

DIFFERENT APPROPRIATIONS OF GREEK TRAGEDY IN CONTEMPORARY DRAMA: IRISH AND OTHERWISE

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It seems to be happening through the English-speaking world that the Greeks are emerging as the dominant international force in our theatre.

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Abstract:

With the support of some versions which take Sophocles' *Antigone* as a point of departure, this essay reflects on the process of rewriting a classic. In a comparative approach, two European Antigones and three in South-American drama are examined before a discussion of the methods and purposes which the Irish playwrights used when reworking myth in *Antigone* and other Greek tragedies.

Keywords: intertextuality, Greek tragedy, Brecht, Anouilh, South American Antigones.

In his 1898 essay, "The Autumn of the Body", W. B. Yeats ponders on different ways to represent reality, mainly by contrasting the mimetic with the symbolic method, and by pointing at some change in the future:

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I think that we will learn again how to describe at great length an old man wandering among enchanted islands, his return home at last, his slow-gathering vengeance, a flitting shape of a goddess, and a flight of arrows, and yet to make all of these so different things “take light from mutual reflection, like an actual trail of fire over precious stones”, and become “an entire word”, the signature or symbol of a mood of the divine imagination as imponderable as “the horror of the forest or the silent thunder in the leaves”. (*Selected Criticism* 42)

Although referring to poetry, Yeats was, in a way, foretelling that James Joyce, and many of the modernist writers, would go back to myth in order to define their world. Much later Yeats himself would translate Sophocles' *King Oedipus* (1928) and Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* (1934). We are fortunate to have Yeats informing us about his reasons for rewriting the myth. In “Oedipus the King” (1931), he tells us that in the beginning of the twentieth century, Sophocles' tragedy had been banned by the English censorship: if staged at the Abbey, it would show the cultural differences between Ireland and Britain. Nevertheless, when he began his version a few years later, the censorship had withdrawn the ban, thus taking from Yeats “the pleasure of mocking it and affirming the freedom of our Irish uncensored stage” (*Later Articles* 220). We are aware, of course, that this was not his only reason for translating Sophocles. Yeats had always believed that part of the process of formation of the Irish public was to expose it to great dramas of the past, whether Scandinavian or Greek. “For Yeats”, in the words of Brian Arkins, “heavily involved in the theatre business of the Abbey and author of more than twenty-five plays, a preoccupation with Greek drama was inevitable” (“Yeats's Versions of Sophocles” 16).

In “Plain Man's Oedipus”, the poet relates the process of translating Sophocles' tragedies with the help of a young Greek scholar and half a dozen different translations, avoiding the “translator's half-Latin, half-Victorian dignity” (*Later Articles* 244). He knew that words

should sound natural on the stage; they should fall into their natural order and this required changes, omissions and additions. T. R. Henn's commentaries on Yeats's translations of Sophocles are enlightening: "His *Oedipus Rex* is mainly of interest for the technique of compression. It is not, and does not purport to be, a translation. Much is omitted, foreshortened, selected as for a ritual. By all accounts it was effective on the stage" (266).

The act of transposing a work of art into a new one had already been commented on by Oscar Wilde in his 1891 essay, "The Critic as Artist", in a blasé fashion: "The artists reproduce themselves or each other, in wearisome iteration" (985). Wilde, who had thought very seriously about the process of transforming tradition, borrowed from the Bible (*Salome*, "The Master"), from the Greeks ("Phèdre", "Narcissus") from legends (Faustus); in fact, according to very debatable statements by critics as Mario Praz in his *The Romantic Agony*, he borrowed from every European source available.

In "The Artist", from "Poems in Prose", the story of a sculptor who desires to fashion the image of "The Pleasure that abideth for a Moment", but cannot find in the whole world the bronze that he needs to make the statue, represents a change in theme and in the nature of the material used when he remembers that in the past he had fashioned the image of "The Sorrow that endureth for Ever": "And he took the image he had fashioned, and set it in a great furnace, and gave it to the fire. And out of the bronze of 'The Sorrow that endureth for Ever' he fashioned an image of 'The Pleasure that abideth for a Moment'" (843). In the story told by Wilde, the statue given to the fire symbolizes the creative act of transformation which must destroy in order to model something new.

The tendency to translate, to write versions, to borrow, to steal, to parody, to adapt, resulting in absorption, contamination, inspiration, intertextual relations, palimpsests and so forth, was strong in the modernist period; in contemporary Irish drama it is one of its most recurrent traits—a constant "when then is now" (to use the expressive title of Brendan Kennelly's book containing his rewritings of three Greek tragedies)—in which the Irish tradition, Greek and European

drama, History and Biography play a very important part. In this essay I wish to focus on the dialogue between contemporary Irish playwrights and Greek tragedy.

When we look at the issues which derive from the practice of intertextuality, many questions come to mind: Why should it happen so frequently? How do the transpositions take place? For what purposes is the dialogue established? Which Greek playwrights and plays have become favourites? When the text is "faithful" to its ancestor, may it be labeled as translation, adaptation or version? When the word "after" is used, does it mean that more freedom to transform is allowed?

We all know that this kind of dialogue is not restricted to the literature produced in Ireland as of the second half of the twentieth century. The answers to those questions have varied according to different literary, historical and social contexts.

Before we reach the Irish scene, it would be helpful to examine a few transpositions of a Greek tragedy in different literatures and periods, so as to mirror the variety of approaches to the process. *Antigone* comes naturally to mind since it is one of most popular and well-known of the ancient classics; George Steiner's *Antigones*, and many books and essays on that play attest to its infinite possibilities of interpretation. In his Preface, Steiner poses two important questions: "why should it be that a handful of ancient Greek myths continue to dominate, to give vital shape to our sense of self and the world?", and "Why are the Antigones truly *éternelles* and immediate to the present?" (Preface). Let us see, then, how some "Antigones" became immediate to the present when they were written.

Jean Anouilh's *Antigone* premièred in Paris in 1944. The date is important because of its historical resonances in France. Although Steiner and other critics consider the rewriting of the myth "a political apologia for Creon" or "defense of the king" (Steiner 193), the analysis of Anouilh's play reveals that this approach is relevant, but not encompassing enough. The play's originality rests on the view of *Antigone* as describing a family conflict rather than a political one.

Creon, after the death of Oedipus and Jocasta, his sister, becomes responsible for two nephews and two nieces, offsprings of the incestuous and doomed marriage. The Prologue, or Leader of the Chorus, created by Anouilh, describes Creon as a tired, strong, white-haired king full of wrinkles. "He is tired because he is playing a difficult game: he has become a leader of men" (11). When young, Creon used to love music, beautiful houses and antiques; when he became king after Polyneices and Eteocles killed each other, he forgot his books and objects, and rolled up his sleeves. It is not hard to imagine the difficulties of human relations inside that family. In opposition to other versions, in Anouilh's play, when the curtain is raised, all actors are on the stage: some are chatting, Eurydice is knitting and the guards are playing cards. The Prologue introduces the actors, describes them, and predicts their future; the metatheatrical device also unfolds the plot before the audience, thus showing that the story is known before it takes place on the stage. The actress playing Antigone is thin and small:

Antigone, c'est la petite maigre qui est assise là-bas, et qui ne dit rien. Elle regarde droit devant elle. Elle pense. Elle pense qu'elle va être Antigone tout à l'heure, qu'elle va surgir soudain de la maigre fille noire. . . seule en face du monde, seule en face de Créon, son oncle, qui est le roi. Elle pense qu'elle va mourir, qu'elle est jeune et qu'elle aussi aurait bien aimé vivre. (9)

[Antigone, that small, thin, silent girl sitting over there. She stares straight ahead. She thinks. She thinks she will be Antigone in a moment, that suddenly she'll come alive from that thin, dark girl . . . alone against the world, alone against her uncle, who is the king. She thinks that she is going to die, that she is young, and that she, also, would love to live.]

If Antigone is going to die, Creon does not want to condemn her to death. After a painful dialogue between niece and uncle, he holds his head in his hands – he can't stand it any longer :

Écoute moi tout de même pour la dernière fois. Mon rôle n'est pas bon, mais c'est mon rôle et je vais te faire tuer. Seulement, avant, je veux que toi aussi tu sois bien sûre de tien. Tu sais pourquoi tu vas mourir, Antigone? Tu sais au bas de quelle histoire sordide tu vas signer pour toujours ton petit non sanglant? (90)

[Listen to me, Antigone, for the last time. My role is not a good one, but it is my role, and I'll have you killed. But before that, I want you to be sure of yours. Do you know why you are going to die, Antigone? Do you know to what kind of sordid story you are going to sign your little, bloodstained name for ever?]

And later, Creon explains: "She wanted to die. Not one of us was strong enough to force her to live. She was born to die [...]. What do you want me to do? Condemn her to live?" (107). By creating a very young Antigone, almost a child, Anouilh is able to show the tender relations which had existed between herself and her uncle, and to reveal that it is not easy to say that one is good and the other is evil, right or wrong. Both are to be pitied. It is also relevant to consider that the playwright stresses the fact that as a spoiled child (references to Nounou, her nurse, to her pet dog, to the doll given to her by her uncle, childhood memories, are revealing), she does not want to grow up; she despises the cynical and hypocritical adult world, and feels that she would rather die than face the process of getting old. Thus, in order to emphasize how stubborn in their positions they both are, words like "think", "understand", "reflect", "listen", are used by Ismene, Haemon and the Chorus throughout the play. The outcome of the refusal to listen and understand leads to tragic events.

Side by side with the story's tragedy, everyday family life manifests itself mainly through a character created by the playwright, namely the nurse, who spoils Antigone in every possible way and treats her as a child. Another slant in Sophocles' story is the absence of Tiresias, probably because, in the original, he is very hard on Creon and would impair Anouilh's more humane creation of the king.

Brecht's *Die Antigone des Sophokles* (1948) is an adaptation based on Hölderlin's translation of Sophocles' *Antigone*. Innovation is seen in the Prologue, which shows two sisters, the First and the Second, in 1945 Berlin. On their way home after having worked in a factory, they meet an SS soldier. When they hear screams of people being tortured, they go to the place where their brother has been hanged; the soldier asks them if they know him and they deny it.

After this Prologue, Antigone is seen in front of Creon's palace in Thebes where the tragedy unfolds. The climactic dialogue between Antigone and Creon concentrates on their different, irreconcilable views of law, authority, religion, order, obedience, duty, rebellion and war. The Prologue is, then, a device used by the playwright to make sure that a parallel with 1945 Germany is established; so much so, that the last words of the play, uttered by The Chorus, are: "Fatality is in everything and there is no time / to live and not to think, and to lightly / go from tolerance to crime until / you grow old and get wise" (250).

It seems that Brecht was not satisfied with the idea of showing the parallel so clearly to the public, for he wrote a new Prologue for the 1951 presentation of his *Antigone*. In the new approach, the actors playing Creon, Tiresias and Antigone are on the stage. The man who is to play Tiresias addresses the audience: they may think that the language of the one-thousand-year-old poem that is being rehearsed may be unfamiliar; the plot might be unknown, though it was intimately known to the ancient world. His role is, then, to introduce the characters, and tell their story which is full of violence and war. Tiresias closes his speech by inviting the audience to "try to remember similar actions / in our recent past, or else, the lack of similar actions" (251). As can be seen, the new Prologue has a different form but its aim is still to establish an analogy with the German context. Like Anouilh's Prologue, Brecht uses a metatheatrical device to alert the public on the violence and cruelty of war and on the importance of the issues leading to it.

The French and the German versions of Sophocles' *Antigone* reveal that the reasons for treating myth do vary. The European trajectory of the

tragic heroine has been very thoroughly examined in the extensive bibliography about her. It is certain, however, that Antigone's reception in South America is not so well-known; that is the reason why it would be interesting to mention two plays in Brazil, and one in Argentina, which have been inspired by Sophocles' play, but with very different purposes, which explains why the myth is in many ways subverted.

Antigone has greatly instigated the Latin American imagination. Understandably so: the conflict between law and order and individual rights has been one of the main issues of both its colonial past and its troubled history since independence. The struggles acquire new nuances, new meanings, when they are depicted through the oblique gaze of myth. It is a real pity, for example, that *Antigone en créole* (1953), by Felix Morisseau-Leroy, from Haiti, must remain unknown, due to the insuperable barriers of language. Morisseau-Leroy is part of a true revival of Haitian literature in the 1950s (Laroche 163) and has been praised greatly for his re-creation, "something probably much more daring and more convincing" (Carpentier 133) than other rewritings. Unfortunately, what we know about Leroy's play comes at second hand, from critics and writers. In "Le Discours Antillais", Edouard Glissant refers to the staging of *Antigón an Kreyól* in the Théâtre de Nations, in Paris; Carpentier comments on its production in Port au Prince, "an Antigone by Sophocles represented in Creole dialect, by actors with bronzed skins with a total transposition of the tragedy's elements to the atmosphere of the magical island of Toussaint-Louverture and Rey Christophe" (133-134). Carpentier's reflections on *Antigone en créole* are significant for the discussion of so many Latin American rewritings of Sophocles' famous tragedy. He sees as perfectly possible "to imagine Antigone in a Caribbean island, or in the jungle, surrounded by a paroxistic nature, supporting the heavy burden of an implacable sun, and giving full speed to her instinctive energy and elemental and true concept [...] of Good and Evil" (134). Besides, (and this is a polemical statement) the novelist and critic thinks that the myth fits better "a Creon and an Antigone in a village in the

Macizo Central de Haiti, surrounded by vultures which *are* real, than in the atmosphere of extreme civilization—courteous, amiable, balanced—of a town in France, Belgium or Scotland[...]” (134).

Place and time are important features in the plays to be discussed: *Antígona Vélez* (1951), by the Argentinean writer Leopoldo Marechal¹, *Pedreira das Almas* (1956) and *As Confrarias* (1968) by the Brazilian playwright Jorge Andrade², written more or less in the same period, recreate the Greek myth. *Antígona Vélez*'s title consists of an overt allusion to its Greek source and of a reference to the element that makes it different, a surname that takes us to a different landscape through markers as setting, names, and historical events revealing Argentina in 1752. From the point of view of plot it is almost a total transposition from Sophocles' play; however, it shows deviations in background, theme, characterization, vision, and aesthetic presentation which announce Antigone in the pampas.

The action is structured in five *quadros* or scenes showing the drama from sunset to sunrise and sunset again. In the first scene, Female and Male choruses narrate the fight between the Indians and the white men; Martin, one of the Vélez brothers, defended the land but Ignacio, the other brother, had joined the “infidels”, as they were called. Both die. Martin's body is now in the drawing-room, wrapped in a clean sheet; in the four silver candlesticks the tapers throw a tremulous and soft light; the women with the rosary beads in their hands, pray and cry. The Other, as Ignacio is going to be referred to from now on, is lying on the clay near the lake, alone but for the company of vultures. In this same scene, the two sisters, Antigone and Carmen, discuss whether it is right or wrong to bury Ignacio's body. The first is determined to do so while Carmen keeps saying that although the house is dead it has eyes and ears. She is terribly frightened.

In the second scene Don Facundo Galván, who has looked over the Vélez children since their father died at war, explains to the ranchers, overseers and men and women why Martin deserves a dignified wake while the Other's body is to be devoured by birds of

prey. The Male Chorus tries to decipher the meaning of concepts such as order, justice, law and duty.

The third scene concentrates on the confrontation between Don Facundo and Antigone. In their tense dialogue, different understandings of the word "law" lead to a hardening of each character's position. In the idyllic fourth scene, Lisandro and Antigone say farewell; in the fifth, Antigone's punishment takes place: dressed as a man but with her long hair streaming in the wind, she rides one of their best horses towards the golden, red and indigo sunset to meet her death. Lisandro follows her in an ink-black colt and, in the words of the Female Chorus, they are killed by *one* spear. Their bodies are buried under the *ombú* tree where their idyllic meeting had taken place. Don Facundo declares that they are husband and wife; on being reminded that he will not have any grandchildren, he says that by their death a new life will result: the naked, cactus land will produce harvests, and peace will replace tears and blood. As one can see, though the story line comes from the myth, deviations transform the source into a new play.

Setting, for example, is one of the first aspects that stamps "difference" on *Antígona Vélez*. Many images are linked with the land. For example, one of the men comments: "*Y en esta pampa uno va dejando su corazón deshecho entre las cosas, un pedazo aquí y el otro allá. Como las ovejas hacen con su vellón entre las espinas*" (55). [And in the pampa one is always leaving parts of one's heart among things, a piece here and there, as the sheep leave their wool in the thorns.]

Many stage directions point at Marechal's preoccupation to establish an Argentinean atmosphere. The detailed descriptions of "La Postrera", a colonial big house on the hill; of the growing dark in the pampas; of the sheep, the colts, the horses; of the abundance of silver objects, define the place where the tragedy is going to happen. An interesting marker is the constant reference to a great variety of horses in the region such as "*redomones, alazanes, overos, moros, cabrunos, doradillos, zainos, lobunos*", their aspect, colour and size explained in three notes.

The presence of horses has other functions besides determining characteristics of the land. When symbolizing beauty, wildness, instinct and strength, they become an analogy for Antigone. Horses also play an important role in Lisandro's and Antigone's rite of passage and also in their death. Don Facundo finds a way to punish Antigone without doing it with his own hands. He says: "everything will depend on the horse's hoofs. Between my law and his law, may God decide" (43).

A galloping horse, taking its rider to death haunts the popular imagination. Marechal's "mythological nostalgia", seen in his poetry as in the long "The Centaur" (1940), is detected in the play, as in the scenes with the three beautiful, tall, young witches. It seems that their function is to represent the supernatural beings that foresee the future by speaking through enigmas, thus establishing a parallel with the Greek source; they may also show superstition mixed with deep religious beliefs in the supernatural, typical of the life of colonial America. One of their prophecies concerns a "golden horse covered with blood all over" (31).

Another characteristic of the Argentinean play is the introduction of characters which are typical of place and time; ranchers, overseers, Capitán Rojas, his *blandengues*³ and trackers, and the careful characterization of Lisandro and Antigone, with the main focus on their personal tragedy.

Differently from other versions, in which Antigone's concern is only for Polyneices, Antígona Vélez loves her two brothers like a mother. As a boy, Ignacio, afraid of the dark, would "press his little head against my breast, his little head full of ghosts" (31). We hear Lisandro saying how kind, how tender she was. But now, how bitter, how strong, how determined she has become.

Difference, in Marechal's play, is also achieved by his placing the centre of interest in the young couple's passionate relationship. The fourth scene constitutes a subplot inside the play. Lisandro and Antigone, under an *ombú* tree whose roots look like vipers, give the impression of a Biblical painting: "the first couple under the first tree" (45). Their

idyllic dialogue is full of childhood memories; the one memory that reoccurs and acquires significance of ritual goes back to the morning when Lisandro, then fifteen, had to break his first colt, a *doradillo* (golden horse). He was very pale and Antigone was pale too. He remembers:

Cuando el potro se metió a corcovear, saltaban en el aire hombres y cosas; pero yo solo veía una cara y un miedo, junto al corral grande[...] aquellos ojos lagrimeaban, ¡eran los tuyos, Antígona! (47)

[When the colt started to capriole men and things flew into the air; but I could only see one face, one fear, in the big corral; those eyes were full of tears; your eyes, Antigone.]

When Antigone kisses his bruised hand, and he kisses her tears, they are aware that the boy that rode the colt is now a man, and the girl that washed his bruised fingers had become a woman. Memories of long ago force them to face their unfortunate present. Antigone's words reflect the sadness of "it might have been", and she accepts that it "had been for some time, which is much". In opposition to the darkness and gloomy atmosphere of the night, this scene takes place in a very bright morning; but at sunset, Antigone gallops towards the sun and the women exclaim: "*¡El alazán es una luz!*" ["The *alazán* is made of light!"] Lisandro's ink-black colt and the *alazán* are one (58); they race together and are killed by one spear.

If *Antígona Vélez* is overtly a rewriting of Sophocles' Greek tragedy, the two plays by Jorge Andrade depend on the reader's allusive competence to establish intertextual links. Far from a literal translation, *Pedreira das Almas* is based loosely in *Antigone*, showing deviations in time (1842), place (São Tomé das Letras, Minas Gerais), and in the story line. Its title defines the village (Soul's Quarry) where the action is to be developed. The setting, described in the stage directions, symbolizes the sterility of its inhabitants' lives: a stone church encircled by rocks as if by a not-to-be-transgressed wall; the churchyard and its tombs; the statues of angels; the church's flight of stairs, all of them

made of stone, impart a gloomy atmosphere, gloomier still by the religious chanting from the church. In the churchyard, a single, angry, twisted tree tries, uselessly, to reach the skies.

In the village, Dona Urbana and generations before her (the souls in the tombs) have confronted the hardships of an impoverished place after the gold mines had been emptied of all metal, gold only to be found in the altars and religious images.

Dona Urbana feels it her duty to stay where “the dead are alive” but most of the people share the dream of leaving Souls’ Quarry in search of a valley, of a fertile land with trees (the fig tree becomes the most important image), birds and rivers which will change their lives.

The year is 1842. In colonial Brazil, insurrections against the Crown had taken place since the eighteenth century. During the Regency period, from 1840 to 1842, risings occurred in Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, and Minas Gerais. This historical background is the basis for Urbana’s story: her daughter, Mariana, and Gabriel, one of the liberal political leaders, are engaged to be married. Mariana’s brother, Martiniano, joins the fight. Everybody hopes that victory will bring the men back; then, the whole population will be led by Gabriel to a new land. The women, as a chorus, voice their anxiety and hope, repeating a kind of litany of the places they have heard of: Invernada, Cajurú, Indaiá, Monte Belo... However, the government troops defeat the rebels. Martiniano is killed and Gabriel goes into hiding.

The conflict between the representative of law and order (Vasconcelos/Creon) and the women, who refuse to tell where Gabriel is, forces Vasconcelos to forbid the burial of Martiniano’s body unless they inform against their leader. Violently, Mariana exclaims: “Then his body shall remain unburied. It will be a living memory of your sin, your indignity” (97).

Mother and sister place Martiniano’s body inside the church and sit up day and night, refusing to bury him. The horror of the decaying corpse covered by a shroud made of his mother’s arms in a sinister embrace; Mariana’s curse on the whole troop; Dona Urbana’s death later, seem to madden the women, who like lost souls walk aimlessly in

the churchyard, and also unsettles the soldiers. Some remember that it is the Season of Lent, of lost souls. Vaguely afraid of the souls in the churchyard and of the souls of the decaying unburied corpses in the church, some of the soldiers desert. Mariana challenges Vasconcelos to enter the church and see with his own eyes the result of repression and oppression, of the "law and order", he represents.

Although the deep love between Gabriel and Mariana is poignant and tragic, reminding us of Antígona Vélez and Lisandro, in their "might-have-beens", the central issue in *Pedreira das Almas* is the ritual of burying the dead. This concern is even more central in Andrade's *As Confrarias* [The Religious Brotherhoods]. Though written much later than *The Souls' Quarry*, it was placed as first in the Cycle *Marta, a Árvore e o Relógio* (1970). This makes sense in view of the historical order of the events in the whole of the playwright's creations. One can see, however, that *The Soul's Quarry* provided Andrade with the thematic preoccupation of the political function of the ritual of burying the dead. *As Confrarias* is about Marta's efforts to convince various religious orders to bury her dead son involved in the 1788 Conspiracy in Ouro Preto. She begins by asking "The Third Order of Our Lady of Carmo", whose members are white, rich men. Marta's arrival exposes their greed, arrogance, violence and hypocrisy. On hearing their refusal, she threatens: "before sunrise you will bury him". This pattern is recurrent in Marta's other attempts, although she seems to know well in advance what to expect and is, in fact, playing a game. In the "Rosary Brotherhood" its black members, in their richly ornamented church in gold and silver, refuse too. Marta tells them that they are as hateful as the white men. The third Brotherhood has mulatto artists, painters and actors, and in the fourth, there is a balanced mixture of white, black and mulatto men. After the persistent refusal of all the groups, Marta reflects: "Nobody has loved my son as I have. I can do nothing for him now. The body will be left in the churchyard [...] until somebody buries him. I can only fight for the living" (68).

As Confrarias is one of Jorge Andrade's best plays; its complexity is due to the simultaneous alternation of scenes on the stage, revealing

Marta's past and present worries. Her early life with Sebastião, her husband, and their son, José, is representative of so many unfortunate families in a colonized country. Sebastião loves his little farm, its animals, trees, and harvests. Gold being found in his land, he loses everything to the Crown; he is hanged for his rebellious acts but before dying he asks his wife not to bury him so that his bones become one with the earth (43).

In Sophocles' *Antigone*, and in its innumerable versions, the main theme is the urge to bury Polyneices as a moral and religious, pious, duty. In *Pedreira das Almas* and *As Confrarias* there is a reversal of expectations through the surprising refusal to bury the bodies so that the awful reality of exploitation, oppression and despair might force everybody to stare it in the face. This notion is alien to Greek feeling and thought.

The South American plays converge in the conflicts for land and power, in the struggle between law and order and an old kind of law, in a religious, Catholic atmosphere, in the use of the historical past to illuminate the present (1950s and 1960s) in Argentina and Brazil. But, of course, those countries have different cultural grounds leading to differences of approach of the same themes. If it is a hideous sin not to dig a grave for the dead, it may also be considered an act of courage to leave them unburied in order to expose injustice.⁴

The three plays take from History and myth elements to mirror extreme situations of periods of dictatorship in our countries. As Octávio Ianni states: "in the Southern part of Latin America the military dictatorship undertook to mutilate things, people and ideas, forms of sociability and manners of being, developing and generalizing the cruelty of allegory" (2). As it was possible to notice, the plays just examined sample diverse approaches to the myth; in the case of Latin America, transculturation becomes a frequent procedure.

In contemporary Ireland the number and quality of plays inspired in Greek tragedy are surprising; among Medeas, Phaedras, Iphigenias, Electras, a special place is reserved for Antigone, in an attempt to see the Irish context through the indirect gaze of myth. As Marianne McDonald observes, "Antigone is appropriate for Ireland and is a clear

favourite in the twentieth century" (52). Three versions of Sophocles' *Antigone* were written in 1984: Aidan Carl Mathews' *Antigone*, regarded by Christopher Murray "as a powerful retelling of the story in the light of Irish social and political conditions of the 1980s" (116); Tom Paulin's *The Riot Act*, and Brendan Kennelly's *Antigone*. The fact that these three versions were written in the same year is justified by Marianne Mc Donald: "The year 1984 was important for human rights, and the rights of women in particular. This was the year the divorce referendum was rejected, just as abortion rights had been rejected, and the year when the Criminal Justice Bill gave increased power to the police" (52-53).

In *The Riot Act* the setting is an open space in front of the royal palace at Thebes; all the characters and plot from the Greek tragedy are maintained; however, the very title is an overt allusion to Northern Ireland and its political scenario. Chris Murray registers this analogy by affirming that "Creon is both himself and the representative of intransigent Unionism" (121). The parallel effect is achieved, as many critics have pointed out, through the use of Northern idiom, but Murray criticizes Paulin's device: "That we are in Belfast and Thebes simultaneously is the premise of this version [...]. But thereafter Paulin's technique is very shaky indeed, and his initial attempts at Ulsterization fizzle out harmlessly" (121). Another parallel-stressing device is anachronism, as in the eulogy of contemporary man, echoing Sophocles' eulogy in *Antigone*:

Fish pip inside his radar screen and foals kick out of a syringe:
 he bounces in the dusty moon and chases clouds about the
 sky so they can dip in sterile ground.
 By pushing harder every way
 by risking everything he loves,
 he makes us better day by day:
 we call this progress and it shows
 we're dammed near perfect. (Paulin 23-24)

Perhaps because Paulin's version as we can see, lacks what Declan Donnellan, in the Introduction to his 1999 *Antigone* defined as the main characteristic of Greek drama—"its supremely verbal drama; it was written by poets. The sheer beauty of the language was its main element" (11)—that *The Riot Act* does not become a "new" play.

Thus it is not a surprise that two other Irish Antigones, which show great literary beauty, were written by great poets. In Brendan Kennelly's *Antigone*, described by the author as "a feminist declaration of independence", what one notices immediately is the repetition of the term "word", containing diverse connotations; one of them is related to the notion that words are both powerful and dangerous.

ANTIGONE. Your words repel me.
My words must be the same to you.
I sought to bury my brother.
That is my word, my deed.
Word and deed are one in me.

.....
CREON. With these words you differ
From all the other people of this city.

ANTIGONE. No, my words are theirs, theirs mine,
But they seal their lips for fear of you. (22).

Very present, also, are dualities such as man-woman; youth-old age; obey-disobey; love-hate; and so forth, showing how complex the tragedy is. As in other versions, the solution for the conflict in which all characters are involved, as in a duel of words, and since this is a tragedy of alienation, depends on the act of listening. Tiresias, for example, begs of Creon: "Listen to me, Creon / Think of my words and act on them / Bury that corpse" (39). Also Haemon urges his father to understand different points of view and to listen (30). Kennelly's *Antigone*, thus, besides being a feminist declaration of independence, establishes many parallels with Irish history by suggesting that the

“corpse” be buried; that people should not stubbornly persist in their own beliefs; that change may be possible if you listen and learn.

Moreover, the poetic power of Kennelly’s text can be appreciated in his comments on the wonders of man and also in his frailty:

CHORUS. Wonders are many
And none is more wonderful than man.
.....
He tames the wild life of words
The mad life of thought
All the dangerous moods
Of heart and mind.
He copes with frost and hail and rain,
He does not flinch from pain.
Only death defeats him,
Death, master of the master (18).

“Supremely verbal drama” is also characteristic of Heaney’s *The Burial at Thebes*, mainly composed of short, incisive, tense, dialogues between Antigone and Ismene, and Creon and Haemon; between Creon and Tiresias, The Chorus, and Haemon.

ANTIGONE. No flinching then at fate.
No wedding guests. No wake.
No keen. No panegyric.
I close my eye on the sun.
I turn my back on the light.

CREON. If people had the chance to keen themselves
Before they died, they’d weep and wail forever:
That’s enough. (39).

The dialogues disclose how all characters stand in their immovable convictions about “ever” and “never”, “obey” and “disobey”, “love” and “hate”, “choice” and “destiny”, “rights” and “duties”, as when

Antigone asks: "What are Creon's rights / When it comes to me and mine?" (4).

Heaney's tragedy follows Sophocles' plot line, maintains the same number of characters, is set in Thebes, but its title is a deviation from the Greek source since it reinforces the act of burying the dead. His allusions to Ireland's history are many, such as "Different worlds, both equally offended" (26); "Two brothers badged red with each other's blood" (9); "The doom in our blood comes back / And brother slaughters brother"; (5) or, "Whoever isn't for us / is against us" (3).

As an illustration of the poetic force of Heaney's play, let us take the famous passage in which Sophocles, and after him, many other translators of *Antigone*, have reflected on how marvellous a being man is:

CHORUS. Among the many wonders of the world
Where is the equal of this creature, man?
First he was shivering on the shore
Or padding a dug-out, terrified of drowning.
Then he put up oars, put tackle on a mast
And steered himself by the stars through gales.
.....
The wind is no more swift or mysterious
Than his mind and words; he has mastered thinking,
Roofed his house against hail and rain
And worked out laws for living together.

Home-maker, thought-taker, measure of all things,
He can heal with herbs and read the heavens.
Nothing seems beyond him (16-17).

The solution to the conflict which places all characters "on the cliff edge", as Tiresias comments, is to be found in the act of listening, considering, thinking, found in the blind seer's advice: "Consider well, my son. All men make mistakes. / But mistakes don't have to be forever" (44).

These brief commentaries on Irish Antigones, which have been thoroughly analysed so many times, record one of their recurrent traits: the adequacy of the old tragedy to the Irish historical context. It is interesting, however, to mention one issue raised by Hugh Harkin in "Irish Antigones: Towards Tragedy Without Borders?", the issue that it is difficult to imagine the production of these plays in "an Irish political climate that has become resolutely sedate, even self-satisfied" (292). Whether the argument is to be accepted or rejected, it leads to an important detail pointed out by Harkin: "the most recent Irish versions of Greek tragedy have resonated with international rather than national politics" (292). If this is so, the rewriting of Greek drama will stress its universal appeal as well as many layers of meanings and themes. In the case of Heaney's *The Burial at Thebes*, both the national and international politics were used by him as inspiration. In "Thebes via Toomebridge: Retitling *Antigone*", the poet affirms that an event that took place in Northern Ireland, in 1981, gave him the idea for *The Burial at Thebes*: in the small village of Toomebridge there was a solemn and dangerous gathering when the body of Francis Hughes, a hunger-striker who had died in prison, caused confrontation between his family, friends, neighbours and sympathizers and the security forces, which treated the body as state property. For Heaney the main question was about the corpse: "Who owned it anyhow? By what right did the steel ring of the defence forces close round the remains of one who was son, brother, comrade, neighbour, companion?" ("Thebes Via Toomebridge" 13).

On another occasion, Heaney commented on why he chose *Antigone*: "There was a general worldwide problem where considerations of state security posed serious threats to individual freedom and human rights. Then there was the obvious parallel between George W. Bush and Creon" (qtd. in Harkin 303).

Heaney's two statements enhance the richness of the source which contains unsuspected possibilities for any kind of drama, either in Ireland or South America, or in the 1940s France or Germany. It would be a challenging research, then, to look at the more recent reworkings of tradition in Ireland such as Derek Mahon's *Oedipus* (2005), Frank

McGuinness's *Hecuba* (2004) and *Phaedra. After Racine* (2006), Euripides *Bacchae* (2002), by Colin Teevan, or Edna O'Brien's *Iphigenia* (2003) to verify whether they have resonated with international politics. The subject of internationalization versus nationalization of politics was touched upon by Frank Mc Guinness in an interview with Joseph Long about his 1997 version of Sophocles' *Electra*. In his words, "it is a play of the 1990s and the production was discreetly Balkanized. The costumes and set . . . suggested a refugee situation with reference to the Balkan wars" (qtd. in Long 266). The playwright explains that the Balkanization of the play was entirely the director's idea; subjectively, what he was thinking about "was the war in North of Ireland, and the psychic disturbances which that prolonged war had had in my imagination." (qtd. in Long 267). Asked whether he was then taking the Greeks as a parallel for the political situation in Ireland, Mc Guinness answered:

I certainly wasn't taking it as being a direct parallel. I wouldn't be interested in doing something like that at all. . . . In the hinterland of my mind, the Northern conflict was there, but I did not want the play to be looked on as some kind of veiled metaphor for the civil war in the North of Ireland. It was not that. (qtd. in Long 268)

The questions asked in the beginning – why and for what purposes the classics are so often revisited by Irish playwrights – have been answered in many different ways. The best answers come from the artists as critics who can be relied upon the experience of transposing a classic. Mc Guinness, for example, reminds us that a writer enjoys the practice:

In this one play [*Electra*], I've learned to appreciate deeply that level of theatrical knowledge, of writerly knowledge. I would love to go back now and see how *Oedipus* does work, what is his method of bringing that play off, what are the methods of Aeschillus in the *Oresteia*, how does Euripedes

work. I don't know how, now, but I know how little I do know, from having the practice of working on this play. (qtd. in Long 271)

Another problem raised while discussing these appropriations is "how" they are done, from "straight translations" to plays loosely based on a classic, through translocation and transculturation; by displacing the myth, each writer will have his aims in mind. It seems that in contemporary Irish rewritings, instead of more radical versions (one of the exceptions, *The Living Quarters – After Hippolytus* (1978), by Brian Friel), they "reproduce the essence of the original plays" (McDonald and Walton 5). "Freedoms" or "liberties" with the source-text, as McGuinness describes the deviations from his point of departure, are mainly of a linguistic kind, as he relates: "One of the freedoms I took was in Electra's speech of lament for her brother [...]. It was to repeat the word "pain" five times" (qtd. in Long 272).

We could say, then, that the gamut of the reworkings of Greek tragedy in Ireland goes from very simple deviations from the myth to more radical creations, but always treating the material as a bronze image in a furnace, a process that will transform the nature of the statue, but not its bronze; or we can apply to them Yeats's image of the seal on the wax, used by him in relation to him and Ireland in the turn of the nineteenth century, and which is adequate for our purposes: the seal (the contemporary Irish writer) applied to the wax (tradition) will either transform or deform the wax by creating a new design, containing it, but differing from it. Such images – the bronze statue given to the fire (seen in Wilde's prose poem), and the seal on the wax – are relevant because they emphasize differences rather than similarities. If we compare these procedures with Latin American reworkings of tradition, we will find two ways of thinking: on one hand, those who conceive our original inspiration for a unique Latin American work of art; on the other hand, those who point at the impossibility of discarding and ignoring tradition for fear of lack of originality, or for political reasons.

In Brazil, the “Manifesto Antropófago” [Anthropophagus Manifest], published by Oswald de Andrade in the modernist review, *Revista de Antropofagia* in May 1928, describes the process of adapting tradition to create a new work of art: the colonizer is devoured so that the colonized people can absorb the elements that are of interest to them. Oswald exemplifies: “From William James to Voronoff. Transfiguration of Taboo into totem. Anthropophagy” (1, 7).

Another way of seeing the issue may be through the notion of transculturation defended by Jorge Luis Borges, for whom borrowing from the colonizer is desirable:

I believe that all the Western tradition is ours and I also believe that we have right to that tradition [...]. I believe that the Argentinians, the South American writers in general [...] can deal with all the European themes, deal with them without superstitions, with irreverence which may result, and has already resulted in fortunate consequences. (qtd. in Ianni 43)

Whichever method is employed, the final result depends on the writer’s talent to create his own great work on his own cultural ground, as many contemporary Irish playwrights have done.

Notes

1. Leopoldo Marechal (1900-1970) wrote many volumes of poems, plays, as *Antígona Vélez* and *Don Juan* (1961), and novels as *Adán Buenosayres* (1948) and *Megafón o la guerra* (1970). In many of his works he re-elaborated myths to portray the life in Argentina.
2. Jorge Andrade (1922-1984) attended Law School for two years and then took the course at the Dramatic Art School (EAD). His plays are a panorama of Brazilian life from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, in rural and urban settings. His most important plays were published as a “Cicle” in *Marta, a Árvore e o Relógio* in 1970.

3. Note from Marechal's text, p. 34: "Blandengues: military corps created in 1752 by the governor of Río de la Plata to give combat to the Indians. For a long period of time they held forts in the frontiers".
4. Allusions to the body of Christ, "exposed by the Church for centuries" (1970, 56) and to the "Conspiração Mineira" which resulted in the hanging of one of its leaders, Tiradentes (José da Silva Xavier), his body cut into quarters and exposed in public places, show the notion of unburied bodies as exemplary.

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