

Metaphors of the Body and Desire in Contemporary Irish Poetry, edited by Irene Gilsenen-Nordin. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, pages 79-110

CHAPTER 4

The Body as Ethical Synecdoche in the Writing of Seamus Heaney

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Abstract

This essay examines the imaginative use of images of the violently abused body in the writing of Seamus Heaney. Looking at *The Cure at Troy* and *The Burial at Thebes*, this essay also looks at real bodies – victims of the violence in Northern Ireland – those of the Kingsills massacre and Robert McCartney. The ethical import of a bruised and abused body is a strong trope in Heaney's work and the conflation between ethics, aesthetic and politics in terms of the body is explored.

This chapter will focus on images of the body in the work of Seamus Heaney as a synecdoche of the ethical imperative that drives the aesthetic in his work. In terms of treading the liminal state between poetry as an autotelic aesthetic discourse and poetry as a site of ideological and socio-political struggle, the bodies that are signified in Heaney's writing serve as a Derridean *brisure*,¹ through which both discourses can mutually enforce each other. By focusing on the materiality of the body, in some of the Bog Poems, the wounded body in *The Cure at Troy* in tandem with his prose musings on the hunger strikes, and the discourse of the dead body in *The Burial at Thebes*, this chapter will examine the

images of the body in Heaney's writing, and will trace an ethical line of enquiry from these particular bodies into the singularity and uniqueness of each life, a discourse which he sees poetry as eminently qualified to profess.

Writing at the conclusion of the title essay of *The Government of the Tongue*, Heaney is discussing the 'paradox of poetry and of the imaginative arts in general' in terms of politics,² and muses on the efficacy of poetry. He says in one sense, the efficacy is 'nil — no lyric has ever stopped a tank'. However, in another sense he sees its efficacy as 'unlimited' and goes on, quoting from chapter eight of St John's Gospel, to cite the metaphor of Jesus' writing in the sand in the face of the scribes and Pharisees who were accusing the woman caught in adultery as an example. He sees this writing 'in the face of which accusers and accused are left speechless and renewed' as analogous to the force of poetry, a 'break with the usual life but not an absconding from it.' In terms redolent of Derrida's notions of *différance* and the trace, Heaney speaks of the epistemology of poetry as paralleling the writing in the sand which is ephemeral in the extreme. As he puts it, poetry does not promise a solution to either the 'accusing crowd' or the 'helpless accused':

Instead, 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. This is what gives poetry its governing power. At its greatest moments it would attempt, in Yeats's phrase, to hold in a single thought reality and justice.³

Poetry can be the space through which reality and justice can operate, not overtly in the political sphere, but in terms of influencing the writer and the reader, in other words, in terms of creating more complex forms of individual identity. He goes on to describe poetry as 'more a threshold than a path' and sees it as one which is 'constantly approached and constantly departed from,' and which effects

reader and writer by the experience of being ‘at the same time summoned and released’ (Heaney 1988, 108).⁴ The oscillatory nature of this dialectical movement demonstrates the complexity of the forces acting on both reader and writer. The fluidity and multi-perspectival nature of these positions are seminal to his notions of the value of poetry in the shaping of ethical attitudes.

In his ‘writing in the sand’ metaphor, Heaney probes these very notions of efficacy and inefficacy: on the one hand, he sees that poetry does not stop tanks; on the other, however, it may alter the mindset that is sending in those tanks. Ironically, it is the very ephemerality of poetry, the writing in the sand that gives it any sense of lasting force; it is ‘the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality’.⁵ However, the force is microcosmic as opposed to macrocosmic; it has no direct effect on the political, but it has the effect of altering the individual consciousness of both writer and reader. In terms of the relationship between writing and politics, he sees the ‘purely poetic force of words’ as ‘the guarantee of a commitment which need not apologize for not taking up the cudgels since it is raising a baton to attune discords which the cudgels are creating’.⁶ And, of course, the core of his ‘writing in the sand’ metaphor is the wounded female body, the body as victim, faced by hands holding stones but saved by a hand writing in the sand. This focus on the frailty of the body is developed in his Nobel lecture, *Crediting Poetry*.

Here, Heaney exemplifies this point by recalling how, in 1976, a minibus full of workers was stopped at Kingsmills, near Bessbrook in County Armagh at a bogus checkpoint. The occupants were lined up at the side of the road, and were asked ‘any Catholics among you, step out here.’ Heaney notes that, since the majority of the group were Protestants, with a single exception, the presumption must have been that ‘the masked men were Protestant para-militaries about to carry out a tit-for-tat sectarian killing’.⁷ He goes on:

It was a terrible moment for him, caught between dread and witness, but he did make a motion to step forward. Then, the story goes, in that split second of decision, and in the relative cover of the winter evening darkness, he felt the hand of the Protestant worker next to him take his hand and squeeze it in a signal that said no, don't move, we'll not betray you, nobody need know what faith or party you belong to.⁸

The man did step forward, but was thrown aside to watch the execution of the ten Protestant workers, murdered by 'presumably, the Provisional IRA'.⁹ Heaney notes that, in the face of such atrocity, we are 'rightly suspicious of that which gives too much consolation in these circumstances'.¹⁰ However, if art is to be of 'present use,' then its redress must take account of both the hand that gripped its other, as well as those which murdered their others. Heaney's field of force hopes to credit the 'marvelous' as well as the 'murderous',¹¹ but always within a context that respects our responsibility to the other. Derrida has made the point that literature is that genre wherein 'license is given to the writer to say everything he wants to or everything he can'.¹² For Heaney, and his notion of poetry, we could perhaps add to this: license is given to the writer to say everything he wants to or everything he can, and everything he should to help to attune the discords at work in society. This ethical component of the aesthetic has a transforming function in terms of how one sense of identity views another.

The focus of his attention in the retelling of the Kingsmills massacre is on the materiality of the bodies as individuals, of hands reaching out for each other, and of hands reaching for triggers, and of bullets being fired. If poetry is in any way to become a threshold between the two poles of which we spoke at the beginning, then its effect, as Heaney notes, can only be on the individual and it is in the trope of the body that such an effect can be enunciated. Heaney has, throughout his writings, foregrounded the materiality of the *Lebenswelt* about which he is writing. Images of concrete reality characterized his earlier work, and nowhere was this seen more clearly than in his descriptions of bodies in his 'Bog

Poems'. There is a strand that weaves its way through Heaney's poetry which is connected with the body as a symbolic index of identity. It can be traced through the Bog Poems, and their embodiment of racial and psychic memory in images of corporeality which have transcended, in ways, death and time, and yet which irrupt within history as harbingers of an essentialist form of identity. Here, desire is enunciated as some form of racial revenge which functions as a means of validating the selfhood of the nationalist consciousness.

As Heaney has noted, there was a sense in which the writers in Northern Ireland were expected to respond to the conflict in their work: 'a simple minded pressure also to speak up for their own side,¹³ and clearly this pressure was felt by Heaney who said that it would 'wrench the rhythms' of his writing procedures to 'start squaring up to contemporary events with more will than ways to deal with them'.¹⁴ He referred to the Yeatsian example of writing in the context of a political and social crisis:

I think that what he learned there was that you deal with public crisis not by accepting the terms of the public's crisis, but by making your own imagery and your own terrain take the colour of it, take the impressions of it.¹⁵

This is precisely what Heaney does in his Bog Poems. Heaney told Edward Broadbridge that he was always aware that his own inspiration sprang from 'remembering' and he went on to extrapolate this into a national fixation, seeing it as typical of Irish people that they 'looked back at their own history' rather than forward towards the future. He went on to explore the ramifications of this: 'The word "remember" is a potent word in Irish politics....Remember 1690 if you're an Orangeman...Remember 1916...if you are a republican'.¹⁶

His seminal Bog Poem, 'The Tollund Man', stemming from pictures in P.V. Glob's book *The Bog People*, focuses on the body as icon. The first stanza is a complete sentence, describing how the poet 'will go to Aarhus' to see the Tollund Man's 'peat-brown head', while the second describes the actual unearthing of the bog figure, as 'they dug him out'.¹⁷ He goes on to describe both the exact physical state of the Tollund Man – his last meal of 'winter seeds' still in his stomach – and the mythic and natural processes which have kept the corpse whole, like 'saint's body' – 'She tightened her torc on him' and opened 'her fen'.¹⁸ It is as if his sacrifice for his people to the mother goddess has been rewarded with a kind of immortality. He has almost become like the bog itself, with his 'peat-brown head', his eye-lids looking like 'mild pods' and his skin coloured by the bog's 'dark juices'.¹⁹ While in this poem, there is clearly a sense that his sacrifice may well have been worth while for his people, in later poems, the focus is less on the body as sacrificial icon, and more on the marks of violence that have been inflicted on that body.

This act of unearthing the past is the subject of 'Come to the Bower', itself the title of an Irish folk song, which recounts the act of uncovering 'the dark-bowered queen' by 'hand', an image which, as Patricia Coughlin, who has provided a seminal feminist critique of Heaney's work, notes: 'combines the traditional topos of disrobing with the richly sensuous apprehension of the landscape which is one of Heaney's most characteristic features'.²⁰ The imagery and narrative are suffused with a strong sexual subtext, as the sensory aspects of the act, the hand being 'touched' by sweetbriar before going on to 'unpin' the queen, and to 'unwrap skins' are dwelt upon. This chain is reinforced by the phallic imagery of 'sharpened willow' which 'Withdraws gently' out of 'black maw / Of the peat', and the added image of spring water which starts 'to rise around her'. The culmination of this sexual image chain is the final reaching of the 'bullion' of her 'Venus bone'.²¹ Here the female body is very much at the mercy of male phallic and penetrative power.

In the next poem, 'Bog Queen', the thematic process is similar but the perspective is completely altered as it is the body itself which speaks. The repeated 'I lay waiting' stresses the fact that, though dead, there is some form of sentience still at work in the consciousness of the bog queen; she remains conscious of all of the processes of decay even as she undergoes them: the 'seeps of winter / digested me'. Her brain is seen as 'darkening', and compared to a 'jar of spawn' which is 'fermenting underground'.²² The constant use of the pronoun 'my' to explain the processes of nature underlines the consciousness of the speaker, and the fact that she retains some form of life. The length of time she has been 'waiting' is beautifully caught by the use of the unusual verb which describes how the 'Phoenician stitchwork / retted on my breasts' // soft moraines'.²³ This verb, which derives from the Middle English *rotten*, meaning 'to soften by soaking in water or by exposure to moisture to encourage partial rotting', captures the gradual rotting of both the body and the clothing which covered that body. The sheer length of time involved in this process is indicated by the use of 'moraines' to describe the queen's breasts, as this word refers to an area or bank of debris that a glacier or ice sheet has carried down and deposited.

The almost complete transformation from human to natural object that is undergone by the bog queen seems to indicate a direction in the poem which will see her totally subsumed by the land: 'the seeps of winter / digested me'.²⁴ However, in the closing stanza and a half, the imagery of decomposition is inverted, and death becomes metamorphosed into a rebirth:

The plait of my hair,
A slimy birth-chord
Of bog, had been cut

And I rose from the dark,
Hacked bone, skull-ware.²⁵

Here, the sentience of memory is symbolized in this image of death being transformed into rebirth. This is possibly his most graphic figuring of the idea of memory as having a life of its own, and it compliments the previous poem, 'Come to the Bower'. There, the 'I' of the poem went searching for the dark-bowered queen' while here, it is the self-same queen who speaks: she is sentient, aware and 'waiting' for this very moment when she can be unveiled and reborn. It is this latent power of memory to incubate the wrongs of the past and to keep them alive in the minds of a community that is the subject of these poems. The levels of violence and pain that are part of the somatic experience are writ large here, and in 'The Grauballe Man', the tension between seeing a dead body as an icon, or as a dead body is made very clear:

Who will say 'corpse'
to his vivid cast?
Who will say 'body'
to his opaque repose?²⁶

Thomas Docherty sees this stanza as asking: 'is history dead, a thing of the past; or is it alive, vivid, a presence of the past'.²⁷ These were the very questions that Irish people, north and south were asking as sectarian violence flared in the streets of Northern Ireland. The unquestioned assumptions of nationalist Ireland, that the 1916 Rising was a good thing, that the IRA had the right to bear arms in the name of the Irish people, and that there was a historical imperative that saw a 'United Ireland' as its *telos* were coming into question, though very gradually. Having called the status of the bog figure into question, he goes on to repeat the same death-resurrection trope that we saw in 'Bog Queen' as the Grauballe Man's hair is compared, again in simile, to a 'foetus', and later, to a 'forceps baby'. The idea that this

man's death, a death caused by a 'slashed throat', has somehow been arrested, and that he now becomes the ultimate image of a rebirth is a classic example of the power of the aesthetic to persuade an audience that death for the tribe can have a salvific purpose. This is how much of *North* has been read, as justifying, or glorifying such violence.

However, Heaney also creates a counter-movement, a movement in this case which occurs over the long sentence that is the final four stanzas of the poem. He tells of how he first saw the Grauballe Man's 'twisted face' in a photograph, but that now he is 'perfected in my memory'. The movement from the external to the internal that structurally underpinned so much of Heaney's artesian imagery is evident here again, as this ancient figure, dug 'out of the peat' is balanced in the poet's memory: 'hung in the scales / with beauty and atrocity'. On one side of this particular scale is the Dying Gaul (a sculpture from the third century B.C. depicting a dying Celtic warrior, with matted hair, lying on his shield, wounded, and awaiting death, now to be found in the Capitoline museum in Rome), and on the other:

the actual weight
of each hooded victim,
slashed and dumped.²⁸

Here, the poem, which seemed to be endorsing an aesthetic approach to this figure, now suddenly broaches the contrast between an actual piece of art, the Dying Gaul, an imaginative creation, and the Grauballe Man, a victim of tribal sacrifice, killed in a most unpleasant manner. Factually, Glob noted that the 'cut ran...practically from ear to ear, so deep that the gullet was completely severed'.²⁹

The word that tips the balance here is the adjective ‘actual’ which stresses the reality of lifting the dead weight of hooded victims, after they were ‘slashed’. Whether these victims are Iron Age figures or contemporary victims of Northern Irish violence is not specified but I would suggest that he is referring to contemporary figures, and I would also feel that he is, once again, foregrounding the victim and the reality of death, as opposed to some form of mythic religious dimension. Again, there was a societal parallel as the images of the victims of the Provisional Irish Republican Army, and Loyalist bombings and shootings began to register with television audiences, and people began to wonder whether political ideology of either sort was worth such suffering. The image of a mutilated body is a synecdoche through which such points can be made. Bodies can be images, symbols, icons and relics, but first and foremost, they are bodies, whose mortality and vulnerability are central to their signification. For a group, or for political expediency, a body may be a sacrifice, or an icon, for the particular body, there is pain, suffering and death, and Heaney’s poetry, by stressing the materiality of bodies, makes this abundantly clear. Ethically, these bodies, the woman in adultery, the victims of the massacre in Kingsmills and the long-dead Bog people, remind us of the frailty of life, and the ease with which it can be destroyed. These images are like the writing in the sand with which we began, a break from the usual but not in any way a form of escape from it.

In his translation of Sophocles’s *Philoctetes*, *The Cure at Troy*, the notion of a bodily wound is again seen in terms of being an index of desire, with the somatic wound of Philoctetes functioning synecdochically symbolizing the ongoing wounds of the polarized positions in Northern Ireland. However, at the same time it is the wounded body qua wounded body that is the central signifier of the play. Written for Field Day in 1990, and first produced in October of that year in the Guildhall in Derry, *The Cure at Troy* foregrounds the conflicts between politics and ethics, between loyalty to one’s tribe and loyalty to a higher sense of humanity and truth, between values which are the products of a

particular ideology and those which aspire to some form of transcendent position in terms of that ideology, are set out.

In this play, Philoctetes has been left by the Greeks on the island of Lemnos, due to a foul-smelling suppurating wound, which left him 'rotting like a leper' caused by a 'snakebite he got at a shrine'.³⁰ A Trojan soothsayer, Helenus, one of King Priam's sons, had prophesied that Troy would only be captured if Philoctetes and his bow were present, so Odysseus and the hero of the play, Neoptolemus (the son of Achilles), are sent to obtain the bow. From the beginning, the stage is set in terms of a conflict between tribal loyalty and some transcendental notion of ethical value and responsibility.

Here, the loyalties of Greeks and Trojans are superimposed onto the contemporary situation of Northern Ireland. This becomes unequivocal near the end of the play when the chorus sums up the developments with an interpolation that speaks of a 'hunger-striker's father' standing in a graveyard, and a 'police widow in veils' fainting at 'the funeral home'.³¹ Hence, the dilemma of the Greeks obeying orders, and taking the bow of Philoctetes against his wishes, can set up resonances with contemporary Irish communal and sectarian loyalties, but can also avoid succumbing to any gravitational entrapment through the creative use of translation.

Consequently, the chorus can see that a loyalty to the tribe which is not counterweighted by some sense of personal ethics causes people who are convinced that they are 'in the right' to 'repeat themselves...no matter what.' This parallel of the Freudian repetition complex (*Wiederholungszwang*), can also be seen as a constitutive factor in the replication of the violence in Northern Ireland, as generation after generation becomes involved (or is interpellated, in Althusserian terms), in sectarian violence in the defence of the ideological certainties of a particular community, be that nationalist or

unionist. The modal cause of this repetitive, trans-generational involvement is a sense of communal grievance, the 'self-pity' that 'buoys them up,' which is developed and fed by pondering upon past injustices.

Philoctetes, as symbolic of this tendency, identifies again and again with his wound: 'I managed to come through / but I never healed';³² 'this ruins everything. / I'm being cut open';³³ 'has the bad smell left me?';³⁴ 'Some animals in a trap / Eat off their own legs';³⁵ 'All I've left is a wound'.³⁶ His subjectivity is intrinsically bound up with his wound; symbolically, he is unable to face the future because of his adhesion to the past; his wound interpellates him as a particular type of ideological subject. The chorus sums up this perspective, a perspective that has a number of connections with the firm roots of the thicket already mentioned, as follows. Having already spoken of 'self-pity,' it goes on to point out the self-fulfilling prophecy that such an attitude can bring about:

And their whole life spent admiring themselves
For their own long-suffering.
Licking their wounds
And flashing them around like decorations.³⁷

This veneration of the wounds of the past is exactly how sectarian ideology seduces new subjectivities into existing moulds, and this is why the survivor of Kingsmills is such a potent ethical symbol – he has survived to tell how awful such killing is. In this play, Philoctetes embodies the siege mentality that is rife in Northern Ireland in his cry: 'No matter how I'm besieged. / I'll be my own Troy. The Greeks will never take me'.³⁸

Another aspect of such entrapment is the sense of immanence within a culture, which sees value only in those areas wherein the tribal imperatives are validated. In *The Cure at Troy*, it is Odysseus who symbolizes this voice of political pragmatism. He defines himself and Neoptolemus as ‘Greeks with a job to do’,³⁹ and makes similar matter of fact pronouncements as the play proceeds, informing the younger man that ‘you’re here to serve our cause’.⁴⁰ In the service of his cause, Odysseus can rationalize almost anything, telling Philoctetes that his ‘aim has always been to get things done / By being adaptable’,⁴¹ and this adaptability is grounded in his tribal loyalty. He can gloss over the sufferings of Philoctetes by invoking his own part of the thicket: ‘We were Greeks with a job to do, and we did it,’ and in answer to the ethical question about the lies that have been told, he gives the classic response of political pragmatism: ‘But it worked! It worked, so what about it?’⁴² Here is the political over-riding the ethical – the voice of *Realpolitik*, the end justifying the means. What is the importance of a single wounded body compared to the general weal of the Polis?

In the climactic confrontation of the play, Neoptolemus, who had shared this perspective earlier in the play: ‘I’m under orders’,⁴³ and who had lied to Philoctetes in order to obtain his bow, realizes the error of his ways and becomes a more complex character through the introduction of an ethical strand to his *persona*. In a colloquy with Odysseus, the gradual opposition between pragmatic tribal politics and a more open humanistic ethics is unveiled. In response to Neoptolemus’s statement that ‘I did a wrong thing and I have to right it’,⁴⁴ and to his further remark that he is going to ‘redress the balance’ and cause the ‘scales to even out’,⁴⁵ by handing back the bow, Odysseus replies in clichés: ‘Act your age. Be reasonable. Use your head.’ The reply of Neoptolemus demonstrates the gulf that exists between the two: ‘Since when did the use of reason rule out truth?’⁴⁶

For Odysseus, 'rightness' and 'justice' are values that are immanent in the ideological perspective of the tribe or community. There is to be no critical distance between his notions of myth and history. He tells Neoptolemus that there is one last 'barrier' that will stop him handing back the bow, and that is the 'will of the Greek people, / And me here as their representative'.⁴⁷ He sees no sense of any transcendental or intersubjective form of justice in what Neoptolemus is attempting. When Neoptolemus speaks of 'doing the right thing,' he is answered by the voice of the tribe: 'What's so right about / Reneging on your Greek commission?' Their subsequent interchange deserves to be quoted in full as it is a *locus classicus* of the conflict between ethics and nationalistic politics; between a view of self and other as connected and mutually responsible, and that of self and other as disparate and in conflict:

ODYSSEUS

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.⁴⁸

In this exchange, the critical distance already spoken of is evident in the value-ethic of Neoptolemus. He has moved beyond the inter-tribal 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; 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 this can cause the ‘entrapment’ which has mired Odysseus, and from which Neoptolemus is determined to escape. His notion of justice is intersubjective, a higher ethical command to do right by another human being, regardless of political imperative.

In a ringing assertion earlier in the play, as he begins to have some form of sympathy with Philoctetes, Neoptolemus says ‘I’m all throughother. This isn’t me. I’m sorry’.⁴⁹ Here the beginnings of an ethics of identity, of a view that the self is not defined in simplistic contradistinction to the other, but rather is shot through with traces of that other, is seen as a painful and self-alienating experience. One is reminded of Levinas’s statement that language is ‘born in responsibility,’ implying that the responsibility involved is to the other, to other traditions, other ideas, but most essentially, to other people.⁵⁰ A comparison can be made between the doubt and questioning of Neoptolemus, and Odysseus’s conviction that ‘he’s in the right’.⁵¹ For Heaney, poetry can aid in the creation of such an ethics of selfhood, functioning as ‘a source of truth and at the same time a vehicle of harmony,’ while at the same time being ‘both socially responsible and creatively free’.⁵²

For Odysseus, the borderline between self and other is clear and finite; it encompasses all lines of vision. For him, ‘justice’ is either Greek or Trojan; where Greek jurisdiction ends, he can only imagine Trojan jurisdiction beginning. His binary logic is exactly that of many groupings in contemporary culture, if you are not for ‘us’ then you must be for ‘them.’ Heaney’s view of the relationship between self and other, as voiced by Neoptolemus, is profoundly at odds with this; he feels a sense of ethical

responsibility for the other as well as the self. Derrida has made the point, in *Of Spirit*, that the origin of language is responsibility, and it is this sense of responsibility to the other that drives the transformation in Neoptolemus.⁵³ Speaking of the binary opposition between Ireland and England, as an origin of that between Catholic and Protestant, Heaney sees poetry as a constellation wherein both can be set in dialectical and transformative interchange: ‘I think of the personal and Irish pieties as vowels, and the literary awarenesses nourished on English as consonants. My hope is that the poems will be vocables adequate to my whole experience’.⁵⁴

Hence, Heaney’s view of the line that separates one community from another is similar to what Derrida envisages when he speaks of the irrepressible desire for a ‘community’ to form but also for it to know its limit: ‘and for its limit to be its *opening*’.⁵⁵ For Derrida, cultural identity is not the ‘self-identity of a thing’: he sees cultural identity as ‘a way of being different from itself,’ adding that a ‘culture is different from itself’ and that ‘language is different from itself’.⁵⁶ This idea of a limit as an opening to alterity is one which has strong echoes in Heaney’s work. Writing about George Herbert’s ‘The Pulley,’ and one of his own poems from ‘Squarings,’ Heaney notes that both works are about ‘the way consciousness can be alive to two different and contradictory dimensions of reality and still find a way of negotiating between them’.⁵⁷ This concept of negotiation is precisely what is meant by his comment that rhyme ‘surprises and extends’ the fixed relationships between words, and, by extension, between individuals and communities. One of his methods of achieving this negotiation is the already discussed ‘field of force,’ from *Preoccupations*. In such structures of thought, the border between self and other is very much a Derridean opening, and this is symbolized, in *The Cure at Troy*, by the role of the chorus:

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.⁵⁸

This borderline will be very much in line with Heaney's notion of a frontier of writing, which allows some form of passage across that border which separates different groups. Borders, says Heaney, are made to be crossed, and poetry may provide the mode of such a crossing. In political terms, Heaney has expressed the hope that the frontier which partitions Ireland into north and south could become 'a little bit more like the net on a tennis court, a demarcation allowing for agile give-and-take'.⁵⁹ Yet again, there are echoes of Derrida who says that we 'have to cross the border but not to destroy the border';⁶⁰ instead, the border, as a limit point of one community, becomes an opening to the other community. In Heaney's terms, the voice of the chorus, a poetic voice, is a point of opening between the 'you' and the 'me;' it is an intersubjective point of mediation between the gods' and human beings' 'sense of things.' He goes on to make the ethical role of poetry *qua* poetry explicit by extending the connection between the voices which enunciate this poetic vision, and poetry itself: 'And that's the borderline that poetry / Operates on too'.⁶¹

It is poetry (in this case poetry as translation) as genre that facilitates this ethical interaction between self and other, this sense that borders are not points of closure but instead, points of opening. Hence, Neoptolemus can say: 'I'm all throughother,' meaning that he is becoming aware that there are not just

two essential identities at work here; he realizes that there are alternatives to the essentialist ethnocentrism of Odysseus; he realizes that 'reality and justice' are values which can have a transformative effect on notions of being Greek or Trojan. As Philoctetes puts it, in a moment of *anagnorisis*: 'the wheel is turning, the scales are tilting back. Justice is going to be woken up at last'.⁶² Neoptolemus, speaking of 'justice herself,' makes the point that 'she isn't only Greek',⁶³ and this is perhaps the crucial message of this play.

While admitting that no 'poem or play or song / Can fully right a wrong',⁶⁴ this translation attempts to stake out the ground for poetry to have some effect in a world where people 'suffer,' 'torture one another' and get 'hurt and get hard.' Realizing the lesson of history, which says: '*Don't hope / On this side of the grave*' [*italics original*], the chorus concludes the play by suggesting that the:

once in a lifetime
The longed-for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up,
And hope and history rhyme.⁶⁵

The conditions required for such a tidal wave are the awareness of the necessary relationship between self and other, and of the transformative effects of this relationship in terms of future definitions of selfhood and alterity. As Derrida has put it, in a broadly similar context, the relation to alterity as the responsibility to the other is also a 'responsibility toward the *future*, since it involves the struggle to create openings within which the other can appear' and can hence 'come to transform what we know or think we know'.⁶⁶

Translation, as has become clear, is the vehicle which allows us to achieve this putative transformation, becoming a way, not of erasing the original, but of keeping the original alive. It is a way of 'translating

oneself into the other language without giving up one's own language.' In political terms, the act of translating is a way of 'welcoming the other's traditions'.⁶⁷ It is also a way of transforming the temporal orientation of a culture from the past to the present, as the old tongue becomes transformed into the new tongue which points towards a politics of the future:

Your wound is what you feed on, Philoctetes.

I say it again in friendship and say this:

Stop eating yourself up with hate and come with us.⁶⁸

To see such an exhortation as politically naive would be to forget that, at the end of the play, Philoctetes still has his wound, and the chorus, while certainly hopeful, nevertheless retains an adjectival sense of doubt and uncertainty regarding the future that is set out before the characters in the play, and by analogy, before the communities in Northern Ireland:

I leave

Half-ready to believe

That a *crippled* trust might walk

And the *half-true* rhyme is love.⁶⁹ [*my italics*]

The uncertainties that are enunciated in these adjectives certainly undercut any untoward optimism. The parallel with the ongoing peace-process, with its analogous uncertainties and half-steps forward, is clearly implied, but it would be incorrect to see this parallel as all-consuming. Heaney's notion of the role of poetry is very much focused on transforming the individual, as opposed to the group or tribe. To get through the thicket is to see it from a transcendent perspective; however, the adhesion of those firm roots is still a factor. Tribal loyalty may still be present, but a personal ethic can act as a

counterbalance, whether in mythical ancient Ireland where Sweeney's wings gave him this Daedalan perspective, or in ancient Greece, where Philoctetes can become 'all throughother' and see beyond Odysseus's identificatory thicket which is composed of the Greek-Trojan exclusive binarism, or in the actual space of Northern Ireland.

The metaphor of the wound which can either cripple any movement beyond itself or else become the catalyst for some form of future which is focused on a form of healing is seminal in this translation. The treatment of a human being, *in extremis* of suffering, is a standard through which ethical behaviour can be adjudged. Indeed the wounded or maimed body becomes in both this translation and the Bog Poems already discussed the structural and symbolic agency for poetry to work on the individual consciousness as opposed to participating. The human body, stoned, with its throat slit, or riddled with bullets, becomes the metaphor of an ethical demand on the body politic, it becomes the demand of the other on the writer to seek a horizon that is beyond that of group or tribal loyalty.

In *The Redress of Poetry*, Heaney has made this very point about the role of the writer when faced with a situation of group loyalty versus a sense of humanistic ethics. Taking three examples, an English poet in World War One, an Irish poet in the wake of the 1916 Rising and an American poet during the Vietnam war, he notes that the cultural expectations on each would be broadly similar: World War One: to contribute to the war effort by 'dehumanizing the face of the enemy';⁷⁰ 1916: to 'revile the tyranny of the executing power' and Vietnam: to 'wave the flag rhetorically'.⁷¹ These are very much the pressures felt by the early Heaney, and discussed in his poetry. His answer underlines his notion of one of the redresses of poetry: as it can see the German soldier 'as a friend'; the British Government as a body 'which might keep faith' and Vietnam as an 'Imperial betrayal':

In these cases, to see the German soldier as a friend and secret sharer, to see the British government as a body who might keep faith, to see the South-East Asian expedition as an imperial betrayal, to do any of these things is to add a complication where the general desire is for a simplification.⁷²

In the above quotation, he crosses the political border by means of the ethical; intersubjective notions of justice are a higher demand than tribal loyalty. It is this need to go beyond simplification that is so important in Heaney's writing. His thoughts on the value of poetry can be brought to this conclusion: it has to be 'a working model of inclusive consciousness. It should not simplify'.⁷³ It must be true to the complexities of modern, or postmodern life, and as such, Heaney's work parallels the growing complexity of life, political, social, religious and cultural, in contemporary Ireland.

As Heaney puts it in *The Government of the Tongue*, a poem 'floats adjacent to, parallel to, the historical moment'.⁷⁴ The poet's role is not to use his gift as a slingstone for the desperate or for any other group. Instead it is, in the words of Zbigniew Herbert, concerned with salvaging 'out of the catastrophe of history at least two words, without which all poetry is an empty play of meanings and appearances, namely: justice and truth'.⁷⁵ And it is in the vexed liminal space of the intersection of these two that he speaks in his translation of Sophocles' *Antigone: The Burial at Thebes*, where the notion of non-simplification is at the core of the play and this version of it.

This translation is part of a developing trend in the work of Seamus Heaney. One can trace a line of translations form within individual books of poetry, since *Field Work*, through to individual works themselves: *Sweeney Astray*, *Beowulf*, *The Cure at Troy* and now *The Burial at Thebes*. As is increasingly the case in Heaney's writing, he tends to view the mater of Ireland best through the lens of another language and culture, imitating the desire of Stephen Dedalus to fly by those nets of language,

nationality and religion. In a piece published in the first edition of *The Irish Book Review*, ‘Thebes via Toombridge: Retitling Antigone’, Heaney sets out the connections between local and universal that motivated the title of this translation. Speaking of Francis Hughes, the dead hunger striker and neighbour of his in county Derry, Heaney stresses the body of Hughes as a site of struggle between the security forces and the nationalist crowd who came to take possession of it. Ownership of the body becomes a seminal metaphor here, as it becomes a potent signifier of the contest between the ‘instinctive powers of feeling, love and kinship’ and the ‘daylight gods of free and self-conscious, social and political life’,⁷⁶ to quote Hegel. Heaney sees the motivation behind the ‘surge of rage in the crowd as they faced the police’ as an index of what he terms *dúchas*, and it is here that we come to Antigone’s retitling. For her sense of propriety and integrity come from that feeling of kinship with the other as a fellow human, regardless of the political differences that separate us. This sense of kinship with the other is what he spoke of in *Crediting Poetry* about the Kingsmills massacre, in *The Cure at Troy* about Philoctetes, in *The Government of the Tongue* about the woman caught in adultery and in the Bog Poems about the long-dead iron-age figures.

The scene of the play is set after an invading army from Argos has been defeated by the Thebans under their new king Creon. Two of the sons of Oedipus, brothers to Antigone and Ismene, died in this battle, Eteocles perished defending Thebes but his brother, Polyneices, was part of the attacking army and hence a traitor:

Their banners flew, the battle raged
They fell together, their father’s sons.⁷⁷

The Theban king, Creon, outraged by this treachery from one of the royal family, decrees that Polyneices shall not receive the normal purifying burial rites and places under interdict of death anyone

who will attempt to provide these rites to the corpse. He decrees that Polyneices that ‘Anti-Theban Theban’ will not be accorded burial but will be left to rot in the open. We could be listening to the voice of Odysseus in *The Cure at Troy* again, as value is placed on loyalty to the group as opposed to some higher criterion. The results are that ‘the dogs and birds are at it day and night, spreading reek and rot’. Creon justifies this, in a manner similar to the British authorities and their treatment of the corpse of Francis Hughes:

This is where I stand where it comes to Thebes
Never to grant traitors and subversives
Equal footing with loyal citizens.⁷⁸

Once again, we are in the territory of the political sense of justice, the betterment of the group or *Polis*, in contradistinction with a higher sense of the value of the individual. For Antigone, the duty she has to her brother as human far surpasses her duty to the Theban notion of patriotism as laid down by Creon, and interestingly, she cites a higher law than that of Creon or Thebes itself:

I disobeyed the law because the law was not
The law of Zeus nor the law ordained
By Justice. Justice dwelling deep
Among the gods of the dead.⁷⁹

By positing a higher order of the treatment of the other than that of the polis, or group, Antigone is voicing the perennial debate between ethics and patriotism or nationalism. To treat the dead correctly and with honour, she implies, is very much an index of our own humanity. The treatment of people as less than human, as often demanded by the voice of the tribe, is the antithesis of her own actions. Hers is an evocation of a higher, intersubjective sense of ethics:

This proclamation had your force behind it
But it was mortal force, and I, also a mortal,
I chose to disregard it. I abide
By statutes utter and immutable –
Unwritten, original, god-given laws.⁸⁰

One of the strongest points about this translation is the degree of moral complexity involved. From his own perspective, and indeed, from that of the chorus, Creon is to be admired:

Creon saved us
Saved the country, and there he was, strong king,
Strong head of family, the man in charge.⁸¹

However, so is Antigone, as in death she teaches Creon that: ‘until we breathe our last breath / we should keep the established law’, and in this line we see the credo of both original and translation: our common humanity should transcend our differences. It is the treatment of the dead, themselves no longer part of politics as agents that is seen as wrong in the dramatic logic of the play and the translation. As Heaney calls it in his prose piece ‘it is a matter of burial refused’, as Polyneices is being made a ‘non-person’ and this is what Antigone cannot countenance, and it is this disrespect for the human in death that is the cause of the metaphorical contagion outlined by Tiresias:

spreading reek and rot
On every altar stone and temple step, and the gods
Are revolted. That’s why we have this plague,
This vile pollution.⁸²

The result is that tapestry of the power structure that Creon is attempting to consolidate unravels in a litany of dead bodies: Antigone, Haemon, Eurydice all lie dead by the end of the play.

However, as his discussion of the Kingsmills massacre demonstrated, Heaney is not just concerned with bodies long dead, or wounded in biblical or classical drama. Those dead Protestant workers are very real indices of the need for an ethical warrant to over-ride political imperatives. Similarly, the voices of women demanding justice for their dead brother have a potent contemporary resonance in Irish political life. On January 30th, 2005, Robert McCartney was murdered outside Magennis' pub in the Short Strand area of Belfast. Reputedly, the murderers were members of Sinn Fein and the Provisional IRA and, in the aftermath of the murder, the pub was cleaned of fingerprints, CCTV evidence was removed and threats were issued to the witnesses of the act as to the consequences of reporting any of this to the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

The sisters of Robert McCartney – Catherine, Paula, Claire, Donna and Gemma – and his partner Bridgeen have spoken out in a campaign to see justice done to their brother in death, and this is eerily resonant of the voice of Antigone in defence of her own dead brother. Their demand is for justice to be done for their brother, a demand that echoes across the centuries, and that could be spoken in the words of Antigone: ‘Justice dwelling deep / Among the gods of the dead’.⁸³ It is significant that Heaney, in describing the genesis of this text, compares the treatment of the body of Polyneices with that of Francis Hughes, the hunger-striker; it is even more significant that this play deals with the voice of women, then, as now, seen as not quite part of the public sphere, women who are totally focused on obtaining justice for the dead:

I never did a nobler thing than bury
My brother Polyneices. And if these men
Weren't so afraid to sound unpatriotic
They'd say the same.⁸⁴

The partner and sisters of Robert McCartney have suffered the same fate as that of Antigone, they are seen as unusual voices in the public sphere: ‘women were never meant for this assembly’,⁸⁵ says Creon, words that have a chilling echo in the warning for the sisters by Martin McGuinness about being used by other political forces. Here, the ethical has engaged with the political, and the political is found wanting in the face of that imperative towards justice that has become symbolized by the name and body of Robert McCartney.

The bodies of Francis Hughes, the woman in adultery, the ten Protestant workers, the Bog people and the body of Polyneices are answered, in the contemporary moment, by the body of Robert McCartney, someone who was killed within his Polis, but who, metaphorically, is a revenant, unable to rest. The women who spoke out for their brothers, both in classical drama and in the contemporary world of the political, are ethical voices who demand justice, and common human decency that goes beyond narrow loyalty to the Polis, the tribe or any ideology that seeks to dehumanize those who are on the other side.

One can do no better than wish that those who killed him can take the advice of Tiresias, the blind prophet:

Yield to the dead. Don’t stab a ghost.

What can you win when you only wound a corpse?⁸⁶

These words, uttered in the present context attest the lasting value of this translation by Seamus Heaney of Sophocles’ *Antigone*. This venerable text still speaks to us across the centuries, and the language of this translation, lucid, crisp and intelligent, makes that voice seem ever more relevant. The images of the human body that we have discussed, frail, wounded, vulnerable or ultimately deceased are potent

signifiers of the power of the aesthetic to imbricate the ethical into the political in a way that can only benefit those who read it. The efficacy of poetry is precisely this sense of the importance of the individual life, the individual body, in the face of any group or societal imperative to dehumanize it.

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