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1984: Antigone-izing the Irish stage

ABSTRACT: The paper explores three versions of *Antigone* staged in Ireland in 1984: *Antigone: The Riot Act* by Tom Paulin; *Antigone: a version* by Brendan Kennelly and *Antigone* by Carl Aidan Mathews. Rewriting, adapting or translating classics can represent a counter-discursive strategy used in crucial moment of a country's history. In the three Irish plays *Antigone's* persona springs out of the confrontation/opposition with both Creon (the institutional opponent) and Ismene (a sort of *Antigone's* double). In the framework of Ireland as a postcolonial context, the paper investigates how this confrontation/opposition fits in Irish politics in the 80s.

Keywords: counterdiscursive strategy; postcolonial Ireland; Irish theatre.

*I can't ever finish the bloody thing.
I always mix my metaphors.
Chorus in *The Antigone**

1. Introduction

There are some tragedies to which we go back, while there are some others which seem to go back by themselves: they flourish as symbols or metaphors of certain socio-political circumstances or of personal human dilemmas and conflicts. The Orwellian year of 1984 saw in Ireland the composition of Tom Paulin's *The Riot Act: A Version of Sophocles' Antigone*, Brendan Kennelly's *Sophocles' Antigone: A New Version* and Carl Aiden Mathews' *The Antigone*¹. Though different both in form and dramatic techniques, the three versions of *Antigone* seem to explore the deep concern behind the troubled recognition of identity within Ireland via the building up of the character of *Antigone* in relation with the others and, in particular, through the opposition with both Creon and Ismene.

Rewriting, adapting, or translating foreign plays for the Irish stage is not a new trend in Ireland, and many playwrights have been involved, at some stage in their career, in one of these procedures². The translation of plays is in many ways linked to the background behind the idea of translation of Irish history itself. In an essay on the nature of Irish translation, Robert Welch argues that «if the story is told with a fixed view then nothing stirs; we are in the realms of petrification (...) but if the story is told as if it were happening again, the something will stir»³. No other tragedy than *Antigone*, featuring an individual pitted boldly against the state, relates a woman's brave-knuckle fight with male authority, better lends itself to Welch's notion of something "stirring". The appearance of the three versions of *Antigone* in the year

¹ Tom Paulin's *The Riot Act: A Version of Sophocles' Antigone* was first performed by Field Day Company at the Guildhall, Derry on 19 September 1984, published by Faber and Faber in 1985; Kennelly's *Antigone: A New Version* was first performed at the Peacock theatre, Dublin on 28 April 1986 and published by Bloodaxe Books ten years later in 1996; Mathews' *Antigone* was performed at the Project Arts Centre, Dublin during the summer 1984, unpublished typescript. Quotations are referred to parenthetically in the text.

² For other versions of *Antigone* in Ireland after 1984 see A. Gotsi, *Irish Antigones*, unpublished PhD Thesis, 2012.

³ R. Welch, *Changing States: Transformation in Modern Irish Writing*, Routledge, London 1993, p. 10.

1984 is not coincidental, and is deeply connected with the political situation during the 80s. 1984 was the year of the Criminal Justice Bill, the Kerry babies' case, and the year after the failure to legalise abortion⁴. As a character, Antigone exists in the play as a different 'entity' and identity contrasting the will of the state in order to assert her own, her strength and fascination remains in the ranks of this amazing modern declaration of independence. As a figure who has been accepted among the ranges of "classics", Antigone is reborn every time that a political and historical situation reclaims her. The *Rechts des Staats*, 'law of the state' and the *Privatrecht* 'private right' represent the two terms of her dialectic conflict; the symmetric reading of the two rights is the path along which man can build his moral conscience, joining the realm of the Spirit⁵. Hölderlin, Schlegel, Kirkegaard, and Goethe have helped to elevate *Antigone* to the realm of the ideal on one hand and the political on the other. Brecht's *Antigone-Modell* seems to return every time to the clash between the two forces of the individual and public. Throughout the tragedy, the word *autos* and its compounds are constantly present; *autos* literally means 'self, myself', and "in oblique sense is used for personal pronouns"⁶.

To some extent, the main characters of the tragedy stand for different parts of the self; Creon represents, in a way, only logical thinking, Antigone pure spirit, while Ismene pure feeling. Ismene and Creon represent two different sides of Antigone's 'anti-ego'. Ismene is the quiet consciousness which is able to conform and does not put under question the will of the State. Creon is, instead, Antigone's opponent, the force to fight against. From the outset, Antigone reveals herself as in opposition with Ismene. In order to define herself, Antigone must be mirrored by her opposite: Ismene. In her polemic, tough opposition with Ismene, Antigone establishes her ego; this ego emphasises the action and its value, while the anti-ego denies it.

The parallel with the Irish political and psychological situation is easily drawn. Like Antigone, the birth of Ireland as a nation is made by the recognition of her anti-ego: England. As Kiberd states: «Ireland was soon parented as not-England, a place whose peoples were, in many important ways, the very antitheses of their new rulers from overseas»⁷. The Irish character has been defined through the years as something opposed to, different from England; the building of the 'ego' of the country, is thus related to the immense concern for self-rule, is well represented by the meaning of the word Sinn Féin (ourselves alone). It can be argued that the strength of the country was built on the trust and validity of this affirmation. As in the tragedy of the cursed race of Oedipus, one of the main concerns of Irish writers and playwrights has been the difficult coping with identity. The state/individual relationship is important in the dynamic of the play, but as important is the need for identity and the neces-

⁴ For a detailed study on the issue of abortion in Ireland see A. Smyth, *The Abortion Papers Ireland*, Attic Press, Dublin 1992; A. Rynne, *Abortion: the Irish Question*, Ward River Press, Dublin 1984.

⁵ George Steiner amply examines the role of *Antigone* within the Hegelian philosophy in *Antigones*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1984.

⁶ Leddell-Scott, *Greek-English Dictionary*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1977 p. 282.

⁷ D. Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, Vintage, London 1996, p. 8.

sity to state it firmly. Thus, in *Antigone*, the political meets the moral and the individual. A desire to comment and write on this conjunction can be asserted as one of the reasons for the birth of the three *Antigones*, for *Antigone* provides these three authors with the content of the myth and of the “titanic clash”, which can easily transposed to the Irish situation.

For reasons of space I will concentrate here very briefly on how Paulin’s involvement with the politics of Field Day and the North are mirrored in his use of the pretitle *The Riot Act* and on how Kennelly’s faith to the text ‘obliges’ him to define his Antigone ‘*A New Version*’. Considering the innovative nature of Matthew’s version, his *The Antigone* will be analysed more extensively.

2. Paulin’s *The Riot Act* and Kennelly’s *Antigone*

Tom Paulin’s *The Riot Act: A Version of Sophocles’ Antigone* was first performed at the Guildhall in Derry on 12 September 1984. It was part of the “Double Bill” which Field Day presented for the touring season of the company that year. The other play was Derek Mahon’s *High Times*, based on Molière’s *L’Ecole des Maris* (*The School for Husbands*). A critical analysis of Paulin’s play has to consider, on the one hand, the relationship to the original, but at the same time underline the fact that Paulin’s real motivation behind the version was the attempt to create a metaphor for the Northern Irish situation. What emerges through the text is a sort of ‘conflict’ between the ‘duty’ of remaining faithful to the original text and his personal need to transfer Antigone’s universal theme onto the Ulster situation through a polemic version. The emphasis on rigidity and stubbornness in the play certainly applied to the troubled situation in the North, but not all elements of the Greek tragedy can be equally transferred onto the ‘provincial situation’. If this characterization holds for and is relevant to the two main characters, the same does not apply to the dramatic texture of the text; We are here at the crossroad of that discourse which sees myth as a “two way street” while the situation in Northern Ireland mirrors a one-way relation. Following Kearney, Irish theatre should escape the categories of mythologizing and demythologising through the process of “remythologizing”:

(...) if we need to demythologize, we also need to remythologize. It is our ethical duty therefore to use our powers of logos to discriminate between the authentic and inauthentic use to which mythos is put in our culture.⁸

Paulin partially incorporates this idea in *The Riot Act*, as his Antigone becomes a metaphor for the authentic building of an identity opposed to that of England. He uses the universal clash between the right of the state against those of the individual as a metaphor for provincial situation. The characters stand for something or somebody: they embody different identi-

⁸ R. Kearney, *Myth and Motherland*, Field Day Pamphlet No. 5 in *Ireland’s Field Day*, Hutchinson, London 1985, p. 63.

ties within the Northern Irish context. Antigone and her affirmation of identity stands «on her own» (23) against Creon and Ismene; her human depth is to be taken as an *exemplum*. It is in the contrast with the official power that Ireland can begin the path towards her identity. A climate of crisis and emergency seems to dominate the Irish context; working within what can be defined as a colonial environment, Paulin still has to frame dissent and to give it authority.

The beginning of *The Riot Act* is, as a matter of fact, a concentration of cross-references to the debate he had with the person he defines the “loyalist”. The play opens with a stage which contains elements of modern-day Belfast and ancient Thebes; the set is decked with «masonic symbols» (9) which identify the power structure with Presbyterianism while the insistence on burial rites is more characteristic of Catholicism. Paulin also develops Antigone’s relationship with Ismene early in the play by constructing her as Antigone’s alter ego, invoking common-sense. Via an oblique reading, two areas of concern can be individuated: a “legitimate” conceptualisation which links the wildness of Antigone as spokeswoman of Civil Rights and metaphorically of Ireland, as opposed to a ‘suppressive’ one of Creon as emblematic of Unionism and England.

Paulin is not always consistent in making references to the political situation. While, for instance, he does not have any problem making a clear connection to a possible Unionist background for Creon, the same does not hold true for Antigone. In order for the polemic to be complete and the characterisation fulfilled as a metaphor for the political situation in Northern Ireland, Antigone should have been set in Armagh Women’s Prison and her language should have been of an extending protest. Unfortunately, as Murray argues, Paulin’s characterisation of Antigone in *The Riot Act* is «half-hearted» and «fall[s] between two stools of translation and application»⁹. The political elements of the play are continually shifted and for this reason the political pace of the play is uneven throughout. This unevenness is attributable, at least partially, to the fact that Paulin was working within Field Day politics and its “limits”. The polemic of the play is in the clash between Antigone and Creon, culminating in the moral victory of Irish identity, Antigone, over that of the English. The “limits” of the play lie in a unsatisfactory development of those elements which should contribute to the creation of an Irish identity (language, for instance). It is important to consider, however, that Paulin was working within the Field Day company, which, after all, was based in Derry and depended on British Arts Council funding. A stronger more detailed characterisation could have curtailed further funding which may explain partially the «half-hearted feeling» many audience members were left to explain. Regardless of the play’s shortcomings, Paulin infuses his Antigone with a strong well-defined identity and the use of the polemic provides, at least initially, an alternative pace of the drama.

From the outset Brendan Kennelly’s *Antigone: A New Version* appears very different from Paulin’s. While Paulin sets a strong, recognisable stage which could be located between

⁹ C. Murray, *Three Irish Antigones*, in J. Genet and R. Allen Cave (eds), *Perspectives of Irish Drama and Theatre*, Colin Smythe, Gerrard Cross 1991, pp. 115-128, 122.

Thebes and Belfast, Kennelly provides no stage direction at all. Words occupy the play from the beginning onwards. Kennelly emphasises that his work is a new version of the play. In his own words, his *Antigone* is: «a straight translation [...] I worked from late nineteenth-century translations, six or seven of them, then put them away and wrote it out of my head»¹⁰. And the version he gives us is certainly the least Hibernicised of the three which appeared in 1984.

Like Paulin's, Kennelly's *Antigone* swings between the contrasts/confrontations between Antigone and Ismene, and Antigone and Creon. She is an emblem of feminism and her identity is built up through contrast with the female passive element, Ismene, and the male opponent, Creon. Here, though, she is not the emblem of the struggle for civil rights in Northern Ireland, but, rather, the voice of millions of women "silenced" in Ireland over the ages. Kennelly's Antigone embodies Irishwomen and their fight for basic human rights; the whole play oscillates between the need to assert the vital function and value of Irishwomen and the belief that in a constructive exchange of opinions we could find a voice to assert these elements. The stress on a choir of different voices is particularly relevant to the Irish situation during the '80s, characterised by abortion and divorce campaigns. Kennelly's *Antigone* is the first of a series of plays which the author has dedicated to women¹¹. Viewed in the context of a project for women's liberation, *Antigone* is a sort of workshop, Kennelly's first step towards the exploration of drama and an exercise of the feminist agenda. Since the compilation of the Irish constitution, which relegated their role "within the home", Irishwomen have been cut out of Irish life. The Irish feminist movement was born during the '70s, but their few victories were dramatically undermined during the '80s by the legislation to prohibit abortion and divorce: women risked becoming even further silenced and outcast. For these reasons, Kennelly's Antigone states her identity passionately in contrast with the will of Creon as a woman, as a feminist *a priori* and as an Irishwoman.

As does Paulin, Kennelly creates Antigone's identity through the contrast with the two other central characters in the play. The contrast/confrontation with Creon is rooted in sexual and gender specific issues, while that with Ismene is based on terms of action/speech vs. staticism/silence. Due to his portrayal of the contrasts between Antigone and Ismene and that between Antigone and Creon, Kennelly's version reads as an emblematic feminist text. Crucial to this point are the ramifications of disagreement between Antigone and Ismene. Antigone's attitude is totally different from Ismene's conservative compliance. This divergence is emphasised from the outset by Ismene who represent the static, and does nothing while Antigone who embodies action goes around getting information concerning the

¹⁰ Interview with Brendan Kennelly, Dublin, June, 1985 quoted in A. Roche, *Ireland's Antigones: Tragedy North and South*, in M. Keneally (ed.), *Cultural Contexts and Literary Idioms in Contemporary Irish Literature*, Colin Smythe, Gerrards Cross 1988, pp. 221-250, p. 237.

¹¹ Kennelly's close attention to women is also manifest in his early poems of *Let Fall No Burning Leaf* (1963), and *My Dark Fathers* (1964) through *Cromwell* (1983) and *The Book of Judas* (1991).

fate of the two brothers. The necessity for the independence of the Sophoclean heroine is semantically clear from the start.

She speaks, acts and reacts to state her will; the contrast/confrontation with Ismene is established in terms of “silence” vs. “speech” as it emerges from the following quote:

[...]

ISMENE: At least, tell no-one what you plan to do.

Be secret. So will I

ANTIGONE: Go shout it from the roof-tops, Ismene.

Forget your despicable silence.

Your silence will bring more contempt on you

In the end. **Be true not silent.** (5) [emphasis added]

The stress on truth more than on silence is peculiar to Kennelly's *Antigone*, and is linked with his idea of the need for women to speak out in order to verbally contest the *status quo* and men's power. If the confrontation with Ismene is based on speech against silence, that with Creon is based, primarily, upon gender confrontation of man against woman. Creon's great shock in dealing with Antigone is not only that she broke the law but, moreover, the fact that she is a woman. Before the actual discovery of the individual who committed the insult, there is a crescendo of gender emphasis on the person who is guilty of the burial. The guard refers to the offender, saying: «Someone has buried/ The corpse of Polyneices», Creon immediately replies: «What are you talking about?/ What **man** alive would dare to do this thing?» (15) [emphasis added]. He presumes the perpetrator is a man. Upon his discovery, Creon makes it clear that the subversive agent is female, he is punishing Antigone for usurping the prerogatives of his sex: «I will be no man,/ She would be the man/ If I let her go unpunished» (22). Ironically, both characters employ such verbal sexist objectification. Antigone, as a woman, answers Creon with the same terms as those he uses with her. Antigone claims the status and adopts such a mode of behaviour which, in a male-dominated world, are associated and used only by men. She implies that she will behave like a man, something that Creon fails to tolerate or to understand.

In a country in which the image of woman has been relegated for many years to that of such roles as mother, wife, sister, or daughter, and never seen as woman alone, Antigone's mixture of masculinity and femininity is very important. Rather than allowing herself to be relegated to either role, Kennelly's Antigone revels in both: «I am a woman without fear/ In a hole in the rocks/ Where no man or woman dare to venture» (35).

The challenge throughout the play is to listen to the words of the different opinions and resist isolation and fixed positions. This is one reason for the constant reiteration of the word 'word' throughout the play. In a script of only forty-eight pages, 'word' is used fifty-six times and the plural 'words' appears an additional sixty-two times. Words are significant as a

means of dialogue, enabling pluralism. Other words such as «right» (used three times in three lines p. 9), «money»(used five times in six lines p.17), «love» (nine times in twelve lines p. 34) are repeated almost obsessively, both as an emphasis on the subject matter and as a sort of ‘subliminal’ message for the audience. The task is to listen to the words; as David Nolan has suggests «the images are secondary»¹².

The play aims at staging the importance of a female identity within Ireland. Kennelly is looking for justice and for a dialogue in justice. What emerges from the play is an Antigone without the overtly political tones of Paulin’s version but who conveys a female strength which is at the core of the Sophoclean drama, and which is conspicuously absent in Ireland.

3. En attendant Antigone: Matthews’ *The Antigone*

Mathews’ recipe for his *Antigone* is a mixture of Pirandello, Beckett and Fo under the common name of meta-theatre, violence and fascism. The play ran at the Project Arts Centre in Dublin for the whole month of August 1984 and evolved from a collaboration between the playwright, Carl Aidan Mathews, and director, Michael Scott: « [...] we’d meet, spit our hands, set to work and get our act together, calling it (with the *hubris* common to the youngsters) not just *Antigone* but *The Antigone*»¹³. Michael Scott has been defined as a «devotee of environmental theatre»¹⁴, and he filled the stage with sand, mud, gravel, a stream (fairly stagnant) and a crashed car. A nuclear holocaust and a chaotic post-modern environment dominate the opening scene. The atmosphere was similar to the post-nuclear “day-after”.

The rhythm of the play is frantic, the structure chaotic, the characters interact, inhabit and exist in the margin and shadows of existence. Mathews’ pervasive theme seems to be fragmentation and the splitting of character. The play functions as a strong invective against fascism and every form of violence and focuses on repression. Among the three Irish *Antigones*, Mathews’ adaptation best befits 1984 as the Orwellian year. Irony, farce and the grotesque are combined in an explosive mixture where everything is at least double-edged. Maeve Kennedy comments:

[...]this is play within a play ‘The Antigone’ and the play of the company that’s has been playing ‘The Antigone’ for several millennia. But it is also two other plays, a jokey- and funny-anarchic romp and a very serious angry play¹⁵.

Mathews utilizes a meta-theatrical approach in order for the process of re-enactment and reapplication to work thus demolishing the fourth wall through the use of audio-tapes and

¹² D. Nolan, *Antigone at the Peacock*, in “The Irish Times”, 29 April 1986, p. 10.

¹³ A. C. Mathews, *The Antigone*, in “Theatre Ireland”, No. 7, Autumn 1984, p. 18.

¹⁴ L. Henderson, *The Antigone by Aidan Carl Mathews*, in “Theatre Ireland”, No. 7, Autumn 1984.

¹⁵ M. Kennedy, *The Antigone in the Project*, in “Irish Times”, 2nd August 1984, p. 10.

technical devices. In the transition from the script to the stage, the play changed its title from *Antigone* to *The Antigone*, the inclusion of the determinative article raises the meaning of the tragedy to an universal stance. Mathews appears to have embraced Steiner's notion that «[...] each production of *Antigone* since the first is a dynamic enactment of understanding»¹⁶. The playwright's aim is to liberate *Antigone* from the theatrical space in which she is trapped by her own stature. Through the years, she has suffered a «[...] sea change, a fate worse than death; it has become a classic»¹⁷. Thus, Mathews attempts a sort of deconstruction of the classic, focusing on the idea that *Antigone*, above all, is the record of a refusal on the part of an individual to consent to the imposition of constrictions on the individual will.

Mathews instils in the text the chaos; the identity of the characters is irrefutably double-edged: they are the characters within the play but, as individuals, they rebel against the 'label' affixed on them. Each yearns to escape the role ascribed to them in the play, and as a result, they behave like a mixture of the characters from Pirandello's *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* (*Six Characters in Search of an Author*), Fo's *Morte Accidentale di un Anarchico* (*Accidental Death of an Anarchist*) and the ever-present, influential Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Mathews' *Antigone* is a confused heroine torn between her dramatic role and her universal meaning. The play proceeds along the Cartesian axes of two twisted elements: the different shadows of oppression and totalitarianism and the way in which to cope with the crisis of identity. Mathews is interested in asserting the value and meaning of *Antigone*'s independent identity both in terms of non-violence and of anti-theatre.

As they entered the Project Arts Centre, audiences were handed copies of the Criminal Justice Bill. Although the source of the bill was vehemently opposed by Irish liberals because it purposed to limit the rights of suspects and to give the *Garda Síochána* more rights to arrest and detain prisoners without any charge being brought against them, it was in process of being ratified by the Irish parliament in the summer of 1984¹⁸. The Bill functions as a subtext to the "tragedy"; in fact, the text of the bill was read at the end of the first act and during the intermission creating a very charged politicised atmosphere in the theatre space. The Criminal Justice Bill focuses on those issues which constitute the basis of the play: the violation of human rights and the assertion of freedom.

Ironically, the importance of establishing political consciousness in Mathews' play is connected with memory and, more specifically, the value of an "historical memory". Creon asks *Antigone* if she wants to know why Polyneices was 'painted out'. Fearing the worst when *Antigone* expresses her disinterest, Creon then asks «Are you developing a political consciousness?» *Antigone* replies: «The best reason in the world would be the worst pretext» (52)

¹⁶ G. Steiner, *Antigones*, cit., p. 138.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ The bill, introduced in Dáil Éireann on 17 October 1983, was passed in the Dail on 5 July 1984, but not yet passed by the Senate. (It passed both houses of the *Oireachtas* on 28 November 1984).

Antigone realises that Creon cannot remember the rationale behind his own edict. Relieved by her response, Creon adds:

CREON: You are developing a political consciousness. There were excellent reasons at the time. But you know how it is. Reasons just don't keep, do they? Go off after a few days. You have to eat them while they're still...fresh in your mind. (52)

Throughout the play, the whitewashing of writing and people is, the means by which power can be manipulated to annihilate conscience. Only memory works as a brake to resist such manipulation. As a result, Antigone does not, as in the original, bury her brother but, instead, goes around writing the letter P on walls (in the play, Eteocles is renamed Peteocles, so the two brothers come to be represented by a single initial "P"). She does so to counter the fascist, who must maintain difference as his *raison d'être*; the stress on the value of memory contains a peculiar relevance in the Irish context.

In coping with this effacement of identity, Mathews' chorus is the manual worker of the Orwellian 'Big Brother's' manoeuvres. The chorus perpetually performs all the manual jobs he is asked for, such as the whitewashing: «I keep rubbing it out» (7). Ironically, with time he finds that «you can't help learning it. And after that, if it's not spelled proper, you...spell it the right way, and rub it out» (7). Like in Orwell's *1984*, the erasure of writing is a means of cancelling historical memory, thereby completely devaluing experience itself.

The analysis of nuances of totalitarianism and of the different forms of oppression is another aspect of the subtext of the play. Violence is the main course of the *Antigone* menu. The play begins with the Chorus announcing: «The drama is set in Ireland in the 1980s B.C. soon after Sparta has entered the war on the German side» (1). It conflates different spatial and temporal sites: 5th century Athens, Germany during the Second World War, and contemporary Ireland. Although Irish vernacular predominates the play, pervasive foreign languages darkly smelling of Nazism and fascism are interwoven. The chorus in the opening scene declares: «I'm your numero uno, your sine qua non» (2). The Italian and Latin words are mixed and they evoke the ghosts of fascism. The chorus employs, however, a language immediately recognisable as inherently Dublin working class dialect, coming straight away from a 'Dub' street «I am on me break» (20). This familiar speech helps to break the wall between audience and stage. The audience encounters, within the dramatic space, a language they had just heard or used in the streets. The Irish setting of the play is immensely relevant considering Mathews' desire to define the new ideologies dominating the Irish scene during the 1980s.

Antigone embodies a universal symbol in the re-enactment and re-evaluation of the myth itself each time the social circumstances reclaim her. Mathews enlarges the experience of fascism, commenting on the procedures used by some regimes: control and inventory of personal belongings which invade the individual space. As a result, Antigone is astonished when she realises that «They took everything. Even a copy of Cosmo he'd done the crossword

in. And his first Communion photo» (17). The regime attempts to eradicate every trace of Polyneices. This intention is also ridiculously expressed by the superficial means with which totalitarian regimes try to revise, recreate and rewrite history. For instance, they try to cut Polyneices out from a picture, but:

ANTIGONE: You know, they did it so quickly, they forgot something. Because he had an arm around Petey. And his right hand was lying on Petey's right shoulder. You don't notice it at first. It looks like an epaulette. And then it strikes you. Just lying there on his shoulder. The whole hand. (18)

The hand stands as a *memento* of the missing Poly. Mathews is creating an enlargement of the experience of Antigone. Her metaphorical story represents a way of actualising some practices still in vogue in some totalitarian regimes.

Ismene recalls the «Thousands of missing persons» (18) and dictatorship in Latin America and the fate of the *desaparecidos* are bridged with the strange accidents happening in Northern Irish prisons: Antigone says: «He was one of the torturers. He drove a sharpened pencil through my cousin's eardrum» (35).

Creon is the chief of the totalitarian state Antigone lives in: all through the play, he complains about his eyes and his sight «I must see clearly today (...) Antigone is coming» (32). Though Tiresias does not appear in the play, the contrast sight-blindness is enacted in terms of Creon's problem with his sight. Tiresias is not present to embody enlightening sight over the matter, but Creon maintains his role as short-sighted. What in the Sophoclean tragedy was a metaphysical blindness is reversed as a concrete problem with the sight. The metaphorical inability to see characterises those who lead the state. Creon is not even able to formulate edicts by himself, and Heman (Mathews' name for Haemon) helps him to build them through a dictionary of quotations.

Antigone opposes the world of violence Creon is creating. Her existence in the play is, by itself, an opposition to Creon's actions. In modern life, she represents a message which people are not able to listen to because they are trapped in the day-to-day. There are «many white faces» (10) who cannot hear her. Her message of peace can, however, be heard by the audience which is composed of «Voyeurs». At the end of the play, Creon denies the possibility of a change «Go. Home. Go home. You can do nothing» (65). But it is Antigone who becomes during the course of the play, the one who can make the audience go home and think; That is after all, as the chorus remarked, what they are paying for.

What is striking in Mathews' play is the marvellous characterisation, none of the characters remain faithful to the original depiction. The play swings between roles, and the author plays with them. Haemon becomes Heman¹⁹, Eteocles is renamed Peteocles and the fifteen actors who sing and dance in the original play, are reduced to one man, Chorus, and his female coun-

¹⁹ Heman was also the name of an '80s American super-hero of cartoons.

terpart, Chora. Tiresias and Eurydice are not even mentioned. The Chorus has lost the classic harmony and wisdom of the original and has become the meddler of the state. His function of commenting on the play and as the voice of the citizens is reversed, and he goes around doing things while informing the audience of the changes in the play. For example, he informs the audience that «We move at a fast centre to the Presidential palace, an underground park at the centre of the **Blast area** Creon and Heman the Police chief are burning the midnight oil» (21) [emphasis added]. He is also the one who whitewashes the ‘P’ on the walls and cleans up after the killing of the critic at the beginning of the second act. He is a sort of jester who creates the links in the play and who also breaks the fourth wall. Like the other characters, however, he is very much concerned about his personal experience as “the chorus”.

The Delphic ‘*gnoti sauton*’ is applied effectively throughout the play by the characters who struggle against their roles. Deconstruction seems to be the key word. Soon after the opening speech of the chorus, the Beckettian exchange between Chorus and Heman, Ismene and Antigone arrive onstage. Ismene wants to be an individual and not a meaning: «I am so bored with being myself» (10); Antigone cannot even remember who she is supposed to be, and adds, «I’m so tired» (10); the chorus violently reacts to the complaints of his ‘colleagues’ re-issuing his central role as the *trait d’union* with the audience: «Who’s been keeping’ them (*Points off to the audience*) in their places?» and «I didn’t ask to be the Chorus. I was told. O.K.? I was fuckin’ ordered» (10). Imposition comes from the outside; first Sophocles and now Mathews have acted upon him. He would like at least: «to have a play named after myself?»(12). These complaints regarding the roles germinate from a physical and physiological exhaustion in endlessly re-enacting a part they have been taking for years, *ad infinitum*. Complaints fill the scene in a stream along which Antigone tries to remember her role and the reason why she took it; she has become playing it for ages and she is confused. Ismene is tired of being a «prissy little Hausfrau» (18), wants to break the rules and reclaims Antigone’s role. Antigone, who is usually the heroine of action and of deeds, is a more reticent character, trying to understand her role. Ismene, on the other hand, is the active one. She has fresh and up-to-date information and can suggest to Antigone how to cope with things. The theatrical environment is never forgotten in the play, and the interaction between the actors and the audience is often pushed forward by the chorus as when the chorus, requests a cigarette from the audience.

Each character’s identity is dependent on the other’s existence. Creon has to fulfil the role which has been given. He has to finish his works, “things” are to be done and he is «tired to budget for your super-ego» (39). Conversely, Antigone juxtaposes the world of human beings with that of Creon’s rigid rationality: «ANTIGONE: A human being is not a vegetable» (39).

It can be argued that one of the few things left untouched from the original version is the majestic confrontation between the two powers: although her position expands and reaches the ranks of different political environments, Antigone is the Irish Liberal conscience. What she wants, Creon insists, is a world of «Statesmanship without politics. Growth without the

growing pains» (39). Their fields of thinking relate to different moral and political spheres. Within the play, she is recognised as an “ideal” but, at the time, she desires to assert her position as a woman.

Mathews repeatedly emphasises that Antigone flows away from any kind of categorisation and he ‘blinks’ at Irish counter-culture in mentioning the magazine of the “fifth province”²⁰. Even though it is replete with satirical political comments, Mathews’ *Antigone* is very much a play which deals with the process of theatricalisation and the elements involved in this process. All of the characters bring into question their roles, and there is an attempt to create a link between the dramatic space and the audience. The bridge between the acts is characterised by strong meta-dramatic gestures: the recording of the Criminal Justice Bill at the end of the first act, and the apology of the critic at the beginning of the second. At the end of the play, the actors remove their make-up and indulge in the dramatic spaces. Antigone can not be found. She physically disappears from the stage and remains only metaphysically present as a principle: «Chorus: Nobody’s seen her. Nobody, just...vanished. Gone [...] HEMAN: That’s not true. She was seen in Khrakov. Only last year» (45).

She has left the dramatic space to become a symbol. At the same time, she is not involved in the metadramatic actions which are taking place on stage. As Mathews has pointed out, “agon” also denotes “play”, “theatre piece”, “drama”; so, Antigone means going against the play, resisting it. Mathews believes that she «[...] opposes dramatic forms, she stands against the ritual of violence which a dramatic performance re-enacts, she de-means drama...[and] seeks to deny the very ground of theatre»²¹.

Each member of the cast and the audience is part of the game within the play, and if Antigone’s identity was built up in the other two versions, against those of Creon and Ismene, every character here lives because of the existence of the other. The final conclusion, however, reveals that Antigone transcends reality and the theatrical space and becomes an ideal. Mathews pushes the conflict/confrontation of the three main characters in the play to the edge. In Paulin’s and Kennelly’s *Antigones*, Creon and Ismene represented the ‘others’ against whom Antigone’s identity was built up. In Mathews’, they come to speak the same lines, joining a total identification:

ISMENE: Perpetual peace shining upon them.

CREON: Perpetual peace shining upon them.

ISMENE: Thank you. Good night and God bless the U.S.S.A.

CREON: Thank you. Good night and God bless the U.S.S.A. (37)

²⁰ For further discussion on the ‘fifth province’ see *Editorial 1/Endodorms*, in “The Crane Bag” 1.1, 1977, p. 4 and S. Deane and R. Kearney, *Why Ireland Needs a Fifth Province*, “Sunday Independent”, 22 January 1984, p. 15.

²¹ A. C. Mathews, ‘Annotations on *Antigone*’, cit., p. 1.

In joining together the two global nuclear powers of the USA and USSR as the U.S.S.A, Mathews continues to build a web of political references. As a character and as an ideal, Antigone exists in Mathews play as an 'anti-heroine', as somebody that goes against those rights of the state to assert those of the individual. At no point in the play does Mathews give up irony and sarcasm: «ANTIGONE: I know I'm a bore. But I'm right, God help me, I'm right» (36).

Mathews' takes a post-modernist position on the play. The script is imbued with reflections on the value and means of constructing and stating self-identity. His *Antigone* uses the stage space as a metaphor for the vacuum which echoes back the cries of the unheeded repression, in what have been already termed "The Uncertain Eighties". In that vacuum, Antigone's identity is the only one which survives.

Three different identities of three Irish Antigones emerge from the opposition/confrontation with Creon and Ismene in the plays examined. Each author answers to a different necessity in coping with the Sophoclean myth. Gender issues, politics and post-modern claims are applied to Antigone's identity according to different perspectives. While generally restating the centrality of woman in a male-dominated culture, the gender issues inherent in *Antigone* are dealt with according to the different priorities of each playwright. But if the three versions respond differently to such specific issues, what they have in common is the urge to state the independence of mind and spirit of Antigone within a social context and they do so better than other versions appeared in most recent years.