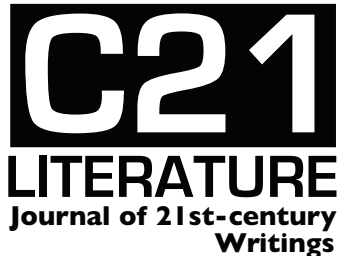




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ARTICLE

Heaney's Mythic Method: Modernist Afterlives in *The Burial at Thebes*

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This essay analyses the relationship between myth and modernity in *The Burial at Thebes* (2004), Seamus Heaney's adaptation of Antigone. It focuses on the poet's cultivation of what T.S. Eliot, in his review of *Ulysses*, called the mythic method; that is, 'the art of holding a classical safety net under the tottering data of the contemporary.' If, for Eliot, the mythic method was part of a reactionary disavowal of modernity, for Heaney it belongs to a more progressive political and aesthetic agenda. Drawing on debates from New Modernist Studies, the article traces and interrogates the significance of the mythic method within Heaney's landmark play. In doing so it demonstrates the ways in which the legacies of modernism continue to shape Irish writing in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Myth; modernism; Heaney; Antigone; Irish Literature

2016 witnessed the posthumous publication of Seamus Heaney's translation of book VI of the *Aeneid*. It features the *katabasis* myth, as Aeneas journeys to the underworld in search of the ghost of his dead father. The volume is dedicated to Father Michael McGlinchey, who had taught Virgil to the young Heaney at St Columb's College in 1957 (Heaney 2016: vii). If the seeds of this work were sown in the soil of Heaney's school days, the recourse to myth has remained a defining preoccupation of his long and illustrious career. As Barbara Hardy comments, 'An involvement with various myths, pre-Christian, medieval, Renaissance, Irish and European, has marked Heaney's poetry from its beginnings' (1982: 151). In the latter decades of Heaney's career this involvement would intensify, emerging as a means of both reimagining the past and re-aligning the co-ordinates of the future. The transition from

myth to mythic method can be witnessed in the 'Route 110' sequence from *Human Chain* (2010: 46). In this poem Heaney pairs a bus journey from Belfast to Derry with the image of Charon, ferrying the dead across the river Lethe. A wake for the poet's drowned neighbor is twinned with the tale of Aeneas' drowned helmsman, Palinurus. And the gathering of shades on the riverbank becomes coupled with the ghosts of the Troubles that have, for decades, haunted Heaney's imagination. It is this poetic pendulum swing, from myth to modernity and back again, that provides the focus of the following essay. In the poet's own words, such maneuvers derive from an explicitly modernist mode of artistic practice, 'a matter of a relatively simple "mythic method" employed over the twelve sections [of the poem]' (2016: viii).

What makes this modernist turn in late Heaney all the more remarkable is the decidedly anti-modern nature of early responses to the poet's work. For Douglas Dunn in the 1970s, Heaney was the poet of 'muddy-booted blackberry picking', while for Al Alvarez, his was essentially a Victorian aesthetic (qtd. in O'Donoghue 2009: 3). Blake Morrison sums up such views, writing that for many Heaney's artistic universe 'was a world in which Ezra Pound and "making it new" might never have happened' (1982: 15). Against the grain of this early criticism, the following essay seeks to relocate Heaney amid the emerging critical framework of New Modernist Studies. It argues that *The Burial at Thebes* can be seen to respond to the claim by the English novelist Tom McCarthy, whereby 'The task for contemporary literature is to deal with the legacy of modernism' (2010). With the exception of Paige Reynolds' *Modernist Afterlives in Irish Literature and Culture* (2016), the Irish aspects of this emerging field have received relatively scant attention. Such omissions are all the more striking given the broad legacies of Irish modernists like Yeats, Joyce and Beckett, and the underlying sense of continuity between the Northern Ireland Troubles and many of the political and historical forces that shaped Irish writing at the beginning of the twentieth century (Corcoran 1997: vii). One of the tendencies within the modernist afterlives project has been to challenge the dominance of European/Anglo-American writing within the discourse of modernism. Susan Stanford Friedman, for example, has argued for a 'transnational turn' by which the formal innovations of previously neglected literary cultures (i.e. non Anglo-American) might be rediscovered within a

radically reconstituted modernist canon (2015). One of the more notable objections to this expansionist ethos has come from Charles Altieri, who comments that the 'desire to expand the field [has] usually require[d] putting writers together who have few actual historical connections with one another's projects' (2012: 767). This essay is an attempt to respond to such objections, offering a more localized and culturally specific instance of the modernist inheritance. It does so by tracing Heaney's mythic method back to James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922). Underlying this article is a materialist claim; namely, that if Irish modernism was, in part, a creative response to a specific moment in Irish history, then thinking about its aesthetic legacies can help us grapple with the sense of unfinished business that has come to characterize the Irish political landscape in the early twenty-first century. Arguably, the most powerful example of such unfinished business concerns the Northern Irish Troubles and the ways in which historical legacies of the past – including partition, political violence and sectarianism – continue to act upon the cultural and political realities of the present.¹ *The Burial at Thebes*, Heaney's 2004 version of *Antigone*, offers a useful case study in which to chart the poet's redeployment of the mythic method.² Focusing on this technique encourages us to reread the play, restoring its crucial yet critically overlooked significance in the Irish context. Having examined the play in detail, the final section of this essay will consider how Heaney's mythic method might contribute to a broader series of debates about the legacies of modernism and the relevance of such aesthetics to our understanding of contemporary Irish writing.

¹ For discussion of the relationship between Irish modernism and questions of cultural nationalism, political self-determination and the legacies of British imperialism see Kiberd (1996).

² In his work as a critic, the poet himself acknowledges an awareness of the technique and its locus within the broader context of modernist aesthetic innovation. In his 1986 lecture 'Sounding Auden' he comments, 'In conditions where the ground might open under the present, a newer approach which Eliot had dubbed "the mythical method" had become available. This was the art of holding a classical safety net under the tottering data of the contemporary, of paralleling, of shadowing, of archetypifying.' Later that year, in an essay on translation Heaney would again alight on this technique and its relationship to the radical, emancipatory energies of modernism: 'Pound and Eliot and Joyce may have regarded themselves as demolitionists of sorts but from a later perspective they turned out to be conservationists, keeping open lines to the classical inheritance of European literature. In getting ready for the end of the world, they extended its life expectancy, indefinitely.' (Heaney 1988: 42–3, 116).

Heaney's mythic method

In terms of critical reception, it is worth recalling that it was Heaney's relationship to myth that gave rise to arguably the most excoriating critique of the poet's relationship to the political conflict in Ireland.³ In his infamous review of *North* (1975), fellow poet Ciaran Carson would lambast the collection, claiming that Heaney had 'moved – unwillingly perhaps – from being a writer with the gift of precision, to become the laureate of violence – a mythmaker, an anthropologist of ritual killing, an apologist for "the situation".' (1975: 183) For Carson, the recourse to iron-age myths in that book avoided the historical moment and signaled an aesthetic retreat from the particularities of Northern Irish history: 'It is as if he is saying, suffering like this is natural; these things have always happened; they happened then, they happen now, and that is sufficient ground for understanding' (1985: 184). Twenty years later, Franco Moretti would make a similar objection to the use of myth within contemporary writing, claiming it served to 'mentally bracket off the historical specificity' of the present (1997: 224). Heaney himself though has always regarded myth as a stimulating rather than stifling vehicle of creative expression. Since the 1970s it has been a constant feature of his work, manifesting in a variety of ways and with a range of inference. At times myth figures as a minor note in individual poems. 'Mick Joyce in Heaven', for example, is referred to as a 'demobbed Achilles' (2006: 8), whilst the translator Robert Fitzgerald comes to us as the 'Harvard Nestor' (2001: 40). On other occasions, myth plays a more pronounced and profound role. In *The Cure at Troy* (1989), for example, the Greek chorus anachronistically departs from the Philoctetes myth to comment on the ongoing crisis in Northern Ireland:

Human beings suffer,
They torture one another,
They get hurt and get hard.

³ Inspired by P.V. Glob's *The Bog People* (1965), *North* deployed iron-age myths of ritual sacrifice as a way of framing the communal chaos unfolding on the streets of Northern Ireland. Whilst a number of commentators saw the comparison as illuminating, others read it as an aesthetic evasion, an attempt to recoil from, rather than represent, historical reality.

No poem or play or song
 Can fully right a wrong
 Inflicted and endured.

 The innocent in gaols
 Beat on their bars together.
 A hunger-striker's father
 Stands in the graveyard dumb.
 The police widow in veils
 Faints at the funeral home.

 History says, *Don't hope*
On this side of the grave.
 But then, once in a lifetime
 The longed-for tidal wave
 Of justice can rise-up,
 And hope and history rhyme. (1991b: 77)

And, in *The Spirit Level* (1996) the mythic method is made manifest through the juxtaposition of particular poems. The 'Mycenae Lookout' sequence uses the myths of the Trojan War to bear witness to the human cost of political violence. Whilst these poems do not refer directly to Northern Ireland, the reader is primed to make the comparison by a pair of Troubles poems ('Two Lorries' and 'Weighing In') that precede them in the collection. As a result, for Helen Vendler the figure of a tortured Cassandra acts as a cipher for Heaney's 'pent up historical anger' over the wasted lives of the Troubles (1998: 117).

As is well known, the idea of the mythic method first appeared in T.S. Eliot's 1923 review of *Ulysses*. For Eliot it was the book's self-conscious dialogue with Homer that lay at the heart of its aesthetic achievement:

In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him... It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving

shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. It is a method already adumbrated by Mr. Yeats, and of the need for which I believe Mr. Yeats to have been the first contemporary to be conscious... Instead of narrative method, we may now use the mythical method. It is, I seriously believe, a step toward making the modern world possible for art. (1953: 681)

Eliot's comments are remarkably prescient, anticipating both the legacy of Joyce and the value of ancient myth for later generations of Irish writers. In *After Yeats and Joyce* (1997) Neil Corcoran confirms as much, describing contemporary Irish writing as 'a literature always having to come to terms with its belatedness or subsequence' (vii).⁴ In tracing the shadow lines of the mythic method, however, one must be careful to distinguish between Eliot's interpretation and an account that Joyce himself would willingly ascribe to. Arguably, his use of the definite article – 'the mythical method' – is a misnomer, suggesting a singular and uniform way in which the ancient and the modern might be brought to bear upon one another.⁵ Furthermore, Eliot's authoritarian verbs ('controlling', 'ordering') disclose a subconscious desire to administer the present and reveal its inadequacies when compared to the heroic and noble past. Such rhetoric, of course, seems closer to the poet's own reactionary conservatism than the more affirmative ethos ('yes...yes...Yes...') of Joyce's everyday epic.⁶ As Declan Kiberd has argued, rather than decry the present, '[*Ulysses*] celebrates the reality of ordinary people's daily rounds' (2009: 10). Thus, to return to Carson's point, for both Joyce and Heaney the mythic method is not a retreat from reality, but rather a way of refracting and re-viewing it. If, for Eliot, the mythic method made the 'modern word

⁴ For other accounts of this belatedness see Falci (2012), McDonald (2002) and Reynolds (2016).

⁵ The diverse range of interpretations that Joyce's mythic method offer a rebuttal to the more rigid and singular tone of Eliot's interpretation. While Ezra Pound downplayed the Homeric correspondences as a mere 'scaffold' for the text, early critics like Stuart Gilbert and Frank Budgen read the allusions as an attempt to legitimate the book and offset some of its more erotic or scatological elements. See Gilbert (1950) and Budgen (1973). For a range of interpretations of Joyce's mythical method see Stanford (1963), Kenner (1987) and Arkins (2009).

⁶ As Keith M. Booker puts it, for Eliot 'the contemporary historical world is disparaged and rejected as a broken image of a nobler past' (1985: 19).

possible for art', one imagines that for Joyce and Heaney, the modern world, whether it be the city streets of Dublin or the rural byways of Derry, was a place in which art always was and always would be possible.

The case for reading a Joycean mythic method is further strengthened by Heaney's intimate relationship with his Irish literary forbearer.⁷ If a younger Heaney regarded Eliot as an intimidating and prohibitive figure, in Joyce he would find a more familiar and facilitating exemplar.⁸ As early as *Death of a Naturalist* (1966), Heaney turns to Joyce to ratify his views about art's ability to elevate everyday experience: 'Blinding in Paris, for his party piece/Joyce named the shops along O'Connell Street' (1966: 43). In *Wintering Out* (1972), poems like 'Traditions' and 'The Wool Trade' see Heaney in explicit dialogue with Stephen Daedalus, fretting in the shadow of his master's language. Most famously, in *Station Island* (1984) the final day of the Lough Derg pilgrimage sees Heaney visited by the ghost of his own secular savior, James Joyce. The shade addresses him directly, telling him he's 'listened long enough [...] Let go, let fly [...] strike your note' (1998: 267). The poet comments: '[In *Station Island*] my intention always was to have the pilgrim leave the island renewed, with liberating experience behind him and more ahead [...] on such matters, Joyce is our chief consultant' (qtd. in O'Driscoll 2008: 249).⁹ Heaney's affinity with a specifically Joycean version of the mythic method is also evident in his introduction to the Everyman *Odyssey* (1992) where he writes, 'it is in Homer's brilliant aliveness at all times to "the plain sense of things" that his genius resides [...] he always remains attentive and truthful to the pathos and richness of the ordinary' (qtd. in Fitzgerald 1992: xix). For Heaney

⁷ The opening anecdote from Heaney's schooldays finds its corollary in Joyce's early encounter with Charles Lamb's *The Adventures of Ulysses* (1808) which he studied for his intermediate examination at the age of twelve. Just as Joyce would claim that 'the spirit of Homer was always beside me to sustain and encourage me', Heaney would similarly admit that 'the motifs of [*Aeneid*] Book VI have been in my head for years.' Qtd. in Potts (1979: 158) and O'Driscoll (2008: 389).

⁸ In his 1988 essay 'Learning from Eliot' Heaney admits that as a schoolboy he 'was daunted by the otherness of Eliot and all that he stood for' (2003: 26).

⁹ Qtd. in O'Driscoll (249). To date, when critics have addressed the Joycean strand in Heaney's work they have focused on questions of language, eroticism and political commitment, and neglected the stylistic similarities, including the recourse to myth, within both writers' work. See Jolly (1986), Haffeden, (1987), Corcoran (1989), Allison (1994) and Johnston (1997).

the mythic method is irretrievably imbricated with this spirit of renewal, with a desire to reveal the latent value in the ordinary and the everyday. As early as 1963 the poet was thinking about the Antigone in just such terms. In that year he would teach Sophocles' play to students at St Joseph's teacher-training college in Belfast. Five years later, he would read an important essay by Irish historian Conor Cruise O'Brien in which O'Brien framed Bernadette Devlin, leader of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Movement, as a modern-day Antigone, a symbol of female defiance in the face of an intransigent and tyrannical state.¹⁰ Heaney comments that from this 'moment on *Antigone* was more than a piece of the academic syllabus: it was a lens that helped inspect reality more clearly' (qtd. in Battersby 2004). Forty years later, the desire for clarity and vision would once again propel Heaney to accept the Abbey's commission of a new version of *Antigone* to celebrate its hundredth anniversary.

Another Irish Antigone

At the heart of *The Burial at Thebes* lies a quarrel between Antigone and the king, Creon, concerning the latter's refusal to allow Antigone to properly bury her brother. Killed whilst fighting on the losing side of the recent civil war, Polyneices has been deemed an 'enem[y] of the state' with the result that there will be 'no laying to rest/No mourning' and his corpse will be 'publicly dishonored' (2004: 7). Upon hearing this news Antigone defies Creon's orders and secretly buries her brother. When she is discovered she is arrested and brought before the king, who sentences her to death. When Antigone's fiancé Haemon (who is also Creon's son) learns of her fate, he also kills himself. Upon hearing of her son's death, Queen Eurydice (Creon's wife), similarly commits suicide. Thus, by clinging to a sense of victor's justice and refus-

¹⁰ It is interesting that the implosion of Northern Irish society in the four years period between this essay's initial publication in 1968 and its reproduction here in 1972, would see O'Brien make a U-turn. Reading *Antigone* as a cipher for the civil rights leader Bernadette Devlin, the 1972 version would see her intransigence castigated and juxtaposed with the character of Ismene, whose attempts to negotiate Creon's decree is, for O'Brien, a less provocative and more suitable response: 'after four years of *Antigone* and her under-studies and all those funerals ... you begin to feel Ismene's common-sense and feeling for the living may make the more needful, if less spectacular element in "human dignity".' See O'Brien (1972: 156–9). For a scathing response to this volte-face on O'Brien's part see Tom Paulin (1996: 6–12).

ing to allow for the proper burial of the dead, Creon participates in the wholesale destruction of his own household.

Whilst some critics have been alert to the contemporary resonance of *The Burial at Thebes*, the prevailing tendency has been to read the play in terms of the post 9/11 'war on terror.' Dominic Cavendish compared the conviction politics of Creon to those of Tony Blair, Sarah Hemming saw in the set 'the shell-pocked walls of today's Middle East', whilst Benedict Nightingale read 'the vaguely Islamic robes' as a gesture toward 'Iran or Saudi Arabia or even Iraq.' Such responses were encouraged by the set design, traditional costume and use of Arabic music in certain productions.¹¹ The mythic method, however, encourages us to read *The Burial at Thebes* within a specifically Irish context. We might recall, for example, that the play was originally commissioned to mark the centenary celebrations of Dublin's Abbey Theatre, a venue steeped in both the history of Irish modernism and the cultural politics of Ireland's turbulent past. For Heaney, the occasion put the play in explicit dialogue with Yeats' own Abbey versions of Sophocles – *King Oedipus* (1928) and *Oedipus at Colonus* (1934). This performance history also alerts us to the issue of the play's language, which became less significant as the production migrated across the Irish Sea where it was performed by a mostly English cast. Writing about the original Abbey production, which had a predominantly local cast, Neil Corcoran observed, 'whilst the play is less transparent to specific political instance than *The Cure at Troy*... the idiom is markedly Irish' (2004). The play opens with Ismene fretting about 'the pair of us left to cope' and recoiling from her sister by declaring 'You have me scared' (2004: 6). Thus, Heaney's *Antigone* resonates with those other classics of the Irish modernist stage, most notably Sean O'Casey's Dublin plays, in which the vernacular voice is used to deconstruct the overblown rhetoric of revolutionary politics, as staged by Pearse et al.

Given the play's debt to the cultural history of Irish modernism, it is unsurprising that Heaney would redeploy the mythic method as a way of illuminating the aftermath of the Troubles and the fraught process by which post-conflict societies

¹¹ Images from the 2005 Nottingham Playhouse production can be viewed at the Photostage. Accessed 30 June 2017. <http://www.photostage.co.uk/gallery/1523/2081/1068?p=2>.

seek to come to terms with their traumatic past. The most compelling correspondence between the Antigone myth and the political realities of modern Ireland concerns the role of women and, in particular, their systematic exclusion from the public and political life of the post-conflict state. As such, it is notable that *The Burial at Thebes* both harnesses and heightens the gender politics of Sophocles' original. When Antigone is arrested and brought before Creon it is difficult to tell what has provoked the king's rage most, having his orders disobeyed, or having them disobeyed by a woman. Heaney's Creon declares:

flaunting that defiance in my face
 Puts her beyond the pale. Who does she think
 She is? The man in charge?
 Have I to be
 The woman of the house and take her orders? (2004: 30–1)

Comparing these lines with the three translations Heaney worked from – the R.C. Jebb (1904), E.F. Watling (1947) and Lloyd-Jones (1994) versions – illustrates the degree to which the poet accentuates the gender dynamics of the original.¹² Watling omits the reference to sexual identity altogether – ‘As I live, she shall not flout my orders with impunity’ (139) – while Jebb and Lloyd-Jones limit themselves to a simple description of role reversal – ‘Now verily I am no man, she is the man’ (2004: 47) and ‘but I am no man, she is a man’ (no pag.). In contrast, Heaney extends the metaphor, allowing Creon four whole lines in which to vent his rage and hammer home the gendered nature of Antigone's offence. Such emphasis permeates the king's speech. Antigone, we are told, is ‘a woman that's no good’; Haemon is weak due to being willing to ‘give in to a woman’ (2004: 41, 4, 47). Later the king declares, ‘women were never meant for this assembly./From now on they'll be kept in place again’ (2004: 38).

The mythic method encourages us to reread such lines in light of the invisibility of women within mainstream political debates about the aftermath of the

¹² See Heaney (2005) for the poet's discussion of which versions he worked from.

Northern Irish conflict.¹³ On the one hand, the marginalization of Antigone stands in marked contrast to the strong female presence at the negotiations of the Belfast 'Good Friday' Agreement (1998). Here a range of influential women including Mo Mowlam (British Secretary of State for Northern Ireland), Liz O'Donnell (Department of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Ireland) and Monica McWilliams (Women's Coalition Party) played leading roles in negotiating the Agreement.¹⁴ In contrast, one of the dominant facets of the post-Troubles era has been the systematic exclusion of women's voices from debates about how to address the legacies of the conflict. Thus, for historian Margaret Ward, the 'lack of gender parity that exists throughout Northern Irish society [has been] a key factor in hindering the development of a new, shared future' (2006: 262). For Celia Davies and Carmel Roulston, the contribution of women in Northern Ireland has been generally unacknowledged 'by those engaged [...] in big-P politics' (2000: viii). While for Sara McDowell, Troubles commemoration has consistently demonstrated an inherent bias towards 'masculine needs [...] and experiences [of] pain [and] trauma' (2008: 35). The mythic method allows Heaney's play to foreground such issues, providing a platform for female voices that have otherwise been silenced by the re-enthronement of sectarian politics and a 'business as usual' approach in the aftermath of the Troubles.

As we saw with Joyce, a key feature of the mythic method is the way it fosters a sense of double vision by refracting contemporary experience through the lens of classical myth. This pluralized approach might be theorized by way of Bakhtin's dialogic imagination, a way of seeing that resists any singular, authoritative version of events (Booker 1985). On the one hand, the mythic quality of the Antigone story fosters a sense of critical distance, enabling the audience to step back from the immediacy of their historical moment and search for underlying patterns of historical continuity.

¹³ The Consultative Group on the Past that produced the Eames-Bradley Report (2009) is indicative of such gender imbalance. Whilst women make up over 50% of Northern Irish society, there were only 2 female members on the 10 strong panel that produced this important report. See Duffy (2010: 28).

¹⁴ Drawing on a membership that straddled the traditional political divide in Northern Ireland, the Women's Coalition were the only non-sectarian party at the negotiation of the Good Friday Agreement. For detailed analysis of their seminal role in the talks see Fearon (2000).

As Sailer comments, 'for Heaney myth expresses the pasts penetration of the present' (1991: 54). At the same time, *The Burial at Thebes* shines a literal and metaphorical light upon the experience of an individual character, encouraging the audience to become intimately acquainted with the ways in which abstract notions of suffering and forgiveness play out in the aftermath of conflict. If the mythic method is about ways of seeing, one might note the degree to which both vision and blindness are critical to *The Burial at Thebes*. As the play's major recurring motif, the audience are constantly being asked to think about what various characters can and cannot see. The chorus tells us, 'All Creon can see is a crazy girl,' before asking us to bear witness to the causes and consequence of such myopia – 'never, you men of Thebes, forget what you saw here today' (2004: 54). Readers are reminded of the citizen/cyclops of Joyce's *Ulysses*, whose ideological militancy is characterized as a form of myopia, a partial sight that ends up as a debilitating form of blindness when he is speared by Ulysses in Homer's original. Similarly, in Heaney's play Creon remains steadfastly hawkish, wedded to his black and white worldview in which there are only us and them, victors and vanquished, patriots and traitors. Creon is unable to envision a world in which women have a meaningful part to play in the public life of the state. The chorus decries his inability 'to control/his tongue, and see things in truer light' (2004: 62). In this vein one might also recall Heaney's description of the blind soothsayer, Tiresias, whose 'second sight gives him 'the power to see and warn' both the king and, by proxy, us audience (2004: 61, 57).

The visionary aspect of the mythic method echoes the search for heightened forms of perception, a core value within the Heaney corpus. As the title of the 1991 collection *Seeing Things* suggests, poems might well be thought of seeing things, as lenses through which we might better perceive and comprehend reality. There is also the suggestion that, as human beings, we are in some essential and definitive way seeing things. And, through the hallucinatory connotations of the phrase, we are invited to recognize and acknowledge our fallibility. Like Creon, we have an ingrained susceptibility to mistakes and errors, to hallucinations and false vision, to seeing things incorrectly. Rather than retreat from reality, like Joyce's before him, Heaney deploys the mythic method to reimagine the present, to forge an art capable of vision and insight, to recast familiar situations in new and revealing ways.

Heaney and Late Modernism

The discussion of Heaney's mythic method adds to the growing body of scholarship that has addressed the self-conscious dialogue between modernist writing and the poet's later output. One of the most popular approaches is to emphasize the Yeatsian inheritance. For Bernard O'Donoghue, Heaney's work is an 'exemplary instance of the Yeatsian conflict between artistic freedom and public responsibility' (2009: 7). Neil Corcoran similarly maintains that the Northern Irish poet is 'schooled [in] the Yeatsian example of self-protective intransigence' (2009: 174). Whilst such comparisons are illuminating, a focus on technique helps broaden our understanding of Heaney's debt to the modernist period and its significance in the Irish context. Such an approach takes cognizance of the deliberate and highly selective ways in which contemporary writers engage with the work of their literary forbearers. As Heaney himself comments, 'when poets turn to the great masters of the past they turn to an image of their own creation, one which is likely to be a reflection of their own imaginative needs, their own artistic inclinations and procedures' (1985: 5).

The attempt to map Heaney's mythic method contributes to the emerging field of New Modernist Studies and a series of debates about the remobilization and recalibration of modernist techniques within twenty-first century writing. In contrast to the planetary and transnational emphasis of much work in this field, the Heaney-Joyce axis seeks to re-activate a more local and culturally specific context in which such influence might be examined. Insisting on such limits is one way to counteract the kind of radical expansionism that, for a critic like Altieri, has become too diffuse and, as a result, devoid of intellectual charge.

In addressing the legacies of modernism, Derek Attridge has argued that 'any modernism after modernism necessarily involves a reworking of modernism's methods' (2004: 5). Heaney's play marks a concerted attempt to rework the mythic method inherited from Joyce. One of the ways it does so is through the relationship between *The Burial at Thebes* and the broader discourse of post-colonial theory. Stephen E. Wilmer argues that Heaney's play 'bears witness to the indelible marks of colonialism and oppression, and to the process of disengagement from it' (2007: 230). Similarly, for Lorna Hardwick it is 'in the language of Heaney's play [that] there are richly textured allusions to various aspects of Irish colonial history,

and the stages of disengagement from it' (2006: 212). Heaney's interest in such matters finds a powerful precursor in Joyce's own complex attitudes toward Ireland and the, so-called, British question. In the sixth chapter of *Finnegan's Wake* (1939), Shaun begins his lecture on the superiority of space over time by announcing: 'Gentes and laitymen, fullstoppers and semicolonials, hybreds and lubberds!' (1992: 152) For Marjorie Howes and Derek Attridge this combination of linguistic *jouissance* and the conjunction of opposites discloses a 'semi-colonial' sensibility in Joyce: 'in its dealings with questions of nationalism and imperialism [Joyce's work] evinces a complex and ambivalent set of attitudes, not reducible to a simple anticolonialism but very far from expressing approval of the colonial organizations and methods under which Ireland had suffered' (2000: 3). At the other end of the century, Heaney's poetry increasingly came to embody a similar sense of 'semi-colonial' ambivalence when it came to Ireland's political predicament. Whilst the poet would respond to his inclusion in *The Penguin Book of British Poetry* (1983) by declaring, 'Be advised/My passport's green/No glass of ours was ever raised/to toast the Queen', he also questions the validity of physical force nationalism (1983; no pag.). 'The Flight Path' recounts a true-life confrontation between Heaney and republican activist Danny Morrison in which the latter demands: 'when, for fuck's sake, are you going to write one for us.' The poet's reply ('If I do write something, whatever it is, I'll be writing for myself') reveals a determination to resist having his art co-opted by the ideologies of militant republicanism (1996: 22). In *The Burial at Thebes* this ambiguity manifests in a reluctance to judge the play's main protagonists. Heaney does not offer the audience easy solutions and as the action closes, it is the intransigence of *both* Antigone and Creon that emerges as the root of this bloody tragedy.

The semi-colonial status of both Joyce and Heaney encourages us to resituate Irish writing alongside one of the prevailing undercurrents of New Modernist Studies; namely the desire to acknowledge the ways in which post-colonial writers have looked to their modernist forbearers for aesthetic inspiration. In this context Neil Lazarus comments that, 'while colonialism is commonly taken as intrinsic to the socio-cultural project of modernity, modernism is not typically viewed – for all its "dissidence" – as featuring an anticolonial dimension' (2011: 28). Simon Gakandi makes

an even stronger claim when he insists that, 'It was primarily [...] in the language and structure of modernism that a postcolonial experience came to be articulated and imagined in literary form' (2006: 420). As this essay has attempted to demonstrate, Ireland continues to occupy a valuable space within the broader intellectual history of postcolonial theory.¹⁵ Whilst the country was an early adopter of revolutionary politics, the stuttering nature of the post-Agreement era discloses a landscape still coming to terms – historically, culturally, aesthetically – with the legacies of British imperialism. Whilst neo-liberal capitalism has undoubtedly played a more significant role in the recent history of the Republic of Ireland, recent debates about Brexit and the status of the Irish border illustrate the degree to which the British question continues to act as a powerful undercurrent within the body politic of both the North and the South.

The emergence of Heaney's mythic method in the 1990s coincides with a particular moment in Irish Studies whereby critics sought to reclaim a number of Irish modernists, and resituate their work within the political, economic and cultural context of early twentieth century Irish history. For Joe Cleary such intellectual developments could, in part, be attributed to the real, on the ground, political transformations that were occurring in Northern Ireland during the 1990s. He writes, 'That an artistic phenomenon [i.e. Irish modernism] that had initially flourished during a period of radical global disturbance and national redefinition should have been reclaimed during a later moment of national redefinition was perhaps not coincidental' (2014: 14).¹⁶ Cleary also helps us make sense of the difference between Eliot's authoritarian mythic method and the more radical and democratic ethos we see in both Joyce and Heaney. 'Colonial origins,' he suggests, 'are probably responsible for

¹⁵ Since the 1990s, the issue of Ireland's place within the broader field of Postcolonial Studies has remained a significant, and often contested, critical terrain. Arguably, the strongest rebuttal of its inclusion came from Edna Longley (1994). Other critics, including Seamus Deane, Declan Kiberd and David Lloyd, would maintain the highly productive nature of reading Irish literature through a post-colonial lens. For discussion of these perspectives see Connolly and King (2003) and Flannery (2009).

¹⁶ Key texts in the critical recovery of Irish modernism include: Deane (1985) and (1991), Nolan (1995) and Howes (1996). For discussion of the significance of Irish writing for postcolonial theory see Lloyd (1993), Kiberd (1996), Cleary (2002).

Irish modernism's... combination of restless formal experiment and its tendency in many instances to be skeptical of historical progress' (2014: 9). As we have seen, such skepticism finds direct expression in Heaney's turn to tragedy as a way of interrogating the end of the Troubles and the dawn of this supposedly redemptive moment in Irish history.

In conclusion, I would like to suggest how the mythic method, and Heaney's interest in tragedy, might inform our understanding of recent Northern Irish history. At its core, *The Burial at Thebes* is a play about frailty, about the human inability to manage and control one's destiny. George Steiner argues that for the Greeks, the forces that shape or destroy our lives lay outside the governance of reason or justice (1961: 7). For Susan Sontag, a play like *Antigone* insists that 'there are disasters which are not fully merited, that there is ultimate injustice in the world' (1966: 137). Such thoughts help us frame the kind of difficulties Northern Ireland continues to experience in its attempts to come to terms with the legacy of its traumatic past. They bring us back full circle, to questions of clarity and vision. It should not surprise us, then, that as Martha Nussbaum argues, 'the primary, ongoing central meaning [of *katharsis*] is clarification' (2001: 389). Such accounts bear remarkable resemblance to Denis O'Donoghue's definition of myth which, he writes, 'is not just a story like any other: it embodies a comprehensive ambition, to clarify human life' (1997: 2008). Thus, *The Burial at Thebes* might be thought of as a visionary play. For Altieri, modernist subversion is a site of positive vision: 'When Pound called for making it new, he also emphasized a contrast between getting people to see new things and giving people new eyes with which to see everything' (2012: 765). Heaney's mythic method provides us with crucial insight into the randomized suffering of the Troubles, reiterating our fallibility and our limited capacity to contain and administer the traumatic past. If F.S.L. Lyons is right, and the Irish are a people 'caught [...] in the web of [a] tragic history' (1979: 177), Heaney reminds us that as Northern Ireland goes forward, modernist aesthetics will continue to play a role in our attempt to bear witness to the past and, ultimately, to try and bury it.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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