



Provided by the author(s) and University of Galway in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite the published version when available.

Title	From Athens to Managua: Myth and sacrifice in Michele Najlis' Cantos de Ifigenia
Author(s)	Shaughnessy, Lorna
Publication Date	2012
Publication Information	Shaughnessy, Lorna. (2012). From Athens to Managua: Myth and Sacrifice in Michele Najlis' Cantos de Ifigenia. <i>Bulletin of Hispanic Studies</i> , 89(8), 883-904. doi: 10.3828/bhs.2012.65
Publisher	Liverpool University Press
Link to publisher's version	<a href="https://doi.org/10.3828/bhs.2012.65">https://doi.org/10.3828/bhs.2012.65</a>
Item record	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10379/6652">http://hdl.handle.net/10379/6652</a>
DOI	<a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.3828/bhs.2012.65">http://dx.doi.org/10.3828/bhs.2012.65</a>

Downloaded 2024-04-20T04:05:10Z

Some rights reserved. For more information, please see the item record link above.



**From Athens to Managua**  
**Myth and Sacrifice in Michele Najlis' *Cantos de Ifigenia***

My father, at thine behest I come,  
And for my country's sake my body give.  
(Euripides, *Iphigenia in Aulis*)

Esto es mi cuerpo  
esta es mi sangre  
(Michele Najlis, *Ars Combinatoria*)

There are certain boundary situations such as war, suffering, guilt, death etc. In which the individual or community experiences a fundamental existential crisis. At such moments the whole community is put into question. For it is only when it is threatened with destruction from without or from within, that a society is compelled to return to the very roots of its identity: to that mythical nucleus which ultimately grounds and determines it. (Ricoeur, 1982: 262)

Michele Najlis is one of a number of Nicaraguan women poets whose work emerged from the insurrectional period of the late 1960s and the 1970s, along with Gioconda Belli, Yolanda Blanco, Ana Ilce Gómez, Vidaluz Meneses, Michele Najlis, Rosario Murillo and Daisy Zamora.<sup>1</sup> A prolonged period of insurrection against the Somoza regime brought the Sandinistas to power 1979, but they inherited a divided country which was soon plunged into the 'Contra War' against counter-revolutionary forces in the 1980s. In 1990 they were removed from office by the democratic system they had helped to establish.<sup>2</sup> This was, in political and cultural terms, one of those 'boundary situations' outlined by Paul Ricoeur: a period of difficult transition for the Sandinista movement, the culmination of a protracted period of armed conflict that brought widespread suffering and death, and gave rise to some soul-searching, re-evaluation and feelings of remorse. It is at precisely such times, Ricoeur suggests, that a community is

---

1 For an introduction to their work, see Zamora, Daisy, 1992 *La mujer nicaraguense en la poesía*. Managua: Editorial Nueva Nicaragua.

2 An analysis of the results of the 1990 elections is not feasible in such a short space, but determining factors were the extent of war-weariness, chronic food shortages, the failure of Sandinista agricultural reforms and the burden of debt inherited from the Somoza regime. The US Government of the time pledged to withdraw its support for the Contra War if the UNO opposition coalition won the elections. For more information see O'Kane, Trish (June 1990) 'The New Old Order', *NACLA Report on the Americas* 24 (2), pp.28-36 and Shaughnessy, Lorna (1995) 'Military Participation and Moral Authority: Women's Political Participation in Nicaragua, 1975-1995', *UCG Women's Studies Review* pp.151-165.

inclined to 'return to the roots of its identity: to that mythical nucleus which ultimately grounds and determines it'.

In 1991, Nicaraguan poet and Sandinista Michele Najlis published her collection *Cantos de Ifigenia*, where she mines that very mythical nucleus. The poems draw on Classical myth, Catholic iconography and biblical imagery and represent, for Amy Kaminsky, 'an engagement with the universal question of life's meaning, and her cultural roots in Spain, Spanish America and the canonical literature of the West' (Kaminsky 1995: 48).<sup>3</sup> This article reads Najlis' collection in the light of hermeneutic theory and classical myth in order to situate it as a conscious re-working of the Greek story of Iphigenia and exploration of the dynamics of sacrifice. It analyses how Paul Ricoeur's reflections on the relationship between myth and the communal experience of crisis can be applied to the Nicaraguan political context of the early 1990s. It also brings to light some key similarities and differences between Najlis' late twentieth century representation of Iphigenia, and the canonical dramatisations of Iphigenia by Euripides and Aeschylus in fifth century BC Athens. The degree of overlap between poetic and political discourses in Najlis' work is not surprising, given her political activities and associations. The reader may, however, be surprised by the fact that such a politicised, radical poet should turn at this point in her career to a classical order and aesthetic, to the canonical source of Greek mythology. By exploring the inter-textual relationship between Najlis' poems and the plays of Euripides and Aeschylus, my aim is to reveal the shared sense of war-weariness that motivates all three re-workings of the story of Iphigenia. Furthermore, Ricoeur's reflections on myth and 'the re-creation of language' are presented as a possible explanation for Najlis' use of classical mythology in her work at this time. In her *Cantos de Ifigenia*, Najlis strives for a kind of poetic expression that is sufficiently inclusive and archetypal to encompass political disillusionment alongside a personal ontological quest for meaning, both of which were symptomatic of the collapse of ideology as a driving personal and social force in Nicaragua after the 1990 elections.

---

<sup>3</sup> Kaminsky, Amy, 1995. 'The Poet after the Revolution: Intertextuality and Defiance in Michele Najlis *Cantos de Ifigenia*', *Latin American Literary Review*, 23, (46), pp.48-65. Other than this article by Kaminsky, the publication of *Cantos de Ifigenia* in 1991 did not inspire a significant critical response in the form of scholarly articles, and many reviews of the book published in Nicaragua were of an ephemeral nature. This may, in part, be due to the historical circumstances of the Sandinista's loss of the 1990 elections and the fact that the gaze of North American and European academics had turned elsewhere. It is also undoubtedly influenced by a lack of distribution. Like many books produced by Central American publishers, only one print-run of *Cantos de Ifigenia* was made, after which the book became unavailable. Finally, the fact that Najlis continues to live in Nicaragua and has not had her work translated into English or distributed in Europe, also contributes to the continuing lack of visibility of her work.

It is arguable that she is forced to resort to mythological archetype by the absence of any alternative mode of representation that can adequately convey the kind of collective crisis experienced by Nicaraguan society at this time. Her dilemma, baldly stated, is this: how to write poetry about political disenchantment without lapsing into bitterness and recriminations? Najlis' response is to use highly archetypal metaphors of sacrifice and forgiveness.

In February 1993, the first *Congreso Internacional de Literatura Centroamericana* was held in Granada, Nicaragua. In the opening session, Michele Najlis introduced her reading of poems from her *Cantos de Ifigenia* with a moving, personal statement on the times she was living in, and the triple sense of 'fracaso' that she felt - political, emotional and spiritual. The poems were seen by many people at the time as a dramatic departure from her previous politically engaged work. In fact the poems are far from apolitical, but they have moved beyond Sandinista ideology, and their politics are not immediately visible on the surface of their poetic expression. *Cantos de Ifigenia* could, however, be seen as a moving away from the *exteriorista*<sup>4</sup> expression associated with much Sandinista poetry of the revolutionary period, to a more *interiorista* or reflective expression that dominates her subsequent work. This is not to say that the poems in *Cantos de Ifigenia* are wholly introspective; they describe experiences that are both collective and personal, as the sense of 'fracaso' pervading the poems was shared by a large portion of Nicaraguan society. Through its structure, its echoes of various versions and tellings of the Iphigenia story and its emotional resonances with those narratives, the collection forms part of that continuum described by Ricoeur as a 'perpetual historical reinterpretation' of myth (1982: p263).

### *Sacrificial Women and the Revolution*

Women's interests were promoted to an unprecedented degree under the Sandinista Governments of the 1980s, most notably in the 1987 Constitution, the national literacy

---

<sup>4</sup>The term *Exteriorismo* was coined by Coronel Urtecho and Ernesto Cardenal in 1950. It describes a poetic approach deeply indebted to the work of Ezra Pound and was to become the stylistic cornerstone of much protest poetry in Nicaragua throughout the 1960s and 1970s, and of the Talleres de Poesía promoted by Cardenal as part of the Sandinista literacy campaign in the 1980s. See Borgeson, Paul (1984 ) *Hacia el hombre Nuevo: Poesía y Pensamiento de Ernesto Cardenal*, pp.32-33.

campaign, public health reform and the Sandinista commitment to participatory political processes. However, the realization of feminist aspirations met with many obstacles under the Sandinista Governments of 1979-1990: the protracted Contra War devoured most of Nicaragua's GNP, and there was significant ideological opposition from both the Church and sectors of the *Frente* itself to social reform that would penetrate the core, private space of the family.<sup>5</sup> Studies of political participation by Nicaraguan women in the revolutionary period have, justifiably, emphasized economic factors as determining the extent and nature of their mobilization in the late 1970s.<sup>6</sup> While class certainly constituted a vital component of women's politicization, I would argue that other, less obvious factors also set the stage for their extraordinary radicalization at this time. A case in point is the religious dimension, which is fundamental to our understanding of Sandinista ideology, and whether through contact with the revolutionary movement or with the Church itself, Catholic iconography undoubtedly fed into the modes of political action and activism pursued by women in the insurrectional period. Two roles in particular, assumed by Nicaraguan women in the insurrectional period of the 1970s had far-reaching social impact: the roles of militant mother (*madre combatiente*) and resistance fighter (*guerrillera*). Managua's militant mothers had emerged from the ruins of the 1972 earthquake, and organised an informal relief network to tend to the homeless and injured. When vast amounts of international aid to earthquake victims were misappropriated by the Somoza family, the mothers' welfare-based action took a decidedly political direction and many became involved in the anti-Somoza resistance. The presence of *guerrilleras* in the anti-Somoza campaign raised expectations that women would play a substantive, rather than peripheral role in the Sandinista Programme for National Reconstruction (1979-84). The FSLN (Frente Sandinista para la Liberación Nacional) attracted women from many social sectors: middle-class intellectuals, landless rural *campesinas*, university students and the urban poor. In the battle for León, four of the seven Field Commanders were women. (Reif 1986: 159) As combatants in the guerrilla war against Somoza, women enacted the supreme identification of self with nation; they were prepared to die for the 'new Nicaragua'; they were also confident that women's interests and national interests were perfectly confluent. Both these roles, the

---

<sup>5</sup> I allude here to issues such as abortion, and a proposed law (the *Ley de alimentos*) designed to oblige Nicaraguan fathers to provide material assistance for their children.

<sup>6</sup> For a fuller analysis see Mason, David (April 1992) 'Women's Participation in Central American Revolutions. A Theoretical Perspective' *Comparative Political Studies*, 25 (1) pp63-89 and Reif, Linda (January 1986) 'Women in Latin American Guerrilla Movements. A Comparative Perspective' *Comparative Politics*, 18, pp.147-169.

*madre combatiente* and *guerrillera*, acquired an iconic status in revolutionary Nicaragua, due in part to their intrinsic relationship with abnegation and self-sacrifice, tapping into that association between self-sacrifice and motherhood so deeply embedded in the Catholic consciousness by centuries of Marian iconography.<sup>7</sup> The practice of self-sacrifice by women in the revolutionary period – whether as combatants or mothers – is interrogated by Najlis’ use of the sacrificial archetype of Iphigenia in her 1991 collection.

It is important to remember that the moral base of the Sandinista movement was essentially that of Christian morality - a combination of Guevarist Marxism, anti-Yankee nationalism and the newer thinking within the Catholic Church in Latin America. With the moral backing of liberationist readings of the Gospels, the revolution saw itself as righteous Crusader against Somoza’s unholy regime: where the dictator’s rule represented hatred and greed, Sandinismo symbolized love and self-sacrifice. In many ways, the moral authority lent by the ‘Church of the people’ (*iglesia popular*) was a more significant mobilizing force than that of class solidarity. Sergio Ramírez, Vice-President of the Sandinista Govt from 1984-1990 acknowledges this in his autobiographical account of the period, saying: ‘en la tradición Cristiana vimos el valor supremo del martirio, del auto-sacrificio como última prueba de la fe’ (1992: 137). The necessity for collective and personal sacrifice, and the value placed on these by the Sandinista Revolution, proved to be a powerful binding agent throughout the anti-Somocista campaign of the 1970s and the much of the Contra War of the 1980s. But the blurring of boundaries between party and state from 1984 onwards inevitably facilitated petty corruption. Observing the creeping inequalities in their communities, the long-suffering populace began to doubt if sacrifice was equitably distributed in the new Nicaragua. This may have been more acutely felt by women, who after 1983 were denied access to the very public, chosen sacrifice of military participation in the Contra War,<sup>8</sup> and felt that their daily, private sacrifices were unacknowledged and undermined by encroaching corruption and a lowering of moral standards

---

<sup>7</sup>For a fuller discussion of the interplay between Catholic iconography and women’s political participation in revolutionary Nicaragua see Shaughnessy (1995).

<sup>8</sup>In 1983, as aggression from the Contra forces escalated, it was decided that despite their previous experience in combat women would be excluded from the draft. Ileana Rodríguez gives a detailed account of the public debate surrounding this decision, and stresses ‘the importance of the heroic space at that key stage in the nation’s political and ideological development’. See Rodríguez, Ileana (1993) *Registradas en la historia. Diez años del quehacer feminista en Nicaragua*, Managua: Editorial Vanguardia, p.39.

in public life. These very concepts of voluntary and involuntary sacrifice are acted out in the tragedies of Aeschylus and Euripides, and further explored in Najlis' *Cantos*. By 1990, two decades of war and privation had exhausted the collective faith in the Christian and Guevarist creeds of salvation through self-sacrifice; in a war-weary community, the revolutionary motto of *patria libre o morir* no longer rang true.

### *Iphigenia in Post-Sandinista Nicaragua*

Najlis' politically intriguing and expressively rich collection, *Cantos de Ifigenia*, was published in 1991, a year after the electoral defeat of the Sandinista Revolutionary Government for whom she had worked in various capacities in both the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Education. The story of Iphigenia is one of the more shocking episodes in the Greek mythical cycle of the House of Atreus. According to the myth, Iphigenia is sacrificed to the goddess Artemis by her father, Agamemnon, to ensure favourable winds for the Greek ships about to set sail for Troy, to retrieve Helen, the rapt wife of his brother Menelaus. He summons Iphigenia to Aulis, where the fleet is anchored, ostensibly to celebrate her betrothal to Achilles; but the promised wedding ceremony is in fact to be her sacrifice.

The poet uses three 'settings' from the Iphigenia story to structure her collection. There are, accordingly, three main sections entitled *Ifigenia en Argos*, *Ifigenia en Aulide* and *Ifigenia en Táuride*. These 'settings' are defined for Najlis' poetic purpose more by tone and emotional content than by geography or plot. In the myth, Iphigenia is summoned by her father and departs from her home in Argos to travel to Aulis where she will ostensibly be married to Achilles. In keeping with this subtext, the first section of Najlis' book, *Ifigenia en Argos*, is suffused with a sense of pre-nuptial anticipation, expressed in poems such as 'Palabras del corazón en flor', 'Palabras del corazón insomne' or 'Palabras de la mujer que vela':

No el elixir de valeriana  
ni la blanca belladonna  
darán reposo a mis ojos cansados  
sino tus manos en las mías  
tu voz en mis oídos  
tu piel junto a mis pechos  
tu cuerpo que temo nombrar  
porque tu solo nombre aviva

el dulce sobresalto del amor. (Najlis 1991: 15)

The joyous anticipation of sexual union is captured throughout this first section with the sensuality of the *Cantar de los Cantares* from the Book of Solomon, and the yearning of Juan de la Cruz's *Cántico espiritual*, both of which are signalled as sources by their use as epigraphs to the poems 'Palabras del corazón insomne' and 'Palabras del corazón en flor' respectively.

The second section, *Ifigenia en Aulide*, uses the mythical site of Iphigenia's sacrifice as an underlying context to Najlis' exploration of feelings of betrayal and dread in poems such as 'Elegía', in 'Abandono', 'Canto sacrificial', 'Las bodas de Ifigenia' and 'Este don de la palabra' in lines such as –

¿Qué viento agita las velas de mis naves  
Mil veces incendiadas y mil veces renacidas  
En las playas de mi Troya invencible? (Najlis 1991: 39)

However certain poems such as 'Sobrevivo' introduce a note of defiance, a tone which culminates in the final section of the collection, *Ifigenia en Táuride*. According to some versions of the myth, Ifigenia is spared by Artemis and magically transported to Taurus to serve as priestess to the goddess. In these versions, it is in Taurus that she defies divine will by refusing to sacrifice her shipwrecked brother to Artemis. The emotional tone of this final section of Najlis' collection ranges from the anger and assertion of the poems 'Ifigenia en Táuride' or 'Ifigenia en Moriah' (both of which will be examined in due course) to the serene acceptance of others such as 'Sin agenda' or 'Nuevo Testamento'.

Kaminsky has written of this collection that it 'mines the veins of high culture, trespassing on sacred ground: the holy books of Judaism and Christianity and the no less sacred texts of Classical Greek literature'(1995: 48). This notion of trespass captures the way in which the poems interrogate the discourse and practice of self-sacrifice so central to both Catholicism and Sandinismo. Potential analogies with Nicaraguan politics immediately spring to mind: Agamemnon, for example, can be read as representing the militarised state, the (ultimately) patriarchal revolution. Following the logic of this line of interpretation, Iphigenia can be read as representing feminist activists and their interests as sacrificed by the Sandinista State in order to preserve its own power. As we will see, however, the poems do not limit themselves to one

fixed interpretation of Iphigenia's sacrifice.

These are lyrical, not narrative poems; they do not set out not to re-tell the story of Iphigenia, but to explore the ethical issues and emotional responses raised by the myth. Having said this, key narrative components of the Iphigenia myth allow Najlis to explore the triple sense of 'fracaso' – personal, political and spiritual – as described in her statement in Granada in 1993. For example, the emotional trauma of betrayal is manifest in the revelation that the promised nuptial ceremony between Achilles and Iphigenia will in fact be the bride's sacrifice on Artemis's altar. The promise of marriage that ultimately leads to sacrifice for Iphigenia, can be read as analogous to the revolution's courting of feminist support and its pervasive discourse of the 1970s and 80s that equated love with revolution, an equation largely inspired by 'Church of the People' and its liberationist interpretations of the Gospels. The title of Sandinista leader Sergio Ramírez's testimony, *Confesión de amor* (1992), tells us something of how the Revolution saw itself. As do statements such as 'el hombre que sea capaz de amar y de hacer del amor un instrumento de cambio, es un revolucionario' made by Tomás Borge, one of the founders of the Frente (1991: 22). Such a reading is invited by the tone of disillusionment and the suggestion of betrayal in many poems, including 'Elegía':

He sido Prometeo que roba en cada aurora  
el fuego de los dioses  
y por la noche – oh Sísifo – descubre  
que fue un sueño. (Najlis 1991: 25)

Secondly, the sense of political betrayal and disillusionment felt by Najlis and many other Nicaraguans resonates with Agamemnon's willingness to sacrifice not only his daughter, but also the collective good of his people, to the idea of greater glory for Greece in a war that would clearly bring no material gain to the polis. Najlis' poems repeatedly evoke an injury endured by a feminine collective subject, and this solidarity extends to women past and present. A clear parallel is drawn between patriarchal sacrifice in Classical and Christian sources in the highly syncretic poem 'Ifigenia en Moriah', where the allusion to the Mountain of Moriah brings us from the story of Iphigenia to the Old Testament account of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac. For both patriarchs, (and here we are reminded of Sergio Ramírez's words on the revolution), the sacrifice of a child is the ultimate 'prueba de fe'.

Mis hermanas dijeron: 'Vemos el fuego y el cuchillo

pero quién será el cordero?’  
‘Todas somos el cordero,’ contesté. (Najlis 1991: 63)

And finally, the ‘spiritual’ disillusionment expressed by Najlis in 1993 finds an analogy in the myth, in Iphigenia’s defiance of Artemis to save her brother from sacrifice in Taurus. It is this defiance of a prescribed fate that emerges in Najlis’ poem ‘Ifigenia en Táuride’:

Ifigenia, en Táuride, seguirá salvando  
fieramente a los que ama,  
aunque de nuevo  
setenta veces siete ponga su blanco cuello  
en el altar del sacrificio.

### *Iphigenia and the Peloponnesian War*

The use of Greek myth as an analogy for contemporary political conflicts has a long history in European Theatre, which has drawn repeatedly on myths already dramatised by Sophocles, Aeschylus and Euripides in order to critique governments and their policies through the metaphoric relationship between contemporaneous political events and mythical narrative.<sup>9</sup> According to Paul Ricoeur, this critical relationship between the Western literary canon and myth is an inevitable product of the fact that the development of myth, like society, is both and synchronic and diachronic:

that the kinds of myth on which our societies are founded have themselves this twofold characteristic: on the one hand, they constitute a certain system of simultaneous symbols which can be approached through structuralist analysis; but, on the other hand, they have a history, because it is always through a process of interpretation and re-interpretation that they are kept alive. (Ricoeur 1982: 261)

The critical nature of this relationship between artist and myth was as true for the Athenian tragedian of the fifth century BC as it was in the late twentieth century for the Nicaraguan poet.

---

<sup>9</sup> One of the most frequently revisited Greek myths in Western theatre is Antigone. Some examples are Jean Anouilh’s *Antigone* of 1944, Bertolt Brecht’s of 1948; Judith Malina’s version staged in New York in 1967 while she was in prison for protesting against the Vietnam War; Athol Fugard’s *The Island* of 1973; Miro Garan’s Croatian version of 1990, and two versions by Northern Irish poets, Tom Paulin’s *The Riot Act* (1985) and Seamus Heaney’s *The Burial at Thebes* (2005). See also Steiner, George (1984) *Antigones*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

The thematic content of Athenian theatre of the fifth century BC was based on the traditional cycles of heroic legend already familiar to its audience, while, according to Aristotle's *Poetics*, it should also fulfil the political imperative to 'instruct' the *polis*.<sup>10</sup> This instruction could be interpreted as either personal, concerning individual morality, or as collective, concerning the rights and wrongs of governments and their policies. Both areas are addressed in Euripides', *Iphigenia among the Taurians* (2000), and *Iphigenia at Aulis* (1972), and in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* (1991). Like Najlis' poems, the plays reveal a sense of *fracaso* or tragedy that is at once individual and collective. Like her *Cantos de Ifigenia*, they are faced, in Ricoeur's terms, with 'a boundary situation [...] in which the individual or community experiences a fundamental existential crisis' (1982: 261), and all three respond with an approach to the myth that is highly critical of the glorification of war and the militarization of the state. This underlying awareness of public ethical issues such as betrayal and the sacrifice of others to military ambition, confirms the presence of a line of literary inheritance leading from Najlis back to Athenian tragedy.

More than one version of the story of Iphigenia's sacrifice survived the oral mythic tradition as poets and dramatists frequently drew on more than one source for their work. As Alan Sommerstein points out, 'There was no such thing as "the myth" in the sense of a fixed canonical story; there were only variant versions of it, and all the audience knew for certain was that the variant they were going to see would in at least some ways be entirely new' (2002: 16). In one version she is, in fact, sacrificed by her father to Artemis. In another, as previously mentioned, she is transported through Artemis' intervention, to the island of Taurus where she lives as a priestess to the Goddess. This lack of narrative fixity may surprise the modern reader, given that the incident represents a vital link in the chain of tragic consequences that unfold in the whole cycle of The House of Atreus: Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia is the reason why his wife Clytemnestra murders him and so instigates the cycle of revenge that leads to her own murder by Orestes. It is telling, then, that Iphigenia's sacrifice is not included in Homer's *Iliad*, probably because it would undermine the epic heroism with which he paints the Greek campaign. And it is hardly surprising, therefore, that Najlis' poems should be more influenced by the fifth century BC dramatic versions of the myth, than those set down in epic verse. It is

---

<sup>10</sup> According to Justina Gregory, 'That tragedy possessed a political component is now generally acknowledged.' 'Tragedy [...] exploits the tensions inherent in the contrast between past and present; it juxtaposes the characters of legend with the world of fifth-century polis in order to bring into focus the divergent values of the inherited culture and the new social order'. Gregory, Justina, 1997. *Euripides and the Instruction of the Athenians* pp6-7.

precisely the critical stance taken by the dramatists Euripides and Aeschylus in relation to war that made them such an appropriate and resonant source for Najlis' poems in 1991. Apart from their desire to address the ethical issues thrown up by Iphigenia's sacrifice by her father, another likely source for this critical stance was the dramatists' own experience of the hardship inflicted on Athenian society by the Peloponnesian War.

Euripides makes Iphigenia's story the focal point of two of his plays: *Iphigenia among the Taurians* and *Iphigenia at Aulis*. *Iphigenia among the Taurians* was first performed between 415-412 BC, approximately 15 years into the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC) and is the first of his plays dealing with the figure of Iphigenia. It dramatizes the episode on the island of Taurus where she saves her shipwrecked brother from the barbaric practice of sacrificing the survivors of wrecked ships to the goddess Artemis. Lighter in tone than the later *Iphigenia at Aulis*, the play ends with the reunification of brother and sister and their joint escape from the island. At the level of dramatic structure it seems to offer the possibility of forgiveness and resolution, as Iphigenia returns to her family and her people.<sup>11</sup> It is difficult to imagine, however, that an Athenian audience familiar with the larger narrative picture of the mythical cycle of the House of Atreus, could observe the play without being aware of the implicit comparisons being drawn between Iphigenia's efforts to save her brother from human sacrifice in Taurus, and her own treatment at her father's hands in Aulis. This sense of double standards is expressed quite explicitly by the 'barbarian' King Thoas, who, on hearing that Orestes has killed his mother declares, 'By Apollo, no-one would have dared this even among the barbarians'(Euripides 2000: 34). The play has been interpreted as a thinly disguised critique of Greek supremacism through its exploration of the concepts of barbarity and civility.<sup>12</sup> It is interesting in both literary and historical terms that Euripides should choose Iphigenia's story - a story pushed to the margins of mythic tradition by epic accounts of the Greek campaign in the Trojan War - as a vehicle for scrutinising the lines drawn between barbarity and civility.

---

<sup>11</sup> Sommerstein suggests that with its 'pure' tone, and 'exhilarating entertainment', *Iphigenia in Taurus* finds its true dramatic successors in New Comedy. Sommerstein, Alan H. (2002) p.58

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Edith Hall's commentary: 'Superficially Euripides seems to take every available opportunity to contrast Greek valour with barbarian cowardice, Greek cunning intelligence with barbarian gullibility, and Greek sensibility with barbarian savagery. (...) Yet on a deeper level the play presents a greater challenge to unthinking Greek ethnic supremecism than any other text of the fifth century.' Introduction, *Iphigenia among the Taurians*, (2000) p.xvii.

The timing of the composition of Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis* is not without political significance. In 416 BC the Athenians attacked the rebel island of Melos, which did not want to lend military support to the Athenian war effort, killing all its male inhabitants and selling the women and children as slaves. This is the military context against which the theme of civility emerges as a key concern in Euripides' work at this time. In the spring of 415 BC, a large Athenian army and fleet gathered to set sail to attack Syracuse. Inviting analogies with the mythical thousand ships that sailed for Troy to retrieve Helen and avenge Menelaus' honour, the Sicilian expedition was hailed as 'the greatest ever undertaken by any Greek State' (Vellacott 1972: 8). However the expedition ended disastrously in 413 BC with the destruction of the fleet and the Athenian army's defeat. Militarily, it was a blow from which Athens never recovered. Politically, its effects were equally drastic with an oligarchic coup and the suspension of Athenian democracy in 411BC. It was against this background of rampant militarism that both Euripides and Aeschylus produced and presented their re-workings of the Iphigenia myth. There was open opposition to the war effort in Athens; various political factions opposed it and their opposition could be expressed publicly due to the protection of free speech by the Athenian constitution. Playwrights were in a privileged position in this respect, due to the capacity of their plays to reach and influence large audiences. There can be little doubt that writers like Euripides and Aeschylus were aware that the war was the dominant preoccupation of their audiences at this time. The whole ambience of war-weariness and fear for the future permeates much of Euripides' work in the ensuing decade, as does his exposure of the follies of militarism. Euripides wrote three plays between 409 and 405: *The Phoenician Women*, *Orestes* and *Iphigenia in Aulis*. In all three, according to Vellacott, he 'is addressing citizens who do not remember how or why the war began, who are still fighting because they cannot stop, and who despair' (1972: 8).

The second play by Euripides that draws on the story of Iphigenia is *Iphigenia in Aulis*, first performed in 405 BC, which dramatises Agamemnon's plans to sacrifice his daughter. The text, however, is problematic. Probably written in the last years of his life in voluntary exile,<sup>13</sup> it is generally assumed that he died before its completion and that it was finished by his son and/or

---

<sup>13</sup>According to biographical tradition. Euripides spent the last years of his life in voluntary exile in the Court of the King of Macedonia. Hall, Edith. *Ibid*, p.xiv.

others.<sup>14</sup> This would explain the *deus ex machina* conclusion whereby Iphigenia escapes the sacrificial blade in Aulis, to be transported by Artemis to safety in Taurus. This conclusion is generally perceived as incompatible with the tone and mood of the rest of the text, where scant attention is paid to Artemis' role in the unfolding events – or to the concept of divine will. Euripides' plays show much more interest in human action and responsibility than the preordained – in this case the actions and responsibilities of Agamemnon - whom he characterizes as a man blinded and brutalised by ambition and war. What Euripides shows us, through his characterisation of Agamemnon, is the gap between the professed aims of the Greek campaign against Troy, (the preservation of Greek culture and its political system from destruction at the hands of barbarians), and the reality of the real motive behind it, the quest for power. Aeschylus' characterisation of the Greek King in *Agamemnon* is hardly more flattering. What is most striking in the latter's depiction of the king is that he appears so cut off from his people. Importantly, given the political context against which they were written, both dramatists present Agamemnon as betraying not only his daughter and wife, but also the people of Greece.

#### *From Athens to Managua*

When we read Aeschylus' and Euripides' versions of the Iphigenia myth in the context of the long and increasingly unpopular Peloponnesian War, we uncover many points of comparison with the political context in which Najlis wrote her *Cantos de Ifigenia*. By choosing the figure of Iphigenia as the unifying motif of her 1991 collection, Michele Najlis expresses, like Euripides and Aeschylus, the tragic gap between political leadership and the *polis*. Her *Cantos de Ifigenia* invites analogies between the story of Iphigenia and the decline of Sandinismo and the electoral defeat of 1990. Two Sandinista protagonists whose political leadership grew from their military roles in the FSLN, were Daniel and Humberto Ortega; like brothers Menelaus and Agamemnon, the Ortegas could also be said to represent the domination of civic life by militarism. The Sandinista electoral campaign of 1990 centred on the military record of Daniel Ortega who was presented in the Sandinista press of the time as the *gallo* or fighting-cock; his discourse was unremittingly militaristic, urging the populace to continue to support the war effort against the US-backed counter-revolutionary forces that had mounted an offensive from the border with Honduras. Ortega and his campaigners were apparently unaware of the degree

---

<sup>14</sup> This tradition is acknowledged by both Sommerstein, A.H. (2002) p.49 and Vellacott, Philip (1972), p.8.

of war-weariness that was endemic in the country. Whether blinded by personal ego and the pursuit of power, or by the genuine belief that victory in the Contra War was a possibility, the victors of the Revolution, like Agamemnon in both Euripides and Aeschylus' plays, failed to provide the kind of leadership that Nicaragua needed in 1990.

If, in *Iphigenia in Aulis*, the ignobility the war is embodied by Agamemnon, the brutality of its execution is left in no doubt by Euripides' repeated references to the Greek troops as an unruly, mutinous and superstitious mob. When the Chorus predicts how the Greek troops will behave in Troy there is no sense of heroism or glory:

There will be heads forced back, throats cut;  
Streets stripped, every building gutted and crashed;  
Screams and sobs from young women,  
And from Priam's wife;  
And Helen daughter of Zeus  
Shall learn what it is to leave a husband.  
God grant that neither I nor my children's children  
Ever face such a prospect  
As Lydian and Phrygian wives will see awaiting them  
When they sit, glittering in gold, before their looms  
And ask each other, 'Who will be the man  
Who twists his hard hand in my silken hair  
And like a plucked flower drags me away  
While my tears flow hot and my home burns?' (Euripides, 1972: 395)

Euripides' interest centres on the victims of war, not its perpetrators, as demonstrated by his choice of Chorus – young girls from Chalcis – who express the empathy of potential victims. They identify with the women of Troy, knowing that if the tables were turned, they too would be defenceless, helpless victims.

A similar degree of empathy between women is also expressed by Michele Najlis in the first poem of her collection, 'Oficios de mujer'<sup>15</sup> a poem whose importance for the poet is signalled by the fact that it opens the book and is given the status of a prologue in the section-title 'A manera de prólogo'.

---

<sup>15</sup> As Kaminsky points out, the dedication of this poem to Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz appears to locate the poems within a context of Latin American feminist writing. Kaminsky (1995) p.48.

Aprendimos los oficios del amor y del silencio  
de la terca soledad y de la angustia  
el oficio del temor y de la muerte  
el duro trabajo de apuntalar los sueños.

Aprendimos el oficio de tinieblas y abandono  
el trabajo del verso  
el canto gregoriano  
el mundo misterioso de los Astros  
el ritual inexorable de la espera  
las ceremonias del miedo y del valor  
los secretos del arco y su fleche impredecible  
de la noche y del fuego que la alumbró.

Aprendimos la alegría  
la sonrisa  
la luz y las tinieblas  
la magia de la ciencia  
el árbol, la manzana, el paraíso,  
la serpiente, las aves,  
los mitos, el enigma.

Aprendimos los oficios de los hombres  
y arrebatamos otros  
que estaban destinados a los dioses. (Najlis 1991: xvii)

The speaker of the poem clearly identifies with a collective feminine subject, here presented as a collective novice, having served many apprenticeships in 'los oficios de los hombres', from music and poetry to religion, science and war. Again, echoing Euripides in his *Iphigenia among the Taurians*, there are echoes of Iphigenia's defiance of divine will or a preordained fate, when the poem ends with an image of empowerment and defiance, of women snatching the work of the gods for themselves.

There are important differences between the approaches to the mythical narrative of Iphigenia's sacrifice in the various re-tellings of the story by the Athenian tragic poets. One is the question of perspective: while Euripides strives to give the victim's perspective and allows Iphigenia to address the audience directly, Aeschylus chooses not to dramatise her person, but has a Chorus of the Elders of Argos give an account of how she is bound and gagged on the sacrificial altar that is as brutal as it is unflinching.

The prayers go up. Her father  
 Gives the signal. Iphigenia  
 Is hoisted off her feet by attendants –  
 They hold her over the improvised altar  
 Like a struggling calf.  
 The wind presses her long dress to her body  
 And flutters the skirt, and tugs at her tangled hair –  
 ‘Daddy!’ she screams. ‘Daddy!’ – [...]

Hands are cramming a gag into her mouth.  
 They bind it there with cord, like a horse’s bit.  
 Her lovely lips writhe at the curb [...]

Now rough hands rip off her silks  
 And the wind waltzes with them [...]

She recognizes her killers –  
 Men who had wept  
 To hear her sing in the home of Agamemnon. (Aeschylus 1999:15)

In this way, Aeschylus gives greater emphasis to her victimhood: she is passive, visible only to the audience through the accounts of others, her character mute, a dumb animal to the slaughter. In Euripides’ account, on the other hand, the dignity of Iphigenia’s demeanour and her willingness to believe that some good will come of her sacrifice, is set in direct contrast with the shameful behaviour of Agamemnon and the ineffectual Achilles.

You must not let one tear fall.  
 Women of Chalcis, chant a hymn to Artemis,  
 Daughter of Zeus, a paen from my sacrifice.  
 Let holy silence be proclaimed throughout the camp.  
 Prepare the holy vessels; let the pure flame blaze  
 With sprinkled barley; let my father pace around  
 The altar, following the sun. I come to give  
 To all Hellenes deliverance and victory! (Euripides 1972: 422)

Where Aeschylus’ account of Iphigenia’s sacrifice excites pity in the reader or audience, Euripides’ Iphigenia inspires a heart-wrenching poignancy. Her acceptance of her proposed sacrifice is not by the audience as passive, but relies on our awareness of the unjust and barbarous nature of that sacrifice. The same can be said of the tone of many of Najlis’ poems in her *Cantos de Ifigenia*, as for example in ‘Canto sacrificial’:

Nadie quiso decirme  
 dónde duele la vida  
 dónde vive la muerte que me acecha  
 y me tienta apasionada,  
 dónde duele este amor que he padecido

tercamente  
como el digno samurai  
que lucha hasta el cansancio con su sombra  
y herido tres veces por el fuego  
acepta finalmente su derrota.

Y pues no es mía la Gloria de Afrodita  
saliendo de las aguas,  
convídame, Ifigenia, a tus bodas  
rituales con la muerte  
para que el viento sople  
una vez más –  
las velas  
de aquellos que siempre nos inmolan. (Najlis 1991: 47)

As a lyric poem, this ‘Canto sacrificial’ resists fixed, narrative interpretation. The exact nature of ‘este amor que he padecido’ remains unspecified; pain is experienced as an existential precondition of life; but whatever its cause, what is most significant about the poem is that the victim of sacrifice has loved ‘tercamente’, consciously choosing, like Euripides’ Iphigenia, this ritual marriage to death. The final lines of the poem are a clear allusion to Agamemnon’s ambitions and his justifications of Iphigenia’s sacrifice as the necessary price to pay for Artemis’s favourable winds, and so to sail his fleet to victory over Troy. A similar tone of dignified but knowing resignation is struck in ‘Las bodas de Ifigenia’:

Subo con paso firme al altar  
del sacrificio.  
Al altar de la muerte que escogí  
con dignidad. (1991: 51)

Here, the sacrificial victim chooses self-sacrifice as an act of will over the role of sacrificial victim to either divine will or the political will of others. In this sense, some of Najlis’ poems appear to echo the dilemma faced by Iphigenia in Euripides’ play: her only choice is whether to die willingly or unwillingly. However the similarities of tone shared by Euripides’ *Iphigenia at Aulis* and Najlis’ *Cantos* should not be allowed to disguise important distinctions. Helene P. Foley points out the problematic nature of Iphigenia’s ‘conversion’ to acceptance of her sacrifice in the play (2001: 124). Before Agamemnon’s speech, where he appeals to the freedom of all Greeks as a rationale and justification for her sacrifice, she can perceive her fate only in personal terms, and appeals to her father for mercy as his daughter. After his speech, however -

she comes to accept her father's appeal to an abstract, impersonal cause and to a glorious death [...] she views her sacrifice as a marriage to Greece. [...] She will save her father and Achilles from the wrath of the army, and the Greek women from rape; obey Artemis' commands and keep the barbarian subservient to Greece. The life of many women is in her view not worth that of one man. (Foley 2001:124)

Stated in these terms, Iphigenia's change of heart certainly appears more like making a virtue of necessity than a genuine conversion.<sup>16</sup> Such an unquestioning espousal of self sacrifice for the military glory of nation or revolution is not to be found in any of Najlis' poems.

### *Sacrifice and Syncretism*

However the issue of self-sacrifice persists. In the third and final section of the *Cantos, Ifigenia en Táuride*, Najlis' poems look more to the spirit of Euripides' *Iphigenia among the Taurians*, stressing the possibility of forgiveness:

Setenta veces siete Ifigenia  
amará de nuevo a aquellos  
que cortaron su cuello en el altar de sacrificio.  
Ningún rencor guardará para Aquiles el guerrero  
que pudo, con sus bodas, preservarla de la muerte.

Ifigenia, en Táuride, seguirá salvando  
fieramente a los que ama,  
aunque de nuevo  
setenta veces siete, ponga su blanco cuello  
en el altar del sacrificio. (1991: 57)

In Euripides' *Iphigenia among the Taurians*, Iphigenia is spared from sacrifice, and by sparing her brother from a similar fate some hope is presented of possibility of breaking the cycle of violence and revenge that plagues the House of Atreus. But here, in Najlis' poem of the same name, there is no such hope. Yes, the poem seems to tell us, forgiveness is possible, but the price of sacrifice is inescapable. Responsibility for others still lies within the persona of Iphigenia. On this point, the observations of C. Fred Alford on the Greek understanding of

---

<sup>16</sup> The suddenness of Iphigenia's 'conversion' in the play was criticized by Aristotle who saw this sudden shift to patriotism as 'unmotivated' in dramatic terms, an argument countered by Foley on the grounds that Aristotle 'no doubt failed to notice that she changes her mind under unbearable pressure from men and authority around her. (...) Like the bride she imagined herself to be, she tries to unite Achilles with her father as well as the factions of the Greek army.' Foley, Helene (2001) p.124.

responsibility are helpful.<sup>17</sup> He reminds us that ‘tragedy means, above all else, that people are responsible without being free’(1992: 127); and that what interested the poets in fifth century BC Athens, was not whether or not a character’s *moira* - their individual portion in life – were fair, but rather, how they conducted themselves within the confines and limitations of those circumstances. A similar sense of responsibility seems to haunt Najlis’ *Cantos*, and contributes to the overriding sense the reader is left with by many of the poems, that the only way to meet the needs of ‘los que ama’ continues to be through self-sacrifice.

The imagery of the poems in this final section draws on an increasingly syncretic understanding of sacrificial narrative, as Najlis draws extensively on biblical narratives and images. But just as her approach to Classical myth is one of interrogation and shifting perspectives, so too her use of the Christian narrative of redemption through sacrifice.<sup>18</sup> In the poems’ expression of collective feminine grief and sacrifice, it is difficult not to hear the experiences of many Nicaraguan women throughout twenty years of conflict. Many saw their children sacrificed and took comfort from their analogous relation to Mary, but unlike the Catholic Marian icon, the *madres combatientes* did not perceive themselves as handmaids or instruments of another’s will. Others departed from the roles allotted to them by Christian and Guevarist scripture when they took up arms as *guerrilleras* and appropriated for themselves the messianic role in the Christian/Revolutionary narrative of bodily self-sacrifice. In doing so, they transgressed all manner of taboos and gendered boundaries because, essentially, they were acting out the role of Christ in that narrative. This complex and intimate relationship between Nicaraguan women and self-sacrifice in the 1970s and 1980s allows Najlis to approach the archetypal figure of Iphigenia from many perspectives. The poems are not limited to the views of either Euripides or Aeschylus, and have the added resonances of the Christian and Guevarist eschatologies of

---

<sup>17</sup> Alford (1992) also stresses the relational, rather than individualistic nature of the Greek understanding of responsibility: ‘The poets’ view of responsibility is familiar; concerned above all else with what we owe the network of relationships put at risk by our actions’, p.127.

<sup>18</sup> Throughout the twentieth century, Latin American revolutionary ideology has drawn extensively on the messianic model of salvation: Castro ‘came down from the mountain’ like a latter-day prophet, and Che Guevara’ formulation of the *guerrillero* as ‘new man’, is founded on the Christian moral code of self-sacrifice for the collective good. The most immediate messianic model for Nicaraguans, however, was their own Augusto César Sandino, who, with his ‘barefoot army’, led a guerrilla campaign against the occupying US marine forces between 1927 and 1932. Sandino’s messianic sacrifice has been immortalised by Nicaraguan poets and song-writers, and his political legacy of messianic nationalism inspired periodic resurgences of resistance to the Somoza dictatorships throughout the 1950s and 1960s.

redemption through sacrifice that are absent from the Athenian tragedies. Because of its profoundly syncretic treatment of sacrifice it is worth returning to the poem 'Ifigenia en Moriah' at this point.

A la hora señalada por los dioses  
emprendí el camino a la tierra de Moriah.  
Al tercer día vi el monte que esperaba  
paciente, mi llegada.  
Sonreí para él como solo sonrío  
la mujer que se despide para siempre.  
En una mano blandí el fuego, en la otra  
el viejo puñal.  
Mis hermanas dijeron: 'Vemos el fuego y el cuchillo  
pero ¿quién sera el cordero?'  
'Todas somos el cordero,' contesté.

Al llegar al lugar indicado por los dioses  
Construí el altar del sacrificio.  
Sobre el altar puse mi cuerpo que nació  
para la muerte. Alcé el puñal afilado  
señalando limpiamente el corazón.(1991: 63)

The poem, as previously stated, draws analogies between the Old Testament account of Abraham's test of faith and willingness to sacrifice Isaac to Yaweh, and Agamemnon's willingness to sacrifice his daughter to his ambition, dressed up as the greater glory of the Greeks and their gods. A tension is quickly established in the poem between the compliance of the 'yo' with her pre-ordained fate, in lines such as 'A la hora señalada por los dioses' and 'Al llegar al lugar indicado por los dioses', and the fact that she builds her own sacrificial altar, lays herself out on it and lays bare her own heart. The presence of 'mis hermanas' suggests a belonging to a sisterhood, a community of women, and echoes Iphigenia's role as one of Artemis' priestesses in Euripides' *Iphigenia among the Taurians*. Here, just as in Taurus, the role of sacrificial victim is subverted: in Taurus Iphigenia deceives Artemis and does not sacrifice her brother; in Najlis' poem the speaker's response to the question 'who will be the lamb', is the rather chilling response that they are all sacrificial victims. However, at the point in the poem where the speaker is about to sacrifice herself, in a turn reminiscent of the Dea ex machina intervention by Artemis in Aulis, the poem undergoes a dramatic change of direction. In the mythical source, Iphigenia is magically transported to Taurus; in Najlis' poem, the victim undergoes a transfiguration:

Una voz dentro de mí dijo entonces mi nombre  
el que quise escuchar como un murmullo  
desde que abrí mis ojos a la vida,  
el nombre que busqué angustiada en los espejos  
sin sombra ni imagen.  
Mi nombre era mi espejo  
la imagen que me fue negada  
desde antes de nacer.

Alguien con mi voz dijo mi nombre.  
El gólem entonces bajó el brazo  
y comenzó a florecer. (1991: 64)

Death is mysteriously transcended by the revelation of the self-sacrificing victim's true identity, which now addresses her in a voice she has struggled to hear from birth. This 'alguien con mi voz', this new self, speaks her name, and the poem ends with an image of re-birth and new beginnings. The self-sacrificing 'yo' is revealed to have been an automaton-like figure, incapable of independent thought or action, like the golem of Jewish legend. In the final stanza of the poem, instead of plunging the sacrificial knife into its own heart, the golem responds to the true voice of the 'yo', lowers its arm and bursts into flower (Ashliman 1999). The cycle of sacrifice is broken; the identity of the victim and her sisters is no longer defined by self-sacrificing acts. The bittersweet tone of many of the poems in this final section of the book conveys grief at what has passed, an acknowledgement of the complex dynamic of collective sacrifice, and a reluctance to apportion blame.

### *Poetry and 'the Re-creation' of Language*

The emergence of Nicaraguan poetry onto an international stage at the turn of the twentieth century through the works of Rubén Darío, coincided with a perceived need in the Central American Region to clearly define and defend national sovereignty – whether cultural or territorial – against expansionist US foreign policy. Poetry continued to be a favoured vehicle for the expression of national identity throughout the twentieth century, most notably in Pablo Antonio Cuadra's seminal collection *Poemas Nicaragüenses* (1934). It should not be forgotten that the Sandinista movement saw itself as part of an ongoing nationalist project whose long-

term aim was to free Nicaragua from nefarious political interference from outside its national boundaries. In his study of nationalism and nationalist movements, *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson associates what he called 'the communal function of language' with anthemic, celebratory expression, the suggestion being that these 'occasions for unisonality' (1984: 143) are therefore more easily located in times of struggle, insurgency and victory than in periods of demoralisation and defeat. Underlying this assessment, there appears to be an assumption that experiences of defeat, crisis or trauma resist communal expression – that each individual is locked by pain into a cell of non-expressivity, analogous perhaps to the isolating effects of physical pain on the individual as described by Elaine Scarry in her seminal study, *The Body in Pain* (1985). Perhaps, after the Sandinista's electoral defeat in 1990, it was the loss of this sense of 'unisonality' in Nicaraguan society that inspired Najlis to look to older archetypes as a means of both individual and collective self-expression. Whatever the motives, the result in *Cantos de Ifigenia* is a collection of poems that exemplify in a very imaginative and innovative way, that very 'communal function of language' that Anderson alludes to. The poems invite various interpretations of a socio-political nature; they simultaneously invoke inner and outer realities, individual and collective experience.

In the late 1980s Barbara Harlow's *Resistance Literature*, brought Central American literature of the 1970s and 80s to the attention of many North American and European Academics. In it she argues that the very nature of the language and symbolism deployed by 'politically engaged' poetry of the period makes it difficult for the genre to break with historical events and inherited value-systems. The implication is that poetry of resistance is so inexorably tied to the past through its symbolic and expressive legacy, that in a sense it is politically suspect, a potentially conservative genre: 'The poems of organized resistance movements struggle to preserve and even to redefine for the given historical moment the cultural images which underwrite collective action'. Whereas narrative prose, she feels, has a better chance of breaking inherited moulds and modes of expression: 'narrative by contrast analyses the past, including the symbolic heritage, in order to open up possibilities for the future' (Harlow 1987: 82). This suspicion that the symbolic legacy of poetic expression may be trapped in cycles of inherited meaning – ultimately preventing an expressive or political break-out - has always struck me as rather limited, as it fails to allow for the potential for subversion of old symbolic orders within poetic expression. It is a view that would not be shared, I suspect, by 'engaged'

Central American poets who see themselves as part of a lyric tradition dating back to José Martí and Rubén Darío and for whom poetry has always been the favoured medium for expressing the possibility of new social and political structures. It is pertinent to quote Jean Franco's reminder that 'It was poetry rather than the realist novel that narrated Latin America's fragmented history as an epic adventure, with the poet, not the politician, as prophet'(Franco 2002:4). While much poetic symbolism may be inherited, it is the very utopian nature of poetry - its striving for new forms of expression - that makes it compatible with forces of social change. Seen from Harlow's perspective, the dependence on inherited symbolic orders in Najlis' *Cantos de Ifigenia* would have to be read as politically conservative. I would argue that her conflation of the Sandinista and Christian discourses of sacrifice with the mythical archetype of Iphigenia challenges many assumptions about the possibilities and politics of poetic language. Her *Cantos de Ifigenia* 'reinterprets', in Ricoeur's terms, the myth of Iphigenia for a late twentieth century readership in a war-torn Central American country. The poems also, crucially, contribute to what Ricoeur describes as 'the re-creation of language':

Language has lost its original unity. Today it is fragmented not only geographically into different communities but functionally into different disciplines – mathematical, historical, scientific, legal, psychoanalytic etc. It is the function of a philosophy of language to recognize the specificity of these functions [...] But this is not all. Hermeneutics is also concerned with the permanent spirit of language. By the spirit of language we intend not just some decorative excess or effusion of subjectivity, but the capacity of language to open up possible worlds. Poetry and myth are not just nostalgia for some forgotten world. They constitute a disclosure of new and unprecedented worlds, an opening onto other possible worlds. That is what I mean by the re-creation of language (Ricoeur 1982: 265).

### *Conclusion*

The capacity of myth and archetype to provide a means of expressing both individual and collective trauma was not something that Euripides or Aeschylus needed to be reminded of. Theatre in fifth century BC Athens, like poetry in twentieth century Nicaragua, was the preferred genre for the exploration of themes such as the corrupting effects of power, the nature of justice, the limits of civility, and the effects – both political and personal – of betrayal and revenge. The fact that their plays were experienced as live spectacle and social event obviously enhanced the effectiveness with which they aired their views on the affairs of state, albeit

obliquely, through the analogies of mythical narratives. Indeed, this oblique form of communication can have a more powerful effect on the reader or audience precisely because it requires us to extract meaning for ourselves. Like Aeschylus and Euripides, Najlis turns to the unfixed, varying narratives of the sacrifice of Iphigenia and its function in the Trojan wars, as a means of exploring personal and communal trauma. Nicaragua in 1990 met all the criteria of Ricoeur's 'boundary situations' that compel a society to look to 'that mythical nucleus which ultimately grounds and determines it'. The question of sacrifice was central to the experience of Nicaraguans in the twenty-year period of revolution and war leading up to the 1990 elections. Michele Najlis' use of the Iphigenia myth, like Euripides' and Aeschylus' before her, allows the reader to investigate the complexities of sacrifice, both within mythic narrative and in our own experiences as members of families, communities and nation. In her *Cantos* we encounter many kinds of sacrificial victim: the passivity of Aeschylus Iphigenia and the resigned dignity of Euripides'; the feminine poetic subjects who consciously choose the agency of self-sacrifice over abject victimhood to either divine will or the political will of others. We learn from the poems that for some, the price of self-sacrifice is an inescapable price to be extracted for the wellbeing of those the victim loves. Only in the final section of the book does the cycle of sacrifice seem to be broken by the syncretic use of the symbolic orders of Hebrew legend, biblical and mythical sources. There is much truth in the statement that 'mythology reflects the pathology of a culture ridden by its guilt',<sup>19</sup> truth in relation to Greek Tragedy and in relation to any modern society engaged in violent conflict or emerging from a war. Surely this is one of the reasons why, in divided and violent societies, writers – whatever their genre - return again and again to these canonical texts. In her *Cantos de Ifigenia*, Michele Najlis, war-weary and disillusioned, reminds us of the inexhaustible social relevance and expressive possibilities of myth.

---

<sup>19</sup> Stanford, W.B. (1976) 'Introduction to Aeschylus', in *The Oresteia*, (Trans Robert Fagles), London: Wildwood House, p.7.

## Works Cited

- Aeschylus, 1999. *Agamemnon*, in *The Oresteia*, trans. Ted Hughes (London: Faber).
- Alford, C. Fred, 1992. *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Greek Tragedy* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press).
- Anderson, Benedict, 1983. *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso)
- Ashliman, D.L. 1999. *The Golem. A Jewish Legend*. <http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/golem.html> (Accessed 9 August 2009).
- Borge, Tomás, 1991. *El arte como herejía* (Donostia: Tercera Prensa).
- Borgeson, Paul, 1984. *Hacia el hombre Nuevo: Poesía y Pensamiento de Ernesto Cardenal* (London: Tamesis Books).
- Euripides, 1972. *Iphigenia in Aulis* in *Orestes and other Other Plays* (London: Penguin Books).
- Euripides, 2000. *Iphigenia among the Taurians* in *Euripides. Bacchae and Other Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Foley, Helene, 2001. *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy* (Princeton, NJ and London: Princeton University Press).
- Franco, Jean, 2002. *The Decline and Fall of the Lettered City. Latin America in the Cold War* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press).
- Gregory, Justina, 1997. *Euripides and the Instruction of the Athenians* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press).
- Hall, Edith, 2000. 'Introduction' in *Euripides. Bacchae and Other Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Harlow, Barbara, 1987. *Resistance Literature* (New York: Methuen).
- Kaminsky, Amy, 1995. 'The Poet after the Revolution: Intertextuality and Defiance in Michele Najlis *Cantos de Ifigenia*', *Latin American Literary Review*, 23. 46: 48-65.
- Mason, David, 1992. 'Women's Participation in Central American Revolutions. A Theoretical Perspective', *Comparative Political Studies*, 25. 1 (April): 63-89.
- Najlis, Michele, 1969. *El viento armado* (Guatemala: Editorial Universitaria).
- , 1980. *Augurios* (San José: Editorial Costa Rica).
- , 1988. *Ars combinatoria* (Managua: Editorial Nueva Nicaragua).
- , 199. *Cantos de Iphigenia* (Managua: Vanguardia).
- O'Kane, Trish, 1990. 'The New Old Order', *NACLA Report on the Americas*, 24 2 (June) 28-36.
- Ramírez, Sergio, 1992. *Confesión de amor* (Madrid: Talasa).
- Reif, Linda, 1986. 'Women in Latin American Guerrilla Movements. A Comparative Perspective', *Comparative Politics*, 18 (January):147-169.
- Ricoeur, Paul, 1982. 'Myth as a Bearer of Possible Worlds.' Interview with Richard Kearney in *The Crane Bag of Irish Studies, 1977-1981* (Dublin: Balckman Press): 260-66.
- Rodríguez, Ileana (1993) *Registradas en la historia. Diez años del quehacer feminista en Nicaragua*, (Managua: Editorial Vanguardia).
- Scarry, Elaine, 1985. *The Body in Pain: the Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Shaughnessy, Lorna, 1995. 'Military Participation and Moral Authority: Women's Political Participation in Nicaragua, 1975-1995', *UCG Women's Studies Review*, 3: 151-165.
- Sommerstein, Alan H., 2002. *Greek Drama and Dramatists* (London and New York: Routledge).
- Stanford, W.B., 1976. 'Introduction to Aeschylus', in *The Oresteia*, trans. Robert Fagles (London: Wildwood House).
- Steiner, George, 1984. *Antigones*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press).
- Vellacott, Phillip (trans.), 1972. 'Introduction' in *Orestes and other Other Plays* (London: Penguin Books).
- Zamora, Daisy (ed.), 1992. *La mujer nicaraguense en la poesía*. Managua: Editorial Nueva Nicaragua.