing lends an imaginary character to that utterance. I think that that's pretty great. It's pretty amazing. I love that. I love the way the various Iphigenias move, the way they come back from the dead. The way that they're still breathing and moving. And I'm horrified by the fact that they keep getting sacrificed.

But at the same time, I feel that all the drama is over there on that feminine side. Is this a sacrifice? Is this a subversion? Is this an escape? Is this a resistance? And men, they don't have self-doubt. And in the play (*Iphigenia in Aulis*) there is self-doubt. It seems as though Agamemnon's not sure. Maybe in the opera there's some self-doubt. There's some hesitation, for sure. And yet that drumbeat of masculinity keeps going on and on and on. And that, I thought, produced a kind of binary between the masculine and the feminine. It was maybe too easy. Masculinity became a foil for this other drama that seemed feminine. Some people see Iphigenia as a passive victim; others see her as possibly complicitous with Agamemnon: 'Yeah, take my life, definitely. I'll die for the nation. I'm a soldier too. Take my life.' What if that's ambiguous, and what if Agamemnon is also ambiguous? I would have liked to see the genders and the complicity between the genders more in the open. Because I'm not sure you can really have one of those genders without the other. And you can choose to stage it as absolute difference or as a feminine upsurge or resistance against a monotonal and repetitive masculine drumbeat. What about the men who help them, and what about self-doubt? And what about complicity on the part of the women? And what about the complicated interplay? So there was something that was very satisfying from a feminist perspective, but from a perspective that would maybe see gender relations as relational, as complicated, as internally vexed, it was maybe less satisfying.

So one social structure that I thought did not collapse was binary gender itself. I think spalding herself or themselves is an interesting character because there is a nonbinary character to the figure in the spacesuit or even to the vocalization, to some degree. So maybe we can't appreciate that particular production without the appearance of spalding, the complication of spalding. Maybe more could be made of that. But in the end I had mixed feelings about the production.

MT: It's so interesting that you are raising this issue, because in Euripides, on the other hand, we could say that the play to an extent is all about gender trouble because this is a play that takes place in the camp, and then two women arrive—that is, Clytemnestra and Iphigenia. And the men say, 'Why are the two of you here?' And that draws attention to the fact that the two women are played by men, by male actors, but consequently that can have repercussions also in terms of gender trouble on the identities of the male actors who play men. There is a sense in which the camp becomes campy, if you like, in Euripides, precisely because of the intervention of the two women. In Euripides there's a sense of disruption precisely because there is this infiltration of two women into the camp.

I love what you say about the collapse of structure. So do you think that Iphigenia in a sense stands also for the state and the possibility of the collapse of the state through tragedy or for the need of the state to stage its own collapse periodically?

JB: I think of it maybe more in terms of the nation-state or the nationalism and militarism that are required to sustain the nation-state. And maybe we can't really talk about a nation-state in classical Greece, or maybe we look at it now through the nation-state. It's unclear. It seems as though there's a free-floating militarism in the Wayne Shorter-esperanza spalding production. What I would say is that to the degree that the nation-state requires the sacrifice of its youth, it usually requires the sacrifice of its men as soldiers. It destroys itself in order to preserve itself. And of course with Iphigenia it sacrifices the daughter precisely to get the good wind and to placate the gods, as I understand it, which means that there's a kind of self-sacrifice and a devastating loss. Only a truly devastating loss for humans would apparently satisfy the gods. So one undergoes a devastating loss, or one enacts a devastating sacrifice for the nation, but the nation at that moment also does violence against itself. So it is the self-devouring character of the nation and the nation-state understood as a military state that comes to the fore. The nation-state will be a place of infinite grieving. The nation-state will be a place where people destroy what is most important to them for the purposes of the state. There's also a destruction of the family in the name of the state that is going on, the destruction of the so-called blood tie. I think there are different ways of understanding that. Well, women are victims of war. Women are sacrificed. Women are usually the ones who are grieving the loss of men who went to war and died at war. But in this case women are sacrificed for the war effort and they allow themselves to be sacrificed or they seem to. And do they do that out of nationalism or out of dedication to the men, or do they do that because their lives are not considered valuable enough? Or maybe they *don't* do that. Maybe

- they seem to be sacrificing themselves, but actually they're escaping. Actually, there's some magical reprieve at the end. Or maybe they become ethereal. They don't need bodies in order to hang around. It's unclear to me, but I do think this play raises all those questions.
- MT:* Do you think that at the end the Greeks actually go to Troy or not? Because my impression is that the play is not interested in staging that future.
- JB:* No, I think everybody enters the abyss. There's a cave, which I find interesting. At least it looked like a cave. I don't know if it's Antigone's cave or Plato's cave or whose cave that is. But it seemed as though everybody entered the abyss. From this plot, there is only one place to go: darkness and the abyss. The production stages this repetitive structure, and then it dissolves it and consigns it, banishes it, to darkness. It's the collapse of the social structure that we see repeated throughout.
- MT:* So the war itself becomes the before-the-war, the before-the-event, so the very fact of the sacrifice of women becomes the war.
- JB:* The war devours everything, and in the end it is enveloped in darkness. But if I remember correctly the way the Shorter-spalding production works, those drumbeat men actually march into this dark hole. They are enveloped in that darkness. So there is a kind of obliteration of the social structure in the end. This can only end in obliteration, in darkness. Or we can say that the play consigns them to that darkness, banishes them into an irretrievable darkness. But no, there's no home. There's no repair. There's no return.
- MT:* I wonder whether you had any thoughts on the deer, the dead deer who remains onstage throughout the production, and about the woman clad in a blue dress whom we see at the end—and actually I think I also saw her before the performance in the audience.
- JB:* If I remember correctly, the woman in the blue dress was walking around the audience saying, 'Oh, this is a really rough play, but it's really important. You're going to see it should never have happened. There's something wrong with what you're about to see. I just want you to know, there's something really wrong with what you're about to see.' So she's didactic and ethical, and I believe she actually tries to intervene in the action at one point and is rebuffed or there's some indifference to her. So there's some kind of ethical position that doesn't quite take hold. It's not going to work like that. Whatever ethics comes out of this is not going to work by an ethical *deus ex machina* who arrives from offstage and says, 'By the way, there's this wrong.' Although Euripides is faulted for precisely that, for sometimes having an external force come in and tell us what's what.
- MT:* Yes, I love this reading, that she's the failed *deus ex machina*.

- JB:* Yes, she's rebuffed. But the deer was of course interesting because, on the one hand, the deer is the potential substitute for Iphigenia's life. So are we supposed to want the deer to be killed so that Iphigenia can live? And then we're stuck with a new problem, which is the slaughter of animals, which we also have a problem with. So the way in which the play is supposed to go, the sacrifice we're supposed to hope for, turns out to be another iteration of violence, and yet that deer keeps hanging around too. It's supposed to be slaughtered but is not quite slaughtered, still living on, insistent, reminding us of animal life, not letting us substitute the animal for the human. The animals are dwelling among the humans; the humans are dwelling among or with the animals. So that plot structure doesn't take hold either; it doesn't quite work. Something is resisted about the bargain we are asked to accept: 'Oh, sacrifice of animal, much better; Iphigenia can live. It's a good idea.' Right. We see it there; we see it in the Bible. We see it in many places.
- MT:* The fact that the deer is always there is really the collapse of the plot, as you said before.
- JB:* Yes, I think so. It's the collapse of the plot, and it's the haunting character of animality, which is also the haunting of the human by its own animality and the inextricable coexistence of the human and animal models not as separate kinds of species but as interconnected. The human is always a human animal. And the animal is pretty human, in that production at least, wandering about, socializing.
- MT:* That's such a beautiful insight. Thank you. To go back to the woman in blue—is she Artemis in some form? Because the play has a kind of queer potentiality if you think that in some versions Artemis takes Iphigenia away and they leave together. And of course Artemis is the goddess who never gets married, who is always surrounded by female companions. I and others have tried to see this in the play of Euripides, this possibility of a queer kinship in a sense, following you. So I wonder whether you see that as a possibility at all.
- JB:* I think it's an interesting question. The only thought I had is that I don't know how to understand that usher, that ethical *deus ex machina* who fails, but she tries to stop the action: 'No, let's not have this sacrifice. Let's not do this.' And that doesn't work, but what does happen instead is that the sacrifice keeps happening and it's never fully successful because the Iphigenias start proliferating. Are we to say that we cannot just have a prohibition on the sacrifice? That's not the end of the problem. That's not the ethical resolution. The resolution, if there is one, has to do with restaging the scene so that women are empowered in different ways or where different kinds of agency or resistance or subversion are possible. So the very fact that the Iphigenias multiply suggests that there's power in numbers and that a kind of multitude of Iphigenias

emerge who are struggling with this scene, reworking this scene. And rather than an ethical interdiction against sacrifice, what we have is a political appropriation of the scene and an experimentation with the scene in various imaginary ways that allow for new strategies, for new ways of imagining countering that power, undermining that power. I think that's the way I see it. Maybe those Iphigenias are the same but they are different. They are a kind of feminist multitude. They keep proliferating, as much as the killings happen, the femicides throughout the world. There is a feminist response to violence that plays out in imaginary ways new political strategies for undermining and countering the force of that violence. So I don't know if I would call it kinship. I might be more prone to call it a kind of improvisational solidarity.

MT: That's such a beautiful phrase, which I am sure many people will pick up on: improvisational solidarity.

JB: But you know, Mario, it's interesting because Anne Carson in 2013 offered a translation of *Iphigenia among the Taurians*.³ And maybe you remember this, that she made the quite astonishing claim that we might think of the play more as a romantic comedy than as a tragedy. Her way of doing this is to deflate the tragedy of its horror and its terror and and its sorrow and to offer almost an ironic or literal enactment of Iphigenia in the first person. So I looked it up and see that Carson starts her translation with 'I am Iphigenia, daughter of the daughter of Tyndareus. My father killed me at Eurypus for stiff breezes that spin the salt blue sea in spirals. For heaven's sake, a sacrifice, to Artemis in famous Aulis. Or so people think.' Now, there's something disarming about that. It goes with the idea that maybe Iphigenia escaped. Maybe she's still around. 'I am Iphigenia.' If someone is saying 'I am Iphigenia', 'I' am still alive. 'I, Iphigenia, was sacrificed.' Where am 'I' speaking from? Am 'I' speaking prosopoeitically from the dead? Or am 'I' an ethereal 'I'? Am 'I' an unknown 'I'? In other words, she's taking seriously the idea of Iphigenia as a survivor, as miraculously surviving, or as a fugitive survivor. Iphigenia is a fugitive somewhere. 'I am Iphigenia, daughter of... I was sacrificed.' I laugh, but it is a kind of deadpan deflation of the high drama that we see in the Shorter-spalding version. And I think there's something here that I appreciate. All these messages are going back and forth. Clytemnestra doesn't get the message. Agamemnon... There are a lot of miscommunications in the play. We could actually see it as a kind of romantic comedy. And to do so deflates it a little bit from the high drama that we maybe float to or require. But it does, I think, offer another perspective that's worth remembering.

3. Carson in Griffith and Most (2013a).

- MT:* You know that in *Iphigenia in Tauris*, Iphigenia is a survivor. So she says, 'I'm here in Tauris. And Artemis saved me. So I'm here.' And in a sense, she says about her father, 'Oh my father is such a loser. He wasn't even able to kill me. So here I am, having to go through the trauma of having been on the altar and having had to wait for him to kill me, and he didn't even do it, because Artemis actually snatched me away.' So I want to go back to what you said at the beginning, that Shorter and, from what you are suggesting, Carson too, tried to conflate the two plays but also in a sense rescue Iphigenia from both plays and bring her into a different space that, in the case of Carson, is this ironical take on tragedy; in the case of Shorter, opera.
- JB:* I think that's true, but maybe the point is that there is something quotidian about the survival of Iphigenia. In other words, how many girls, how many women—we could add, how many non-gender-conforming people, how many trans, how many transvestites, how many queers—experience their lives as almost taken, their lives as almost sacrificed, their lives as having been put on an altar to save the family or the nation or the state? Maybe there is something kind of quotidian. It's like, 'Hi, I am this queer creature whose family almost killed me, whose family sent me to a psychiatric hospital, whose parents pummeled me when they found out I was gay, and I almost died, but someone came along and helped me to the hospital.' I don't know, in a way making it quotidian actually restores it to this question of the social structure of violence, and allowing for the imaginary variation on the scene allows us to see how people do escape, survive somehow, perhaps through the help of everyday Artemises, get to a better place and time, and even to a solidarity, an improvisational solidarity. Maybe.