When Dionysus lands on Erin: Greek tragedy on Irish grounds

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CHAPTER II

Seamus Heaney's *The Cure at Troy* & *The Burial at Thebes*: Greek Tragedy for Every Irish Occasion

Better Call Seamus: A Poet Turned Playwright

As a playwright, Seamus Heaney has engaged with Greek tragedy on two separate occasions, with a significant time span between the two instances. The first time was with *The Cure at Troy* (1990), an adaptation of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*. Fourteen years later, *The Burial at Thebes* (2004) marks the second time that the Irish poet appropriates a Sophoclean text, this time *Antigone*. Naturally, the contexts from which the two Irish versions of the Greek plays arise, are quite distinct. *The Cure at Troy* was first staged on 1 October 1990 in Northern Ireland, at the Guildhall in Derry, pretty much in the heyday of the Troubles. It was produced by the Field Day Theatre Company, the cultural enterprise dedicated to actively participating in the political upheaval in Northern Ireland. Heaney joined the Company after receiving an invitation by its co-founders, the playwright Brian Friel and the actor Stephen Rea. In this context, the embracement of Philoctetes' predicament – the hero's stubborn devotion to the contemplation of his leg wound instead of eagerly seeking for a cure – serves as an ample metaphor for the enduring deadlock in Northern Ireland. Yet, Heaney does not give in. As will be clarified later, *The Cure at Troy*, a play whose title forecasts imminent redemption, comes as a breath of hope amidst the darkest of times.[1]

The Burial at Thebes, on the other hand, hit the stage during less turbulent times, post-Good Friday Agreement, this time in the Republic of Ireland. It premiered on 5 April 2004 at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. Curiously, the motivation behind Heaney's reception of *Antigone* was celebratory. The Abbey, Ireland's national theatre, was commemorating its centenary, and *Antigone* could not be missing from the festive programme. Heaney was specifically commissioned to come up with a rendition of the famous Sophoclean tragedy, a Greek play that, arguably, has a rich and intricate history of reception in Ireland, reinforcing the idea that Antigone is a heroine firmly intertwined with Ireland. Still, Heaney's version of the play manages to thematically distinguish itself from its predecessors, since in its scope it looks as much towards outside the Irish borders as contemplating local affairs. For instance, the US army invasion into

[1] As McGuire observes in retrospect: "The play anticipates a series of debates that would, in subsequent decades, come to define the social and political landscape of Northern Ireland; these include confronting the past, the tension between notions of remembering and forgetting and the broader challenges of achieving transitional justice in the aftermath of political conflict" (2016: 19).

Iraq as a palpable consequence to the 'War on Terror' pronouncement made by the George W. Bush administration at the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks is not left unnoticed when one reads between the lines of Heaney's adaptation; nor does Heaney miss out the chance of criticizing the whole Bushian rhetoric of 'Good *versus* Evil' when his Creon enters the stage. Nevertheless, as will be shown, *The Burial at Thebes* is equally informed by a set of home-grown traditions like Irish lament songs and other elaborate keening rituals.

Admittedly, neither of these two Heaneyan renditions are the first of their sort. Although not widely known, there has been another contemporary Irish play that is based on *Philoctetes*, albeit more loosely. Sydney B. Smith's *Sherca* (1979), a play that "completely transfers the setting from ancient Greece to modern Ireland, with Lemnos in the North-east Aegean becoming Sherca off the west coast of Ireland" (Arkins 2010: 68), is an extraordinary precursor in the history of reception of *Philoctetes* in Ireland.[2] The title of Smith's play is taken from the actual Inisherk, a little island in County Galway that was formerly inhabited but now – like Lemnos in Sophocles' tragedy – remains abandoned. In *Sherca*, the Greek names are somewhat altered: "Odysseus becomes O'Dea, Neoptolemus is Leo and Philoctetes simply Phil. Smith adopts Hibernicised and truncated versions of the original names, thereby underlining the fragmented and conflicting nature of the characters themselves" (Salis 2005: 149). Moreover, unlike his Sophoclean counterpart, Phil does not suffer from a physical injury, but his affliction is chiefly psychological: Phil is a middle-aged man, an ex-member of the Communist Party, who, after falling short of his comrades, decides to break with society and seek refuge to a desolate place. Hence, Phil's exile transpires as self-willed, opposed to Philoctetes' pre-planned abandonment in Lemnos by the Achaean army. Still, in both cases, the individual isolation trope is brought under scrutiny. Commenting on the overall symbolism of a desert island, Loredana Salis underlines that:

> Islands are often deployed as metaphors for society at large, as well as being projections of individual yearnings for solitude. Islands can be a "refuge for the soul" (as is Yeats's Innisfree), and home to hermits, exiles, nomads or poets. On a more negative note, islands may be prisons and places for the outcast. However literal, romanticizing or metaphorical the notion, an island is characteristically associated with the ideas of transience, temporality, finiteness, unreliability, instability. (*Ibid*. 146)

[2] Arkins informs us that, essentially, Philoctetes had already stepped foot on Ireland in the 18th century: "in 1725, Thomas Sheridan (grandfather of Richard Brinsley) produced the first English translation of *Philoctetes*, and had it staged in Dublin before the Viceroy" (2010: 65). Additionally, Lorna Hardwick mentions that the Sophoclean play had also been staged "in the context of the alienation caused by unemployment in Belfast in 1933 when the performance was regarded as a useful occupation and fundraiser for the jobless" (2000: 92-3).

Continuing with *Philoctetes'* presence in Ireland, there is another take on the Sophoclean text, this time coming after Heaney's version. Desmond Egan´s *Philoctetes* (1998), a straightforward translation from Greek to English, similar to his *Medea* (1991). As Brian Arkins notes in the foreword to the book, "[Egan] resists any temptation to add to Sophocles – unlike e.g. Heaney who, in his version, makes the Chorus refer to Northern Ireland" (Egan 1998: 8). Finally, although Egan´s translation has never been staged by a professional theatre group, we know that his fascination with this particular Sophoclean tragedy stems from his notion that "some of the most profound issues [are] touching on human life [in] the simplest of plots" (Egan 1990: 121).

This simplicity of plot coupled with a wealth of meaning, is what also drew Heaney to Sophocles' *Philoctetes*. In Heaney's hands, the story transforms into a subtle yet profoundly significant allegory for divisions in Northern Ireland and beyond, especially as an indictment of the apartheid regime in South Africa, as it is not far-fetched to draw parallels between Mandela's imprisonment on Robben island and Philoctetes' seclusion on Lemnos.[3] Therefore, on both occasions that Heaney has dealt with Greek tragedy, he appears to embrace a more international perspective than his fellow Irish playwrights, all the while maintaining a clear focus on Ireland.

Regarding *Antigone*, the fascination of Irish dramatists with the rebellious Sophoclean heroine cannot be overstated. Remarkably, "*Antigone´s* first major impact in Ireland was marked by way of its non-appearance" (Harkin 2008: 292-3). Specifically, the first modern Irish production of *Antigone* was supposed to premiere on 29 January 1907, in the newly built Abbey Theatre. The founders of the theatre, W. B. Yeats and Lady Augusta, had requested from Robert Gregory to write a version of the Sophoclean tragedy. However, there was a late change of plans, and instead of an Irish *Antigone*, John Millington Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* took its place. After successfully staging Oedipus Rex in 1926, Yeats contemplated adapting Sophocles' *Antigone*. However, his plans did not materialize as he had imagined. Instead, Yeats brought an adaptation of *Oedipus at Colonus* to the Irish stage in 1927. Judging from these two notoriously unsuccessful attempts to stage the Sophoclean tragedy, for the most part of the twentieth century, *Antigone* could be deemed a sort of doomed play in Ireland.[4]

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[3] Before Heaney, the Belfast-born poet Michael Longley, had spoken about the 'invisible apartheid' holding sway in the North (1985: 24). Overall, "The connection between South Africa and Ireland as emergent post-conflict societies in need of the remedy of multiple forms of transitional justice is reflected in this beneficial cross-pollination between writers… Heaney, an active supporter of the anti-apartheid movement, noted that the release of Nelson Mandela from prison and his return to active public life in South Africa was the 'miraculum' that inspired his own sense of hope for the Irish conflict as he wrote *The Cure at Troy*" (Carr Vellino 2008: 50-1). For a comparative study about the political impasse in Northern Ireland and South Africa see: Guelke (1991).

[4] For more information about the failed attempts to stage *Antigone* in Ireland see: Kentrotis Zinelis (2023: 431).

However, as we have seen, 1984 became an *annus mirabilis* for the reception of *Antigone* in Ireland, when three different versions of the tragedy saw the light.[5] Tom Paulin's *The Riot Act*, Brendan Kennelly's *Sophocles' Antigone: A New Version*, and Aidan Carl Mathews' *The Antigone*, were all written that same year. Then, we have the twenty-first century re-invigorations of the play: Conall Morrison's *Antigone* (2003) and Owen McCafferty's *Antigone* (2008). Next in line are two more plays that share a thematic affinity to the Sophoclean text, but this time the adaptor's focus is on Antigone's sister, Ismene. Both Stacey Gregg's *Ismene* (2007) and Colm Tóibín's *Pale Sister* (2019) pay homage to the often-overlooked sister of Antigone. Finally, Colin Murphy, recently saw his version of *Antigone* made its debut in November 2020 at LexIcon in Dun Laoghaire, County Dublin.

Arguably then, none of the two Sophoclean plays were new or unfamiliar to Ireland when Heaney took up the challenge of producing a new version of them for the theatre public.[6] Although *Antigone* is the most frequently performed Greek play in Ireland, *Philoctetes* also got its fair share of reception. Therefore, Heaney was not only faced with the challenge of reworking the ancient texts *per se*, but also had to deal with the fact that the outcome of his work would be measured against a well-entrenched tradition of classical reception. Heaney was quite aware of this phenomenon and its repercussions, as we may see from this comment:

> At the beginning of 2003, the Abbey Theatre in Dublin invited me to do a version of *Antigone* for the centenary of the theatre, which occurs this year. I was honoured and attracted, but unsure if I could take it on. For a start, the play had been translated and adapted so often, and had been co-opted into so many cultural and political arguments, it had begun to feel less like a text from the theatrical repertoire and more like a pretext for debate, a work that was as much if not more at home in the seminar room that on the stage.[7] (2004b: 414)

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[5] Tom Paulin actually counts five 1984 *Antigones*: "There were three different versions of *Antigone* produced in Ireland in 1984, or four if one count's Fugard's *The Island*, or five with the film *Anne Devlin*, about Robert Emmet's housekeeper" (2002: 166). Also considering that George Steiner's *Antigones*, the seminal work on the reception of Antigone's legend in Western thought, was also published in 1984, one is struck dumb with the developments that this calendar year brought to the Antigonean legacy.

[6] Heaney has also come up with a verse rendition of Sophocles' *Ajax*, retelling the episode where the disrespected hero loses his senses and slaughters the Greek cattle believing that it is Odysseus, Agamemnon, and Menelaus. "Testimony: The Ajax Incident" was first published in *Times Literary Supplement* on 25 November 2004, but, as Joanna Kruczkowska underlines, the poem was eventually "excluded from *District and Circle*" (2017: 279). It is also noteworthy to stress that Sophocles does not enjoy a monopoly as Heaney's sole Greek tragedian, since "a version of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* had been projected as a response to the IRA ceasefire of 1994 but was displaced by one of Heaney's most interesting engagements with Greek tragedy, the *Agamemnon*-inspired, poetic-sequence 'Mycenae Lookout'" (Harrison & Macintosh 2019: 2).

[7] Heaney's assumption that nowadays *Antigone* befits more the classroom than the stage resonates his prior experience with the tragedy. As he confesses to *The Irish Times* on 3 April 2004, two days before the

Heaney's hesitance to adapt *Antigone* once again reveals his concern that the thematic elements of *Antigone* may have been overused, reaching a point where their application to recent historical events has become exhausted.

Specifically, by suggesting that *Antigone* now belongs more to the forum than the stage, Heaney highlights the diverse use of Antigone's *exemplum* of civil disobedience in various historico-cultural contexts, worldwide but also notably in Ireland. Heaney feared that the prolonged reception of Sophocles' heroine had made Antigone a kind of caricature of herself. It seemed that, due to the chronic overuse, the potency of Antigone's message had weakened. As Heaney mentions on another occasion regarding adapting *Antigone*:

> The invitation to do this job came from Ben Barnes at the Abbey Theatre. In 2004 the Abbey was celebrating its centenary and the artistic director wanted to have at least one classical tragedy in the centennial repertoire. I was honoured to be asked, and was attracted to the commission, not least because W. B. Yeats had done versions of Sophocles' two other Theban plays for the theatre, but I still wasn't sure how to respond. How many Antigones could Irish theatre put up with?... I was reading desultorily about the play in various essays and introductions and glazing over as again and again the old familiar topics came swimming up: individual conscience versus civil power, men versus women, the domestic versus the public sphere, the relevance of the action in times of crisis, in France, in Russia, in Poland, in Northern Ireland - of course, of course, of course. But why do it again? Indeed, how do it again, if there wasn't a tuning fork? (2005: 170-1)

Heaney ultimately succumbed to the temptation of engaging with Antigone, giving rise to *The Burial at Thebes*. What remains to be uncovered is the so-called tuning fork, namely which element prompted Heaney to have Antigone pay Ireland another visit. Consequently, the section dedicated to Heaney's version of *Antigone* will illuminate all aspects through which the playwright made this illustrious heroine his own.

As for Heaney's decision to adapt *Philoctetes*, one could argue that it worked exactly the other way around for the playwright. It was the poet's contemporary historical milieu and the newfound sense of optimism permeating that era that sparked Heaney's interest in Philoctetes' story:

> I don't think I would have had the gall to do a play with such a consoling outcome had it not been for the extraordinary events of late 1989. In the autumn of that year, as one watched the Berlin Wall

premiere of *The Burial at Thebes*: "I taught *Antigone* to college students in a Belfast teacher-training college in 1963. I talked about it in relation to Aristotle and Greek tragedy" (Heaney 2004c).

> come down, and the philosopher president[8] come to power in Czechoslovakia, and the Romanian tyranny crumble, and so on, it was as if molten and repressed reality was erupting into history in much the same way as volcanic crisis erupts (with radiant historical consequences for the Greeks) in Philoctetes – the character *and* the play. (2002: 176)

Without doubt, the favourable conditions that had arisen to adapt *Philoctetes* made Heaney reconsider some earlier hesitations that he had, such as his unfamiliarity with the Greek language:

> I [had] declined to do versions of Greek plays for the Oxford University Press series that William Arrowsmith was editing because I didn't know the Greek language. So I didn't feel I should enter the canonical territory. But the *Philoctetes* was for a theatre company I was involved with in Derry, and I felt free to tackle it in that context.[9] (Hass & Heaney 2000: 22)

The theatre company that Heaney alludes to is Field Day. It is his direct involvement with this enterprise that paved the way for him to enter the Greek tragedy field. As Heaney confesses, he was willing to take the risk of conversing with the Greek tragedians only when this endeavour was placed under the aegis of Field Day, a prospect that Heaney had declined to the authoritative OUP.[10] In fact, Marilynn Richtarik notes that Heaney used the phrase "just my homework for Field Day" (2018: 99), when inquired about his first dramatic attempt. There is also Brian Friel's

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[8] With the somewhat bizarre term 'philosopher president' – echoing the notion of the Platonic philosopher-king – Heaney refers to Václav Havel, the last President of Czechoslovakia, and after its dissolution in 1992, the first President of the Czech Republic. Havel, like Heaney, was a renowned poet and playwright, and a person of admiration for Heaney. In an interview for *The Independent*, after he had completed his first visit to South Africa, Heaney comments about the post-apartheid South African nation: "Looking at South Africa's future, I would have to use the word 'hope' in the way that Vaclav Havel used it. Not just optimism – hope is something that is there to be worked for, is worth working for, and can work" (Heaney 2002c). As it will be argued in the section dedicated to *The Cure at Troy*, the Havel-inspired expression of 'hope' is central to Heaney's appropriation of *Philoctetes*.

[9] In the same interview we learn that Heaney first became familiar with the story of Philoctetes from Edmund Wilson's *The Wound and the Bow* (1941), a collection of essays exploring the association of artistic creation with personal trauma and suffering. The final essay is dedicated to Philoctetes, whose two defining features – the wound in his leg and the invincible bow bequeathed by Hercules – comprise the book's title, thus encapsulating Wilson's overall vision regarding the means of artistic production (Hass & Heaney 2000: 22). Wilson's sketching of the creative artist is that of a morbid genius, namely "the conception of superior strength as inseparable from disability" (Wilson 1941: 287). In respect of which, Patrick Crotty recognizes a similarity between Philoctetes and Mad Sweeney (*Suibne mac Colmáin*), the protagonist of the medieval Irish tale *Buile Shuibhne* that Heaney translated into English as *Sweeney Astray* (1983): "both characters are unusually talented (Sweeney in verse-making, Philoctetes in bowmanship), fallen from former glory, greatly afflicted, and given to regaling everyone within earshot with lurid, self-pitying catalogues of misery" (1991: 119).

[10] The 'Greek Tragedy in New Translations' series that the late William Arrowsmith envisioned and still runs today, began with a translation of Sophocles' *Oedipus King* in 1989, followed by Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* and Euripides' *Alcestis* in 1990 – the year that *The Cure at Troy* hit the stage. One then understands that Arrowsmith wanted Heaney to be one of the very first collaborators for his ongoing translation project.

postcard to Heaney imploring him that "you have got to do something for the theatre – a translation, a version, a dramatization … You are needed. Okay?" (*Ibid*. 102). Heaney, then, was strongly encouraged by the Field Day executives to produce a play, but his choice of going full Greek and adapting *Philoctetes*, was principally his.[11]

One therefore begins to recognize that a thorough examination of the historical context of *The Cure at Troy* is as essential as the content of the adapted text itself. Without a detailed analysis of the societal impact that the politically charged Field Day initiative had on Northern Ireland, one lacks a vital interpretative tool to comprehend Heaney's decision to adapt *Philoctetes*. If *Antigone* was already too important in Ireland to be missing from Abbey's festive programme, one is prompted to consider the circumstances that led Heaney to believe that a version of *Philoctetes* would be fitting for Field Day. Therefore, a complete section of this chapter will be dedicated to the history of the Field Day Theatre Company to highlight how its artistic policies, cultural intentions, and political interventions informed Heaney's choice of that particular Sophoclean play.

In fact, although Heaney had dismissed the likelihood of translating a Greek play before the Field Day appointment, it is noteworthy that some Greek mythological elements were already present in his early writings.[12] However, a more methodical insertion of Greek material in Heaney's poetry starts with *The Haw Lantern* (1987), published three years before *The Cure at Troy*. In this volume, Heaney refers to certain Greek figures – both mythical and actual – such as Diogenes, Penelope, Socrates, and Hermes.[13]

Also in his prose writings, Heaney does not refrain from alluding to ancient Greece to mirror his own experiences and reality. In "Mossbawn", the introductory essay of *Finders Keepers* (2002), Heaney correlates his early childhood memories in the townland of Toomebridge to the

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[11] Inquired whether he chose *Philoctetes* or this was suggested to him, Heaney response was that "I chose it. I'd read about it, years before… and then it was brought to my attention again by… Michael Blumenthal [who] showed me the script of a lecture he'd given on the operation of justice in *Philoctetes*. But the main attraction was the material itself… That kind of dilemma was familiar to people on both sides of political fence in Northern Ireland. People living in a situation where to speak freely and truly on certain occasions would be regarded as letting down the side" (O'Driscoll 2008: 420).

[12] See, for instance, the volume *Door into the Dark* (1969). In 'Personal Helicon' Heaney reminisces rather regretfully his childhood habit of looking at his reflection on springs like 'big eyed Narcissus', whereas in 'Thatcher', the exceptional craftmanship of the eponymous artisan in making roofs out of straw or reeds is equalled to 'Midas touch'. Also, in 'Belderg' from *North* (1975), the poet describes the ancient quern-stones used for hand-grinding as 'One-eyed and benign', an inverted yet unmistakable reference to the brute Cyclops of the *Odyssey*. 'Antaeus' and 'Antaeus and Hercules' are two more poems from *North* with a classical subject matter, as Heaney relates the sought earthliness of his poetry to the mythical giant who was gaining his supernatural strength from contact with the soil.

[13] For a study of all classical allusions, Greek and Latin, in *The Haw Lantern* see: Dillon (1995).

phonetic sound of *omphalos*, the supposed centre of the world according to Greek mythology, situated at Delphi, where the Temple of Apollo stands erect:

> I would begin with the Greek word *omphalos*, meaning the navel, and hence the stone that marked the centre of the world, and repeat it, *omphalos*, *omphalos*, *omphalos*, until its blunt and falling music becomes the music of somebody pumping water at the pump outside our back door. It is County Derry in the early 1940s. The American bombers groan towards the aerodrome at Toomebridge, the American troops manoeuvre in the fields along the road, but all of that great historical action does not disturb the rhythms of the yard. There the pump stands, a slender, iron idol, snouted, helmeted, dressed down with a sweeping handle, painted a dark green and set on a concrete plinth, marking the centre of another world. Five households drew water from it. Women came and went, came rattling between empty enamel buckets, went evenly away, weighed down by silent water. The horses came home to it in those first lengthening evenings of spring, and in a single draught emptied one bucket and then another as the man pumped and pumped, the plunger slugging up and down, *omphalos*, *omphalos*, *omphalos*.[14] (2002b: 3)

In an interview with Dennis O'Driscoll, Heaney mentions that his ever-growing attraction to Greek myth was a somewhat incidental yet decisive by-product of an unexpected encounter at the time Heaney had moved to the United States to teach at Harvard as a visiting professor in 1981:

> The general availability of the classics in translation in the Cambridge bookshops also had its effect. I was reacquainting myself with the material, and with a part of myself. One book, for example, that I bought by chance – just because it was on the shelf – turned out to be of great and permanent interest: William K. Guthrie's *The Greeks and Their Gods* (1950). That's where I read about the relationship between herm and Hermes. A herm was a standing stone – in many senses: a stylized representation of Hermes erect; and Hermes, as god of travellers and marketplaces and suchlike, was connected with cairns at crossroads and stone-heaps of all sorts. Through all that, I began to connect him with my father, and so you got 'The Stone Verdict'. (O'Driscoll 2008: 293)

Heaney's experience at Harvard thus played a pivotal role in his engagement with the Greek corpus, let alone Greek tragedy. *The Cure at Troy* is dedicated to the memory of Robert Fitzgerald, Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard, ardent translator of Homer and Virgil, and personal mentor of Heaney. Remarkably, Heaney confesses that when the Boylston chair came up for him as well, Fitzgerald advised him to think twice before saying yes: "Robert, I believe, had

[14] Heaney has also written 'Stone of Delphi', as part of the poetic-sequence 'Shelf Life' from *Station Isla*nd (1984). In the poem, the speaker yearns to do a pilgrimage to Delphi and share his hopes and fears as an offering to the Oracle: "To be carried back to the shrine some dawn | When the sea spreads its far sun-crops to the south | and I make a morning offering again: | *that I may escape the miasma of spilled blood*, | *govern the tongue, fear hybris, fear the god* | *until he speaks in my untrammelled mouth*".

found the professorship a bigger drain or constraint that he'd bargained for… He was genuinely concerned, at any rate, about whether or not it would be good for me to take the job – afraid it might interfere with the poetry work" (*Ibid*. 273). Luckily, this was not the case for Heaney, since his time at Harvard signals a mid-career 'Greek turn' in his writings, with *The Haw Lantern* and *The Cure at Troy* to be the outcome of this newly found pathway. No wonder then that Heaney chose to articulate his rapport with Fitzgerald in Greek terms, since in his 'Sonnets from Hellas' from *Electric Light* (2001), he paints Fitzgerald as his "Harvard Nestor, | Sponsor and host, translator of all Homer".[15]

It should also be noted that although Heaney's involvement with Latin will not be thoroughly examined in this chapter, one cannot completely overlook his deep-seated engagement with authors like Horace and Virgil. Having studied Latin as a schoolboy at St Columb's College in Derry, and having attended Catholic Mass at a young age, Heaney has confessed that Latin became a kind of a ratified sacred tongue for him (Hardwick 2016: 1). By the same token, Heaney's work as a translator of Latin surfaces as a less thorny task than his struggle with the ancient Greeks. His most straightforward association with Latin is his translation of Virgil's *Aeneid* VI, narrating Aeneas' journey to the underworld where the hero meets the ghost of his father Anchises passing on him a prophetic vision about the glory that awaits Rome, granted that Aeneas will set foot on shore. This is the last completed work of Heaney before he passed away, published posthumously in 2016.[16]

To revert the discussion back to the Greek texts in question, it is noteworthy that the two Heaneyan adaptations have been renamed, as Heaney did not include the name of their

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[15] "Another telling influence encouraging Heaney to delve into the classics was Ted Hughes, with whom he corresponded regularly throughout the Harvard years. In November 1983, after reading Heaney's rendering of *Buile Suibhne*, Hughes urged him to tackle Sophocles, sending him a translation of *Antigone* as a prompt. In an undated letter a year later, Hughes returned to the subject, speculating about 'what you might make of an *Antigone'*, adding that such a project might 'give you an even bigger release, now you've got such a grip on the nerve of it'. In a reply from 8 October 1984, Heaney confesses to having 'funked Antigone. I couldn't face it without some purchase on the Greek'" (Parker 2016:4).

[16] Allusions to Virgil seem to be a staple of Heaney's work: he chose 'The Golden Bough', a rendering of *Aeneid* VI.98-148, as the incipit of *Seeing Things* (1991). Heaney's fascination with Aeneas' *katabasis* can also be discerned in the sequence of twelve poems entitled 'Route 110', from Heaney's final poetry collection *Human Chain* (2010). Here Heaney combines episodes derived from the sixth book of the *Aeneid* with autobiographical elements. Finally, in *Electric Light*, we see Heaney tackling another Virgilian text, the pastoral *Eclogues*, in three different manners: "a translation of *Eclogue* 9 ('Virgil: Eclogue IX'), a transposition of *Eclogue* 4 to modern Ireland ('Bann Valley Eclogue'), and a poem which juxtaposes the world of the *Eclogues* both with that of Yeats and with that of Heaney himself ('Glanmore Valley Eclogue')" (Harrison 2019: 252) Heaney also tackled Horace: Stephen Harrison informs us about an unpublished translation of *Odes* 3.21 entitled 'To a Wine Jar' that Heaney produced as a member of a Belfast group of young poets, of which Derek Mahon and Michael Longley were also members (*Ibid*. 244-7). However, Heaney's most renowned engagement with Horace is in 'Anything Can Happen', first published in *The Irish Times* on 17 November 2001, and later included in *District and Circle* (2006). It is a poem composed in response to the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, reflecting Heaney's reaction to the tragedy.

protagonists in the title of his plays. Thus, *Philoctetes* is transformed to *The Cure at Troy*, and *Antigone* to *The Burial at Thebes*. The respective choice of words like 'Troy' and 'Thebes' – two unmistakable Greek markers – indicates that Heaney may intend for his plays to retain a Greek essence, while, if possible, having a greater appeal to the Irish. Again, interviewed by Dennis O'Driscoll, Heaney explains:

> We were going to be touring *Philoctetes* to audiences who wouldn't have much historical sense of the play… so I believed a new title could work as a pointer, a kind of subliminal orientation. And this led to *The Cure at Troy*, since in Ireland, north and south, the idea of a miraculous cure is deeply lodged in the religious subculture, whether it involved faith healing or the Lourdes pilgrimage. With *Antigone*, on the other hand, the problem was different: a lot of people were going to be overfamiliar with that play rather than underfamiliar, so I was glad when the phrase *The Burial at Thebes* came to mind, quite early on in the process. The word 'burial' pointed directly to one big anthropological concern that's central to the action, and the whole title was a nice parallel to *The Cure at Troy*. (*Ibid*. 422)

Heaney directly addresses the anticipated Irish audience when it comes to naming his plays. Assuming that they are either too familiar or unfamiliar with the subject matter of the two tragedies, he provides a clear explanation for his choice to rename them. Heaney argues that the strategic introduction of keywords such as 'Cure' and 'Burial' is a well-thought out tactic, since it brings the two Greek plays closer to an understated communal experience. Both words ring a bell with an Irish audience, and by incorporating them in the titles of the plays, they do render visible the sought Irishness of the two versions. Here, one must consider the fact that Heaney acknowledges a conceptual parallelism between the two chosen titles, something that in turn urges one to investigate closer the presumed affinity between the two plays.

Hence, one is invited to look for possible threads of communication between the two plays. *The Cure at Troy* is a Northern Irish version of *Philoctetes* produced at the apex of the Troubles by a regional theatre company with a rigid political agenda like Field Day, whereas *The Burial at Thebes* is a version of *Antigone* emerging from the South, within a post-Troubles landscape, commissioned by the Abbey, Ireland's most traditional theatre organization. While the two adaptations share a common Greek ancestry, they have been culturally transposed into two seemingly different epochs, if not Irelands. Perhaps, a comprehensive analysis of the content of both plays, coupled with an assessment of the distinct political contexts that inspired these adaptations, and a consideration of the varied sociocultural environments, could reveal the complete politics of Heaney's reception of Greek tragedy, along with its aims and objectives. In essence, the subsequent investigation of *The Cure at Troy* and *The Burial at Thebes* revolves around the following question: If the Irish zeitgeist has changed significantly over time, does

Heaney's engagement with the Greeks evolve accordingly, or is there a programmatic continuity in his discourse with them?

To answer this question, I will present and discuss the two plays jointly, as part of a single chapter. This approach can be effectively captured through a set of key issues: first, why 'Cure' and 'Burial' are designated as two Irish signifiers? Second, in what manner these notions are integrated into the Irish collective memory? Third, is there sufficient stylistic evidence within the corresponding theatrical texts, along with extratextual testimonies, to assert that the action of the two plays unfolds in Ireland? In other words, does Heaney's interaction with Sophocles ultimately create the space for the two adaptations to be thoroughly imbued with Irish significance?

These concerns will be central to both subsequent chapter subdivisions. Philoctetes' adamant refusal to accept the possibility of a cure for his leg wound and Antigone's immovable firmness to carry out the prohibited burial of her brother will be examined through the lens of Heaney's skillset and sensibility.

The Cure at Troy: Philoctetes Marooned in the Fifth Province

A Tragedy of Many Tales: Looking at Sophocles' *Philoctetes*

Heaney was not familiar with Greek. Therefore, he developed the script for *The Cure at Troy* by "relying on three translations – a late-nineteenth-century version, a Loeb Classical Library text translated by Francis Storr (1912), and a modern translation by David Grene (1957)" (Parker 2016: 3). Overall, Heaney remains largely faithful to the storyline of *Philoctetes*, following the incidents narrated by Sophocles without major departures from the Greek text. As Heaney explains: "I worked line by line, in blank verse – except for the choruses, and a couple of prose paragraphs for a change of pitch" (O'Driscoll 2008: 420). These are the only instances where Heaney deviates significantly from the ancient text.

However, it should be noted that there is no specific stylistic correspondence between the earlier English translations of *Philoctetes* and Heaney's version. Heaney may consult the above translations in terms of plot, but the outcome of *The Cure at Troy* is quite distinct. In the following passage, Heaney elucidates why he considers his version of *Antigone* different from previous English translations of the tragedy. This observation holds true for his adaptation of *Philoctetes* as well:

> Jebb, for example, and E.F. Watling, who did the old Penguin translations of the Theban plays, were under an obligation to render the Greek correctly. They had a scholarly discipline to obey. I, on the other hand, did want to give the substance of the meaning, but my first consideration was speakability. I also wanted different registers, in the musical sense, for different characters and movements in the play. You could say mine is a parallel text. (2004c)

In *The Cure at Troy*, Heaney sticks to the development of *Philoctetes* as indicated by the translators preceding him. Simultaneously, Heaney takes the liberty to retell the play using a more flexible or 'speakable', as he frames it, language.

The only two significant instances where Heaney diverges from the Sophoclean precursor are situated at the very beginning and at the end of the play. Heaney adds a choral ode preceding the moment that the action normally starts in Sophocles (*prologos*), whereas towards the end (*exodos*), he includes another choral ode and extends the final choral song by ten lines. Moreover, the characters of the two plays are almost identical, with the slight variation that Heaney has reduced the number of the actors comprising the Chorus of Neoptolemus' sailors from the traditional twelve to three, besides changing their sex from male to female. Heaney has also made

one of the three actors of the Chorus to speak as Hercules,[17] a distinct character in Sophocles' original fulfilling the *deus ex machina* role.[18] These subtractions, modifications, and additions are critical to the apparent transposition of the tragedy into a contemporary setting and the conveying of a particular Northern Irish sentiment, and they will be thoroughly discussed. Before that, however, a synopsis of the Philoctetes story must be given.

Sophocles' *Philoctetes* unfolds during the ninth year of the Trojan war. With Troy still unconquered and hope waning after Achilles' death, the Greeks undertake a night raid. They capture Helenus, a Trojan seer. Helenus predicts that Troy will remain impregnable unless Philoctetes, armed with his bow gifted by Hercules,[19] joins the expedition and kills Paris. The bow holds a magical history: Philoctetes, by setting Hercules' funeral pyre ablaze, earned the hero's gratitude, receiving the powerful weapon in return. The main obstacle to Helenus' prophecy is Philoctetes' strained relationship with the Greeks. Originally meant to fight in Troy, he was abandoned by the Greek army on Lemnos due to a leg wound caused by a snake bite.[20] Overwhelmed by the foul odour of the wound, Odysseus, with the agreement of Agamemnon and Menelaus, orchestrated his abandonment on the deserted island. Having endured years of solitude, Philoctetes harbours a deep-seated bitterness towards the Greeks. Expectedly, he is a

[17] Heaney chooses the Latin equivalent of the Greek Heracles. For matters of cohesion, I will stick to the same variation.

[18] As Heaney clarified in the programme note of the play: "I attempted to present the conclusion as the inevitable culmination of an honestly endured spiritual and psychological crisis rather than as the result of a supernatural intervention" (1990b). Richard Jones adds: "the theatrical device of giving Hercules' lines to the Chorus Leader provides a visual reinforcement of the idea that Philoctetes had come to his own conclusions: the physical representation of Hercules' character, and by extension his words, were always already present in Philoctetes' world (1997: 241).

[19] In addition to Helenus' prophecy mentioned in the Sophoclean tragedy (*Phil*. 1337-45), according to Pseudo-Apollodorus, there is also a second prophecy made by Calchas that Troy could not be captured without Hercules' bow and arrows fighting on the Greek side (*Epit*. 5.8).

[20] The myth has it that Philoctetes was injured in Chryse, an islet near Lemnos taking its name from the nymph Chryse. Philoctetes was bitten by the snake that protected the altar of the nymph, probably when he approached the site to make libations. In Sophocles' tragedy, Neoptolemus explains to Philoctetes the source of his torture: "You suffer from this severe pain because it was god-sent, since you drew near the guardian of Chryse, the snake that secretly keeps a vigilant watch over her roofless sanctuary" (*σὺ γὰρ νοσεῖς τόδ᾽ ἄλγος ἐκ θείας τύχης, Χρύσης πελασθεὶς φύλακος, ὃς τὸν ἀκαλυφῆ σηκὸν φυλάσσει κρύφιος οἰκουρῶν ὄφις*) (*Phil*. 1326-8). Pausanias also makes mention of Chryse, arguing that the islet has now disappeared in the depths of the sea (*Paus*. 8.33.4.). Additionally, the Latin author Hyginus slightly variates the episode, claiming that the snake was sent by Juno, as she got angry with Philoctetes for lighting Hercules' funeral pyre (*Fab. 102*). Finally, Servius, the Latin grammarian, provides a totally different account of Philoctetes' injury, claiming that Philoctetes had promised Hercules never to disclose where his human remains were to be found, but being pressured by the Greeks, he indicated with his foot the gravesite, thinking that this way he still remained true to his oath. However, while in Troy, Philoctetes got injured by his own arrow, which pierced him in the same foot with which he had designated Hercules' grave (*Serv*. 3.402).

character consumed by self-pity.[21] In anticipation of complications, the Greeks dispatch Odysseus and Achilles' son, Neoptolemus, to capture Philoctetes and his bow.

Sophocles' tragedy begins with the two men arriving at Lemnos. Odysseus tells Neoptolemus that Philoctetes will not come to Troy if he recognizes him. Neoptolemus must go alone and deceive Philoctetes, claiming to be on his way to Scyros, expressing disgust at the Greeks. This is the moment when Neoptolemus must propose to Philoctetes that he accompanies him. Odysseus argues that Philoctetes will be willing to return home, unaware that the ship is headed straight to Troy. Neoptolemus reluctantly agrees to Odysseus' scheme. He encounters Philoctetes, who appears unwell but welcomes him warmly. Indeed, Philoctetes pleads to be taken home to Malis. Neoptolemus seizes the bow and waits Philoctetes to prepare for the journey. Suddenly, Philoctetes is gripped by excruciating pains, and blood oozes from his wound. Distraught by the spectacle, Neoptolemus faces a moral dilemma: pity Philoctetes and fail the Greek army, or adhere to Odysseus' plan and betray the friendship Philoctetes feels for him. When Philoctetes regains consciousness, Neoptolemus opts to disclose their true destination, hoping for understanding. Philoctetes erupts in anger and insists on retrieving his bow, a request that Neoptolemus denies.

Sensing the danger, Odysseus reappears, and a quarrel ensues between him and Philoctetes. Going against Helenus' prophecy, Odysseus declares that Philoctetes is not needed, heading to the ship. Neoptolemus orders his sailors to stay with Philoctetes while preparing the boat. As they talk, Philoctetes continues portraying himself as helpless, while the Chorus urges him to stop being stubborn. Odysseus and Neoptolemus return, with Neoptolemus now breaking free of Odysseus' influence. Neoptolemus returns the bow to Philoctetes, inviting him to follow them willingly to Troy. Philoctetes, unmoved, asks Neoptolemus to keep his promise of taking him home. The three characters are trapped in a vicious circle, unable to find a satisfying solution. Finally, the ghost of Hercules descends solving the issue: Hercules commands Philoctetes to go to Troy, assuring him that Asclepius will cure his wound there. Philoctetes, moved by Hercules' instructions, finally agrees. The tragedy ends with an emotional Philoctetes bidding farewell to Lemnos.[22]

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[21] Srila Nayak looks at Shakespeare's *Tempest* to give a matching character: "Philoctetes is the Sophoclean version of Caliban, an outcast from society suffering from the curse of an incurable, foul-smelling wound, living a brutish life on the desolate island of Lemnos" (2014: 119).

[22] A startling aspect of *Philoctetes* is that the death toll is zero; something bizarre for a Greek tragedy. *Philoctetes* is also the only surviving play that has no female characters. These are two uncommon traits that set *Philoctetes* apart from the rest. As Oliver Taplin states: "It is often said (quite wrongly) that 'nothing happens' in *Philoctetes*: it is true that there is no death, no cataclysmic violence—some say that it is not really a tragedy at all" (2004: 148). Correspondingly, Joe Park Poe, in his comprehensive philological treatment of *Philoctetes*, stresses the singularity of this tragedy's subject matter: "I have chosen to write about *Philoctetes* because, perhaps more than any other of Sophocles' plays except *Oedipus at Colonus*, it

After providing a detailed account of the Sophoclean tragedy, one can reflect on what the story of Philoctetes has come to represent. P. E. Easterling outlines the primary themes in binary terms: "alienation and communication, ends and means" (1978: 27). Starting with the second pair, it refers to the acceptable range of human agency; namely what should be the limit in the measures taken to achieve a certain goal, collective or personal. Do the ends always justify the means or are the events narrated in *Philoctetes* a vivid proof of how harmful this way of thinking is? As such, sincerity and opportunism, "the conflict between personal integrity and political expediency, between the conscience of the individual and the call of the tribe" (Parker 2016:3), embodied by Neoptolemus and Odysseus respectively, are two competing forces in the Sophoclean tragedy.

Regarding alienation *versus* communication, this theme underscores the symbolic significance of Philoctetes' estrangement from the rest of the Greeks. Injured and marooned on an island, ostracized from the community he once belonged to, Philoctetes' identity has been shaped by those events. Philoctetes is characterized by a mix of isolation, resentment, and self-pity. To preserve his wounded ego, he feels compelled to internalize his alienation from the community as an integral part of who he is. When the community recognizes Philoctetes' indispensability and decides to reconnect, his instinctive reaction is to refuse any overtures of reconciliation. His existing wound takes precedence, overshadowing any prospects of remedy.[23] Having completely embraced suffering and banishment as the enduring elements of his existence, Philoctetes regards change as a more formidable danger than his present situation. Philoctetes's subject position "illustrates the ways in which the trope of victimhood serves to both consume and define his identity" (McGuire 2019: 21). Consequently, Philoctetes' fixation on his wound, coupled with his steadfast rejection of a better future, delineates his uncompromising demeanour: "Your wound is what you feed on, Philoctetes" (*CT*: 61), utters the Chorus summarizing Philoctetes' *raison d'être*.

Referring back to Heaney, the Irish poet discerned a point of correspondence between Philoctetes' immovable stance and the political impasse in Northern Ireland: "Sullen, rancorous, inwardly gnawed by hatred and paralyzed by memories of past injustice, Philoctetes is Heaney's unlovely image of the sectarian North of Ireland" (Eagleton 1998: 374). So, by "domesticating

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seems on the surface to be affirmative and idealistic, even optimistic" (1974: 6). As argued next, it is this aura of optimism that drew Heaney to stage an adaptation of *Philoctetes* in Northern Ireland.

[23] According to the programme note of *The Cure at Troy*, Heaney sketches Philoctetes as a hero who "suffers a division in himself between a sense of personal grievance and an inner command (which he keeps repressing) to comprehend his own experience, however painful, in the light of a more generous, less self-centred vision" (1990b). Also, in a private letter to Marianne McDonald, Heaney expounds his attraction to Philoctetes in terms of "a fascination with the conflict between the integrity of the personal bond and the exactions of the group's demands for loyalty. A sense that the pride in the wound is stronger than the desire for a cure. A sympathy with that reluctance to shed the haughtiness of the hurt spirit for the humdrum and *caritas* of renewal. The intoxication of defiance over the civic, sober path of adjustment" (1996: 137).

Sophocles and making the wound of Philoctetes emblematic of the trauma of Ulster's maimed and distrustful communities" (Croty 2001: 204), Heaney developed an inventive way to address the Troubles. Commenting on the disposition of Philoctetes, and how he precisely interprets it in relation to the Troubles, Heaney argues:

> He is first and foremost a character in the Greek play, himself alone with his predicament, just as he is also an aspect of *every* intransigence, republican as well as Unionist, a manifestation of the swank of victimhood, the righteous refusal, the wounded one whose identity has become dependent upon the wound, the betrayed one whose energy and pride is a morbid symptom. (2002: 175)

Heaney establishes a connection between Philoctetes' portrayal by Sophocles and the realities of the conflict in Northern Ireland. Specifically, Heaney interprets Philoctetes' predicament as paradigmatic of the deadlock in his country, acknowledging clear parallels "between the psychology and predicaments of certain characters in the play and certain parties and conditions in Northern Ireland" (*Ibid*.).[24]

For instance, in the following lines from *The Cure at Troy*, Philoctetes' preference of pain over the fear of the unknown, could also be read as a commentary of the Northern Irish situation:

> The past is bearable,
> The past's only a scar, but the future –
> Never. (*CT*: 73)

Philoctetes' statements in the play often carry a dual significance, hinting at the Troubles. However, this is not to say that Heaney uses the Philoctetes story to back up a specific party agenda:

> Anyone looking to Heaney for some *parti pris*, coded political stance of a sectional nature will be disappointed. The analogy works rather in the more generalised terms of division, resentment and a sense of grievance or injustice - plus the possible cessation of these for the greater good. The play is beyond any sectional pleading of a case in this respect. (Peacock 1992: 243)

Conceivably then, a major incentive for Heaney to adapt *Philoctetes* must have been the conspicuously promising ending of the tragedy, represented by Philoctetes' atonement. As McDonald argues: "The history of the Trojan War differs from the history of Ireland, but they meet

[24] Hugh Denard elaborates: "Heaney's work boldly opened up a dialogue between its Sophoclean model and the culture and politics of Northern Ireland. To the Sophoclean representation of a wounded, embittered Philoctetes, Heaney brought the experience of suffering in Northern Ireland. To the Northern Irish crisis, the Sophoclean model brought a vision of miraculous redemption" (2000: 2).

symbolically in this story of Philoctetes' wound… Heaney is in favour of a cure, or healing, and he uses Greek tragedy to distance and yet make familiar the major issues of conflict" (McDonald 1996: 133). Based on this observation, a third antithetical pairing surfaces, that of 'wound *versus* cure'. The wound is what Philoctetes – and by extension Northern Ireland – suffer from, whereas the cure is what both urgently need.[25]

Heaney quickly sensed that Philoctetes' central message "was familiar to people on both sides of the political fence in Northern Ireland. People living in a situation where to speak freely and truly on certain occasions would be regarded as letting down the side" (O'Driscoll 2008: 420). Moreover, Heaney acknowledged in *Philoctetes* an allegory that not only reflected the prevailing situation in Northern Ireland at that time but also provided a symbolic resolution to the violent stalemate. By transposing the Philoctetean thematics to a Northern Irish context, Heaney becomes "an *iconographer* of reconciliation" (Wallace 2015: 9). Minding also that "the reading of the play to which an audience is directed is that political reconciliation is an available and viable alternative to the nursing of a 'wound'" (Richards 1995: 82). In this way, Heaney's adaptation becomes a powerful vehicle for exploring and advocating for resolution in the Northern Irish context.

To elaborate further, in the following section, *The Cure at Troy* will be juxtaposed against the turbulent political climate of the epoch as well as the intricate cultural network from which the play originated.

[25] The imagery of the wounded body and the political associations it engenders, transpires also in Heaney's poetry. In 'At Potato Digging' from *Death of a Naturalist*, Heaney divulges that "where potato diggers are | you still smell the running sore", whereas in 'Act of Union' from *North*, a pessimistic Heaney suggests that "No treaty | I foresee will salve completely your tracked | And stretchmarked body, the big pain | That leaves you raw, like opened ground, again".

Inside Derry City Walls: The Troubles and the Workings of the Field Day Theatre Company

As previously noted, *The Cure at Troy* was originally staged at the Guildhall in Derry. Based on this information, two things stand out: first the choice of Guildhall, which, as its name suggests, is not a traditional theatre building but an administrative centre. Second, the choice of Derry, which, besides being the city with the largest Catholic representation in the predominantly Protestant Northern Ireland, it is also linked with a name dispute that came to represent the sectarian division in Northern Ireland. What is more remarkable, however, is that the stories of Guildhall and Derry are somewhat related.

Derry, the second largest city in Northern Ireland, is like a ground zero for the political and cultural divide in the area, as since its formation as a colonial settlement, Derry has always been a particularly symbolic contested space. Situated on the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, Derry is a place with disputed nomenclature, referred to as Londonderry by the Protestant community. Thereby, Derry/Londonderry is a semantically as well as culturally divided city expressing "in its very location and in its two names the split and doubled identities that are to be found in Northern Ireland, and [reflecting] the enmeshed consciousness within both communities of simultaneously belonging and isolation" (O'Malley 2011: 17).

As for Guildhall, built in 1887 and located just outside the Derry city walls, it was financed by the Irish Society, originally a consortium of traders and manufacturers (known also as Liver Companies) of the City of London. Guildhall came to replace the previous 17th-century town hall called Market House that stood in the centre of the old city but got destroyed during the Siege of Derry in 1689. For the biggest part of the 20th century, Guildhall's main function was to serve as the meeting place of the Londonderry borough. On 12 June 1972, almost half a year after Bloody Sunday, Guildhall was bombed by members of the Provisional I.R.A. As such, due to its history, sponsors, and function as city hall, Guildhall was largely considered a Unionist landmark in the area, reminiscent of the first Protestant settlers in Ulster. Therefore, despite its rather misleading name, the operations of the Irish Society had left an irrefutable British imprint on the nomenclature and political life of Derry, something that became more evident centuries later, once the sectarian division broke out in the late 1960s.

Derry, arguably the most affected city in Northern Ireland by the Troubles, witnessed one of the early significant events of the thirty-year conflict. In August 1969, the Battle of the Bogside unfolded—a three-day communal riot between Catholic residents and the Royal Ulster Constabulary police forces. Triggered by the provocative annual march of the Protestant Apprentice Boys commemorating the city's defence against Jacobite forces, this particular parade reached the predominantly Catholic Bogside area, sparking an enraged reaction from residents

and leading to police intervention and ensuing chaos. Obviously, Derry is also infamous for the Bloody Sunday massacre on 30 January 1972, where British paratroopers shot and killed fourteen unarmed civilians protesting the internment without trial of several hundred Catholics suspected of IRA ties. Following the atrocity, Heaney quit his lecturer position at Queen's University in Belfast and permanently relocated from Bellaghy, Co Derry, to Glanmore, Co Wicklow in the Republic.[26]

Overall, during the 1960s, an unusual political phenomenon emerged in Derry. Despite a Catholic and Nationalist majority in the city, gerrymandering resulted in most elected members of the Londonderry Corporation aligning with Unionism. This anomaly immediately impacted job and housing opportunities for Catholics, leaving them largely disenfranchised. Naturally, "The long status of Northern Ireland Catholics as second-class citizens… brought an endless suppuration of Catholics statements of grievance" (Dudley Edwards 1997: 47). Despite non-sectarian and ostensibly peaceful civil rights marches addressing inequality and discrimination faced by Catholic residents, the subsequent years saw an escalation of violent sectarian conflict. Republican and Loyalist paramilitary attacks spread throughout Northern Ireland, transforming what began as a local Derry issue into an armed dispute over governance in Northern Ireland.

Throughout the Troubles, both Protestant and Catholic communities in Derry harbored a so-called siege mentality. This shared perception led both groups to feel constantly threatened and under attack by the other, fostering sentiments of victimization and defensiveness. Both sides were inclined to "parade their isolation and suffering as badges of honor" (Rankin Russell 2014: 289), with the Protestant community doing so more literally, considering the Apprentice Boys' parade. The origins of this siege mentality trace back to the historic Siege of Derry, historically linked with the Protestant heritage of the city. However, Marilyn Richtarik notes that an atmosphere of confinement also loomed over the Catholic consciousness:

> For unionists, Derry, which withstood a lengthy siege by James II in 1689 to make possible the continuation of Protestant rule, is a symbol of their determination to remain British. For nationalists, who constitute a majority in Derry but a minority in the North as a whole, the gerrymandering that kept a protestant minority in power in the city stands out as one of the most egregious of the official and legal discrimination practiced against Catholics in Northern Ireland. (1995: 13)

[26] In 'Exposure', the concluding poem of *North*, Heaney laments for being forced to become an internal exile: "I am neither internee nor informer; | An inner ŕmigrŕ, grown long-haired | And thoughtful; a wood-kerne | Escaped from the massacre". In 'Casualty', published in *Field Work* (1979), Heaney mourns the loss of his dear fisherman friend Louis O'Neill, who, on the Wednesday after Bloody Sunday, and in defiance of the imposed curfew, died while drinking in a pub, as a result of a bomb attack: "He was blown to bits | Out drinking in a curfew | Others obeyed, three nights | After they shot dead | The thirteen men in Derry".

Isolation and marginalization are two notions that both conflicting communities identify with. Intriguingly, this circumstance has been tackled by Heaney, using a Greek equivalent. In 'Whatever You Say, Say Nothing' from *North*, Heaney, speaking from the perspective of a disentangled Catholic, deftly presents how the Catholic minority perceives its existence in the North: "Were cabin'd and confined like wily Greeks, | Besieged within the siege, whispering morse". In introducing this Homeric imagery of the Greeks inside the Trojan horse, Heaney showcases how the prevalent Protestant siege mentality, inevitably affects the Catholic sense of self. Allegedly ensnared by each other, both Catholic and Protestant residents of Derry perceive the other's existence as inherently stifling and unwelcome. By the same token, in *The Cure at Troy*, Philoctetes' wails about his isolation in Lemnos suggesting that "This island is a nowhere" (*CT*: 18), speaking of "a home where I never was at home" (*Ibid*. 29), and also mentioning that "No matter how I'm besieged. | I'll be my own Troy" (*Ibid*. 63). Such lamentations could aptly describe the consequences of the mutually exclusive coexistence of Protestants and Catholics in Derry.

Considering now that *The Cure at Troy* was produced in 1990, more than twenty years since the beginning of the Troubles, the respective choice of Derry and Guildhall by the Field Day Theatre Company as the location and venue for the premier of *The Cure at Troy* was immensely symbolic. In fact, *The Cure at Troy* was not the first play to be staged at the Guildhall. Starting with Brian Friel's *Translations*[27] in 1980, all Field Day productions used the Guildhall as a starting point, before touring all Ireland bringing its dramas "to large and small towns throughout the island, playing in local theatres and other community venues, often before audiences that had limited access to professional theatre" (O'Malley 2011: 5).[28] On that note, Carmen Szabo comments:

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[27] Lorna Hardwick makes an intriguing connection between Friel's *Translations*, Heaney's reception of Sophocles, Irish resistance to British colonialism, and the overall significance of Classics in Ireland: "The descendants of the Trojans, the Romans, were also regarded as agents through which the Irish might use classical culture to resist colonial domination. This tradition was drawn on by Brian Friel in his play *Translations*… Friel's play explored the impact on the rural Ireland of the 1830s of the Ordnance Survey that substituted English place names for Irish. It also explored the effects of the national schools that imposed English-medium education on all Irish children. The play highlighted the resistance of the hedge-school tradition and also illuminated the potential of Latin, and especially Vergil, as a cultural bridge between opposing groups who could not otherwise understand one another linguistically or culturally… Thus Seamus Heaney's classical work is situated in a classical tradition that is unique to Ireland, derived from and associated with an early interplay in Irish cultural history between the classical and the indigenous. This interplay constantly subverted any attempts by the English to use classical culture as a means of embedding Ascendancy domination. It meant that the Irish classical tradition could use Greek and Roman texts as allegories for political debate without fatal association with the colonizers" (2007b: 315).

[28] Anthony Roche explains further: "From their Derry base, the Company toured their annual productions around Northern and Southern Ireland, setting an influential pattern for cross-border cultural activity. They also made a frontal assault on London theatre. *Translations* was the first Irish play to enter the repertoire of the British National Theatre" (2009: 179).

> The Guildhall, a bleak, Victorian building… embodies the essence of the oppressive colonial structures, containing the Mayor's parlour and the offices of the city council. By entering the space of power and using it as starting point for their tours, Field Day not only re-enhanced their political status but, in time, they reacted against the cultural *status quo* enjoyed at that point by Belfast and Dublin… Thus, Field Day, began their fifteen-year journey as a theatre company which, if it still wanted to establish a new national theatre for the North, advocated a complete severing of the links with a romantic theatrical past, represented in part by W. B. Yeats's Abbey Theatre and by the Lyric Theatre in Belfast. (2007: 8)

Szabo's remarks disclose that any comprehensive analysis of *The Cure at Troy* cannot omit referring to the workings of Field Day, its ideological apparatus and artistic vision. Speaking of which, Heaney concretizes the Field Day mission: "We could create a space in which we could try to redefine what being Irish meant in the context of what had happened in the North, the relationship of Irish nationalism and culture" (Walsh 1990). Accordingly, Heaney's adoption of Philoctetean themes will not be explored in isolation, but as a pivotal moment in a broader Northern Irish cultural endeavour.

Field Day is a far cry from any conventional theatre company, as its practices were never solely limited to theatre-making. That is, apart from an annual theatrical production, Field Day oversaw "the publication of five sets of pamphlets on various aspects of Irish culture, a series of monographs and essay collections… and the massive *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*" (Richtarik 2004: 194).[29] This rather ambitious and multifaceted initiative was instigated by the director Brian Friel and the actor Stephen Rea.[30] Soon, four more literati would join the board of directors, viz. the poets Seamus Heaney and Tom Paulin, the scholar Seamus Deane, and David Hammond, a filmmaker and musician. The board consisted of three Catholics and three

[29] The *Anthology* includes examples of Irish writing from 550 CE to the late 20th century. As for the pamphlets, they tackle issues "on language, myth, law and the interrelation of literature and colonialism, all with specific reference to the Ireland-England question" (Murray 1997: 208). Heaney's pamphlet contribution, entitled 'An Open Letter', is a verse response to the editors of *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* (1982), who had wrongly included poems by Heaney in the volume. Protesting to his classification as a British poet, Heaney decided to offer a serio-comic poetic response, explaining to the editors the distinction between Britannia and Hibernia. With the most explicit and oft-quoted lines of the poem being: "My passport's green | No glass of ours was ever raised | To toast *The Queen"*.

[30] There are two explanations behind the name of 'Field Day'. The first, that is a witty amalgam of 'Friel' and 'Deane' (Murray 1997: 208). The second, included in the programme note of *Translations*, is the lexical entry from the OED: "A day on which troops are drawn up for exercise in field evolution; a military review; a day occupied with brilliant or exciting events; a day spent in the field, e.g. by the hunt, or by field naturalists". Stephen Regan makes an alluring remark about the second explanation: "The field, it would seem, is a place of conflicting pursuits, and while being subject to military occupation it is also available for more natural or leisurely pastimes: it is simultaneously a place of violence and conservation" (1992: 27).

Protestants, all from Northern Ireland. Later, the playwright Thomas Kilroy became the only member from the Republic of Ireland, serving as the board's sole southern representative.

This harmonious balance between the directors, representing equally the two dominant religious groups in Northern Ireland, had its purpose. Although Field Day was often accused of being a 'green activity',[31] its professed primary objective was to contribute to the overcoming of the sectarian division in Northern Ireland, in an attempt to think *otherwise* in relation to the Troubles. According to Heaney:

> We could create a space in which we could try to redefine what being Irish meant in the context of what had happened in the North, the relationship of Irish nationalism and culture. We were very conscious that we wanted to be quite independent of the British influence exercised through Belfast and the equally strong cultural hegemony of Dublin. (qtd in Taplin 2004: 161)

This is a cultural group with a "stated intention of subjecting the political crisis in the North and its reverberation in the Republic to a necessary and urgent reappraisal" (Richards 2003: 62). Field Day's interventionist agenda is succinctly conveyed by the directors' collectively sanctioned statement, which declares that "Field Day could and should contribute to the solution of the present crisis by producing analyses of the established opinions, myths and stereotypes which had become both a symptom and a cause of the current situation" (Deane et al. 1985: vii).

The Field Day executives intended to dismantle outdated and ineffective approaches to addressing the conflict by formulating a new discourse on Northern Ireland. Essentially, Field Day sought to enable the conflict's protagonists to communicate directly. This endeavour underscored the necessity for a new language of reconciliation, with the belief that the linguistic aspect could potentially break the political deadlock in Northern Ireland. Brian Friel's comment aligns with this direction: "I think that the political problem of this island is going to be solved by language, and that the linguistic overhaul will lead to a cultural state, not a political one, but out of that cultural state, the possibility of a political state follows" (McGrath 1987: 148).

With its nuanced and multivalent interventions in the Northern Irish cultural proceedings, Field Day envisaged to bring forward a new means of communication, "finding or creating a space between unionism and nationalism and proving by example the possibility of a shared culture in the North of Ireland" (Richtarik 1995: 7). Michael Etherton extrapolates on this:

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[31] The literary critic Edna Longley has been one of Field Day's fiercest and longstanding critics, repeatedly accusing the company for "unreconstructed nationalism" (Richtarik 2004: 201) and for "throw[ing] theory at Ireland, hoping that bits of it will stick" (Longley 1985: 28). Also, Colm Tóibín has stated that "there were times in the 1980s when it was hard not to feel that Field Day had become the literary wing of the IRA" (1995: 10).

> The Field Day writers see the problem in linguistic terms. In their view, the conflict is expressed in the arid rhetoric of Loyalist and Republican sympathizers. The physical brutality and the impending annihilation of communities is matched by an increasingly debased language of critical perception and commentary. There is now a perceived need to try to define such goals as freedom, justice, and independence within a revitalized cultural discourse… Put simply, the Field Day Theatre Company wants to revitalize Irish literature and criticism by finding completely new ways of talking about the problems of Ireland. (1987: 65)

Field Day was programmatically endorsing the articulation of a new theatrical language to ponder on the detrimental effects of sectarian division, thus undermining the restrictive binary structures hitherto dominating the Irish critical discourse.

Considering now how ideologically disparate was the original audience of *Translations* to attend the first ever Field Day performance, it suffices to grasp the conciliatory *modus operandi* of the theatrical company:

> The first night in the Guildhall saw a complete political spectrum of Northern Ireland - from Sinn Fein and the SDLP on the Catholic side through Unionists of various shades on the other - sharing the same space and anticipating by several decades what was out in place by the power-sharing Executive.[32] (Roche 2009: 179)

At the other end, when the group took a hiatus in 1993, Brian Friel summarized the whole Field Day initiative by suggesting that the project was founded "to create an opportunity for 'talking amongst ourselves', others can listen if they wish" (Hadfield 1993: 47). Here, it is also worthwhile to mention Eamon Hughes' words about Field Day's cultural input suggesting that "theatre in Ireland, after several decades of introspective provincialism, characterized by Douglas Kennedy as 'talking to itself', was beginning to emerge once again as a theatre which was worth attending to" (1990: 68-9).

Friel's call for "talking amongst ourselves" signifies a paradigm shift in Northern Irish affairs, emphasizing the need for dialogue among those most deprived of it. However, to arrive at this realization, the Field Day intelligentsia first had to acknowledge the limitations of the existing stalemate. Seamus Deane explains in more detail:

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[32] In the same light, Derek West, reviewing the premier of *The Cure at Troy*, reads the play as an abrupt attempt to transcend the sectarian nature of the conflict: "One look around the Guildhall was enough to confirm my suspicions that the gang would all be there - sharpening their quills and watching for the first clear evidence that Lemnos was Ireland, that Philoctetes was in the DUP and that Field Day was nothing more than etc etc. But it was all too subtle for that. The themes were clear enough - but any attempt to plant Heaney's adaptation square onto one or other version of the Irish situation simply would not work" (1990: 12).

> The major communities in the North, Protestant and Catholic, unionist and nationalist, are compelled by the force of circumstances… to rehearse positions from which there is no exit... Each community sees the other as a threat to its existence. Each regards itself as, at one and the same time, the preserver of basic principle, caricatured by its erstwhile allies and friends into a blind and benighted tribe. Both communities are trapped within a tight geographic space, within a stifling set of stereotypes, half-persuaded that they are an embarrassment to the nation-states that cooperate to govern them. Even the usual vocabulary of democratic discourse fails to operate successfully. (1990: 15-16)

From Deane's words, one fathoms that for the directors of Field Day, their project signified a rupture with the established approaches on the Northern Irish question. To do so, Field Day constructed its policy on the basis of an equivocal concept, that of the 'fifth province'. Before delving into details about the origins and the various clarifications of the 'fifth province', it is important to stress that all manifestations of the concept are language-bound. As Richard Kearney, the Irish thinker most associated with the concept, argues: "the creation of this fifth province calls for the creation of a new vocabulary, a new mode of communication which will acknowledge, and perhaps, ultimately mediate between the sundered cultural identities of this island" (Kearney 1988: 125).

The earliest mention of the 'fifth province' in the contemporary Irish cultural discourse can be traced to the first volume of *The Crane Bag* published in 1977. According to its editors, Richard Kearney and Mark Hederman, the journal aimed "to supply challenging visions on culture, history, tradition and identity and to fill the gaps between the overused binary oppositions that dominated previous approaches to the cultural discourse in Ireland" (Szabo 2007: 1). With this objective in mind, the two editors accentuated the existence of the 'fifth province', an allegorical space without specific geographical coordinates: "The symbol was taken from a Celtic tradition according to which Ireland was divided into four quarters and a spiritual middle - counterbalancing the political centre of Tara" (Boss 2002: 143). As such, the 'fifth province' was introduced as an icon of primordial spiritual unity, placed above any of the tangible intricacies of the present Irish nation. To quote the exact passage from *The Crane Bag*:

> Although Tara was the political centre of Ireland, this second centre was just as important and acted as a necessary balance. It was a non-political centre. It was sometimes described as a secret well, known only to the druids and the poets. The two centres acted like two kidneys in the body of the land. The balance between the two was essential to peace and harmony in the country. It seems clear to us that in the present unhappy state of our country it is essential to restore this second centre of gravity in some way. The obvious impotence of the political attempts to unite the four political and geographical provinces would seem to indicate another kind of solution, another kind

> of unity, one which would incorporate the 'fifth' province. This province, this place, this centre, is not a political position. In, fact, if it is a position at all, it would be marked by the absence of any particular political and geographical delineation, something more like a dis-position. (Kearney 1977: 4)

Despite the various ambiguities regarding its definition, the emergence of the 'fifth province' seems to come as a response to the political standstill in Ireland, North and South. Through the lens of the 'fifth province', Kearney envisioned a utopian site of concord, where any of the customary conflict endemic to Ireland is totally absent. As such, within the 'fifth province', a new united Irish identity could be negotiated, freed from the obvious complicacies set by history.

Given its distinctive constitution, to access the 'fifth province' requires fine handling. As Kearney underlines: **"**The fifth province can be imagined and reimagined; but it cannot be occupied. In the fifth province, it is always a question of thinking *otherwise*" (Kearney 1997: 81). From this, one understands that the 'fifth province' is a mental state that necessitates a special way of thinking in order to be reached. Hence, according to Hederman, it is only "the artist, and especially the poet [that] can provide us with access to this domain because [it] requires a method and a language which are *sui generis* both to reach it and to describe it" (1985: 11). While somewhat obscure, this statement effectively outlines Heaney's Field Day assignment: to create a play for the Irish stage prompting the audience to think *otherwise* in relation to the Troubles.

To sum up, the 'fifth province' is better perceived as a transcendental region; a liminal space where all man-made oppositions are resolved. Field Day utilized this imaginative realm as the notional bedrock of its artistic practices: "Rather than issue a program or manifesto, the company turned to the 'fifth province' in order to define its objectives" (O'Malley 2007: 302). In this regard, discussing Field Day's employment of the concept as the cornerstone of their policy, Brian Friel asserts that "we appropriated the phrase 'fifth province'… through which we hope to devise another way of looking at Ireland, or another possible Ireland – that first must be articulated, spoken, written, painted, sung but then may be legislated for" (Quilligan 1984). All Field Day's plays must be conjectured as by-products of this aspiration, namely as theatrical interventions that imaginatively forecast what eventually is deemed politically viable. Especially in Heaney's case, it could be argued that the broad reconciliatory tone of *The Cure at Troy* anticipated major institutional changes in Northern Ireland, as typified by the 1998 Good Friday Agreement that sealed the end of the Troubles.

In the following section, a close reading of *The Cure at Troy* will methodically examine how Heaney's adaptation of Sophocles *Philoctetes* is conflated with topical references to Northern Ireland.

'Between the You and the Me and the It of It': Heaney's Handling of the Chorus

A close reading of *The Cure at Troy* should begin with the distinct introductory approach adopted by Heaney. Unlike Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, where Odysseus is the first to speak, announcing that "this is the coast of the seagirt island of Lemnos" (*ἀκτὴ μὲν ἥδε τῆς περιῤῥύτου χθονὸς Λήμνου*) (*Phil.* 1-2), Heaney inserts an additional passage, namely an inaugural choral ode to make clear what is thematically at stake in *The Cure at Troy*.[33] Specifically, Heaney demarcates the prevalent atmosphere of his play, set in a terrain of endless discord and conflict. As such, before introducing his characters and delving into the particularities of the play, Heaney delivers a vignette of what is to be expected in *The Cure at Troy*. The overall sentiment that transpires from the initial choral ode is that of collective and compulsive suffering, of a traumatic circumstance with no seeming way out, giving rise to the idea that the expressed pain oozing from Philoctetes' wound is not strictly personal, but pertains to a communal experience of distress and agony.

Significantly, Heaney's poetic 'I' is located in the two choral pieces, one introductory and the other conclusive, which together constitute the greatest departure from the ancient source-text. Heaney utilizes the two extra pieces for the Chorus to communicate his own perspective on the events enacted on stage. By inserting himself into the Greek Chorus, Heaney not only succeeds in contextualizing the action of the play to a Northern Irish setting, but also fashions himself as the proper mediator of the Philoctetean thematics. Following this meta-dramatic technique, "the audience is made aware that, in witnessing a version of a Greek play, they are witnesses also to an individual poet's meditation on the play, and that the dramatic medium is therefore a far from impersonal one" (P. McDonald 1995: 192). As we will see, this strategy renders *The Cure at Troy* contemporaneous to the lived experience of the poet.

In the first choral piece, Heaney declares his intention to speak from the perspective of the poet, emphasizing poetry as the fitting medium to convey the essence of the Sophoclean play to his contemporaries. This includes articulating the central reconciliatory message of the tragedy. Having established poetry's authority, in the second ode Heaney delivers a compelling encomium on the pre-eminence of hope in times of adversity, which in addition to its direct application to Philoctetes' story, could also be read as a call for peace and compromise in Northern Ireland.

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[33] As Paul Turner clarifies about *The Cure at Troy*: "The play begins with a 32-line 'prologue'. This word (*prologos* in Greek) is a technical term in the structure of Greek tragedy for 'the part preceding the entrance of the chorus, a monologue or dialogue which sets out the subject of the drama and the situation from which it starts'. In *Philoctetes* the prologue is the opening dialogue between Odysseus and Neoptolemus (lines 1–134). But Heaney seems to use the term in a generalized modern sense to mean a preface or introduction. His 'prologue', instead of preceding the entrance of the chorus, is actually spoken by his chorus; and instead of setting out the initial dramatic situation, makes general comments on the whole action" (2007: 121).

Naturally, topical references to Northern Ireland are present in both additional passages. In the opening choral ode, Heaney mirrors the relentless violence and uncertainty characteristic of the Troubles. Conversely, in the concluding ode, he imparts an optimistic message, suggesting that the prolonged era of anguish and sorrow can conclude through a collective embrace of hope. The Chorus in *The Cure at Troy,* exhorts, recommends, and warns, without it always being clear whether receiver is the protagonists of the play or the audience. By attesting that the words of the Chorus are the very words of the poet, Heaney subtly conveys a sentiment of immediacy in the occurrences developed on stage, without this to transpire as overtly obvious or at the expense of the *Philoctetes* plot. Accordingly, Helen Eastman underlines "the duality of Heaney's chorus, who are nominally the ancient sailors of the original but use a diction and metaphoric landscape that places the play firmly in Heaney's Ireland; they are meta-textually aware of their own choral role and directly address the audience to discuss it" (2019: 95). So, the functioning of the Chorus is inseparable from its display as the main source of commentary for the Northern Irish affairs of the time as well as Heaney's own reading of those events.

To explore further, it is useful to quote the entire opening ode, preserving its original typography:

Philoctetes.
Hercules.
Odysseus.
Heroes. Victims. Gods and human beings.
All throwing shapes, every one of them
Convinced he's in the right, all of them glad
To repeat themselves and their every last mistake,
No matter what.

People so deep into
Their own self-pity self-pity buoys them up.
People so staunch and true, they're fixated,
Shinning with self-regard like polished stones.

And their whole life spent admiring themselves
For their own long-suffering.
Licking their wounds
And flashing them around like decorations.
I hate it, I always hated it, and I am
A part of it myself.

And a part of you,
For my part is the chorus, and the chorus
Is more or less a borderline between
The you and the me and the it of it.

Between
The gods' and human beings' sense of things.

And that's the borderline that poetry
Operates on too, always in between
What you would like to happen and what will –
Whether you like it or not.

Poetry
Allowed the god to speak. It was the voice
Of reality and justice. The voice of Hercules
That Philoctetes is going to have to hear
When the stone cracks open and the lava flows.
But we'll come to that.

For now, remember this:
Every time the crater on Lemnos Island
Starts to erupt, what Philoctetes sees
Is a blaze he started years and years ago
Under Hercules's funeral pyre.

The god's mind lights up his mind every time. (*CT*: 1-2)

The ode is organically divided into two distinct parts. The first part ends with the "A part of it myself" line, whereas the second part starts with the "And a part of you" line, coming just after. In the first part, Heaney describes a situation of perpetual terror absorbing everyone in its vortex. The universality of the phenomenon is accentuated by the phrase "Heroes. Victims. Gods and human beings", stressing anyone's inability to break free from it, regardless their stature or importance. The Chorus does not constitute an exception to this. Actually, the sentiment that it is Heaney who is behind the Chorus is confirmed by the Chorus' triple use of the personal pronoun 'I' – "I hate it, I always hated it, and I am | A part of it myself" – revealing the poet's loathing and powerlessness. This way, Heaney makes sure that the audience is aware that the Chorus will echo his own thoughts throughout the play. The first section concludes with the impression that a halt

to collective suffering is not feasible due to the deep-seated victimhood and self-righteousness of the involved parties, who end up perceiving their personal plight as the only valid truth.

Having first disclosed the totality of hostility, the second part comprises an attempt to fathom it. The Chorus, acknowledging its reluctant yet inevitable involvement in the vicious circle of pain and hatred, ponders on how to deal with this adverse circumstance. The Chorus concludes that only poetic language can serve to tackle the present unfortunate reality, coupled with a yearning for a better future. In support of this, the Chorus recognizes an innate affinity between the intermediary role that it traditionally occupies and the function of poetry: "Just as the chorus acts as a bridge between audience and action, so poetry occupies a liminal role, posed between hope and what ineluctably is" (Peacock 1992: 242). This leads to the fashioning of poetry, and consequently of the poet, as the *locus* where the play's traumatic scenario can be articulated as well as its resolution can be imagined. As Wallace comments about the ending of *The Cure at Troy*: "it is the spirit of Poetry rather than that of Hercules who ultimately convinces Philoctetes. The Chorus channels Hercules' words to him, but they also channel the voice of Poetry itself" (2015: 104).[34] This has already been foretold in the introductory lines, with the Chorus mentioning that "Poetry | Allowed the god to speak". Therefore, only after designating to poetry the precise role it will play, the Chorus refers to Philoctetes, for its story to be developed on stage.

Moreover, the Chorus names poetry as the voice of "reality and justice", but it also happens to be the voice that Heaney knows best: poetry is literally the *medium* steering Heaney's play to completion. Via the Chorus, Heaney pronounces that he will not do theatre by momentarily removing the poet's mantle, but *as* a poet. By doing theatre *as* a poet, Heaney aims at reflecting his poetic outlook on stage. Central to this is Heaney's understanding of what poetry can accomplish. In fact, the key notion of poetry's in-betweenness, namely "the borderline that poetry | Operates on", is a vital component of the whole Heaneyan poetics. As Heaney expounds in 'The Government of the Tongue':

> In the rift between what is going to happen and whatever we would wish to happen, poetry holds attention for a space, functions not as distraction but as pure concentration, a focus where our power to concentrate is concentrated back on ourselves. (1988: 108)

[34] Heaney explains further his decision to incorporate the *deus ex machina* in the Chorus: "Hercules' speech at the end (which I transpose to the Chorus) is an expression of recognition which Philoctetes has repressed: in other words, the Chorus is the voice of his unconscious" (2002: 173). The swift from divine to human language is significant, as this way Heaney insinuates that the impending catharsis is man-made, not a result of divine intervention.

Heaney defines poetry as the great mediator between reality and imagination. Reminiscent of Aristotle's *Poetics* that the difference between history and poetry is that the first deals with what has happened, while the latter with what may happen (*ἀλλὰ τούτῳ διαφέρει, τῷ τὸν μὲν τὰ γενόμενα λέγειν, τὸν δὲ οἷα ἂν γένοιτο*) (*Poet*. 9), Heaney delimits poetry's field of action in-between these two poles. Similarly, the Chorus in *The Cure at Troy* functions always in-between "What you would like to happen and what will – | Whether you like it or not". It is a constant strife between actuality and possibility that best describes poetry's purpose, and consequently the domain that the Chorus inhabits.[35]

Also, in 'The Redress of Poetry', Heaney states that all poets are challenged "to show how poetry's existence as a form of art relates to our existence as citizens of society – how it is 'of present use'… [whereas] poets are typically more concerned to conjure with their own and their readers' sense of what is possible or desirable or, indeed, imaginable" (1995: 1). This is not to insinuate that the two tasks at hand are mutually exclusive for the poet. Rather, it is Heaney's insistence that poetry's practical use lies in attributing to reality an image of itself that has not yet been realized. Heaney programmatically believes that the utility of poetry is to enrich the present with potential versions of itself. This entails that the poet – to be able to think *otherwise* and *ahead* – possesses a deep awareness of the present world. This is precisely what happens in *The Cure at Troy*: the opening ode describes with brutal candour the present unfavourable situation in which the Chorus finds itself entrapped, whereas, in the conclusive ode, the Chorus moves on to propose an imaginative exodus from it, set in an ideal future. To this end, Neoptolemus' affirmation that "I am going to redress the balance" (*CT*: 65), when he hands the bow back to Philoctetes, can be read as a nod at the "redressing effects of poetry [that] comes from its being a glimpsed alternative, a revelation of potential that is denied or constantly threatened by circumstances" (Heaney 1995: 4). While not immediately apparent, *The Cure at Troy* consistently draws support from Heaney's theoretical grasp of how poetry operates.

Heaney's cognition of poetry as a middle point between two competing forces seems to be informed by personal experience. In 'Terminus' from *The Haw Lantern* (1987), a poem named after the Roman god of boundaries and borders, Heaney asserts: "Two buckets were easier carried than one | I grew up in between". This typical farmyard practice of balancing one side against the other, a trick that Heaney probably learned as a youngster by his elders, serves as a metaphor for the poet's sought midway position: emphasizing the poet's place between tradition and innovation as well as their responsibility to remain balanced amidst conflicting pressures. Likewise, in 'Flight Path' from *The Spirit Level* (1996), Heaney memorializes an encounter he had

[35] The notion that the Chorus of *The Cure at Troy* is thematically informed by Heaney's theoretical writing on poetry is corroborated by the Chorus' command to Philoctetes that: "You should govern your tongue and present a true case" (CT: 61).

during a train journey, where he was recognized and confronted by a Sinn Féin member over why he does not write poetry that explicitly endorses the Republican cause:

> 'When, for fuck's sake, are you going to write
> Something for us?' 'If I do write something,
> Whatever it is, I'll be writing for myself.'

From these lines, it is easy to grasp the 'us *versus* myself' mindset: as a well-known Catholic from the North, this episode is suggestive of the community's expectations imposed on Heaney as well as Heaney's commitment of keeping his poetic vision intact. Correspondingly, Zirzoti stresses that is "easy to grasp in the Chorus' words an allusion to Heaney's own 'in-betweenness', that is his feeling of occupying a halfway position between the allegiance to his community and the loyalty to his role as a poet" (2014: 132). Hence, Heaney's espousing of the middle ground and his ensuing identification with the Chorus should not be taken as a sign of weakness or disengagement. Instead, it is a consciously chosen standpoint enabling the poet to exhibit a hitherto unfulfilled condition.

By making the Chorus enumerate the powers of poetry, Heaney not only delineates his position as a poet in charge of appropriating a Greek play for the Irish stage, but also hints at the possible parallels between the Philoctetean thematics and the prevalent situation in Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, according to Heaney, such undertaking is not single-minded: "The extra speeches for the Chorus… were meant to contextualize the actions, and not just within a discourse that could apply to Northern politics. These two speeches also defend the right of poetry/poetic drama to be something other than 'protest'" (2002: 173). Evidently, Heaney envisioned something more than a mere site-specific condemnation of the Northern Irish *status quo*. As Wallace argues: "With *The Cure at Troy*, Heaney elaborates on the idea of auratic human rights poetry by integrating it into a Greek chorus – and thus a larger narrative – rather than just presenting it as a free-standing lyric poem" (2015: 103-4). Thus, by alluding to the conflict in Northern Ireland, Heaney aspires to adopt a more expansive and sophisticated approach to times of crisis. In addition to mere protest, Heaney envisions poetic drama as an impetus to inspire real change.

Looking for instances in the opening Chorus that situate the action of the play in Northern Ireland, these are cleverly placed and require some scrutiny. These occasions are mostly found in the first part of the ode, where the Chorus addresses the lamentable circumstance in which it is embroiled. For example, by referring to "People so deep into | Their own self-pity self-pity buoys them up", the Chorus brings up the trope of victimhood: the foregrounding of personal suffering as a principal identity marker is an impulse symptomatic of the Troubles. By refraining from naming those directly concerned, opting instead for the generic "people", Heaney underscores the

detrimental ubiquity of the phenomenon. This way, Heaney warns "how suffering can be so intense and protracted that it obliterates all other frames of reference" (McGuire 2016: 22); clearly indicated in the play by the lines "And their whole life is spent admiring themselves | For their own long-suffering". Such profound self-absorption with personal trauma is taken as perilous and futile, as it leaves no room for further action.

A more direct reference to the conflict comes one line after: "People so staunch and true, they're fixated". With 'staunch', Heaney evokes the so-called 'staunch Unionists', the hardline loyalist supporters of the British Crown in Ireland. The juxtaposition of 'staunch' with 'true' creates an ironic tone, as Heaney mocks those individuals for their tendency to believe they are always correct. Still, the choral ode represents more a general disapproval of the conflict than the endorsement or condemnation of either side: "It might be tempting to assign Heaney's description of self-pitiers to Northern Irish republicans, and to read 'People so staunch and true, they're fixated' as a description of Unionist loyalists; but, in fact, the lines could equally apply to the rhetoric of either group" (Rankin Russell 2011: 175). Indeed, the following lines are exemplary of how the Chorus concretises the blind devotion shown by members of both sides, highlighted by the double usage of the determiners 'all' and 'every':

> *All* throwing shapes, *every* one of them
> Convinced he is in the right, *all* of them glad
> To repeat themselves and their *every* last mistake. (*CT*: 1; italics mine)

The Chorus openly denounces all protagonists of the conflict, as Heaney exposes the underlying narcissism sustaining their unwavering positions. "Heaney uses the 'polished stones' simile to suggest the self-regard of both republicans and loyalists who, Narcissus-like, gaze at themselves, an image of reflection that is heightened by their 'flashing' around their wounds 'like decorations'" (Rankin Russell 2014: 175). By introducing this imagery, Heaney insists on the apparent inability of those implicated to constructively distinguish between their pride and pain. Instead, they go about "Licking their wounds", a phrase that is repeated by Neoptolemus later in the play when he orders Philoctetes to "Stop just licking your wounds. Start seeing things" (*CT*: 74).[36] For Heaney, to 'see things' is to look outside the intricacies of one's self; an activity involved "with transforming of the given, with preferring the imagined over the endured" (Heaney 2002: 176). This is a pursuit

[36] *Seeing Things* (1991) is also the title of the poetry collection that Heaney had in the works, whilst writing *The Cure at Troy*. In addition to their temporal proximity, there seems to be a thematic correspondence between the two projects: "Just as in *the Cure at troy* Heaney had found formal and stylistic means, taking his cue from antiquity and the urgent present, to formulate a vatic voice which might be deployed on public issues of strife and division without embarrassment or presumption, so, in *Seeing Things*, he creates an inclusive frame of reference where journeys into another dimension prove to be a return to 'the heartland of the ordinary', and vice-versa" (Peacock 1992: 249).

that is in clear alignment with the Chorus' appraisal of poetry's attributes. "You're making me see things in such brilliant light | I can't bear it" (*CT*: 73), are Philoctetes' corresponding words when he finally accepts that his wound needs healing.

Actually, Heaney's analogy of single-mindedness to 'polished stones' has its antecedent. In 'Easter, 1916', W. B. Yeats famously commemorates the Irish republicans engaged in the Easter Rising, sacrificing themselves for Ireland's independence. On three occasions in the poem, Yeats introduces the image of the stone to emphasize the revolutionaries' singular obsession with the assigned mission:

> Hearts with one purpose alone
> Through summer and winter seem
> Enchanted to a *stone*
> To trouble the living stream.
> …
> Minute by minute they live:
> The *stone's* in the midst of all
> …
> Too long a sacrifice
> Can make a *stone* of the heart.
> O when may it suffice? (1996: 180; italics mine)

While Yeats's poem expresses more celebratory tones regarding the dead Irish republicans than Heaney's Chorus does for those directly involved in the Troubles, it remains intriguing that Heaney opted for the charged image of the stone to convey the fanaticism of the reported period. This could be read as a subtle yet powerful method of forging a connection between the events depicted in *The Cure at Troy* and those recounted by Yeats in 'Easter, 1916', as both poets contemplate on the economy of pain fueled by violent moments in Irish history. This is another way for Heaney to attach topical Irish significance to the events that are to take place on stage, thereby placing his play within a wider historical genealogy.

Altogether, Heaney succeeds from the outset to render his play pertinent to a lived experience of distress. What is more compelling in that respect is how Heaney casts attention on the communal aspect of such ordeal: Heaney manages to override the customary divisions between the usual suspects of the conflict, illuminating instead what he thinks to be a common place for all, namely pain as a foundational basis upon which the multifarious episodes of the Troubles are based. With the inaugural ode, Heaney conveys that the impending story of Philoctetes will be something that concerns all, regardless of ideological and political convictions.

The Cure at Troy stands at the epicentre of the division, ingeniously epitomized by the Chorus' self-confessed standing "between | the you the me and the it of it". By the same token, Heaney's asserted 'in-betweenness' surfaces as a politically engaged position, not necessarily keeping equal distances between two conflicting camps, but rather including both in the articulation of a newly formed reconciliation discourse. It is an intersubjective point of mediation authorizing Heaney to make an intervention, otherwise unimagined. As Heaney has claimed: "The Greek Chorus allows you to lay down the law, to speak with a public voice. Things you might not get away with in your own voice, in *propria persona*, become definite and allowable pronouncements on the lips of the Chorus" (Hass & Heaney 2000: 23). Within this scheme, Philoctetes' pain, his wound, and the searching for a cure, are part of a shared communal experience, and will be discussed in more detail next.

'A Home Where I Was Never at Home': Lemnos as a Counterimage of the Troubles

Once the connection between *The Cure at Troy* and the Troubles is discernible, some critics seek direct correspondences. They attempt to assign real-life counterparts to the characters or identify specific Irish factions associated with certain events in the play. For example, Owen Dudley Edwards argues that "we can take the character Philoctetes as being Heaney's idea of the predicament of the Northern Ireland Catholic, isolated and ignored since the partition of Ireland in 1920" (1997: 47). Similar to this, Peter McDonald claims that: "Philoctetes might, for instance, represent the wounded and betrayed community of the Catholic North, and Neoptolemus the sometimes confused liberal conscience (English or Irish) trying to steer a curse between the rival claims of Philoctetes and Odysseus" (1995: 196). Marilynn Richtarik's understanding of the play is entirely different arguing that "the most obvious political readings of *The Cure at Troy* centre on Philoctetes as a Unionist, with his magic bow representing the so-called unionist veto over constitutional change in Northern Ireland" (2018: 107). Terry Eagleton, on the other hand, focuses on Odysseus' "devious *realpolitik"*, naming him "the Charlie Haughey of Lemnos", the then serving Irish Taoiseach (1998: 375). Finally, Hugh Denard turns the tables on Philoctetes' characterization, claiming he is a Republican revolutionary, set against the loyalist group of Odysseus and Neoptolemus:

> if one imagines an alignment of Philoctetes with a broadly Catholic stance, and Odysseus and Neoptolemus as occupying something akin to a Protestant position, Philoctetes with his bow can easily be regarded as analogous to a pre-ceasefire I. R.A., or militant republican position. His arms are 'decommissioned' by deception at first – the promise to take him 'home' perhaps signifying the end of partition – and then by force. (2000: 4)

Given the above examples, there is a plethora of proposals about the likely matches between the protagonists of the play and palpable Irish ideologies.[37] However, what the various analyses collectively disclose is the impossibility of a coherent assignment of roles. For example, Odysseus gets portrayed both as a Catholic and a Protestant. Likewise, is Philoctetes a Unionist, whereas Odysseus and Neoptolemus are Republicans or *vice versa*? Critics tend to reach precisely opposite conclusions. The demonstrated indeterminacy complicates, if not renders fruitless, the task of finding clear pairings.

[37] Richtarik accordingly proclaims: "Interpretations of the play vary from seeing it as a parable about the reintegration of nationalist factions (including the 'men of violence') to regarding it as a comment on the necessity of including unionists in any realistic vision of a united Ireland" (2004: 200).

The same applies to Troy. What does its imminent destruction signify, once Philoctetes agrees to set sail there? Is it the old regime that will get abolished or does its sacking represent something else? Who are the Greeks and who the Trojans? As Oliver Taplin accurately notes:

> Troy's 'meaning' in the play's system of political reference is ostensibly clear; it refers to Northern Ireland. But there is the problem that it also refers to a place that is finally sacked and that this prelude to the final battle, which seems to be about a miraculous change, is not in any coherent sense really about an alteration that will bring reconciliation. Instead, it will bring victory to one side and defeat to the other. This can all be dismissed by denying that the play should be mapped precisely on to the Northern Irish situation. But that would, surely, be to say that it can be partially mapped in that way only up to the critical moment. Then the allegory or the reference system can be abandoned. This seems unsatisfactory. (2004: 162)

Taplin's concerns about Troy's shaky symbolism are symptomatic of an ingrained critical tendency to read the play in terms of clear-cut antithetical pairings, and then look in which camp Heaney's sympathies lie. Since Troy eventually gets destroyed, is this what Heaney insinuates that will happen to one of the two antagonizing groups? This certainly goes against the grain of the reconciliatory finale of *The Cure at Troy*. Such discrepancy raises questions about whether Heaney misjudged Troy's capacity to reflect Northern Ireland, or if there is an unacknowledged factor at play. In fact, the only way out is to abandon Troy as the primary reference point for the Troubles and focus on Lemnos.

Lemnos is the island where Philoctetes is marooned, and the place where the entire conflict between him and the Greek band takes place. Yet, its weight as a site of figurative signification is overlooked due to the intangible presence of Troy. As McDonald argues: "the play is about a man with a wound, and he will be cured at Troy. But Troy is a place only discussed in the play: Philoctetes' intent is finally to go there, but the wound and Lemnos are what is shown. It is obvious that this is Ireland and the Irish who have suffered" (1996: 132). It is therefore more appropriate to view Lemnos, rather than Troy, as a counterimage of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. This approach temporarily sets aside the problematic connotations of subsequent havoc and obliteration associated with the city of Troy. Also minding that "throughout the play intermittent volcanic activity on Lemnos functions as an objective correlative for the political and psychological turbulence which haunts and rives lives on and off-stage" (Parker 2016: 9), one is prompted to reevaluate Lemnos' symbolism in connection to the Troubles.

By viewing Lemnos as the foundation of all topical references to Northern Ireland, one is liberated from the futile task of determining each character's political conviction. Instead, it becomes clear that all on-stage incidents are relevant to those experiencing the Troubles firsthand, whether Unionist or Republican: "All parties are equally to blame in this drama where

intransigence is the obstacle to peace" (Torrance 2021: 284). Instead of entering into a 'who is who' contest regarding the Troubles, Heaney chooses to mirror the strife itself. This way, Heaney aims at representing the conflict from a holistic standpoint, namely to articulate what it means to be part of an ongoing experience of distress and suffering.

To accomplish this, Heaney foregrounds certain communal sentiments that succinctly capture the life prospects in Northern Ireland at the time. Particularly, Heaney places key utterances in the mouths of his characters, incorporating the everyday vocabulary of the Troubles. The following words by Philoctetes attest to this:

> Terrible times.
> I managed to come through
> But I never healed.
> My whole life has been
> Just one long cruel parody.
> This island is a nowhere. (*CT*: 18)

The insular reference to an island that "is a nowhere" applies both to Lemnos and Ireland. Heaney draws an analogy between the deserted Greek island that Philoctetes is stuck on and the sensation of entrapment that both Catholics and Protestants experience in places like Derry. Similarly, the "terrible times" that Philoctetes refers to, hint both at the ongoing wars in Troy and Northern Ireland. As for Philoctetes' bitter admission that he has "managed to come through," though not healed, it resonates directly with the original audience who carried on their backs nearly twenty years of turmoil, with no plausible prospects of resolution before them. This is even more the case when Philoctetes exclaims that "Every day has been a weeping wound | For ten years now. Ten years' misery and starvation" (*Ibid*. 19), a pronouncement that heightens the implication of his wound by elevating it into a collective trauma.

The examples above illustrate a potential alternative interpretation of Philoctetes' predicament, one that is less partisan and more inclusive. The anguish in Philoctetes' words sheds any Orange or Green nuances, pointing instead to a shared foundation of pain fueled by the political divide. This way, Heaney highlights certain feelings that insofar had remained muted. The end result is closer to a universal plea for help, an admission of defeat under sustained terror, rather than a targeted attack against a specific adversary. This culminates when Philoctetes, falsely believing that Neoptolemus will bring him back to Greece, bids farewell to Lemnos:

> We have to go, but before we go, I want
> To kiss this ground . . . Take one last farewell
> Of a home where I never was at home.

> Many's another would have given up.
> For most people, one glimpse of the life here
> Would have been enough. But I was fit for it.
> I matched necessity. I passed the test. (*Ibid*. 29)

The idea of a dwelling place that you cannot call home conveys the raw reality of the stalemate. With Philoctetes never being "at home" in Lemnos, Heaney brings out the ultimate truth about the daily life in the North: as long as the hostility persists, no one will be safe. In addition, Philoctetes' comment that "The island's all there is | That'll stand to me" (*Ibid*. 51) specifically recalls "the passionate attachment to the physical landscape of Ireland that, for many unionists, can coexist with their denial of any cultural affiliation" (Richtarik 2018: 107). This brings up an additional similarity between Lemnos and Ireland.

A final vindication that Lemnos represents something greater than a physical space comes when one compares the scene of Philoctetes' exit from the island in Sophocles and Heaney. In the ancient text, an assured Philoctetes seems to part completely with Lemnos: "Farewell, seagirt land of Lemnos, and send me off to a peaceful voyage, to the place where mighty Fate is bringing me, and the will of my friends and the all-taming god, who has accomplished this" (*χαῖρ', ὦ Λήμνου πέδον ἀμφίαλον, καί μ' εὐπλοίᾳ πέμψον ἀμέμπτως, ἔνθ' ἡ μεγάλη Μοῖρα κομίζει γνώμη τε φίλων χώ πανδαμάτωρ δαίμων, ὃς ταῦτ' ἐπέκρανεν*) (*Phil*. 1464-69). Contrastingly, in *The Cure at Troy*, Philoctetes carries the experience of confinement with him: "I'll never get over Lemnos; this island's going to be the keel under me and the ballast inside me. I'm like a fossil that's being carried away, I'm nothing but cave stones and damp walls and an old mush of dead leaves" (*CT*: 80). Philoctetes has been profoundly transformed by his exile, and although he finally escapes, he will always carry a part of the island with him. Specifically, the introduction of a nautical idiom ("keel" and "ballast" denoting 'base' and 'balance') to describe his everlasting association with Lemnos, demonstrates how Philoctetes' subsequent life is destined to hold remnants of his tormented past. Philoctetes has internalized what happened to him in Lemnos, and this anamnesis is set to function as a visceral compass.

Arguably, the overtones of Philoctetes' exodus from Lemnos are more pessimistic in Heaney than in Sophocles. Yet, this major contrast between the two authors unveils Heaney's treatment of Lemnos as a site of deep-layered signification. As Szabo claims: "Lemnos is a space of the mind, a limbo between reality and illusion, where solutions can be found but where hopes could be also destroyed. It is a 'no-man's-land' that provides the proper ground for discussions and solutions related to the conflict between personal loyalties and public calling" (2007: 181). If Philoctetes' suffering on the island mirrors the experience of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, preventing a complete blackout of these hardships is imperative for real progress to be made.

Philoctetes' reconciliation with the Greeks and, more significantly, the treatment of his wound, necessitate that he vividly remembers the events leading to this point. This is to prevent the repetition of mistakes and the reopening of old wounds. Heaney's Philoctetes must distance himself physically from Lemnos but remain connected mentally.

Heaney, then, seems to assert that the memory of the Troubles cannot – and should not – be erased, even if they are over. Similar to Philoctetes in Lemnos, people living in the North have been transformed by the hostile environment surrounding them. The protracted struggle, the long list of casualties, and the ongoing pain symbolically clustered around the island of Lemnos must not be buried in oblivion. Curiously, a successful breakaway from the painful reality of the Troubles entails the activation of a vivid reminder of this experience in the times yet to come. Philoctetes' avowal that he "will never get over Lemnos" is suggestive of this. As such, Heaney's Philoctetes is "part of the past and the future: he is what Ireland should be, one that can incorporate its past and sail into the future with a secure ballast" (McDonald 1996: 136). Therefore, having pinpointed Lemnos as the bedrock of the strife, the next step is to closely examine how the Troubles are represented in *The Cure at Troy*.

‘You’ve Turned Yourself into a Trojan, Lad’: The Intertribal Epistemology of the Troubles

As mentioned earlier, through the juxtaposition of the story of *Philoctetes* and the Troubles, Heaney is more interested in describing a phenomenon of discord than in assigning unambiguous historical roles to his characters. Throughout *The Cure at Troy*, there are several instances where the close reader senses Heaney’s effort to infuse his text with topical references to Northern Ireland. For Heaney, the imperative task is to convey the dynamics that arise when the individual conscience clashes with the demands of the group, along with the catastrophic repercussions of a factional mindset epitomized by the 'us versus them' mentality. Particularly, Heaney navigates the intricate triangle relationship of Odysseus, Neoptolemus, and Philoctetes to bring forth the conflicting forces of loyalty to the tribe and a broader solidarity with human suffering, as these are also manifested in his country.

From early on in the play, Odysseus sets the tone: “Just remember: you’re here to serve our cause” (*CT*: 6). This is the warning he gives to Neoptolemus, before disclosing that they will “work out some way | Of deceiving Philoctetes with a story” (*Ibid*.). Neoptolemus quickly understands that he does not represent himself in Lemnos, but the entire Greek army. He is a man on a mission, the projection of the Greek will. Odysseus, as the more seasoned of the two men, is responsible for keeping Neoptolemus on track: “And here we are then, Neoptolemus, | You and me. | Greeks with a job to do” (*Ibid*. 3). This phrase is crucial for understanding what Odysseus embodies: unwavering obedience to achieve an apparent higher goal. Failing to do so, will mean a blow to the whole Greek community. Appropriately, Odysseus’ biggest fear is that “the Greek cause is doomed” (*Ibid*. 7). In his mind, the communal goal of seizing the bow and taking Philoctetes to Troy justifies any means. When Neoptolemus questions his direct involvement in Philoctetes’ exile in Lemnos, Odysseus defends himself, claiming he merely followed orders: “Yes I left Philoctetes here. | Marooned him – but | Only because I had been ordered to” (*Ibid*. 3). It is evident that the normative Greek behaviour is goal-oriented: “My aim has always been to get things done | By being adaptable” (*Ibid*. 57), Odysseus exclaims. Indeed, Neoptolemus quickly discovers that political expediency takes precedence over virtuous behavior. Odysseus’ explicit words to him dispel any doubt: “Do it my way, this once. | All right, you’ll be ashamed | but that won’t last” (*Ibid*. 8).

Neoptolemus, however, is directed by an altogether different set of beliefs. “For Neoptolemus, just action is its own reward, although he understands that it is unlikely to be rewarding in the worldly sense of the word” (Richtarik 2018: 105). Grappling with his conscience, there is no way that tricking Philoctetes would not bring him shame. His ironic and reluctant stance toward Odysseus' instructions illustrates this:

> We're Greeks, so, all right, we do our duty.
> I don't think I could bear being called a traitor.
> But in all honesty I have to say
> I'd rather fail and keep my self-respect
> Than win by cheating. (*CT*: 8-9)

Neoptolemus struggles to embrace Odysseus' cynicism. He will do what is required, but only half-heartedly, as he considers the proposed scheme a "low behaviour" (*Ibid*. 8), a strategy that "boils down to a policy of lies" (*Ibid*. 9), simply put, a "Duplicity! [and] Complicity!" (*Ibid*. 11). As such, Neoptolemus is caught up in his own sense of truth and justice, suffering under Odysseus' coercion. "You don't think lying undermines your life?" (*Ibid*. 10), he questions Odysseus, being unable to follow his comrade's persuasion that trickery will "save the day" (*Ibid*.) for the Greeks. Even worse, when Neoptolemus asks him if "You can look me in the eye and still say that?" (*Ibid*), Odysseus authoritatively decries that "Scruples are self-indulgence at this stage" (*Ibid*.). Persistently in *The Cure at Troy*, the personalities of Neoptolemus and Odysseus are depicted to clash due to their fundamentally opposing values and approaches to moral dilemmas.

A daring interpretation of the Odysseus-Neoptolemus pair comes from Heaney himself. For Heaney, Odysseus and Neoptolemus do not necessarily represent two opposing ideologies or the generation gap between them, but they together reconstitute the divided self of those who grew up during the Troubles:

> Anyone who grew up in the north of Ireland from their moment of consciousness was aware of, if you like, a public dimension to their lives, they were bonded into a group, one side or the other side. And they were also living in the, you know, a personal, private intimate, the theatre of your own conscience and consciousness. So, the demand for solidarity was there from the start with your group, and if you were growing into some kind of authentic individual life, the imperative for solitude or self-respect or integrity or self-definition was there also. So there was always that little, sometimes quite often, an ill-fit between the group line, the party line if you like, and the personal condition. And that is precisely what drew me to *Philoctetes*, where… Neoptolemus is caught between the demands of loyalty and solidarity, he is a soldier on the Greek expedition and so he has to help the cause but in order to help the cause, he has to do something which infringes his own sense of truth and justice and self-respect, he has to tell a lie to this wounded man. So it's that friction between the demands of the group and the demands of the individual integrity. (Hardwick 2016: 2)

Heaney's confession is illuminating in terms of the play's hermeneutics. Although Philoctetes' wound and the cure it awaits manifestly relates to Northern Ireland, it is Neoptolemus' status that

serves as the common thread between what happens on and off stage. Stuck between the supposed collective good and personal autonomy, Neoptolemus' position resonates a well-known, supra-factional sentiment of suffocation. Characteristic of Neoptolemus' divided mind is the phrase he exclaims when he is gradually overtaken by pity and changes his mind over Odysseus' plan: "I'm all throughother" (*CT*: 48), a word "which will certainly need translation for a non-Irish audience" (Meir 1991: 98). Denoting someone who is in disorder and confused, Heaney uses this peculiar Irish word to express Neoptolemus' state of mind.

As such, the unremitting fight between collective cause and individual conscience becomes a dominant leitmotif in *The Cure at Troy*. "In crisis situations, as Odysseus knows, there is little room for the tender conscience. If your side wants to win politically, you all have to bond together. And that bonding can strangle truth-to-self" (Hass & Heaney 2000: 22). Especially because this collective action necessitates a hierarchical organizational structure, wherein the leader issues orders and the rest comply: "When the captain speaks, the crew has to obey" (*CT*: 58), the Chorus forcefully announces. Considering that Northern Ireland is also a place in crisis, it follows that this statement by the Chorus mirrors the overall *modus vivendi* there.

Neoptolemus finds himself entangled within this stringent model. He gradually starts to realize that his decision-making is controlled by a superior force. Although it severely torments him, this control cannot be bypassed. Characteristically, when Philoctetes demands his bow back, Neoptolemus refuses with affliction: "I cannot. | There's a cause, a plan, big moves, | And I'm part of them. I'm under orders" (*Ibid*. 51). Hearing this, Philoctetes insists that "Solidarity with the Greeks is a sham" (*Ibid*. 53), genuinely wondering whether "Are you all just yes-men?" (*Ibid*. 58). Such comment is not that far from the truth: with Philoctetes rebutting Neoptolemus, Heaney questions the limits of allegiance to an authority that has repeatedly abused its power. Being confronted by Philoctetes' suffering and the numerous injustices he has suffered from the Greeks, Neoptolemus' absolute duty and loyalty to the Greek cause is diminished to the point it seems farcical. Gradually, Neoptolemus realizes that he has also been a victim of the Greek mentality: "How did I end up here? Why did I go | Behind backs ever?" (*Ibid*. 53), he yells regretfully. "You did it because | You had agreed to do it" (*Ibid*.), savagely answers Odysseus refusing to acknowledge Neoptolemus' dilemma in all its complexity. So, Odysseus is not merely a pragmatist but an excellent bender of truth. With his arbitrary assessment of Neoptolemus' plight, it follows that Neoptolemus will also become expendable once he has succeeded in his mission.

To recapitulate, the opposition between Odysseus and Neoptolemus is not strictly personal, but pertains to broader ideological issues applicable to Northern Ireland. Specifically, Neoptolemus' change of heart translates to breaking the code of the tribe, something unforgivable as this is a "vital signifier in nationalist and unionist rhetorical structures" (Zirzotti 2014: 141). Once again, Heaney succeeds in rendering his play relatable to his home country and the Troubles.

If Odysseus embodies the calcified Northern Irish *status quo*, then Neoptolemus expresses a drastic subversion of such morals. The following dialogue is characteristic of this:

> Neoptolemus: I did a wrong thing and I have to right it.
> Odysseus: What was that?
> Neoptolemus: I did this whole thing your way.
> Odysseus: We were Greeks with a job to do, and we did it.
> Neoptolemus: I behaved like a born liar.
> Odysseus: But it worked. It worked, so what about it?
> Neoptolemus: Not for me. And I'm not leaving till the thing's put right. (*CT*: 64-5)

Following this heated conversation between Odysseus and Neoptolemus, "the gradual opposition between pragmatic tribal politics and a more open, humanistic ethics is unveiled" (O'Brien 2016: 251). Indeed, it is a bit comical that the two men fail completely to understand each other. Odysseus cannot process how Neoptolemus is not joyful, given that they have carried out their risky mission. For Odysseus what is correct and appropriate is to act according to the Greek interest. For Neoptolemus, on the other hand, righteousness possesses a more fluid and abstract subsistence. That is, a sense of justice that is not predetermined but subject to the givens one has before them. "You're capable, | Odysseus, and resourceful. But you have no values" (*CT*: 66), Neoptolemus utters with abhorrence. Truly, Odysseus has values, but these are near-sighted and outrageously utilitarian. As O'Brien elaborates: "For Odysseus, 'rightness' and 'justice' are values that are immanent in the ideological perspective of the tribe or community… He sees no sense of any transcendental or intersubjective form of justice in what Neoptolemus is attempting" (O'Brien 2016: 251). In a way, what Neoptolemus proposes is unthinkable for Odysseus, mainly because it is unknown to him. It is Odysseus' crumbling worldview that Neoptolemus challenges and seeks to upturn, by putting "Candour before canniness" (*CT*: 67).

Now, beyond the acknowledged dialectic between collective cause and individual conscience, there is another strong dynamic at play, typified by the 'us *versus* them' pair. This model engenders a binary way of understanding reality, exemplified by the idea that if one is not with us, then they are by default with the enemy. This polemical way of thinking is eminently restrictive, as it leaves no room for an alternative position between the two extremes. Especially in times of crisis, having to choose between two opposing camps becomes mandatory: one should be either Greek or Trojan, Republican or Unionist. If one individual fails to fully behave according to the set protocols of the group they theoretically represent, then they run the danger to be labelled as conspirators for the enemy: "That's real turncoat talk" (*Ibid*. 74), is a corresponding phrase sealing the play's prevailing atmosphere. The relentless expectation for everyone to serve as a role model for the community to which they belong can prove asphyxiating. In eras of conflict

and uncertainty, members of one's own tribe can be the harshest critics and very often the cause of one's downfall.

Heaney is bitterly aware of this tendency, as it is ubiquitous in all aspects of communal life in Northern Ireland. Accordingly, there are certain instances in *The Cure at Troy* where this formidable we/they distinction becomes palpable. Again, this becomes evident during an argument between Odysseus and Neoptolemus:

> Odysseus: What's so right about
> Reneging on your Greek commission?
> You're under my command here. Don't you forget it.
> Neoptolemus: The commands that I am hearing overrule
> You and all you stand for.
> Odysseus: And what about
> The Greeks? Have they no jurisdiction left?
> Neoptolemus: The jurisdiction I am under here
> Is justice herself. She isn't only Greek.
> Odysseus: You've turned yourself into a Trojan, lad,
> And that will have consequences. (*Ibid*. 67)

By hearing Neoptolemus proclaiming that he believes in a form of justice that overcomes the Greek command, Odysseus' immediate reaction is to portray Neoptolemus as a defector. The logic behind this is simplistic: since Neoptolemus does not conform to the Greek rules, he must be part of the Trojan camp. No further investigation is made as to whether Neoptolemus tries to convey something squarely different from a discourse of betrayal, namely the prioritization of unmediated justice over party politics.

Neoptolemus' viewpoint is radical, exactly because it escapes the 'us *versus* them' axiom, and tries to evaluate reality from a different standpoint. "There's a whole economy of kindness | Possible in this world" (*Ibid*. 37), he pledges to Philoctetes. Clearly, Neoptolemus sees things from a perspective that others fail to grasp. Translating this to Northern Ireland, Neoptolemus evades the intertribal epistemology of the Troubles dictating that any move or decision acquires meaning only when it is juxtaposed against the enemy. To give a vivid example of this: "What's the shame in working for a good thing? "(*Ibid*. 74), Neoptolemus asks Philoctetes. "But good for who? Me or my enemies?" (*Ibid*.), answers Philoctetes echoing the intertribal rivalry. Within this scheme, "a good thing" cannot be something shared, an outcome that is benefiting to all. This is the toxic mindset that Neoptolemus resists:

> [Neoptolemus] has moved beyond the intertribal epistemology of Odysseus, where not to be Greek necessitates one's being Trojan. Such a perspective severely limits one's range of choices: one is either Greek or Trojan— a parallel with the population of Northern Ireland being divided into the adversarial binarisms of Catholicism or Protestantism, nationalism or unionism, or republicanism or loyalism. That such identifications, such "firm roots," exist is beyond question; what is open to question, however, is whether it is wise to see them as all-encompassing, as doing so can cause the 'entrapment' that has mired Odysseus and from which Neoptolemus is determined to escape. Neoptolemus has moved into that third space, that third area, that becoming space of which we have spoken, and he dramatizes this more complex perspective throughout the play. (O'Brien 2016: 252)

So, it is erroneous to label Neoptolemus as a traitor when he chooses to chart his own course instead of following Odysseus'. He simply takes a completely different approach: attempting to persuade Philoctetes through openness and sincerity, recognizing that deception has yielded no results. Neoptolemus admonishes Philoctetes by inciting him that "You are to come | Of your own free will to the town of Troy" (*CT*. 72) and that "All this must come to pass" (*Ibid*. 73).[38] Neoptolemus does not seek to force Philoctetes to change, but to guide him to make that choice himself.

As in previous cases, the above sentences convey a double meaning: they not only relate to the Greek tragedy *per se*, but also signify a transformative shift in the assessment of the Troubles. Specifically, they encourage a course of action aimed at bridging the gap between the involved parties rather than exacerbating it. The intention is to demonstrate that generous behaviour constitutes a shared effort, benefiting everyone involved. Otherwise, as Neoptolemus forewarns Philoctetes, "The danger is you'll break if you don't bend" (*Ibid*. 75), an assessment that could very well serve as a coded warning concerning Northern Ireland.

[38] The last quoted sentence has a biblical resonance: "And ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars: see that ye be not troubled: for all these things *must come to pass*, but the end is not yet" (Matt. 24.6; italics mine).

‘Are You Going to Stay Here Saying No for Ever?’: The Northern Irish Conflict Incognito

Having systematically pinpointed the presence of a Northern Irish subtext in *The Cure at Troy*, it is surprising to see that Heaney has downplayed the deliberate existence of such underpinnings: “while there are parallels, and wonderfully suggestive ones, between the psychology and predicaments of certain characters in the play and certain parties and conditions in Northern Ireland, the play does not exist in order to exploit them. The parallels are richly incidental rather than essential to the version” (2002: 175). Considering this statement, it is curious that Heaney preferred his play to be received in such a nuanced manner. Are those occasions truly “richly incidental” or do their concealment add to the power of the intended reconciliatory message?

The impression that what unfolds on stage is in thematic proximity with the political situation in Northern Ireland can be justified in terms of the domestic language used. Throughout the play, Heaney makes an extensive use of Irish colloquialisms; words and phrases that are distinctly Irish. As Hugh Denard demonstrates:

> On a more general level, the language also serves to locate the version in a recognizably Irish context, with terms such as “slabbering,” “canny” and “canniness”, “hagged” (for “hacked”), “clouts,” “is his head away?” “shake-down,” “wheesht!” “that put me wild,” “I am astray,” “blather?” “shilly-shallyin,” “This is it . . .” becoming a statement of bewilderment, and the vernacular Heaney gives to the Sophoclean Merchant character, especially the use of the present simple in describing past events (“So Odysseus organises a night raid,” etc.), is also recognizably Irish. (2000: 4)

Yet, it is not only in the type of the language employed, where unmistakable references to Northern Ireland come up. It also relates to what is being said. There are several instances within the play that unavoidably draw parallels with the Troubles: “He’s condemning me to a death by hunger. | I am going to be a ghost before my time” (*CT*: 52), Philoctetes screams in agony, only to repeat a few moments later: “I am going to die here, | I’m going to die of hunger” (*Ibid*. 59). The spectator does not need to be Irish to call to mind the Republican hunger strikers upon hearing Philoctetes’ wailing words. The same goes for Hercules’ advice to Philoctetes and Neoptolemus to “Win by fair combat. But know to shun | Reprisal killings when that’s done” (*CT*: 79), echoing “the surge in sectarian tit-for-tat murders in Northern Ireland during the mid-to-late 1980s” (Parker 2016: 27). For the attentive reader with some knowledge of the Northern Irish affairs, such concealed allusions are not hard to decipher.

Yet, there are two more interrelated cases that demand further investigation to unveil their historic connection with the Troubles and its protagonists. The first involves an anathema directed by Philoctetes towards Menelaus and Agamemnon:

> God curse them all!
> I ask for the retribution I deserve.
> I solemnly beseech the gods to strike
> The sons of Atreus in retaliation. (*CT*: 19)

Philoctetes' vehement criticism of the Greek commanders mirrors the fiery denunciations made by Ian Paisley, the DUP leader, against Margaret Thatcher following the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement, which gave the Irish government a consultative role in Northern Ireland. While this development was considered by many a stepping-stone to ease the Troubles, it was fiercely opposed by the Unionist leader Paisley:

> We pray this night that thou wouldst deal with the Prime Minister of our country. We remember that the Apostle Paul handed over the enemies of truth to the Devil that they might learn not to blaspheme. O God, in wrath take vengeance upon this wicked, treacherous lying woman; take vengeance upon her, Oh Lord, and grant that we shall see a demonstration of thy power. (qtd. in Cochrane 2001: 27)

Actually, the main slogan of the Unionist protest campaign against the Anglo-Irish Agreement was the infamous 'Ulster says No'. Mass protests against the provisions of the treaty were held under this banner. With time, the slogan became exemplary of the steady suspicion towards any effort for compromise. Comparably, Philoctetes expresses his suspicion when Neoptolemus hands him the bow: "Where's the ambush? This I do not believe." (*CT*: 70). This is a very familiar reaction to any Loyalist or Republican faced with a constitutional impetus for change.

Also, in one of the most emotionally charged scenes of the play, Neoptolemus appeals to Philoctetes by invoking the Unionist 'No' propaganda but subverting its meaning:

> Neoptolemus: Do you deny
> The possibility of a change of heart?
> Philoctetes: Once was enough. You slithered in like this,
> All sincerity till you got the bow.
> Neoptolemus: Things are different now. I ask again:
> Are you going to stay here *saying no for ever*
> Or do you come with us? (*Ibid*. 69; italics mine)

Reading this, it is hard to believe that Heaney did not have in mind the Unionist reactionary stance. Neoptolemus challenges Philoctetes' obstinacy, and in that he simultaneously offers a critique on the Ulster crisis. By overturning the Unionist phraseology, Neoptolemus asks Philoctetes what purpose it serves to always react with hostility to any hint of change or progress. This, in turn, suggests that as long as the culture of refusal persists and forgiveness remains unfamiliar, the animosity in Northern Ireland will endure.

Minding the above examples, it is unlikely that all identified parallels to Northern Ireland are "richly incidental", as Heaney proclaimed. Instead, the Troubles and its protagonists are present as a subtext throughout the play. Therefore, it would perhaps be fairer to say that allusions to Northern Ireland are more 'incognito' than 'richly incidental'. This is not to say that Heaney wanted to confuse his audience or was dishonest about the play's relevance to his country.[39] The strength of such topical references rests in their subtlety, not in overemphasis: Heaney plants the idea of a potential resemblance between stage and real life, instead of shouting it out loud. Any alternative approach would likely fail, as magnifying this connection risks yielding unintended consequences. Explicitly stating the correspondence between Philoctetes' wound and the collective trauma of the Troubles would diminish the impact of the longed-for reconciliation message at the play's conclusion.

As it will be demonstrated in the following section, the culmination of such a message is found in the conclusive Chorus of the play. It is an encomium on hope that not only serves as a beacon for settlement and reconciliation, but also happens to be the most famous passage from *The Cure at Troy*.

[39] After all, Heaney "retrospectively dedicated [the play] to the victims of the 'Real IRA' bombing at Omagh in August 1998, which killed twenty-nine people and injured hundreds more" (Rankin Russell 2011: 173).

When 'Hope and History Rhyme': Pious Aspiration as an Antidote to the Troubles

As emphasized in the introduction, Heaney's major interpolations in the Sophoclean text occur at the outset and in the concluding sections of *The Cure at Troy*, respectively. Both times it is a choral ode that is superadded, encapsulating Heaney's poetic 'I'. In the introductory Chorus, Heaney describes the dystopian-like scenery of the Troubles, also establishing poetry's in-between position as the proper *medium* for one to speak of this period. Conversely, in the conclusive, Heaney delves into a visionary contemplation of reconciliation, recommending the advancement of hope as the only remedy to the sectarian division. As such, "it is precisely in the choric passages that Heaney most significantly uses his power *qua* poet to project hope, to make a kind of declaratory gesture" (Peacock 1992: 242). Correspondingly, in this section, it will be examined how Heaney speaks through the Chorus, with the ode serving as a plea for peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland.

The two extra passages thematically correspond to each other with the conclusive ode providing a resolution to the issues raised in the inaugural one. If, in the introduction of *The Cure at Troy*, the Chorus laments its entrapment in a vortex of violence, pain, and terror, the play's finale sees the Chorus pushing through adversity in an attempt to overcome the arduous stalemate. Considering also that the position of the second ode is quite strategic, coming just before Hercules' speech that finally softens Philoctetes and makes him befriend his former enemies, one realizes that the two additional odes signal the start and finish of an extended reconciliation mission. In this transition from discord to concord, Heaney assumes the role of a guide. Just as he directed the Chorus to convey and condemn the harsh reality of the Troubles, he now employs it to inspire those affected and carve out room for hope to prevail. Emphasizing the shared experience of suffering, the final Chorus implies that putting an end to it requires a collective effort. Therefore, Heaney communicates through the Chorus that the prospect of redemption persists if blind retribution can transform into mutual concession.

To quote the entire choral piece:

> Human beings suffer,
> They torture one another,
> They get hurt and get hard.
> No poem or play or song
> Can fully right a wrong
> Inflicted and endured.
>
> The innocent in gaols
> Beat on their bars together

A hunger-striker's father
Stands in the graveyard dumb.
The police widow in veils
Faints at the funeral home.

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

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

Call miracle self-healing:
The utter, self-revealing
Double-take of feeling.
If there's fire on the mountain
Or lightning and storm
And a god speaks from the sky

That means someone is hearing
The outcry and the birth-cry
Of new life at its term. (*CT*: 77-8)

Like with the inaugural Chorus, this ode can also be divided into two distinct parts. The first part consists of the first two stanzas, where Heaney touches on the collective and reciprocal aspect of suffering, assigning to it an exchange value. Pain is something that all humans give and take. It is the real currency of all human interactions. Pain and suffering are two primordial givens that go hand in hand with life. They are part of the innermost core of human experience, as if predating civilization itself. The assertive statement of the first couplet ("Human beings suffer, | They torture one another") contributes to the solidification of this idea. Also, the following sequence of people getting "hurt" and getting "hard" exposes the aftermath of suffering: humans not only suffer, but they are also physically transformed by it. Given that no human life is devoid of sorrow, the focus

lies more on how a community effectively addresses pain than on how an individual escapes it. The Chorus appears fully conscious of this when suggesting that "No poem or play or song | Can fully right a wrong | Inflicted and endured". By this, the Chorus rejects the view of art being a panacea of all ills. But, as Carr Vellino notes, "the counter-implication is that a poem may partly right a wrong. This pairing of injustice and poetic redress invites exploration of a possible relationship, however tenuous, between poetry and justice" (2008: 53). So, although poetry cannot eradicate injustice, it can at least confront it.

At this point, one may recall the following lines from W. B. Yeats's 'On Being Asked for a War Poem':

> I think it better that in times like these
> A poet's mouth be silent, for in truth
> We have no gift to set a statesman right;

Writing a poem about refusing to write a poem is another self-referential device, bespeaking the complications that arise for the poet when having to address a tough topic like war. Being asked by Henry James to compose a poem about World War I, Yeats questions the purposefulness of such assignment. Yet, Yeats's expressed pessimism about what positive input can poetry bring to politics in times of war, is undermined by the fact that Yeats answers in verse. Yeats yields to the temptation and crafts a war poem, even if it merely chronicles the futility of the arduous task before him. Similarly, in the concluding Chorus, Heaney addresses the manifestation of human misery, acknowledging that achieving its complete obliteration is beyond reach. For both Irish poets, while suffering cannot be circumvented, it seems crucial to be the focal point of poetic contemplation.[40] Evidently, with the Chorus Heaney puts forward "the question of art's efficacy as an agent of political and ethical amelioration" (Parker 2016: 26). Heaney is convinced that deep poetic reflection can indeed serve as a blueprint for a better world.[41]

The second stanza of the ode, although still dealing with the omnipresence of pain, is evidently more site specific, as Heaney refers to certain characteristic examples of suffering pertaining both camps of the conflict in Northern Ireland. Arguably, "this is the only place in the play where an allusion to the Troubles in Northern Ireland is so explicit and intrusive that it must

[40] Questioned early in his career whether he believes that in times of crisis 'poetry makes nothing happen', Heaney gave the opposite response: "It can eventually make new feelings, or feelings about feelings, happen, and anybody can see that in this country for a long time to come a refinement of feelings will be more urgent than re-framing of policies or of constitutions" (1972: 6).

[41] As another Northern Irish poet, Derek Mahon, has written, a good poem can be "a paradigm of good politics – of people talking to each other, with honest subtlety, at a profound level" (qtd. in Twiddy 2013: 426).

be recognized as such" (Taplin 2004: 160). Precisely, with the triple image of the innocent prisoners protesting, the father of a dead hunger-striker visiting his son's grave, and the wife of a murdered policeman collapsing, Heaney delivers a condensed description of the multiple variations of personal anguish in the Troubles.[42] These are the micro-histories of some representative victims, covering the whole ideological spectrum of the conflict. Significantly, the individuals mentioned are depicted to be entrapped in the same cluster of grief and violence giving rise to the idea that, despite their respective differences, their plight has a common denominator. Carr Vellino elaborates on this:

> The particulars of historical suffering in stanza two of the choral ode are the most obvious links to fifty years of twentieth-century sectarian strife in Northern Ireland, but Heaney, in his even-handed way, gives three different registers of that suffering. The first figure of social suffering, the innocent in jails, reminds us that before the waves of loyalist and IRA paramilitary retributive violence, there was an Irish civil rights movement inspired by Martin Luther King in the 1960s. This line also refers to the British governments' policy of interning suspected political militants such as the Guildford Four and the Maguire Seven without trial in the early seventies. The second figure of social suffering, the hunger striker's father, should be read as a sign of Heaney's regard for the human impact of the 1981 IRA hunger strikes in which ten prisoners starved themselves to death in an effort to have themselves classified as political prisoners by the British government… Heaney's final figure of suffering is that of a police widow. While police security forces were implicated in collusion with loyalist paramilitaries as the Stevens inquiries made clear, it is again the human cost that Heaney registers. With each of these three swift examples, Heaney compassionately catalogues the personal toll of three kinds of implications in the Irish dilemma from across the political spectrum. (2008: 53-4)

Whereas the prisoners and the father of the hunger-striker are presumably Republicans, the dead policeman is part of the Royal Ulster Constabulary police force, and hence most likely a Protestant with Unionist inclinations. What Heaney showcases with this antithetical pairing is that a shared experience of pain has the power to bring even the most profound enemies closer. After mutually acknowledging suffering, individuals with opposing backgrounds and ideologies can establish common threads of communication. Thus, although pain is the main ingredient of the Troubles, a thorough assessment of it could potentially serve as the cornerstone for any realistic reconciliation dialogue.

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[42] Heaney eventually regretted these obvious Northern Irish implants: "once the performances started I came to realize that the topical references were a mistake. Spelling things out like that is almost like patronizing the audience" (O'Driscoll 2008: 421). In fact, the second stanza of the conclusive Chorus was completely removed from the excerpt of *The Cure at Troy* included in Heaney's anthology *Opened Ground* (1998). This strengthens the claim that camouflaged allusions to the conflict are the ones that work best.

Moving on, the second part of the choral ode comprises the remaining four stanzas and is characterized by a sudden mood change. Misery is substituted by hope, pain and fear by optimism and miraculousness. As for the grim reality of the Troubles, it is now seen through the lens of poetic imagination. In this new scenario, "*The Cure at Troy* portrays suffering while rejecting a victim mentality. It escapes its present moment of composition and performance by offering hope for an imagined end to contemporary conflict" (Rankin Russell 2011: 182). With actuality gradually giving way to possibility, Heaney maps out an escape route from the bleak reality of the dispute. The concluding lines of the Chorus can be read as an open letter to all those who are afflicted, implying that relief from their woes is within reach if they choose to take a leap of faith and embrace hope.

The pivotal expression indicating a swift and uplifting turn of events is found in the final line of the third stanza, encapsulated in the somewhat enigmatic statement of making "hope and history rhyme". Given the underlying irony that acoustically the two words do not rhyme, one rightfully wonders what this phrase possibly means. Is the expressed sentiment a utopian impulse, or rather, a practical proposal fully applicable to reality? As Aidan O'Malley underlines: "The idea of making hope and history rhyme invokes immediately… a chiasmic relationship between a transcendental ideal and human interaction" (2007: 302). Moreover, the supposed "once in a lifetime" occurrence of such phenomenon adds to its singularity.[43] How this hope comes to being and what are its characteristics? To answer this, it is essential to get a grasp of Heaney's theoretical understanding of hope.

Hope, for Heaney, is a notion that possesses particular philosophical underpinnings. Being hopeful entails a unique way of looking and acting in the world; it has clear-cut moral and epistemological dimensions. As hinted in 'The Redress of Poetry', Heaney claims that the coveted redress effects of poetry provoke "something like an exercise of the virtue of hope as it is understood by Václav Havel" (1995: 4), the influential Czech writer and politician. To directly quote Havel's definition of hope:

> The kind of hope I often think about I understand above all as a state of mind, not a state of the world. Either we have hope within us or we don't; it is a dimension of the soul; it's not essentially dependent on some particular observation of the world or estimate of the situation. Hope is not prognostication. It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons. Hope, in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest

[43] In 'Exposure' from *North*, an ambivalent Heaney contemplates his decision to escape Ulster and move South, blaming himself for missing out "The once-in-a-lifetime portent, |The comet's pulsing rose". In *The Cure at Troy*, the corresponding "once in a lifetime" phenomenon of the tidal wave of justice conveys a more optimistic outlook.

> in enterprise that are obviously heading for success, but, rather, an ability to work for something that is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed… Hope is definitely not the same as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out. (1986: 181)

Taking cues from Havel's argumentation, Heaney delineates the kind of hope he advocates in *The Cure at Troy* as belonging "in the realm of pious aspiration" (O'Driscoll 2008: 421). Heaney asserts that while he lacks ready-made solutions to break the stalemate, he firmly contends that resolution is only achievable if the conflicting communities prioritize the triumph of hope. In essence, hope stands as the singular antidote to the poisonous furnace of violence in Northern Ireland.

Following Havel's train of thought, reconciliation is the only outcome that makes sense for Heaney, and 'Hope' the sole means to achieve it. Therefore, the rhyming of "hope and history" must be understood as a prayer, vocalizing a yearning to break the incessant reproduction of violence in Northern Ireland. If 'History' is life as it is normally experienced, rhyming with 'Hope' is life as it should be lived. To see how this is rendered intelligible:

> With every reason to side with a history that says, "Don't hope," the poet uses three powerful water metaphors—a "longed for tidal wave of justice," "a great sea-change on the far side of revenge," and miraculous "healing wells"—to convey the force of an astonishing hope based in the possibility of wrongs righted. More astoundingly, in stanza four, the speaker uses the imperative voice three times: "hope, believe, believe" the poem cries out in the face of catastrophic history. (Carr Vellino 2008: 54)

The escalating sentiment of miraculous redemption is affirmed by the certainty "that a further shore | Is reachable from here" (*CT*: 77).[44] This shore is no other than Northern Ireland, but this time detached from Lemnos and what it notionally represents. Consequently, compared to the Sophoclean precursor, the protagonists of the Troubles substantiated in Philoctetes' wound do not need to travel to another place to find the cure they desperately need, but to look for it within and between themselves. So, upon hearing that "The winds are blowing and the tides are high" (*Ibid*. 80), this is an inner journey that Heaney's natives are invited to embark on.

In the face of significant political upheavals, "Heaney succeeded in the construction of a language of compromise and cooperation, propounding a vigorous ethos of optimism that had not previously been considered feasible" (Kentrotis Zinelis 2021: 26). The compelling rhyming of "hope and history" is a direct outcome of this mindset. It is a public declaration to imagine a new

[44] Philoctetes' enthusiastic response also involves a water metaphor: "Something told me this was going to happen. | Something told me *the channels were going to open*" (*CT*: 79; italics mine).

reality for Northern Ireland “in the megaphone sense of the term” (O’Driscoll 2008: 385). Overall, Heaney mapped out an escape plan from the Troubles, exemplified by the treatment of Philoctetes’ wound. *The Cure at Troy* turns out to have a happy ending, becoming a frame of reference for the peace process in Northern Ireland. “I feel I’m part of what was always meant to happen, and is happening now at last” (*CT*: 80), are Philoctetes’ last words before setting sail to Troy to find the cure he desperately needs, a statement that is all too pertinent to the peace talks in Northern Ireland. As a result, the following comment by Stephen Wilmer feels rather apt: “the Greek tragedies have been used by Irish poets not so much to express tragedy as to express hope – a hope that comes out of years of tragedy” (1996).

Remarkably, “the vision Heaney presents at the end of *The Cure at Troy* seemed utopian in 1990, but it would be realized to an extent that no one then could have predicted before the end of the decade” (Richtarik 2018: 110). Judging from its immediate impact, Heaney’s play was literally a ray of hope shining over Northern Ireland, as the "hope and history" verdict transcended the confines of theatre to influence the political sphere, both in Ireland and abroad, prompting Hugh Denard to acknowledge that *The Cure at Troy* is among the "few other dramatic texts which can claim to have acquired such prominence in the political affairs of modern times" (2000: 2).

After the Troubles: The Hopeful Afterlife of a Historic Verse

The Troubles officially ended on 10 April 1998, with the signing of the so-called Good Friday or Belfast Agreement, ratified by two referenda in both Ireland and Northern Ireland. With this in effect, the violence and atrocities from both opposing camps were largely put to a halt. To borrow Heaney's *dictum*, such agreement signified the work of hope in history. This is not an overstatement considering that *The Cure at Troy* never really left the spotlight until the securing of the agreement. As Taplin remembers: "The phrase 'Hope and history rhyme' even went on to supply newspapers with their front-page headlines at the time of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998" (2004: 145). This indicates how influential Heaney's play has been in the coming ground-breaking developments in his country. In the subsequent years, the desire to make "hope and history rhyme" would attain a talismanic status, being used "by politicians of various political stripes" (Richtarik 2018: 99), and eventually come to be seen as synonymous with transformation and advancement in world politics.

The earliest politician to quote Heaney was Mary Robinson, the first female politician to be elected President of Ireland. On 3 December 1990, a couple of months following the staging of *The Cure at Troy*, Robinson concluded her inaugural address by invoking Heaney's famous lines:

> May God direct me so that my Presidency is one of justice, peace, and love. May I have the fortune to preside over an Ireland at a time of exciting transformation when we enter a new Europe where old wounds can be healed, a time when, in the words of Seamus Heaney 'hope and history rhyme'. (2012: 180)

Robinson's declaration serves as clear evidence of how rapidly Heaney's lines have been integrated into the Irish consciousness. Also, in the opening ceremony of the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation established in Dublin in 1994, Dick Spring, the then Irish Minister for Foreign affairs, read aloud the same lines to set the tone for the Forum's workings.[45] In both instances, the speculative assertion of the alignment between "hope and history" comes to fruition through its connection with concrete political initiatives.

Even more profound is the application of the phrase in Northern Ireland. This came from Bill Clinton, who made a presidential visit in Derry on 30 November 1995, to assist the peace initiative. Today, Clinton's historic visit is generally regarded as catalytic for the securing of the Good Friday Agreement, "bringing the weight of American influence and dollars to bear on the

[45] Also, Jacques Santer, the then President of the European Commission, quoted Heaney's lines upon addressing the Forum in 1995 (Zirzotti 2014: 9).

Northern Irish peace process" (Denard 2000: 1). Standing in the square facing Guildhall – literally in front of the building where *The Cure at Troy* was staged – Clinton addressed an ecstatic mixed crowd of Catholics and Protestants, commending them to give peace a chance. Memorably, Heaney's lines on hope lay at the heart of Clinton's speech:

> Well, my friends, I believe. *I believe we live in a time of hope and history rhyming*. Standing here in front of the Guildhall, looking out over these historic walls, I see a peaceful city, a safe city, a hopeful city, full of young people that should have a peaceful and prosperous future here where their roots and families are. That is what I see today with you. (qtd. in Impens 2021: 225; italics mine)

It is indeed extraordinary how Clinton reiterated the famous Chorus lines only a few steps outside the theatre where they were first heard. As such, Heaney's appeal to hope would manifest in a profound and prolific manner, taking on tangible form and substance. In Clinton's words, the Northern Irish people would witness the political realization of what Heaney had proposed a few years earlier in the form of a theatrical play.[46] With this, the hope invoked in *The Cure at Troy* was really becoming part of history.

Clinton came to consider his Derry visit as one of the most significant moments of his presidency. The following year, in the time preceding his re-election in the White House, Clinton would publish a book entitled *Between Hope and History: Meeting America's Challenges for the 21st Century* (1996). In there, Clinton narrates what he thinks to be the most fundamental principles and accomplishments of his first term in the White House.[47] The title's obvious allusion to Heaney's line validates the burgeoning strength of such verse. Now, the "hope and history" maxim is disengaged from its Northern Irish origins and transplanted into the entirely new terrain of American politics. This can be regarded as the decisive step for the phrase to attain a universal stature, as since then its connotations gradually change and extend to denote a numinous code of political conduct.

In fact, Bill Clinton is not the only United States President to cite Heaney. Within this tradition, Joe Biden has been recorded to use Heaney's phrase three times, before assuming office. Two times as Vice President, "at a memorial service for the Boston Bombing in 2013, and again in a speech he gave about Israel and Palestine" (McGuire 2019: 26). More recently, the phrase

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[46] Taplin makes known that "on the wall of his home at Chappaqua, NY, Clinton has a framed postcard from Heaney which says, 'It was a fortunate wind that blew you here.' This is from the closing lines of *The Cure at Troy*" (2004: 145).

[47] Two more books written by leading political figures have borrowed their title from Heaney. The first is by Gerry Adams, the long-serving leader of the Irish Republican Sinn Féin party, who, in *Hope and History* (2003), discusses his direct involvement in the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. The second is by Nadine Gordimer, the late South African writer and anti-apartheid activist, who published a volume of political essays entitled *Living in Hope and History* (1999).

emerged at the Democratic National Convention on 20 August 2020, marking Biden's official nomination for the upcoming presidential elections. Concluding his victory speech, Biden addressed the audience: "Are you prepared? I believe we are. This is our moment to 'make hope and history rhyme'" (Armus 2020). It is plausible to assert that Heaney's verse has become the focal slogan of Biden's campaign to win the elections, especially given that on 29 October 2020, Biden released a video on his official YouTube channel where he recited the entire Choral ode (Biden 2020).

To return now back to *The Cure at* Troy, a particular observation stands out. Following this long chain of politicians embracing Heaney's invocation to hope, it is remarkable how the seminal traces of *Philoctetes* are progressively getting lost. That is, although the rhyming of "hope and history" was arguably the culminating moment of a very influential Irish version of the eponymous ancient play, the implicated phrase now seems to enjoy an independent standing. As exhibited in the political jargon of today, the phrase acts as a stimulus to inspire change and societal improvement. It is actually questionable as to whether those using it are mindful of its initial context, namely the verse's relation to the Troubles in Northern Ireland, let alone the ancient source-text standing behind. Presently, it could be said that the "hope and history" maxim stands alone, disassociated from Philoctetes' story of hatred and reconciliation, anger and forgiveness.

Yet, one could argue that Heaney would likely be delighted with this outcome. As hinted in the opening section of this analysis, by appropriating the story of *Philoctetes*, Heaney did not aim at limiting his scope to the intricacies of the conflict in his home country, but taking cues from this event, he aspired to establish a firmer and wider response model to times of crisis. There is little room to deny that Heaney made this happen: judging from its ongoing reception, *The Cure at Troy* is as much an Irish adaptation of a Greek tragedy with topical affinity to the sectarian division in Northern Ireland as much a contemporary Irish play with universal resonance and applicability, now that the Troubles are over and Philoctetes' wound is cured.

The Burial at Thebes: Antigone Keening Beyond the Pale

Antigone Again: The Unsung Legacy of *The Burial at Thebes*

As hinted in the introduction of this chapter, *The Burial at Thebes* was a project marked by considerable hesitation for Heaney. Adapting *Antigone* did not come as naturally to him as adapting *Philoctetes*, partly because the latter was his personal choice, whereas *Antigone* was a request from the Abbey board. Situated chronologically in a post-Troubles era and lacking Field Day's intellectual guidance this time, the preparation of *Antigone* for the Irish stage could not simply follow the trodden path. Specifically, the time period from 1990 to 2004 separating the two plays brought about significant changes to both Heaney and his country: not only was it a drastically different Ireland that Heaney was faced with, but in the meantime Heaney's voice as a Nobel laureate author had been amplified, reaching international stature.

Heaney's initial struggle with *Antigone* is central to the critical understanding of the play, considering also that he vocalises his doubts in the endnote of *The Burial at Thebes*:

> The invitation to translate *Antigone* for the Abbey's centenary programme was an honour, but at first I wasn't sure whether to accept. How many *Antigones* could Irish theatre put up with? Round about the time the idea was floated, Conall Morrison was touring his adaptation, setting the action in a Middle Eastern context, and a little earlier I had read in a manuscript a scholarly and illuminating translation by Professor Marianne McDonald. And if that weren't enough, I had to face the fact that Brendan Kennelly, Tom Paulin and Aidan Carl Mathews had all done their own versions of this particular tragedy, so why take it up again? (*BT*: 75)

On one hand, the plethora of Irish *Antigones*, and on the other, the assumed scarcity of innovative approaches to the Greek play, outline Heaney's position at the outset of the creative process in writing *The Burial at Thebes*. If with Philoctetes Heaney feared that the Greek hero would be largely unfamiliar to Irish audiences, now things are reversed, with Antigone being very well known in Ireland. With a fixed canon of Irish *Antigones* laying ahead, Heaney recognized the implicated dangers to fit in his version.

The entire issue comes down to one question: how could Heaney make *Antigone* 'his own', creating a play markedly different from those recently staged by his peers, but still distinctly Irish? Also, with Heaney having used Greek tragedy to address the Troubles, another looming challenge in adapting *Antigone* involved the new way he would have to integrate various Irish elements in his text. The singular issue that tantalized (Northern) Ireland for nearly forty years had been constitutionally met, opening up the potential for Greek drama to be associated with other Irish

concerns. This outcome, however, could momentarily create uncertainty for an author who previously reworked an ancient play in a more straight-forward, goal-oriented manner. Neil Corcoran, in his Guardian review of the play, comments:

> This version is less transparent to specific political instance than *The Cure at Troy*, even if Tiresias's encouragement to Creon must sound with particular resonance from a poet whose work has been so profoundly involved in the matter of Northern Ireland: "All men make mistakes. | But mistakes don't have to be forever. | They can be admitted and atoned for. (2004)

Given the evolving historico-political climate in Ireland, it follows that, in terms of content, *The Burial at Thebes* could not be as monothematic as *The Cure at Troy*.

A crucial point when assessing Heaney's Greek plays is the critical attention they have received over time. One quickly notices an asymmetry: the number of entries in peer-reviewed journals and edited volumes dedicated to *The Cure at Troy* is greater than those about *The Burial at Thebes*. Although the difference in the production time of the two plays could partially explain this phenomenon, and perhaps in the future more research will be conducted on *The Burial at Thebes*, still Heaney's reception of *Philoctetes* has proven the most noted and studied endeavour. This is not to say that *The Burial at Thebes* has been neglected, but it surely did not have the same impact as *The Cure at Troy* had had, culturally speaking and in academia.[48] This discrepancy supports the case that the two Heaneyan revisions were composed at two distinct moments in Irish history: *The Burial at Thebes* during a comparatively more peaceful and less eventful period than *The Cure at Troy*. Consequently, this disparity explains why the latter overshadows the former in terms of scholarly recognition.

Overall, the main sources of commentary about *The Burial at Thebes* come from Heaney himself, who has spoken at length about the composition of his play. Other than that, on the occasions that *The Burial at Thebes* was in the spotlight by other critics, it seems to have generated mixed feelings:

> From the very beginning, controversy surrounded the play, critics disapproving of the change of title, considering that, by changing *Antigone* into *The Burial at Thebes* the focus of the play shifts from the heroine who fights for the familial right of burial, to the burial itself, to the dead hero

[48] Interestingly, Heaney seems to value higher his artistic output in *The Burial at Thebes* than in *The Cure at Troy*. Enumerating the reasons why, he noted: "For one thing, I had a different purchase on the actual line-by-line writing, and more pleasure in it. The blank verse in *The Cure* came to feel like a container for the paraphrasable meaning. There wasn't any great job of fashioning being done – whereas, in *The Burial*, I started with the idea of making different metrical provisions for different characters and different phases of the action, which gave me a far greater sense of mining a verbal face" (O'Driscoll 2008: 422).

> brother, leaving the female protagonist in the background and giving way to yet another patriarchal interpretation of the text. (Szabo 2007: 185)

In the following sections this view will be rebutted, particularly in the context of funeral rites and the keening of the dead, which are central to the Irish sense of self. Actually, the shift of the title's focus to 'burial' became Heaney's way to adopt "a wider Celtic frame that affords [his] Irish Antigone representative status" (Harrison & Macintosh 2019: 4). Heaney recognized in Antigone's defiant act of burying Polyneices a mythic equivalent to a central Irish practice that permeates both public and private life. Hence, the explicit emphasis on burial is not a miss, as some critics may have claimed, but Heaney's way to Irishize *Antigone*.

The fact that Heaney's version of *Antigone* was the first to emerge in a post-conflict context will be a central consideration of this analysis. As Macintosh insinuates: "Perhaps, the difficulty for Heaney was not simply (as he implied) that he was writing within a long tradition of Antigones, but that he was writing at the end of a particular tradition and at the dawn of a new one" (2011: 102). Indeed, at the beginning of the 21st century, Ireland was gradually freeing itself from a long period of arduous navel-gazing. Many Irish writers began to think about Ireland's wider place in the world and the way Irish literature could be globally relevant, without losing any of its peculiar traits. Heaney, once again, pioneered in this: in *The Burial at Thebes* Heaney looks in and out of the Irish border and comes up with a play that interlaces certain ingrained Irish elements with the prevalent international events of the day like the war in Iraq and George W. Bush's detrimental foreign policy. Truly, Marianne McDonald's assertion that "This is the tragedy of Ireland; this is the tragedy of the world" (2019: 146) solidifies Heaney's achievement in *The Burial at Thebes*.

What follows is an examination of how this is made possible, specifically how Heaney uses the Antigonean themes to align local Irish elements with the current affairs of the time.

'And Bury Him, No Matter…?': From Thebes to Toomebridge

By changing the title of Sophocles' tragedy, Heaney places the act of burial at the epicentre, designating 'burial' as the driving force of *Antigone*. The (non)buried status of Polyneices serves as the catalyst of the events that are about to unfold: Antigone's decision to take care of the corpse that laid unattended precipitates the imminent bloodbath and decimation. Both Creon and Antigone are well aware of the significance of Polyneices' burial, and for their respective reasons, they actively resist or endorse such act. Antigone's insistence to perform funeral rites to Polyneices is a palpable gesture of inclusion and recognition, whereas Creon's edict to let Polyneices rot translates to his erasure from the chronicles of the *polis*. Either way, the handling of the dead is never neutral, but rather pertains to an intricate nexus of power relations between competing powers. Burial is as much a political act as a spiritual and familial affair.

Starting with Sophocles, the first direct mentioning of burying Polyneices' body comes from Antigones' sister Ismene, who fearfully asks: "So, you plan to bury him, although it is forbidden by the city?" (*ἦ γὰρ νοεῖς θάπτειν σφ', ἀπόρρητον πόλει;*) (*Ant.* 44). Here, it becomes immediately evident what the act of burial opposes, namely the state of Thebes embodied by Creon. Politically, Polyneices is considered a traitor, and Creon, occupying the seat of power of Thebes, is the one to judge about the future of Polyneices' body. Heaney, in the corresponding passage from *The Burial at Thebes*, makes Ismene to imply this by using three suspension points instead of referring directly to the city of Thebes or Creon: "And bury him, no matter…?" (*BT*: 8). In this case, the attention switches from the repercussions that Antigone will face by laying dust on Polyneices – "The common handful of clay" (*Ibid*. 7) as Antigone defines it – to her steadfast resolve to accomplish the deed. Clearly, Antigone's determination is a product of a different value system: Antigone asks Ismene whether "Are we sister, sister, brother? | Or traitor, coward, coward?" (*Ibid*.), thus prioritizing familial bonds over the control and jurisdiction of the state.

Remarkably, the above confrontation that mythically took place in Thebes, was re-enacted in real life in Toomebridge, a small village in Northern Ireland. Ironically, the etymology of the placename comes from the Irish word *tuaim*, connoting a burial mound. In place of Polyneices there was Francis Hughes, an Irish hunger striker who died on 12 May 1981, after refusing any food for fifty-nine days. Hughes followed Bobby Sands in a total of ten Republican men that starved to death in the so-called H-Blocks of Maze prison, collectively demanding to be recognized as political prisoners.[49] Heaney was personally affected by this loss, as he was part of the wider circle of the deceased:

[49] According to Heaney, Francis Hughes was "one of a group of IRA prisoners ready to make the ultimate sacrifice for what were known at the time as the five demands. Basically these demands constituted a claim by the prisoners to political status, a rejection of the demonizing terminology of criminal, murderer and

> Although I had never known [Hughes] personally, our families had been friends for a couple of generations and I had grown up friendly with his older brothers and sisters. So, because of all those ties of memory, affection and community, my mind kept turning towards that corpse house in Co. Derry… What was in the eyes of the world at large the death of an IRA hunger striker was in the eyes of a smaller, denser world the death of a son and a neighbour. (Heaney 1995: 186-7)

Echoing the dual identity of Polyneices – a traitor for Creon, a brother for Antigone – Francis Hughes was viewed differently by distinct groups of people. This phenomenon culminated the day that Hughes' body was meant to be transferred from Maze prison to his family home in Toomebridge for the wake and funeral. Instead of the body to be immediately released and handed over to Hughes' family, "it was escorted 'as state property' by the police along some thirty or forty miles from the Maze prison to Toome, generating a rage in the awaiting crowd" (Torrance 2020: 331). Similar to Polyneices, Hughes' body becomes a site of struggle, contested between two rival parties: Hughes' family and the British police.

Naturally, the illicit capture of Hughes' body by the British authorities was majorly condemned by Irish public opinion, especially between the Republican sympathisers, militant or more moderate.[50] As Heaney explains:

> The surge of rage in the crowd as they faced the police that evening was more than ideological. It did of course spring from political disaffection, but it sprang also from a sense that something inviolate had been assailed by the state. The nationalist collective felt that the police action was a deliberate assault on what the Irish language would call their *dúchas*, something that is still vestigially present in English-speaking Ulster in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. (Heaney 2004b: 413)

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terrorist, and an assertion of their rights to wear their own clothes, to abstain from penal labour and to associate freely within their own cell block. Faced with all this, Margaret Thatcher and her government were predictably inflexible and between 5 May and 30 August 1981, ten hunger strikers died, resulting in a steady issue of emaciated corpses from the gates of the prison and repeated processions of miles long funeral crowds through the gates of cemeteries" (2004b: 412).

[50] *The New York Times* reported the electrified atmosphere at the day of the funeral: "the funeral procession this afternoon to a country churchyard in this peaceful little village 25 miles west of Belfast was accompanied by masked paramilitary commandos in battle dress… The tense military mood - set not only by the hard-looking young men with their masks and guns but also by four British Army helicopters that clattered overhead… More than 5,000 people turned out for his funeral, many of them having to walk several miles across country because the hundreds of policemen patrolling the remote area in bulletproof vests had closed off most roads leading into Bellaghy. When the cortege reached the 100-year-old graystone church, the Rev. Michael Flanagan, the Hughes family's parish priest, was at the gate, carefully observing the policy of the Roman Catholic Church on I.R.A. funerals: The paramilitary activities stopped at the church door as Father Flanagan and several altar boys led the procession inside" (Borders 1981).

Dúchas is one of those Irish words that remain largely untranslatable. In an attempt to clarify the term, the Irish critic Brendan Devlin offers an extended definition:

> In an effort to explain it in English, the Royal Irish Academy's dictionary of the common old Gaelic languages uses such terms as 'inheritance, patrimony; native place or land; connection, affinity or attachment due to descent or long-standing; inherited instinct or natural tendency'. It is all of these things and, besides, the elevation of them to a kind of ideal of the spirit, an enduring value amid the change and the erosion of all human things. (1986: 85)

The Irish *dúchas* can be described as a set of values shared amid one's community and kin. It is a sacred domain, impenetrable by external forces. In fact, Heaney makes his Antigone reflect this when she exclaims to Ismene: "What are Creon's rights | When it comes to me and mine?" (*BT*: 9). From this standpoint, Polyneices' burial surfaces as a strictly personal matter for Antigone. By extension, Antigone follows a code of behaviour that rules out Creon's influence as head of state: "I'm doing what has to be done" (*Ibid*. 12), she assuredly announces. To this Antigone adds that "There's no shame in burying a brother" (*Ibid*. 32), an assertion that reflects her total lack of remorse to do what she thinks correct, whether prohibited or not. Polyneices, an "anti-Theban Theban prepared to kill" (*Ibid*: 17) according to Creon, is for Antigone "no common criminal" (*Ibid*. 33). Interestingly, Antigone's evaluation of Polyneices echoes and upturns Margaret Thatcher's infamous saying that 'Crime is crime is crime, it is not political' about Francis Hughes and the rest IRA hunger-strikers.

Certainly, one of Heaney's notable achievements in *The Burial at Thebes* is the echoing of an unmistakably Antigonean episode of contested burial occurring in Northern Ireland.[51] Heaney has been clear about this: "If we wanted… to find a confrontation that paralleled the confrontation between [Antigone] and King Creon we could hardly do better than the incident on the street in Toomebridge" (2004b: 413). To give a vivid example, Creon's pronouncement against Polyneices resonates with the bitter events surrounding Hughes' funeral:

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[51] Michael Parker brings up two more events coinciding with *The Burial at Thebes* that inform the play's political context: "Two other unresolved local narratives haunted the sixteen-month period that Heaney worked on *Antigone*. Around the time the Abbey commission was mooted, Westminster and Dublin governments intensified pressure on the Provisional IRA to accelerate decommissioning weapons and to reveal the whereabouts of the remains of the 'disappeared', seventeen people abducted, killed and secretly interred during the first decade of the Troubles… Largely concurrent with this focus on the fate of the 'disappeared' was media coverage of the Saville Inquiry into Bloody Sunday, set up by the Blair government in Westminster in January 1998 to establish the truth about the killing of thirteen civilian demonstrators by the British Army in Derry on 30 January 1972. It was a recognition of a need for redress and intended to advance the Peace Process. For Heaney, the central conflict addressed in Sophocles' play was not dissimilar to that surrounding the victims of Bloody Sunday, who in a figurative sense remained 'unburied', despite the solemnities held for them in early February 1972" (2019: 104-5).

> He is forbidden
> Any ceremonial whatsoever.
> No keening, no interment, no observance
> Of any of the rites. (*BT*: 17)

Knowing Hughes' story, Creon's words are conspicuously relatable. Like Creon, the state authorities did everything in their power to not allow Hughes' relatives and friends to properly mourn him. In a sense, Heaney's Antigone experiences a violation comparable to the events in Toomebridge, and like the Irish crowd, she decides to take action and perform the funeral rites, as the protocol dictates. Bringing the two incidents together, it follows that "Both the civilians' opposition to the English soldiers and Antigone's position are interpreted as forms of loyalty to the *dúchas*" (Zirzotti 2014: 137). They represent a set of unwritten rules that both Antigone and the Irish Republicans fervently adhere to.

In light of this, and to underline the centrality of 'burial' in his adaptation, Heaney concedes the following:

> Putting 'burial' in the title signals to a new audience what the central concern of the play is going to be. But because it is a word that has not yet been entirely divorced from primal reality, because it recalls to us our final destiny as members of the species, it also reminds us, however subliminally, of the solemnity of death, the sacredness of life and the need to allow in every case the essential dignity of the human creature. Wherever you come from, whatever flag is draped on the coffins of your dead, the word 'burial' carries with it something of your *dúchas*. It emphasizes, in other words, those 'Instinctive Powers of Feeling, Love and Kinship' which authority must respect if it is not to turn callous. (2004b: 426)

Heaney indicates that 'burial' and its rituals have never ceased to be important, from Sophocles' time to today's Ireland. Aptly quoting Hegel, Heaney suggests that the way communities pay their respects to the dead is indicative of the "Instinctive Powers of Feeling, Love and Kinship" (2019: 1796), which motivates Antigone as well as Hughes' family and friends, understanding it as their *dúchas*. Familial oversight over burial practices and civic expression of grief is something that any political authority, whether Creon or Thatcher's cabinet, needs to make room for and comply with, so as not to become tyrannical.

Having shown how the unrest in Toomebridge has served as the contextual framework for *The Burial at Thebes*, the next section considers how Heaney looked for inspiration in traditional Irish lament songs, attempting to find a fitting voice for his Antigone.

Looking for that Three-beat Line: An Irish Lament for Antigone's Grief

Reading through *The Burial at* Thebes, one expects a certain number of interventions to the ancient text, similar to *The Cure at Troy* and the two extra choral parts inserted there by Heaney. However, this is not the case: Heaney admits that "when I came to do the *Antigone*, I kept much more strictly to the original" (O'Driscoll 2008: 421). Recalling that Heaney's additions to *Philoctetes* were essentially the passages in which most of the key Irish allusions were found, the absence of such passages from *The Burial at Thebes* makes one wonder whether this time an Irish substratum really exists.

Yet, there are some other strategies that Heaney follows to Irishize *Antigone*, apart from the infusion of the Sophoclean text with additional passages directly related to Ireland. Heaney once stated about *The Burial at Thebes* that "Even though there was an urgent political context, there was no writerly urge" (Heaney 2005: 171). Heaney found an Irish solution to this problem in discovering in traditional Irish lament songs a cure for his writer's block: "The eye of the needle I passed through in order to re-enter the kingdom of Thebes was an Irish one and I found it in the nick of time, the night before I was due to give my decision to the Abbey Theatre's artistic director" (Heaney 2004b: 422). Accordingly, it will be argued that the rich legacy of Irish lament songs serves as an indispensable component of the play's hermeneutics and of its critical reception. In addition to this, it will be shown how Heaney – without deviating at any point from the Sophoclean source-text – achieves to incorporate into the characters of *The Burial at Thebes* and especially Creon certain keywords and mannerisms reminiscent of some groundbreaking contemporary historical events and their perpetrators.

Not knowing Greek, and similar in his dealing with *The Cure at Troy*, Heaney had to rely on English translations of *Antigone*, in this case two substantially older ones by R.C. Jebb (1904) and E.F. Watling (1947), and a more recent by Hugh Lloyd-Jones (1994) (McGuire 2017: 292). Given the almost half a century separating each translation from the next, one would expect that the English vernacular used in the three attempts would vary drastically. Still, all of the above are scholarly and authoritative translations of *Antigone* that tend to stick to the ancient text as much as possible, providing a faithful word-to-word rendition of the Greek play into English. No doubt, such translative works have helped Heaney with the sense of *Antigone* and allowed him to keep on track with the plotline of the Sophoclean tragedy while he was writing *The Burial at Thebes*. For Heaney, however, consulting the English translations of *Antigone* is not enough to attain a satisfying result. Rather, he seems to recognize that when it comes to poetry, the translator's work is much more complex than what initially seems to be a line-by-line transposition of the text to a new language:

> Verse translation is not all that different from original composition. In order to get a project under way, there has to be a note to which the lines, and especially the first lines, can be tuned. Until this register is established, your words may well constitute a satisfactory semantic equivalent but they cannot induce that blessed sensation of being on the right track, musically and rhythmically. (Heaney 2005: 169)

Although Heaney was not translating *Antigone* from ancient Greek to English but, effectively, from English to *his* English, the above remark about the struggles of verse translation applies very well to *The Burial at Thebes*, which, after all, is a poetic work consisting of different verse metres. Defending his choice to produce a verse translation of *Antigone*, Heaney says in the endnote of *The Burial at Thebes*: "Greek tragedy is as much musical score as it is dramatic script. I wanted to do a translation that actors could speak as plainly or intensely as the occasion demanded, but one that still kept faith with the ritual formality of the original" (*BT*: 79).[52] In order to achieve this, however, Heaney had to look elsewhere than the previous canonical and trustworthy but poetically sterile translations of *Antigone*.

Apparently, the key opening Antigone's door to Heaney came out of the blue: "Then suddenly, as if from nowhere, I heard the note. Theme and tune coalesced. What came to my mind, or more precisely, into my ear, were the opening lines of a famous eighteenth-century Irish poem, called in the original 'Caoineadh Airt Ui Laoghaire'" (2004b: 423). *Caoineadh* is the Irish word for 'keening' and the poem's title is known in English as 'Lament for Art O'Leary'.[53] The poem, a product of oral tradition, is credited to Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill, an Irish woman who composed and sung this lament after the killing of her husband Art O'Leary by a Protestant officer.[54] The story goes as follows:

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[52] Given Heaney's demonstrated understanding about the intricacies of verse translation, Michael Parker poignantly notes that: "Until recently little critical attention was paid to Heaney's role as a translator, due in part to the erroneous assumption that such activity was somehow peripheral to his literary project, rather than a significant element within it" (2019: 98).

[53] Angela Bourke gives an illuminating explanation about the significance and the practice of *caoineadh* in Ireland: "'Keening' in English suggests a high-pitched, inarticulate moaning, but the Irish word *caoineadh*, from which it derives signifies among other things, a highly articulate tradition of women's oral poetry. The lamenting woman led the community in a public display of grief. Acting out in her appearance and behaviour the disorder brought about by death, she was often barefoot and dishevelled. Her *caoineadh* or lament was a series of breathless utterances of rhymed, rhythmic praise of the dead person (usually a man), and invective against his enemies" (1988: 287).

[54] Patricia Lysaght mentions that the 'Lament for Art O'Leary' "was written down from oral narration only at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and appeared in print for the first time towards the end of that century" (1997:69). Lysaght also explains that "this lament is essentially a structured personal, tribal and communal response to death in the traditional manner. It invites interpretation on a number of levels: it can be read as a public document in response to a public duty, one that is redolent of the political, religious and cultural antagonisms and tensions of eighteenth-century Ireland, and concerned, too, with the cosmic significance of death; but it is also a review of the significant moments of the shared private life of Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill and Art O'Leary (*Ibid*. 73).

> Eibhlin's husband Art O'Leary had refused to sell his fast horse to Abraham Morris, the High Sheriff of Cork. Morris tried to pressure him, and so O'Leary challenged him to a duel. Morris then declared that O'Leary was an outlaw and had his men shoot O'Leary, leaving him on the road to die. Eibhlin Ni Chonaill immediately composed a poem as a lament or keen to his memory that evokes both her love for her husband and her sense of loss, as well as her anger at the state authorities. (Wilmer 2007: 231)

To situate Eibhlín's performance within the wider Irish lament protocol, one of the most detailed accounts of keening comes from J. M. Synge, who, on his visit to the Aran Islands, recorded the mourning ritual:

> While the grave was being opened the women sat down among the flat tombstones, bordered with a pale fringe of early bracken, and began the wild keen, or crying for the dead. Each old woman, as she took her turn in the leading recitative, seemed possessed for the moment with a profound ecstasy of grief, swaying to and fro, and bending her forehead to the stone before her, while she called out to the dead with a perpetually recurring chant of sobs. (1911: 64)

To present now the first two stanzas of 'Caoineadh Airt Ui Laoghaire' in Irish, followed by its English translation:

> *Mo ghrá go daingean thú!*
> *Lá dá bhfaca thú*
> *Ag ceann tí an mhargaidh,*
> *Thug mo shúil aire dhuit,*
> *Thug mo chroí taitneamh duit,*
> *D'éalaíos óm charaid leat*
> *I bhfad ó bhaile leat.*
>
> *Is domhsa nárbh aithreach:*
> *Chuiris parlús a ghealadh dhom,*
> *Rúmanna á mbreacadh dhom,*
> *Bácús á dheargadh dhom.*
>
> My love and my delight,
> The day I saw you first
> Beside the markethouse
> I had eyes for nothing else
> And love for none but you.

I left my father's house
And ran away with you,
And that was no bad choice;
You gave me everything.
There were parlours whitened for me,
Bedrooms palmed for me,
Ovens reddened for me. (qtd. in Heaney 2005: 171-2)

Spanning over four hundred lines, the 'Lament for Art O'Leary' is considered the definitive Irish example of this poetic form: involving "an exposition of two journeys by the lamenting woman in question: a private journey through the grief and mourning process, from denial through anger to acceptance of death; and a public journey in her symbolic role as agent of transition and incorporation" (Lysaght 1972: 72). Singing the lament, Eibhlín assumes a dual role: she is both the bereaved wife and the chief mourner of an elaborate death ritual.

Heaney found in the lament of O'Leary's wife an equivalent to Antigone's stance regarding Polyneices: Antigone's position is not only that of a sister mourning a brother, but also that of a custodian of funeral rites, observant of the procedures surrounding Polyneices' burial. In other words, Heaney discovered in the three-beat line of 'Caoineadh Airt Ui Laoghaire' a so-called tuning fork:

> In a flash I saw refracted in Eibhlín Dubh the figure of the stricken Antigone, and heard in the three-beat line of her keen the note that Antigone might strike at the start of the proposed translation. There was no distinction at that moment between the excitement I felt at the discovery of the trimeter as the right metre for the opening and the analogies I could sense between the predicaments of a sister affronted by a tyrant in Thebes and a wife bereft by English soldiery in Carriganimma in County Cork. (2005: 172)

Indeed, Antigone's first utterances in *The Burial at Thebes*, following the three-beat metrical arrangement of the Irish lament, immediately transmit her agony and sense of the injustice felt:

Ismene, quick, come here!
What's to become of us?
Why are we always the ones?
…
Here's what has happened.
There's a general order issued
And again it hits us hardest

The ones we love, it says,
Are enemies of the state.
To be considered traitors. (*BT*: 5)

Antigone's rapid spitting of words afforded by the use of the trimeter is Heaney's way to depict the urgency surrounding her decision to bury Polyneices. Heaney's Antigone speaks piercingly and in short sentences, pressured as she is to perform the illegal burial rites and being aware of the impending dangers of such a mission. The following address to Ismene is exemplary of the determination shown by Antigone to complete the burial deed and redeem Polyneices:

And right you are to be scared.
Creon has made a law.
Eteocles has been buried
As a soldier, with full honours,
So he's gone home to the dead.
But not Polyneices.
Polyneices is denied
Any Burial at all. (*Ibid*. 6-7)
…
There's to be no laying to rest,
No mourning, and the corpse
Is to be publicly dishonoured.
His body's to be dumped,
Disposed of like a carcass,
Left out for the birds to feed on. (*Ibid*. 7)
…
Live, then; and live with your choice.
I am going to bury his body. (*Ibid*. 11)

Antigone's resentment about the lack of mourning concerning Polyneices is somehow answered by the fact that her words are attuned to the Irish lament cadence. This is an indirect way of showing that Antigone is doing the right thing when she ignores Creon's edict and performs the burial rites. The harmony between Antigone's word and deed is Heaney's way of showing where his sympathies lie. By appropriating a distinct Irish metre used in traditional lament songs as the proper voice for his Antigone, Heaney succeeds in Irishizing the Greek heroine, who is transformed into an Irish keener.[55] Correspondingly, when Eurydice storms the stage saying "I

[55] Moments before Antigone is led to her cave prison to await her death, she speaks of herself: "No flinching then at fate. | No wedding guests. No wake. | *No keen*. No panygeric. | I close my eye on the sun. | I turn my

heard keening in the house, and fainted" (*Ibid*. 67), one cannot but imagine an Irish lament being sung. Evidently, Heaney found his own way to 'dress Antigone in green', doing justice to his poetic outlook by searching and finding in the registers of the Irish poetic tradition a compatible voice to Antigone's anguish.

After discovering the appropriate meter for Antigone, Heaney felt it necessary that other important characters in the play should also have their own established tune to enhance certain intrinsic qualities possessed by these characters: "The speeches of the chorus, for example, almost spoke themselves in an alliterating four-beat line, one that echoed very closely the metre of Anglo-Saxon poetry and that seemed right for the enunciation of proverbial wisdom and the invocation of gods" (Heaney 2004b: 425). In the first *stasimon* of *The Burial at Thebes*, known in *Antigone* as the hymn to Victory, the choice of this "gnomic and grim [metre], but capable also of a certain clangour and glamour" (Heaney 2005: 173) manifests itself:

> Glory to be to brightness, to the gleaming sun,
> Shining guardian of our seven gates.
> Burn away the darkness, dawn on Thebes,
> Dazzle the city you have saved from destruction. (*BT*: 13)

This traditional Old English metre fits the role of the vigilant advisor that Heaney wants the Chorus to represent. As for Creon, to bring up the voice of authority, Heaney confesses that "I didn't even bother with a trial run: blank verse it had to be, iambic pentameter, the obvious medium 'to honour patriots in life and death'" (2005: 173). To quote the exact lines that Heaney alludes to:

> This is where I stand when it comes to Thebes:
> Never to grant traitors and subversives
> Equal footing with loyal citizens,
> But to honour patriots in life and death. (*Ibid*. 17)

The use of this more conventional metre befits Creon's devout adherence to tradition and the laws of the state. In fact, Antigone also adopts this particular rhythm by moving "from trimeter towards pentameter in her final heroic utterances. Her final moments, before going to her death, gain a sense of grandeur and formality, which is appropriate for facing her voyage to Hades" (Pitman-Wallace 2019: 73). Here are some of these lines:

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back on the light" (*BT*: 53; italics mine). By using the designated lament trimeter to refer to the expected absence of keening following her death, Antigone indirectly dedicates a lament song to herself. Apart from doing this job for Polyneices, Antigone ends up being her own keener.

> Stone of my wedding chamber, stony of my tomb,
> Stone of my prison roof and prison floor,
> Behind you and beyond you stand the dead.
> They are my people and they're waiting for me
> And when they see me coming down the road
> They'll hurry out to meet me, all of them.
> My father and my mother first, and then
> Eteocles, my brother – every one
> As dear to me as when I washed and dressed
> And laid them out.
> But Polyneices,
> When I did the same for you, when I did
> What people know in their hearts of hearts
> Was right, I was doomed for it. (*BT*: 53-4)

Interestingly, the Guard is the sole character who speaks in prose, with his ranting and candour serving as a source of comic relief for the audience. A notable instance of his bewilderment occurs as he stands before Creon, attempting to explain the disappearance of Polyneices' body:

> Sir, I wouldn't exactly say I was panting to get there. Far from it. As a matter of fact, I was more for turning back. I was over a barrel. One part of me was saying, 'Only a loony would walk himself into this,' and another part was saying, 'You'd be a bigger loony not to get to Creon first.' It was 'You take the high road, I'll take the low road,' then 'What's your hurry?' then 'Get a move on.' But when all was said and done there was only one thing for it: get here, get it out and get it over, no matter what. So here I am, the old dog for the hard road. What will be, says I, will be. (*Ibid*. 19)

Besides the scene's comic overtones, the Hiberno-English vernacular used by the Guard is possibly the most obvious indication that the happenings of *The Burial at Thebes* have an Irish resonance.

To recapitulate, the didactic lyricism of the Chorus, Creon's sombre parlance, Antigone's short but powerful pleas, and the Guards' Irish slang, are either afforded by different metrical verses or, in the Guard's case, by the lack of one. Each metre used serves a different purpose for Heaney, as the characterization of his protagonists depends greatly on their locution. To strengthen this point, Remoundou-Howley notes that in *The Burial at Thebes* the "alternate beat register defines opposing speech acts: when Ismene and the Chorus express sympathy and solidarity with Antigone, they use her meter, while even Creon reverts from iambic pentameter to

the three-beat line in his repenting final scene" (2011: 297).[56] The significance of this final observation is indeed crucial in determining the ultimate outcome of *The Burial at Thebes*. To cite one of these characteristic passages, where a penitent Creon adopts Antigone's metre:

> Why doesn't somebody take
> A two-edged sword to me?
> The dark is on me too.
> I'm at bay in guilt and grief. (*BT*: 72)

Creon expresses genuine remorse not just through the words he selects but also by adopting Antigone's manner of speech. Creon embraces the three-beat line of Antigone originally taken from Eibhlín's lament, and this way he indirectly concedes that Polyneices deserved to receive the funeral rites denied to him. Also minding Creon's earlier sacrilegious talk that "If people had the chance to keen themselves | Before they died, they'd weep and wail forever" (*Ibid*. 53), the fact that he ends up appropriating the keening melody makes his change of mind even more astonishing and dramatic. Thus, by making Creon talk like Antigone, Heaney finds a subtle way of acquitting the Greek heroine, whose willingness to pay respect to Polyneices transgressed the laws of the state.

Overall, what can be noted about Heaney's writing strategy in *The Burial at Thebes* is the poet's deep investment in poetic language and metrics. To produce his own version of *Antigone*, Heaney had to first look for that three-beat line from the 'Lament for Art O'Leary' and then build the rest of the play around it. Similarly, the sought Irishness of *The Burial at Thebes* is placed within the fabric of Heaney's poetic language. The intrinsic connection between Irish lament and Antigone's grief as well as the final vindication of Antigone may not be explicitly stated, yet they are traceable to someone who comprehends the nuances of Heaney's poetic discourse.

[56] Neil Corcoran highlights that the same happens with the Guard: "the 'guard' - the Irish word for 'policeman' - is particularly Irish in idiom and accent, and is also (wittily) elevated from low-life prose to more heroic blank verse when he steels himself to rebuke Creon and then pityingly hauls Antigone before him" (2004).

The Emperor's New Clothes: Creon as George W. Bush's Alter Ego

As stressed before, a central theme of *The Burial at Thebes* is the commentary it provides on contemporary international political events. The supposed association of *The Burial at Thebes* with world politics is crucial for the critical reception of Heaney's play not only because it enhances the applicability of the Antigonean thematics, but also because it serves as a differentiating factor from other Irish versions of the Greek tragedy. Heaney's *Antigone* is a play that actively engages with the key global affairs of its day and does not falter to assume a clear-cut position in relation to them. Specifically, Heaney focuses on the figure of Creon to offer an acute critique of present-day hegemony, simultaneously exposing the demagogic practices sustaining it.

Given the time of its production, many critics have attempted to associate Heaney's play with a variety of personalities and places that dominated the news at the turn of the 21st century. To this end, McGuire argues that while critics disagree on the political crises addressed in *The Burial at Thebes*, there is a general consensus that these events unfolded far from the Irish border:

> *The Daily Telegraph*'s Dominic Cavendish compared the politics of Heaney's Creon to those of Tony Blair. *The Financial Times*'s Sarah Hemming saw in the set 'the shell-pocked walls of today's Middle East,' and in *The Times* Benedict Nightingale read 'the vaguely Islamic robes' as a gesture toward 'Iran or Saudi Arabia or even Iraq.' Such readings were encouraged by the decisions of the play's initial directors – the Canadian Lorraine Pintal (Abbey Theatre, Dublin, 2004) and the London-born Lucy Pitman- Wallace (Nottingham Play House, 2007) – regarding set design, background music, and costumes.[57] They also reflect the distance, both literally and metaphorically, of the cities in which it was staged from the political machinations being played out in post-Troubles Northern Ireland. (2017: 290-1)

Although the reviewers seem to reach different conclusions as to who is the recipient of Heaney's censure, the professed international scope of *The Burial at Thebes* is hardly denied. What is at stake seems to overcome Ireland and its usual tribulations. Characteristically, Anthony Roche hints that with this play Heaney "looks out to address a world where the threat is much more global than just the ancient enemy on the neighbouring island" (2020: 15). Correspondingly, Eugene McNulty develops the following reasoning about Heaney's ultimate objective in *The Burial at Thebes*:

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[57] Lorna Hardwick lambasts the costume choices and scenography of the first production: "when the play was staged at the Abbey, audiences were very conscious of a disjunction between Heaney's text and the production, directed by the Quebecoise Lorraine Pintal. Creon was costumed and played as a white-uniformed, red-sashed Latin American-style dictator amidst a brutalist set design that gave little sense of the House of Thebes" (2006: 213).

> Heaney largely refuses the more obvious temptations of an over-determined and reductive localization of the myth. By refusing to be limited by the contours of a specific *history* (most obviously the events of the Northern Irish Troubles) Heaney confronts his audience with a play intent on exploring the motors of *History*, those ideological engines - the will to power, the rise of the State, the construction and policing of communal boundaries - that drive change over time and birth those relational events we think of as history. (2015: 112)

Heaney had to discover anew how a Greek tragedy like *Antigone* could be historically and culturally pertinent on a global scale. Asked by Eileen Battersby if there was a new sense of the play's relevance after September 11, Heaney admits that "There was the general worldwide problem where considerations of state security posed serious threats to individual freedom and human rights" (2004). Within this new milieu, Heaney seems more interested in exposing the overall workings of hegemony and state control as they manifest themselves in public discourse rather than offering a site-specific critique.

Yet, as with *Philoctetes* and its organic linking to the Troubles, Heaney needed an external stimulus to tackle *Antigone*. This is something that he touches on in the endnote of *The Burial at Thebes*:

> Early in 2003, the situation that pertains in Sophocles' play was being reenacted in our world. Just as Creon forced the citizens of Thebes into an either/or situation in relation to Antigone, the Bush administration in the White House was using the same tactic to forward its argument for war on Iraq. Creon puts it to the Chorus in these terms: Either you are a patriot, a loyal citizen, and regard Antigone as an enemy of the state because she does honour to her dead brother, or else you yourselves are traitorous because you stand up for a woman who has broken the law and defied my authority. And Bush was using a similar tragedy, asking, in effect: Are you in favour of state security or are you not? If you don't support the eradication of this tyrant in Iraq and the threat he poses to the free world, you are on the wrong side in the 'war on terror' (*BT*: 76).[58]

Remarkably, it is not for Antigone but for Creon that Heaney finds a fitting counterpart. Also, contrary to the suggestions of some critics, the central focus in *The Burial at Thebes* is pretty clear: George W. Bush and his aggressive politics against Iraq, reminding Heaney of Creon's absolutism

[58] Heaney expands this argumentation in a lecture given at the American Philological society the same year: "If you were not for state security to the point that you were ready to bomb Iraq, you could be represented as being in favour of terrorism. If you demurred at the linking of Al Qaeda to the despotism of Saddam Hussein, you were revealing yourself as unsound on important issues, soft on terrorism. If you demurred at the suspension of certain freedoms, you were unpatriotic" (2004b: 421).

as head of state in Thebes.[59] As we will see, the ideological mechanisms justifying the US expedition in Iraq – grouped together under the label 'war on terror' – are traceable in Creon's proclamations and mannerisms. Heaney replicates Bush's black-or-white rhetoric by making Creon use the same sort of phraseology when it comes to questions of power and dominance.

The audience's first indirect contact with Creon is through Antigone, who conveys his threats to Ismene in the first person:

> 'I'll flush 'em out,' he says.
> 'Whoever isn't for us
> Is against us in this case.
> Whoever breaks this law,
> I'll have them stoned to death.' (*Ibid*. 7)

Conspicuously similar to Creon's "I'll flush 'em out", George Bush notoriously declared about the Taliban that 'We'll smoke 'em out' (Kellner 2007: 626). Moreover, as Biljana Vlašković Ilić first observed, the above passage is reminiscent of "Bush's demagogic, at times tyrannical-sounding speeches, like his address to a joint session of Congress on 20 September 2001" (2017: 143), where Bush declares to the rest of the world that anyone not aligning with him in the newly declared 'war on terror' will automatically be considered an enemy:

> This war will not be like the war against Iraq a decade ago, with a decisive liberation of territory and a swift conclusion. It will not look like the air war above Kosovo two years ago, where no ground troops were used and not a single American was lost in combat. Our response involves far more than instant retaliation and isolated strikes. Americans should not expect one battle, but a lengthy campaign, unlike any other we have ever seen. It may include dramatic strikes, visible on TV, and covert operations, secret even in success. We will starve terrorists of funding, turn them one against another, drive them from place to place, until there is no refuge or no rest. And we will pursue nations that provide aid or safe haven to terrorism. Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. *Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists*. From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime. (qtd. in Ilić 2017: 143; italics mine).

[59] The same year as the US invasion in Iraq and one year before the staging of *The Burial at Thebes*, a collective volume of poetry and prose was published entitled *Irish Writers Against the War* (2003). Heaney contributed to the anthology with a poem. In the preface to the edition, Brian Friel states: "I oppose this war because I just know – every instinct insists – that there is something not thought through about it; something wildly disproportionate about it; something inimical to reason and reasonableness; something, indeed, that offends the notion of what it is to be fully human" (Korstick & Moore 2003: 3).

Heaney has taken the gist of Bush's overly dramatic speech – epitomized by the phrase 'you are either with us or against us' – and has placed it in Creon's mouth. The purposefully simplistic logic behind this statement in truth describes a power relationship where the stronger party, be it Creon or Bush, uses their force to threaten and coerce others. Also, it seems that Bush's somewhat farcical comment that most war operations will be televised did not remain unnoticed by Heaney, as evidenced in the debate between Antigone and Ismene about the future of Polyneices' body, when the latter shouts "Oh, stop! This must never get out" (*BT*: 12), Antigone answers "No. No. Broadcast it." (*Ibid*.). A comparable moment takes place later in the play when Creon ironically asks: "Do my orders come from Thebes and from the people?" (*Ibid*. 45). Such arrogant and audacious demeanour to justify one's power is also encountered in Bush, who, in an interview, once stated: "I'm the commander, see. I don't need to explain — I do not need to explain why I say things. That's the interesting thing about being the President. Maybe somebody needs to explain to me why they say something, but I don't feel like I owe anybody an explanation" (qtd. in Woodward 2002: 145-6). Evidently, Heaney's Creon and George W. Bush seem to share the same understanding, showing an identical disregard of the public opinion when it comes to decision-making and the promotion of their agenda.[60]

Unsurprisingly, the vocabulary that Creon uses to address the Theban crowd abounds in Bushisms. By employing a combination of populist remarks and patriotic rhetoric, Creon endeavours to unify and control his subjects. He does so by celebrating the cultural traits that purportedly bind them together, and emphasizing the imminent dangers posed by an unnamed but ostensibly menacing enemy:

> Gentlemen. We have entered calmer waters.
> Our ship of state was very nearly wrecked
> But the gods have kept her safe.
> So, friends, well done.
> You from the start have been a loyal crew.
> …
> But rest assured:
> My nerve's not going to fail, and there's no threat
> That's going to stop me acting, ever,
> In the interest of all citizens. Now would I,
> Ever, have anything to do

[60] Stephen Wilmer correspondingly argues: "Creon's refusal to listen to popular criticism evoked memories of Bush and Blair not listening to the huge demonstrations in London and Dublin against the war, as well as foreshadowing Donald Rumsfeld's announcement, to the applause of US soldiers in Iraq on 13 May 2004, that he was no longer listening to media criticism: 'I've stopped reading newspapers'" (2010: 388).

> With my country's enemy. For the patriot,
> Personal loyalty always must give way
> To patriotic duty.
> Solidarity, friends,
> Is what we need. The whole crew must close ranks.
> The safety of our state depends upon it.
> Our trust. Our friendships. Our security.
> Good order in the city. And our greatness. (*BT*: 16)

Creon tries to emotionally manipulate his audience by launching a bunch of flatteries and adulations to them. Blurring the divide between himself and those under him by calling them "friends" and "gentlemen", Creon speaks like a modern-day politician, who knows how to steer the debate towards his advantage. Commenting on the same passage, Stephen Wilmer is quite convinced about the man standing behind Creon's declarations:

> Creon's language starts to resemble the rhetoric of George Bush in his war on terror. By emphasizing such words as 'patriot', 'patriotic duty', 'patriots in life and death', as well as 'safety' and 'security', Creon's phraseology calls to mind the post-9/11 climate of fear, loyalty (to the government), and vengefulness, which was encouraged by the US president through the adoption of the USA Patriot Act, the creation of the Department of Homeland Security and the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq. (2007:235)

By excessively extolling the virtues of patriotism, Creon becomes the mouthpiece of Bush's policies. Especially for the original audience of *The Burial at Thebes*, with Bush's public calls to eliminate world terrorism fresh in their minds, Creon's verbal strategies must have sounded eerily familiar. In fact, the patriotism-terrorism dialectic persists in one of Antigone's attacks to Creon, as she reveals that if the Thebans "Weren't so afraid to sound unpatriotic" (*BT*: 32), they would have dared to confront Creon about the impiety done to Polyneices body. Creon, however, remains stubbornly fixed in his position, insisting that Polyneices "terrorized us. Eteocles stood by us" (*Ibid*. 33). His rationale about the two men is unshakable: the one is a saviour, whereas the other a traitor. On and on, Creon furthers a 'Good *versus* Evil' theorem in an attempt to preside over Thebes. Curiously, such binary also happens to be the dominant ideological compass and hegemonic tool championed by George Bush during his double-term presidency in the White House.[61]

[61] Peter Singer's *The President of Good and Evil: The Convenient Ethics of George W. Bush* (2004) is an instructive read deconstructing Bush's black-or-white ideology and his contradictory policies.

Considering all the above cases, the correspondences between Bushian and Creonian politics are too many to be coincidental or go unnoticed. In fact, the depiction of Creon as George W. Bush's alter ego is not only visible in the play, but is also explicitly acknowledged by Heaney himself:

> We were watching a leader, a Creon figure if ever there was one, a law-and-order bossman trying to boss the nations of the world into uncritical agreement with his edicts in much the same way as Creon tries to boss the Chorus of compliant Thebans into conformity with his. With the White House and the Pentagon in cahoots, determined to bring the rest of us into line over Iraq, the disposition and passion of an Antigone were all of a sudden as vital as oxygen masks, so I soon found myself doing a version of the 'wonders chorus' and publishing it as a sort of open letter to George Bush. (Heaney 2005: 170)

The part of *Antigone* that Heaney refers to is the so-called 'Ode on Man' (*Ant.* 332-75), where the Chorus commends the many human achievements that produce dread and wonder (*πολλὰ τὰ δεινὰ*). After listing an array of material, social, and spiritual accomplishments that have given shape to human civilization, the Chorus concludes by cautioning that the human race is also capable of the worst disasters and blasphemies, with men crawling from good to evil and back (*μὲν κακόν, ἄλλοτ᾽ ἐπ᾽ ἐσθλὸν ἕρπει*). Heaney first produced a version of the above Ode under the working title 'Sophoclean' and published it "less than three weeks before hostilities in Iraq began… in both a British-produced anthology, *101 Poems against War*, and in *The New Yorker*" (Parker 2019: 102). With some necessary modifications, the Ode was later included in *The Burial at Thebes*. Here are the last two stanzas, which are the closest in being regarded as an open letter to George Bush:

> Home-maker, thought-taker, measure of all things
> He can heal with herbs and read the heavens.
> Nothing seems beyond him. When he yields to his gods,
> When truth is the treadle of his loom
> And justice the shuttle, he'll be shown respect –
> The city will reward him. But let him once
>
> Overstep what the city allows,
> Tramp down right or treat the law
> Wilfully, as his own word,
> Then let this wonder of the world remember:
> He'll have put himself beyond the pale.
> When he comes begging we will turn our backs. (*BT*: 25)

The Chorus' cautionary words are targeted at Creon, and by extension, George Bush. The message it tries to convey is that arrogance and overestimation of one's powers can prove disastrous, and eventually be subject to punishment. The same person that thinks that nothing is "beyond him", suddenly finds themselves "beyond the pale". With this witty antithesis, Heaney reprimands the tactics of any politician – of this world or mythical – that thinks of their powers as absolute and infinite. For Heaney, George Bush and Creon are of the same breed; wrought by an insatiable desire to control and a disdain for criticism. Yet, Creon's demise serves as a reminder that payback for hubris always comes, one way or another. Hence, if the story of Creon could teach something to the US president, is that one's downfall can be quick and unexpected.

Beyond the Pale and Beyond: Greek Tragedy and Irish Identity on the Cusp of a New World

As demonstrated in the previous section, the thematic considerations of *The Burial at Thebes* go beyond the Irish border, extending to the political machinations played out on the world stage. Via the handling of Antigone's duel with Creon, Heaney proves successful in mirroring the key combat events that were in the forefront at the time *The Burial at Thebes* was staged. Accordingly, the dominant polarizing narratives of the post-9/11 world resonate vigorously throughout the play. Still, it would be misleading to think of *The Burial at Thebes* as an international tragedy *per se*. Rather, as this analysis attempted to illustrate, it is an Irish play that refuses to limit itself solely to Irish matters. In this final section, a recapitulation of this contention will be provided to underscore Heaney's mastery in intertwining the Greek tragedy of *Antigone* with reflections on Irish identity and the broader implications of particular distressing wartime events on a global scale, all set against the backdrop of a rapidly changing world.

An effective way to illustrate how Heaney's play never loses touch with its Irish orientation is by highlighting the dual layers of meaning inherent in specific crucial phrases. As we saw earlier, the Chorus indirectly referred to Creon as "putt[ing] himself beyond the pale" (*BT*: 25). This is a phrase that in everyday English connotes someone whose actions lie outside the boundaries of acceptable behaviour. However, such phrase has also a distinct Irish provenance. Before explaining further, it is important to note that the phrase occurs two more times in the theatrical text. On both occasions it is introduced by Creon, who, referring to Antigone, he blasts:

> When she defied the general order
> Antigone had already gone too far,
> But flaunting that defiance in my face
> *Puts her beyond the pale*. Who does she think
> She is? The man in charge?
> …
> There's no blood on my hands here. It was she
> *Who put herself beyond the pale*. She is to blame
> For every blackout stone they pile up round her. (*Ibid*.: 25, 53; italics mine)

One could attribute to the phrase in question its usual meaning: Creon thinks of Antigone's conduct as simply intolerable, justifying his decision to punish her on those grounds and acquitting himself from all blame. To an Irish audience, however, Antigone's positioning 'beyond the pale' could also be understood in a literal way. As Anthony Roche explains:

> the Pale refers to a specific area of the island of Ireland, 'that eastern strip running from Dundalk to Dublin', as Roy Foster describes it. The rest of the country—by far the greater part of it—was, therefore, beyond the Pale. The term is not just geographic but metaphoric and political. It gained particular force during the Elizabethan period in referring to the area most associated with British rule. The centre of English colonial practice in Ireland was Dublin, on the eastern seaboard, located in the administrative centre, Dublin Castle. The area which came most directly under not only England's rule but its social practices, customs and language was the Pale. The other provinces of Ireland were beyond this rule and associated instead with the irrational, the wild, the ungovernable, as represented in the survival of Gaelic social practices and the Irish language. As Foster puts it, 'the Elizabethan mind found the native Irish [...] incomprehensible, and rapidly took refuge in the analysis of barbarism'.[62] (2020: 16-17)

Antigone's portrayal in *The Burial at Thebes* is inextricably linked to the Pale's signification and its geographic coordinates. Antigone's transgressive behaviour takes place in "a wild and unaccountable area where anything might happen" (Wilmer 2007: 234), far away from the claws of English jurisdiction in Ireland. In truth, Creon abhors Antigone not so much for the crime she has committed, but because he cannot control her. By being situated beyond the Pale, Antigone is in a position to decide for herself which course of action she will take. Accordingly, Antigone's determination to rebel against Creon and bury Polyneices is automatically infused with Irish relevance, understood as a form of resistance against an external oppressor. Thus, with the strategic introduction of certain geopolitical colourings, Heaney succeeds in keeping intact the local Irish relevance of his play, no matter the numerous instances where his critical eye seems fixed to incidences that are occurring overseas.

To conclude, what can be said about *The Burial at Thebes* as a whole is the notional affinity that Heaney establishes between Greek tragedy, Irish identity, and what one could name 'current history'. First, we saw how Heaney juxtaposed Sophocles' *Antigone* with the Irish lament practices and the wider Irish rituals surrounding death. Antigone's grief for the death and unburied status of her brother Polyneices was coupled by the funeral rites and the keening of the dead, as these are manifested in exemplary Irish lament songs like the 'Lament for Art O'Leary'. Additionally, the consideration of the contested burial of the hunger striker Francis Hughes not only served as a

[62] In his influential essay 'Civilians and barbarians', Seamus Deane provides further information about the prevalence of the civilization/barbarism dialectic in Anglo-Irish relations: "The language of politics in Ireland and England, especially when the subject is Northern Ireland, is still dominated by the putative division between barbarism and civilization. Civilization still defines itself as a system of law; and it defines barbarism (which, by the nature of the distinction, cannot be capable of defining itself), as a chaos of arbitrary wills, a Hobbesian state of nature. But it is a distinction which operates within a modern state system which prides itself on the transparency of the whole population to the concentrated stare of bureaucratic (including police and military) control. In Ireland, this new situation (dating from the early nineteenth century) has enormously increased the ideological rift between the competing discourses of the civilian and the barbarian" (1985: 39).

tangible re-enactment of Antigone's duel with Creon, but also underlined the evergreen importance of the handling of the dead in Irish culture. Specifically, we explored how close-knit is the Irish sense of self with the way the community chooses to pay its respects to the dead. Burial is both a familial and public affair in Ireland, and Heaney's reception of Antigone's story prompted by the events in Toomebridge attests to this. By the same token, Heaney's amalgamation of the Irish *dúchas* with Antigone's devotion to "Justice dwelling deep | Among the gods of the dead" (*BT*: 29) is characteristic of how ingrained to the Irish morals and customs *The Burial at Thebes* is. All in all, what the above analysis sought to exhibit is that Heaney's adaptation of *Antigone* cannot be appreciated in depth, without the accompanying detection and investigation of all topical Irish allusions, embedded in the theatrical text or extratextual.

Yet, the reciprocal association between Greek tragedy and Irish identity coexists with another major theme running through *The Burial at Thebes*. To acquire a complete overview of Heaney's play, one must also read it as a political commentary on the global hegemonic practices of its day. Having emerged at the post-9/11 era, at a time when global relations were drastically changing and the dawn of an unpredictable new millennium was suddenly felt, *The Burial at Thebes* offered a critique on Western hegemony, as personified in George W. Bush. Using Creon as Bush's alter ego, Heaney succeeds to reiterate the abusive black-or-white rhetoric of the US president, particularly notable during the American expedition in Iraq. By adapting Antigone to the setting of the Iraq War and endowing Creon with Bush-like characteristics, Heaney delivers a contemporary cautionary tale about the exercise of power and its limits. This way, *The Burial at Thebes* does not falter to take part in the political debates of its epoch, assuming a clear-cut position against the Western intervention in Middle East. Within this framework, Heaney's reception of *Antigone* serves another purpose: it solidifies the role of Greek tragedy as a means of commenting on the unfolding political developments on a global scale.