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The Body Politic: The Ethics of Responsibility and the Responsibility of Ethics

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Abstract

This chapter examines Heaney’s translations of *Antigone* in terms of its being a vehicle for an ethical interrogation of the laws and loyalties and of the contrast between the loyalty to one’s tribe and a broader intersubjective sense of laws and duties.

I would begin this chapter with the body of a woman and stones; I would conclude this chapter with the body of a woman and stones. The two women are different and their stories are different, as are their fates. What connects them is the power of words and ethical decisions, a power which is ethical in its import on language and the law, but which is practical and potent in its import on the bodies of these women, who stand as synecdoches for millions of other bodies upon whom the consequences of the decisions of the body politic are enacted. I will not begin with the caving in of Antigone as one might expect, given the title of this book, but with another woman who stands accused by men in a story that has come down to us from the time before and beyond.

In the title essay of *The Government of the Tongue*, Seamus Heaney is discussing the ‘paradox of poetry and of the imaginative arts in general’,¹ 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 to cite the metaphor of Jesus’ writing in the sand – ‘in the face of which accusers and accused are left speechless and renewed’ – as an example of the status or force of poetry. Quoting from Chapter Eight of John’s Gospel, he cites Jesus’ writing, in the face of the scribes and Pharisees who were accusing the woman caught in adultery. He sees poetry as analogous to this writing, a ‘break with the usual life but not an absconding from it’. In terms redolent of Jacques Derrida’s notions of difference and the trace, Heaney speaks of the epistemology of poetry as paralleling the writing in the sand, a process which is ephemeral in the extreme. As he puts it, poetry does not promise a solution to either ‘accusing crowd’ or ‘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.²

Here, we see different, but parallel statements about the field of force. 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; 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 affects reader and writer by the experience of being ‘at the same time summoned and released’.³ The focus of this exemplary reading of the gospel story is on the single body of a woman, of a woman about to be stoned to death because of the law, and of an intervention, of an eruption, in that law of a new law. The ‘governing power’ of poetry here stands for the governing power of language. Jesus took an

ethical decision which violated the law of Moses but which he saw as ethically correct. In this way he was enacting the power of language to alter the body politic and to address it with ethical imperatives which force a change in the material of that very body.

This governing power is an act of responsibility, of deciding whether hands should hold stones or attempt to communicate, even in the knowledge that all such communication is ephemeral in the extreme and that writing in the sand is destined to be transient. The question of responsibility is at the core of this text. Posing an ethics of the question, Derrida makes the point that the ‘liberty of the question’ must be ‘stated and protected’, and he goes on to say that if this ‘commandment’ has an ethical meaning, it is not ‘that it belongs to the *domain* of the ethical, but in that it ultimately authorizes every ethical law in general’.⁴ The force of such open-ended questions within Irish culture has been seismic in recent years. It has underpinned the gradual decentring of church and state as unmoved movers in an Irish context. While this situation may lead to something of an epistemological void, nevertheless it provides the opportunity to reshape or refashion the culture in which we live. The past, or our received notions of the past, can be seen as either a straitjacket, delimiting progress or development of the present culture, or as something to be renegotiated. It is this project of reimagining the historical, cultural, linguistic and societal givens that I see as central to the role of theory in developing a fresh conception of the structures that govern society.

In this chapter I want to look at a number of bodies in literature and in politics and use them as a lens through which issues of ethics, responsibility and choice can be discussed and examined. At the core of his ‘writing in the sand’ metaphor is the wounded female body, the body as victim, and in Antigone, the body as victim occurs again and again. The sense of Antigone’s responsibility for her actions, of her responsibility as a daughter of the royal house of Thebes to the politics and polis of

Thebes is one of the central cruxes of the play, and can be seen as the inheritance of the play in terms of what it says to us in contemporary culture. One of the reasons why *Antigone* has been so enduring is that questions of different responsibilities and of the ethical import of political decisions, and here I would like to interrogate the notions of the different responsibilities enunciated in the play – Antigone’s to her brother’s memory and Creon’s to the polis of Thebes. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida speaks of the fractured notion of an inheritance, which, far from issuing from a fixed centre, and from containing an unequivocal meaning, ‘is never gathered together, it is never one with itself’.⁵ It is always in need of interpretation, and this can be hierarchically imposed or can be achieved by a form of critique, which is precisely the role of the process of theoretical questioning which will be the subject of this chapter.

Seamus Heaney makes a similar point in ‘The Settle Bed,’ a poem from his volume *Seeing Things*: ‘an inheritance’ is from ‘the long ago,’ and yet it can be made ‘willable forward/Again and again and again,’ because: ‘whatever is given/can always be reimagined’.⁶ These lines could serve as a rubric for the transformation of the *mentalité* of Irish society over the last twenty years or so. Heaney here is suggesting that any culture which predicates its values on the past, and which adopts hegemonic attitudes as ‘givens’ within a culture is only taking one possible narrative pathway in terms of its development. The value of deconstructive theory has been questioned a lot in recent years. In the context of this discussion, however, a deconstructive critique brings to the fore the other face of deconstruction which is: ‘its hair-raising radicalism – the nerve and daring with which it knocks the stuffing out of every smug concept and leaves the well-groomed text shamefully dishevelled’.⁷ I am not sure if *Antigone* can be seen as a well-groomed text, but I hope that this chapter will probe the issues of responsibility and irresponsibility and will problematise these concepts and the reactions to her decisions within the play. I also hope to look at the contexts called to mind by this text, and to

show how the text speaks to us across time, space and culture to pose deconstructive questions of our contemporary moment and the body politic.

Both Derrida, in *Glas*, and Heaney, in *The Burial at Thebes*, both look at *Antigone*, with particular reference to this ethical issue of responsibility. Both writers approach the play through Hegel, and for both writers, the dead body of Polyneices becomes a site of ethical resistance to the general will of the polis. The body becomes a synecdoche of the resistance of the singular human experience to the general ideological current and the ultimate value of voice and agency of the individual to effect a degree of societal change. For Derrida, writing about Hegel's comments on *Antigone*, the family is an example of a structure which exists in opposition to the political, and *Antigone's* opposition to Creon is based on the notion of her responsibility to her brother's memory, as manifested in his dead body. In this sense, she exemplifies Derrida's conception of an ethics of responsibility which must always be irresponsible to one group if it is to be responsible to another. The family for Derrida is both an index of the Hegelian system but also a site of that system's rupture:

If the family's thing is pure singularity, one belongs to a family only in busying oneself around the dead: toilette of the dead, institution of death, wake, monumentalization, archive, heritage, genealogy, classification of proper names, engraving on tombs, burying, shrouding, burial place, funeral song and so on. The family does not yet know the universality producing labor in the city, only the work of mourning.⁸

For Derrida, the issue is one of the singularity of her relationship with Polyneices as opposed to the iterability of her relationship with her polis. But is she then, as is often suggested, irresponsible as a member of the Theban royal family, to her polis and to the future stability of Thebes by disobeying Creon? Or is Creon, in his act of responsibility towards political stability, being irresponsible to his family commitments and to another member of the royal family/ In short, who is right and who is

wrong? Are the ethical and political compatible? What is the play trying to communicate to us on these issues?

To begin our process of deconstructive questioning, it is necessary to question the origins of the word responsibility itself. It derives from the Latin *spondere* meaning 'to promise', with an inbuilt sense of answering to one's community and promising to obey the rules of that community. Thus the concept is very much a social one, which relates the individual to his or her community, with the community providing the codes which must be obeyed, or conformed to, by the individual either voluntarily or through some form of societal pressure.. The sense of the promise to conform, or of an obligation, presupposes a relationship to the social and consequently the inculcation of responsibility is one of the core values of western liberal democracy.

Issues of decision, calculation, responsibility, language, inauguration all combine in anastomosis to create the context which permeates and allows the discussion on the force of law and the force of justice. As Derrida has noted:

However careful one is in the theoretical preparation of a decision, the instant of the decision, if there is to be a decision, must be heterogeneous to the accumulation of knowledge. Otherwise there is no responsibility. In this sense not only must the person taking the decision not know everything . . . the decision, if there is to be one, must advance towards a future which is not known, which cannot be anticipated.⁹

So too Derrida sees justice as intimately connected with notions of responsibility to the 'absolute singularity of the other',¹⁰ and to an 'endless promise' to the future.¹¹ In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida's recent intervention into the legacies of Marx offered a similar possibility: a chance now to call for justice:

Not for calculable and distributive justice. Not for law, the calculation of restitution, the economy of vengeance or punishment not for calculable equality therefore, not for the symmetrizing and synchronic accountability or imputability of subjects or objects, not for a rendering of justice that would be limited to sanctioning or restituting, and to doing right, but for justice as incalculability of the gift and singularity of the an-economic ex-position to others.¹²

Is this the sense of justice that the dead body of Polyneices provokes in *Antigone*?

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.¹³

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'.¹⁴ Creon justifies this:

This is where I stand where it comes to Thebes
Never to grant traitors and subversives
Equal footing with loyal citizens.¹⁵

His decision is taken with the authority of the king – his is a decision that is responsible to his society, his culture and his polis. That one of the royal family should betray his country is an act that he feels the need to respond to through an invocation of the law. Through the symbolic order, Creon

sets out a responsibility of the loyal citizen to his or her polis. As a law has been broken by the desire of Polyneices to achieve power in Thebes, a desire that is irresponsible from Creon's perspective, so Creon sees the need to make an example of the body of Polyneices in order to enforce an ethic of responsibility in all Theban citizens. He asserts this through the symbolic order of language and through a meta-signification at the level of the dead body. The body of a traitor will become the ultimate signifier of the fate of irresponsible desire. The natural processes of death and decay will become part of the symbolic order and will signify the fate of traitors in life and in death. It is also an exercise of Creon's own power within, and control of, the symbolic order of Thebes.

The symbolic order is made up of those laws and restrictions that control both desire and the rules of communication, which are perpetuated through societal and cultural hegemonic modes. Jacques Lacan condenses this function in the term the 'Name of the Father'. Through recognition of the Name of the Father, one becomes a member of a society or culture. The symbolic is about language and narrative. Once a child enters into language and accepts the rules and dictates of society, it is able to deal with others. The symbolic is made possible because of the acceptance of the Name of the Father, those laws and restrictions that control both desire and the rules of communication: 'it is in the *Name of the father* that we must recognize the support of the symbolic function which, from the dawn of history, has identified his person with the figure of the law'.¹⁶ Through recognition of the Name of the Father, entry into a community of others is made possible. The symbolic, through language, is 'the pact which links... subjects together in one action. The human action *par excellence* is originally founded on the existence of the world of the symbol, namely on laws and contracts'.¹⁷ But again, there is the exchange with desire which is always deferred by language and deflected by language.

For Lacan, the nature of desire means that it is always unfulfilled. Madan Sarup sums up this up by saying, 'I always find my desire outside of me, because what I desire is always something that I lack, that is other to me'.¹⁸ In this play the dead body of Polyneices is just such an attempt to fill a lack – for Creon it is a lack in his own perception of his power; for Antigone it is the lack of her family relationships, sundered by death. Desire is therefore a relationship to a lack and not a relationship to an object. However, desire itself is partially narcissistic, because the subject's desire for the other is also the desire for reciprocation: '[t]he first object of desire is to be recognized by the other'.¹⁹

Moreover, it is through the other, as well as through the subject's own image, that desire is located and recognised. The subject thus recognises his desire in the body of the other. This means that his desire has passed over to the other because the subject's desire is fragmented, and what is fragmented is essentially dismemberable. Thus, 'the subject becomes aware of his desire in the other, through the intermediary of the image of the other which offers him a semblance of his own mastery',²⁰ much like the semblance of mastery that is experienced during the mirror stage. In this play, the body of Polyneices becomes the signifier of conflicting desires. For Creon, the decaying body outside the walls will signify his ultimate power over life and death in Thebes. It will satisfy his desire to be seen in the role of the Name of the Father of his culture. For Antigone, giving the body burial will signify her desire to do what she sees as the right thing for her connection with her family and her brother. Each one is acting according to a sense of responsibility but a responsibility to two very different ethical imperatives: living versus dead; law versus moral choice; an ethics of the polis versus an ethics of the family. For Creon, his words enact responsibility; for Antigone, the act of burial enunciates responsibility. For Creon, his is another law, enacted by his decree and this is his social function within the polis. The ruler is coterminous with the fountainhead of law: his voice is coterminous with the law. His law is for the common good.

Many societal laws and contracts involve the valorization of the social over the individual and the suppression of desire. When one looks at the ten commandments, the precepts that govern the Judeo-Christian ethos of western Europe and America, the imperative towards responsibility is expressed as a series of prohibitions:

Thou shalt not kill;
Thou shalt not steal;
Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour,
Thou shalt not commit adultery,
Thou shalt not covet thy neighbours's goods,
Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife.

Clearly, the responsible is in some way seen as counter to the natural instincts of people. Logically, commandments are set out to counter aberrant behaviour and if all of the above are cited, then again, logically, they must have been popular practices that were deemed as unsuitable, and irresponsible. All of the above could be seen as instances of desire and as Lacan notes, desire is born through the acquisition of language but so also is prohibition. The Name of the Father is invoked through the commandments handed down by the father, and the familial relationship is clearly an attempt to transpose the values and responsibilities of the family onto a socio-cultural platform.

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.²¹

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, and more crucially in terms of Heaney's work, between the society, or tribe, and the individual.

Her stress is on the rights and duties of the individual to other individuals, or in Levinasian terms, to the 'face of the other'.²² 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.²³

For Creon, the binary is simple: 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.²⁴

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. 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'.²⁵

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. Antigone's 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.²⁶

One of the strongest points about this translation is the degree of moral complexity involved. Antigone is not a particularly attractive character; she is unyielding, especially to her sister Ismene, and can be seen as almost naive in her demand for honour for her brother. From his own perspective, and indeed, from that of the chorus, Creon is to be admired:

Creon saved us
Saved he country, and there he was, strong king,
Strong head of family, the man in charge.²⁷

However, so is Antigone, as in death she teaches Creon that: 'until we breathe our last breath / we should keep the established law',²⁸ 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. Here is Derrida's incalculable justice, and the fact that we can question her decision and that Creon, in the world of *Realpolitik* is correct, is what lies at the heart of the play. Her choice is difficult, and ethical in the sense used by Derrida in that she has no rule to guide her, no definite sense of right and wrong, only her strong sense that she must do this.

Derrida makes the point that ethics is precisely what is required for these decisions:

There are ethics precisely because there is this contradiction, because there is no rule. There are ethics because I have to invent the rule; there would be no responsibility if I knew the rule. There is responsibility only because there are these two aporetic structures in which I have to respond to two injunctions, different and incompatible. That's where responsibility starts, when I don't know what to do. Ethics start when you don't know what to do, when there is this gap between knowledge and action, and you have to take responsibility for inventing this new rule which doesn't exist. An ethics which guarantees is not an ethics.²⁹

Antigone has no rule and her decision can be seen as parallel responsibilities and irresponsibilities: her responsibility to her dead brother necessitates irresponsibility to her King; her responsibility to her family necessitates irresponsibility to her polis and her responsibility to a broader human bond necessitates irresponsibility to her own life, as she will ultimately sacrifice it. Hers is a singular decision and is ethical in the Derridean sense because it is a singular response to its context.

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. The dangers of the hegemony of the polis as opposed to the rights of the individual are signified in the tragic conclusion of the play. Heaney, in his classical translations, has made the choice of the individual

over the group an ethical trope, and this trope can be seen to derive from his Field Day pamphlet *An Open letter*, wherein he prioritises the individual over the group for the first time.

I would argue that to ponder about the rightness or wrongness of Antigone's decision is very much to miss the point of the play's ethical imperative. There is no right or wrong decision here. Creon is enforcing the law of the polis and protecting Thebes from further treachery. Antigone is protecting the memory of her brother and upholding a common humanity against political ideology. In both cases, we need to look at a different ethical paradigm and that is to be found in the work of Derrida.

In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida speaks of the different types of responsibility which make ethical demands on us. He uses the story of Abraham being asked by God to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, and of the struggle between Abraham's responsibility to the call of the transcendent, to the call of his own family, to the call of his future (in the sense of his son carrying on his genes), and of his responsibility to his community. For Derrida, there is no programmatic right or wrong decision here: Abraham is at the same time, the most moral and the most immoral, the most responsible and the most irresponsible'.³⁰ For Derrida, an ethical decision is one which must make an 'undecidable leap' beyond all prior preparation for that decision.³¹ Abraham can never be sure whether his decision is right or wrong, and yet he must make the decision: he is in that aporia that exists between the force of justice and the force of law:

I am responsible to anyone (that is to say, to any other) only by failing in my responsibility to all the others, to the ethical or political generality. And I can never justify this sacrifice What binds me to this one or that one, remains finally unjustifiable.³²

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*'.³³ 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.

Nevertheless, it is relatively clear that in *The Gift of Death*, Derrida intends to free us from the common assumption that responsibility is to be associated with behaviour that accords with general principles capable of justification in the public realm. In opposition to such an account, he emphasises the 'radical singularity' of the demands placed upon Abraham by God³⁴ and those that might be placed on us by our own loved ones. Ethics, with its dependence upon generality, must be continually sacrificed as an inevitable aspect of the human condition and its aporetic demand to decide.³⁵ As Derrida points out, in writing about one particular cause rather than another, in pursuing one profession over another, in spending time with one's family rather than at work, one inevitably ignores the 'other others',³⁶ and this is a condition of any and every existence. He argues that: 'I cannot respond to the call, the request, the obligation, or even the love of another, without sacrificing the other other, the other others'.³⁷ For Derrida, it seems that the Buddhist desire to have attachment to nobody and equal compassion for everybody is an unattainable ideal. He does, in fact, suggest that a universal community that excludes no one is a contradiction in terms. According to him, this is because responsibility to the one necessarily means irresponsibility to the other, as already cited.

Derrida hence implies that responsibility to any particular individual is only possible by being irresponsible to the 'other others', that is, to the other people and possibilities that haunt any and every existence. Thus if one looks at the points made by Iranian president Mahmud Ahmadinajad, he suggests that the victims of the holocaust should not have been located in Palestine, as this act caused a further disenfranchisement of a completely blameless people, the Palestinians. His point is that the responsibility felt by the western world towards the Jews because of the holocaust, blinded them to

the effects of this resettlement programme on the indigenous people living in Palestine.

Responsibility to the one can often result in irresponsibility towards the other, and very often the ethical decision is not as easy as it might sound.

And the responsibility-irresponsibility aporia is also to be found throughout the political sphere in contemporary society just as it was in the time of Creon and Antigone. We may blame George W. Bush and question his decisions to invade Iraq and Afghanistan. We may question him on the issue of the supposed weapons of mass destruction. We may question the ethics and integrity of the incarceration of terrorist suspects in Guantanamo bay and the policy of rendition of prisoners into jurisdictions where torture of suspects who have not been proven guilty takes place as a matter of course. However, if we were in charge of a country which had suffered the cataclysmic event of the 9/11 and if we were told that the torture of some suspects could prevent a similar attack, what decision would we take? Would we be responsible to the polis, as was Creon, or would we see ourselves as responsible to a more intersubjective ethics which valorized the individual human being?

This has been the dilemma of Antigone and of Creon – I would argue that it is both of their tragedies and not just that of the eponymous heroine. They each have enacted the ethical aporia of singular responsibility and irresponsibility, and this is a dilemma that has strong resonances in the political world generally as we have seen. In this text, as in *The Cure at Troy*, there is an almost allegorical level of connection between classical Greece and contemporary Northern Ireland. Indeed, in the aftermath of the play, the image of a woman pleading, and then demanding, justice for a dead brother had a particular resonance in Ireland. 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’.³⁸

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; 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’, to quote Hegel.³⁹ 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*,⁴⁰ 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. As a woman, though not expected to speak, and running the risk of being seen as irresponsible if she does, nevertheless she accepts the responsibility of voicing her own ethical perspective and questioning the *status quo* as set out by Creon. 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.⁴¹

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',⁴² 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 and of Polyneices are answered, in the contemporary moment, by the body of 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.

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.⁴³

This public sphere which is deemed to be not a woman's place is both ancient Thebes and contemporary Belfast. 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?⁴⁴

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 ghosts of decisions taken, and of the impossibility of a decision that will be completely responsible to all, are the inheritance of this seminal play in Western culture. To take a decision which is responsible to the other is, by definition, to be irresponsible to all others. Each decision is singular and each will have irredeemable consequences. In a culture where women had little value, and little political power, Antigone defies the law, the state and the king and ultimately triumphs by proving her point and obtaining proper burial for her brother. Her triumph is ethical and not political, and costs her her life. 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'.⁴⁵

Thus the play leaves us with the question of decision and of the responsibility for that decision that is central to our lives and to our ethics and politics. The body politic is comprised of such decisions and their consequences can often cause the body ethical much pain and the body physical suffering or even death. The deconstructive approach taken in this chapter allows the relationship between political and ethics, the iterable and the singular and responsibility and irresponsibility to be theorized, and hopefully to shed some new light on this text, and its dishevelled context. On being asked about the role of deconstruction within the academy, Derrida says that the life of any institution implies that 'we are able to criticize, to transform, to open the institution to its own future'. He goes

on to talk about the paradox of the moment of inauguration of any institution, which, while starting something new, is at the same time true to a memory of the past, and to things received from the culture, adding that such a moment must 'break with the past, keep the memory of the past, while inaugurating something absolutely new'. Derrida, looking at the notion of inauguration, notes that there are no guarantees, and 'we have to invent the rules'.⁴⁶ This is what Antigone does in this play: she invents the rule with no guideline as to the rightness or wrongness. She keeps faith with immutable laws as she terms them but only to break another law – it is the dialectic of responsibility and irresponsibility at work again.

He goes on, in this context, to make a keynote statement about the operative mode of deconstruction, something which, as is clear from his 'Letter to a Japanese Friend',⁴⁷ he has often been at pains to avoid. Speaking about the moment of inauguration, he suggests that:

There is no responsibility, no decision, without this inauguration, this absolute break. That is what deconstruction is made of: not the mixture but the tension between memory, fidelity, the preservation of something that has been given to us, and, at the same time, heterogeneity, something absolutely new, and a break.⁴⁸

This tension is a trope which carries through in all of his answers, and in his discussion of theaporetic relationship between law and justice. On discussing Greek philosophy, Derrida notes that what he looks for is the heterogeneity in the texts, how the *khôra*, for example, is incompatible with the Platonic system, before going on to speak more broadly about how a specifically Greek philosophy had within it an opening, a potential force which was ready to cross the borders of Greek language, Greek culture'.⁴⁹ From this discussion, he progresses to the concept of democracy, a further thread in the ethical theme of these answers, making the point that while the concept of democracy is

a Greek heritage, it is a heritage that ‘self-deconstructs...so as to uproot, to become independent of its own grounds’.⁵⁰

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.⁵¹

This perspective is completely in line with the already outlined practices of deconstruction. The single concept of ‘law’ is situated within a system and each part of the system, in a process of anastomosis, crosses the borders of other parts of the system in an ongoing play of *différance*. Thus Derrida will stress that ‘justice is not the law’ and goes on to add that ‘justice is what gives us the impulse, the drive, or the movement to improve the law, that is, to deconstruct the law’.⁵² That is what Antigone does in this play. Her decision deconstructs the law of Creon and is singular and responsible to her own ethics of an inter-subjective human bond. Hers is a profoundly ethical decision as, to paraphrase Derrida, there are ethics precisely because there is this contradiction, because there is no rule. There are ethics because the rule has to be invented every time; because the inheritance has to be reinterpreted every time; because it is only in this situation that there can be responsibility. It is the same crisis of conscience that faces us every day in our own lives and for which there is seldom a right or wrong answer – we can only decide before we know the outcome and

invent the rule with no security or certainty that we are right. And this, I would suggest, is the lasting value of this play: it foregrounds the responsibility – and the concomitant and necessary irresponsibility – of ethics.

Notes

- 1 Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (London: Faber, 1980), 107.
- 2 Heaney, *Preoccupations*, 108.
- 3 Heaney, *Preoccupations*, 108.
- 4 Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, 80.
- 5 Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 16.
- 6 Seamus Heaney, *Seeing Things* (London: Faber, 1984), 49.
- 7 Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London, New Left Books, 1981), 134.
- 8 Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, translated by John P. Leavey and Richard Rand (Lincoln Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 143.
- 9 Jacques Derrida, *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971-2001*, translated and edited by Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2002), 231.
- 10 Jacques Derrida, 'On Responsibility', interview with J. Dronsfield, N. Midgley and A. Wilding. *Responsibilities of Deconstruction: PLI – Warwick Journal of Philosophy*, edited by J. Dronsfield and N. Midgley, volume 6, Summer (1997) 19-36: 25.
- 11 Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, edited by Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992), 38.
- 12 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning & the New International* translated from the French by Peggy Kamuf, London: Routledge, 1994), 22-3.
- 13 *The Burial at Thebes: Sophocles' Antigone*, translated by Seamus Heaney (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), 8.
- 14 Heaney, *Burial at Thebes*, 44.
- 15 Heaney, *Burial at Thebes*, 11.
- 16 Jacques Lacan, Jacques, *Écrits - A Selection*, translated by Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock, 1977), 67.
- 17 Jacques Lacan, *Freud's Papers on Technique 1953-1954. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book 1*. Translated by John Forrester. Edited by Jacques-Alain Miller. (New York: Norton, 1991), 230.
- 18 Madan Sarup, *Jacques Lacan* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), 68-9.
- 19 Lacan, *Écrits*, 64.
- 20 Lacan, *Freud's Papers on Technique*, 155.
- 21 Heaney, *Burial at Thebes*, 20-21.
- 22 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 188.

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- 23 Heaney, *Burial at Thebes*, 10.
- 24 Heaney, *Burial at Thebes*, 11.
- 25 Heaney, *Burial at Thebes*, 11.
- 26 Heaney, *Burial at Thebes*, 21.
- 27 Heaney, *Burial at Thebes*, 49.
- 28 Heaney, *Burial at Thebes*, 48.
- 29 Jacques Derrida, 'Following Theory – Roundtable Discussion' in *Life After Theory*, edited by Michael Payne and John Schad (London: Continuum, 2003), 1-51, 32.
- 30 Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, translated by David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 72.
- 31 Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 47.
- 32 Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 70.
- 33 Jacques Derrida, 'The Force of Law: "The Mystical Foundation of Authority"' in *Acts of Religion*, edited Gil Anidjar (London: Routledge, 2002) : 228-298, 256.
- 34 Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 60; 68; 79.
- 35 Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 70.
- 36 Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 69.
- 37 Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 68.
- 38 Heaney, *Burial at Thebes*, 20-1.
- 39 Seamus Heaney, 'Retitling *Antigone*', in *The Irish Book Review*, volume 1, number 1: 13-14, 13.
- 40 Heaney, 'Retitling *Antigone*', 13.
- 41 Heaney, *Burial at Thebes*, 23.
- 42 Heaney, *Burial at Thebes*, 27.
- 43 Heaney, *Burial at Thebes*, 5.
- 44 Heaney, *Burial at Thebes*, 44.
- 45 Heaney, *Burial at Thebes*, 54.
- 46 Jacques Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, edited with a commentary by John. D. Caputo (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), 6.
- 47 Jacques Derrida 'Letter to a Japanese Friend', in *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, edited Peggy Kamuf (Hemel Hempsted: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), 270-276.
- 48 Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 6.
- 49 Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 9.
- 50 Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 10.
- 51 Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 16.
- 52 Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 16.