


Mimesis, Alteration and Interruption. Bartleby, Antigone and a Feminist Politics

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Abstract. The article is proposed as a reading of *A Feminist Theory of Refusal* (2021), by Bonnie Honig. Under the assumption that Honig has the merit of introducing into feminist political theory a thought of rejection patiently elaborated from a commentary on literary figures such as Antigone and Bartleby, the article interrogates the logic of resistance that these figurations of negativity advance. From the perspective of *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, the names of Antigone and Bartleby are not only subjective indications of the interruption of a domain, but above all they are agonistic figurations of a politics that has the dispute of meaning as one of its main axes. In other words, the politics of rejection that Honig proposes is at the same time an agonal politics that is organized around the meaning of words, of the narratives that structure the commonality of a social order. Following this line of reading, the essay sets out to interrogate the politics of rejection elaborated by Honig from the figurations that embody it.

Keywords: Bonnie Honig; Refusal; Feminism; Hegemony; Resistance

[ES] Mimesis, Alteración e Interrupción. Bartleby, Antígona y la política feminista

Resumen. El artículo se propone como una lectura *A Feminist Theory of Refusal* (2021), de Bonnie Honig. Bajo el supuesto de que a Honig le corresponde el mérito de introducir en la teoría política feminista un pensamiento del rechazo elaborado pacientemente a partir de un comentario de figuras literarias como Antígona y Bartleby, el artículo interroga la lógica de la resistencia que estas figuraciones de la negatividad adelantan. Desde la perspectiva de *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, los nombres de Antígona y Bartleby no solo constituyen puntualizaciones subjetivas de interrupción de un dominio, sino que ante todo constituyen figuraciones agonísticas de una política que tiene en la disputa de la significación uno de sus ejes principales. En otras palabras, la política del rechazo que propone Honig es al mismo tiempo una política agonal que se organiza en torno a la significación de las palabras, de las narraciones que estructuran lo común de un orden social. Siguiendo esta pista de lectura, el ensayo se propone interrogar la política del rechazo elaborada por Honig a partir de las figuraciones que la encarnan.

Palabras clave: Bonnie Honig; rechazo; feminismo; hegemonía; resistencia

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The commemoration of the fifty years of the military coup in Chile took place in a time without time, a time extracted from any identifiable material demarcation. An extended time on that visual wound that is the image of the Palacio de la Moneda in flames. A stigmatic time, which in its hallucinated presence is consumed in monotonous operations such as those practices that stage the memory of a ritual, of an act that insists on the task of its consummation. It could be said that

this commemorative time belongs to a regime of historicity that could perhaps be identified with “presentism.”¹ In these commemorative rituals, a powerful mandate, a “slogan”, a word of order that seeks to preserve or recreate a certain reality, resonates indirectly in these commemorative rituals identified with a certain use of the word history. The judicative structure of the historiographic declaration, the anteriority of the meaning that history presupposes, are part of

¹ On this concept, F. Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité. Présentisme et expériences du temps*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2003; also, by the same F. Hartog, *Croire en l'histoire*, Paris, Flammarion, 2013.

the choreography of gestures that a commemorative rhetoric mobilizes again and again under the mandate of preserving or recreating a certain principle of reality, an absolute present.

There are two works by Chilean artist Alfredo Jaar that show with absolute clarity the tension that affects the timeless time of the Chilean commemoration of September 11, 1973. Works that, in the motive that seems to constitute them, testify to the double rhythm that marks the operations of memorialization and commemoration of a reality principle. The first of them can be seen today at the Sala Matta of the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, in the exhibition that the artist inaugurated a few weeks ago under the title *El lado oscuro de la luna* [*The Dark Side of the Moon*].² The work I am referring to is dated 1974, and consists of a series of “calendars” that insist on a date (Tuesday, September 11, 1973), on a number (11), which is repeated by exchanging all the days of the week, of the month and of the year for the punctuality of a single day. Time stops at the number 11, making that day an arch-day, a number from which to read the present. The second work was presented ten years ago, in the Sala Miró of the Museo de la Solidaridad Salvador Allende, on September 11, on the occasion of the commemoration of the fortieth anniversary of the coup. Under the title “September 11, 2013”, a video installation was exhibited showing the Moneda Palace on September 11, 2013, one hour before and half an hour after its bombing³. The image traces an image in another image, superimposes them by mimicking them, replacing them, interchanging them, subjecting them to a rewriting that is at the same time an action of “symbolic purification,” (in Jaar’s words) a kind of visual therapy aimed at “cleaning” the image of the bombed Moneda⁴. Both works in their difference and insistence show the tension of a work of memory apprehended according to the logic of a propaedeutic disjunction (memory-forgetting, past-future, trauma-elaboration). Disjunction that organizes not only the forms of a political rationality, of a clinic, of a diagnosis, but that also ensures the deployment of memory in a temporal *continuum* imposed on the unity and homogeneity of a social space. In other words, the spatial reference acts as a homogeneous surface that finds in history a common experience of meaning ensured by the permanence of a reality identified with the territory and the population. The double rhythm that Jaar’s works testify to is thus that of a theoretical problematic, that of a structure that provides the answers to the questions it raises, the order of a gaze that forms the objects that becomes visible to its inspection, to the recognition

and knowledge of a domain. This double rhythm, this tension, this double journey of the works, if you will, is also that of the operations of memorialization and commemoration of a certain reality principle, of a principle of historicity that is proper to a certain common sense of politics, to a certain political rationality.

In other words, the exemplary, paradigmatic character of Jaar’s works on September 11, 1973 is none other than that of condensing, in the insistence and difference that constitute them, the set of problematizations, positionings and figurations common to the imagination of a left in mourning with its own tradition. Following a small critical work of Walter Benjamin from the 1930s on Erich Kästner (“Linke Melancholie”, 1931), Enzo Traverso has recently characterized this psycho-political state of the left as “left melancholy”, melancholy for the loss of revolution as an object of history. In the same book, the Italian historian points to Carmen Castillo’s *Calle Santa Fe* (2007) as one of the epitaphs in which it is possible to read the demise of the Latin American revolutions of the 1970s. Castillo’s film tells a story of militancy, of militancy torn apart by the end of the revolutionary dream (we are not yet, of course, in that other heartbreaking moment of the end of revolutionary militancy that can be read in Diamela Eltit’s novel, *Jamás el fuego nunca*). It is the story of a house, of a “safe house”, which serves as a refuge for Miguel Enríquez and Carmen Castillo herself, both militants of the MIR (Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria, Revolutionary Left Movement). At the same time, the house is also a place of remembrance, an emblem of the visual memory of a left that honors the death of the main revolutionary leader of the MIR, fallen in combat after the house was ambushed by the military and security apparatuses of the dictatorship. Following the film’s script, Traverso dwells on the age of revolutionaries, on the suspension of the time of the underground life by the small pleasures of everyday life, on the drama of death, defeat and exile. According to him, Miguel Enríquez was thirty years old when he died; Carmen had worked as an employee at the Moneda Palace, beside President Allende, between his election and the putsch of September 1973. After that date, they lived together in this house, which was one of the underground bases of the MIR leadership. At that moment, Carmen was pregnant and, seriously wounded, miraculously survived the police attack thanks to the neighbors who called an ambulance. Her movie tells a story of exile, the rediscovery of her country after the end of the military dictatorship and also – this is perhaps the most moving dimension – of the living legacy of the MIR among a new generation of Chilean activists.⁵

El lado oscuro de la luna (2023), *11 de septiembre* (2013), *Calle Santa Fe* (2007). Three scenes of remembrance, three visual registers, three acts that punctuate a political memory, the effect of a date, of an obscure disaster, of a catastrophe. Three interventions that, in their insistence, in their wound, in their punctuality, *overlap* with that other date identified with the attack on the World Trade Center and

² The exhibit will be on display from September 14, 2023 through February 25, 2024. See, <https://www.mnba.gob.cl/cartelera/alfredo-jaar-el-lado-oscuro-de-la-luna>.

³ The video of the installation is available at the Museo de la Solidaridad Salvador Allende website. See, <https://www.mssa.cl/exposicion/11-de-septiembre/>.

⁴ The phrases in quotation marks are by Alfredo Jaar. See the interview Jaar gave to the *Universidad de Chile* newspaper on the occasion of the inauguration of the video installation. R. Alarcón, “Alfredo Jaar. ‘Ironically, the country that supported the coup also robs us of the meaning of the 11th,’” *Diario Universidad de Chile*, Tuesday, September 10, 2013. <https://radio.uchile.cl/2013/09/10/alfredo-jaar-ironicamente-el-pais-que-apoyo-el-golpe-tambien-nos-roba-el-significado-del-11/>.

⁵ E. Traverso, “Santiago Remembrance,” *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History and Memory*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2016, p. 111.

the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. The word *overlapping* [superposición], which evokes the words coincidence, concealment, and even covering, speaks of a contact and a separation, of a translation that is both impossible and possible, that brings together in one date two events that in their absolute singularity remain ineffable. As if its singularity could not be captured by any generalization, the date September 11 exhibits itself as a species without a genus, as an intuition without a concept. In its incessant repetition, in a certain impossibility of naming the traumatism it shows, that date, in its double insistence, in the singularity of its double step, imprints on the left the question of *how to continue*, of how to rise up after the fall of representation. How to organize resistance, rebellion, revolt when the coordinates that gave meaning to a world seem to sink in the edge of a date, of a repetition, of a difference that comes to witness not reality, but the destruction of reality.

Ever since Jacques Lacan turned his gaze upon Sophocles' *Antigone*, the brightness of the tragic has not ceased to blind the logic of the commentary on resistance. Somehow, embedded in the *pathos* of this figure, resistance is always found already situated between two-deaths. Lacan will say of Antigone that she is inflexible, inhuman, perhaps monstrous. Kneeling beside the corpse of her brother, her countenance is that of "a bird that has just lost its young". It does not escape Lacan's notice that this singular image of Antigone evokes the very limit at which the possibility of metamorphosis is situated. Like Melville's *Bartleby*, Sophocles' *Antigone* is the bearer of the death drive and the signifying cut. Her realm is none other than that of ashes, Lacan says, that of the universal fire. These two tragic figures, figures that seem to dwell between two-deaths, have been proposed as exemplary figures of a leftist thought that insists on a double movement of memorialization and invention.⁶ A melancholic left, it has been said, that is constituted *in* the exhaustion of the utopian energies of the project of modernity.

In seminal work including *Antigone, Interrupted* (2013) and also *A Feminist Theory of Refusal* (2021), Bonnie Honig has made of Antigone and Bartleby two indispensable names to any feminist elaboration of resistance and emancipation. As a feminist political theorist, Honig has the merit of inscribing these two desperate figures of resistance in the order of a political thought of refusal. It could be said that refusal, contestation, and even lament are forms of a non-dialectizable negation, figurations of a negativity that cannot be reinscribed or reappropriated in a positive movement of universalization. On the other hand, as figures of refusal, of negation, of recusation, these figures stand, by definition, in absolute solitude, in an interruption that isolates them and concentrates them in the singularity of an act that is pure cut, unworking, inoperativity. How is it possible then

to consider these figures of solitude and despair as the exemplary figures of a politics of resistance and refusal? How to elaborate a feminist theory of refusal from syntagms such as "I would prefer not to" or "Enough! Give me glory!"? Honig's proposal consists in reinterpreting these figures through a double movement of contrast: on the one hand, to read them as figures that interrupt a diurnal order of production, the normality of the day that is the normality of work, of an occupation that confines bodies to a domain of servitude and subjection. Presented as figurations of the interruption of production, the names of Antigone and Bartleby thus show, in their refusal, the refusal of a common solitude, that of a solitude *in* common. In this perspective, it is not only possible to read in the names of Antigone and Bartleby the subjective punctuations of a time of unwork, of a resistance that is both rejection and liberation from work, but, going a step further, it is also possible to see in these absolute figures of negation, other figures of an affirmation of life, of an ethical life, as a common and participatory life. Also, in a silent work of translation and retranslation of concepts, or, still better, in a practice of assemblages and situated compositions of authorships, which can be presented at the same time as the effect or result of a hospitable dwelling in theory, Honig takes up notions such as those of "inclination" (Adriana Cavarero), "inoperativity" (Giorgio Agamben) and "fabulation" (Saidiya Hartman) to unwork and work those figures of refusal that can be identified with Antigone and Bartleby. In this work of stitching, the text is being formed some agonistic figures of politics that have in the dispute of signification one of their main investments. In other words, the politics of refusal proposed by Honig is at the same time an agonistic politics that is constituted as a struggle for the meaning of words.

If indeed what is decisive in Honig's proposal is to think of interruption as an agonal practice as a dispute for signification, it remains to be specified whether the feminist politics of refusal is *still* a politics of hegemony.⁷ In its baroque nature, in that excess or delay that marks the permanence of an earlier time, in that *still*, the question or the questioning seems to be suspended in the formula: "even so, however, nevertheless"... Otherwise, it could be said that both the concepts of "inoperativity" in Agamben and of "inclination" in Cavarero are not inscribed within a conception of politics as a hegemonic form. As concepts marked by declination, flagging, fall, *casus*, these concepts are not constituted within a hegemonic logic that thinks of politics as "articulation" or "direction".⁸ In this sense, these concepts have been considered as the vehicle of a politics without *arkhé*, perhaps anarchist or anarchizing⁹, aprincipal. Taking up a term that is at the heart of

⁶ I refer to the readings carried out in recent decades in Argentina and Chile around Bartleby. See, AA.VV., *Bartleby: I would prefer not to. The bio-political, the post-human*, Buenos Aires, La Cebra, 2008; and the special issue dedicated to Bartleby in *Papel Machine*, no. 7, Santiago de Chile, 2012. On the centrality of Antigone in the discussions of the Latin American left, see O. A. Cabezas and M. Valderrama, "Resistencias", *Consignas*, Buenos Aires, Palinodeia, 2013, pp. 77-86.

⁷ Of course, the main reference here is E. Laclau and C. Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 2nd ed., London & New York, Verso, 2001.

⁸ For a recent discussion of the notion of hegemony, see, C. Malabou, "Contemporary Political Adventures of Meaning: What Is Hegemony?," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 50, num. 1, 2023, pp. 54-66.

⁹ G. Agamben, "Vers une théorie de la puissance destituante," *Lundimatin*, no. 5, 2016; A. Castillo, "Tres motivos para la inclinación," *Papel máquina. Revista de cultura*, no. 12, Santiago de Chile, 2018, pp. 139-146 [issue dedicated to Giorgio

Jean-François Lyotard's philosophy, it could be said that the concepts of "inoperativity" and "inclination" enact a *differend* in politics, an untranslatability, a logic of incommensurability. It is precisely this logic that the current uses of Antigone and Bartleby seem to reflect.

Now, the question remains: is it possible to think politics beyond its hegemonic form? Is it possible to vindicate a politics that is constituted on the basis of a refusal that is necessarily articulated as a struggle for significance, command, or direction? This series of questions, which mark an insistence at the very moment when we are witnessing a certain retraction of politics, of hegemonic politics apprehended as a discursive dispute for signification, is typical of a series of questions that, with regard to the revolts that shook Chile, Ecuador or Colombia between October and November 2019, examine post-hegemonic forms of politics, forms of political manifestation that could perhaps be called "infrapolitic."¹⁰

The pose of the feminine is by antonomasia the inclination, Adriana Cavarero claims.¹¹ This does not mean that the inclination implies a bodily gesture without a frame, outside the iteration that every pose carries. We should not forget the powerful figuration of the feminine given by the *pietá*, a pose that, despite its inclination, paradoxically does not cease to be a straight line that enhances the proliferation of other different inclinations of the "feminine-maternal". The inclination is always in relation to a fixity: is it possible to think of an inclination without a frame, to think of monstrous concepts, without *arkhé*, without representation? Minor concepts, *exhausted*, in the sense that Gilles Deleuze gives to this word in his commentary on Samuel Beckett's television plays.¹²

Thus far we have retained in our reading of Honig the figures, the names, of Antigone and Bartleby. We have done so based on a situated interrogation of *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*. An interested reading, an overreading that superimposes on the figures and names that open Honig's book the figures and names that mark a certain Latin American obsession for those same names, for those same figurations. It is well known that Antigone and Bartleby are surrounded by a politics of insistence and resistance that is identified with impossible mourning, "disappearance" and survival, where each of these words testifies to a certain untranslatability common to the mother tongue itself, a kind of difference that separates the Spanish of Latin America from the Spanish of Spain.¹³ This interested reading, this superimpo-

sition of readings, which can also be apprehended as an overlapping, as an overlapping of two politics of negation, has always been the effect of a superimposition of two dates, of two incommensurable dates: September 11, 1973 - September 11, 2001. Two dates that in their repetition and superposition count as one and the same insistence, one and the same vision, one and the same blindness.

As if it were necessary to return again and again to the Greek scene, as if it were necessary to recreate again and again the story of a murder, of an incest, of a daughter crying out in front of the unburied corpse of her brother, Honig opens and closes *A Feminist Theory of Refusal* with discussions of ancient tragedy. She opens with Euripides' *The Bacchae* and closes with a veiled redescription of Antigone by asserting that *Sister* is an anagram of *Resist*. "Open" and "close" is just a way of saying, for *The Bacchae* and various modern versions of this tragedy are in fact the metatext or arch-text from which the figurations of inoperativeness, inclination and fabulation are reread. They are read and reread in a movement of continuous inversion and reversal, where the very concepts that are the object of critique and restructuring serve as lenses through which to scrutinize the tragic text.

Women boldly desiring freedom, female choirs protesting against injustice, heroines cursed by power making their own way and singing songs of pain. Women in resistance, defying the sovereign, decapitating him, decapitalizing him, overthrowing him and fleeing the city. Women united, empowered, who discover in concert with others, in the common experience of resistance and action, the practices of care, of fabulation and confabulation. Women who, after living on the run, fortifying themselves in dwellings located beyond the walls, finally feel the need, the duty, to return to the city to dispute the past, the present and the future of the archive, of the *arkhé* of the community. This metatext, this arch-text, in its essential traces describes, however, a tragic destiny, which Honig seeks to transform through the metamorphosis of the story in order to dispute the words, to make the signifier an *agon*, to give rise to an agonistics of senses, to a fabulation *qua* agonistics. This rectification, which is essentially based on the political experience of women, which takes that experience as its theoretical force, is a rectification that gives itself the task of reconfiguring the archive, of disputing the past, present and future memory of the *polis*. The archive, the very monumentalization on which it is founded and to which it gives rise, is reconceptualized in terms of a screen that can be seized, occupied, graffitied, defaced, rewritten. In this return to the archive, to the city, in this call for a transversal and intersectional feminism, which does not renounce the universality of words and experience, there is something Greek common to Plato and the myth of the cave. "Is the women's claim too mimetic?", Honig asks. And she answers, "Perhaps so. But demanding glory they also claim the right to the city, and that is a claim to political power."¹⁴

Agamben]. And, more broadly, C. Malabou, *Au vouloir! Anarchisme et philosophie*, Paris, PUF, 2022.

¹⁰ See, on this concept, A. Moreiras, *Infrapolitics. A Handbook*, New York, Fordham, 2021. See also the issue on posthegemony and infrapolitics published in *Papel máquina*, 10, Santiago de Chile, 2016.

¹¹ A. Cavarero, *Inclinations. A Critique of Rectitude*, trans. Amanda Minervini and Adam Sitze, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2016.

¹² G. Deleuze, "L'épuisé", in S. Beckett, *Quad et Trio du Fantôme, ... que nuages...*, *Nach und Träume*, trad. Edith Fournier, Paris, Minuit, 1992, pp. 57-105.

¹³ In the transition from the Spanish of Latin America to the Spanish of Spain, words such as "disappearance", "grief" or "survival" seem to be the object of a dispute, of a mark of untranslatability. In this regard, see M. Valderrama, *El duelo de la imagen*, Santiago de Chile, Ediciones Qualquella, 2022.

¹⁴ B. Honig, "Conclusion: Sister Is an Anagram for Resist," *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, Cambridge, Mss, Harvard University Press, 2021, p. 103.

Sister is an anagram of *Resist*. But, with regard to Sophocles' tragedy, who is the sister here? Who is this sister that Honig claims in her call to action? If *The Bacchae* weaves a tale of fabulation that gives rise to an arc of refusal, to a curvature of refusal that is structured through inoperativeness, inclination and fabulation, it is worth insisting again on what that conceptual braid figures for the eyes to see, on the body that claims the gaze in its twisting of refusal, denial, recusation. Refusal, the English word rings the bell of language, mobilizes different senses that range from bodily responses to others that border on or are configured in sublimation. Thus, not only contradiction, violent resistance, bodily defense against an assault, judicial denial or affective denial surrounds the English word, but also denial as lack, need, withdrawal and emptiness are close to it. This game of semantic possibilities, which opens the word to the task of translation, gives rise to a game of subtle indeterminations where the call to the sister or sisters risks being unrequited. Hence the insistence regarding who is summoned by the name of the sister, what resistance or resistances are intended to be stoked and justified by that nomination. In principle, one would say, among all, among the first of all, Hannah Arendt is the name of the sister who is anagrammatically thought of as resistance. Her theorization of civil disobedience, of plurality, her acknowledged hostility to use and productivity, are pointed out as traits akin to a political theorization of refusal. However, attending to the historical nature of resistances and actions of recusation of authority and domination – resistances and actions that Honig apprehends more properly in their phenomenological dimension –, Arendt's appeal as the first sister is displaced or recused in favor of a more visible semblance of resistance or refusal.¹⁵

Indeed, the book's conclusion seems to displace Arendt from that place of sisterhood and primal resistance that claims for itself a politics of sisterly rejection, to put in her place Muhammad Ali, an African-American boxer considered in the history of the sport as the greatest boxer of all time. Ali closes the book's conclusion, and in the Appendix that is added as a parergon to the work, he is the subject of the most extensive study.¹⁶ His exemplarity is paradigmatic, to the point of being considered as embodying in his actions of resistance and civil disobedience the three concepts that braid the curvature of refusal (inoperativeness, inclination, fabulation). Honig presents Ali's story strained by the curvature of refusal. In his resistance to military conscription, not only did Ali publicly express his rejection of the Vietnam War as an imperial war waged by white supremacy (fabulation), but in his refusal to be part of the warmongering machine, and suffering exclusion from all professional sporting activity as a consequence of that refusal (inoperativity), he put his body to another use, inclining it towards

his less favored comrades to embody the rejection of forced conscription of brothers (inclination).

The story is exemplary, there is no doubt about it, and yet it is worth insisting again on the question: at what point the sister has given way to the brother, under what logic of substitution, of superposition, of superimposition, Arendt has been relieved by Ali? The question of figuration, of the semblance, of the name, in a politics of resistance and refusal is not a minor question, since it determines the forms of appearing and the medial architectures through which a world becomes visible. Honig is the first to remind us of this lesson, and yet there is something that is displaced, denied in this final conclusion, something that refers to the sister as an anagram of resistance. There is in the names of resistance, in the name of resistance – when this name is an encrypted name, a cryptonymy, a nickname –, the memory of a point, of a stitch, that opens and closes the wound of a world and in which we turn to become others in the memory of that unspeakable, singular, untranslatable wound. Memory of the plurality of a world that crashes or runs aground in the punctuality of Antigone, of Bartleby, of a date, of a crypt without representation.

In the illegibility of that figure, of that date that is divided into two, and that here is identified with September 11, a politics of resistance emerges, which is always already a politics of the proper name, of its erasure, of its insistence.

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¹⁵ It would be necessary to dwell on the different evaluation of Arendt's philosophy made by Honig and Cavarero, regarding the revolts and occupations of public squares in recent years. For a first confrontation, see A. Cavarero, *Democrazia sorgiva. Note sul pensiero politico di Hannah Arendt*, Milan, Raffaello Cortina editore, 2019.

¹⁶ B. Honig, "Appendix: Muhammad Ali's Repertoire of Refusal," *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, *op. cit.* pp. 123-132.

