

'Beyond the Pale': Transgressing Boundaries in Heaney's Translations

Paula Murphy

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'Since when', he asked,
'Are the first line and last line of any poem
Where the poem begins and ends?'

This essay investigates two of Seamus Heaney's translations, *The Cure at Troy* (1990) and *The Burial at Thebes* (2004), teasing out their relationship to his aesthetic philosophy and the parallels present with Lacanian and Derridean analyses of symbolic and ethical structures. The epigraph above provides an appropriate starting point for considering this topic, because it suggests that the effects of a poem go beyond the boundary of the written page, which is one of a series of boundary crossings that will be discussed in this essay. Beginning with Heaney's positioning of the space of poetry outside of social and political concerns, it will be argued that these translations are analogous with his artistic philosophy: in *The Cure at Troy* through the ideas expressed in its language, and in *The Burial at Thebes* through the events of the plot, which provide a symbolic counterpoint to Heaney's concept of the space of poetry. This outside space will be explored firstly in relation to Jacques Derrida's *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, in which he argues that the general principle of justice is located outside of juridical and legal structures, echoing the moral debates of the play. It will also be analysed in relation to Jacques Lacan's commentary on *Antigone* in Seminar VII. Lacan proposes that *Antigone*, on which Heaney's translation is based, dramatizes an individual crossing from the realm of language and law into an intermediary space between life and death; transgressing the symbolic order and moving into the liminal space of the second death.

Both plays are translations of Sophoclean drama: *The Cure at Troy* is based on *Philoctetes* and *The Burial at Thebes* on *Antigone*. Heaney changes the title of each to reflect the place and the action that define the play, rather than the principal character. Yet, *Philoctetes* and *Antigone* of course remain the central figures of the dramas, and the original titling of the plays after their name is undoubtedly justified. In Heaney's translations, these characters play no less of a part than in their original incarnations in Greek drama. So, why does Heaney name these plays after the place in which they are set and the action that occurs there? This question gets the crux of inciting incident in both of the plays, and to the core of Heaney's aesthetic philosophy. In both cases, the action is impelled by conflict between those who are faithful to the laws of the community, and those who rebel against them to pursue a sense of right that is personal, and which in both the case of *Antigone* and *Neoptalmus*, is believed to be beyond social law. In Heaney's prose writings, he occasionally ponders the efficacy of poetry in the real world, and this is elaborated in a particularly interesting manner in *The*

Government of the Tongue. The title of this set of memorial lectures has a two-fold, contradictory significance for Heaney. On one hand, it articulates the personally-sanctioned autonomy of the tongue to speak authoritatively and he states that, 'In this reading, the tongue (representing both a poet's personal gift of utterance and the common resources of language) has been granted a right to govern' (Heaney 2002, 197). This right, he argues, is not ethical or moral; it is a separate system of meaning that stems from the individual: 'the self validating operations of what we call inspiration' (Heaney 2002, 197). On the other hand, the government of the tongue implies restrictiveness and censorship: 'a denial of the tongue's autonomy and permission' (Heaney 2002, 197). It is in this Derridean double-bind that the poetry is situated for Heaney, attached to the individual and the community; personal morality and social law, but not fully invested in any of these categories, instead retaining an element of separation and autonomy. It is here too, in the realm of these opposing forces and beyond them, that the dilemma of the Antigone and Neoptalmus is located². Heaney's naming of the plays after the setting and the action that occurs there is indicative of the importance of social and symbolic structures in his interpretation of these Greek texts, and more importantly, as I will argue, the effect of their transgression.

Central to these plays, whether they are interpreted as simply versions of ancient Greek drama, or ethical evaluations of crime and punishment, is the idea that as a genre, poetry can inhabit a symbolic space where an alternative reality can be articulated. For Heaney, it is imperative to be aware of tradition and the past, but not to be bound by it, because to do so would make progress and change impossible. This essay seeks to examine the site of poetry in Heaney's aesthetic philosophy and its relationship to poststructuralist theoretical concepts.

In *The Cure at Troy*, the chorus illustrates how art can present an alternative perspective on reality. It is completely fluid, both imaginatively and performatively, interjecting on behalf of the modern audience and the temporally and geographically specific public of the play's ancient setting. The chorus leader even moves between gender positions, as she is a woman at the beginning of the play, but becomes a man at the end, speaking as Hercules. This ability of poetry to be 'a break with the usual life but not absconding from it' (Heaney 2002, 208) contrasts sharply with the characters of the play, who like people in the real world, are hopelessly structured by social codes: 'people so stanch and true they're fixated' (Heaney 1990, 1). They are tied down to tradition and custom, and like the women who are punished for attacking Orpheus at the end of *The Midnight Verdict*, they behave
as a caught bird struggles to get free
From a cunningly set snare, but still can only
Tighten the mesh around its feet still tighter
The more it strains its wings and frets and flutters (Heaney 1993, 41).
Poetry differs from these, because it is ideally unfettered by ideological and political allegiances, but sensitive to them, as the description of the chorus

makes clear:

I hate it, I always hated it, and I am

A part of it myself.

And a part of you,

For my part is the chorus, and the chorus,

Is more or less a borderline between

The you and the me and the it of it. (Heaney 1990, 2)

Poetry is both of the world and not of the world; it is born from the language and created by the context of the culture from which it emerges, but is in itself a threshold to an alternate reality. In his Nobel lecture, Heaney remarks on the ability of poetry to provide 'not only a surprising variation played upon the world, but a re-tuning of the world itself' (Heaney 1995, 16). Hence, its position on the circumference of reality allows poetry to not only alter the presentation of the concrete facts of existence, but to radically re-recreate and re-imagine those facts. The instrument that is being re-tuned is language, and as Lacanian psychoanalysis verifies, language is not simply a vehicle for articulating ideas already present in a nascent fashion, it actively structures thought and defines subjectivity itself. Lacan's most significant departure from Freud is in his inter-meshing of linguistics, philosophy and psychoanalysis to produce a theory of the subject. Language is at the centre of his theory, and he regards the symbolic order as the most influential factor in the development of the subject. In *Écrits*, he states that, 'the slightest alteration in the relation between man and the signifier ... changes the whole course of history by modifying the moorings that anchor his being (Lacan 1989, 192). Consequently, the ability to re-tune the instrument of language means that the poet wields both formative and transformative power.

In *The Cure at Troy*, the chorus is represented as a metaphor for poetry. In the opening verses, it claims:

And that's the borderline that poetry

operates on too, always in between

What you would like to happen and what will

Whether you like it or not.

Poetry

Allowed the god to speak. It was the voice

Of reality and justice (Heaney 1990, 2).

Poetry, in this description, gives access to something beyond the ordinary realm of human experience, which here is represented by a god in accordance with the religious beliefs apparent in Sophoclean drama. So for Heaney, poetry treads the line between what is experientially known, and what is on the edge of our systems of law, and language; the limit at which social codes become most ambiguous. This is an idea that is articulated in almost exactly the same words in 'The Government of the Tongue': in the rift between what is going to happen and whatever we would wish to happen, poetry holds attention for a space ... a focus where our power to concentrate is concentrated back on ourselves. This is what gives poetry its governing power. At its greatest moments it would attempt, in Yeats's phrase to hold in a single thought reality and justice (Heaney 2002, 208).

These quotations from Heaney's drama and prose elucidate the contradictory dualisms that make up his definition of poetry: it is affiliated to both society

and the individual, with its primary loyalty vested in the artistic event itself; it is concerned with driving towards future aspirations, but is tied to the social structures that bind and shape; it can incorporate the grim immovability of reality with a fantastical ideal. It is in the midst of these conflicting forces that the dramatic action in *The Cure at Troy* is situated.

At the beginning of the play, the main conflict appears to be the tension between duty to the show allegiance to the community by acting in accordance with moral and ethical norms, and the right of the individual to act independently of these codes of behaviour. The play provides a dramatisation of Heaney's maxim that poetry should be 'true to the impact of external reality and ... sensitive to the inner laws of the poet's being' (Heaney 1995, 16). Odysseus appeals to Neophthalmus's need to belong community and his sense of duty to it, when he convinces him to deceive Philoctetes in order to obtain his magical bow, and thus win the battle to take Troy. Acknowledging Neophthalmus's desire to emulate his father, he argues that duty to the community over-rides personal or familial loyalties. Although Neophthalmus is admittedly noble and strong, his 'father's son', he is reminded: 'if parts of this brief seems puzzling to you, / Just remember, you're here to serve our cause' (Heaney 1990, 6). Odysseus regards loyalty to the hierarchy of the community to be a valid reason for committing Philoctetes to ten years exile on the island of Lemnos, where he and the newly recruited Neophthalmus eventually confront him: 'I left Philoctetes here / Marooned him – but / only because I had been ordered to' (Heaney 1990, 3). Later in the play, when after a crisis of conscience Neophthalmus decides to be truthful to Philoctetes about his mission, he holds steadfast to his duty and refuses to return the bow that he has won from him under false pretences: 'There's a cause, a plan, big moves, / And I'm part of them. I'm under orders' (Heaney 1990, 51).

According to Philoctetes however, the persona that Neophthalmus adopts in order to accede to social codes of behaviour is false, and he pleads with him, 'O son, be yourself again. This isn't you' (Heaney 1990, 52). He tells the chorus that 'the only real thing is the thing he lives for: / His own self respect' (Heaney 1990, 52). When Odysseus arrives on the scene, there is an emotional tug of war between him and Philoctetes, with Neophthalmus in the middle. Philoctetes claims that he brings out his innate inclination to honesty, whereas Odysseus makes him follow orders blindly: 'With you he does what he is told, with me he did what his nature told him' (Heaney 1990, 56). The influence of both men on Neophthalmus is portrayed as the collision between personal individuation and social submission. But Neophthalmus, when under the influence of Philoctetes, can be no freer than he is under the orders of Odysseus. And so Neophthalmus appeals to an authority greater than either his personal freedom or his duty to the community when he returns the bow to Philoctetes, telling Odysseus that 'The jurisdiction I am under here / Is justice herself. She isn't only Greek' (Heaney 1990, 67). In Derrida's essay 'On Forgiveness', he professes the transcendent quality of forgiveness, itself intimately linked with justice, in the same way as Neophthalmus does: The proliferation of scenes of repentance or of asking 'forgiveness', signifies,

no doubt, a universal urgency of memory: it is necessary to turn toward the past; and it is necessary to take this act of memory, of self-accusation, of 'repentance', of appearance [comparution] at the same time beyond the juridical instance, or that of the Nation-State (Derrida 2001, 28).

This site outside of personal and social conventions, codes and structures, is where Heaney locates his poetry. Poetry is part of the individual and of society, but as he states, 'The fact is that poetry is its own reality, and no matter how much a poet may concede to the corrective pressures of social, moral, political and historical reality, the ultimate fidelity must be to the demands and the promise of the artistic event' (Heaney 2002, 200). Just as Neoptalmus ultimately decides that his loyalty must lie outside of social and personal considerations in the realm of justice, Heaney argues that poetry inhabits a space that connects with reality, but is also removed from it. For Heaney, poetry is like Neoptalmus' appeal to 'Justice herself', because it is capable of articulating an innate and personal sense of rightness, even if this instinct contravenes social mores. It possesses 'the power to persuade that vulnerable part of our consciousness of its rightness in spite of the evidence of wrongness all around it' (Heaney 1995, 29).

Derrida also locates the defining principle of justice beyond conventional social law. In 'On Forgiveness', he comments on the concept of the imprescriptible³, a reference to a type of crime so abhorrent that the punishment is has no specified duration. The most interesting aspect of the imprescriptible is the characteristic it shares with its opposite, forgiveness, that of being situated in a realm outside of tangible reality. The imprescriptible, he states, 'stems perhaps from what it also introduces, like forgiveness or the unforgiveable, a sort of eternity or transcendence, the apocalyptic horizon of a final judgement: in the law beyond the law, in history beyond history' (Derrida 2001, 32). The imprescriptible, like the idealistic concept of forgiveness, is not an aberrant part of the system of justice: rather it is the transcendental signifier; the exception that paradoxically ensures the viability of the system. The only thing that needs forgiving is the act that is unforgiveable claims Derrida, which is why forgiveness is essentially impossible. And yet, it must exist as an aspiration in order for any thinking about forgiveness or justice to take place. In the same way, the imprescriptible is carried beyond the existence of the life of the criminal, the victim or those who sentence the punishment, but exists in order to differentiate those heinous imprescriptible crimes from other, lesser offences. Derrida notes that in the USA, the Presidents and governors have the right of grace: the right to pardon. He states that 'this exception from the law, the exception to the law, is situated at the summit or at the foundation of the juridico-political ... the transcendental principle of a system doesn't belong to the system. It is foreign to it as an exception' (Derrida 2001, 46). So, pardon is intrinsic to punishment, just as the unforgiveable is intrinsic to forgiveness. The unforgiveable, the imprescriptible, the pardon, all operate outside of the normal systems that humans exist in as social beings. In *The Cure at Troy*, the existence of this separate sphere of exception and impossibility is made evident when, amidst the tension between personal morality and social duty, the appeal to justice appears. The relationship between the real world and poetry, as Heaney describes it, is like that of these exceptions: poetry is part

of it, but also outside of it.

At the end of *The Cure at Troy*, the chorus stipulates the limited role of art in influencing the violence of the real world: 'No poem or play or song / Can fully right a wrong / Inflicted and endured' (Heaney 1990, 77). But they go on to state that,

...once in a lifetime

The longed-for tidal wave

Of justice can rise up

And hope and history rhyme

Poetry may not change reality, but it offers a way of re-imagining reality, which is the first stage of any practical change. The assertion ends the play in symmetry by recalling the opening lines of the chorus that situate poetry on the borderline in between 'What you would like to happen [hope] and what will [history]' (Heaney 1990, 2). This orientation towards the future is evident from the title of the Heaney's translation: *The Cure at Troy*. The action takes place on the island of Lemnos, not Troy, and Philoctetes has not been cured by the end of the play. Hercules, through the voice of the chorus, tells him to go and find Asclepius, who will 'make you whole, / Relieve your body and your soul' (Heaney 1990, 79). Philoctetes' 'cure' is but a hope of cure when the play ends: it is the ideal outcome that must negotiate with the actual outcome. Poetry's strength, its gift, is that it can incorporate one into the other, juggle 'what you would like to happen and what will' (Heaney 1990, 2); and this is 'the promise' of the artistic event, to which I have already referred. And of course, a promise is orientated towards the future, in the unknowable beyond of the present.

Heaney's later translation, *The Burial at Thebes*, shares some characteristics with *The Cure at Troy*. In the case of the former, the space beyond poetry and symbolic codes of behaviour is symbolized by a moment in the action of the play itself, when Antigone is sentenced to be walled into a tomb as punishment for the crime committed by paying respects to her brother's dead body. Lacan's commentary on Antigone illuminates the significance of this scene, in a manner that I will argue is analogous to the site where Heaney situates the place of poetry. Lacan is adamant that in opposition to the Hegelian viewpoint, Sophocles' *Antigone* is not simply about the clash between two different discourses, one of law and one of sibling duty. In fact, Lacan's interpretation of the play does not locate the play's nexus in a debate on ethics or morality, even though it appears in the seminar entitled *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. Instead, his most significant intervention into the analysis of the figure of Antigone is in establishing her position beyond the realm of any such human considerations, when he describes how she crosses over into the second death. Žižek gives an interesting insight into the position of the seminar in the overall context of Lacan's output, which provides a parallel to Heaney's growing interest in translation in later years. He describes the early Lacanian seminars as structuralist; a style of theory critical of the decay of symbolic authority. The next phase of his work, of which *Antigone* is a part, displays an interest in transgressing symbolic authority, and is, he maintains, 'Lacan's reaction to the

first cracks which appeared in the solid edifice of post-World War II French society' (Žižek 2001, 30). Likewise, the early Heaney collections such as *Death of a Naturalist*, *Door into the Dark*, *Wintering Out* and *North* exhibit an interest in the local socio-cultural context in which Heaney writes; it would be possible to say that Heaney is to a large extent work within his geographically-situated symbolic order in these texts. However, Heaney's later writing shows an increasing interest in expanding and transgressing this local symbolic into wider literary contexts in terms of geography and history, which is evident in translations such as *The Midnight Verdict*, *Laments*, *Beowulf* and *Sweeney Astray*. In this way, the path of his writing career follows a broadly similar trajectory to that of Lacan.

To situate the boundary transgression of *Antigone*, Lacan makes recourse to a characteristic of tragic heroes in general, before discussing their role in the plays of Sophocles in particular: tragic heroes, according to Lacan, 'are always isolated, they are always beyond established limits, always in an exposed position and, as a result, [are] separated in one way or another from the structure' (Lacan 1992, 271). In Sophoclean drama, this characteristic of the tragic hero is taken to an even greater extreme, as all the heroes of the extant plays (with the possible exception of *Oedipus Rex*), enter into the play when 'the race is run' (Lacan 1992, 273). By this, Lacan means that the events which will combine to create the hero's downfall have already been set in motion at the beginning, and all that remains is to see the hero's fall being played out on the stage⁴. In *The Burial at Thebes*, Polyneices has died before the play begins. The edict that his body is to be left for the birds to pick at has been issued, and *Antigone* has already decided what she will do, a decision she never considers repealing for a moment during the play:

I'll go down to the underworld

Hand in hand with my brother.

And I'll go with my head held high.

The gods will be proud of me.

The land of the living, sister,

Is neither here nor there

We enter it and we leave it.

The dead in the land of the dead

Are the ones you'll be with longest (Heaney 2004, 6).

Here, Heaney emphasises *Antigone's* death wish: she seems to embrace the prospect of dying and exhibits no fear of it whatsoever. Moreover, he anticipates her situation between the land of the living and the land of the dead, which is so crucial for Lacan's interpretation. According to Lacan, *Antigone's* decision goes beyond the laws of men and is in accordance only with an unwritten law, which is 'a horizon determined by a structural relation' (Lacan 1992, 278). In other words, it is a place known only for its situation outside of the language and social laws of living beings. She states:

The proclamation had your force behind it

But it was a mortal force, and I, also a mortal,

I chose to disregard it. I abide

By statutes utter and immutable –

Unwritten, original, god-given laws (Heaney 2004, 21).

It is in this way different from Creon's notion of law, even the law of the

gods, which is tangible and can be known. He shows that he pertains to know the will of the gods when he scoffingly asks, referring to Polyneices, 'The gods, you think, will side with the likes of him?' (Heaney 2004, 14).

Antigone, on the other hand, freely admits that unwritten laws of the Gods may not be those known by the populace. Lacan suggests that in the absence of any other vocabulary, Antigone identifies the place where her rules are written with the gods, but in the modern era, this concept has been replaced by the Christian God, in religious terms, and by the second death, in psychoanalytic terms. As the second death is identified by Lacan as being in the realm of the Other (Lacan 1992, 277), this beyond is the beyond of language and the symbolic. It is perhaps too, to this beyond of language that Neophthalmus appeals to when he makes his claim on Justice, because it is evidently not a type of justice known to the Greeks, and does not exist within his social or cultural context.

So, Antigone does not persist in law-breaking only for the glory in the eyes of the gods. In fact, the only justification she gives for her actions in the play has puzzled many scholars. She claims that the punishment she is willing to undergo for the sake of paying respect to Polyneices' body, would not be undertaken by her for another:

Not for a husband, not even for a son
Would I have broken the law.
Another husband I could always find
And have other sons by him if one were lost.
But with my father and my mother gone,
Where can I find another brother, ever? (Heaney 2004, 40)

Antigone's justification for her action is the irreplaceability of her brother as a unit in the structural relationships of family. Moreover, her willingness to die for him is based on his being, as separate from the actions of his life – if he were to be judged by the latter, he would not deserve such a sacrifice. Lacan maintains that Antigone would not be able to separate Polyneices' being from his doings, were it not for language. It is language that creates a split in the subject from childhood when it is first acquired. This causes a rift between the subject of enunciation and the subject of the enounced; the 'I' who articulates and the 'I' who is consequently articulated in language, shaped and moulded by its structures. He goes on to state: 'that separation of being from the characteristics of the historical drama he had lived through, is precisely the limit or the ex nihilo to which Antigone is attached. It is nothing more than the break that the very presence of language inaugurates in the life of man' (Lacan 1992, 279). Lacan argues that when Antigone is walled up in the tomb, her justification for the actions that led her there evidence the split subjectivity of the individual that Lacan elaborates and develops throughout his whole career. She represents 'the relationship of the human being to that of ... the signifying cut that confers on him the indomitable power of being' (Lacan 1992, 282). In other words, the individual makes a transaction when language is acquired: the ability to operate in the social sphere is granted in exchange for the fullness of being that is only experienced by the pre-linguistic child. Language introduces a split or a cut in

the individual, and it is this universal human wound that Antigone embodies for Lacan.

Moreover, her physical incarceration in the tomb, when she is alive but waiting for inevitable death, also bears witness to the effect of language on the subject, and Lacan explains this through the concept of *Atè*. This word, he tells us, can be translated as misfortune although it only seems like misfortune from the outside, and it can also be found in the word 'atrocious'⁶. *Atè* is reached when Antigone pursues her desire until it is outside of the realms of what is human, so her destruction is therefore self-willed and not externally manipulated. As Creon states: 'It was she / Who put herself beyond the pale. She is to blame / For every blackout stone they pile up round her' (Heaney 2004, 40). *Atè* can be thought of as a dividing line that Antigone passes over when she has accepted that her life must come to an end, and before she physically dies, which is why this part of Lacan's seminar is entitled 'Antigone Between the Two Deaths' (Lacan 1992, 271). When she is walled up in the tomb, she gives a long speech. She will certainly soon die and is the 'still living corpse' (Lacan 1992, 268) like the figures of Niobe and Danae (Heaney 2004, 37, 42) with whom Antigone is compared in the play. She exists, briefly, having stepped outside the boundaries of symbolic law, but her being is without the support of the symbolic, and so she must die: it is, as Žižek states, 'the heroic suicidal transgressive gesture which excludes the subject from the symbolic community' (Žižek 2001, 29). It is a separation of being from meaning in the same way that Antigone thinks of Polyneices after his death: after *Atè*, Antigone enters a realm where she is outside of symbolic law, and so she experiences a symbolic death, which is soon followed by her actual death. This is why Lacan states that, '*Atè* concerns the Other, the field of the other' (Lacan 1992, 277), because crossing *Atè* means that symbolic law has been violated, and the ability to be part of the symbolic community, granted when language is acquired, is taken away. Here, Lacan shows that language itself is more important than any other social structure – gods, God, law, ethics, all fall under its power. It is this mighty power that Heaney would attempt to re-tune in accordance with his poetic philosophy. The Lacanian theory of the subject isolates language as the cause of split subjectivity and of the insatiable desire that ensues as a result; desire that passes from object to object like endless links in the signifying chain, unable to find a sense of completeness because that completeness has been exchanged for language itself. The importance of language and symbolic law is also attested to in Heaney's translation when the chorus state:

Among the many wonders of the world,
Where is the equal of this creature, man ...
The wind is no more swift or mysterious
Than his mind and his words; he has mastered thinking,
Roofed his house against hail and rain
And worked out laws for living together (Heaney 2004, 16-17)

The place beyond *Atè* in the realm of the second death, the place where being is detached from meaning, can be regarded as a symbol of the splitting effect of language. Just as Derrida shows the imprescriptible crime to be the transcendental signifier of justice, so too does Lacan show the second death

to be the transcendental signifier of human life. Heaney similarly locates the poetic impetus in a location beyond chthonic concerns, in a space that is like that of the second death, where language is dislocated from reality, and the cords of symbolic bindings are loosened. Žižek states that the space between the two deaths is between 'the symbolic and the real' and points out that this was later theorized by Lacan as 'lamella, the undead-indestructible object, Life deprived of support in the symbolic order' (Žižek 1999, 155).

A similar act of transgression, and temporary lack of regard for symbolic structures, is part of the artistic philosophy of Heaney, who does not wish his poetry to be entirely fettered by social and political considerations. Perhaps this is why in 'The Redress of Poetry', Heaney separates the poetic sphere from lived experience, saying that the nobility of poetry 'is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality' (Heaney 2001, 281). And of course, the act of transgression committed by Antigone is precisely what leads her to the second death; that place between the symbolic of human life and the real of death. Heaney's translation emphasises the expulsion that will result if an individual steps too far outside of symbolic law:

But let him once
Overstep what the city allows,
Tramp down right or treat the law
Wilfully, as his own word,
Then let this wonder of the world remember:
He'll have put himself beyond the pale.
When he comes begging, we'll turn our backs.

Although, as the fate of Antigone verifies, it is a dangerous act when taken to extremes, for Heaney, poetry is located outside of social, political and even moral codes; it emerges from the individual who desires, a desire instigated by the first words that are spoken, Freud's 'fort/ da', which create and divide reality, and simultaneously create and divide the speaking subject. It emerges from the individual who desires justice, and is courageous enough to imagine a new way of thinking, like Antigone who is willing to die for her brother's right to have his corpse treated with respect, and like Polyneices, who casts aside Greek conceptions of justice and creates his own. Poetry is something that goes beyond the symbolic, but not into the Lacanian real, since after language, the real can only be accessed by death. This beyond of justice created by poetry is at the outer limits of the symbolic order, just as Derrida's notions of the imprescriptible crime and the pardon are at the edge of juridical and legal systems, and the transcendental signifiers of them. Like these, poetry is the radical exception to reality, and because of this, it has the power to alter reality. 'How does the real get into the made up?' / Ask me an easier one' (Heaney 2001, 21), the poet persona states in 'Known World'. It may be the case that by its very fictional nature, poetry brings us closer to truths about life than factual discussion ever can. Like clemency to punishment, fiction is the exception to fact, to reality, but it may be the exception that proves the rule. As Žižek claims, 'truth has the structure of a fiction': truth is condemned to remain a fiction precisely in so far as the immovable Real eludes its grasp' (Žižek 1999, 167). In other words, the structure of the symbolic denies the subject fullness of meaning, and so the

truth itself is de facto a fiction, and can arguably be presented most accurately as such. Heaney would seem to agree because he writes that 'The paradox of the arts is that they are all made up and yet they allow us to get at truths about who and what we are or might be' (Heaney 2002, 73). Just as Lacan's signifying cut that Antigone represents in the realm of the second death is beyond the symbolic, but is also the transcendental signifier of it, it would not be unreasonable to claim that poetry as Heaney defines it, outside of society, politics and morality in the real world, is the transcendental signifier of reality itself.

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¹ Epigraph is taken from 'The Fragment' in *Electric Light*, p. 57.

² Although the play is originally named after Philoctetes, the character who is left stranded on the island of Lemnos, it is Neophthalmus who must face the dilemma of whether to obey his orders and duty, or to tell the truth and be faithful to his personal morality.

³ Derrida notes that in 1964, a law was passed in France judging crimes against humanity to be imprescriptible.

⁴ In his discussion of the heroes of Sophoclean drama, Lacan describes how in *Ajax*, *Electra*, *Philoctetes* and to an extent *Oedipus Rex*, the ingredients for the hero's demise are present from the beginning: 'the trajectories that are set in motion have only to come crashing down on top of one another as best they can' (Lacan 1992, 271). *Oedipus at Colonus* is mentioned but there is no description of how it fits into this pattern.

⁵ Lacan states that 'we Christians have erased the whole sphere of the gods. And we are in fact, here interested in that which we have replaced it with as illuminated by psychoanalysis'. He goes on to say that 'it is something I have begun to define as the limit of the second death' (Lacan 1992, 260).

⁶ In the seminar, Lacan mentions that Atè can be found in the word 'atrocious' and that it can be translated as misfortune, 'but it doesn't have anything to do with misfortune. It is this meaning that is assigned by doubtless implacable gods, as she might say, which renders her pitiless and fearless' (Lacan 1992, 263-4).