When Hope and History Finally Rhyme: Seamus Heaney's The Cure at Troy and the Afterlife of a Verse

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WHEN HOPE AND HISTORY FINALLY RHYME SEAMUS HEANEY'S THE CURE AT TROY AND THE AFTERLIFE OF A VERSE

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Using Joe Biden's speech at the Democratic National Convention as a starting point, in which Biden quoted the famous verse by the Irish poet Seamus Heaney "make hope and history rhyme", this paper traces how Heaney's phrase has travelled across geographical, cultural, and conceptual boundaries. Heaney's invocation to hope was originally included in the theatrical play The Cure at Troy (1990), which is an adaptation of Sophocles' Philoctetes. By appropriating the Greek tragedy of Philoctetes, Heaney devised an ingenious way to comment upon the Troubles in Northern Ireland, exhibiting that only a common embracement of hope epitomized by the rhyming of hope and history could put an end to the sectarian division. Since then, Heaney's phrase has escaped the boundaries of literature to enter the domain of politics, as it is often quoted by political figures worldwide, with Biden being the last politician to recite Heaney's line. This paper aims to demonstrate how Heaney's encomium of hope has gradually become a synonym for change and progress in the political arena.

INTRODUCTION: THE RHYMING OF HOPE AND HISTORY

On 20 August 2020, at the Democratic National Convention, Joe Biden formally secured his presidential nomination for the upcoming US elections. This event marked for Biden a decisive step towards his subsequent victory over

Donald Trump to become the 46th US president. In the final remarks of his acceptance speech, Biden addressed the crowd by saying: "Are you ready? I believe we are. This is our moment to 'make hope and history rhyme'".[1] This is an assertion from which it can be argued that a sense of hopefulness and imminent redemption emanates. Biden's proclamation was meant to be a shot of optimism amidst unprecedented political polarization in the US and an ongoing global health pandemic. Therefore, Biden introduced a redeeming phraseology to portray his candidacy as a viable remedy to the Trump administration. Certainly, a political narrative that blends hope with history serves as a beacon of positivity during the most challenging of times. Upon closer inspection, however, one realizes that this statement was not originally Biden's, and it originated in different circumstances.

Joe Biden borrowed his statement from the Irish poet and playwright Seamus Heaney, and specifically from *The Cure at Troy* (1990), a theatrical adaptation of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, a Greek tragedy that was originally performed in 409 BCE. Yet, despite its undeniable Greek ancestry, there is something peculiar about *The Cure at Troy*: from the moment of the first performance, Heaney's play became inextricably linked with the then-prevalent Northern Irish affairs. Composed during the heyday of the Troubles, *The Cure at Troy* premiered on 1 October 1990 at the Guildhall Theatre in Derry; the second biggest city of the Ulster region that was at the epicentre of the sectarian conflict from 1968 until the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, officially terminating the atrocities by the Republican and Loyalist paramilitaries:

> More than 3,300 people died in the course of this protracted struggle between the more extreme factions of the unionists (mostly Protestant), who want Northern Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom, and the nationalists (mostly Catholic), who favour some sort of united Ireland.[2]

1 Teo Armus, "'Make hope and history rhyme': Why Joe Biden loves to quote a passage from Irish poet Seamus Heaney," accessed 29 February 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/08/21/seamus-heaney-biden-dnc-speech/

2 Marilynn Richtarik, "The Field Day Theatre Company," in *Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Irish Drama*, ed. Shaun Richards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 191.

By retelling Philoctetes' predicament, that is, the story of the wounded and abandoned warrior whose pride and self-pity hinder him from overcoming his misery, Heaney devised a powerful yet subtle metaphor to comment upon the longstanding deadlock in Northern Ireland.

Heaney found in *Philoctetes* an allegory that not only applied to the then *status quo* in Northern Ireland, but also provided, albeit in poetic terms, a way out of the violent stalemate. By "domesticating Sophocles and making the wound of Philoctetes emblematic of the trauma of Ulster's maimed and distrustful communities",[3] Heaney used Greek tragedy as a means to talk about the Troubles. What Heaney recommends in *The Cure at Troy* is not the supremacy of one group over the other, but the prevalence of compromise and reconciliation. Therefore, between the antagonizing Nationalist/Catholic and Unionist/Protestant communities, he steadfastly refrains from taking sides. Resisting further feeding the division, Heaney tries to bridge the gap between the two conflicting camps by making an appeal to likely prospects of healing. As such, through the revitalization of the age-old story of Philoctetes, Heaney discovered an indirect but genuinely effective way to tackle a set of well-entrenched issues that plagued Northern Ireland for the most part of the second half of the twentieth century.

Since Heaney did not have knowledge of Greek, he worked on the script of *The Cure at Troy* through "relying on three translations – a late-nineteenth-century version, a Loeb Classical Library text translated by Francis Storr (1912), and a modern translation by David Grene (1957)".[4] Here, it is crucial to highlight that the phrase that Biden borrowed from *The Cure at Troy* does not have an exact match in the ancient Greek text, but is an inclusion made by the Irish poet. That is, although Heaney has largely remained faithful to the plot, setting, and characters of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, he admits to having inserted two "extra speeches for the Chorus – at the very beginning and near the end – [which] were meant to contextualize the action, and not just within a

3 Patrick Croty, "All I Believed That Happened There Was Revision," in *The Art of Seamus Heaney*, ed. Tony Curtis (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 2001), 204.

4 Michael Parker, "Back in the Republic of Conscience: Seamus Heaney's *The Cure at Troy*, its Politics, Ethics and Aesthetics", in *Textual Practice* 31.4 (2016), 3.

discourse that could apply to Northern Ireland politics".[5] It is in the third stanza of the second supplementary Chorus that Heaney notably writes:

> History says, *Don't hope*
> *On this side of the grave.*
> But then, once in a lifetime
> The longed-for tidal wave
> Of justice can rise up,
> And hope and history rhyme.[6]

The fact that Biden, thirty years after the premiere of *The Cure at Troy*, quoted Heaney's 'hope and history' line underscores that Heaney's adaptation of *Philoctetes* has proved relevant not only to the period of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, but to a variety of historical contexts thereafter. In truth, one could argue that Heaney's verse has basically served as the central slogan of the Biden campaign to enter the White House. On 29 October 2020, five days before the US elections, Biden uploaded to his official YouTube channel a video where he recites the entire Chorus passage accompanied by footage from the Black Lives Matter protests and other recent cataclysmic events where people stand united against adversity.[7]

Still, what is more remarkable is the realization that the phrase in question did not travel directly from Heaney's play to Biden's ear. In truth, there is a certain genealogy to be traced with Biden being the last link in a long chain of political figures that have appropriated Heaney's invocation to hope. Isabelle Torrance recounts the prominent politicians having quoted Heaney in their public addresses:

> These include Mary Robinson as President of Ireland; Bill Clinton as President of the United States; Jacques Santer as President of the European Commission; Dick Spring as Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs;

5 Seamus Heaney, "*The Cure at Troy*: Production Notes in No Particular Order," in *Amid Our Troubles: Irish Versions of Greek Tragedy*, eds. Marianne McDonald, and Michael Walton (London: Methuen, 2002), 173.

6 Seamus Heaney, *The Cure at Troy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), 77

7 Joe Biden, "The Cure at Troy by Seamus Heaney | Joe Biden for President 2020," accessed 29 February 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KkCvwvcT1zE&ab_channel=JoeBiden.

Gerry Adams as leader of Sinn Féin; Joe Biden in his presidential campaign against Donald Trump.[8]

Given the above list of illustrious names, it becomes evident that the 'hope and history' motto has long since crossed the frontiers of literature to enter the domain of politics. Another example is the late South African novelist and antiapartheid activist Nadine Gordimer, who published a volume of political essays in 1999 under the title: *Living in Hope and History*. It is then fair to say that Heaney's phrase has travelled through space and time, overcoming physical and spatiotemporal boundaries, to the point where today it has become a sort of political mantra, ready to be applied when the occasion calls for it.

The overall goal of this paper is to delineate the journey of the 'hope and history' *dictum* from the theatre orchestra to the political arena, pinpointing where exactly Sophocles, Seamus Heaney, and Joe Biden stand. This is not only an attempt to construe how this captivating statement has proved resilient over time, but also an effort to comprehend why it has been applicable to an array of heterogeneous situations and historico-political contexts. As I will demonstrate next, conflict is understood as a wound that must be healed even at a cost that may, for the parties involved, seem too high, hence the significance of that rare moment when hope and history do rhyme.

In support of this argument, one primarily needs to look back to *The Cure at Troy* and examine the conditions under which Heaney alluded to the rhyming of hope and history, without omitting to investigate the role that the tragic story of Philoctetes played. This pursuit entails a trajectory that stretches from Classical Greece to present-day Western politics, along the way crossing geographical, cultural, and conceptual boundaries.

8 Isabelle Torrance, "Bodily Abjection and the Politics of Resistance in Tom Paulin's Greek Tragedies," in *Classical Receptions Journal* claa030 (2020), 8-9.

The Cute at Troy and its Relation to Sophocles' Philoctetes

As mentioned earlier, the verse 'hope and history' verse was an add-on by Heaney to the ancient text, enabling him to render his play topical and pertinent to modern events. Nevertheless, without *Philoctetes* as its skeleton, *The Cure at Troy* would not have emerged. Indeed, notwithstanding the number of deep-seated allusions to Northern Ireland, Heaney's play remains a retelling of the Sophoclean tragedy.

From a theoretical standpoint, *The Cure at Troy* can be labelled as a product of Classical reception. Classical Reception Studies (CRS) is a subfield of Classics that investigates the way that the Classical past communicates with subsequent time periods. Unlike conventional and fairly positivistic assumptions that the discipline of Classics "is something fixed, whose boundaries can be shown, and whose essential nature we can understand on its own terms",[9] CRS scholars focus on the reciprocal form of communication between past and present. Within this scheme, any work of art that shares a thematic affinity with the ancient world, ceases to be considered *a priori* subordinate to the classical source; as if the later work lacks any intrinsic value, serving only as proof of the lasting relevance of an unalterable antiquity.

On the contrary, according to a CRS methodology, such a relationship must be perceived horizontally and non-hierarchically. CRS induces a paradigm shift in the practices of the Classical tradition, since it acknowledges an epistemological interdependence between ancient precursor and modern version in terms of the production of meaning. Applying this approach to Seamus Heaney's reception of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, Hugh Denard claims that:

> Heaney's work boldly opened up a dialogue between its Sophoclean model and the culture and politics of Northern Ireland. To the Sophoclean representation of a wounded, embittered Philoctetes, Heaney brought the

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9 Charles Martindale, "Thinking Through Reception," in *Classics and the Uses of Reception*, eds. Charles Martindale, and Richard Tomas (Malden, Ma: Blackwell, 2006), 2.

> experience of suffering in Northern Ireland. To the Northern Irish crisis, the Sophoclean model brought a vision of miraculous redemption.[10]

The Cure at Troy is not exclusively thematically indebted to *Philoctetes*, but also allows the Greek tragedy to be seen from a different angle, thus expanding its scope. Likewise, any modifications to the tragic text, such as Heaney's handling of the Chorus, should not merely be seen as arbitrary and bound to the present time, but simultaneously as affecting perceptions about the Greek source. Before jumping to any conclusions as to why Heaney introduced the 'hope and history' verse, however, one has to recall the events narrated in *Philoctetes*.

Heaney detected that the central message of *Philoctetes* "was familiar to people on both sides of the political fence in Northern Ireland. People living in a situation where to speak freely and honestly on certain occasions would be regarded as letting down the side".[11] As such, one has to trace how this phenomenon is enacted in Sophocles' *Philoctetes* before moving forward with *The Cure at Troy*.

A SYNOPSIS OF SOPHOCLES' PHILOCTETES

Philoctetes must be read against the backdrop of the Trojan War. The Greeks learned from a prophecy that they would not win the war unless they brought Philoctetes to Troy. Philoctetes, however, had been abandoned by his Greek comrades on the island of Lemnos having been bitten by a snake, which had resulted in a terrible leg wound. Naturally, Philoctetes harboured a great hatred for the Greeks, holding them responsible for his misfortunes. Thus, the Sophoclean tragedy starts with Odysseus and Neoptolemus arriving on Lemnos, on a mission to capture Philoctetes and drag him to Troy.

Odysseus explained to Neoptolemus that the only way for them to succeed in their mission was through trickery. He instructed Neoptolemus to meet

10 Hugh Denard, "Seamus Heaney, Colonialism, and the Cure: Sophoclean Re-Visions," in *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 22.3 (2000), 2

11 Dennis O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney*," (London: Faber and Faber, 2008a), 420.

Philoctetes alone and try to fool him by promising to bring him back to his homeland. Neoptolemus would have to convince Philoctetes that he stopped at Lemnos alone on his way back from Troy, where he had wanted to collect the arms of his dead father Achilles, but the Greeks denied his request. Feeling disrespected, he had left the battlefield and was sailing back home. Odysseus believed that the homesick Philoctetes would agree to follow Neoptolemus to the ship, which, unbeknownst to Philoctetes, would not take him home but rather would sail to Troy.

Neoptolemus hesitated to execute such a dishonest deed but eventually succumbed to Odysseus' pressures. He faced Philoctetes and gained his trust. Philoctetes fell into the trap and begged Neoptolemus to take him home, which Neoptolemus willingly agreed to do. Yet, after seeing how Philoctetes suffered as a result of his wound, Neoptolemus decided to reveal to him the truth about their destination. Hearing this, Philoctetes became infuriated, demanding that Neoptolemus keep his earlier promise. Suddenly, Odysseus reappeared, and a quarrel broke out, the three protagonists unable to find common ground. This is the point when the ghost of Heracles manifested itself as *deus ex machina*, delivering an external solution to the standoff: Heracles ordered Philoctetes to travel to Troy, forecasting that he would find there a cure for his wound. The Sophoclean tragedy concludes with a redeemed Philoctetes bidding farewell to Lemnos, the deserted island that he called home for so long.

Alienation and lack of communication appear as the two main themes of *Philoctetes*. Wounded and stranded on an island, expelled from the Greek community, Philoctetes' identity has been influenced by these events. A mixture of isolation, bitterness, and self-loathing describes Philoctetes' state-of-mind. As such, he is forced to embrace his alienation as an essential part of his personality. When the time comes for the Greeks to realize Philoctetes' importance and to reach back to him, Philoctetes' immediate reaction is to reject any kind of interaction that would lead to his social reintegration, as the affliction of

his wound outweighs any prospect of remedy. Having assimilated pain and exile as the two main components of who he is, Philoctetes considers change a greater threat than his present predicament. Consequently, Philoctetes' preoccupation with his wound, together with his persistent denial of an improved future, epitomize the hero's unyielding behaviour.

With this in mind, Heaney spotted in the plot of *Philoctetes* a potential antidote to the Troubles, symbolically expressed via the treatment of Philoctetes' wound: "Heaney is in favour of a cure, or healing, and he uses Greek tragedy to distance and yet make familiar the major issues of conflict".[12] The startling resolution represented by Philoctetes' decision to re-unite with his former enemies represented for Heaney a mythical parable as to what should be the right course of action in Northern Ireland in attempting to overcome the sectarian division. Next I will assess the immediate socio-cultural environment that motivated Heaney to put forward Philoctetes' *exemplum* as a way to deal with the Troubles.

THE STORY BEHIND THE CURE AT TROY

Assessing Heaney's appropriation of the Philoctetean thematics in *The Cure at Troy*, a clear parallel between Philoctetes' obstinacy and the political standstill in Northern Ireland becomes evident: "Sullen, rancorous, inwardly gnawed by hatred and paralyzed by memories of past injustice, Philoctetes is Heaney's unlovely image of the sectarian North of Ireland".[13]

One might therefore expect that, in *The Cure at Troy*, references to Northern Ireland would be explicit and easily labelled. However, the truth is that "while there are parallels, and wonderfully suggestive ones, between the psychology and predicaments of certain characters in the play and certain parties and conditions in Northern Ireland, the play does not exist in order to exploit them".[14] What Heaney sought to avoid was a simplistic identification between

12 Marianne McDonald, "Seamus Heaney's *The Cure at Troy*: Politics and Poetry," in *Classics Ireland* 3 (1996), 133.

13 Terry Eagleton, "Unionism and Utopia: *The Cure at Troy* by Seamus Heaney," *The Eagleton Reader*, ed. Stephen Regan (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 374.

14 Heaney, "*The Cure at Troy*", 175.

his protagonists and real-life persons or policies: for instance, for Philoctetes to be considered a crude personification of hard-line Unionism, suppressing any opposing view regarding how Northern Ireland should be ruled; or else Odysseus be seen as a mirror-image of the IRA, morbidly blinded by the mandate for Irish reunification. Heaney eschews unsophisticated, straightforward interpretations. As John Kelly, himself part of the original audience of *The Cure at Troy*, reminisces about the buzzing ambience at the play's premiere:

> One look around the Guildhall was enough to confirm my suspicions that the gang would all be there - sharpening their quills and watching for the first clear evidence that Lemnos was Ireland, that Philoctetes was the in the DUP […] etc etc (*sic*). But it was all too subtle for that. The themes were clear enough - but any attempt to plant Heaney's adaptation square onto one or other version of the Irish situation simply would not work.[15]

The Cure at Troy was deeply immersed in the political context of Northern Ireland—to the point that the audience in Derry was holding their breath to see how Heaney would transfer the clash in the streets onto the stage. Yet one surmises from Kelly's review that Heaney refrained from sketching one or the other side as enemy. This should be understood as an inclination on Heaney's part to transcend the ingrained stalemate, which always finds expression in restricting 'either/or' contentions. As Alan Peacock states:

> Anyone looking to Heaney for some *parti pris*, coded political stance of a sectional nature will be disappointed. The analogy works rather in the more generalized terms of division, resentment and a sense of grievance or injustice - plus the possible cessation of these for the greater good. The play is beyond any sectional pleading of a case in this respect.[16]

At this point, it must be underlined that *The Cure at Troy* was commissioned by the Field Day Theatre Company, an artistic and intellectual enterprise founded

15 Derek West, "Review: *The Cure at Troy*," *Theatre Ireland* 24 (1990), 12.

16 Alan Peacock, "Meditations: Poet as Translator, Poet at Seer," *Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Elmer Andrews (London: Macmillan, 1992), 243.

in Derry in 1980. From its conception, Field Day aimed at playing an active role in the political crisis in Northern Ireland by intervening dynamically in the public debate: "Field Day proposed – through plays, pamphlets and anthologies – a re-examination of fundamental assumptions about culture and identity in Ireland".[17] Other than Heaney, Field Day's board of directors consisted of a team of well-known Irish writers, including Brian Friel, Seamus Deane, Richard Kearney, Declan Kiberd, and Tom Paulin. This intellectual conglomerate envisioned forging "a new sense of cultural identity for Ireland, creating a space in which it might be possible to contemplate a settled existence beyond the brutal realities".[18] Inevitably, the appraisal of the Northern Irish impasse through literary means was integral to the Field Day project.

The main goal of the Field Day intelligentsia was to deconstruct the purportedly old and futile means of approaching the conflict through the design of a newfangled Northern Irish cultural discourse. In a nutshell, the Field Day project was an attempt to encourage the protagonists of the Troubles to come forward and talk to each other. As Brian Friel asserted, the project was founded "to create an opportunity for 'talking amongst ourselves', others can listen if they wish".[19] Arguably then, Heaney's interest in the thematics of *Philoctetes* did not emerge in a vacuum, but was resolutely influenced by Field Day's aims and objectives.

Considering the programmatic manifesto of Field Day, it suffices to realize that the 'political but not partisan' approach espoused by Heaney was not strictly personal but reflected to a certain extent the overall mission statement of the theatrical company prompting the production of *The Cure at Troy*. As endorsed by its directors, Field Day's *raison d'être* is to "contribute to the solution of the present crisis by providing analyses of the established opinions, myths and stereotypes which had become both a symptom and a cause of the current situation".[20] This mindset was intended as a counterweight to the toxic atmosphere of the Troubles, an artistic endeavour to regulate the rampant hostility by proposing a more nuanced point of view on the conflict.

17 Dennis O'Driscoll, "Heaney in Public," *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney*, ed. Bernard O'Donoghue (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008b), 56.

18 Stephen Regan, "Ireland's Field Day," *History Workshop* 33 (1992), 26.

19 Paul Hadfield, "Field Day: Over But Not Out," *Theatre Ireland* 31.1 (1993), 47.

20 Seamus Deane, *Ireland's Field Day*, (London: Hutchinson 1985), vii.

The choice of Derry as the headquarters of Field Day, and eventually the place where *The Cure at Troy* premiered, should also be taken into consideration. Derry is a placename with a contested nomenclature, known also as Londonderry amongst the Protestant population. Moreover, it is the city in the predominantly Protestant Northern Ireland with the largest Catholic representation. Being remote from the metropolitan centres of Dublin and Belfast, Derry was seen by many at the time as a no-man's land; a place of unrelenting dispute and enmity, considering also that Bloody Sunday occurred in Derry. For Field Day, however, Derry's outsider status represented an opportunity for the establishment of an artistic buffer zone. As Anthony Roche discusses on the occasion of Brian Friel's *Translations* (1980), Field Day's first ever production:

> The choice of venue in a town like Derry which until recently had no proper theatre was symbolically apt: the mayoral Guildhall with its legacy for the Catholics of gerrymandering and second-class citizens. Since then, all these features have changed; but the need for such change was highlighted by Field Day's activities. The first night in the Guildhall saw a complete political spectrum of Northern Ireland - from Sinn Féin and the SDLP on the Catholic side through Unionists of various shades on the other - sharing the same space and anticipating by several decades what was out in place by the power-sharing Executive.[21]

Roche's astonishment about the peaceful co-existence of representatives from both opposing blocs inside Guildhall, calling an informal ceasefire to watch Friel's play together, reinforces Field Day's pivotal role in the development of Northern Irish affairs. This is a manifestation that theatre in Ireland matters in a special way, going beyond considerations of artistic quality and aesthetic pleasure. Characteristic of a Field Day production, the boundaries between stage and public become blurred, whereas whatever is projected in the play has a direct impact on the audience's perceived reality.

21 Anthony Roche, *Contemporary Irish Drama,* (London: Macmillan, 1994), 179-80.

Such realization not only enables one to better grasp the potency of Heaney's invocation to have hope in the advancement of the peace processes in Northern Ireland, but also serves as a stepping stone towards deciphering the demonstrated resilience of such a message, bearing in mind its subsequent circulation within distinct historical contexts. What remains to be unearthed is the process of Hibernization that Heaney commences in *The Cure at Troy*, namely how Heaney foregrounds his version of the Greek tragedy as markedly Irish.

IRISH ALLUSIONS IN THE CURE AT TROY

While Heaney offers a disclaimer that any parallels between his version of *Philoctetes* and Northern Ireland "are richly incidental rather than essential to the version"[22], a close reading of *The Cure at Troy* reveals that the instances where Irish markers transpire are numerous. For example, with the introduction of a distinctive Northern Irish vernacular, Heaney establishes that his version of *Philoctetes* is placed within an irrefutably Irish context:

> With terms such as "slabbering, "canny" and "canniness," "hagged" (for "hacked"), "clouts," "is his head away?" "shake-down," "wheesht!" "that put me wild," "I am astray,"" blather?" "shilly-shallying," […] the vernacular Heaney gives to the Sophoclean [characters], […] is recognizably Irish.[23]

Heaney exploits the animosity and eventual reconciliation of Philoctetes with the Greeks paradigmatically, as both a reflection and a way out of the present state of affairs in his country. Although a complete overview of such a strategy will not be included in this paper, a brief delineation of its most characteristic manifestations will follow. In fact, given that "Heaney took more liberties with the Chorus speeches than with the dialogue passages in *The Cure at Troy* [in order] to highlight the relevance of the action to contemporary Irish concerns",[24] the emphasis in this section will be placed on two Choric odes, one introductory and the other concluding. This allows us to

22 Heaney, "*The Cure at Troy*", 175.

23 Denard, "Seamus Heaney, Colonialism, and the Cure: Sophoclean Re-Visions", 4.

24 Marilynn Richtarik, "Reality and Justice: Seamus Heaney's *The Cure at Troy*," in Estudios Irlandeses 13.1 (2018), 106.

trace how Heaney introduces the struggle and the ultimate amelioration he recommends at the play's finale.

Starting with the opening Chorus, Heaney launches the action as follows:

> Heroes. Victims. Gods and human beings.
> All throwing shapes, every one of them
> Convinced he's in the right, all of them glad
> To repeat themselves and their every last mistake.
> No matter what.
>
> People so deep into
> Their own self-pity self-pity buoys them up
> People so staunch and true, they're fixated,
> Shining with self-regard like polished stones.
>
> And their whole life spent admiring themselves
> For their own long-suffering.
> Licking their wounds
> And flashing them around like decorations.
> I hated, I always hated it, and I am
> A part of it myself.
>
> And a part of you,
> For my part is the chorus, and the chorus
> Is more or less a borderline between
> The you and the me and the it of it.[25]

The lines above describe a dual phenomenon of perpetual victimhood and self-righteousness. The whole excerpt is an expression of "the wounded one whose identity has become dependent upon the wound, the betrayed one

25 Heaney, *The Cure at Troy*, 1-2.

whose energy and pride is a morbid symptom".[26] Although this picture perfectly fits Philoctetes' predicament, it is not necessarily restricted to him. Rather, such vivid sketching of intransigence as consuming one's identity, specifically the reluctance to consider the opposing view, to the point that one is ensnared in a traumatic situation with no apparent way out, illustrates truthfully the scenario of the Troubles. The use of the neutral 'people' to denote the perpetrator of intransigent behaviour, in particular, suggests that the inclination towards obstinacy is indicative of both sides, be it Unionist or Nationalist. As such, the Chorus names fixation, fanaticism, and alienation as the omnipresent constituents of the sectarian discord, engulfing all in its vortex.

Yet, what is more striking is the awareness exhibited by the Chorus of its intermediary role. The Chorus, although openly detesting the deadlock it describes so acutely, simultaneously laments the fact that there is no escape from it. Instead, the Chorus acknowledges the stalemate as a basic constituent of its own complexion. On that note, in an interview, Heaney confessed that:

Anyone who grew up in the north of Ireland from their moment of consciousness was aware of, if you like, a public dimension to their lives, they were bonded into a group, one side or the other side. And they were also living in the, you know, a personal, private intimate, the theatre of your own conscience and consciousness. So, the demand for solidarity was there from the start with your group, and if you were growing into some kind of authentic individual life, the imperative for solitude or self-respect or integrity or self-definition was there also. So there was always that little, sometimes quite often, an ill-fit between the group line, the party line if you like, and the personal condition.[27]

What Heaney outlines about the constant struggle between individual self-realisation and obedience to the group as symptomatic in Northern Ireland, becomes allegorically transcribed in *The Cure at Troy*: Odysseus and Neoptolemus self-identify as "Greeks with a job to do".[28] When at one point

26 Heaney, "*The Cure at Troy*: Production Notes in No Particular Order", 175.

27 Lorna Hardwick, "Interview with Seamus Heaney," in *Practitioners' Voices in Classical Reception Studies* 7.1 (2016), 2.

28 Seamus Heaney (1990), 3.

Odysseus admonishes Neoptolemus by telling him "just remember: you're here to serve our cause",[29] Neoptolemus sarcastically replies "We're Greeks, so, all right, we do our duty […] Which boils down to a policy of lies".[30] Again, Neoptolemus, when Philoctetes urges him to listen to his conscience, defends his stance by saying: "I cannot / There's a cause, a plan, big moves, / And I'm part of them. I'm under orders".[31] Consequently, justifying the unjustifiable on the basis of obscure orders coming from above is the norm in the universe of *The Cure at Troy*, and by extension in Northern Ireland. Independent thinking is casually repressed, whilst most individuals are pawns in the hands of a faceless sectarian machinery.

Philoctetes' utterances are a howl of desperation coming from someone whose life has been totally consumed by the Troubles and who is looking to break loose: "Are you all just yes-men?"[32] Philoctetes yells at his enemies, while protesting that "My whole life has been / Just one long cruel parody […] Every day has been a weeping wound / For ten years now. Ten years' misery and starvation".[33] These words sound like a universal plea against the overall repercussions of the Troubles, as Philoctetes' grievance pertains to the agonies experienced by a person living under a hazardous regime. In fact, his next remark contains a sentiment that those who have experienced the Troubles at their fullest probably felt for themselves: "I managed to come through / But I never healed".[34]

Therefore, as the play progresses, imperatives of healing gradually come to the fore. Heaney, having succeeded in laying out the premises of the conflict, and the inevitability of despair that the present stalemate engenders, now puts forward the foundations of a cure. This is the moment when he invokes the rhyming of hope and history. In the second supplementary Chorus, Heaney writes:

> Human beings suffer,
> They torture one another
> They get hurt and het hard.

29 Ibid., 6.

30 Ibid., 8-9.

31 Ibid., 51.

32 Ibid., 58.

33 Ibid., 18-9.

34 Ibid., 18.

No poem or play or song
Can fully right a wrong
Inflicted and endured.

The innocent in gaols
Beat on their bars together
A hunger-striker's father
Stands in the graveyard dumb.
The police widow in veils
Faints at the funeral home.

History says, *Don't hope*
On this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetime
The longed-for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up,
And hope and history rhyme.

So hope for a great sea-change
On the far side of revenge.
Believe that further shore
Is reachable from here.
Believe in miracles a
And cures and healing wells.[35]

Strategically positioned moments before Philoctetes reconciles with his enemies and agrees to sail to Troy to find a cure for his wound, the above Choric ode represents an exhortation for atonement. The message is clear: since the suffering in Northern Ireland is shared, putting an end to it also has to be a collective undertaking. As a result, Heaney insinuates that possibilities for redemption have not yet eclipsed, if blind retribution is somehow substituted for

35 Ibid., 77

mutual concession. On that note, Marianne McDonald specifically comments about the second stanza of the Chorus:

> Sufferings on both sides are mentioned: the hunger-striker is a Republican who dies in protest while imprisoned by the British or Unionists. The police widow is mourning her dead husband who supported the Unionist regime. The hope is for a peaceful settlement, and a healing of the wound of hate.[36]

Heaney showcases that a shared embracing of pain can bind even the bitterest enemies together. As such, Philoctetes' story becomes in Heaney's hands a forceful encomium of hope applied to the Ireland of his times, since it conveys an auspicious way of confronting and overcoming the obstacles set by history. As the Czech statesman and writer Václav Havel, whom Heaney repeatedly credits as a source of inspiration, has also argued: "Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out".[37] Consequently, with the rhyming of hope and history, a break with the incessant reproduction of the existing division in Northern Ireland is called for, with Heaney classifying such pairing as belonging "in the realm of pious aspiration".[38]

Notwithstanding the tremendous political turbulence, Heaney saw a beam of hope on the horizon for Northern Ireland and appropriately adopted the myth of Philoctetes to communicate this to the others. Thus, Heaney succeeded in the construction of a language of compromise and cooperation, propounding a vigorous ethos of optimism that had not previously been considered feasible. Aptly, it is Heaney's apparent success in this task that made Stephen Wilmer point out that: "the Greek tragedies have been used by Irish poets not so much to express tragedy as to express hope – a hope that comes out of years of tragedy".[39]

36 McDonald, "Seamus Heaney's *The Cure at Troy*: Politics and Poetry", 134.

37 Václav Havel, *Disturbing Peace* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1990), 182.

38 O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones,* 421.

39 Stephen Wilmer, "Prometheus, Medea and Antigone: Metaphors for Irish Rebellion and Social Change," in *Didaskalia* 3.1 (1996), 1.

A PRAYER FOR HOPE AND HISTORY

Having completed the examination of the 'hope and history' dictum in its original theatrical context, it would not be an overstatement to argue that Heaney's verse had an immediate effect in Irish politics. In fact, evaluating the overall impact of The Cure at Troy, critics and scholars often mention that there are "few other dramatic texts which can claim to have acquired such prominence in the political affairs of modern times".[40] Yet, what is sometimes left unmentioned is the distinct role that the 'hope and history' phrase has played in this. As I will show in the following examples, the rhyming of hope and history has come to function almost as a prayer, denoting a desire for change and progress in the political arena.

On 3 December 1990, two months after the premiere of *The Cure at Troy*, Mary Robinson, in the conclusion of her inaugural address as president of Ireland, became the first politician to borrow Heaney's line:

> May God direct me so that my Presidency is one of justice, peace, and love. May I have the fortune to preside over an Ireland at a time of exciting transformation when we enter a new Europe where old wounds can be healed, a time when, in the words of Seamus Heaney "hope and history rhyme".[41]

Five years later, on 30 November 1995, Bill Clinton visited Derry, in an attempt to assist the ongoing peace processes in the region. Nowadays, Clinton's historic visit to Derry is viewed as the catalyst triggering the successful outcome of the peace talks in Northern Ireland, putting an end to three decades of blood-stained turmoil. Standing in the square containing Guildhall (basically in front of the building where Field Day staged *The Cure at Troy*), Clinton bid the jubilant crowd farewell:

40 Denard, "Seamus Heaney, Colonialism, and the Cure: Sophoclean Re-Visions", 2.

41 Mary Robinson, "Address by the President, Mari Robinson, on the Occasion of Her Inauguration as President of Ireland," accessed 24 March 2021, https://www.president.ie/en/media-library/speeches/address-by-the-president-mary-robinson-on-the-occasion-of-her-inauguration

> Well, my friends, I believe. I believe we live in a time of hope and history rhyming. Standing here in front of the Guildhall, looking out over these historic walls, I see a peaceful city, a safe city, a hopeful city, full of young people that should have a peaceful and prosperous future here where their roots and families are. That is what I see today with you.[42]

One year later, in the lead up to his re-election as US president, Clinton would publish a book about what he considered the fundamental principles and values of his administration: *Between Hope and History: Meeting America's Challenges for the 21st Century* (1996). Following Clinton's example, Gerry Adams, the president of the Irish Republican Sinn Féin party, would also publish a book entitled *Hope and History* (2003), discussing his involvement in the run-up to the Good Friday Agreement. Within this tradition, Joe Biden, whose speech at the Democratic National Convention instigated this paper, is the latest politician to quote the 'hope and history' line. That is until—as will undoubtedly happen—the next statesperson comes along and extends the phrase's lineage.

What these examples reveal as a whole is the pertinence of Heaney's phrase to tangible situations. That is, the examples above illuminate collectively how the "utopian impulse that is inscribed in the concept of rhyming hope and history", can be applied to an array of concrete historical events.[43] With this, the multivalent usage of the 'hope and history' verse translates to a singular appeal: the advancement of the idea that the healing of any wound is possible, that any crisis is solvable, when the right politics are exercised and reconciliation prevails.

This paper demonstrates the journey of Heaney's phrase: from its origin as the central message of *The Cure at Troy*, to nowadays being considered a synonym for change and progress in the political arena. Arguably, the maxim of 'hope and history' not only went beyond the boundaries of literature to enter the

42 Bill Clinton, "Remarks to the Community in Londonderry, Northern Ireland," accessed 24 March 2021, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PPP-1995-book2/pdf/PPP-1995-book2-doc-pg1809.pdf

43 Aidan O'Malley, "Rhyming Hope and History in the 'Fifth Province'," in *Exploring the Utopian Impulse: Essays on Utopian Thought and Practice*, eds. Michael Griffin, and Tom Moylan (Oxford: Peter Land, 2007), 293.

domain of politics, but also established its status within the realm of politics, which has changed over time. Instead of its specific application to the Troubles in Northern Ireland, the connotations of the phrase have been altered gradually and extended to indicate a numinous code of political conduct.[44]

44 I would like to personally thank Professor Peter Liebregts, whose talk on Heaney at a recent LUCAS meeting of the "Modern and Contemporary" research cluster, as well as his interview on the Dutch NPO Radio 1 about "The Healing Poetry of Seamus Heaney", was seminal for the publication of this paper.

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