

Translating Tragedy: Seamus Heaney's Sophoclean Plays

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Abstract:

The interest of contemporary Irish authors in the Greek and Roman antiquity testifies to their renewed effort in appropriating the classical tradition both as a source of inspiration and as a means of redefining the nature of Irishness through a constant confrontation with 'Otherness'. Translation and adaptation are among the favoured approaches to the ancient texts, which often become metaphors for the Irish political situation. This paper analyses Seamus Heaney's challenge to the established canon by his creative use of the classical tradition in *The Cure at Troy* (1990) and *The Burial at Thebes* (2004), adapted from Sophocles's *Philoctetes* and *Antigone*. It aims to illustrate the relationship between Heaney's translation practices and his role as a poet.

Keywords: Antigone, Heaney, Philoctetes, poetry as cure, Sophocles

The interest of contemporary Irish authors in Greek and Roman antiquity testifies to their renewed effort in appropriating the classical tradition both as a source of inspiration and as a means of redefining the nature of Irishness through a constant confrontation with 'Otherness'. Translation and adaptation are among the favoured approaches to the ancient texts, which often become metaphors, or, as Terence Brown terms it, a "cultural metaphor" for the Irish political situation. As such, Brown insists, translation is "a sign of the degree to which in contemporary Ireland inherited definitions of national life, of social origins and expectations, fail to account for much individual and collective experience" (1996, 138); hence, the necessity to write "as if Ireland could be translated into somewhere else" (139). Interestingly, contemporary Irish writers (and poets in particular) very often 'translate' Ireland into ancient Greece and turn to ancient Greek plays in order to appropriate and, at the same time, challenge the language of culture by inevitably contaminating it with Irish terms and – notably in the '80s – by introducing precise political messages, which are meant to comment on and spread awareness of the Irish

situation¹. Thus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aeschylus “become poetic weapons and tools for discourse: microphones for the new dialogues” (McDonald 1996)². My paper analyses Seamus Heaney’s challenge to the established canon by his creative use of the classical tradition in *The Cure at Troy* (1990) and *The Burial at Thebes* (2004), adapted from Sophocles’s *Philoctetes* and *Antigone*, which interestingly represent different forms of challenge to power.

Heaney’s first creative approach to the canonical territory of Greek tragedy still reflects his inner tension between his involvement in the Irish cause, and his loyalty to the Irish community, and a more purified aesthetic discourse. *The Cure at Troy* (composed for Field Day and staged in Derry in October 1990) is thus imbued with the spirit of denunciation which animates Heaney’s fellow poets in the ’90s³. *Philoctetes* is a story of exile and dispossession: bitten on his foot by a snake while he was making offerings to the gods before getting to Troy, the hero is abandoned on the desert island of Lemnos by his companions, who cannot stand the stink coming from his infected wound any more. During his ten-year stay there, his resentment against the Achaeans becomes bitter: the main target of his hatred is Odysseus, who had convinced his fellows to act against the hero. However, Philoctetes and his prodigious bow (which he had received from Hercules) are necessary to conquer Troy. Sophocles’s play opens with the Greek ship landing at Lemnos and with Odysseus instructing Neoptolemus (Achilles’s son) to deceive Philoctetes in order to get his bow and persuade him to go back to Troy. Sophocles indulges on the description of the young man’s inner conflict: Neoptolemus is torn between his pity for and loyalty to Philoctetes, and his obedience to the Greek cause, to which he is linked by an indissoluble bond⁴. Heaney inevitably compares Neoptolemus’s delicate situation to the general condition of contemporary Northern Irish people:

The whole deception strategy goes against Neoptolemus’ nature, but, for the sake of the Greek cause, he cooperates. He lies to Philoctetes, but in the end he cannot sustain the lie... Anyhow, the moral crunch of the play connects up with E. M. Forster’s famous declaration that if it came to a choice between betraying his country and betraying his friend, he hoped he would not betray his friend. But that is not a Greek position. Nor an Ulster one, indeed. In the Northern Ireland situation, you feel stress constantly, a tension between your habitual solidarity with your group and a command to be true to your individual, confused and solitary self. But 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. (Heaney 2000, 22)

Heaney thus freely translates “the overall situation of the play” (2000, 22), choosing for his version a title which is resonant with Catholic echoes and suggestive of the optimistic ending of the play, and adopting a kind of language and verse which “would sound natural if spoken in a Northern Irish accent” (2002, 171-174)⁵. If Philoctetes’s story (that of a hero who is exiled

in a “home that is not a home inside” because of his festering sore; Sophocles 1998 [1994], 307) becomes emblematic “of the trauma of Ulster’s maimed and distrustful communities” (Crotty 2001, 204), Heaney concentrates on the ‘cure’, that is a remedy which could heal Ulster’s inner clash and, at the same time, vindicate poetry’s right to be more than a mere instrument of protest. The poet expresses his idea through the introduction of an opening chorus (one of his major changes to the source text) as a prologue commenting on the overall situation of the play. Indeed, Heaney’s voice resonates loudly in the choruses spoken by three women “wrapped in shawls” (instead of the fifteen sailors of the original), insofar as they allow him both to communicate his own personal involvement in political issues with “a public voice” and to legitimize his reflections on the authority of poetry⁶. Thus, *The Cure at Troy* opens with the chorus introducing three heroic figures, “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,
 Shining with self-regard like polished stones.
 And their whole life spent admiring themselves
 For their own long-suffering.

Licking their wounds
 And flashing them around like decorations.
 I 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 the human beings’ sense of things. (1-2)

The prologue is suffused with the prevailing emotion of the tragedy: the above mentioned heroes are associated because of their haughtiness and the firmness with which they stick to their views, whatever they are; their distinguishing characteristic is ‘endurance’, which is set as a justification to their utmost pride in suffering. Hence, in *The Cure at Troy* Heaney makes

Philoctetes's isolation and loneliness more acute in order to highlight the hero's determination to resist and survive, nurturing his resentment towards those who have condemned him to a fate worse than death and showing a deep self-pity at the same time. Thus, while the chorus of Sophocles's play sympathises with Philoctetes, who is "miserable, always alone" and "lies without a share of anything in life, far from all others, with beasts dappled or hairy, and pitiable in his pain and hunger he endures afflictions incurable and uncared for" (Sophocles 1998 [1994], 275), in *The Cure at Troy* the prologue emphasises the exceptionality of the hero's condition ("Human being suffer / But not to this extent") and Philoctetes himself is reduced to a wild beast because of his uncommon physical and emotional pain:

Out in the open always,
Behaving like a savage.
Nothing but squeals and laments.
Nothing left but his instincts.
Howling wild like a wolf. (Heaney 1990, 13)

Like a wild beast indeed, he rages against Neoptolemus and the chorus, when he appears on the stage for the first time ("What's this? Who is this here? How did you land? / What brought you to a deserted island? / Tell us who you are and where you come from"), explaining that his rudeness is the effect of the wickedness of his former friends ("What I am / Is what I was made into by the traitors", Heaney 1990, 15). Philoctetes's fury against the men who left him rot "like a leper" (17) on an island which is "a nowhere" (18) exemplifies the process of metamorphosis that Sophocles's protagonist undergoes in Heaney's version: Heaney's Philoctetes is proud of being an exile, he revels in his suffering, and his wound acquires a symbolic meaning, becoming his distinguishing feature. That is why he firmly refuses to follow the Achaeans to Troy and rejects the possibility to be cured, thus putting an end to his pain: "Never. No. No matter how I'm besieged. / I'll be my own Troy. The Greeks will never take me" (63)⁷.

The opening chorus thus attacks Philoctetes's strictness ("I hate it, I always hated it"), and yet it feels involved in what is going on. It is easy to grasp in the chorus's 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. This assumption is confirmed in the second half of the prologue, in which the poet reveals how he would like to carry out his task of intermediary:

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 on 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. (Heaney 1990, 2)

Like the chorus in the Greek tragedy, poetry brings together past and present, gives voice to the characters' hopes and bears genuine witness to the development of the events. Much more than this, poetry acts as a vehicle for the god's voice, thus anticipating the end of the play, when Hercules speaks during the volcano eruption to blame Philoctetes and convince him to follow the Achaeans to Troy, where he will be cured at last. Heaney seems to imply that if poetry represents the god's voice, at the same time it may offer a cure to both the hero's physical wound and his inner conflict.

In the last section of *The Cure at Troy*, Heaney progressively detaches from the source text. Despite the poet's assumption that "Philoctetes is not meant to be understood as a trimly allegorical representation of hardline Unionism", since 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", and that the parallels between the psychology and the situation of the characters in the Greek play and "certain parties and conditions in Northern Ireland", however suggestive, "are richly incidental rather than essential to the version" (Heaney 2002, 175), those allusions and parallels become indeed necessary to understand some of the poet's thematic and linguistic choices. Not only is Philoctetes *his own Troy*, he is indeed *Troy himself*, pretending to be unassailable but destined to fall. Significantly enough, his resistance is worn down by Neoptolemus's moral integrity and human compassion: the young man refuses to act as Odysseus instructed him and gives Philoctetes back his bow, deciding to "redress the balance" (Heaney 1990, 65) and to behave like a reliable friend, just as his father taught him to do. At the same time, however, Neoptolemus starts to dismantle Philoctetes's strictness ("Are you going to stay here saying no for ever / Or do you come in with us?"; 69)⁸ and useless obstinacy:

You know
 Human beings have to bear up and face

Whatever's meant to be. There's a courage
 And dignity in ordinary people
 That can be breathtaking. But you're the opposite.
 Your courage has gone wild, you're like a brute
 That can only foam at the mouth. You aren't
 Bearing up, you are bearing down.
 [...]
 You're a wounded man in terrible need of healing
 But when your friends try, all you do is snarl
 Like some animal protecting cubs. (Heaney 1990, 72)

There is no dignity in Philoctetes's stand, no courage in his bearing the memory of a distressing past while avoiding to face the future ("The past is bearable, / The past's only a scar, but the future – / Never", 73). Thus, Hercules (whose presence is always perceived on the stage) inflicts the decisive blow to Philoctetes's stubborn opposition. In compliance with his will to freely translate the play, Heaney once again changes the source text: he rejects Sophocles's introduction of Hercules as a *deus ex machina*, just before the curtain falls, and chooses "to prepare for the sudden overturn of attitude in the hero in other ways – while still associating it with the influence of Hercules" (Heaney 2002, 172). Peter McDonald points out the way Heaney internalises Philoctetes's dilemma by translating the divine language of the original into the human language of the chorus (1995, 194), in a speech which seems to move the protagonists of the play through time and space in order to re-contextualise them in contemporary Ireland. Thus, the stage resonates with the roar of the erupting volcano, the lights fade, a spotlight directed at the three women who voice the well-known last chorus of the play:

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. (Heaney 1990, 77-78)

Starting from a universally valid assumption (that is, suffering is common to all human beings), the poet introduces a more private form of suffering, one which indifferently affects people in jail, prisoners on hunger strike in Northern Ireland, helpless relatives withdrawn in their unspeakable sorrow, and the widows of the policemen killed in the conflict. There seems to be no possibility for poetry (and for art in general) to offer a 'redress' to sectarian conflicts. Yet, Heaney strives to show that poetry may still express that hope which is denied by History. Thus, even if only once, justice may be generated by the great wave symbolising change, and surprisingly "hope and history rhyme"⁹. The chorus seems to imply that, in order to make the cure effective, it is necessary to believe in it, as it is necessary to go on believing in miracles and healing wells. Poetry is both the means with which the "further shore" where hope resides can be reached, and the essential tool to get "self-healing" and to conciliate conflicting parties.

The cure is unavoidable: speaking through the chorus, Hercules exhorts Philoctetes to follow the Achaeans to Troy, and to "conclude the sore / And cruel stalemate of our war. / Win by fair combat. But know to shun / Reprisal killings when that's done" (Heaney 1990, 79). The hero cannot but admit the inevitability of his destiny:

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. The sound of waves in draughty

passages. A cliff that's wet with spray on a winter's morning. I feel like the sixth sense of the world. I feel I'm part of what was always meant to happen, and is happening now at last. (72)

Nothing similar can be traced in Sophocles: Heaney's Philoctetes cannot bid farewell to Lemnos, because he *is* Lemnos, he is part of it, metamorphosed in an essential element of its landscape. Philoctetes's last lines close the play full-circle: the healing process begins to have effect when the hero becomes aware of his responsibility towards his community.

Philoctetes becomes a catalyst for Heaney's disappointment towards contemporary Northern-Irish politics. By resuming the translation of Sophocles in 2004, however, the poet avoids the temptation to use Greek tragedy as an instrument of social and political criticism and focuses on its status of work of art. This change is the result of the poet's redefinition of his idea of translation. In an interview with Dennis O'Driscoll, Heaney admits to have started translating as a job after he gave up teaching, and to have later developed a penchant for it because "it's a form of writing by proxy. You get the high of finishing something but you don't have to start it" (Heaney 2003). The poet is also conscious to have incurred in the temptation of contaminating the source text with his personal voice when he was younger: "I suppose it is inevitable that people speak in their own voice in translation. But the older I get the more obedient I tend to become" (Heaney 2000, 14). Greater faithfulness to the source text and deeper respect for its themes and general atmosphere are Heaney's keywords in 2004, when he starts translating Sophocles's *Antigone*. At the same time, his version is much more than "a conditioned response to a venerable work of antiquity, more than a reverential bow to the cultural authority of the Western canon" (Heaney 2004b, 419).

As for *The Cure at Troy*, Heaney chooses an emblematic title for his *Antigone*, *The Burial at Thebes*, which immediately evokes the play's main theme. By focusing on the inhumation rite, the poet highlights the triggering event of the play, that is Antigone's disobedience to Creon's prohibition to bury her brother Polyneices, who had fought with the Greeks against his own people. When he starts translating, however, Heaney has also in mind a recent Irish event, namely the general stir created by a funeral procession in Toomebridge in May 1981; the participants, Heaney recalls, "had come to Toome to observe a custom and to attend that part of the funeral rite known as 'the removal of the remains'". It was no ordinary event:

[...] before the remains of the deceased could be removed that evening from Toome, they had first to be removed from a prison some thirty or forty miles away. And for that first leg of the journey the security forces deemed it necessary to take charge and to treat the body effectively as state property. The living man had, after all, been in state custody as a terrorist and a murderer, a criminal lodged in Her Majesty's Prison at the Maze, better known in Northern-Ireland as the H Blocks. He was a notorious

figure in the eyes of Margaret Thatcher's government, but during the months of April and May 1981 he was the focus of the eyes of the world's media. (Heaney 2004b, 411)

The corpse claimed by both the English authorities and the Irish people was Francis Hughes's, an IRA militant victim of the hunger strike, and a friend of Heaney's¹⁰. In the poet's mind, myth fuses with history and he interprets the dispute over the corpse as a metaphor for what he terms, after Hegel, the conflict between "the daylight gods of free and self-conscious, social, and political life" and "the Instinctive Powers of Feeling, Love and Kinship" (Heaney 2004b, 413-414), embodied in Sophocles's tragedy by Creon and Antigone, respectively.

Both the civilians' opposition to the English soldiers and Antigone's position are interpreted as forms of loyalty to the *dúchas*, that is set of values of one's own community and kin:

Antigone [...] is surely in thrall to patrimony, connection, affinity and attachment due to descent, to longstanding, to inherited instinct and natural tendency, and for her all these things have been elevated to a kind of ideal of the spirit, an enduring value. If we wanted, what's more, to find a confrontation that paralleled the confrontation between her and king Creon we could hardly do better than the incident on the street in Toomebridge. (Heaney 2004b, 413)

Heaney decides not to push the parallel further¹¹, and no other reference to Irish issues can be traced in his play¹². Standing out from his contemporaries, who turn Sophocles' *Antigone* into a symbol of the Irish fight against English authority¹³, in *The Burial at Thebes* Heaney focuses on the heroine's moral integrity even when opposing the law and on her respect for her family and her people's traditions. Antigone appeals to her loyalty to the *dúchas* when she tries to convince her sister Ismene to help her arrange the funeral rites for Polyneices:

ANTIGONE [...]

I say

It's a test you're facing,

Whether you are who you are,

And true to all you belong to,

Or whether —

[...]

His body... Help me to lift

And lay your brother's body.

ISMENE

And bury him no matter...?

ANTIGONE

Are we sister, sister, brother?

Or traitor, coward, coward?

ISMENE

But what about Creon's order?

ANTIGONE

What are Creon's rights

When it comes to me and mine? (Heaney 2004a, 3-4)

Heaney's Antigone insists on the primacy of blood and emotional ties ("are we sister, sister, brother?", which harshly emphasises the original "I will bury *my brother, and yours*, if you will not"; Sophocles 1998 [1994], 9, my emphasis) and appeals to them even when Ismene categorically refuses to help her, afraid of the consequences of breaking "the laws of the land" (Heaney 2004a, 5)¹⁴. By opposing both the law and the man who embodies it, Antigone performs an "anthropological" gesture (Heaney 2004b, 422), more than a political one, insofar as she affirms the force of "statutes utter and immutable – / Unwritten, original, god-given laws" (Heaney 2004a, 21), which are eternal and should be binding for the community as a whole. Creon's law, however strict, relies on a 'mortal force' which sets the preservation of the polis and the common good above the demands of individuals, family and friends. In the name of this 'mortal law', Polyneices is reduced to a 'non-person' deprived of soul and thus of the right to be buried. Antigone's subversive act aims at restoring Polyneices's dignity as an individual and a human being more than as part of a community; and when that community condemns her to an extreme punishment (she will be buried alive for having given a suitable burial to her brother), she still asserts the legitimacy of her private gesture appealing to the immutability of the feeling which links her to her family and to the ancestral law that her people silently recognise as 'right':

Stone of my wedding chamber, stone 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. (Heaney 2004a, 40)

Antigone's last monologue stands as both her ultimate challenge to the community and her most touching declaration of innocence. Heaney's tone

is sharper than the original, he closes the monologue with the image of the Justice Antigone had invoked since the beginning of the play:

Ancestral city of the land of Thebes and gods of my forebears, I am led away and there is delay no longer! Look, rulers of Thebes, upon the last of the royal house, what things I am suffering from what men, for having shown reverence for reverence! (Sophocles 1998 [1994], 91)

Now gods of Thebes, look down.
Through my native streets and fields
I'm being marched away.
And never, you men of Thebes,
Forget what you saw today:
Oedipus's daughter,
The last of his royal house
Condemned. And condemned for what?
For practising devotion,
For a reverence that was right. (Heaney 2004a, 41)

As the stage directions read, "*Antigone is led out*" (41). Coherent till the end, Heaney's Antigone leaves the scene as a real Greek heroine should do. If, as Fintan O'Toole assumes, "there is not and never has been a pure, universal text of Antigone divorced from contemporary politics" (quot. in Younger 2006, 158), *The Burial at Thebes* stands as a wonderful exception: while focusing on the theme of inhumation, Heaney exalts the universal value of Antigone's loyalty to her *dúchas* and reminds the audience of "our final destiny as members of the species"; hence, the word "burial" subliminally brings together the "solemnity of death" and "the sacredness of life": "wherever you come from, whatever flag is draped on the coffins of your dead, the word 'burial' carries with it something of your *dúchas*" (Heaney 2004b, 426).

In *The Burial at Thebes* the necessity to give public expression to his involvement in certain dynamics of contemporary politics (which is manifest in *The Cure at Troy*) seems to be superseded by the urge to adhere to a greater textual strictness. However, both plays are imbued with the need to legitimize the poet's private voice, that is to defend the originality of his art and to affirm his identity as a poet. Heaney's approach to Greek tragedy provides an essential element to understand his 'composite' Irishness, an identity which transcends geographical boundaries and political ideology.

Notes

¹ Des O'Rawe remarks that the effort in translating ancient Greek tragedies constitutes one of the most challenging aspects of contemporary poetry, and that such is the variety of texts and translators that "one might be forgiven for thinking that no (male) Irish poet's *oeuvre* can any longer be considered complete without at least one published version of a Greek play"

(1999). Among the translations and adaptations of the Greek classics which are performed on the Irish stage from the second half of the '80s, it is worth recalling: Tom Paulin's *The Riot Act* (1984) and *Seize the Fire* (1989), respectively versions of Sophocles's *Antigone* and Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*, Aidan Carl Matthews's *Antigone* (1984) and *Trojans* (1994), Brendan Kennelly's *Antigone* (1985), *Medea* (1991), and *The Trojan Women* (1993), Desmond Egan's *Medea* (1991), and Derek Mahon's *The Bacchae* (1991) and *Oedipus* (2005), a two-act play combining Sophocles's *Oedipus the King* and *Oedipus at Colonus*.

² See, for example, Paul Turner's interpretation on the subject: "Greek tragedies are approached, not as historical masterpieces in their own right, but as means to the end of the Irish protest" (2007, 132). However, the critic seems to ignore the existence of a parallel trend, which aims at stressing the artistic value of ancient tragedies, without necessarily making them symbols of the Irish political situation. Part of this trend are Derek Mahon's *Oedipus* tragedies and Heaney's own version of Sophocles's *Antigone*.

³ "In [...] *The Cure at Troy*, classical imagery of a destructive war, and an ensuing demand for tribal vengeance, is used to achieve a crossing from the tribal to the ethical" (O'Brien 2005, 110). In fact, Heaney had previously declined to translate Greek classical plays for Oxford University Press, because of his insufficient knowledge of the Greek language (2000, 22). However, when he starts translating for Field Day, he feels perfectly at ease: the play, as he conceives it, responds to one of the main principles of the company, that is the opposition to any form of sectarian division in Ulster. Field Day's main aim is "[to] contribute to the solution of the recent crisis by producing analyses of the established opinions, myths and stereotypes which [have] become both a symptom and a cause of the current situation" (quot. in Richards 2003, 67).

⁴ Thus, for example, Neoptolemus addresses Odysseus, questioning the licitness of his actions: "Son of Laertius, things which it distresses me to hear spoken of are things which I hate to do! It is my nature, and it was also my father's nature. But I am ready to take the man by force and not by cunning; with only one foot he will not get the better of us who are so many. I was sent to help you, but I am unwilling to be called a traitor; I had rather come to grief, my lord, while acting honestly than triumph by treachery". In addition, when Philoctetes finds out that he has been cheated and asks to have back his bow, Neoptolemus reiterates his loyalty to his kin, because "[j]ustice and policy cause [him] to obey those in command" (Sophocles 1998 [1994], 265, 349).

⁵ The opening lines of the play, a description of the setting in Odysseus's words, are translated into a colloquial language, whose broken rhythm conveys the protagonists' tension when landing to Lemnos: "Yes. / This is the place. / This strand. / This is Lemnos all right. / Not a creature! / And here we are then, Neoptolemus, / You and me. / Greeks with a job to do" (Heaney 1990, 3). The choice of such a language is itself dictated by Field Day's policy: "I wanted" — Heaney explains — "to have verse that would sound natural if spoken in a Northern Irish accent. But this is not suggesting that actors should try to *do* Northern Ireland accents: that would be a deplorable distortion. It's just that I knew beforehand that we would be using a number of actors from Ulster, would be opening in Derry, touring the North (as well as the South) and operating under the banner of Field Day; Field Day is a company whose purposes include the revoicing and revisioning of experience by 'talking Irish', as it were (as in 'talking dirty', not as in 'talking French' — the 'Irish' here is adverb rather than noun)" (2002, 174).

⁶ "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" (Heaney 2000, 23).

⁷ The parallel between Philoctetes and Troy is Heaney's invention; as a matter of fact, in the original Philoctetes mentions Troy only to curse both the town and those who are besieging it: "May Ilium perish, and all those beneath it who had the heart to reject my tortured foot!" (Sophocles 1998 [1994], 375).

⁸ It is interesting to notice that, despite he claims that references to Irish political issues are absolutely accidental, in Neoptolemus's question Heaney himself detects an allusion to a

particular political event: "This echoes the Ulster Unionist refusal of the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1987, when they would not grant that the Irish government had any right to be involved in the envisaging or the conduct of the new political arrangements in Northern Ireland. (Incidentally, Thatcher's Tories stuck to their guns — oops, that's what she said about the IRA — and the ultimate result, I would argue, is the relatively hopeful conditions which prevail at present. If the Unionists are still saying no to an Irish dimension, they are doing so with less overbearing and less credibility)" (Heaney 2002, 175).

⁹ Hugh Denard points out that some of the lines of Heaney's chorus have been quoted by leading politicians in relevant moments in Irish history, that is when there seemed to be a correspondence between history and hope. Thus, in November 1990, only a month after the *première* of *The Cure at Troy*, the new president of the Irish Republic, Mary Robinson, quotes the "hope and history rhyme" stanza of the chorus in her inaugural address. On December 1, 1995, one year after the IRA had proclaimed the ceasefire, president Bill Clinton appropriates the same stanza during his speech from the Bank of Ireland, "bringing the weight of American influence and dollars to bear on the Northern Irish peace process." Finally, still in 1995, Jacques Santer, President of the European Commission, addresses his audience using Heaney's words, wishing that "history and hope can be made to rhyme" in Ireland (2000, 1-2).

¹⁰ Heaney's opinion regarding his fellow countrymen's attitude towards the prisoners' protest (an attitude he, in a way, adopts) is worth noticing: sympathizing with the convicts would have meant to connive at the IRA's violent methods, "so many people hesitated. But in their hesitation they were painfully aware that they were giving silent assent to the intransigence and overbearing of Margaret Thatcher" (Heaney 2004b, 412).

¹¹ Heaney asserts that the play could provide a response to the post-September 11 political situation, in particular when "President Bush and his secretary of defence were forcing not only their own electorate but the nations of the world into an either/or situation with regard to the tyrant of Baghdad". It could be easy, then, to offer a version of Sophocles's play in which Creon "would have been a cipher for President Bush", but this would have disparaged both Sophocles's work and the White House's effort in preserving national security (Heaney 2004b, 421-422). Writing for *The Guardian*. In 2005, Heaney goes back over the comparison Creon-Bush: "Early in 2003 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 passion and protest of an Antigone were all of a sudden as vital as oxygen masks" (Heaney 2005). Heaney thus avoids the temptation to make Antigone's opposition to Creon a symbol of the world's protest against Bush the 'tyrant'. The poet refers in particular to Creon's first cue, in which he proudly affirms that his laws aim at preserving both the city and its institutions: "That is my way of thinking, and never by my will shall bad men exceed good men in honour. No, whoever is loyal to the city in death and life alike shall from me have honour" (Sophocles 1998 [1994], 23).

¹² In *The Burial at Thebes* Eugene O'Brien notices a clear Irish subtext; relying on Heaney's general observations on the choice of the title of his version, O'Brien detects in Polyneices's disputed body "a potent trope in nationalist rhetoric in an Irish as well as classical context. The images of dead martyrs or traitors are the motive forces behind so many of the commemorative parades, processions and demonstrations that have caused such tension, bloodshed and death throughout the history of Northern Ireland. The honouring of one's own glorious dead and the dishonouring of those who broke the code of the tribe is a vital signifier in nationalist and unionist rhetorical structures [...]. In this text, as in *The Cure at Troy*, there is an almost allegorical level of connection between classical Greece and contemporary Northern Ireland". Hence, the critic assumes that the image of the women demanding justice for their brother's corpse has a strong resonance in contemporary Ireland; in particular, he has in mind the stir

caused by Robert McCartney's sisters in Belfast on January 30, 2005: trying to shed light on their brother's death (McCartney was murdered outside a pub by members of the Sinn Féin and of the irregular IRA), the women had started a protest against the government's investigation methods. To O'Brien, the event bears a strong resemblance to what *The Burial at Thebes* describes, since "The public sphere which is deemed to be not a woman's place is both ancient Thebes and contemporary Belfast" (2005 [2002], 128, 132-133). O'Brien is certainly right in pointing out the similarity between Antigone's and McCartney's sisters' positions, however I do not agree with his general reading of Heaney's play; if, as he explains, "to see these translations as locked in the symbolic order of the ancient classical world is to miss the subtext that is at work here", to over-interpret *The Burial at Thebes*, as he does, by forcing an Irish subtext into the play, implies to diminish the value of Heaney's translation as a work of art *per se*.

¹³ See, for example, Kelly Younger's interesting study, focusing on the frequency with which translations of Sophocles's *Antigone* have been staged in Ireland since the '80s. Younger interprets these versions as Ireland's disastrous attempt to "de-colonise" itself, to get free from its English "father" (Younger 2006, 151-153).

¹⁴ "In the land of the living, sister, / The laws of the land obtain — / And the dead know that as well. / The dead will have to forgive me. / I'll be ruled by Creon's word. / Anything else is madness" (Heaney 2004a, 5).

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