The Jayne Lecture

Title Deeds: Translating a Classic[1]

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TWENTY-THREE YEARS AGO, in May 1981, there was a gathering at once solemn and dangerous in the village of Toomebridge in Northern Ireland. The name of the place comes from the Irish word *tuaim*, meaning, as you would expect, a burial mound, and in the circumstances that meaning was most appropriate. The bridge at Toome links Co. Antrim, on the east bank of the River Bann, to Co. Derry, on the west bank, and a lot of the crowd that were gathered in the main street of the village on this particular occasion had crossed from the Co. Derry side. They were there to meet a hearse that contained the body of a well-known Co. Derry figure, and once the hearse arrived they would accompany it back to a farmhouse on a bog road some six or seven miles away, where the body would be waked in traditional style by family and neighbours. They had come to Toome to observe custom and to attend that part of the funeral rite known in Ireland as "the removal of the remains."

But before the remains of the deceased could be removed that evening from Toome, they had first to be removed from a prison some thirty or forty miles away. And for that first leg of the journey the security forces deemed it necessary to take charge and to treat the body effectively as state property. The living man had, after all, been in state custody as a terrorist and a murderer, a criminal lodged in Her Majesty's Prison at the Maze, better known in Northern Ireland as the H Blocks. He was a notorious figure in the eyes of Margaret Thatcher's government, but during the months of April and May 1981 he was the focus of the eyes of the world's media.

His name was Francis Hughes and although I did not know him personally, I knew and liked other members of his family. They were

[1] Read 23 April 2004.

our neighbours and during the 1950s I had walked the road to Mass with his sisters and had worked in summertime in the bog side by side with his father. Now, however, his world and mine were far apart. For the last fifty-nine days of his life Francis Hughes had been on hunger strike, one of a group of IRA prisoners ready to make the ultimate sacrifice for what were known at the time as the five demands. Basically these demands constituted a claim by the prisoners to political status, a rejection of the demonizing terminology of criminal, murderer and terrorist, and an assertion of their rights to wear their own clothes, to abstain from penal labour and to associate freely within their own cell block. Faced with all this, Margaret Thatcher and her government were predictably inflexible and between 5 May and 30 August 1981, ten hunger strikers died, resulting in a steady issue of emaciated corpses from the gates of the prison and repeated processions of miles long funeral crowds through the gates of cemeteries.

It was a cruel time, but especially so for those on the nationalist side of the Northern Ireland divide, all those who sought fundamental political change, who wanted to break in the Unionist Party's monopoly on power, but who nevertheless did not think it an end worth killing for. It was possible for them, as for everyone else, to regard hunger strikes both as an exercise in *realpolitik* and an occasion of sacred drama. Undoubtedly there were huge propaganda rewards for the IRA in the spectacle of their volunteers fasting to the end for a principle. Even so, many on the nationalist side still felt cautious about expressing public support for them, however noble their sacrifice. Support for their fast could be read by the IRA and others as support for their violent methods, so many people hesitated. But in their hesitation they were painfully aware that they were giving silent assent to the intransigence and overbearing of Margaret Thatcher, who stated with a too brutal simplicity that "Crime is crime, is crime. It is not political." And Thatcher greeted the news of the death of the first hunger striker, Bobby Sands, with a statement in the House of Commons to the effect that "Mr Sands was a convicted criminal. He chose to take his own life. It was a choice that his organization did not allow to many of its victims."[2]

This was the context in which the crowd of sympathizers waited for the hearse at Toomebridge, a crowd that naturally included family members, friends and neighbours in great numbers, and an even greater number of political supporters, enraged at the hijacking of the body. Who owned it? By what right did the steel ring of the defence

[2] Tim Pat Coogan, *The Troubles*, London, 1995, pp. 237–38.

forces close round the remains of one who was son, brother, comrade, neighbour, companion? If ever there was a dramatisation of the contest between what Hegel called the "Instinctive Powers of Feeling, Love and Kinship" and "the daylight gods of free and self-conscious, social, and political life,"[3] it was that evening when the hearse with its police escort arrived on the village street and the cordon that surrounded it was jostled in fury and indignation by the waiting crowd.

The surge of rage in the crowd as they faced the police that evening was more than ideological. It did of course spring from political disaffection, but it sprang also from a sense that something inviolate had been assailed by the state. The nationalist collective felt that the police action was a deliberate assault on what the Irish language would call their *dúchas*, something that is still vestigially present even in English-speaking Ulster in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The Irish critic Brendan Devlin has remarked that *dúchas* is as untranslatable a term as *virtù* or *honnête homme*, but he still offers this account:

> In an effort to explain it in English, the Royal Irish Academy's dictionary of the common old Gaelic languages uses such terms as 'inheritance, patrimony; native place or land; connection, affinity or attachment due to descent or long-standing; inherited instinct or natural tendency'. It is all of these things and, besides, the elevation of them to a kind of ideal of the spirit, an enduring value amid the change and the erosion of all human things. . . . [4]

If we wanted a set of words to describe the feelings that motivate the heroine of Sophocles' *Antigone*, we could hardly do better than that, for Antigone, the daughter of Oedipus, is surely in thrall to patrimony, connection, affinity and attachment due to descent, to longstanding, to inherited instinct and natural tendency, and for her all these things have been elevated to a kind of ideal of the spirit, an enduring value. If we wanted, what's more, to find a confrontation that paralleled the confrontation between her and King Creon we could hardly do better than the incident on the street in Toomebridge that I've just recounted. No doubt many of you recognized that the quotation from Hegel I employed in relation to that incident comes from his discussion of Sophocles' tragedy. In particular, it applies to the conflict between Creon, who represents the law of the land, what Hegel calls "the daylight gods of free and self-conscious, social, and political life" and

[3] Quoted in Seamus Deane, "Field Day's Greeks (and Russians)," in *Amid our Troubles: Irish Versions of Greek Tragedy*, edited by Marianne McDonald and J. Michael Walton, London, 2002, p. 154.

[4] *Sorley MacLean: Critical Essays*, edited by Raymond J. Ross and Joy Hendry, Edinburgh, 1986, p. 85.

Antigone, who embraces by contrast the law of the gods, what Hegel calls the "Instinctive Powers of Feeling, Love and Kinship." And no doubt you further recognized that all this has a bearing on the title I gave to my own translation of *Antigone*, which was *The Burial at Thebes*.

From beginning to end, Sophocles' play centres on burial. First, it is a matter of a burial refused. Refused to Antigone's brother Polyneices whom Creon, the king of Thebes, makes anathema because he was a traitor to his native city and came to attack it with an army from Argos. As a ruler responsible for security and good order in the *polis*, Creon's concern is the overall thing and he can tolerate no exceptions. "This," he declares, "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.[5]

And this unbending attitude brings out the resister in Antigone, whom the Chorus calls *autonomos*, a law unto herself. She defies the order and gives ritual burial to her brother. The laws of the land, she avers, cannot overrule the laws of the gods. And from this fundamental opposition the whole action and catastrophe follow. Creon will not yield to any counsel until he is admonished by the prophet Tiresias and by then it is too late. For burying her brother, Antigone is herself buried alive inside a rock-piled mound and hangs herself. Her prudent sister, Ismene, who refused to help her in her transgression, survives, but Creon's son, Haemon, Antigone's beloved, the man she was to marry, kills himself in order to be with her in the land of the dead; and in grief at all this self-murder, Haemon's mother, Eurydice, Creon's wife, also dies by her own hand. The result is a play that the ancients could well have entitled *Creon*, since Creon's suffering weighs equally in the tragic Sophoclean scale. And the many observations to this effect gave me the idea of changing the title of the version I myself eventually produced.

At the beginning of 2003, the Abbey Theatre in Dublin invited me to do a version of *Antigone* for the centenary of the theatre, which occurs this year. I was honoured and attracted, but unsure if I could take it on. For a start, the play had been translated and adapted so often, and had been co-opted into so many cultural and political arguments, it had begun to feel less like a text from the theatrical repertoire and more like a pretext for debate, a work that was as much if not more at home in the seminar room than on the stage. Tragedy for Aristotle had been the imitation of an action, but in the culture wars of the

[5] Seamus Heaney, *The Burial at Thebes*, New York, 2004, p. 17.

last half century, *Antigone* had become an accumulation of issues. You didn't need to have read George Steiner's book on the subject to know how often the play or its heroine could be adduced in the cause of liberation movements of many different kinds, in the cause of civil disobedience, of feminist resistance to the patriarchy, of prisoners of conscience, and even, as we shall see, of law and order reactions to all these things. In Ireland alone, inside the past twenty years, we have seen and heard versions by five writers, three by poets, one by a playwright, and one by a classical scholar, produced in collaboration with the distinguished South African playwright Athol Fugard.[6]

Still, in a perverse way, this constant revisitation of the play made the Abbey's invitation a tempting one. The fact that so many other versions are now in existence has become part of the play's meaning, and can be understood to constitute a guarantee of the work's classic status. Italo Calvino gets this and much, much else right in his sprightly but intellectually substantial essay "Why Read the Classics." He writes there:

> The classics are the books that come down to us bearing the traces of readings previous to ours, and bringing in their wake the traces they themselves have left on the culture or cultures they have passed through (or, more simply, on language and customs).[7]

In the case of *Antigone*, we have amongst others French traces and German traces, Polish traces and South African traces. In South Africa, for example, Athol Fugard's originality and his political sympathies were clear when in his play *The Island* he reimagined the circumstances of an actual production of *Antigone* that had taken place in a maximum security prison. And when he looked back on the circumstances of the first production of *The Island*, in a venue in Cape Town called simply the Space, Fugard had this to say:

> Something else that contributed to our unwavering and unanimous determination to proceed with the performance is the fact that the windows of the Space looked over Table Bay, with Robben Island in the distance, where Nelson Mandela . . . [was] no doubt at that moment dreaming of a new South Africa.[8]

No doubt also the French members of the audience at the first night of Jean Anouilh's adaptation of the play in Paris in 1944 were dreaming of a newly liberated France, just as the German censors who passed it

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[6] For an account of the evolution of Fugard's play, see his "Antigone in Africa," in McDonald and Walton, op. cit., 128–47.

[7] Italo Calvino, *The Literature Machine*, London, 1989, p. 128.

[8] McDonald and Walton, p. 146.

for performance must have been dreaming that this time Creon's rule would be more perfectly realized in the ongoing dominance of the Reich.

Antigone now bears traces of these former readings, and of Brecht's, and of Alexander Wajda's, whose production was mounted in Poland in 1984 and pointed up analogies between the heroine's resistance in Thebes and the resistance of the Solidarity workers in the shipyards of Gdansk. It is all a far cry from the way I first encountered the play, in undergraduate lectures about the difference between Classical and Shakespearean tragedy, all those old discussions of Greek plays in relation to Aristotle's poetics, much ado being made of the unities and the hero's flaw, the central importance of plot and the precise meaning of the word *catharsis*. And to remember that necessary early schooling is to concede the truth of Calvino's very first cheerful and slightly cheeky definition of a classic, namely a book "of which we usually hear people saying, 'I am rereading. . . .' and never 'I am reading. . . .'"[9]

My own re-reading of *Antigone* began in earnest in 1968, in the month of October. On the fifth day of that month, in the city of Derry, a civil rights march which had been banned by the Unionist authorities was baton-charged by the Royal Ulster Constabulary. It was a nakedly repressive reaction and set in motion a chain of events which are still unfolding. Other large protest meetings followed, including one in Belfast a week and a half later, basically a student march from Queen's University where I was then a lecturer. I remember us sitting in the street, having been halted by a cordon of police who were there because the main city square had been occupied by a counter protest organized by the Reverend Ian Paisley. In those days, Paisley's law and order bully-boys could call the tune, the police would fall into line and the rest of us could like it or lump it. It was humiliating and enraging and as we sat in the broad glum reaches of Linen Hall Street, there came a point when I had to act the academic Creon and restrain some students from making a charge at the police lines (and it is probably worth mentioning here that among those I restrained was a student who would go on to be the Antigone of that time in Northern Ireland, the passionate young protester Bernadette Devlin).

One result of this was an article I contributed to the BBC's current affairs magazine, *The Listener.* In the issue of 24 October, I wrote about that student march and other matters, including the demands of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association for reform of the local government situation and an end to discrimination in the allocation of

[9] Calvino, 125.

houses and jobs. I ended with an allusion to the song, "Danny Boy," which is also known as "The Londonderry Air," although for me and for many others—because of what we might call the *dúchas* factor—it was better known as "The Derry Air." "The new 'Derry Air,'" I concluded, at any rate, with words that revealed my sympathy for the Antigone party, "sounds very much like 'We Shall Overcome.'"[10]

It was in that same issue of *The Listener* that Antigone was finally sprung from her old place in the syllabus and took her place decisively in all future thinking about the developing political situation in Northern Ireland. She and all she stands for were invoked in an article of seminal importance by the writer and former diplomat Conor Cruise O'Brien, at that time still holder of the Schweitzer Chair of Humanities in New York University. Three years earlier, in December 1965, O'Brien had been arrested for time he too had spent sitting down in the street, in the distinguished company of Dr. Benjamin Spock, in what his wife, Maire, has described as "a highly respectable protest" outside the Induction Center in Manhattan.[11] This protest was meant to obstruct the progress of recruitment for the war in Vietnam, a protest that O'Brien could hardly have avoided, given that he was then speaking and writing on the theme of America's "Counter-Revolutionary Imperialism." This, at any rate, was the man who was now observing sit-downs by students in the north of his own country, highly aware of the righteousness of their cause and highly sensitive also to the ominousness of the situation.

O'Brien's article, I should remind you again, was written in 1968. It begins with a résumé of the plot of Sophocles' tragedy that emphasizes how the consequences of Antigone's non-violent action emerge in acts of violence. O'Brien then goes on:

> The role of Antigone attracts the young, though those capable of playing it to the end will always be few. Creon continues his interminable series of rash engagements: suppression of communism in Asia, suppression of freedom in Czechoslovakia, white supremacy and every other form of the supremacy of the supreme. In the press and the pulpit, Tiresias admonishes Creon, Ismene seeks to restrain Antigone. And the rest of the tragedy unfolds, since Creon and Antigone are both part of our nature, inaccessible to advice and incapable of living at peace in the city. Civil disobedience is non-violent, but everywhere attracts violence.[12]

[10] Seamus Heaney, "Old Derry's Walls," *The Listener*, 24 October 1968.
[11] Maire Cruise O'Brien, *The Same Age as the State*, Dublin, 2003, p. 289.
[12] Conor Cruise O'Brien, *States of Ireland*, London, 1974, p. 151.

The piece continues with examples of such violence, in particular the murders of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, and then rises to Tiresian heights in declaring that the American anti-war protests have "elicited a powerful counter-movement—for the restoration of full white supremacy and the extension of imperialist war."

O'Brien is a provocative writer and this world-sweeping survey would have been thrilling in itself, but when it proceeded to focus on the situation in Northern Ireland, and in particular on the gerrymandered city of Derry, the argument became even more compelling and more complicated. The search by the Catholic majority of the city for full civil rights, for a release from the status of second-class citizens, he says, means that these people will have to brace themselves against what he calls "shocks to come." He goes on:

> . . . these people know that much more is involved than the correction of an electoral anomaly: it is a question of changing historic relations between conqueror and conquered—something not likely to happen without violence. The subordination of Catholic to Protestant in Derry is a result of force and the threat of force. The condition of Derry may be thought of as one of frozen violence: any attempt to thaw it out will release violence which is at present static.[13]

This was a stark statement of the realities of the situation and a true premonition of what was indeed to come, and it allowed O'Brien to ask the kind of question that Ismene asks: would the removal of the disabilities of Catholics in Northern Ireland be worth attaining at the risk of precipitating riots, explosions, pogroms, murder? Nevertheless, having raised this doubt, O'Brien went on to allow Antigone to have her say:

> Antigone will not heed such calculations: she is an ethical and religious force, an uncompromising element in our being, as dangerous in her way as Creon, whom she perpetually challenges and provokes. Peace depends upon the acceptance of civil subordination, since the powerful will use force to uphold their laws. . . . We should be safer without the trouble-maker from Thebes. And that which would be lost, if she could be eliminated, is quite intangible: no more, perhaps, than a way of imagining and dramatizing man's dignity. It is true that this way may express the essence of what man's dignity actually is. In losing it, man might gain peace at the price of his soul.[14]

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[13] Ibid., 152.
[14] Ibid., 152–53.

Some time ago, in answer to a question about the use of the classics at the present time, I said that consciousness needs co-ordinates, we need ways of locating ourselves in cultural as well as geographical space. If I'd had time, however, I could have given the interviewer this rather long account of Cruise O'Brien's discussion of *Antigone*, because this was something that did indeed give me co-ordinates that have been helpful ever since. But I could equally well have answered by quoting two other definitions of the classics offered by the ever resourceful Calvino, as follows:

> The classics are books that exert a peculiar influence, both when they refuse to be eradicated from the mind and when they conceal themselves in the folds of memory, camouflaging themselves as the collective or individual unconscious.[15]

And furthermore:

> A classic does not necessarily teach us anything we did not know before. In a classic, we sometimes discover something we have always known (or thought we knew), but without knowing that this author said it first, or at least is associated with it in a special way. And this, too, is a surprise that gives a lot of pleasure, such as we always gain from the discovery of an origin, a relationship, an affinity.[16]

And with that, I am sorry to say, I come to an end of my citation of Calvino's cheerful QEDs.

Still, if I have finished with Calvino, I have not yet finished with my topic, the translation of a classic. I have said enough, I am sure, to indicate that my agreeing to provide a new version of *Antigone* was more than a conditioned response to a venerable work of antiquity, more than a reverential bow to the cultural authority of the Western canon. But I also hope I have said enough to substantiate my earlier claim that by now the play has been translated and adapted so often, has been co-opted into so many cultural and political arguments, that it has begun to function less as a text from the theatrical repertoire and more as a pretext for debate. And this became even more the case in Ireland after Conor Cruise O'Brien came back to the topic and published a famous revision of his earlier salute to Antigone as the representative of human dignity, recommending instead to the northern Irish minority the peaceable compromise adopted by Ismene. In 1972, four years after he wrote his first article, at a time when the Provisional IRA, the British army and the Loyalist paramilitaries were all fully in action, O'Brien wrote:

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[15] Calvino, 127.
[16] Ibid., 129.

> after . . . all those funerals—more than a hundred dead at the time of writing—you begin to feel that Ismene's commonsense and feeling for the living may make the more needful, if less spectacular element in 'human dignity'. In any case the play has been moving—like so much else in Northern Ireland—backwards, away from the ceremonial act of non-violent disobedience, and into the fratricidal war, which precedes the action of the play.[17]

O'Brien himself had been also moving in the meantime, back from New York to Dublin, out of the chair of humanities and into the cabinet of Irish government, a move which for many of his early admirers amounted to a U-turn from the front line of protest to the back room of Creon's palace. And while it would be fascinating to trace O'Brien's subsequent actions and influence, enough has been said in these flashbacks and contextualizations to make two simple facts crystal clear: first, *Antigone* is a play that has had a deep and abiding purchase on me and my generation in Ireland; but second, this long-standing concern with *Antigone* as our own special allegory is the very thing that made me disinclined to return to it.

Besides, conditions in Northern Ireland have changed. The allegory doesn't quite fit the situation that pertains there now, since what has been happening over the past decade is thankfully more like a squabble in the *agora* than a confrontation at the barricades. Nevertheless, if the local row has abated, the global situation has worsened. Things that were once the preoccupation of an embattled and apparently historically retarded population in Northern Ireland have now come inescapably to a head for everybody. People in liberal democracies now find themselves forced to take a position on conflicts where God is invoked by both sides and where the great challenge that W. B. Yeats once posed for himself, namely, "to hold in a single thought reality and justice,"[18] is the challenge faced by us all. The question of *dúchas* and dignity, the scandal of "the supremacy of the supreme" exercised without check or embarrassment, the fact that one man's criminal or murderer or terrorist is another man's freedom fighter or martyr, none of these complicating and distressful realities has gone away. On the contrary, the fundamental crisis has deepened and the voltage generated even in the mere discussion of these matters has increased to a degree that is explosive and often destructive of all civil exchange.

The world no longer looks with liberal dismay at the polarized sectarian ghettoes of Belfast: on the contrary, those ghettoes look out with

[17] Conor Cruise O'Brien, 153.
[18] W. B. Yeats, *A Vision*, London, 1962, p. 25.

eagerly partisan eyes at the polarized world, to the extent that some loyalist enclaves in Belfast now fly the Israeli flag and the Republicans answer from their roofs and chimneys with a display of the Palestinian one. Night after night we watch on TV the crowds surging around biers borne shoulder high, carrying the dead through the streets of Fallujah or Ramallah, and watch the military with their cordons and snatch squads and armoured vehicles as they wait tensely in position or go fiercely into action, and as we watch it is impossible not to think that passions of a sort which were barely contained when the hunger striker's body changed hands at Toome have now been let loose to apocalyptic effect in the world at large.

Sophocles' presentation of the domestic and civic troubles of ancient Thebes has great staying power and in the midst of the after-shocks running through the post-September 11 world his play still functions in the way Wallace Stevens said poetry functions, as the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality. In certain moods, however, even the incontrovertible steadiness and clarity of Greek tragedy can seem almost too Apollonian: we may want Goya instead of Sophocles, the Goya of *The Disasters of War*, the Goya of *The Shootings of the Third of May*, the Goya who looked aghast at the Napoleonic liberation of Spain with the same shock as the artists of Iraq must have watched the bombs begin to fall in Baghdad. In our time, acts of terrorism committed against those who wield the equivalent of Napoleonic power have driven them to a point where the impulse to retaliate is in danger of overwhelming all need to understand what lies behind the terrorism. It was possible to feel, for example, that there was something not so much Napoleonic as Roman about the images of the prisoners in irons being marched in front of the world to their cages in Guantanamo Bay. It was as if we were witnessing a triumph on the Via Appia. Respect for the *dúchas* and dignity of the defeated had been set at nought.

When the Abbey asked me to do the *Antigone*, President Bush and his secretary of defence were forcing not only their own electorate but the nations of the world into an either/or situation with regard to the tyrant of Baghdad. If you were not for state security to the point that you were ready to bomb Iraq, you could be represented as being in favour of terrorism. If you demurred at the linking of Al Qaeda to the despotism of Saddam Hussein, you were revealing yourself as unsound on important issues, soft on terrorism. If you demurred at the suspension of certain freedoms, you were unpatriotic. And all this circumstance would have made it easy to proceed with a treatment of Sophocles' play where Creon would have been a cipher for President Bush and the relationship between audience and action would have been knowing and

predicated on the assumption of political agreement. But to have gone in this direction would have been reductive and demeaning, both of Sophocles' art and of the huge responsibility the White House must bear for national security.

The issues of loyalty and disloyalty are real, both in the play and for the American legislature. Creon has to decide what to do with Polyneices, whom he calls in my version

> An anti-Theban Theban prepared to kill
> His countrymen in war, and desecrate
> The shrines of his country's gods.[19]

Basically Creon turns Polyneices into a non-person, in much the same way as the first internees in Northern Ireland and the recent prisoners in Guantanamo Bay were turned into non-persons. By refusing Polyneices burial, Creon claims ownership of the body and in effect takes control of his spirit, because the spirit will not go to its right home with the dead until the body is buried with due ceremony. When Antigone refuses Creon's ruling and performs the traditional rites, her protest is therefore a gesture that is as anthropological as it is political, and it was only when I saw it in this light that I found a way out of the cat's cradle of political arguments and analogies the play has become and could re-approach it as a work atremble with passion, with the human pity and terror it possessed in its original cultural setting.

The eye of the needle I passed through in order to re-enter the kingdom of Thebes was an Irish one and I found it in the nick of time, the night before I was due to give my decision to the Abbey Theatre's artistic director. I was paging through other translations, one older and one more recent. I've never studied ancient Greek so I was going to be relying on scholars such as Richard Claverhouse Jebb, who did a standard translation in accurate if by now slightly fusty Victorian English, and on the current edition of *Antigone* in the Loeb Classical Library. In Jebb's prose, Antigone's first speech turns out like this:

> Sister Ismene, my own dear sister, do you know of any ill, of all those bequeathed by Oedipus, that Zeus does not fulfil for us two while we live? There is nothing painful, nothing fraught with ruin, no shame, no dishonour, that I have not seen in your woes and mine.[20]

And in Hugh Lloyd-Jones's version, done for Loeb and also in prose, the lines are rendered thus:

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[19] Heaney, *The Burial at Thebes*, 17.

[20] *The Complete Plays of Sophocles*, translated by Richard Claverhouse Jebb, edited with an introduction by Moses Hadas, New York, 1967, p. 117.

> My own sister, Ismene, linked to myself, are you aware that Zeus . . . ah, which of the evils that come from Oedipus is he not accomplishing while we live. No, there is nothing painful or laden with destruction or shameful or dishonouring among your sorrows and mine that I have not witnessed.[21]

The sense conveyed by both translators is the same; we know there is a sisterly relationship, a shared awareness of family history, and it soon becomes clear that some impending event is causing them anxiety and panic, yet the anxiety and panic are not there in either the pace or the diction or the rhythm of the prose. The prose, moreover, construes lines that were originally in verse, and verse drama—even in translation—surely needs the meaning to be transformed into a metrical and musical register: unless I could get the panic into the pace of the speeches, I felt I could not proceed. I might be able to convey the content of the text but I would remain doomed to be what the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam once described as a mere purveyor of the paraphrasable meaning.

Then suddenly, as if from nowhere, I heard the note. Theme and tune coalesced. What came into my mind, or more precisely, into my ear, were the opening lines of a famous eighteenth-century Irish poem, called in the original "Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire":

> Mo ghrá go daingean thú!
> Lá da bhfaca thú
> Ag ceann tí an mhargaidh,
> Thug mo shúil aire duit,
> Thug mo chroí taitneamh duit,
> D'éalaíos óm charaid leat
> I bhfad ó bhaile leat.[22]

I say I heard this in my ear as if from nowhere, but in fact the listening posts of the unconscious had been attending all along and had come up with exactly the right register, one that sprang moreover from circumstances similar to those in which Antigone found herself. "Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire" means in English "The Lament for Art O'Leary" and it is a poem uttered by O'Leary's widow, Eibhlín Dhubh Ní Chonaill, over the dead body of her husband. And this body, like the body of Polyneices, had been left exposed, unattended to, cut down by enemies and abandoned.

O'Leary, who was killed in 1773, was a sassy pre-Emancipation

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[21] *Sophocles*, vol. 2, edited and translated by Hugh Lloyd-Jones, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, Loeb Classical Library, 1998, p. 5.

[22] See *An Duanaire/Poems of the Dispossessed*, edited by Sean O'Tuama and Thomas Kinsella, Dublin, 1981, p. 200.

Catholic, a strutter of his Gaelic stuff, a provoker of the English squirearchy in his home district of County Cork. He was set upon by a group of soldiers and left dead on the roadside, after which his horse had run on home with his blood on the bridle. Here is the opening of Eibhlín Dhubh's poem in English, in Frank O'Connor's translation, as well as some other from the later sections:

My love and my delight,
The day I saw you first
Beside the markethouse
I had eyes for nothing else
And love for none but you.

I left my father's house
And ran away with you,
And that was no bad choice.
You gave me everything . . .

My mind remembers
That bright spring day,
How your hat . . . became you.
Your silver-hilted sword,
Your manly right hand . . .
The English lowered their head before you,
Not out of love for you
But hate and fear . . .

My love and my mate
That I never thought dead
Till your horse came to me . . .
Till I found you lying
By a little furze bush
Without pope or bishop
Or any priest or cleric
To whisper you a prayer,
Only an old, old woman
And her cloak about you
And your blood in torrents . . .[23]

Because of the pitch of that voice, because the lament was for a beloved left lying without the last rites, and because I needed a metre to make the love and panic of the two sisters pulse with a certain ritual force, I picked up the note of Eibhlín Dhubh's three-beat line—"Mo ghrá go daingean thú, / Lá da bhfaca thú /Ag ceann tí an mhargaidh—" and got started on Antigone's first speech:

[23] Frank O'Connor, *Kings, Lords and Commons*, London, 1962, pp. 110–12.

Ismene, quick, come here!
What's to become of us?
Why are we always the ones?

There's nothing, sister, nothing
Zeus hasn't put us through
Just because we are who we are—
The daughters of Oedipus.
And because we are his daughters
We took what came, Ismene,
In public and in private,
Hurt and humiliation—
But this I cannot take.[24]

Admittedly, there is nothing very distinct about the language here, the thing is plain and bare of figures of speech, but the three-beat line established a tune that I could carry, and that the sisters could carry. And with a first tune established, it was easy enough to play variations. The speeches of the chorus, for example, almost spoke themselves in an alliterating four-beat line, one that echoed very closely the metre of Anglo-Saxon poetry and that seemed right for the enunciation of proverbial wisdom and the invocation of gods. So the hymn to Victory, which is the first utterance we hear from the Chorus, came out as if it had been fetched up from the word-hoard of some Athenian Caedmon:

Glory be to brightness,   to the gleaming sun,
Shining guardian   of our seven gates.
Burn away the darkness,   dawn of Thebes,
Dazzle the city   you have saved from destruction.

Argos is defeated,   the army beaten back
    All the brilliant shields
Smashed into shards   and smithereens.[25]

And so on. And then, needless to say, the traditional iambic pentameter, with its conventional *tee-tum, tee-tum, tee-tum,* seemed right for Creon, who must in every sense hold the line, so I tuned his speeches to a fairly regular blank verse form:

March to the rock vault, wall her in and leave.
After that it'll be up to her to choose.
She can live there under dry stone or can die.
There's no blood on my hands here . . .[26]

[24] Heaney, *The Burial at Thebes*, 5.
[25] Ibid., 13.
[26] Ibid., 53.

Moving in and out of the strict iambic is one way of signifying adherence to tradition and convention, but it also confers a certain dignity, so when Antigone rises to her final heroic utterances, I moved from trimeter toward pentameter and tried to make the pitch of the lines rise with her:

> Stone of my wedding chamber, stone of my tomb,
> Stone of my prison roof and prison floor,
> Behind you and beyond you stand the dead.
> They are my people and they're waiting for me
> And when they see me coming down the road
> They'll hurry out to meet me, all of them.
> My father and my mother first, and then
> Eteocles, my brother—every one
> As dear to me as when I washed and dressed
> And laid them out.
> But Polyneices,
> When I did the same for you, when I did
> What people knew in their heart of hearts
> Was right, I was doomed for it.[27]

In poetry, we only believe what we hear. *Antigone* is poetic drama, but commentary and analysis had dulled it. I wanted to do a translation that would be true to the original in so far as it would be as much musical score as dramatic script, one that actors could speak as plainly or intensely as the occasion demanded, but one that still kept faith with the ritual formality of the original. I have talked a good deal here about the political and cultural resonances which the text possessed for us in Ireland, because these resonances constituted my title deeds, as it were, my claim to be somebody with a right to do a version of it. But the real title deed was written when I changed the name of the play from *Antigone* to *The Burial at Thebes*. Putting "burial" in the title signals to a new audience what the central concern of the play is going to be. But because it is a word that has not yet been entirely divorced from primal reality, because it recalls to us our final destiny as members of the species, it also reminds us, however subliminally, of the solemnity of death, the sacredness of life and the need to allow in every case the essential dignity of the human creature. Wherever you come from, whatever flag is draped on the coffins of your dead, the word "burial" carries with it something of your *dúchas*. It emphasizes, in other words, those "Instinctive Powers of Feeling, Love and Kinship" which authority must respect if it is not to turn callous, powers which will nevertheless also continue to inspire the one whom Cruise O'Brien called "the trouble-maker from Thebes."

[27] Ibid., 53–54.