

Raquel Carrió

Acts of Writing and Rebellion

"The land is dry, the land is dead," was the sentence that came to my mind again and again while writing a very free version of Euripides' original play *The Bacchae*.¹

We know that myths - stories and characters - travel from antiquity to the contemporary world in complete freedom: Medea suddenly reappears in a loft in La Havana, Antigone in a neighbourhood of Lima, or Romeo and Juliet in a *favela* in São Paulo.

In some way we are all Bacchae. Each of us has wanted at some point to abandon the kitchen and the loom (especially when there are no men to take care of, or children to produce, because we are at war) and go to the mountains to sing and dance, and perform the millennial rituals of fertility until dawn.

All of us have somehow flirted with madness, rebellion, or simply the desire to return to that natural state in which rain is rain, the earth is the mother of all fruit, and the night covers us like a cautious lover.

This was the sensation I had when I revised Euripides' play again and again. I consulted several translations, studies and treatises that interpreted the text, but I had a contradictory feeling. The learned explanations indicated a possible origin for the story; the historical treatises gave me a collection of political reasons for the author's point of view and the nature of the conflict, but in turn, I felt that the text itself - its literality - captured an impulse (which I would dare call natural) that escaped from historical reasoning and poetic formalities.

What is the poetry of *The Bacchae*, if not that pure and simple need for rebellion, for the liberating act as the expression of an uncontrollable impulse? I never experienced so strongly or so intimately, how the written word

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1. *Bacantes*, a Teatro Buendía production, directed by Flora Lauten, opened in La Havana in September 2001. The text of the performance was published by the journal *Tablas*, La Havana, Cuba, January-April 2002.

gives form or freezes a feeling or an impulse. And I understood certain differences between poetry and drama; between the freedom to sparkle and the obligations of the fable; at least, in my own act of writing: an old habit of scribbling poems on the margins of books, among work-notes, on the walls of my bedroom and - many years ago now - in places in my city where I experienced parts of myself, that I didn't understand, explode.

I thought of the poems that I write and keep in dark drawers, or that I give to my friends and hardly ever publish because, amongst other reasons, they seem to me to be only pieces, life fragments that I have not wanted to see frozen in a book or on a book-case. In reality, they seemed to me too alive, imperfect and changeable to be confined.

I know that I am wrong, but this feeling has accompanied me since I was a little girl, when I liked writing on the bark of the trees, in the sand, or in the humid earth of the courtyard that erased the letters as it dried: a fleeting, minimalist and perhaps elusive art, but essential for me because that secret and ephemeral writing saved me many times from suicide, madness or from abandoning all that I, paradoxically, loved and hated, that I desired and that hurt me at the same time.

Strangely, I always felt that something tied me to my island: the sweet and fertile land of my childhood that was drying up with the passing of the years, becoming arid and grey in the landscape of power and with the exile of friends; my island was giving me the sensation that it was caught, imprisoned, by sterile prejudices and discussions.

It was this feeling that came to me whilst rereading *The Bacchae*, as if what mattered in the story was not the place or time of the action, but the need for a liberating act, an escape, a break from the false (or reiterated) reasons to that area of the self where the body and the stone could recover

their primal beat, their root.

I also remembered the paintings and performances of a Cuban artist who had died in New York some years earlier. As a child, she had been sent to the USA without her parents in an exile that turned into a series of nightmares which recalled her lost country and history. She worked with natural materials: earth, water, fire, leaves. Like me, she tried to recover a memory: sometimes using herself as a model, she built a body with clay and water; giving shape to a woman-island that was herself and her forgotten island. She wanted to discover a face, some eyes. Then the fire would devour her drawings.

These were the basic references that marked my reading of *The Bacchae*: myself wandering in the city, searching in its stones and trees for a secret, not official, story; a mystery to talk about or reveal, and a dead girl who tried to save herself with fire or save the image of an exiled body.

However, I also recognised in *The Bacchae* civic behaviour that I had not expected, because the structure of the fable itself condemned the women's act of rebellion. Undoubtedly Pentheus was the City's dictator and undoubtedly the orgy, the *bacchanal*, was a subversive, transgressive act that disturbed the established order. But in the confusion of the senses; in the altered state in which Agave and the other women mistook Pentheus for their quarry, a wild animal; in that instant when Agave killed as a result of enthusiasm or ecstasy; the power of punishment in face of this excess exercises the civic mechanism: the restoration of order as compensation for the chaotic impulse. These are the well-known antinomies of guilt and punishment, chaos and order, etc.

And I didn't want this; I didn't want to write a version of *The Bacchae* that respected the convention of fore-

warning the spectator. I didn't want to warn or inflict understanding on anyone, or tell anyone that the liberating impulse leads to social chaos and thence to the loss of the City and to mandatory exile. I didn't want to do this because, amongst other things, the spectators themselves were fed up with orchestrated political speeches designed, of course, to indicate clearly what they should do or think. In agreement or not, the theme of the City, of its social order and forms of government, would be communicated through an interaction that was all too familiar to the spectator. I was interested in the secret and incoercible impulse of the rebellion, not in the predictable social or political consequences.

But to write from ignorance, from the liberating impulse, has its traps. And the curious thing, that made the writing of *Bacantes* such an extreme experience for me, was that this impulse (personal, inevitable, and almost blind) led me to a way of writing sensations down where, for the first time, my secret poetry that had been written on trees could open to the possibility of relating to others - the spectators.

In reality, I was not thinking about spectators - perhaps already an over familiar term - but about people who would share with me an experience that could scarcely be confessed. Behind walls, in the places of the soul, how much had we had to destroy in order to live, how much had we forgotten of our childhood or our blood, how many things the City had forbidden us to remember: flavours, scents, festivities and rituals that remained in the hidden, submerged memory of the blood.

Until then, my theatre experience had been basically an intellectual exercise. I am a professor of literature and dramaturgy. It was relatively easy for me to adapt texts for the stage. I work with a director who is imaginative and theatrical by nature. I

contributed with my knowledge, but not necessarily or always from my roots. Far from my classes, adaptation work and dramaturgical consultancy in the theatre, my poetry continued to provide the secret place where I was able to meet myself, the sacrificial stone where a silent priestess carried out her heresies, her personal transgressions. The metaphor saved a part of myself; it was the perfect place for sacred heresies.

And thus my dialogue with Agave happened. She is not a very important character in Euripides' text, she is not at the centre of the action, which is devoted to the confrontation between Dionysus and Pentheus, to the ethical and religious debate around the forms of government in the City. Agave is only Pentheus' mother, a follower of Dionysus, whose sole function is to fall into a Dionysian delirium and, in ecstasy, make the tragic error that provokes the punishment. In fact, when she confuses her son with the wild beast she is implementing a kind of fate. It doesn't matter too much that Pentheus has been a tyrant, nor is it very relevant that land is dry and bellies are empty because he has led the men to war, cut down the forests and abandoned the women. Ultimately, he provoked the City's imbalance; but it is this woman who, irrationally, carries out the unbalanced action, the action that brings punishment down on everyone.

She is only an accident; a confused consequence of the delirium. Agave shows her vulnerability, her lack of reason, that is to say her precarious nature, but in no instance does she show her conscious reasons. Her madness is demonstrated, but never what made this woman - or any of the *Bacchae* - abandon the City, rebel against order and imposed reason, to choose delirium and go to the mountains in search of the dancing god.

This was my meeting point with the

character. Suddenly I understood the secret fable - not the visible one narrated in the literal text - but the invisible one that reminded me of the days of my youth, the glimpses of life imprisoned in due obedience to the Order of the City, the impossibility of screaming or dancing when and what I wanted, and above all, punishment, the supposedly ethical power mechanism that regulates disorder and error.

I experienced this in this way because I also belonged to a City lost through intolerance and the weight of state reason; because maternity took me by surprise when I was an unprepared twenty-year-old; and because I always wanted forest to be forest, river, river, stone, stone, and that the world of my childhood, the sound of water and the scent of orange trees should not disappear without leaving traces other than dry earth and fallen walls facing the sea.

Because I also live in a threatened City, forever threatened, and it terrifies me to think of saving myself and leaving behind the dust of my dead and the leaves on which I have written my poems.

From this dry and silent scream I gave to Agave's voice the evocation of my childhood and youth which begins Teatro Buendía's performance, directed by Flora Lauten:

SCENE 1: THE LAND

Ruins of the City. Faint light on the stone figures. At the back or in different places on the stage the Chorus of the Bacchae. They are figures confined by time. At the centre (front) Agave, Cadmus and Tiresias. Agave on the floor, Cadmus beside her. The fortune-teller Tiresias on the other side. In the background a dry tree and the figure of Dionysus. Stone and burnt wood. The earth and the sand of the stones cover the whole floor.
AGAVE'S SCREAM (Silent)
SOUND (Exile Music) Slow movements. The figures acquire life, emerging from the stone.

Simultaneous actions: they evoke city life before exile. Agave's text starts over the sound and the actions:

AGAVE (With her hands in the earth):

"It was when this earth flourished
and the plains were green.

The river descended from the mountain.

My sisters and I searched for the trail...

(Chorus: images of the sisters
and games with water)

to go and bathe naked

and cover our bodies

with garlands of flowers.

It was a good land.

The sun shone in the mountains and my father
took care of the horses.

My son grew up to ride, (Image of horses)

to run over the plains and sow trees.

To sow... to sow. (Chorus: sowing work actions)

On this hard and rough earth

I have seen the orange trees grow.

The war took the men and our sons to the sea.

(War actions)

I hate war!"

CHORUS: Song of the Nanny hummed
under the texts of Agave and Cadmus.

AGAVE (As a lament):

"My son was beautiful!

Oh, the forests that have been cut down,
and the green wood,

fragrant with wheat and vine!"

(Sound of the wind)

It was an impulse. I had not thought that the whole action - the narration: the story of Dionysus, Pentheus and the City - would remain as simple interpolations in Agave's evocation. But it was the image of this displaced woman killing, implementing fate, of the confusion and error; it was Agave as the delirious engine of the action, without conscious motivation, who captivated me so much that I transformed the play, putting her at the centre of a story that, in this version, is in its entirety an evocation: a



Agave and Pentheus (Antonia Fernandez and Alejandro Alfonso)
in *Bacantes* of Teatro Buendía. Photo: William Burger

woman who remembers, before the walls of her destroyed city, the days of her childhood and youth, love and hate, war and the desire to live.

This is why this version begins where Euripides' play finishes. The action is made subjective because everything takes place

within the memory-space of this woman who is Mother-Earth-Tree (Agave in Greek means tree, plant, as well as admirable), and in this way the poetic discourse of the performance, the images that the spectator visualises, are the evocations of a consciousness that remembers, not from the point of view of

delirium, but of *anagnorisis* or the character's recognition.

If I had not done this, if I had not changed the structure of the original text, Agave would have remained only the crazy woman who kills her own son out of delirium and fury, that is to say committing the greatest error, the irrational and delirious transgression; which is like saying committing a bleak act that brings about the downfall and firing of the City.

In the performance, Agave's opening speech is enunciated with lucidity, a terrible lucidity. The extreme, intimate and visceral suffering of the character has forged the words. It is not only reasons of state, or the blind exercise of power, that gives structure to the fable. It is the tragic vision of a woman whose real nature, whose maternal instincts (to conceive and give life) have been displaced by the disastrous deeds of error and death that, surprisingly, she only carries out under the influence of the Dionysian trance. Once the act is completed, she recovers her senses for the punishment.

Obviously, the change of perspective in this version - the fable illuminated or re-written from Agave's point of view - supposes another form of transgression. And then her true act of rebellion takes place. Not one realised through delirium, but one born out of agony, understanding and extreme lucidity.

Because at the end of the performance, after images that evoke the splendour and destruction of the City, amidst the ruined walls, with the smoke of fire, the cries of the women and ashes blown about by the wind, when they have no apparent choice but exile, Agave returns to the City. Cadmus and Tiresias have already turned their backs to leave. Agave takes Pentheus' head in her bloodstained hands. Over the song of the women, she says:

SCENE XV: RETURN TO THE CITY

Sound of wind. Darkness. Faint light on the dry tree. Shadows in the background.

AGAVE (*From the floor, with Pentheus' head*):

"No, father.

I see my son's head

and the punishment of the gods.

But neither man nor god

will take my land away from me.

It is irrigated

with my son's blood.

(She starts covering the head with sand)

Here are my loves and dreams.

Here my madness and sadness.

Here my mother's tomb

and that of my sister.

I will sow Pentheus with the same fury

with which these hands stole his life from him.

(She cradles the head against her belly)

The dismembered body will grow.

Under the grass I will grow also.

(She walks towards the tree,

the head on her belly as if she were pregnant).

That the hands that once sowed

the seed of the dragon

shall now lift and elevate this body to the sun,

and one day harvest the fruit of the land!"

(Image of the hands on the tree)

CADMUS' VOICE:

"Open the doors!"

TIRESIAS' VOICE (*To Agave*):

"Will you remain alone among the shadows?"

(Agave hugs the tree)

CADMUS' VOICE:

"Even without your sisters?"

(Sound of the wind. Darkness.

Footprints in the sand.)

AGAVE'S VOICE

(Very low, a faint figure next to the tree):

"Even without my sisters!"

(Only the sound of the wind.

And the footprints.)

This ending surprised me more than

anybody. Because I had not thought that Agave would return. On the contrary: if there was anything I wanted to talk about it was exile, the reasons that move a City-state, a country or a culture towards destruction; towards the loss of its utopias and roots, and finally to exile.

But we know this: "the heart has reasons that reason doesn't understand". As a result of this impulse which I described earlier, and in the difficult course of my re-writing of *The Bacchae*, in the strange evocation of my days and nights in my City, and finally with the recognition within myself, of my own signs and traces, a deeper, more visceral understanding of why I live in my country emerged - it was finally born. I understood why I live on an island, in a country, a city, always threatened by destruction, or by exile as the only compensation for poverty or confinement.

The besieged city, a city that I love above all things, prison of the feet and soul at the same time, was the real scene for my writing, as it always was for the poetry locked in my drawers. Only what I wrote in the air has survived. And I suspect that these fragments and bits of poetry, material melted in the dust and stones of the streets, organised themselves in their own way on the night of the premiere of *Bacantes* in Buendía's theatre space, flying in the wind to reach the ears and eyes not of the "spectators", but of those brothers and sisters who still accompany me.

Personally, I do not have anything against the individual's choice of exile. But it pains me to see more and more young people abandon my country in search of another promised land. Most of them lose a home and their civil rights. Most of them cannot return. It provokes in me a feeling of absolute sadness and solitude, because these are not gratuitous migrations. They are provoked by poverty and frustration. It is something that is not discussed clearly, something we

accept as if it were natural. But it is not, nor should it ever be.

For this reason, and so that some light may come out of the shadows, I hope that this recognition can be perceived in the texture of the words, in the strange ritual in which I lent my voice to the character - or maybe it was Agave who lent me her image so that I could also confess my lucidity and madness. I know the perception was there in the performances of *Bacantes* in our small room in La Havana. I know that the trembling that I always felt at the beginning and end of the performance, and at many other moments, was a trembling that arose from the secrets and submerged memory of the blood.

So the transgression had meaning: perhaps to sow seeds in the earth again and again; or perhaps so that the wind, beyond the fire, can bring the lost words back to us again.

Translated from Spanish by Julia Varley

RAQUEL CARRIÓ (Cuba) is a lecturer, playwright and essayist. She is a founder of the Institute of Scenic Arts of the University of La Havana and of the EITALC (International School of Theatre of Latin American and the Caribbean), Professor of Drama and Methodology of Theatrical Research and Ph.D in Dramatic Arts. She has received numerous awards and honours for her essays and critical studies. Raquel Carrió has conducted workshops and seminars in many countries and she has been the dramaturgy consultant to the Buendía Theatre since its inception.