When Dionysus lands on Erin: Greek tragedy on Irish grounds

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CHAPTER I

Tom Paulin's *The Riot Act*: The Irish Troubles Through the Lens of Greek Tragedy

A Northern Irish Among the Greeks: *The Riot Act* as Tom Paulin's One-hit Wonder

Born in Leeds in 1949 and raised in Belfast, Tom Paulin is an author who resists strict categorization. A poet, playwright, and political essayist, Paulin's dual identity as an artist and public intellectual follows a parallel trajectory. Paulin's creative output is regularly informed by his political convictions, whereas his quite intricate political ideology becomes more intelligible with a meticulous study of his poetic and theatrical work. Whether in verse or prose, the dominant themes of Paulin's literary work expose his political stance in an array of matters. With such a versatile disposition, the evaluation of Paulin's works invites a similar approach: one must probe and expose the reciprocal connections between art and politics central to Paulin's writings to fully capture his complex nature as a thinker and writer.

Yet, if there is one constant in Paulin's career, it is his preoccupation with the political developments in Northern Ireland. Reaching adulthood at the time the Troubles began, Paulin's growth as a man of letters went hand in hand with the ongoing turmoil in Northern Ireland.[1] This fact stands out even more considering that Paulin ended up spending the biggest part of the Troubles away from home: "Despite the fact that he had attended Hull and Oxford Universities and that he was teaching at Nottingham University in 1981, Paulin's writing still focused on the North (Richtarik 1995: 104-5). With his political writing and creative work, Paulin directly addresses the violent conflict in Northern Ireland, without hesitating to identify and condemn the practices and perpetrators that he thinks responsible for the blood-stained struggle in the North.

Paulin's interest in Greek tragedy is rooted in those grounds. *The Riot Act*, subtitled 'A version of Sophocles' *Antigone*', marks the first time that Paulin produces a play with a Greek ancestry. Staged on 19 September 1984, *in medias res* of the Troubles, *The Riot Act* evokes the fierce political climate of its time and the sectarian division in the North. The play premiered in Derry, the city best known as the birthplace of the Troubles, further underscoring the

[1] Paulin's familial ties with Northern Ireland come from the side of his mother, whose birthplace is Belfast. Looking back at his ancestors, we learn that "His grandfather had been a Presbyterian elder, and his grandmother served as a nurse in Carson's army, which helped to resist the home rule tide and kept Ulster (or at least part of it) British. His father, however, was an outsider, an Englishman who had moved to Belfast to become headmaster of a school there" (Richtarik 1995: 4).

spatiotemporal relevance of *The Riot Act* to the Troubles. The play was part of "a double bill with Derek Mahon's adaptation of Moliere's *L'Ecole des Maris* (as *High Times*)" (Murray 1991: 120), brought to the Northern Irish stage by the Field Day Theatre Company.[2] Yet, of the two plays, it was Paulin's reworking of *Antigone* that grabbed most attention from both audience and critics, as its topical resonance to contemporary Northern Ireland decisively contributed to this.[3]

Paulin's fascination with Greek tragedy does not start and finish with *Antigone*. Actually, *The Riot Act* is part of an unofficial trilogy, as Paulin has dealt with Greek tragedy two more times. Besides his adaption of *Antigone*, Paulin has written *Seize the Fire* (1990), which is a version of Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, followed by *Euripides' Medea* (2010), named after the eponymous tragedy. Although exclusively comprised of dialogues, *Seize the Fire* does not strictly count as a theatrical play. As Isabel Torrance notes: "*Seize the Fire* was commissioned as the basis for a film that would form part of a second-year course on fifth-century BCE Athens run by the Open University" (2021: 281). The film was aired on BBC2 in February 1989, and a year after the published text followed. Unlike *The Riot Act* and its thematic fixity to the Troubles, "The political span of *Seize the Fire* is far broader, alluding to various oppressive regimes and applying itself to the whole of humanity" (*Ibid*. 285).[4] As for Paulin's adaptation of *Medea*, this was first performed on 2 February 2010, at the Oxford Playhouse. Utilizing the status of Medea as a stranger in a foreign land, Paulin's rendition of Euripides' tragedy "played to the theme of immigrant experiences in British culture" (*Ibid*. 290). Curiously, none of the two plays has left a mark, commercially speaking or within academia. Besides Torrance's recent article, the critical attention cast on them is scant. Something that is not true about *The Riot Act*, which is one of the most discussed Irish adaptations of Greek tragedy to date.

Given the disproportionate scholarly attention allocated to the trilogy, one could reasonably argue that, in terms of his engagement with Greek tragedy, *The Riot Act* stands out as Paulin's one-hit wonder. Without wholly diminishing the artistic value and political impact of the other two plays, *The Riot Act* is surely the attempt that Paulin is most known for and the subject of numerous subsequent analyses. It seems that the retelling of Antigone's story hit a special

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[2] A full section dedicated to the history, workings, and cultural imprint of the Field Day Theatre Company is included in the chapter on Seamus Heaney.

[3] As Fiona Macintosh notes, *The Riot* Act "courted controversy even during rehearsal when the director, Simon Stokes, was given the sack and the actor playing Creon (and a Field Day Director) Stephen Rea took over the direction. This is an angry play, and there is a shocking savagery about Creon's demotic language that is shaped by a brutalized world" (2011: 92).

[4] In a short comment about the play, Brian Arkins lists that "Important in Paulin are the title, the epigraph, and the prevailing brevity. Paulin's title *Seize the Fire* directs us not to Prometheus' imprisonment by Zeus, but to his providing human beings with the crucial gift of fire. Paulin's epigraph from Marx also stresses the importance of Prometheus as a champion of mankind, as a kind of humanist saint: 'Prometheus is the foremost saint and martyr in the philosopher's calendar'" (2010: 130).

nerve; something that the other two stories of Prometheus or Medea did not manage to do, at least with respect to Irish matters. This asymmetry requires further explanation. As it will be argued in this chapter, *The Riot Act* was put in the limelight because of the imaginative way that Paulin associated the powerful Antigonean thematics with the main events and protagonists of the Troubles. Specifically, Antigone's decision to bury her brother Polyneices against state rules, and the subsequent repercussions that culminate in her death sentence, are transformed into a symbolic parallel for the ongoing cycle of violence in the North. Similarly, Creon, the Theban king that sentences Antigone to death, is portrayed by Paulin as the equivalent of an authoritarian politician obsessed with the maintenance of the *status quo* in Northern Ireland. As Murray comments: "that we are in Belfast and Thebes simultaneously is the premise of this version" (1991: 121). Upon witnessing the play, the original audience of *The Riot Act* could identify the play's characters as the main perpetrators of the sectarian strife in Northern Ireland. Additionally, by having his characters speak in a distinct Hiberno-English dialect, Paulin managed to resonate on stage the nuanced language of the conflict spoken daily in the streets.

Paulin's main preoccupation with political violence can be sensed by his choice to change the title of the Sophoclean tragedy and rename it *The Riot Act*. To 'read someone the riot act' is an expression that means to berate an individual or a group of people for their unruly behaviour. Apart from its everyday usage, the phrase has an underlying history: originally, the Riot Act was "an English statute of 1715 providing that if twelve or more persons assemble unlawfully and riotously, to the disturbance of the public peace, and refuse to disperse within an hour upon proclamation of the statute by a competent authority, they shall be considered guilty of felony" (qtd. in Harkin 2008: 308). To invoke the law, the police authorities had to read out loud the proclamation below:

> Our sovereign lord the King chargeth and commandeth all persons, being assembled, immediately to disperse themselves, and peaceably to depart to their habitations, or to their lawful business, upon the pains contained in the act made in the first year of King George, for preventing tumults and riotous assemblies. God save the King. (qtd. in Remoundou-Howley 2011: 123)

The Riot Act was not unknown to the Irish, as it was "used by British authorities to quell 'disturbances' in Ireland" (Harkin 2008: 308). Paulin accomplishes a dual purpose with his choice of title, effectively capturing the inherently conflictual relationship between political authority and civil disobedience, while subtly alluding to British rule in Ireland. In doing so, he sets the tone for a retelling of *Antigone* that seeks to mirror the unsettling political reality in Northern Ireland.

As it will be made clear in more detail, *The Riot Act* must be read against the backdrop of the Troubles in order to be fully comprehensible. This amounts to both the reasons that urged

Paulin to deal with *Antigone* in the first place as well as for the very content of his adaptation. In the following section, we will explore how Paulin's interpretation of Sophocles' tragedy did not arise in isolation but was instead influenced by a longstanding debate regarding Antigone's place in Northern Irish affairs. Specifically, we will examine how *The Riot Act* serves as a polemical response to previous influential readings of the tragedy by Irish intellectuals.

A Friend Turned Foe: Conor Cruise O'Brien and the Fight Over Antigone's Reputation

Commenting on the reasons that he was drawn to *Antigone* in the first place, Paulin gives a compelling remark: "It was a play that belonged in Ireland." (2002: 166). The assertiveness of Paulin's claim is noteworthy. In 1984, the same year that *The Riot Act* was staged, two more Irish playwrights, Brendan Kennelly and Aidan Carl Mathews, were preparing their own versions of the tragedy. The astonishing production of three *Antigones* in one calendar year did not remain unnoticed. Since then, most critics tend to examine these versions together, investigating the socio-political causes that triggered the plethora of Irish *Antigones* in such a short time interval.[5]

Yet, when Paulin made his claim about *Antigone's* firm place in Ireland, he had something else in mind. The avowal that *Antigone* belongs in Ireland is not based on current events, but rather on incidences happening in the past. The appraisal of Sophocles' tragedy has a history that predates 1984. What Paulin concealed in his succinct statement about *Antigone*, is that the female protagonist of the tragedy was not exactly revered by those who first thought that her tragic story applies to Ireland. On the contrary, Antigone's *exemplum* of defiance against the law and the imminent consequences of this transgression were read as a cautionary tale about the domestic chaos that awaits Ireland, and especially the Northern part, if Antigone were allowed to enter politics there.

To give a clearer idea, Anthony Roche historically contextualises the entry of *Antigone* into Northern Irish politics, without omitting to reveal the man responsible for this development: "The first person to draw the comparison between events in the North of Ireland and Sophocles' *Antigone* was diplomat-critic Conor Cruise O'Brien. He did so very early on, in October 1968, within the same month as a Civil Rights march was set upon by the Ulster police" (1988: 222). Leaving momentarily aside any mentions about Conor Cruise O'Brien and the details of his reading of the tragedy, the date that Roche indicates cannot be overlooked. 5 October 1968 is widely considered as the day the Troubles began. The spark was lit at the Civil Rights march that took place in Derry and ended up in riots between the protesters and the police forces. In theory, the Civil Rights march was a peaceful protest demanding an end to gerrymandering and to job

[5] Christopher Murray provides an excellent recapitulation of the *Antigone* frenzy in Ireland: "The coincidence of three versions of *Antigone* in the Irish theatre within months of each other calls for special comment… I suggest that the imaginations of these three poets, Kennelly, Paulin and Mathews, none of them more than an amateur dramatist, were attracted to the Antigone myth through an apocalyptic vision of political and social events in Ireland, North and South, in 1984. This was the year of the New Ireland Forum *Report;* the year of the Criminal Justice Bill; the year of the Kerry Babies' Case; the year after the failure of the abortion debate and the year before the sequel, the debate on divorce which ended in a crushing defeat for liberal opinion in Ireland. 1984, accordingly, was an appropriate year for Antigone to walk forth and state her 'non serviam' to the Irish establishment" (1991: 128-9).

and housing inequalities faced by many residents in the North (the majority of them disenfranchised Catholics).[6] However, its violent conclusion precipitated the sectarian division that erupted in the following decades, taking the form of a national questioning over Northern Ireland's place within the United Kingdom. Although more information will follow about the fateful Derry march and its wider implications in the subsequent thirty-year impasse, it is notable that Antigone's name entered the public discourse in Ireland on the onset of the Troubles. That is, more than fifteen years before Paulin produced *The Riot Act*.

At the time the Troubles broke out, Conor Cruise O'Brien was a leading public intellectual in Ireland. Like Paulin, he was a man of many interests. A politician and a diplomat, a journalist and an academic, a historian as well as a playwright, O'Brien was enjoying recognition in diverse fields. Born in Dublin in 1917, one year after the Easter Rising, O'Brien had experienced first-hand all major developments that took place in Ireland during the course of the 20th century: the partition of the island and the establishment of the Irish Free state in 1922 as a consequence of the Anglo-Irish War of Independence, De Valera's 1937 Constitution and the change of the country's name to *Éire* (Ireland), and finally the outbreak of the Troubles that brought forward the claim of Ireland's unification with the creation of a new all-Ireland state and the termination of British rule in the North. From all these occurrences, O'Brien was more directly involved with the latter: although originally a moderate sympathizer of the nationalist cause, 'the Cruiser', as his nickname was, shifted sides over the 1970s and steadily became an advocate of the Unionist position and the two-state solution in Ireland.

Interestingly, Paulin's first point of contact with O'Brien is cordial. Paulin seems to initially espouse O'Brien's views about the maintenance of the *status quo* in Northern Ireland. Although never a hard-line Unionist himself, Paulin was persuaded by O'Brien's argumentation in favour of Ireland's partition. To provide a testimony of Paulin's early rapport with O'Brien:

> Until about 1980 I… believed what most Ulster Protestants still believe – that Northern Ireland was, and ought to remain, permanently wedded to Great Britain. Although I had always hated Ulster Unionism very bitterly and supported the Civil Rights movement from the beginning, I believed that civil rights and greater social justice in Northern Ireland could be achieved within the contexts of the United Kingdom… As the situation hardened, I reacted like most members of the Unionist middle class and believed that Conor Cruise O'Brien was putting 'our case'. (Paulin 1984: 16)

Furthermore, in a 2003 interview preceding the restaging of *The Riot Act* in London, Paulin opens up once again about his early admiration of O'Brien:

[6] The numerous Civil Rights marches that took place in Ireland at the time were inspired by the US Civil Rights movement and its iconic leader, Martin Luther King.

> As a student in England, I followed obsessively what was happening in the North of Ireland, the civil rights campaign to bring democracy and equality (one man, one vote) to all the population. The failure of that non-violent campaign led to Loyalist violence, followed (that verb is crucial) by Republican violence (the first RUC constable killed by terrorists in the North of Ireland was murdered by Loyalists). Somewhere in the middle, I supported neither side. I admired the writings of the Irish intellectual Conor Cruise O'Brien, who for several years was editor-in-chief of *The Observer*, and wrote a weekly column which often denounced Irish nationalist values and actions, as well as the attitude of certain southern Irish politicians towards IRA violence. (2003)

The above extracts are illustrative of Paulin's initial alignment with O'Brien. Paulin shares O'Brien's conviction that the border in Ireland is a necessary evil. Yet soon an ideological rift would occur between the two men. No doubt, O'Brien's alleged misreading of *Antigone* in the context of the Civil Rights movement in Northern Ireland proved catalytic in widening the gap between them. Before touching on this, however, it is it crucial to take a closer look at Paulin's own ideological upbringing and transformation from a self-professed 'moderate Unionist' to an adherent of Irish Republicanism. This way, Paulin's disillusionment with O'Brien will be better understood.

Tracing the formation of Paulin's ideology, Anthony Roche explains that Paulin is not the typical Nationalist supporter that predominantly defines himself against the Unionist 'Other'; instead, Paulin possesses a vision of a unified Ireland where those sectarian divisions will cease to exist:

> Paulin himself does not slot conveniently into the dividing categories so favoured in the North. He was born in England [but] he was raised in the North as a Protestant Unionist when his parents returned there; and in the late 1970s he changed sides, switching allegiances from his Unionist heritage, not so much to its Catholic counter-image as to a utopian vision of nationalist identity that would reconcile Protestant Dissenter and Catholic Republican. (1988: 221)

Paulin seems aware that his political ideas are somewhat unconventional: "My own critical position is eclectic and is founded on an idea of identity which has as yet no formal or institutional existence. It assumes the existence of a non-sectarian, republican state which comprises the whole island of Ireland" (1984: 17). A critic of Paulin would readily judge this statement as

baseless or flimsy. In truth, however, there seems to be a certain historical precedent on which Paulin bases his vision of a non-sectarian unified Ireland. The following excerpts by Marilynn Richtarik and Elmer Kennedy-Andrews point to this:

> Paulin believed that the Protestants did not have a proper sense of themselves as a distinct people with a historical identity. Rereading history, he fastened upon the abortive revolution of 1798 as an opportunity Protestants missed to unite with Catholics in a shared Irish identity. Modern-day unionists, he felt, were insufficiently aware of the radical republican element of their heritage. (Richtarik 1995: 107)

> Just as Yeats had his imaginary Ireland, so Paulin has his 'platonic' republic founded on a myth of Protestant radicalism deriving from a highly selective historical memory which centres on the rebellion of the United Irishmen in 1798. The 1798 rebellion occupies a central place in Paulin's imagination, representing for him the possibility of a union between Ulster Presbyterian and Irish Catholic who, placing rational ideals of political independence and self-determination above considerations of religious denomination, fought side by side for the republican cause. (Kennedy-Andrews 2013: 183)

Paulin's Republicanism is essentially secular. He considers the possibility of a unified Ireland, where religion differences will no longer matter, at least in national consciousness formation. As improbable as this sounds, Paulin envisages a situation where both Catholics and Protestants will put their differences aside and construct a common identity together. "The priority for Paulin is a social democratic Irish republic, founded on equality of citizenship and the civic institutions of the just state, and capable of transcending inherited colonial and religious divisions**"** (*Ibid*.).[7] For this to occur, the identification of the Ulster Protestants with the British national identity and culture must be put to a halt. As Paulin admits in an interview: "it was really only after 1979 or 1980 that I realised the fundamental flaws in the structure of the Northern Irish state could only be redressed if the link with Britain was broken or at least attenuated" (Marshall & MacCabe 2000: 97). Although all historico-cultural developments indicated that this is an unlikely scenario, for Paulin it remained a prerequisite for the establishment of a unified Irish state, and ultimately, for the termination of the Troubles.

[7] Patricia Horton notes that allusions of Paulin's imaginary republic can be found in his poetry as well: "Paulin's secular republic is envisioned utopically in *Liberty Tree*. Poems like 'The Book of Juniper' uphold Enlightenment ideals, the dream of 'that sweet/ equal republic'" (2002: 315).

Overall, one could rightly argue that it would be difficult to find two more diametrically opposed personalities than O'Brien's and Paulin's. Especially regarding Northern Ireland and the Troubles, O'Brien's cold-blooded pragmatism finds no point of correspondence with Paulin's fervent utopianism. For O'Brien, the partition of Ireland is non-negotiable; any political advancement needs to foremostly abide to this arrangement. For Paulin, on the other hand, Northern Ireland is a failed state in need of disbanding.[8] The following extract taken from a comparative essay Paulin wrote about the shared cultural struggle in Palestine, South Africa, and Northern Ireland is indicative of this:

> Here I would like to say a little about my personal experience of becoming involved in a cultural struggle that was and is also a political struggle, and that is the struggle to articulate a central political fact – the Northern Irish State or statelet, established in the Downing Street peace talks in 1921, had failed. The extent and depth of that failure was hard to perceive or accept, for those Protestants, like myself, who could remember the IRA campaign in the 1950s, and who were fundamentally opposed to the paramilitary violence, which has caused such suffering. One prominent defender of that Northern Irish State was a then well-known writer and intellectual, Conor Cruise O'Brien, who put his revisionist guilt about the excesses of traditional Irish nationalism at the service of the beleaguered state. (2005: 10-11)

Paulin's tirade against O'Brien is suggestive of the chasm separating them. Paulin cannot digest how a Northern Protestant like himself eventually comes to acknowledge the systemic injustice fostered by the Northern Irish state, whereas a Southern Catholic like O'Brien refuses to see it.

Seen from another angle though, Paulin and O'Brien have something in common that is hard to deny. Essentially, both men go against the grain of the expectations of the ethnoreligious group they originate from. Paulin, though a Northern Protestant, ended up a Republican, whereas O'Brien gradually embraced Unionism, notwithstanding his Southern Catholic roots. That is, both intellectuals took the opposite political pathway from the one they were expected to follow. As Joe Cleary comments:

[8] Interviewed by John Haffenden, Paulin openly questions the legitimacy of the Northern Irish state: "what I find at the moment is a real sense of how fundamentally ridiculous and contradictory it is to be an Ulster Protestant. It's a culture which could have dignity, and it had it once – I mean that strain of radical Presbyterianism… which more or less went underground after 1798. I pretty well despise official Protestant culture, and can't now understand how people can simultaneously wave the Union Jack and yet hate the English, as many Protestants do. I think there really *has* to be a united Ireland, and I don't mean in any way that I'm committed to bloodshed – but it is a fundamentally absurd political state, and it's got to go" (1981: 159).

> Having campaigned against Partition some decades earlier, O'Brien went on (after the Troubles erupted in Northern Ireland) to become a vigorous champion of state right and to adopt an increasingly rigid pro-union line, eventually joining the U.K. Unionist Party. On one level at least, then, Paulin's version of *Antigone* can be read as part of the northerner's ongoing imaginative engagement with O'Brien, a southerner whose intellectual migration from Irish nationalism to Ulster unionism ran in an inverse direction to Paulin's own political development. (199: 523)

O'Brien and Paulin thus embrace the political position that the other has rejected. This may well explain the mutual dislike: each man is a reminder of the other man's apostasy. What requires further explanation is the role that *Antigone* plays in all this.

Having laid out the ideological foundation of their clash, let us now take a closer look at the very incident that perpetually damaged Paulin's relationship with O'Brien. This was a lecture that O'Brien gave at Queen's University in Belfast, in the wake of the riotous Civil Rights march in Derry. In front of a socialist-oriented student audience comprised of both Catholics and Protestants, O'Brien brought up the story of Antigone's disrespect of Creon's edict to contemplate whether civil disobedience is an effective tool for social change. O'Brien initially adopts an ambivalent stance. He is not sure whether Antigone's *exemplum* is commendable or not:

> We should be safer without the troublemaker from Thebes. And that which would be lost, if she could be eliminated, is quite intangible. No more, perhaps, than a way of imagining and dramatising man's dignity. It is true that this way may express the essence of what man's dignity actually is. In losing it, man might gain peace at the price of his soul. (qtd. in Richtarik 1995: 217)

O'Brien esteems the humanism embodied by Antigone but fears its repercussions. As Fiona Macintosh argues, "Antigone, according to O'Brien, is dangerous, yet a source of human 'dignity', the elimination of which may lead to perdition" (2011: 194). Antigone's rebellion is a tricky matter: simultaneously a humane virtue and a hazardous trait. O'Brien's lecture purposefully reaches no firm conclusions, with O'Brien tacitly occupying a middle position between Antigone and Creon. Yet this sought ambiguity would be undermined quickly. A few days later, O'Brien's lecture was published in *the Listener*. In there, O'Brien adds a sentence that he had not dared to spell out in front of the student body: "Without Antigone, we could attain a quieter, more realistic world. The Creons might respect one another's spheres of influence if the instability of idealism were to cease to present, inside their own dominions, a threat to law and order" (qtd. in Paulin 1984: 27). This is a way off from O'Brien's initial hesitation. The invocation of Creon in plural cannot but remind one of the respective seats of power in Stormont, Westminster, and Dublin. Within this scheme, the suggested eradication of Antigone ensures that the delicate balance

between these three poles will not be disrupted. Also, this extra sentence cannot but be read as an indirect way of condemning the Northern Irish Civil Rights movement as incongruous and illegitimate.

With certain modifications and omissions, O'Brien's lecture was also reprinted in his influential book *States of Ireland* (1972). In short, O'Brien's book

> provided a compelling narrative that defended the Irish state, accepted partition, and criticised the irredentist aims of the Provisional IRA and other Irish republicans. *The States of Ireland* argument is a classic articulation of what can now be seen as an ideological counter-insurgency reading of how terror is sustained in sympathetic ideological waters. O'Brien's argument was that wider Irish nationalist and in particular republican cultures were a common cultural and ideological ground. (O'Callaghan 2018: 224)

Again, using *Antigone* as a political analogy, O'Brien points to the tumultuous aftermath of the Derry Civil Rights march, suggesting that all forms of protest, even if fundamentally peaceful, attract violence and should therefore be banned:

> Antigone's action was one of non-violent civil disobedience,[9] the breaking of a law which she considered to be contrary to a higher law. The consequences of her non-violent action emerge in acts of violence: Antigone's own violent death; Haemon's turning of his sword first against his father Creon and then fatally against himself; the suicide of Eurydice, Creon's wife and Haemon's mother. A stiff price for that handful of dust on Polyneices. Nor it is possible to put out all the blame on Creon. Certainly his decision to forbid the burial of Polyneices was rash, but it was also rash to disobey his decision… It was Antigone's free decision, and that alone, which precipitated the tragedy. Creon's responsibility was the more remote one of having placed this tragic power in the hands of a headstrong child of Oedipus. (1972: 151)

O'Brien bluntly declares that it was mainly Antigone's fault, as she drew sword first. Creon's accountability comes secondary, since he is reacting to a previous offence. Still, this is a dangerous mindset. Applying the same logic to the Derry march, the excessive use of police violence against the Civil Rights protesters gets disturbingly justified, only because the march had been declared prohibited moments before its start.[10] Also, O'Brien's overtly cynical remark about

[9] O'Brien definition of Antigone's actions as "'non-violent civil disobedience' [echoes] the Civil Rights movement in the U.S., especially Martin Luther King's doctrine of passive resistance and his argument that civil laws are just or unjust when viewed in the light of a divine of higher law" (Roche 1988: 222). Using such emotionally charged terminology, O'Brien's disapproval of Antigone is altogether more distressing.

[10] Considering also that *States of Ireland* was published a few months after Bloody Sunday, with fourteen civilian protesters being shot dead by British paratroopers, one is appalled by this way of thinking.

"that handful of dust on Polyneices" referring to Antigone's burial of her brother does not sit well with the ritualised burial practices, so much revered in Ireland.[11]

Additionally, there is another historical reason to regard Polyneices' lack of burial as not a trivial matter that created more problems than it solved. One remembers 'the Disappeared', a "group of individuals from the North who were abducted and taken to the South to be murdered. Their exact whereabouts – that is, for the few whose remains have since been found – were often only uncovered decades after their murder, during which time these individuals laid without burial or commemoration" (Chou 2010: 9). In most of those cases, it is believed that the IRA was involved. The organization considered the victims to be informers and by forcibly disappearing them ensured that secret information would not be shared with the enemy. This phenomenon regularly took place in the first decade of the Troubles. Interestingly, in *Seize the Fire*, Paulin makes Hephaestus address Prometheus – chained in an abandoned cliff by Zeus – in a way that evokes 'the Disappeared':

> It breaks my heart
> to leave you in this abattoir –
> a dump for rebels
> and *the disappeared*. (*SF*: 3; italics mine)

Paulin acknowledges the spectre of 'the Disappeared' haunting the Irish mind, as a form of collective trauma. So, it is fair to say that, for a combination of cultural and historical reasons, the burial of Polyneices by Antigone becomes of importance to the Irish consciousness, and surely much more so than O'Brien would initially like to believe.

Still, to fully comprehend O'Brien's ensuing dislike of Antigone, one must place it in the right historical context. The four years separating his original lecture at Queen's University from the publication of *States of Ireland* brought with them the unfolding of the Troubles. Now, the Derry march is no longer seen as a single unfortunate event, but as the starting point of an ongoing stream of violence tantalizing the North. Understandably, O'Brien's reading of *Antigone* is also subject to change.[12] O'Brien had already given up his middle position, to come closer to Creon. In

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[11] In her pioneering work about death practices in Ancient Greece and Ireland, Fiona Macintosh writes: "It is, then, both on account of the continuing public nature of death in Ireland and the persistence of residual beliefs and rituals surrounding death, that death in Ireland is so markedly different from commonly held conceptions of 'modern' death. Furthermore, it is the existence until fairly recently of highly elaborate rituals surrounding death that makes it possible to parallel, and indeed sometimes match, the death rituals in ancient Greece" (1994: 31). Taking this into account, O'Brien's bitter remark about Antigone throwing dust on Polyneices's corpse appears even more misplaced.

[12] Nathan Wallace presents a list of major political events that took place in Northern Ireland between 1972 - the year O'Brien published *States of Ireland* - and *The Riot Act's* premiere in 1984, which also influenced

the end though, he gets intrigued by another character of Sophocles' play, Antigone's sister Ismene:

> The disabilities of Catholics in Northern Ireland are real, but not overwhelmingly oppressive: is their removal really worth attaining at the risk of precipitating riots, explosions, pogroms, murder? Thus Ismene… Antigone is very fine on the stage, or in retrospect or a long way off, or even in real life for a single, splendid epiphany. But after four years of Antigone and her under-studies and all those funerals… you begin to feel that Ismene's common sense and feeling for the living may make the more needful, if less spectacular element in 'human dignity'. (*Ibid*. 152-3)

Ultimately, O'Brien sides with Ismene, who in Sophocles' tragedy refuses to partake in Antigone's plan to bury Polyneices, maintaining an impassive stance. O'Brien praises Ismene for this, arguing that it is her less charismatic demeanour that could eventually save "man's dignity", and not Antigone's erratic behaviour, as he first had mused. Correlating Antigone with the outburst of violence in Northern Ireland, O'Brien sees in Antigone's reluctant sister an ideological ally. Ismene sees the injustice imposed on Polyneices but refuses to act fearing the possible repercussions – "I ask for pardon to those buried under me; since I am constrained, I will obey those in power. It is silly to try to act differently" (*ἐγὼ μὲν οὖν αἰτοῦσα τοὺς ὑπὸ χθονὸς ξύγγνοιαν ἴσχειν, ὡς βιάζομαι τάδε, τοῖς ἐν τέλει βεβῶσι πείσομαι: τὸ γὰρ περισσὰ πράσσειν οὐκ ἔχει νοῦν οὐδένα.*) (*Ant.* 65-8). Similarly, O'Brien declares that Catholic subjugation in Northern Ireland is real but not worthy of intervention, as this would bring on bigger troubles.[13]

Expectedly, Tom Paulin was in complete disagreement with O'Brien's conclusion. Paulin felt that O'Brien was deliberately bending the meaning of the Sophoclean play to make it fit his own political ends. Therefore, he decided to take up action. His first response came in essay form. On 14 November 1980 O'Brien published in the *Times Literary Supplement* a biting critique of O'Brien's political profile entitled 'The Making of a Loyalist'; the essay was reprinted four years

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Antigone's reception: "Just as the situation, and, therefore, also the applicability of the Antigone analogy, had developed significantly between the publication of O'Brien's article in 1968 and 1972, huge changes had, of course, also taken place between 1972 and 1984. In 1976, for instance, the British government revoked republican and loyalist paramilitary prisoners' special-category status. Over the next several years, this led to various kinds of protests - mainly by republicans - from 'blanket protests' and 'dirt protests' to, most horrifyingly, the IRA hunger strikes of 1981. Despite the international pressures brought upon Margaret Thatcher's government to negotiate with the republican leadership inside the prison, the Prime Minister infamously held fast. It would, therefore, be her image as the 'Iron Lady', steadfastly refusing the symbolic demands of republican prisoners at Long Kesh, that became the inevitable modern analogy for Creon" (2015: 75-6).

[13] In *The Riot Act*, the Chorus makes a comment about Polyneices that "His story was a thin wee grievance that went on for ages" (*RA*: 15). Such remark is reminiscent of O'Brien's depreciation of the problems faced by the Catholic population in the North.

later in Paulin's collective volume *Ireland & the English Crisis* (1984). As the essay's title suggests, Paulin narrates the gradual transformation of O'Brien into a Unionist. Paulin offers a psychological reading of O'Brien's persona supported by biographical information like O'Brien's peculiar upbringing:

> Francis Cruise O'Brien ensured that his son received a Protestant education, and this tempered his inherited Catholic allegiances. In O'Brien's self-portrait we can see how the two traditions balance each other and allow that rare figure, the 'objective' historian to emerge. This transcendental historian is able to voice and confirm Protestant fears of domination by a Catholic state. (Paulin 1984: 24)

Paulin moves on to argue that O'Brien's self-fabricated 'objectivity' is just a façade, thus undermining his stature "as the objective historian, the *engagé* intellectual who is also disengaged by virtue of his superior wisdom" (*Ibid*. 26). In truth, Paulin maintains, O'Brien is biased and picks sides according to his political beliefs. Although he may have been successful in hiding it so far, O'Brien's supposed lack of objectivity is finally evident in his profound dislike of Antigone: "Here Antigone (i.e. Bernadette Devlin[14] and the Civil Rights movement) becomes responsible for 'all those funerals'. This means that the Unionist state is virtually absolved of all responsibility and Creon's hands appear to be clean" (*Ibid*. 27). Paulin concludes that O'Brien's reading of the tragedy is far from innocent, as he does not treat the two adversaries the same way:

> O'Brien loyalties are to the 'daylight gods', and he sees the political conflict in the play as one of unequal personal responsibilities. Creon, therefore, is both individual and institution, yet he appears to be more an institution, while Antigone, like St Joan, appears as an individual ahead of her supporters. She is 'headstrong' and therefore more responsible because she can supposedly exercise choice. So Creon is rendered almost innocent by his immobile precedence, his simply being there. (*Ibid*. 28)

Paulin is convinced that O'Brien did not invoke the duel between Antigone and Creon to even-handedly describe the political impasse in Northern Ireland, but in a way that serves his political convictions that side with the maintenance of the *status quo* in the North and the preservation of the Northern Irish state.

[14] Bernadette Devlin McAliskey was one of the leading figures of the Civil Rights protests in Northern Ireland. Her young age and impassioned demeanour quickly brought the Antigone impression on her. More information about her will be given in the following sections.

Yet, Paulin is only partially satisfied by his essay response to O'Brien. Unveiling O'Brien's true motives behind the condemnation of Antigone is not enough. The harm O'Brien has done to the female heroine warrants another form of response. Paulin feels that the best way to redeem Antigone is in her natural habitat, the theatre: "O'Brien's target was Irish nationalism, Bernadette Devlin McAliskey and the Northern Irish Civil Rights Movement, which he saw as responsible for the violent politics of Northern Ireland. He misinterpreted the play, and in doing a version of it I set out to try and prove him wrong" (2002: 167). This is the very moment when Paulin decides to adapt *Antigone* for the Irish stage.

Starting from the following section, we will delve into *The Riot Act* to examine how Paulin defends Antigone in an attempt to upturn O'Brien's argumentation and restore her reputation in Ireland.

Staging the Language of the Troubles: Paulin's Usage of Hiberno-English

Regardless of whether one opts for O'Brien's or Paulin's interpretation of the tragedy, the very choice of the plot of *Antigone* as a mythic equivalent of the turbulences in Northern Ireland can be hardly questioned. "*Antigone* is a story of a city divided; where a family's feud for power precipitates a conflict so cruel that it pits friend with friend and neighbour against neighbour. In many ways, no better metaphor exists than this for the civil conflict which has marked Northern Ireland's recent past" (Chou 2010: 1). Despite their quarrel, none of the two Irishmen would find fault with the above remark. Arguably, after O'Brien's lecture, Paulin did not have to demonstrate at length that *Antigone* is a tragedy that possesses topical relevance. "The Creon-Antigone pairing as a metonymic resemblance of the politics of polarization between Catholics and Protestants in Ireland" (Remoundou-Howley 2011: 135) had already been established.

Still, Paulin was faced with another pressing challenge upon preparing *The Riot Act*. Specifically, he had to device a way to transfer the atmosphere of the Troubles to stage by infusing the plotline of *Antigone* with distinguishing Northern Irish markers. He did this by making the tragedy's protagonists speak the language of the conflict:

> Drawing on Richard Jebb's nineteenth-century translation, Paulin pares away the florid Victorian embellishments to arrive at a short verse line, lean, terse, understated. The play is written in a pared, minimal style, conversational yet urgent, whose Anglo-Irish speech and syntax find a home and context for such lexical outcasts as 'screggy', 'sleg', 'pobby'. (Roche 1988: 225)

Paulin invests in the nuances of the Northern Irish vernacular to attribute to *The Riot Act* a sense of local significance and immediacy. Just like any other Field Day Company production, Paulin's play "takes the theme of language and naming as critical to the representation of personal and public identity in Northern Ireland; [he] sees 'Irish' identity to be inextricably bound to the languages of Ireland (Gaelic, English, Irish English), languages defined largely in terms of their innate cultural authority" (Worthen 1995: 24). Therefore, one must examine closely the theatrical text to discern the special type of language that Paulin uses to characterize his protagonists, and, in turn, enhance the action of the play with indisputable Irish referents.

To start with, Paulin sees the replacement of Gaelic with English as a traumatic event for the Irish people, who were compelled to relinquish their mother tongue for the language of the conqueror. This sentiment is conveyed in the theatrical text, where the Chorus declares: "Ever since the day I made this speech – it was in another time and place, and in a different language too – the grief I was speaking of then has grown and multiplied. It's got more and more" (*RA*: 35). This confession is ingrained in the collective experience of being Irish. As Maria-Elena Doyle explicates:

"Paulin's chorus laments its own sad history, one shaped, even defined, by a change in language, and the fact that the accumulation of sorrows is connected to the loss of a language gives the play perhaps its closest identification with the situation in Ireland" (2000: 179). The replacement of Gaelic with English as the main language in Ireland translates into a fundamental issue that the Irish faced, namely the need to domesticate and make their own a language that has been forced upon them. Arguably, this circumstance contributed decisively to the development of the Hiberno-English dialect.

In *The Riot Act*, Paulin aims to emphasize this peculiarity and bring to the fore certain English words that possess a distinct Irish nuance. For instance, early in the play, Ismene refuses Antigone's proposal to bury Polyneices by saying: "You are talking *wild* | it's Creon's order" (*RA*: 11; italics mine). Here, a small but crucial deviation from the ancient text occurs. In the corresponding passage from the Sophoclean tragedy, Ismene accuses Antigone as reckless for speaking against Creon (*ὦ σχετλία, Κρέοντος ἀντειρηκότος;*) (*Ant.* 48). The adjective *σχέτλιος* can also mean 'unflinching' or 'steadfast', but mainly in a bad sense. In *The Riot Act*, Paulin prefers to sketch Antigone as 'wild'. This is an adjective that has a distinct meaning in Ireland. Opposed to the negative connotations of 'reckless' or 'cruel' that the Greek word *σχέτλιος* denotes, 'wild' has a positive bearing in the Irish imagination.[15] Particularly, "The wildness of Paulin's Antigone is not a synonym for anarchic action or a threat to civic order as Creon would like to believe. On the contrary… it is a form of loyalty to her kin, and the extended family; a kind of tribal alliance with its own instinctive rules and unwritten laws" (Kentrotis Zinelis 2023: 443). Therefore, from the outset of *The Riot Act*, Paulin makes a powerful statement about Antigone's character: to be 'wild' means to be Irish.

To give a characteristic example of the Irish usage of 'wild', W. B. Yeats's 'On a Political Prisoner' is a poem that refers to Constance Gore-Booth. During the Easter Rising, Gore-Booth was incarcerated for her participation in the rebellion. In the poem written about the female revolutionary, Yeats commemorates:

> When long ago I saw her ride
> Under Ben Bulben to the meet,
> The beauty of her country-side
> With all youth's lonely *wildness* stirred,
> She seemed to have grown clean and sweet
> Like any rock-bred, sea-borne bird. (1996: 80; italics mine)

[15] In his translation from ancient Greek, Jebb translates *σχετλία* as 'over-bold'. Still, this does not match the semantic richness of Paulin's 'wild'.

Yeats's portrayal of Gore-Booth could also fit Antigone. In fact, a resemblance between the two is established: both women are political prisoners in the prime of their youth. Also, they both get punished by a higher authority as a result of their rebellious behaviour. Finally, both of them are convinced for the righteousness of their struggle, showing unwillingness to compromise. All these features are a result of the 'wildness' that motivates them. Yet, to understand better this attribute, one should refrain from the common definition of the word and check instead how it is understood in Ireland:

> This wildness is not a barbarism to be set over against civilisation since the terms of these polarities have been too long co-opted by the British, casting themselves in the light of the bearers of civilisation, order, rule, and moderation, and the Irish as the unkempt barbarians, who will not be tamed but Caliban-like insist on wallowing in the mud. The 'wildness' may be transvalued as exuberance, primitive earthiness, an integrity of body and soul that resists social integration or confinement within limits. (Roche 1988: 226)

Paulin is aware of the above distinction. The 'wildness' of his Antigone is the moral compass by which she judges how she should act. Within this context, the burial of Polyneices comes as non-negotiable, notwithstanding the illegality of such 'wild' act. This view gets reinforced by the following report that the Guard gives to Creon upon finding the body of Polyneices buried: "He wasn't the least bit ripped nor torn. It was *wild*, though" (*RA*: 20; italics mine). Thus, Antigone's transgression is inseparably bound to her innate 'wildness'. It is this attribute that makes her disregard death, echoing the Republican martyrs. As the Chorus comments about Antigone's fearless demeanour: "It's in her blood: | she won't surrender" (*Ibid*. 27). And again, when Antigone sings her own dirge before meeting death, the Chorus exclaims: "*Wild* as ever | in her speech she is" (*Ibid*. 47; italics mine). In fact, the same could apply to Constance Gore-Booth and the rest of the Easter Rising conspirators, about whom Yeats famously wonders in 'Easter, 1916': "And what if excess of love | *Bewildered* them till they died?" (1996: 180; italics mine). Once more, Irish history and Greek myth seem to correspond; similar to the Easter rebels, it is Antigone's love for her brother Polyneices that 'bewildered' her and led her to death.

The Riot Act abounds in examples like this. The whole text is permeated with allusions to recent events in Irish history and its leading actors. Naturally, the Troubles are placed in the foreground. The incessant violence of this period as well as the lack of a possible way out of it are recorded in the following words of Tiresias to Creon:

> Now so much blood's been split
> there's none can call a halt
> to those thrawn and jaggy hates

deep-rooted in your state. (*RA*: 53-54)

Some hints to this period like the above are overly explicit, while others may escape the untrained eye/ear. In any case, most of these associations do not arise from extratextual elements, such as the theatrical setting and the actors' clothing, but rather, they are accomplished through language alone:

> *The Riot Act* sticks very closely to the structure of the original play, and the first production's modern costumes and draperied set hinted at, but did not clearly delineate, particular national affiliations. Visually, the play seemed to strive for profound abstraction with its precise choreography, its dark curtains and starkly lit stage, but by manipulating the way the characters sounded, Paulin was able to suggest a number of connections that would be familiar parts of the cultural vocabulary of a local audience. (Doyle 2000: 178)

As a result, to trace Paulin's topical echoes in *The Riot Act*, one must not only focus on *what* is said, but also *how* this is said. Paulin persistently reproduces on stage the Ulster demotic, the language and vocabulary of the conflict. It is with the strategic introduction of this peculiar Hiberno-English idiom that the Antigonean thematics acquire topical resonance and come to symbolize the sectarian division in Northern Ireland. Generally, Paulin does not digress too much from the plotline of the Sophoclean tragedy, remaining faithful to the sequence of events as they unfold in the original text.[16] As Marianne McDonald notes:

> Paulin has pared down Sophocles' *Antigone* from 1353 lines to 1256… In Paulin's play the Northern accents shape the classical text, and particular joins universal. The theme is justice: who has power over whom? Is it the state that prevails? Do one's family and friends take precedence? Should the Irish accept British rule, or are there roots that are stronger in the family and the soil that must be protected? Does one sell one's soul to save one's life? (1996: 96)

This serves as a firm attestation that all references to Northern Ireland result from the type of language that Paulin uses in *The Riot Act*.

By the same token, the political affiliation of each character in the play is revealed by their manner of speaking. It is "quite easy to see Creon as a Unionist intransigent and Antigone as a republican martyr, one asserting the law of the state as a universal, the other a more fundamental

[16] The main alternation that Paulin has made in *The Riot Act* is that he reduced the size of the choric passages: "I used the Ulster vernacular as far as I could, and slashed away at the choruses to make the play run for fifty minutes and no more" (Paulin 2002: 167).

natural law as superior to any created by humans" (Deane 2002: 154). The two antagonists address one another in a way that is reminiscent of how the two opposing camps fight each other in Northern Ireland. In fact, each of the two characters has its real-life counterpart: both Antigone and Creon come to embody some prominent figures of the Troubles like Bernadette Devlin McAliskey and Ian Paisley respectively. Certain keywords they utter and quirks they have decidedly attests to this. Yet, before moving to specific examples, it is interesting to take a closer look at Paulin's view on the overall status of Hiberno-English. This way, we will better grasp the political effects behind Paulin's choice to theatrically stage the language of the Troubles.

In an essay devoted to the current standing of Hiberno-English in the English-speaking world, Paulin laments the fact that this dialect has not been properly recorded:

> Although there are scholarly studies of 'Hiberno English' and 'Ulster English', the language appears at the present moment to be in a state of near anarchy. Spoken Irish English exists in a number of provincial and local forms, but because no scholar has as yet compiled a *Dictionary of Irish English* many words are literally homeless.[17] They live in the careless richness of speech, but they rarely appear in print. When they do, many readers are unable to understand them and have no dictionary where they can discover their meaning. The language therefore lives freely and spontaneously as speech, but it lacks any constitutional existence and so is impoverished as a literary medium. It is a language without a lexicon, a language without form… Until recently, few Irish writers appear to have felt frustrated by the absence of a dictionary which might define those words which are in common usage in Ireland, but which do not appear in the OED. This is possibly because most writers have instinctively moulded their language to the expectations of the larger audience outside Ireland. The result is a language which lives a type of romantic, unfettered existence - no dictionary accommodates it, no academy regulates it, no common legislative body speaks it, and no national newspaper guards it. Thus the writer who professes this language must either explain dialect words tediously in a glossary or restrict his audience at each particular 'dialectical' moment… One of the results of this enormous cultural impoverishment is a living, but fragmented speech, untold numbers of homeless words, and an uncertain or a derelict prose. (1985b: 11, 15, 17)

Paulin is not in a position to solve the basic problem of Hiberno-English as he understands it, due to the absence of an authoritative lexicon. Yet, in *The Riot Act* he attempts what other Northern Irish have consistently failed to do, namely to expose their audience to the full potential of Hiberno-English. Hence, instead of handling the dialect with hesitation or a constant need of clarification as if it is a taboo, "Paulin aims to legitimate Irish English as a recognized form of

[17] A dictionary of Hiberno-English would finally be published in 1998 by T. P. Dollan.

English, and as a literary, aesthetic, and political medium" (Worthen 1995: 24). To do so, Paulin uses the dialect uncompromisingly, as this is spoken every day in the North:

> The conversational speech tone in Anglo-Irish and Ulster-Scots, the minimalist syntactical and verbal approach, the deliberate use of colloquial words, and the understated expressions of tragic pathos such as "aye, it's fixed" (35), " Ismene, love" (9), "aye, dust on the crop" (19), "o' the whole pack o 'ye" (22), "that yap like this one" (27), "hard-nosed bitch" (36), "born eejit" (37), all go hand in hand with Paulin's belief in the power of spoken, familiar language. In the context of modernizing the classical text for the Irish audience, the surrendering to the Northern Irish vernacular seems fitting for a poet whose strong views on language have shaped his disavowal of an elite verbosity in favour of the unpretentious, natural, recognizable rhythms of everyday *langue*. (Remoundou-Howley 2011: 148)

The Ulster vernacular pervades *The Riot Act* and serves as the main communication currency between all characters in the play. In doing so, Paulin pioneers in the exposition of a cultural vocabulary that is admittedly shared by everyone in Northern Ireland, irrespective of their religion or where they stand politically. Consequently, the original audience of *The Riot Act* comprised of both Nationalists and Unionists, witnesses a version of *Antigone* the language of which sounds eerily familiar. The Greek ancestry of the play gets momentarily obscured, as Antigone, Creon, and the rest of the characters re-enact on stage the severe climate of the sectarian divide in the North.

In the following section we will investigate further how the distinct language that Paulin uses to depict his characters leaves no room for doubt as to who are the two figures standing behind the contest of Antigone with Creon.

Ian Paisley & Bernadette Devlin McAliskey: The Standard-Bearers of the Conflict

Throughout *The Riot Act*, Paulin inserts a coded phraseology that obliquely points to the Troubles and their protagonists. A characteristic example is located in the opening dialogue between Antigone and Ismene. In their verbal exchange, Antigone warns her sister about the punishment that awaits anyone who breaks Creon's edict. The way that Antigone chooses to share this information is quite intriguing, as she uses a phrase that is all too intimate to a Northern Irish audience:

> And you and me both,
> we're expected to take this!
> *We must bend the knee*
> Or they'll stone us in the street. (*RA*: 10; italics mine)

The message here is clear: any form of disobedience to Creon's rule will lead to death. Antigone and Ismene will either show submission to Creon or they will be fatally battered. On the surface, Paulin seems to be following Jebb's translation of the corresponding Sophoclean passage a little loosely, yet conveying the same meaning about Creon's edict: "nor counts the matter light, but, who disobeys in aught, his doom is death by stoning before the folk" (1897: 7) (*καὶ τὸ πρᾶγμ᾽ ἄγειν οὐχ ὡς παρ᾽ οὐδέν, ἀλλ᾽ ὃς ἂν τούτων τι δρᾷ, φόνον προκεῖσθαι δημόλευστον ἐν πόλει.*) (*Ant*. 34-6).

Upon a second reading, however, an infamous slogan of the Troubles crops up. It is the third line of the excerpt that carries a special weight. One remembers the Reverend Ian Paisley, the belligerent loyalist leader and Protestant zealot, who throughout the Troubles pushed for an ultra-hardline Unionist agenda. Paisley was the founder and head of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), the chief loyalist organization in Northern Ireland. Paisley's political trajectory is so conflated with the Troubles that he has been fancifully portrayed "as much the prisoner as the master of the sectarian demon" (Lee: 1989: 428). Seen by his enemies as an agitator responsible for much of the violence against the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland, Paisley maintained that he and his people were actually those under assault. Paisley was a vocal opponent of any power-sharing concessions with the Catholics of Northern Ireland. Having also founded his own church, the Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster, Paisley was combining religious sermon with political propaganda to put forward his anti-Catholic sentiments. A vociferous personality, Paisley was "bestriding the political landscape of Northern Ireland with the Bible in one hand and both eyes on the ballot box" (Coogan 1996: 45). In all of his public addresses, a notorious battle cry repeatedly came out of his mouth: "No surrender. We will never bend the knee". This phrase came to become synonymous with Paisleyan politics. It not only summarizes the combative demeanour

of the Ulster firebrand, but also sets the tone for the hostility towards the Catholic enemy that Paisley expects all Ulster Unionists to exhibit.

As shown above, Paulin incorporates Paisley's phrase within the narrative of *The Riot Act*, but with a twist. Antigone and Ismene "must bend the knee" to Creon. This inversion is certainly ironic. Antigone must do what Paisley vehemently refuses to do. This way, Paulin wants to underline Creon's, and by extension Paisley's, thirst for domination. Paisley's refusal to "bend the knee" ultimately translates to the aspiration he has that his enemies submit to him. By appropriating the "bend the knee" imagery, Paulin not only establishes a connection between the forceful Unionist spokesman and Creon, but also provides a commentary about the basic ideological teachings of Paisleyism: by not bending the knee, the DUP demagogue assumes that his Catholic opponents will bend it themselves first. This way, Paulin indirectly articulates that Paisley's stance is not really defensive as he purports, but behind his "no surrender" disposition, lies a threatening tactician.

The notion that Paisley is behind Creon's mask is further corroborated by the following announcement made by the Chorus moments before Creon enters the stage:

> Now watch *the big man*
> this bran-new morning:
> our new King Creon's
> wanting some wise words
> from us old ones. (*RA*: 15; italics mine)

"The big man" is no other than Paisley himself, who, because of his tall and sturdy appearance, was known by this nickname among friends and foes. Upon hearing this epithet, the audience at the premiere of *The Riot Act* has no doubts as to who is the person that Creon represents. The timing is not accidental: Paulin wants from the very beginning of his play to make sure that everyone sees Creon and imagines Paisley. Having defined pretty much all aspects of public life in Ulster, "the big man" prepares now to dominate the Northern Irish theatrical stage.

Before presenting Creon's opening speech, it is worthwhile to briefly digress and take a look at an essay that Paulin wrote about Ian Paisley in 1982. Entitled 'Paisley's Progress', Paulin traces some of the key moments in the Ulsterman's political career and makes certain observations about how carefully orchestrated his public persona is: "Paisley's particular kind of puritan egotism is voracious in its subjectivity, and for all its insistence on sincerity is in practice highly theatrical. He is a compulsive role-player and is fond of dressing up in other people's personalities" (Paulin 1996: 32). Paulin stresses that Paisley's attributes as an orator possess theatrical underpinnings. His populist allure is performance-based. The same goes for his

chameleon-like temperament: Paisley assumes different roles according to the expectations of the audience that he has in front of him. Instead of consistently speaking his mind, Paisley is predominantly preoccupied to deliver what the people want to hear.

The critique and psychological reading that Paulin offers of Paisley influences on a great extent the impending portrayal of Creon in *The Riot Act*.[18] Like his real-life counterpart, Paulin's Creon uses a different type of language, depending on the occasion before him. To quote Paulin's words: "I imagined Creon to be a kind of puritan gangster, a megalomaniac who spoke alternately in an English public school voice and a deep menacing Ulster growl" (2002: 167). This is a description that could also fit Paisley, a man with acumen in communication matters but also a master of disguise. Similarly, it is one Creon publicly addressing the masses to appease them or gather them to his side, and a totally different version of him standing behind the curtains and conversing with those he considers his inferiors. In the first occasion Creon comes across as considerate and reliable, whereas in the second he reveals his manipulative and abusive side.

Creon's first appearance on stage carries with it comical undertones. One must read between the lines to perceive Paulin's ridiculing of Creon. The whole setting is a bit absurd: a somewhat fatigued Creon addresses the crowd as if in a press conference, using a subtly condescending rhetoric to establish his position as king of Thebes and inform the citizens about his edict regarding Polyneices' body.[19] The overall feeling produced from his speech is that Creon just pretends to respect the institutions that he supposedly represents. He wants to transmit the impression that everything is back to normal and ensure his people that safety prevails in Thebes. In reality, however, Creon is boorish and inconsiderate of others; he just wants to be done with his speech quickly, seeing the interaction with his subjects as an unpleasant inconvenience instead of a respectful obligation. As Richard Jones observes: "Creon's lengthy opening speech, with its aura of a press conference, is spoken completely in prose, but in a special kind of prose: evasive, pompous, official: the language of power" (1997: 236). Thus, listening to Creon, the audience senses immediately the despotic traits of his character.

To provide a condensed version of Creon's speech:

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[18] Before *The Riot Act*, Paulin wrote a poem inspired by the Theban king entitled 'Under Creon', which is included in his poetry collection *Liberty Tree* (1983). In the poem Creon "represents the Ulster Unionist establishment, while the poet implicitly becomes the voice of Antigone in memorializing forgotten heroes of radical Presbyterianism" (Torrance 2021: 278). Specifically, the poem sheds light on Paulin's political ideology and his views on a united Irish state. As Arkins adds: "'Under Creon' establishes that [Paulin's] preferred state, though green, would have to find room for the genuine Dissenters in Northern Ireland in the late eighteenth century such as Henry Joy McCracken, James Hope, and Joseph Biggar" (2010: 39).

[19] Creon's public voice strikes one critic as "a parody of a Northern Ireland Office political functionary appealing for public support" (O'Toole 1984), whereas Mitchel Harris becomes more specific by arguing that Creon's entry echoes "the opening remarks of Northern Ireland's incoming Secretary of State, Douglas Hurd, in the summer of 1984" (qtd. in Roche 1988: 224).

> Mr. Chairman, loyal citizens of Thebes, these recent months have indeed been a most distressing time for us all. It therefore gives me great pleasure to report that public confidence and order are now fully restored, and, if I may, I would further like to take this opportunity of thanking each and every one of you for your steadfastness and your most exceptional loyalty… For purely technical and legal reasons – kinship to the dead and so on – the office of king therefore devolves upon me… For my own part, I have always held that one of the soundest maxims of good government is: *always listen to the very best advice*. And in the coming months I shall be doing a very great deal of listening, sounding opinions and so forth… However, let me say this, and say it plainly right at the very outset, that if ever any man here should find himself faced with a choice between betraying his country and betraying his friends, then he must swiftly place that friend in the hands of the authorities…[20] If I might further add – and I know that Zeus will support me here – that if ever I should see this country heading for disaster I would be quite incapable of standing idly by and saying nothing…[21] These, in brief, are the principles by which I intend to govern this city… And it follows naturally from those same principles that I should wish to amplify the statement which was issued in my name yesterday evening. 'Eteocles, who died fighting for his city, shall be given a full state funeral' – reversed arms, carriage and so on – 'whilst Polynices shall be deemed guilty of treason and refused all burial'… Thank you all for coming, and any questions just now? We have one minute. (*RA*: 15-7)

Paulin modernizes Creon by making him speak like contemporary politicians do in front of television cameras. This way, it is easier for the audience of *The Riot Act* to identify as the addressee of Creon's speech: the "loyal citizens of Thebes" is indeed them. Immediately, a strong feeling spreads that Creon is untrustworthy. For instance, the promise that Creon will be doing "a great deal of listening" is straightaway undermined by the succeeding remark that "we have one minute" only for questions. Clues like this show that Creon is double-faced and deceitful, reminding the play's spectators about their prevalent distrustfulness towards Northern Irish politicians.

Creon, like every gifted orator, can speak in various tones and dialects. In his first address, he speaks to all of Thebes (or Northern Ireland) using a clinical language akin to a bureaucratic official from Westminster. In his private dealings, on the other hands, he switches to a vulgar lingo.

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[20] Creon's statement about betrayal is an ironic reversal of E. M. Foster's famous saying that "If I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country".

[21] Here Creon refers to a well-known phrase uttered during the Troubles, also used by Seamus Heaney as the title of one of his poem, 'Whatever You Say, Say Nothing'. The poem is about the culture of silence that the Troubles brought in the North and the prevailing life-threatening dangers that exist if one speaks freely their mind.

His foul-mouthed charge to the Guard to go fetch the person who put dust on Polyneices's body is characteristic of this:

> go you, dead quick,
> and find who done it,
> else I'll tear the skin
> off o'the whole pack o'ye
> and roast you real slow. (*Ibid*. 22)

Compared to his earlier composure when addressing the public, in his private moments Creon is shockingly rude and impatient. An indicative example is when Creon commands that Antigone is presented to him: "Bring out the dirty bitch | and let's be rid of her" (*Ibid*. 42).[22] Evidently, Creon exerts his dominance by being cruel to those serving him. The way he belittles the Guard is another indicator of the power games that Creon thrives at playing:

> My good man,
> pray tell me simply
> what's on your tiny mind. (*Ibid*. 19)
> …
> You never thought!
> Don't strain yourself,
> a philosopher-guard[23]
> would make us all weep. (*Ibid*. 23)

Creon's brazen disregard of others is not only limited to his subordinates, but also extends to his family members. For instance, Creon does not back down when his son Haemon tries to convince him to release Antigone. Actually, he is furious that Haemon decided "To turn on me like this | out here in public!" (*Ibid*. 40). As the caricature of a modern politician, Creon is obsessed with

[22] Isabelle Torrance makes an interesting case for Creon's repeated cursing of Antigone as "dirty", and how this relates to autochthonous Irishness and an array of dark moments in Irish history: "Antigone's association with the earth, through her act of covering her brother's body, along with her confinement to a rural landscape, speak to prejudices against a rural ethnic Irish identity. At the same time, the demeaning way in which Creon uses the language of dirt to degrade Antigone evokes the 1980 'dirty protests' of female political prisoners in Armagh Women's Prison, who alleged mistreatment by male prison officers. Antigone is to be imprisoned in a dirty cave and left to die of starvation once the food she has been given runs out. Death by starvation once again echoes contemporary Northern Irish experiences not long after ten political prisoners had died on hunger strike in 1981" (2020: 329).

[23] This is an ironic reference to the Platonic notion of the Philosopher-King, as elaborated in the *Republic*. Plato's ideal ruler had to combine extraordinary political skills with deep philosophical training, attributes that Creon mockingly implies that the Guard does not have.

maintaining his public image, fearing any developments that might spoil it. Also, when Haemon blames him that as a leader "You never listened" (*Ibid*. 39), Creon sarcastically replies "Or split my rule, then, | with some king else?" (*Ibid*.). Apart from its obvious absolutist overtones, Creon's retort leaves off a tempting topical resonance, as it reminds one of the Northern Irish Protestant leadership persistently refusing to participate in governance alongside the Catholic minority. Similarly, when Creon screams to Haemon "Obey your father, | that's only nature" (*Ibid*. 36), one understands that Paulin here makes a wider claim about the overwhelming ubiquitousness of patriarchy in politics and all other aspects of life.

Unsurprisingly, Creon is also casually misogynistic. In the beginning, he underestimates Antigone's determination on the basis of her femininity. Creon does not recognize Antigone as an equal opponent, refusing to take her seriously. Characteristic is the following statement he makes about the supposed mental weakness of women compared to men:

> They're easy broken
> that yap like this one.
> If she were a man, now,
> She'd maybe stick. (*Ibid*. 27)

When Creon sees that Antigone is not broken down nor will have a change of heart, he switches to a ludicrous rhetoric of 'man *versus* woman': "You'd take a woman's side?" (*Ibid*. 40), Creon asks Haemon with genuine wonder, only to exclaim with pure disgust a moment later: "He's given in – and to a *woman*!" (*Ibid*. 41). Creon unashamedly espouses male superiority, unable to accept that a woman can stand her own ground, let alone partake in decision making: "As long as I draw breath | I'll not be bested by a woman." (*Ibid*. 30), he chillingly vows. For him, Antigone's transgression comes to signify something bigger that the act of burial itself; it translates to a threat of the whole male order.

Finally, Creon is also disrespectful with the elders. When the wise seer Tiresias comes to warn him that executing Antigone will lead to his destruction, Creon scorns him by referring to his old age and his allegedly deteriorating mental capabilities:

> Old man, old shaman,
> Just spit it out –
> what bribe d' you take? (*Ibid*. 51)
> …
> No fool like an old fool. (*Ibid*. 52)

Despite Creon's outward self-assurance, he harbours deep-seated insecurities. He perceives enemies everywhere, particularly within his inner circle, where everyone is seen as a potential threat to his rule. This way, Creon persistently confuses good-natured criticism with treachery. The fact that he is convinced that Tiresias must have been bribed to advise him to change his decree, confirms this. Creon has a similar reaction upon hearing the Guard recounting the story of how he found the body of Polyneices buried: "You were bought, boy, | and you'll pay the price" (*Ibid*. 22). In Creon's worldview, everything has a price. "Money, brother - | dirty, dirty money - | might lead them by the nose." (*Ibid*. 18), is a phrase that sums up the lack of faith that Creon has in his advisers and humans in general.

To conclude with Creon, Anthony Roche spells out Creon's double-layered identification with Northern Ireland that Paulin sought to establish in *The Riot Act*:

> Creon's speech, therefore, is not only that of the practiced public official from 'the mainland' but also of someone from Ulster, Unionist anxious to reassure those he represents by sounding the code words of the tribe, 'law', 'order' and 'loyalty'. Creon's speech progressively mutates into distinctively Ulster, rather than Oxbridge, tones and dialect, as in his reference to Ismene: 'And this one here - | the sneaky, sleaked one - | she lived in my house too'". (1988: 224)

Repeatedly switching from 'official' English to the local Ulster dialect, Creon's hybrid verbal presence is representative of Northern Ireland's status as a *locus* of contested powers and cultures. Likewise, Creon's aberrant behaviour and double standard personality blatantly reflects the *status quo* in Northern Ireland, with the unequal share of power between the Protestant majority and Catholic minority. Paulin masterfully depicts a leader who is afraid that his rule rests on feeble grounds and knows that the only way to political survival is to perpetuate the systemic injustice cultivated by his governorship.

Creon's prevalent identification with Ian Paisley, urges one to think that Antigone's portrayal in *The Riot Act* will generate analogous comparisons. If Creon embodies the Northern Irish establishment, Antigone must personify the fervent opposition to it. Hence, Paulin is expected to match Antigone with a figure that fulfilled this defiant role during the Troubles. As mentioned before, this person is Bernadette Devlin McAliskey, the female Civil Rights activist and youngest MP in the history of the British parliament since William Pitt the Younger. As will be shown, the similarities between Devlin and Antigone are too many to ignore. Devlin's unflagging determination and tenacious personality cannot but remind one of Antigone. Once again, Paulin manages to convey the sensation that behind the mask of his Greek protagonists, a familiar Irish person is to be found.

Being a Northern Catholic, Bernadette Devlin knew first-hand the subordination suffered by the members of her community.[24] A woman of action like Antigone, Devlin took matters into her hands and fought back, both in the streets and in the political arena. Furthermore, like Antigone, Devlin did not bow to any authority until she got imprisoned for her unruly behaviour. Specifically, Devlin "won a seat in the British parliament for the Mid-Ulster constituency in 1969 at just 21 years of age, and in December that same year, [she got] incarcerated for 'incitement to riot' before being successfully re-elected to her position as MP in 1970" (Torrance 2020: 326).[25] Paulin is observant of this, and accordingly models his Antigone in the likes of a contemporary political prisoner in Northern Ireland. As Torrance notes: "When the Guard delivers the news to Creon that the perpetrator has been apprehended and found to be Antigone, he tells Creon 'you can lock her up now and knock a statement out of her', an allusion to police brutality against political prisoners during the Troubles in Northern Ireland" (*Ibid*. 328). Devlin was on the receiving end of this repulsive reality, making her connection to Antigone even more plausible.

Devlin's radicalism serves as the perfect counterweight to Ian Paisley's intransigence. With this established, Paulin ensures that both rivals in *The Riot Act* carry with them a set of opposing ideals that are encountered in the North: "Paulin envisions Antigone as a Republican rebel and Creon as a Unionist leader of the Thatcherite era, representing two worlds, two mindsets, two laws, two creeds, and two languages colliding" (Remoundou-Howley 2011: 124).[26] Devlin wants to bring change to what Paisley fights with all his heart to preserve. So, as the audience of *The Riot Act* watches Antigone revolting against Creon's rule, they unavoidably call to mind the political opposites of Bernadette Devlin and Ian Paisley.

Bernadette Devlin's parallelism to Antigone has deep roots. Placing Antigone's sudden popularity in Ireland during the 1980's in a wider historical context, Fiona Macintosh provides a convincing explanation as to why Bernadette Devlin was seen by many as a living personification of the Greek heroine:

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[24] It is nevertheless important to note that at their core Devlin's politics were socialist and class-oriented. Devlin believed in working class solidarity between Catholics and Protestants in Ulster, whom she equally saw as the real victims of a constitutionally unfair Northern Irish state.

[25] Devlin's imprisonment inspired another Irish poet, John Montague, to write and dedicate a poem to her, entitled 'A New Siege'. The poem is described as a 'historical meditation' on the sectarian conflict in Ulster and has as a subheading the sentence "Old moulds are broken in the North". Montague recited the poem in front of the prison gates where Devlin was held. 'A New Siege' was later included in Montague's poetry collection *The Rough Field* (1972).

[26] Although not acknowledged by all critics, Thatcher's politics were Creonian at their core. Carmen Szabo characteristically recalls an occasion when Thatcher was "addressing the issue of the miners' strikes, [she] invoked the idea that 'the state had to obey ethical imperatives that were senior to all other ethical demands - familial, tribal, religious, sectarian - by virtue of their universality and impartiality'" (2006:163). Such belief is very similar to Creon's arguments in Sophocles and Paulin.

> By 1980, the rhetoric of blood sacrifice, promulgated by the Nationalist leader, Padraic Pearse, in the years running up to the Easter Rising in 1916, was back in currency. The most celebrated hunger striker in the Irish Republican tradition, Thomas McSwiney, Lord Mayor of Cork, who had died in Brixton Jail in 1920 after seventy-four days without food, had proclaimed: 'It is not those who can inflict the most but those who can suffer the most who will conquer.' Now, in 1980, with the IRA hunger strikes in the Maze Prison underway, Antigone as nationalist heroine and potential martyr was back centre stage, especially in the person of the civil-rights activist Bernadette Devlin. When Paulin's Antigone played by Veronica Quilligan sparred with Creon, it was Devlin whom audiences watched before them: You'd do more than murder | I can tell it by your eyes". (2001: 94-5)

Macintosh stresses the existence of a whole genealogy of sacrificial martyrdom in Ireland that predates Bernadette Devlin's association with Antigone. In other words, Paulin's audience was already familiar with native histories of extreme blood sacrifice before they learned about the identity of the Irish woman represented by Antigone. The Greek heroine's determination to go to great lengths for her ideals and defy death finds a familiar place in the Irish psyche. In fact, one of the last statements that Antigone makes in *The Riot Act* before dying could be understood as a self-proclaimed entry to this long Irish tradition of personal sacrifice:

> *There were others like me.*
> Niobe, I heard it said,
> Was turned to stone. (*RA*: 45; italics mine)

The same could be argued about Bernadette Devlin. Her conspicuous linking to Antigone is rooted in a rich tradition of personal sacrifice in the face of a higher authority, as this phenomenon spread in Ireland across the 20th century. Although she did not pay with her life, Devlin is the final member in a long line of Irish rebels who risked everything for a cause they passionately considered just, whether this is Ireland's independence or social justice in the North.

Still, there are more examples in *The Riot Act* that urge one to connect Antigone and Devlin. Similar to the tactics that Paulin followed with Creon's characterization, there are certain occasions in the play that the audience hears Antigone speaking and instantly imagines the prominent Irish woman. One can see this in the following statement Antigone makes about her true motives to bury Polyneices:

> It's never pride,
> not pride that's pushing me –
> it's my own soul and honour

I can nor bend nor sell. (*Ibid*. 14)

Antigone maintains that her intentions are pure and innocent, with no personal benefit to be gained from her transgression. Antigone basically confesses that she defied Creon's edict, only because her conscience and morality restrained her from acting differently. Especially, the double phonetic correspondence in Antigone's words between "soul" and "sell" and "honour" and "nor", is a witty move from Paulin's part to seal Antigone's personal ethics.

Upon a second reading, however, Antigone's mentioning about her soul that cannot be bought calls to mind Bernadette Devlin, who in 1969 published her autobiography bearing the corresponding title *The Price of My Soul*. Devlin's autobiography offers a critical look at the impasse in the North and its chronology.[27] As Devlin explains in the introduction to her book: "I have written this book in an attempt to explain how the complex of economic, social, and political problems of Northern Ireland threw up the phenomenon of Bernadette Devlin" (1969: vii). In the same introduction, Devlin also explains the alluring tittle of her autobiography, maintaining that she used this phrase ironically, reversing its original meaning: "*The Price of My Soul* refers not to the price which I would be prepared to sell out, but rather to the price we must all pay to preserve our own integrity" (*Ibid*. viii). With this clarification, Paulin's appropriation of Devlin's phrase is fully understood. Embracing Devlin's theorization, Antigone will pay with her life to keep her soul intact.

To give a brief overview, *The Price of My Soul* begins with Devlin's upbringing and tells how she got involved with the Civil Right Movement from its early stages until the protests reached their climax. Devlin also provides a vivid first-person account of the riotous Derry March that precipitated the three decades of sectarian strife in the North, describing it as follows: "What had started as a clash between civil-rights supporters and Paisleyites had developed into sheer faction fighting between the Catholics and the police, and to the people of the Bogside, the police were fighting on behalf of the Protestants" (1969: 185). Devlin's testimony is remarkable, as it pinpoints Paisleyan politics as a factor at play since the incipit of the Troubles. The book finishes with Devlin's election in the House of Commons, along with a fervent promise that the Unionist Party government that has ruled Northern Ireland since partition will soon come to an end: "For half a century it has misgoverned us, but it is on the way out. Now we are witnessing its dying

[27] With the hindsight we have now about the outcome of the Troubles, some of the early observations that Devlin made in her autobiography prove disturbingly prophetic. The following extract is a characteristic example of this: "Everyone knows there are ills in our society, but if you have a job you content yourself with it and mind your own business. No criticism, no urge to go out and make progress can be afforded because these might disturb the delicate balance of the peace. Just how delicate this balance is was proved in 1968 when the civil-rights movement's demand for simple justice send the country up in flames" (1969: 49).

convulsions. And with traditional Irish mercy, when we've got it down we will kick it into the ground" (*Ibid*. 224).

Surely, this last remark has something of Antigone's temperament in it. An impassionate Devlin openly declares that there is nothing that keeps her from achieving her goal of social justice and equality. Her prevalent fanaticism and absolute wrath towards the Northern Irish government is an attribute that also Paulin's Antigone shares. Look, for instance, what Antigone answers back to Creon when admonished by the latter about the illegality of her actions:

> It was never Zeus
> Made that law.
> Down in the dark earth
> There's no law says,
> 'Break with your own kin,
> Go lick the state.' (*RA*: 27)

Both Antigone and Devlin find fault with the authority they are subject to, viewing it as a hindrance rather than a guarantor of justice and security. As a response to this, revolutionary action is what both women recommend. Devlin wants to completely overthrow the existing Northern Irish government and work to create a more just state in the North, while Antigone deliberately snubs the Creonian law system in the face of a supreme divine law that commands the burial of the dead.

To conclude with Devlin, her ideological feud with Paisley is not a product of Paulin's imagination but is based on real facts. In her biographical account, Devlin offers an elaborate portrait of Paisley's character and politics. Unsurprisingly, her words are not very flattering:

> The Reverend Ian Paisley, self-styled Moderator of the Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster, is to my mind a dangerous man and an influence for evil… He came to power in the 1950's preaching a militant anti-popery, and his appeal for his followers lies both in their strong religious feelings and in their fear that the depressed Catholic third of the population would, by getting a share of power, rob them of the small measure of prosperity and security they now have. (1969: 106-7)

Paisley's obsession of not sharing power with the Ulster Catholics is also implied in *The Riot Act*, where the Messenger laments Creon's imminent destruction: "Take Creon now – that man… *shared power with no man*… He could neither bend nor listen. He held firm just that shade too long. There was no joy nor give in him ever" (*RA*: 56; italics mine). Paulin here insinuates that Creon's downfall was due to his unwillingness to compromise and exhibit flexibility in political matters. Borrowing a distinctive Paisleyan phraseology to convey this belief, in turn suggests that

Paulin predicts the same outcome for the Ulster bigot: Paisley's tactics will bring him to his knees, like Creon.

To recapitulate, in this section we saw how Paulin uses the clash between Antigone and Creon to introduce on stage two of the most prominent figures of the Troubles. Paulin identifies Ian Paisley and Bernadette Devlin as the standard-bearers of the opposing Unionist and Republican camps, and accordingly assigns them the roles of the main antagonists of *The Rio Act*. For Paulin, Paisley and Devlin are the two figures *par excellence* to respectively wear the masks of Creon and Antigone and, in doing so, to represent on stage the conflicting ideologies of the two dissenting traditions in Northern Ireland. In the next section, we will explore how Antigone emerges victorious in this duel, and how, in doing so, Paulin endorses Devlin's politics over Paisley's.

'Aye, Changed it Utterly': Antigone's Triumph at *The Riot Act's* Finale

The outcome of *The Riot Act* leaves little room for doubt. Antigone dies but she triumphs. Creon, on the other hand, though still alive, gets utterly destroyed. As we will see in this section, Paulin introduces a sense of poetic justice casted upon the two conflicting characters. Creon's falling to pieces is portrayed by Paulin as a deserved ending, a fair consequence of his malicious behaviour.[28] In fact, Paulin understands poetic justice quite literally: Paulin puts in Creon's mouth one of W. B. Yeats's most well-known poetic lines to express Creon's downfall and regret in *The Riot Act*. By appropriating "a crucial phrase from Yeats's poem 'Easter, 1916' referring to the impact of the 1916 rising" (Arkins 2010: 39), Creon indirectly admits his fault and vindicates Antigone. At the play's finale, Creon gives up his bureaucratic jargon and speaks instead the language of Antigone, which is a poetic language. This way, Creon eventually embraces Antigone's worldview, which he previously denied. With this unexpected turnaround, Paulin elevates Irish poetry as a source of truth and as an ethical standard. Having exposed the self-serving limitations of political speech and the dishonesty of those sticking to it, Paulin celebrates poetic language as a timeless beacon of light in the dark turns of Irish history.

Creon's tragedy is that he eventually changes his mind over Polyneices and Antigone, but this happens too late. In his penultimate appearance on stage, Creon finally considers Tiresias' warnings, and although evidently at a loss, he obediently follows the instructions of the Chorus:

> Creon: What'd you have me do then?
> Chorus Leader: Let the girl go free,
> and rest him in his grave.
> Creon: Back down, you're saying?
> Chorus Leader: You've still got time.
> Creon: We can't fight nature.
> It grates, but.
> Chorus Leader: Go quick now.
> Just you and no one else.
> Creon: Boys, go build the pyre –
> you can be gentle

[28] Interestingly, Creon's clear defeat is seen by some critics as one of the biggest weaknesses of Paulin's play, since it erases any sense of tragic pity originally bestowed to him by Sophocles. As Marillynn Richtarik explains: "Paulin in his own version of *Antigone* would presumably attempt to redress the balance between Creon and Antigone. It is intriguing, then, that one of the most telling criticisms levelled against Paulin's version of the play was that he had cheapened the character of Creon, reducing tragedy to what Michael Billington described as 'political melodrama'. Billington commented, 'When Creon at the end cried 'Pity me if you can, blind and thick' I simply felt an Ulster demagogue was receiving his comeuppance.' Several other critics reached similar conclusions" (1995: 218).

with his body now.
Antigone, I'll set her free.
It's best we keep that custom. (*RA*: 54-5)

Creon thinks that by building the funeral pyre of Polyneices and setting Antigone free, he will escape danger and things will come to peace. Creon's admittance that "We can't fight nature" is an indirect way of accepting the innate inferiority of the man-made laws of the *polis* compared to "the laws set among men by the Justice who dwells with the gods below" (Jebb 1897: 41) (*τῶν κάτω θεῶν Δίκη τοιούσδ᾽ ἐν ἀνθρώποισιν ὥρισεν νόμους*) (*Ant*. 451-2). But the delay to reach this conclusion has already taken its toll. In the meantime, Antigone kills herself in her cave prison, and as the news spread, the suicides of her fiancé Haemon and his mother Eurydice follow. Creon is the sole main character to remain alive, but as Paulin will make very clear, this is the gravest form of punishment he could ever imagine.

Creon's impeding catastrophe is foreshadowed by the Messenger's announcement about Haemon's suicide: "There's blood, I'm saying. | Aye, and guilt too" (*RA*: 56). As these words demonstrate, the overwhelming feeling of regret is already palpable in the atmosphere moments before Creon enters the stage for his final speech. At this point, Creon's liability for the bloodshed is a viewpoint shared by the rest of the characters:

Chorus: So? Who died?
Who killed them?
Would you tell us?
Messenger: Haemon's dead.
Chorus: Who killed him?
Messenger: He killed himself.
It was this mad anger
at his father made him.
Chorus: The blind one saw it all.
Messenger: You're right to say it.
But there's worse yet. (*Ibid*. 56-7)

"The blind one" is, of course, Tiresias, who was initially humiliated by Creon but is now commended by the Chorus, as his words have proven to be true. Ironically enough, Creon's stubbornness and poor judgment have made him the blind one, with Tiresias being the one with clear sight.

Another indication that Creon has belatedly come to accept Antigone's stance can be traced in the Messenger's description of Polyneices funeral, supervised by Creon:

And then we washed him,
took olive branches
and green laurel leaves
to crown and lap him in –
we burnt him then. (*Ibid*. 58)

The choice of flora to adorn Polyneices serves a clear symbolic purpose. The olive branches and laurel leaves are considered universal emblems of peace. Moreover, the reference to the laurels around Polynices' head being green is not accidental, as green is often associated with Ireland. Therefore, it is easy to imagine that what is at stake here is peace in Ireland, particularly in its Northern region. With this funeral description, Paulin makes a bold statement about the necessity of peace talks in his country. Given that it is Creon who observes the funeral rites, one can understand that Paulin suggests a potential change of mind among Unionists, a coming closer to the Republican position. Within this framework, Creon, and by extension figures like Conor Cruise O'Brien and Ian Paisley, must deeply reconsider their politics to facilitate peace negotiations.

Returning to *The Riot Act*, the feel of imminent disaster is already hanging over the theatrical stage. Everything is now in place for Creon's final appearance. As he enters the stage, Creon immediately acknowledges his culpability for the turmoil that has befallen his household, realizing that he changed his mind too late:

Creon: Pity me, if you can.
Blind and thick,
a wretched, sinful man.
Chorus: It was too late
you changed your mind.
Creon: I changed it, but.
Aye, changed it utterly.
Son, what god was it
that sent me *wild*?
And, son,
how ever did I harm you?
How could I do that
My own *wee man*? (*Ibid*. 59-60; italics mine)

In the preceding dialogue with the Chorus, Creon reveals a profound transformation in his beliefs and consciousness. This is made clear by the register of language that he uses. Going for semantically charged words like "wild" or Irishisms like "wee man" to express his grief for the

death of his son, Creon essentially speaks Antigone's tongue. For instance, a few moments later Creon tenderly addresses Haemon as his "bairn" (*Ibid*. 61), which is a colloquialism for 'child'. Earlier in *The Riot Act*, Antigone has uttered the same word. When she is sentenced to death by Creon and dragged by the Guard to her prison, Antigone sings the following threnody:

> 'I heard her cry
> as I climbed the track –
> my friends are cold
> though *my bairns are dead*' (*Ibid*. 46; italics mine)

Having no one to mourn her, this is a lament song that Antigone sings to herself. As Anthony Roche observes, "Antigone sings her own dirge with snatches of an anonymous folk-song" (1988: 228). This is a crucial moment for the Hibernicization of Antigone's death by Paulin: by featuring this characteristic mourning melody, Paulin links Antigone with the tradition of Irish sacrificial martyrdom, as "one of the most popular responses to this sacrificial attitude has been the emergence of ballads, snatches or rhymes which, like myths, are often authored by nobody yet known to everybody" (Kearney 1985: 67). With this in mind, the fact that Creon uses a key phrase from Antigone's lament to express his own grief over the death of Haemon is a powerful indicator that now Creon finds himself in agreement with the ideals that Antigone embodies concerning the treatment of the dead. With his *bairn* dead, Creon learns a bitter lesson about the reverence the living must show to the dead.

Overall, having lost his credibility together with his former verbal eloquence, Creon stands naked before the audience of *The Riot Act*: "In the face of the loss of his family, Creon cannot muster the formal structures of the standard he employed earlier, and instead, in broken syntax, he calls himself 'cack-handed... Creon [who's] made a right blood-mess' of things" (Doyle 2000: 189). The fictitiousness of Creon's public discourse has now been laid bare. This revelation carries broader implications, as the loss of his public voice renders Creon's rule illegitimate. Left with no recourse, Creon must fully accept responsibility for his actions: "All I want's the dark" (*RA*: 62), he exclaims in agony. This pitiful remark calls to mind an earlier statement in the play: "our enemies – *they're in the dark just*. They're ancient history" (*Ibid*. 15; italics mine). Without ever imagining it, Creon ends up sharing the same misfortune.

These instances highlight Creon's transformation. Both his pompous vocabulary and arrogant demeanour have vanished. No longer able to engage in power games, Creon speaks the language of the common people:

> In his transformation, Creon finds a means of uniting his public, poetic voice with the colloquial Irish of his roots. Gone are both the literally and figuratively prosaic tones of Unionist palaver we see in his first speech and the almost bestial quality created when, in dealing with first the Guard and then Antigone, the nastier side of his nature burbles through crack in the public facade. Now, when all seems lost, we see a Creon transformed, and the transformation is expressed above all through language. (Jones 1997: 237)

By making Creon speak in dialect, Paulin reveals Creon's covert identity, the secret about "his 'Northernness', his bond not only with Antigone but also with the rest of his city's population" (Doyle 2000: 180). Being preoccupied with maintaining his power at all costs, Creon has forgotten his ties with the community he presides over. It takes a triple tragedy to finally recognize that he shares more than he would like to admit with those he always considered his inferiors. The extreme shift in Creon's way of talking is a natural outcome of this bitter acknowledgement.

The key word in Creon's lament is "change". The Chorus reprimands him that "you changed your mind", with Creon affirming that "Aye, changed it utterly". This assertion serves as proof that Antigone emerged victorious in their duel: "Creon is eventually forced to change his mind and achieve knowledge (*anagnorisis*)" (Arkins 2011: 39). However, there is a deeper layer of meaning in Creon's words. For an Irish audience, Creon's acknowledgment of defeat and his immediate transformation call to mind W. B. Yeats's poem 'Easter, 1916'. Yeats wrote this poem to commemorate the failed Irish rebellion, in which he memorializes the instigators of the uprising, people whom Yeats was previously acquainted with. Seven times in the poem, Yeats employs the word 'change' to indicate how, in revolutionary times, common people whom the Irish poet had shunned in the past "with a nod of the head | or polite meaningless words" (1996:180) can be transformed into emblems of a terrible beauty. The transformation that these Irish revolutionaries experience after sacrificing themselves for Ireland's independence is profound yet positive. As Kearney states: "Yeats admits that those rebel leaders whom he had previously dismissed 'in a mocking tale or gibe' have been 'transformed utterly' by the mythic rite of blood-sacrifice. The motley crew of disparate individuals have been transmuted into a visionary sect" (1985: 71). The rebellion may have been put down, but for Yeats, the collective sacrifice of its initiators will be a lasting source of reverence and wonder.

Specifically, in the concluding lines of 'Easter, 1916', Yeats writes:

> I write it out in a verse—
> MacDonagh and MacBride
> And Connolly and Pearse
> Now and in time to be,
> Wherever green is worn,

Are changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born. (1996: 180; italics mine)

Similar to Paulin's use of 'green laurel leaves', Yeats prominently employs the colour green to symbolize Ireland. He suggests that whenever Ireland's fate is at stake, be it in the present or the future, the legacy of the 1916 Easter revolutionaries will come to mind. Yeats believes that the transformation experienced by these Irish rebels is enduring, transcending their individual traits. Instead, their collective sacrifice fosters a sense of unity. In the Irish collective consciousness, the Easter Rising conspirators have transformed into a national symbol of courage and resistance.

Arguably, Creon's transformation in *The Riot Act* is not positive. No "terrible beauty" is born from his change of mind. In fact, quite the opposite; a terrible pain awaits Creon. "I'm thick with sin" (*RA*: 61), he roars. Unlike the Irish revolutionaries, Creon's trajectory has nothing commendable. One therefore rightly wonders why Paulin linked Creon's downfall with the commemoration of the Easter Rising by Yeats. One plausible answer could be that Paulin wanted to associate Creon with the Republican ideas for which the Irish rebels gave their lives. Having before identified Creon with the Unionist politics of segregation, Paulin evokes Yeats to accentuate the deep change in Creon's ideology. At *The Riot Act*'s finale Creon stands as an ally of Antigone, and by extension of Bernadette Devlin. Through this unexpected conclusion, Paulin implies that bringing an end to the Troubles requires a significant political shift from the Unionist side.

An alternative, more cynical interpretation of this episode, would be that Paulin had Creon echo Yeats's renowned words to solidify his transformation from being a formidable ruler to a state of utter defeat and insignificance. Creon is truly "changed utterly", as he plummets from grace into an irreparable journey of self-loathing. His misery is complete and irreversible, a point that Paulin underscores through the subsequent lines, using the contrasting elements of light and darkness once more:

The full guilt's mine.
Show me the door just,
then chuck this dead one out.
Let it come, aye, let it come.
I want no light at all. (*Ibid*. 62; italics mine)

Still, there is something else that we could take from Creon's destruction. His devastating condition might well be seen as an advice to two well-known Irishmen, thoroughly discussed in this chapter. Given Creon's unmistaken association with Ian Paisley and Paulin's notorious dispute with Conor Cruise O'Brien over Antigone's place in Ireland, Creon's collapse at the end of *The Riot Act* could serve as a cautionary tale for both men. In this case, Paulin voices to his political

adversaries that if they adhere to their Creon-like beliefs, they risk sharing Creon's fate. "There is no happiness, but there can be wisdom" (*Ibid*. 63), is the final verdict made by the Chorus. This could very well be the moral of *The Riot Act*. With Creon left in tatters, those who previously identified with him must wise up and change their course of action.

To conclude this section, regardless of which of the above interpretations one finds more compelling, it is essential to contrast Creon's claim that he "changed utterly" with the political backdrop of the Troubles and interpret it accordingly. The fact that both Antigone and Creon can be linked to some of the most prominent figures of the conflict leaves no room for doubt that we must evaluate Antigone's vindication and Creon's defeat within the context of Northern Ireland. *The Riot Act* is a play that resonates with the complex facets of the ethno-religious conflict in Northern Ireland during the mid-1980s, a period when the demand for 'change' was gaining momentum. Consequently, while intending to create a version of Sophocles' *Antigone* to serve as a symbolic representation for the turbulent politics of the Troubles, Paulin ultimately crafts a play with undeniable contemporary relevance and significance. *The Riot Act* is not merely an adaptation of a Greek tragedy; it stands as a distinct contemporary Northern Irish play with its own unique character.

A Greek Heroine of the Troubles: The Rescuing of Antigone's Legacy in Northern Ireland

After closely tracking the development of *The Riot Act*, from its conception to its finale, we can conclude the following about the overall influence of Paulin's play and the subsequent impact of his enthralling portrayal of Antigone: Paulin is not the first author to situate the Greek heroine in a (Northern) Irish context, but his main achievement in *The Riot Act* is the reconsideration of Antigone in relation to the Northern Irish affairs and the Troubles. Paulin thus introduces a significant shift in the way Antigone's rebellion is viewed amid the urgent challenges confronting Northern Ireland.

Looking at the history of reception of Antigone in Northern Ireland, what one quickly discovers is that the critical evaluation of the female heroine has passed through various phases. Specifically, we observed how Paulin's adaptation came as a response to previous unfavourable depictions of Antigone. Prior to Paulin, primarily due to Conor Cruise O'Brien's negative focus on her, the assessment of Antigone's *exemplum* in the context of Northern Ireland was far from positive. Antigone's transgression was perceived as closely connected to the unsettling turmoil in the North. Thus, for a significant period, the prevailing reading of the tragedy suggested that Antigone introduced unwarranted unrest and should be seen as an opponent of those striving for peace in Northern Ireland. Paulin vehemently opposed this interpretation and took action to redress the balance. With *The Riot Act*, Paulin attempts to save Antigone's reputation. In his own rendition of the Sophoclean tragedy, Paulin posits that Antigone's defiance is not an example to be shunned but one to be emulated. To emphasize this further, in *The Riot Act* Antigone prevails over Creon, who, in turn, witnesses his authority crumble. Unlike O'Brien's insistence that Creon's sphere of influence must be respected at all costs to ensure peace and stability in Northern Ireland, Paulin does not hesitate to bring Creon to his knees. By overturning O'Brien's interpretation, Paulin promotes a favorable outlook on Antigone's rebellion in connection to Northern Irish politics.

It should also be noted that regardless of which of the two interpretations one chooses, the remarkable flexibility of the Antigone story as a source of commentary on the developments in Northern Ireland can hardly be denied. As the intellectual confrontation between Paulin and O'Brien made evident, the tragedy is subject to both Unionist and Republican readings. Clearly, the eternal conflict between Antigone and Creon offers multiple perspectives for exploration, and as seen in the context of the play's reception in Northern Ireland, conflicting political ideologies manage to successfully align themselves with the Sophoclean tragedy. From an outsider's perspective, and after a considerable amount of time has passed since the end of the Troubles, one is less inclined in trying to determine which of the two opposing perspectives is more truthful

or valid. Instead, one is struck by the divergent possibilities that the reception of Antigone's story in Northern Ireland offers. Leaving aside the expectation for definite answers, one begins to recognize that the allure and, ultimately, the strength of Antigone's rebellion reside in the breadth of its applicability.

Another intriguing aspect that came to the fore during this investigation is that the dispute over Antigone's legacy in Northern Ireland did not primarily unfold on the theatrical stage. In fact, the staging of *Antigone* was a later development. Prior to the premiere of *The Riot Act*, the conversation over Antigone's place had already begun in university debate chambers, newspaper articles, and essays published in books. In a way, before taking up the theatre, the spirit of Antigone was already present in the streets. The unanimous identification of Bernadette Devlin McAliskey as a modern-day Antigone, by both friends and foes, attests to this. Additionally, when considering the striking parallels between Ian Paisley's politics and Creon's rule, it becomes evident that the Antigonean thematics were deeply ingrained in the Northern Irish collective consciousness. Therefore, *The Riot Act* is not the initial instance where these connections became apparent, but rather the culmination of this phenomenon.

Also, judging from the extratextual information we gathered about the creative process of writing *The Riot Act*, Paulin was particularly drawn to retell Antigone's story because he first saw it being enacted in real life. In fact, the correlation between Paulin's protagonists and real individuals, along with the political commentary he makes on the Troubles by appropriating the tragedy of *Antigone*, might lead one to perceive *The Riot Act* as a somewhat unconventional *Roman à clef*. Antigone's revolutionary fervour and erratic behaviour, Creon's absolutism and abusive rule, even Ismene's passivity and acceptance of the *status quo*, no matter how unfavourable, are all personality traits that could be attributed to specific individuals or, at the very least, used to describe collective behaviours and tendencies exhibited by conflicting groups during the Troubles. Surely, there are many occasions in *The Riot Act*, where members of the original Derry audience – a mixed Catholic and Protestant crowd – must have recognized themselves or their less agreeable neighbours in the verbal exchanges between the characters.

The primary means of identification between the protagonists and the audience is none other than the language employed. Paulin has succeeded significantly in capturing the language of the Troubles and seamlessly integrating it into his play. At hindsight, this is no small feat. Through the various passages quoted and analyzed, we observed the complexity and richness of this special language and its various manifestations. For instance, Creon's opening speech serves as an illustration of the vagueness and duplicity that characterized political discourse in Northern Ireland. During a time when a political solution to the Troubles remained a distant hope, the lack of credibility among those in power was most prominently reflected in the content and style of their speeches. For Paulin, power politics and the politics of language are inherently intertwined.

For instance, the British dominion in Northern Ireland is marked by Creon's highbrowed Oxbridge tone, which sharply contrasts with the Ulster demotic spoken by the rest of the populace. The critique is obvious: those in power speak differently from those they govern. That being said, the widespread use of the Hiberno-English dialect by the play's protagonists in their private interactions is unquestionably the method by which *The Riot Act* gains topical resonance. Paulin has his characters speak in the common people's vernacular. Especially, peripheral characters such as the Guard and the Messenger speak in the manner typical of working-class residents of Ulster. Consequently, Paulin succeeds in documenting the cultural lexicon of a particularly traumatic era for Northern Ireland. By centering on Northern slang, Paulin commemorates how the Troubles were experienced and articulated by those who directly witnessed them. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that Paulin imparts an ethical dimension to the use of Hiberno-English. Creon, upon realizing how terribly wrong he was and with the catastrophe impending, forgets his earlier eloquent verbosity, drastically changes his tone, and cries his heart out in the local dialect. As previously argued, this marks a symbolic turn in *The Riot Act*. Creon comes to embrace Antigone's worldview by speaking her language.

Another significant moment in *The Riot Act* is the association of Antigone's rebellion to the 1916 Easter Rising and W. B. Yeats's poem about this historic event. Once again, it is Creon, defeated and having undergone a change of heart, who establishes this connection when, in his lament, he appropriates one of the poem's most famous lines. Specifically, like Yeats's perspective on the Easter rebels, Creon's opinion of Antigone "changed utterly". This transformation occurred after both the Irish revolutionaries and Antigone paid, respectively, with their lives for certain causes they deemed just. Thus, Paulin, following in the footsteps of Yeats, memorializes Antigone's sacrifice in *The Riot Act*. The explicit link between his theatrical play and Yeats's poetry serves a clear purpose: Paulin intends to firmly place *The Riot Act* within the Irish literary tradition. While never obscuring its evident Greek ancestry, Paulin creates a play that thematically engages with the Irish canon. Overall, the *Riot Act* is a good example of how a product of Classical reception can simultaneously be regarded an independent work of art with contemporary topical relevance. To this end, Paulin successfully Irishizes his adaptation by referring to one of Ireland's greatest poets. However, there is more to discuss regarding this decision, and how it affects the characterization of Antigone in *The Riot Act*. With the spectre of Yeats hanging on, Antigone joins the tradition of Irish republicans fighting for Ireland's independence. Metaphorically, as the play reaches its conclusion, Antigone removes her Greek mantle and wears green. Especially for the initial audience of *The Riot Act* – well-versed in every nuanced or overt Irish element of the play – it is indisputable that, as the curtains fell, Antigone must have been perceived as an authentic Irish heroine.

To conclude, what this examination has hopefully shown, is that to fully appreciate the impact and depth of *The Riot Act*, it is essential to read it within the context of the Troubles and the broader framework of Irish history. As this detailed analysis has demonstrated, *The Riot Act*, through its language, characters, and references, consistently alludes to the ongoing unrest in the North. Neglecting those aspects would significantly restrict one's comprehension of Paulin's play. Indeed, the abundance of Northern Irish references found throughout *The Riot Act* establishes Paulin's adaptation as an exemplar of Northern Irish drama, offering a vivid representation of a traumatic epoch for everyone living North of the border. Paulin's most significant achievement with *The Riot Act* is creating a play that, while never obscuring or denying its Greek ancestry and its thematic connection to Sophocles' *Antigone*, ultimately develops a distinct identity of its own.