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Volume 10, to be released in the summer of 1999, will be a collection of papers delivered at *Crossing the Stages*, a conference on the ancient stage, held in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan on October 22-25, 1997. It will include articles by Eric Csapo, Mary K. Gamel, Donald J. Mastronarde, and Niall Slater.

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A GLASNOST ANTIGONE: TENGIZ ABULADZE'S *REPENTANCE*

MARIANTHE COLAKIS

THE 1984 FILM *Repentance*, directed by the Georgian filmmaker Tengiz Abuladze (screenplay by Nana Djanelidze, Tengiz Abuladze, and Rezo Kveselava), has already become a classic of the cinema of *glasnost*. It has generally been celebrated as the first political film acknowledging in such an explicit way the evils of totalitarianism. Others have noted its Biblical allusions, particularly in its title, and seen it as a "surreal religious allegory."¹ It is both of these, as well as what its filmmaker called "a tragic phantasmagoria, a grotesque tragi-comedy or perhaps a lyrical tragi-farce."² Yet the core of the story depicts the conflict between the public realm and the spiritual/familial realm, with the issue of burial serving as the catalyst. It presents a male as the embodiment of the state and a female as the embodiment of the private realms of family and religion. This is the same conflict at the center of Sophocles' *Antigone*; and the parallels between the Greek tragedy and the Soviet film deserve closer examination. Occasionally the film satirically inverts episodes in the *Antigone*, but on the whole it preserves the tragic conflict and remakes the myth for the changing Soviet Union of the 80s.

While no direct influence can be proven, it is not farfetched to see Abuladze as drawing on the *Antigone*. There have been Russian adaptations since 1823; and the *Antigone* myth has never been far from Western consciousness. As George Steiner stated in his *Antigones*, "Since the fifth century B.C., western sensibility has experienced decisive moments of its identity and history in reference to the *Antigone* legend and to the life in art and in argument of this legend. Overwhelmingly, it has felt women in the face of arbitrary power and of death to be,

¹ Nicholas Galichenko, *Glasnost-Soviet Cinema Responds*, ed. Robert Allington (Austin: U of Tex Pr, 1991), 2. Galichenko notes the resemblances between the trial in *Repentance* and the appearance of St. Paul before Festus and Agrippa in Acts.

² From the Canon Publicity Department interview with Tengiz Abuladze, undated.

as Romain Rolland called them . . . 'the Antigones of the earth.'³ Both *Repentance* and *Antigone* combined timeless themes with contemporary issues. The question of burial in *Repentance* coincided with concerns about where Lenin's body should rest; and the *Antigone* had relevance to a contemporary debate on who should bury the war dead, the *demos* or the family.⁴

The Antigone-figure in this film is Ketevan Barateli, who from the beginning is associated with religion, albeit in an initially trivial way—she is first shown decorating cakes with models of churches on top. Shortly thereafter, her husband reads the news of the death of the "great man" and former town mayor Varlam Aravidze, whose name means "no man" and whose appearance suggests a composite of Hitler, Stalin, Beria, and Mussolini. The Creon-role in this film is split between Varlam and his son Abel Aravidze (the similarity between father and son is heightened by the fact that both are played by the same actor, Avtandil Makharadze).

Early in the film, the audience receives the first hint of the crucial importance of burial. At the funeral of Varlam, one of the mourners demands, "Why won't he be buried in the Pantheon?" suggesting that Varlam should be considered a secular saint. His mourners downplay the significance of death and deny the existence of any afterlife beyond the memory of his civic deeds—a great irony in view of what happens next. The corpse suddenly turns up on the grounds of Varlam's family's home; and despite the increasingly frantic measures Varlam's son Abel takes to reinter it and keep it buried, it reappears three times. We may recall the ineffectiveness of Creon's soldiers in guarding the body of Polynices. The astonishment of the ancient and the modern soldiers is equally great when they learn that the "lawbreaker" is a woman. Ketevan is caught in the act, arrested, and brought to trial. Ketevan insists like Antigone that she has obeyed a more important law than Abel's: "I confirm the fact but do not admit my guilt . . . I exhumed the corpse but do not consider myself guilty." She invokes Heaven: "Judgment has been passed by Providence on Aravidze and myself." Like Creon, Abel retorts that he is pursuing the civic good by persecuting her.

There follows a lengthy flashback—seen through the eyes of Ketevan as a child—depicting Varlam's ruin of Ketevan's parents, her artist-father Sandro and mother Nino. Antigone is unimaginable without the chthonic wisdom and tragic suffering of Oedipus; and Ketevan resembles her father Sandro in that they are both associated with divine authority. Our first glimpse of Sandro is followed by a shot of an icon

³ George Steiner, *Antigones* (Oxford: Oxford U Pr, 1984), 109.

⁴ On the topicality of the *Antigone*, see William Blake Tyrrell and Larry J. Bennett, *Recapturing Sophocles' Antigone* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman, 1998).

and the sound of monks chanting. We also see him working while a broadcast of Einstein's last speech plays, in which Einstein cautions the audience: "In his blind quest for scientific truths [the modern scientist] has forgotten about his responsibility to mankind. The liberated force of the atom has changed everything but our mentality and we are sliding towards an unprecedented catastrophe." The message is roughly the same as that in the famous Sophoclean "Ode to Man," in which human creativity is *deinos*—both wondrous and terrible. In both, humans are cautioned against hubris. This is precisely the lesson both Creon and the Aravidzes ignore, with catastrophic results.

Sandro runs afoul of Mayor Varlam Aravidze when he argues for the preservation of a church and the discontinuing of its use for laboratory experiments. He argues that "Destroying the church means severing the roots that enrich people spiritually." Varlam presents himself as the proponent of science and progress, convinced that "Our times will produce a hero" who can lead and enlighten the people without spiritual authority. Like Creon, Varlam "embodies a mode of mortality . . . which seeks to bar from the secular city the sacred energies of the chthonic, of the underworld."⁵ The result is far from the paradise the leaders envisioned. Varlam becomes a tyrant, rounding up, exiling, and torturing to death hundreds of innocent citizens in the name of a better society. While Creon never reaches this extreme, he does end up imperilling his city through his disdain of *philia*, or family ties, which leads him to commit impiety. His belief that *μείζον' ὅστις ἀντὶ τῆς αὐτοῦ πατρὸς / φίλον νομίζει, τοῦτον οὐδαμοῦ λέγω* (*Ant.* 182-183) [Whoever considers a *philos* greater than his own fatherland, I put him nowhere] ends up benefiting neither his kin nor his fatherland. The same disaster occurs in *Repentance*. It had been one of the myths of Stalinism that society's leaders were the "fathers" and the state a "family," loyalty to which took precedence over affection for members of the nuclear family.⁶ In a moment of deceptive friendliness, Varlam tells Sandro that they share a common ancestor, "Taraskoneli." However, Varlam's disregard of kinship is plain; the blood tie does not save Sandro or Ketevan any more than the bond with Creon had saved Antigone. Both *Repentance* and *Antigone* show the limitations of a society that devalues the traditional feminine realm of family. It is significant that the child Abel lacks a mother; it is as if without the guidance of mothers, three generations of Aravidze men remain children forever. Varlam is par-

⁵ Steiner (above, note 3) 129.

⁶ "The Stalinist Myth of the 'Great Family'" is one of the chapters in Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Chicago: U of Chicago Pr, 1981). What she says of novels is also true of film: "If there was any conflict between the state's interests and the nuclear family, citizens were urged to jettison their sense of family, based on blood ties, and replace it with a higher one, based on political kinship" (115).

ticularly childlike in his impulses and tantrums.⁷ Creon, while more mature, shows flashes of the same childlike petulance; at one point his own son points out that he is behaving like a *neos* (735).

As in much Sophoclean tragedy, there is a secondary character who with good intentions attempts to avert the protagonist's doom but whose tactics prove to be inadequate. Antigone had Ismene; Sandro has his mentor and friend Mikhail Korisheli. Mikhail advocates using "cunning and sly" tactics rather than outright resistance. He believes that he can defeat Varlam by confessing to such absurd crimes and naming so many names that "the Government" will realize Varlam's madness and unseat him. But since Mikhail trusts in secular authorities and his own "wisdom of invention," he is doomed to fail. He ends up insane and unable to help Sandro. His female counterpart is his wife Elena, Nino's friend, who advises courage and faith in the ultimate goodness of the government. She believes that Sandro and Mikhail will be released and that their pain will turn to joy. However, she ends up arrested as well. Varlam's secretary attempts to help in a practical way; when she instead finds out that Nino is to be arrested, she attempts to help by giving Nino money and train tickets to escape. But she is too late.

As the time returns to the present, the Antigone-tragedy reaches its consummation. As Ketevan stands firm in her resolve to disinter Varlam's corpse a hundred times if necessary and leave him to the vultures, Abel Aravidze's son and Varlam's grandson Tornike enters the picture. Although he never falls in love with Ketevan, he nevertheless occupies a role comparable to that of Haemon. He pleads for mercy for Ketevan in opposition to Abel, who argues like Creon that the public interest must take precedence above private considerations. His declaration that he hates his father recalls the angry conclusion to the debate in *Antigone* between Creon and Haemon (757-762). As Tornike rebels, Abel becomes vulnerable for the first time. He seeks advice, as Varlam never had. He is similar to Creon in vacillating between stubbornness and willingness to yield to others' pressures. His men advise him to have Ketevan declared insane and put away in a mental hospital, a judgment he is all too ready to accept. Like Creon, he believes that those who oppose him are either enemies of the state or victims of madness; he and his wife Goriko also treat Tornike like an invalid who can be "cured" with rest and pills. The tragedy reaches its consummation when Tornike commits suicide to atone for his family's crimes; and Abel—once again like Creon—learns his error too late. Unlike Creon, he does not subsequently lose Goriko to suicide as well; and yet she is significantly absent from the lamentation for Tornike. Nothing is allowed to distract

⁷ On the Freudian overtones of this film, see Andrew Horton and Michael Brashinsky, *The Zero Hour: Glasnost and Soviet Cinema in Transition* (Princeton: Princeton U Pr, 1992), 39-44.

from the focus on father and son. Abel's curse upon himself "Why were you ever born, you fiend, Abel Aravidze?" recalls Creon's "This is my guilt, all mine . . . I who am nothing more than nothing now" (*Ant.* 1319-1321). The Antigone-in-reverse black humor with which the film had begun then resurfaces—Creon buried Polynices, but Abel throws Varlam's body off a cliff. The authoritarians end up doing the heroines' will, despite their earlier commitment to the patriarchal values of the state.

In the brief epilogue, we learn that the entire film has been a fantasy in the mind of Ketevan—she is not a tragic heroine at all, but merely a sad and resigned baker of church-shaped cakes. And yet the critique of the secular city remains. An old woman comes to Ketevan's window and asks whether this street leads to a church. Ketevan replies, "This is Varlam Street. It doesn't lead to a church." The last word in the film goes to the old woman: "What good is a street that doesn't lead to a church?"

What made this lengthy—nearly three-hour—and often slow film a hit for which Soviet citizens lined up around the block and read subtitles (since its language is Georgian, not Russian)? The renunciation of the past made it exciting and daring, but there is more. It has been pointed out that "a strong subcurrent of mythology always flows through a commercial film. Only when the archetypes of a viewer's subconscious are evoked can the viewer totally become immersed in the film."⁸ The success of *Repentance* has been attributed both to its timeliness and to its mythic quality. We never learn the name of the town; and even the costumes belong to no single period. Contemporary wear shares the screen with suits of armor; automobiles, with horses; rifles, with lances. While the allusions to the Soviet past are unmistakable, the indeterminate setting suggests the timelessness of myth. It is hardly surprising that this independent-minded filmmaker should be drawn to the mythic; Abuladze's native Georgia (also the birthplace of Stalin!) has a long history of association with myth. It is there that Prometheus was believed to have been imprisoned.

The filmmaker's two previous films have elements of myth and folk tale as well. *Repentance* is the third part of a trilogy in which the films do not share a storyline or characters but rather all examine questions of faith and of justice. His 1968 *The Plea* is the saga of a warrior who defies ancient law by not cutting off the hand of a slain enemy, and the subsequent sacrifices required to undo the curse. His 1977 *The Wishing Tree* includes a girl trapped in an unhappy pre-arranged marriage who is stoned to death when she displays her feelings for her true love; and whose spirit is believed to enter a nearby "wishing tree."

⁸ Mikhail Yampolsky, "Cinema without Cinema," in *Russian Critics on the Cinema of Glasnost*, ed. Michael Brashinsky and Andrew Horton (Cambridge: Cambridge U Pr, 1994), 16.

But myth is one thing and tragedy is another. There are many elements in *Repentance* that recall the form of Greek tragedy. Groups of people occasionally behave as one—the mourners at Varlam's funeral not only sing in unison, they all pull out their handkerchiefs and wipe their eyes at the same moment. There is also abundant music, as there was in Greek tragedy—opera, symphonies, marches, folk tunes, American pop songs. Abuladze effectively juxtaposes happy music with catastrophic events, as Sophocles had frequently preceded catastrophe with a joyous choral ode. In the *Antigone*, a celebration of Dionysus and Thebes occurs just before a messenger announces the deaths of Antigone and Haemon (*Ant.* 1118-1151). In *Repentance*, the death by torture of Sandro occurs to the strains of Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*; the 60s pop song *Sunny* plays as Tornike commits suicide.

Theme as well as form suggests Greek tragedy. Earlier Soviet cinema had depicted variants on a simpler heroic myth—the triumph of Communism and the ushering in of an age of progress. The story typically involved the testing of a hero and his struggles against various foes—human or natural—at the end of which he was declared worthy to be a “man of the future.”⁹

Repentance draws instead on a myth that raises disturbing questions, and which has often served as a cultural touchstone and as raw material for tragedy. To quote George Steiner again: “[Creon and Antigone] and the moral argument between them initiate, exemplify, and polarize primary elements in the discourse on man and society as it has been conducted in the West. . . . There is a sense . . . in which it is both natural and economic to return to ‘Antigone’ each time conflicts of a historically and psychologically analogous order . . . recur.”¹⁰ As the new political leaders of the former Soviet Union looked to the West for political/economic models, so did one of its new cinematic leaders look to an important Western myth to speak to a culture in transition.

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⁹ Ibid., 15-16.

¹⁰ Steiner (above, note 3) 108, 128.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

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DISCOVERING SHAKE-SPEARE. The 4th Annual Edward de Vere Studies Conference. 6-9 April 2000. Concordia University. Write: Dr. Daniel Wright, Dept. of Humanities, Concordia University, Portland, OR 97211-6099. Phone: (503) 493-6223; Fax: (503) 280-8519; E-mail: dwright@cu-portland.edu