

## *The Force of Law in Seamus Heaney's Greek Translations*

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### **5 keywords**

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### **Abstract**

This essay examines the use of law in Heaney's Greek translations: *The Burial at Thebes*, and *The Cure at Troy*. For Derrida, the founding moment of law, in a society or culture, is never a moment 'inscribed' in the history of that culture since it 'rips it apart with one decision', a decision which Derrida sees as a 'coup de force', a 'performative and interpretative violence' which is in itself 'neither just nor unjust'. In Heaney's quest for adjudication, for saying the law, he looks at the performative nature of violence in originary contexts and finds the symbols adequate to his society's predicament in these translations .

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The writing career of Seamus Heaney has been coterminous with the thirty years of violence that have characterised the politics of Northern Ireland. Now given the Northern Irish context of that work, one would expect that some form of critique of his aesthetic in terms of the notions of nationalist politics, and of the identificatory stance contained therein, would be a major strand of critical discourse. One would, however, be wrong. Of the few studies which deal with this area, the diversity of perspective instantiates the lack of epistemological clarity in these approaches to date. Eoghan Harris is typical in seeing Heaney's work as having not much to say to modern Ireland, coming, as he sees it 'from haunts of coot and fern' (Harris 1995), while Desmond Fennell sees his writing as a published form of 'private musing,' something which he sees as far removed from any political stance (Fennell 1991, 33).

In contrast to these views of his work as avoiding political engagement, Edna Longley, Ciarán Carson and Conor Cruise O'Brien have all, to some degree, seen Heaney as an aestheticizer of political violence, as someone who is sanctifying the violence of his tribe. As Blake Morrison summarizes, speaking of some of the poems in the opening section of *North*, it seems as if he is having these poems 'written for him' by his nationalist, Catholic psyche (Morrison 1982, 67). To Fennell, on the other hand, Heaney is placed in the dock for being a political quietest, unsure of his allegiance, and unwilling to speak for his own people, as exemplified by his 'silence' during the hunger strike in the Maze prison from March to October in 1981 (Fennell 1991, 38). Finally, David Lloyd sees Heaney as reducing history to myth, and privileging aesthetics over ethics (Lloyd 1993, 13-40).

Clearly the issue of violence in Heaney's writing is a problematic one, and the poet himself has probed his own symbolic approach to violence and art. Writing about the role of the artist in the face of the political confrontation in Belfast in 1971, Heaney says that he is 'fatigued by a continuous adjudication between agony and injustice, swung at one moment by the long tail of race and resentment, at another by the more acceptable feelings of pity and terror' (Heaney 1980, 30). Perhaps the most important words in this passage are 'continuous adjudication.' The interaction of active and passive voices in this passage outlines the complexity of the struggle that is ongoing within the culture, and within the poet. Heaney's metaphor of being 'swung' by the 'long tail' represents the atavistic, visceral emotions that were rife in Belfast at this time. Members of Heaney's own community were slaughtering for the 'common good' (Heaney 1975, 45), even as he was writing, and this internecine violence, itself both caused by, and creative of, a binary opposition, foregrounded questions about the nature and function of art.

The etymology of 'adjudicate' helps to clarify the issue at this point. Stemming from the Latin '*judicare*,' the original composite was '*jus*' (law) and '*dicere*' (to say). The word highlights Heaney's difficulty in continually attempting to 'say the law' of proper aesthetic, ethical and political action in

the face of a violent contemporary context, and his own attempt to do this involves a 'search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament.' (Heaney 1980, 56). Interestingly, there is a connection between violence and the law that has been pointed out, in a parallel context, by the French theorist Jacques Derrida. In "The Force of Law", Derrida offers his most probing analysis of the concept of the law and how it operates. Tracing his thoughts through a *pensée* of Blaise Pascal and the work of Montaigne, he stresses the aporetic relationship between the law and justice, using the Kantian dictum of 'no law without force' to syncretise these positions (Derrida 2002, 233).

The general view is that Pascal wrote this passage with the work of Montaigne in mind. Montaigne made the point that laws are 'not in themselves just but are rather just only because they are laws', and he goes on to speak about 'the mystical foundation of the authority of laws' as being simply custom (Derrida 2002, 239). Clearly, part of the signification of the title of this essay for Derrida is that law as societal construct, deriving from this mystical foundation of authority, can only be law through its enforcement: there is 'no law without force as Immanuel Kant recalled with the greatest rigour' (Derrida 2002, 233). Here the force is the threat of punishment if the law is violated – the mailed fist held within the velvet glove.

Derrida points to the aporia that most laws must have been created through an act of violence (another example of the force of law) whereby control and power were won:

How to distinguish between the force of law [*loi*] of a legitimate power and the allegedly originary violence that must have established this authority and that could not itself have authorized itself by any anterior legitimacy so that, in this initial moment, it is neither legal nor illegal, just or unjust. (Derrida 2002, 234)

Here the irony is that an act which may have been foundational in terms of setting up a law, the taking of a country, or a province by war, will later be seen as illegal when referred to the law which

was enacted after the original act of violence. In other words, when one group uses violence to overthrow another, it then, on achieving power, invariably makes such actions illegal.

In Irish history for example, in 1916, a number of members of the political party Sinn Fein, without any democratic mandate or ethical warrant, undertook an armed rebellion against the British government. Under the invocation of martial law, the British authorities executed sixteen of the rebel leaders for treason. Six years later, some of those same insurgents, now members of the first native Irish government, executed former comrades in a bitter civil war over the future of the country, using the self-same martial law which executed a number of the leaders of 1916 six years earlier.

Derrida goes on to probe how the very emergence of justice and law, the ‘instituting, founding and justifying moment of law implies a performative force, that is to say always an interpretive force and a call to faith’: not in the sense, this time, that law would be in the service of force or the prevailing ideology but that instead it would maintain a ‘more complex relation to what one calls force, power or violence’ (Derrida 2002, 241). For Derrida, the founding moment of law, in a society or culture, is never a moment ‘inscribed’ in the history of that culture since it ‘rips it apart with one decision’, a decision which Derrida sees as a ‘coup de force’, a ‘performative and interpretative violence’ which is in itself ‘neither just nor unjust’ (Derrida 2002, 241).

In Heaney’s quest for adjudication, for saying the law, he looks at the performative nature of violence in originary contexts and finds the symbols adequate to his society’s predicament in the translations of two plays from ancient Greece: Sophocles *Antigone*, translated as *The Burial at Thebes*, and *The Cure at Troy*, his translation of Sophocles’s *Philoctetes*. At the beginning of *The Cure at Troy*, the chorus speaks about the connection between the voice of the aesthetic and the forces of violence:

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. (Heaney 1990, 2)

The imagery of stones and lava in this extract is, in my opinion thematic of a central concern in Heaney's work, namely the role of visceral emotions, atavisms and prejudices within the mindsets of those engaged in violence in Northern Ireland, and the *locus* of such emotions is to be found in the relationship between the different traditions and notions of territory and home. However, the violence here will be verbal.

In an essay appropriately entitled *The Place of Writing*, Heaney makes the point that 'the poetic imagination in its strongest manifestation imposes its vision upon a place rather than accepts a vision from it' (Heaney 1989, 20), and goes on to add that 'we are more and more aware of writing as a place in itself, a destination in art arrived at by way of art' (Heaney 1989, 19). In terms of *The Cure at Troy*, the writer can either become captivated by cracking 'stones' and flowing 'lava,' or he can listen for the voice of 'reality and justice.' Here the force of law will be the voice of justice and the reality is that this justice will be imagined as outside of the socio-political binary of Greeks versus Trojans. Here the speaking of the law is enunciated by the god, and poetry, the vehicle of the images and symbols adequate to our predicament, will allow this to happen. In *The Cure at Troy*, 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 'snake-bite he got at a shrine' (Heaney 1990, 17). 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 and legal value and responsibility: in other words between law as tribal act of force and some higher concept of a broader intersubjective justice.

The opening lines of the chorus set out the connection between the island of Lemnos and the island of Ireland, as well as between the siege of Troy and notions of siege in Northern Ireland:

People so staunch and true, they're fixated,  
Shining with self-regard like polished stones. (Heaney 1990, 1)

Here, the difference between hero and victim is elided, as the tribal certainties and 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' (Heaney 1990, 77). 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 a greater force of law 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 (Althusser 1977). 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' (Heaney 1995, 18); 'this ruins everything. / I'm being cut open' (Heaney 1995, 40); 'has the bad smell left me?' (Heaney 1995, 57); 'Some animals in a trap/Eat off their own legs' (Heaney 1995, 53); 'All I've left is a wound' (Heaney 1995, 61). 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. Having already spoken of 'self-pity,' the chorus 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. (Heaney 1995, 2)

This veneration of the wounds of the past is exactly how sectarian ideology seduces new subjectivities into existing moulds. Philoctetes embodies the siege mentality that has been 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' (Heaney 1995, 63).

Another aspect of such entrapment is the sense of immanence within a culture, which sees value only in those areas wherein the existing legal and political 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' (Heaney 1995, 3), and makes similar matter of fact pronouncements as the play proceeds, informing the younger man that 'you're here to serve our cause' (Heaney 1995, 6). 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' (Heaney 1995, 57), and this adaptability is grounded in his tribal loyalty. He can gloss over the sufferings of Philoctetes by invoking his own sense of the law: '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?' (Heaney 1995, 65). In a sense this is his version of 'we were only obeying orders', a phrase which has an unfortunate history in our culture

For Derrida, one of the key points about the law is that it changes over time and can itself then be an agent of broader societal change. His discussion of justice is similarly contextualised. He immediately distinguishes between justice and the law, and makes the point that the law can be deconstructed. In an argument that follows logically from his view of inauguration as both a break with, and a continuation of, a tradition, he goes on to speak of the legal system as a history of transformations of different laws:

You can improve the law. You can replace one law by another one. There are constitutions and institutions. There is a history, and a history as such can be deconstructed. Each time you replace one legal system by another one, one law by another one, or you improve the law, that is a kind of deconstruction, a critique and deconstruction. So the law as such can be deconstructed and has to be deconstructed. (Derrida 2002, 16)

In *The Cure at Troy*, agent of this change of law is Neoptolemus. In the climactic confrontation of the play, Neoptolemus, who had shared this perspective earlier in the play: 'I'm under orders' (Heaney 1995, 51), 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' (Heaney 1995, 52), and to his further remark that he is going to 'redress

the balance' and cause the 'scales to even out' (Heaney 1995, 65) 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?' (Heaney 1995, 66).

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' (Heaney 1995, 66). 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 the force of law as a societal hegemonic tool and a broader notion of justice, dare I call it deconstructive justice; 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. (Heaney 1995, 67)

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.

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' (Heaney 1995, 48). 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 (Levinas 1989, 82). A comparison can be made between the doubt and questioning of Neoptolemus, and Odysseus's conviction that 'he's in the right' (Heaney 1995, 1). For a change in the law, there must be a questioning of the existing dispensation and the symbolic language to arrive at that originary moment of change, which 'is neither legal nor illegal, just or unjust' (Derrida 2002, 234). I would argue that in his invocation of the idea of the 'all throughother', and in his decision to invoke a different concept of justice, Neoptolemus is deconstructing the existing legal mores of his culture, and that his act of violence is one of interpretation rather than physical violence.

For Derrida, the founding moment of law, in a society or culture, is never a moment 'inscribed' in the history of that culture since it 'rips it apart with one decision', a decision which Derrida sees as a '*coup de force*', a 'performative and interpretative violence' which is in itself 'neither just nor unjust' (Derrida 2002, 241). As Derrida puts it 'deconstruction takes place in the interval that separates the undeconstructability of justice from the deconstructability of law', and he further asserts that justice

can be seen as the possibility of deconstruction (Derrida 2002, 243). The moment that a set of rules, precepts, codifications are written as text, they lose the force of authority and instead become open to the force of interpretation and hermeneutic analysis. So the original violence, the force of law that inaugurates a law, attempts to set out the conditions through which that law is to operate, or be enforced. This is what Neoptolemus does as he deconstructs the Greek-Trojan self-other binary with the force of a new law – the all throughother. This is the interval within which a new sense of justice can be enunciated, a justice which violently overthrows the previous dispensation – it is the force of law, brought about by saying the law, and the continuous adjudication of which Heaney speaks parallels the idea of the law as singular in its interpretation each and every time.

However simultaneously the interpretative force of law allows for this intention to be deconstructed in the interests of ‘the possibility of justice’ (Derrida 2002, 249). In other words, the codification of law is not a structural machine which grinds the subject through its machinations. Instead, each individual instance requires a singular performative event, where the case is debated by lawyers, before a jury, and a judge, and where the individual circumstances of each protagonist are taken into account. In this case, there is a strong element of the undecidable to be found. Just as the law addresses itself to the polis, to the generality of the citizens of a state, so each case is about a single individual, and his or her case is interpreted on its own merits. So just as the force of law is general, the force of justice is particular: ‘one must know that this justice always addresses itself to singularity, to the singularity of the other, despite, or even because, it pretends towards universality’ (Derrida 2002, 248). Thus Neoptolemus is acting in a single particular instance, and by so doing is changing the concept of law by an act of interpretive violence. The same is true of the central character in Heaney’s other translation, *The Burial at Thebes*.

In a piece published in *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 after he has died and his body was being brought back from prison by the security forces and handed over to his family and to Sinn Fein. 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’, to quote Hegel (Heaney 2005, 13). 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* (Heaney 2005, 13), 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.

The scene 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. (Heaney 2004, 8)

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. 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 (Heaney 2004, 11)

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 (Heaney 2004, 20-1)

By positing a higher order of the treatment of the other than that of the polis, or group, Antigone is voicing the same debate between different versions of the law as was seen in the previous play.

Her stress is on the rights and duties of the individual to other individuals, or in Levenasian terms, to the face of the other. Interestingly, Creon is not depicted as some sort of political fundamentalist, he is a heroic figure in his own right who has done the state some service. He has saved Thebes from its enemies and voices a sense of patriotic philosophy which underwrites his personal ideology. His views on the polis and its need to impose order could well serve as a credo for many states in the world:

For the patriot  
Personal loyalty always must give way  
To patriotic duty.  
Solidarity, friends,  
Is what we need. The whole crew must close ranks.  
The safety of our state depends upon it. (Heaney 2004, 10)

The stress here is on the individual as defined by his or her group. It is a sentiment similar to that of Odysseus in *The Cure at Troy*, where the choices of definition are binary; one is either Greek or

Trojan. For Creon, the binary is parallel: one is either a patriot or a traitor, and this carries through in life and death:

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. (Heaney 2004, 11)

The need to see these bodies as signifiers of patriotism or betrayal after death is 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. These bodies, like that of Francis Hughes, have lost all individual resonance; they have been transposed into ideological signifiers, and it is this process of ideological transformation that is being assayed by Creon as he refuses burial to Polyneices, that 'anti-Theban Theban' (Heaney 2004, 10). By so doing, he attempts to attenuate the humanity of Polyneices; he is to be buried without 'any ceremony whatsoever' and is adjudged to be merely a 'carcass for the dogs and birds to feed on' (Heaney 2004, 11).

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. (Heaney 2004, 21)

We remember that to be just, the decision of a judge for example, must not only follow a rule of law or general law, but must also assume it, approve it, confirm its value by a reinstating act of interpretation, as if, at the limit, the law did not exist previously – as if the judge himself invented it in each case. Each exercise of justice as law can be just only if it is a ‘fresh judgment’ ..... This new freshness, the initiality of this inaugural judgment can very well – better yet, must very well – conform to a preexisting law (Derrida 2002, 251). Antigone is not looking to establish a rule; what she is doing is looking for justice in this singular situation.

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. (Heaney 2004, 44)

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. Just as this review opened with a political contextualisation of this translations, it is formally and ethically fitting that it close with a further such contextualisation

The body of Francis Hughes, 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. On January 30<sup>th</sup>, 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' (Heaney 2004, 20-1). 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. (Heaney 2004, 23)

The partner and sister 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' (Heaney 2004, 27), 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. In real terms this means that the force of justice is an ethical, singular and individual one, rooted in a call of an impossible future: ‘justice remains *to come*, it remains *by coming*’ (Derrida 2002, 256). Each individual case is an event not governed by the past applications of the rules of law but by a present and future interpretation based on singularity.

Read in the context of this event, the following lines have a double resonance, both within the text and the current political, as they state the role of women in the public sphere:

Two women on our own  
Faced with a death decree –  
Women, defying Creon?  
It’s not a woman’s place.  
We’re weak where they are strong. (Heaney 2004, 5)

In a culture where women had little value, she defies the law, the state and the king and ultimately triumphs by proving her point and obtaining proper burial for her brother. Again, the strength of this text is the focus on the individual. Creon is far from the two-dimensional figure of evil with whom we have become familiar over recent years as complex political issues are attenuated into a just war against ‘bad guys’ whose names have been almost domesticated for familiarity: Saddam, Bin Laden, Arafat. At the end of the play, as Creon ponders the wreckage of his personal and political life, he utters the poignant phrase: ‘I have wived and fathered death’ (Heaney 2004, 54).

Hence the force of law in these two plays is a verbal one, an eruptive one, and a singular one. However, once the law has become a textual entity, it is open to the violence of interpretation, a violence that is enacted according to the call of justice, that initiates some ‘irruptive violence’ (Derrida 2002, 256), which deconstructs the power relationships of those structures wherein the hegemonic power resides in the shape of these politicians who make the laws. In this sense, justice

relates to the law in terms of the undecidable which may deconstruct and unhinge the structural relationship between the discourses of law and power and instead operates in that temporal futurity of the perhaps – ‘one must always say perhaps for justice’ and perhaps no justice is possible except to the degree that ‘some event is possible which, as event, exceeds calculation, rules, programmes, anticipation and so forth’ (Derrida 2002, 257).

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