Hearing Heaney:Layout 1 29/06/2015 20:01 Page 111

Words into action: re-hearing Antigone's claim in *The Burial at Thebes*

EUGENE McNULTY

As part of its centenary celebrations in 2004 the Abbey Theatre invited Seamus Heaney to stage a version of Sophocles' *Antigone* (which he would re-title *The Burial at Thebes*). Given that Heaney has often been described as the most important Irish poet since W.B. Yeats, there was an elegant symmetry to the invitation. Yeats had staged his versions of *Oedipus Rex* and *Oedipus at Colonus* at the Abbey during the 1930s and, while admitting that *Antigone* would not have been his first choice, Heaney himself noted that 'there was a certain satisfaction in being invited by his theatre to complete his trilogy'.[1] For Heaney it was also an opportunity to return to the work of 'versioning'[2] Sophoclean tragedy and bringing the work to physical realization on the stage: in 1990 his version of *Philoctetes*, re-titled *The Cure at Troy*, had been staged by the Field Day Theatre Company to widespread acclaim. *The Cure at Troy*, indeed, came to be seen as one of Heaney's most powerful and eloquent renderings of the tragic catch-22 within which the northern Irish communities were then caught. In its famous lines, much loved by politicians – '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' – the play would also be seen as shining a light on the linguistic and performative pathway out of that self-same catch-22.[3] In the build-up to those famous lines on stage, for example, the contemporary relevance of the tragic action was clearly signalled for the audience via references to the 'innocent in gaols', a 'hunger-striker's father' and a 'police widow in veils'.[4] Of Heaney's two ventures into the world of the theatre it is *The Cure at Troy* that has tended to garner most attention – exactly because, once could argue, of its imbrication in the socio-political mindscape of the Troubles in Northern Ireland.

1 Dennis O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones*, p. 422. **2** These are not quite translations in the traditional sense, as Heaney was not working directly with the original Greek. **3** Seamus Heaney, *The Cure at Troy* (Derry, 1990), p. 77. **4** Ibid.

Hearing Heaney:Layout 1 29/06/2015 20:01 Page 112

Indeed in the reviews of *The Burial at Thebes* fourteen years, and a significant peace process, later one can sometimes detect a mild disappointment that the play did not replicate the overt and direct politicality of *The Cure at Troy*. Writing about the opening production at the Abbey, Neil Corcoran makes the point that while an audience 'might expect a Heaney version to crackle with poetic, political and cultural static' they were confronted with 'a scrupulously faithful version' that is 'less transparent to specific political instance than *The Cure at Troy*'.[5] As Corcoran goes on to acknowledge, however, this may well turn out to be *The Burial at Thebes*'s greatest attribute. In this nuanced and multivalent re-performance of Antigone's dilemma 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 *H*istory, 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.

This is not to suggest that *The Burial at Thebes* completely occludes the historical reality of the contemporary moment. As with *The Cure at Troy*, *The Burial at Thebes* is empowered as a significant artistic statement partly from the resonances that occur between the original and its re-performance in 2004. It would, of course, be impossible for this to be otherwise. After all, the action of *Antigone* is set in the aftermath of a bloody conflict; moreover, this conflict, the battle for the throne of Thebes, is perhaps the ultimate civil war ever imagined – three of the central protagonists are Oedipus' children, putting them in the tragic position of being their father's half-brothers (Eteocles and Polyneices) and half-sister (Antigone). Just as importantly, Sophocles' play concerns the search for justice and a balanced exercising of power in a post-conflict situation – ideas that obviously resonated with audiences in a post-Good Friday Agreement Ireland. As we shall see, critics have also discerned in Heaney's version a response to the kind of neo-conservative / neo-imperial ideologies that came to dominate western political discourse in the aftermath of 11 September 2001. These various resonances are clearly there and their power cannot be ignored. However, in what follows I wish to argue that the play's real power derives from its searching out of the architecture (imaginative, ideological, ideational) that lurks beneath the surface of perceived historical reality.

ANTIGONE'S CLAIM

The action in *Antigone* takes place in the aftermath of a bitter dispute concerning who should sit on the Theban throne. Following the death of their father,

5 Neil Corcoran, Review of *The Burial at Thebes* in *The Guardian*, 1 May 2004.

Hearing Heaney:Layout 1 29/06/2015 20:01 Page 113

Oedipus, a conflict arises between his two sons – Eteocles and Polyneices – over who should rule and for how long. In the ensuing war Eteocles and Polyneices kill each other in a duel and their uncle, Creon, steps in to assume control of the city. The action of *Antigone* begins in the immediate wake of Creon's first major decision as the new king of Thebes. He has ordered that Eteocles, whom he regards as a defender of the city, should be accorded all the proper burial rites and customs, but that Polyneices, whom he sees as an attacker, should be left unburied and denied any ritual whatsoever. Antigone never wavers in her opposition to this decree regarding the treatment of her two brothers, despite her sister Ismene's refusal to join her in opposing Creon's law. For Antigone man-made law can never over-ride the law of the gods – a higher law that decrees that Polyneices should be honoured in death regardless of his supposed crimes in life. From these opening moments the play is structured as a battle of wills between Creon and Antigone. Neither will 'give ground' and in the end Creon sentences Antigone to be entombed alive in a cave – this despite the fact that she is betrothed to his son Haemon. It is only in the final moments of the play that Creon realizes he has gone too far – a revelation induced by the blind poet Tiresias; but this all comes too late, when the cave is unblocked Creon discovers that Antigone has hanged herself within and beside her body they find a bewildered Haemon who will also take his life in front of his father. Creon's final agonies come at the very end when it is revealed that his wife, Eurydice, has also taken her life on the news of their son's death.

Antigone's claim captures a tragic impulse that has fascinated and troubled western culture for two-and-a-half thousand years. In his magisterial study of the work and its afterlife, George Steiner is very clear that 'Sophocles' *Antigone* is not "any text". It is one of the enduring and canonic acts in the history of our philosophic, literary, political consciousness'.[6] The reasons for this continuing fascination are manifold and complex. For Steiner, *Antigone* is a play that speaks directly to our experience of a modernity dominated by the rise of the nation-state, industrialization, and the attendant collapsing of public and private identity. As he puts it: 'Sophocles' *Antigone* dramatizes the meshing of intimate and public, of private and historical existence'.[7] In this reading we are still fascinated by Antigone because her dilemma – caught between public power and private obligation – is a dilemma shared by us all. *Antigone* thus speaks directly to one of modernity's central processes: 'there is scarcely a recorded life or body of experience in the 1790s, in the Napoleonic era, in the decades of explosive urbanization, technological change, and social challenge that followed, which does not bear witness to the irruption of the political into the private'.[8] One of the most remarkable things in the history of western culture is the way in which every time we turn anew to

6 George Steiner, 'Preface', *Antigone* (Oxford, 1984). **7** Ibid., p. 10. **8** Ibid., p. 11.

Hearing Heaney:Layout 1 29/06/2015 20:01 Page 114

Greek tragedy we find a version of our own condition staring back at us. After the French Revolution, as Steiner so eloquently phrases it, 'the individual knows no armistice with political history', and here in *Antigone* we are confronted with a play 'that turns on the enforced politics of the private spirit, on the necessary violence which political-social change visits on the unspeaking inwardness of being'.[9]

This is a process that late twentieth-century philosophers, such as Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben, would term 'bio-politics', a turn within modernity wherein the apparatus of the state gains increasing control over the very biological existence of its subjects.[10] For Hegel, one of the giants of nineteenth-century European philosophy, the character of Antigone likewise revealed something of the nature of modern politics as it negotiated the private and public realms. In *Phenomenology of Spirit*, most famously, Hegel 'represents the conflict between Antigone and Creon as the conflict between two forms of legality – divine law and human law – and as a conflict between the private sphere of kinship relationships and the public sphere of the state'.[11] In Hegel's terms this is a contest between the 'Instinctive Powers of Feeling, Love and Kinship' (as represented by Antigone) and 'the daylight gods of free and self-conscious, social, and political life' (as represented by Creon). Hegel thus presented the Antigone narrative as an allegorical space to explore a central narrative in the development of western civilization, namely the process whereby 'as society gets larger and more complex, the authority of the state or government (whatever its form) and the autonomy of the family are bound to conflict, and the *legal* statues of society will contradict the *moral* obligations of interpersonal relationships'.[12] There is little one might challenge in this broad sweep of human development, but what has remained contentious within Hegel's argument is the role assigned to women in this socio-political model. As Wilmer and Žukauskait parse it, for Hegel 'Antigone, as a symbol for womankind in general, is seen as 'an internal enemy' and 'the everlasting irony [in the life] of the community'.[13] The particularity of Antigone's act is thus seen as incommensurate with the universal reason of the state, as expressed in man-made law, meaning that 'Antigone cannot act politically' and so 'represents perversion and particularity'.[14] Unsurprisingly, feminist thinkers have found much in Hegel to resist and debate.

Likewise, the work of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan has inspired and infuriated feminists and non-feminists alike. For Lacan, Sophocles' play dramatizes the conflict between morality and ethics, where morality is that field of regulation constructed by a community in the public realm, and ethics is that which

9 Ibid. **10** See, for example, Michel Foucault, *Discipline and punish* (London, 1991); Giorgio Agamben, *Homo sacer: sovereign power and bare life* (Stanford, 1998). **11** Editors' introduction in S.E. Wilmer & Audron Žukauskait (eds), *Interrogating Antigone in postmodern philosophy and criticism* (Oxford, 2010), p. 2. **12** Robert C. Solomon, *In the spirit of Hegel: a study of G.W.F Hegel's* Phenomenology of Spirit (Oxford, 1983), p. 540. **13** Wilmer & Žukauskait , *Interrogating Antigone*, p. 2. **14** Ibid.

Hearing Heaney:Layout 1 29/06/2015 20:01 Page 115

is driven by private desire. Especially controversial in this regard is Lacan's suggestion that Antigone's act has little to do with resistance to the law and/ or the State but is, rather, driven almost exclusively by her own desire for self-annihilation.[15] Somewhat problematically, as in Hegel, Antigone's act (and with it the very idea of female identity) appears to be re-inscribed as an irrational zone – her actions thus become imbued with a quality of unreason, and as a consequence can be relocated to a zone that is beyond the properly political.

As we can see, Antigone's story has been invested with an extraordinary interpretative energy. This is a play with a seemingly endless capacity to open up fundamental existential questions about the nature of identity (personal and communal) and it has been constantly re-imagined and re-voiced – particularly in those moments of crises when such questions are very much at play in the realm of *realpolitik*. As Steiner puts it:

> Whenever, wherever, in the western legacy, we have found ourselves engaged in the confrontation of justice and of law, of the aura of the dead and the claims of the living, whenever, wherever, the hungry dreams of the young have collided with the 'realism' of the ageing, we have found ourselves turning to the words, images, sinews of argument, synecdoches, tropes, metaphors, out of the grammar of Antigone and of Creon.[16]

Even the briefest scan of twentieth-century history reveals the validity of Steiner's argument. Bertolt Brecht's 1940s version of the play encoded Antigone as a resistance figure in opposition to a clearly fascist Creon; while Jean Anouilh's 1944 adaptation, produced in occupied Paris, is often cited as a more politically problematic piece, given that he appears to go out of his way to demonstrate that Creon is in fact a reasonable man just 'doing his job' (an idea that naturally appealed to the German officers who often came to the performances). The sense of Antigone as a misguided troublemaker is only reinforced by a crucial alteration that Anouilh makes to Sophocles' original plot. In Anouilh's version Creon reveals to Antigone that the bodies of her two brothers were so damaged that it was impossible to tell one from the other, and therefore impossible to tell which of them had been buried and which left uncovered.

Christoph Nel's 1978 version in Frankfurt was given added political resonance by the contemporary context of the Baader-Meinhof controversy, while Antigone took on a special relevance in Argentina during the dictatorship periods of the 1970s and 1980s when opponents of the government had a tendency to 'disappear'.

15 For more on this element of Lacan's argument, see Jacques Lacan, *The ethics of psychoanalysis* (2007); Judith Butler, *Antigone's claim: kinship between life and death* (New York, 2000); Paul Allen Miller, 'Lacan's Antigone: the sublime object and the ethics of interpretation', *Phoenix*, 61:1/2 (Spring–Summer 2007), pp 1–14. **16** Steiner, *Antigone*, p. 138.

Hearing Heaney:Layout 1 29/06/2015 20:01 Page 116

(See, for example, Griselda Gamaro's *Antigone Furiosa* from 1986.) We can look too to Alexander Wajda's 1984 Polish version which, as Heaney himself has indicated, 'pointed up analogies between the heroine's resistance in Thebes and the resistance of the Solidarity workers in the shipyards of Gdansk'.[17] The Antigone–Creon complex has also provided an amenable framework for writers from previously colonized spaces to re-perform the colonial condition and its postcolonial aftermaths: Femi Òsófisan, *Tègònni: An African Antigone* (Nigeria, 1984); Kamau Brathwaite, *Odale's Choice* (Ghana, 1967); Athol Fugard, *The Island* (South Africa, 1973); Sylvain Bemba, *Black Wedding Candles for Blessed Antigone* (Republic of Congo, 1990). As Kevin J. Wetmore would have it, *Antigone* is a text that 'can be adapted into any situation in which a group is oppressed, or in which, in the aftermath of struggle, the forces of community and social order come into conflict with the forces of personal liberty'.[18] George Steiner brings us closer to the source of the play's historical mutability when he writes: 'Indwelling in our semantics, in the fundamental grammar of our perceptions and enunciations, the Antigone-and-Creon syntax and the myth in which they are manifest are "specific universals" transformative across the ages'.[19]

ANTIGONE IN IRELAND

It is all of this, and more, that Antigone brings with her on her many re-visits to the Irish stage and cultural imaginary. In 1984, for example, no fewer than three new versions of Sophocles' play were staged by Irish writers: Brendan Kennelly's *Antigone*, Tom Paulin's *The Riot Act*, and Aidan Carl Matthews's *Antigone*. In addition, Pat Murphy's film from that same year, *Anne Devlin*, drew on the Antigone myth in its retelling of Devlin's story. In the years since, the Irish stage has also greeted Conall Morrison's (2003) and Owen McCafferty's (2008) versions of *Antigone* as well, of course, as Heaney's *The Burial at Thebes* (2004). Writing about the experience of working with Greek tragedy, Brendan Kennelly gives us a strong sense of its appeal to the contemporary Irish writer:

> Mythic drama is both immediate and distant. The immediacy enables a now-writer to stare into the past and invest it with the present and its problems. The distance enables that writer to stand back from, and at the same time confront whatever is troubling, hurting or inspiring him or her.[20]

17 Seamus Heaney, 'Title deeds: translating a classic', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 148:4 (December 2004), pp 411–26 at p. 416. **18** Kevin J. Wetmore, *The Athenian sun in an African sky: modern African adaptations of Classical Greek tragedy* (London, 2002), pp 170–1. **19** Steiner, *Antigone*, p. 138. **20** Brendan Kennelly, 'Introduction' to idem, *When then is now: three Greek tragedies* (Newcastle, 2006), p. 7.

Hearing Heaney:Layout 1 29/06/2015 20:01 Page 117

In all of this, as he goes on to say, there is 'an element of healing present pain when one converses with the mythic world'.[21] For the critic Fiona Macintosh, moreover, Antigone's status as an important cultural touchstone in Ireland is tied to affinities with indigenous symbolic female bodies – 'Erin, the virginal emblematic figure of Romantic Irish Nationalism' but also 'the mythological figure of Deirdre' who resides 'in the Irish cultural imaginary as a strong independent woman who challenges the dictates of the patriarchal system'.[22] In this regard, Macintosh notes that 'Brendan Kennelly's version', most particularly, 'was able to draw upon these deep affinities between Deirdre and Antigone'.[23]

If the oblique politicality of Kennelly's version is borne out of its concern for the dynamics of gender in an Irish society still very much dominated by patriarchal institutions (of State and Church), the other two versions which appeared in 1984 were much more direct in their mapping of Antigone's story onto the political landscape. As Antony Roche recounts, for example, when Aidan Carl Matthews's *Antigone* was performed in Dublin 'copies of the Criminal Justice Bill were handed out to members of the audience as they entered'. This controversial Bill, which was at that time making its way through the Irish Parliament, 'encountered widespread opposition because of its further enlargement of the powers of the police to seize and detain suspects and a consequent erosion of the rights of the individual in such a situation'.[24] The audience could have been left in little doubt as to Matthews' point – that an increasingly invasive state apparatus had the potential to make Antigones of us all.

While Matthews' version was concerned with the evolving jurisprudence of the southern part of the island, Tom Paulin's *The Riot Act* was very much an intervention into the political landscape of Northern Ireland and the violence that was then consuming it. As we have already seen, the image of Antigone and her struggle has always been one that speaks to locations and times of conflict. In 1968 Conor Cruise O'Brien famously drew on Antigone to reflect upon the civil rights movement that was at that time growing apace in the North. His position is by no means straightforward, proposing that the civil rights agitators (modern Antigones) were drawing violence to themselves in ways that were on one level problematic but, in the end, conceding that this was a necessary process:

> We should be safer without the troublemaker from Thebes. And that which would be lost, if she could be eliminated, is quite intangible. No more, perhaps, than a way of imagining and dramatising man's dignity. […] In losing it, man might gain peace at the price of his soul ('Views', *The Listener* 1968).[25]

21 Ibid. **22** Fiona Macintosh, 'Irish *Antigone* and burying the dead' in E.B. Mee & H.P. Foley (eds), *Antigone on the contemporary world stage* (Oxford, 2011), pp 91–2. **23** Ibid., p. 92. **24** Anthony Roche, 'Ireland's *Antigones*: tragedy North and South' in Michael Kenneally (ed.), *Cultural contexts and literary idioms in contemporary Irish literature* (Gerrards Cross, 1988), pp 221–50 at p. 230. **25** As re-quoted by

Hearing Heaney:Layout 1 29/06/2015 20:01 Page 118

As Macintosh puts it, for O'Brien at this moment in history Antigone 'is dangerous, yet a source of human "dignity", the elimination of which may lead to perdition'.[26] Four years later O'Brien performed a rather remarkable, and controversial, change of tack. In his book *States of Ireland* (1972) O'Brien looked back on his earlier article and its reading of Antigone and informs his readers that he is 'no longer in sympathy with the conclusion', arguing that:

> Antigone is very fine on the stage, or in retrospect or a long way off, or even in real life for a single, splendid epiphany. But after four years of Antigone and her understudies and all those funerals – more than a hundred dead at the time of writing – you begin to feel that Ismene's commonsense and feeling towards the living many make the more needful, if less spectacular element in 'human dignity'.[27]

For many O'Brien's was a troubling new stance, seeming as it did to advocate a passive acceptance of state power – even when such power was exercised in clearly unjust ways. Tom Paulin was one of those who would come to vehemently disagree with O'Brien's revised stance on the relevance of *Antigone* to the Northern Irish situation. More than ten years later the issue continued to nettle and *The Riot Act* is, at least in part, his response to what he saw as O'Brien's misreading of Antigone and her contemporary relevance. As Paulin bluntly observes: 'that we are in Belfast and Thebes simultaneously is the premise of this version. Creon is both himself and the representative of intransigent Unionism'.[28] More specifically, the open wounds of the early eighties are very much part of the traumatic psycho-geography in which the piece is played out. As Roche points out, 'Antigone's dual allegiance to the dead and to her family also resonates off the recent Hunger Strike'.[29] For many critics, indeed, the obviousness of these connections rather damages the play as a theatrical and aesthetic experience. We can see just how directly Paulin sought to draw on the contemporary political machinations in his recollection of the writing process: 'I imagined Creon partly as a Northern Irish Secretary, and had him give a press conference where he used the usual cliché about doing a great deal of listening'.[30] The success of Paulin's political 'double-voicing' can be seen in the press conference scene in question which concludes with Creon the apparatchik stating:

> And you may rest assured that anyone who breaks the law will be pursued with all the vigour that I can command, while those who uphold it can

Conor Cruise O'Brien, *States of Ireland* (London, 1972), p. 158. **26** Macintosh, 'Irish *Antigone* and burying the dead', p. 94. **27** Cruise O'Brien, *States of Ireland*, p. 159. **28** Christopher Murray, 'Three Irish Antigones' in Jacqueline Genet & Richard Allen Cave (eds), *Perspectives of Irish drama and theatre* (Gerrards Cross, 1991), pp 115–29 at pp 120–1. **29** Roche, 'Ireland's *Antigones*', p. 227. **30** Tom Paulin, 'Antigone' in Marianne McDonald & J. Michael Watton, *Amid our troubles: Irish versions of Greek tragedy* (London, 2002), pp 165–70 at p. 167.

Hearing Heaney:Layout 1 29/06/2015 20:01 Page 119

> always count on my full support. Thank you all for coming, and any questions just now? We have one minute (*Flashes stonewall smile*).[31]

Paulin later recalled, with clear satisfaction, that when Stephen Rea took to the stage as Creon, 'he glowered like Lord Edward Henry Carson'.[32]

HEANEY'S DOUBLE-VOICED ANTIGONE: *H*ISTORY AND *H*ISTORY

What all of these Irish versions of *Antigone* have in common, then, is the attempt to negotiate the space between the play's supra-historical qualities and its localized relevance to the contemporary moment of re-performance. Heaney, of course, was all too aware of the tensions involved in just this kind of negotiation. Indeed the problem of using figures from Greek myth to ventriloquize contemporary subjectivities appears to have greatly occupied him in his engagement with Antigone and her dilemma. In *Stepping Stones*, for example, he reveals how his strategy for approaching *The Burial At Thebes* was significantly different to that which he had deployed in his work on *The Cure at Troy*. As he puts it, the main attraction when working on *The Cure at Troy* (a play concerned with the effects of victimhood) was that its central dilemma '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'.[33]

It is just this 'familiarity' of the situation that allows the lexicon of the Northern Irish troubles (innocent in gaols, hunger-striker's father, police widow) to fairly seamlessly intrude on the play's imaginative space. Reflecting on the relationship between source material and these very specific and localized references Heaney recalled that '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', and went on to note that 'when I came to do the *Antigone*, I kept much more strictly to the original'.[34] Indeed this move may be read as part of Heaney's strategy for engaging with a play that had become so imbricated in the politico-cultural landscape of Irish theatre. In this regard Fiona Macintosh suggests that one of Heaney's greatest challenges in tackling *Antigone* was finding a voice 'free of multiple echoes from the plethora of political *Antigones* that appeared in Ireland in the wake of O'Brien's controversial essay'.[35] The legacy of these *Antigones*, as Heaney would later put it, was that Sophocles' play began to feel 'less like a text from the theatrical repertoire and more like a pretext for debate'.[36]

31 Tom Paulin, *The Riot Act* (London, 1985), p. 17. **32** Paulin, 'Antigone', p. 168. **33** O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones*, p. 420. **34** Ibid., p. 421. **35** Macintosh, 'Irish *Antigone* and burying the dead', p. 100. **36** Heaney, 'Title deeds: translating a classic', p. 414.

Hearing Heaney:Layout 1 29/06/2015 20:01 Page 120

Confronted with this notion of an over-determined *Antigone* – of a play and a character that in a sense fitted too readily into the conditioned habits and dead-ends of Irish social and political discourse – Heaney seems to have been intent on returning in a more nuanced way to George Steiner's reading of the 'Antigone-and-Creon syntax' as 'specific universals'. Thus *The Burial at Thebes* is a play that continually invites its audience to locate the action in a performative space between key dialectics: private/ public; History/ history; morality/ ethics; positive law/ natural law; life/ death; the living/ the dead; nation/ state; state/ family; man/ the gods; reason/ unreason; private choice/ public obligation. In each case the specificity of any given action can be read in terms of its relationship to an ideational framework located both inside and outside the reality of the play: the local events that make up history are thus located in the architecture that is History; personal choice is located in the field of possibilities that map (and limit) the range of options from which we choose; an act of localized power is revealed as an expression of a much deeper-set will to Power.

We get an insight into this process in Heaney's reflections on the contemporary events that shadowed the writing of *The Burial At Thebes*:

> George Bush's 'war on terror' was on my mind when I started. And the Guantánamo Bay prisoners, a couple of whom were Americans and whom Bush would have regarded much as Creon regarded Polyneices, 'an anti-Theban Theban' etc. Creon's lines got inflected with at least one Bushism, where he says of subversive elements, 'I'll flush 'em out.' And here and there the word 'patriot' is employed with a definite neo-conservative righteousness.[37]

We can see this 'neo-conservative righteousness' most obviously at play in those moments when Creon addresses his decision to refuse burial to Polyneices and his calls for 'unity and loyalty to the *polis*':[38]

> 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.[39]

Interestingly the one direct 'Bushism' indexed above by Heaney ('I'll flush 'em out') is in fact delivered as reported speech by Antigone in dialogue with her sister:

37 O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones*, pp 422–23. **38** S.E. Wilmer, 'Performing *Antigone* in the twenty-first century' in Wilmer & Žukauskait , *Interrogating Antigone*, pp 379–92 at p. 385. **39** Heaney, *The Burial at Thebes*, p. 11.

Hearing Heaney:Layout 1 29/06/2015 20:01 Page 121

> And he's coming to announce it.
> 'I'll flush 'em out,' he says.
> 'Whoever isn't for us
> Is against us in this case.'[40]

While retaining their chilling quality, Antigone's act of mimicry also introduces a parodic quality to Creon's words and sets them up as hackneyed vehicles for dictatorial power. It is this kind of duality that gives the play its real strength. Heaney is too great a poet to make Creon a mere cypher for George W Bush; instead, Creon occupies the stage as a cypher of the desires born of a (patriarchal / imperial) will to power and in so doing suggests the absent George Bush as another manifestation of this same drive. Rather than the specificities of a given historical moment, then, the audience is confronted with the mechanisms through which Power has always sought to control those within its purview. In this regard George Steiner's sense that *Antigone* speaks so powerfully to modernity because it addresses the collapsing of the political into our most private selves resonates with Heaney's version and Antigone's insistence that she and her sister have endured too much at the hands of Creon 'In public and in private'.[41] Tellingly, it is the figure of Creon who seems most ready to embrace this erasure of the private self, as he tells Haemon:

> […] The city has to see
> The standards of a public man reflected
> In his private conduct.[42]

For others the situation is not so straightforward, and the historical trauma of this melding of the political into the very core of being finds a different echo in Antigone's hypersensitivity to the conditions of surveillance that pertain in Creon's dictatorial city-state. Thus in the opening scene she explains to her sister Ismene why she has taken her outside of the palace to reveal her secret plans to bury her brother: 'The walls in there have ears. / This is for your ears only'.[43] While slightly later, and now somewhat emboldened, Antigone addresses issues of freedom of speech (and action) in the face of a state power that seeks to invade the most personal dimensions of life. Ismene begs her sister to stop her talk of disobedience – 'Oh stop! This must never get out' – but Antigone replies:

> No. No. Broadcast it.
> Your cover-ops sicken me.
> I have nothing to hide
> *From the powers that see all.*
> I am doing what has to be done.[44]

40 Ibid., p. 3. **41** Ibid., p. 1. **42** Ibid., p. 30. **43** Ibid., p. 2. **44** Ibid., pp 6–7 [italics added].

Hearing Heaney:Layout 1 29/06/2015 20:01 Page 122

Such moments speak not so much to the specifics of a particular situation but to the motors of History (the rise of the state, surveillance society, liberation movements) that have helped shape the material of historical reality.

Thus Heaney's real achievement in *The Burial at Thebes* is to present his audience with an Antigone that speaks to / of Ireland without becoming an 'Irish Antigone'. When the Chorus sums up the action and its roots in Oedipus' tragedy, for example, the Northern Irish troubles ghost the description without fully inhabiting the stage: 'When high gods shake a house / That family is going to feel the blow / Generation after generation.'[45] This is not to suggest, however, a complete evacuation of contemporary Irish politics from the stage. It is certainly the case that events which occurred during the Troubles directly shaped Heaney's sense of Antigone's refusal to leave her brother unburied and scapegoated. Heaney would later reveal, for example, that when confronted with Antigone's struggle his thoughts turned to the situation surrounding the burial of Francis Hughes, his one-time neighbour who died after sixty-nine days on hunger strike in the hospital wing of the H-Blocks. In particular, Heaney recalled the evening when Hughes's family and friends gathered in Toomebridge to take possession of body and the ill-will created by the security forces' decision 'to take charge and treat the body effectively as state property'.[46] The battle of wills that ensued set, as S.E. Wilmer puts it, the 'hunger striker's family against the State, and reflected the division between the regulations of the State authorities on the one hand and the personal needs of the family to observe the traditional rites on the other'.[47] It seems, indeed, that this ideologically charged battle with a body at its centre was one reason why 'Heaney decided to emphasize the word "burial" in changing the title of *Antigone* to *The Burial at Thebes*'.[48] Such recent political history may also be read as informing Antigone's key question in *The Burial at Thebes*: 'What are Creon's rights/ When it comes to me and mine?'[49] While the dangers of majoritarian rule, and the discourse of minority rights, may also be heard inflected in Creon's more paranoid pronouncements:

> For a good while now I have had reports
> Of disaffected elements at work here,
> A certain poisonous minority
> Unready to admit the rule of law
> And my law in particular.[50]

For Irish audiences especially Creon's repeated description of Antigone as 'beyond the pale' sounds out a deep-set part of the historical unconscious.[51] In each

45 Ibid., p. 28. **46** Heaney, 'Title deeds: translating a classic', p. 411. **47** Wilmer, 'Performing *Antigone*', pp 384–5. **48** Ibid. **49** Heaney, *The Burial at Thebes*, p. 4. **50** Ibid., pp 14–5. **51** Ibid., p. 22.

Hearing Heaney:Layout 1 29/06/2015 20:01 Page 123

instance, however, words and actions are charged with a crucial multivalence that directs an audience to see specificity and universality at work simultaneously.

The same can be said of the very register within which the language of the play operates. Heaney's search for the right 'voice' for Antigone / *Antigone* led him to mine another piece of culturally archived Irish history. After a long struggle to find an aural 'way in' to the play's linguistic worldview Heaney eventually located a cultural echo in the eighteenth-century Irish poem 'The Lament for Art O'Leary'. The poem is voiced through O'Leary's widow Eibhlín Dhubh Ní Chonaill as she looks upon the corpse of her husband who has been shot dead by the Sheriff of Cork, Abraham Morris, for refusing to sell his horse.[52] As Heaney recounts: 'In a flash I saw refracted in Eibhlín Dhubh 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'.[53] In *The Burial at Thebes* this 'under-voicing' is beautifully subtle and works as an aural architecture for the action – as in this moment when Antigone pleas with her sister for help:

> Are we sister, sister, brother?
> Or traitor, coward, coward?[54]

Crucially, for the reading of the play proposed in this essay, Heaney manages to draw on this 'political unconscious' without over-burdening his *Antigone*/ Antigone with the baggage of a specific socio-political mindscape (a balance, as we have seen, that has not always been achieved by Sophocles' Irish interpreters).[55] In this regard, Seamus Deane has argued that Heaney's engagement with Sophoclean tragedy reflects a broader shift in the emphasis and philosophical approach of his poetic vision:

> The turn in his poetry … is not simply a turn from the ground to air; it is a turn from place to time, from a past that was literally grounded – in bogs, in earth, in graves – to a mobile future that refuses locality and localism and risks another kind of language, of perception.[56]

However, as I have sought to argue throughout this essay, while *The Cure at Troy* may well reveal the beginnings of this poetic shift, it is *The Burial at Thebes* that most perfectly captures its possibilities in the work of Heaney the dramatist. It is Heaney's *Antigone*, with its beautiful balancing of Steiner's 'specific universals' that reveals the poet fully at play in the space where history meets History.

52 Macintosh, 'Irish *Antigone* and burying the dead', p. 100. **53** As quoted in Stephen E. Wilmer, 'Finding a post-colonial voice for Antigone: Seamus Heaney's *Burial at Thebes*', p. 233. **54** Heaney, *The Burial at Thebes*, p. 4. **55** See Fredric Jameson, *The political unconscious: narrative as a socially symbolic act* (London, 1981). **56** Seamus Deane, 'Field Day's Greeks (and Russians)' in McDonald & Watton, *Amid our troubles*, pp 148–64 at p. 159.