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Migrating Myths: From Greece to Nicaragua, Mexico and Ireland.

My interest in Greek mythology began in Managua. In 1993 I spent four months of a sabbatical in Mexico and Central America, reading and learning about literature by women in the context of the Central American Revolutions of the 1970s and 1980s. Peace processes or attempts at reconciliation were underway in Northern Ireland, Guatemala, Nicaragua and El Salvador at the time, and I was interested in hearing the viewpoints of women activists and artists. A group of women poets closely associated with the Sandinista Revolution were of particular interest, among them Gioconda Belli, Vidaluz Meneses, Michèle Najlis and Daisy Zamora. In addition to their literary activities they had all been active participants in the Revolution and had held administrative posts under the Sandinista Governments of the 1980s. At the first International Conference of Central American Literatures (CILCA) in Granada, Nicaragua, in February 1993, Michèle Najlis read from her collection, *Cantos de Ifigenia* (*Songs of Iphigenia*) (Najlis, 2015) and spoke memorably about feelings of personal and collective failure that dominated the mood in Nicaragua in the years following the electoral defeat of the Sandinista Government in 1990. Najlis' poems express an acute awareness of the sacrifices made for the Revolution, particularly by women. I was moved and intrigued by the ways in which she employed the figure of Iphigenia to embody those sacrifices

I have always been fascinated by the question of where we write from. Our early life experiences can have an enormous impact on the choice of subject matter for any writer. I was a child when the 'Troubles' broke out in Northern Ireland in the late 1960s, and I lived there through the difficult years of the 1970s and 1980s. At no point in my life did I make a conscious decision to write about conflict, either in my poetry or academic research, but there is no denying its presence in both. It found ways of creeping into my work when I starting writing poetry in the late 1990s, perhaps because the Peace Process was underway at the time; perhaps because ten years of living outside the North had given me sufficient distance; perhaps becoming a parent also impelled me to reflect on my childhood. 'The Troubles' came into my work, then, in a variety of ways in different poems. Some were inspired by memories of personal or family experiences. Others were more surprising. For example, I didn't expect to find a connection between events in Northern Ireland and Greek Tragedy. Twenty years ago I didn't know very much about the Classics, but in my quest for ways to write about public, social subjects such as political violence or betrayal, I have found, like many writers before me, a rich source of metaphor in Classical myth.

A poem from my first collection that brings together politics and family relationships is 'Antigone'. The poem is dedicated to Jean McConville, one of Northern Ireland's 'Disappeared' who was abducted and shot by the IRA, leaving 10 children who were all taken into care. At the time I wrote the poem her daughter was leading a campaign to find her body, and those of other IRA victims, and called to mind Antigone's defiance of Creon when she gives her dead brother the burial rights the King has forbidden.

Antigone

*You have dishonoured a
living soul with exile in the tomb. (Sophocles)*

In memoriam Jean McConville

The last time I saw you, daughter,
 you were coming back from the shop;
 you didn't even drop the messages
 and only broke into a run
 after they bundled me into the car,
 the shopping clutched to your breast.
 Rumour seeps onto the streets
 like poisonous gas, corrupting the dead.
 My memory, buried alive,
 scrapes at earth and stones
 with nails that keep growing.
 Alive and still unheeded,
 your requests always untimely
 in the ears of important men. Too young
 you learned about the silence of the grave,
 looking down for signs.
 And my bones lit up the dark soil
 like a portentous constellation
 neither I nor my children can read.
 Antigone, speak to us now,
 raise your voice above
 the trite moralities of the Chorus.
 We know the price we have paid,
 can you tell us what it is
 we have bought? (Shaughnessy 2008: 43)

Sophocles' *Antigone* is a play that has been used in many political contexts over the years to explore the nature of tyranny and resistance: by Jean Anouilh in Vichy France in 1944; Tom Paulin in Northern Ireland in 1995; Miro Galan in Croatia in 1990, to name just a few (Steiner, 1984). In my academic work, I have become very interested in the potential of classical figures to act as archetypes of resistance and dissent. However, I am drawn more to the ambiguities of Euripides' characters than the certainties of Sophocles'. Euripides' characters are much more 'slippery'; they constantly shift position and it is difficult to pin down his own point of view in his plays. Having said this, his *Trojan Women* is a play that is today generally read as expressing anti-war sentiments, and many characters in his other plays oppose militarism. This is undoubtedly related to the fact that he lived through the protracted Peloponnesian Wars (431-404 BCE) and witnessed the decline in Athenian democracy that they produced. There is a tradition that Euripides lived out the last years of his life in voluntary exile. In another poem from my first collection I imagine him as a war-weary old man writing letters to Athens from Macedonia. The young girl the poem alludes to is Iphigenia, the subject of his late play, *Iphigenia in Aulis*, which dramatizes the events leading up to Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter to Artemis to gain favourable winds for the campaign in Troy.

The point I wish to make is that while the poem is not about me, or my experiences of living in a period of conflict, those experiences gave me a 'way in' to this subject matter; it was not difficult for me to imagine the perspective of an old man who had seen too much death, and had tired of patriotic jingo-ism.

Euripides Writes to his Pupil from Exile in Macedonia...

Rain-sodden sparrows peck
the last spilt seeds from my doorstep,
my bones ache from the damp.
I wish I could summon
in my heart such courage
as I penned in the young girl's mouth, who,
knowing the winds would not change
for any miracle or sacrificial blood,
that men would set a thousand sails
against their better senses,
laid bare her neck to the knife
and shamed the House of Atreus. (Shaughnessy 2008: 44)

The sacrifice of Iphigenia as told by Euripides and many other artists is a profound example of the triumph of militarism over all other public and personal values. According to the myth, after Helen and Paris's departure for Troy, Helen's husband Menelaus persuades his brother King Agamemnon to assist him in the pursuit of his rapt wife. The Greek Lords gather their fleet in Aulis, ready to set sail – not just to recover Helen, but to wage war on the wealthy city of Troy – when a stillness descends. Frustrated by the ongoing absence of wind and conscious of unrest among the troops who follow him in expectation of the rewards of victory, Agamemnon consults the oracle. He learns that Artemis bears a grudge and will not send winds for his fleet unless he sacrifices one of his own family, his eldest child, Iphigenia. In some versions of the myth, such as Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, the sacrifice is relayed in all its brutality, with a vivid description of the young girl being dragged to the altar screaming for her father's mercy. This is the version preferred by some contemporary authors and dramatists who wish to convey the shocking nature of Agamemnon's decision to sacrifice his own child to military ambition (Toibin, 2017). Analogies can be drawn between the story of Iphigenia, the decline of Sandinismo and their electoral defeat of 1990. Two protagonists whose political leadership grew from their military roles in the FSLN (*Frente Sandinista para la Liberación Nacional*) were the Ortega brothers, Daniel and Humberto. Like the mythical brothers Menelaus and Agamemnon, the Ortegas contributed greatly to the domination of civic life by militarism. The Sandinista electoral campaign of 1990 highlighted Daniel Ortega's war record as he was characterised as the *gallo* or fighting-cock, and the discourse of their campaign was relentlessly militaristic. Whether Ortega and his campaigners were unaware of the degree of war-weariness in the country, or genuinely believed that victory in the Contra War was possible, they failed to provide the kind of leadership that would win the 1990 elections.

Like Euripides' plays, Michele Najlis' 'Songs of Iphigenia' are critical of the glorification of war and the militarization of the state; they question the nature of ongoing, fruitless sacrifice, particularly in relation to the women's movement. Women's interests were promoted to an unprecedented degree by the Sandinista Governments of the 1980s. However, many feminist aspirations met insurmountable obstacles: the Contra War swallowed up much of the GNP; there was trenchant opposition from both the Catholic Church and sectors of the FSLN to social reforms that would penetrate the domain of the family. Analyses of political participation by Nicaraguan women in the revolutionary period have tended to emphasize economic participation as the exclusive marker of the extent and nature of their mobilisation in the late 1970s (Mason, 1992; Reif, 1986). I have argued elsewhere that other factors also contributed to the extraordinary radicalisation of women at this time (Shaughnessy, 1995). One such factor that is fundamental to any understanding of Sandinista ideology is religion, as Catholic iconography informed many modes of political action and activism, particularly during the insurrection of the 1970s. Their actions tapped into two deeply rooted affirmations of the value of self-sacrifice in the Catholic

consciousness. The Christian narrative of collective redemption through individual, Messianic sacrifice had been deepened in the collective consciousness by Guevarist ideology. In addition to this, the association of self-sacrifice with motherhood had been deeply embedded by centuries of Marian iconography.

Women had played key roles in the Revolution, both as military participants and political activists, and expected to play a central rather than peripheral role in Post-Revolutionary Nicaragua. However, the need for ongoing self-sacrifice continued to be a dominant social message throughout the Contra War of the 1980s. Women were excluded from military participation in the Contra War from 1983, but the ongoing practice of self-sacrifice by women – whether as activists or in Sandinista Government positions or in their own homes – comes under scrutiny in Najlis' use of the story of Iphigenia's sacrifice in her poems. The escalation of the Contra War in the 1980s made Nicaragua an increasingly militarised state, with 'the defence of the Revolution' its primary aim. A combination of war-weariness, disillusionment and sense of betrayal is captured by Najlis in her poems, as she questions the militarist imperative that again and again leads to sacrifice that brings little gain:

*¿Qué viento agita las velas de mis naves
Mil veces incendiadas y mil veces renacidas
En las playas de mi Troya invencible?* (Najlis 2015: 110-111)

What wind stirs the sails of my ships
A thousand times burned and a thousand times reborn
On the shores of my invincible Troy?

In 'Ifigenia en Moriah' the fact that the sacrificial victim is specifically feminine is clear in the Spanish:

*Mis hermanas dijeron: 'Vemos el cuchillo
pero quién será el cordero?'*
'Todas somos el cordero', contesté. (Najlis 2015: 124)

My sisters said: 'We see the fire and the knife
But who will be the lamb?'
'We are all the lamb', I replied.

And again in 'Canto sacrificial' the sense of inevitable defeat by militarism is evoked by Iphigenia's sacrifice:

*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 –
uan vez más – las velas
de aquellos que nos inmolan.* (Najlis 2015: 116)

Not for me the Glory of Venus
rising from the waves,
invite me, Iphigenia, to the rite

of your marriage to death
so the wind may blow
once again –
the sails of those
who always put us to the torch.

Many rights and guarantees for women had been won under the Sandinista Governments of 1979-90, but the militaristic verticalism of a political party that had evolved from a guerrilla fighting-force had the effect of silencing dissent. The Sandinista women's organisation AMNLAE (the Luisa Amanda Espinosa Association of Nicaraguan Women, named after the first female combatant to die in the guerrilla campaign against the dictator Somoza) gradually lost touch with its base. In part this was due to the immediate demands of the war-effort, but also because of the blurring of party and state institutions. By the mid 1980s, far from feeding into the Frente's policies from the bottom up, AMNLAE had become another top-down party channel. Given the context of the Contra War, many women activists did not express publicly their criticisms of the party on this and other issues, for fear of appearing disloyal, but the feelings of betrayal and disillusionment that contributed to the Sandinista's defeat in the 1990 elections are captured in Najlis' poems in the metaphor of Iphigenia's fate. Lured to Aulis by her father, Agamemnon, with the promise of marriage to the hero Achilles and the beginning of a joyous new life, Iphigenia discovers when she arrives that all has been a ruse, and that she will be sacrificed to aid the Greek campaign against Troy. Burdened by the responsibilities of heading families in the absence of partners and fathers, of work, activism and the grief of losing loved ones in a second decade of conflict, many Nicaraguan women shared the sense of despair expressed in Najlis' lines: there seemed to be no end to sacrificial winds to fill the sails of armies, and no end to the 'collateral damage' they would cause.

Myths have the habit of migrating across time and space. Each myth houses its own set of archetypes that can be drawn upon when required. This is particularly true in what Paul Ricoeur has described as "boundary situations" such as war, when "the whole community is put into question", a point I have considered elsewhere in relation to Najlis' work (Ricoeur 1982, Shaughnessy 2012). For example, throughout the twentieth century, the story of Antigone was repeatedly employed as a political metaphor for resistance to authoritarianism. The story of Iphigenia, it appears to me, is often employed as a metaphor for 'collateral damage', the deaths of civilians (many of whom are women and children) in the interests of militarism. The seeds planted by reading Najlis' *Songs of Iphigenia* in 1993 lay dormant for almost twenty years before they began to grow and bear fruit in my own poetry and academic research. I have subsequently published work on Najlis' poetry (Shaughnessy, 2012) and on the extraordinary poetic drama by Mexican writer Alfonso Reyes, *Ifigenia cruel (Cruel Iphigenia)* (Shaughnessy 2015, 2017). I am fascinated by the political resonances of this myth for different writers at key political periods of transition or, to use Ricoeur's term, "boundary periods". Both these Nicaraguan and Mexican writers draw on the Iphigenia story in a post-revolutionary context. Both works display a rejection of militarism and the concept of military solutions to political problems; both reject the sacrifice of the most vulnerable (women and children) for the sake of military victory; both are infused by a sense of betrayal that is both individual and collective. My third collection of poems, *Anchored* (2015) includes a section of poems entitled "The Injured Past" that revisit sectarian killings in mid-Ulster in the mid-1970s. It was inspired, in part, by the high quality of investigative journalism of the last decade and its revelations which shocked me to a degree I found disturbing – not just by virtue of the hideous actions they revealed, but also the fact that the truth had been hidden for so long. I deliberately placed this section next to my "Aulis Monologues", a series dramatic monologues based on the sacrifice

of Iphigenia, to stress the timeless nature of victimisation, political scapegoating and sacrifice. They are very deliberately positioned side by side, emphasizing the continuing relevance of subjects such as betrayal and sacrifice in our political environment. Shortly after the book was launched, Galway-based director, Max Hafler, asked if I would expand on the monologues with a view to creating a stage performance. We worked with a cast of three on *The Sacrificial Wind* which was staged as part of the NUI Galway *Arts in Action* Programme in November 2016 and the *Cúirt International Festival of Literature*, April 2017. The work is made up of a series of monologues by participants and witnesses to the sacrifice in Aulis. Here, two Greek Footsoldiers give their perspective on the eve of the sacrifice:

- S1: Blame is a coin passed down from hand to hand:
 it starts off hidden in the fists of powerful men
 but like most things they want to be rid of
 it finds its way down here to the likes of us.
- S2: I'll give you an example. Helen takes off with Paris
- S1: - Good riddance I've heard some say –
- S2: But her husband, a powerful man, gathers the lords
 and all their ships, all prepared for war
 when out of nowhere an eerie stillness descends.
 We wait. Temperatures rise. We wait some more.
 Supplies run down. The men wager and squabble.
 Nature won't comply so Agamemnon sends Calchas
 to go find out the gods' true intentions.
 The priest comes back with sly and sinister counsel.
 Artemis bears a stubborn grudge, he says,
 there'll be no wind till Agamemnon pays a price
 with his own kin. I'll grant you
 it's not a choice a man would ask to face,
 but it was clear to all of us which way it would go.
 Agamemnon was already itching to get out of Aulis,
 in his own mind he'd waved to his family on the quayside,
 he was miles out to sea and sailing for Troy.
- S1: Next thing, we hear the officers muttering -
 'Years of loyal service... No thanks... Badmouthed
 on the eve of a campaign', while Calchas drip-feeds
 hints in high places, 'The men couldn't be trusted,
 the anger meant for Troy could climax too soon,
 all that frustration spurting out prematurely.
 Who knows? They could even harm their own people.'
 As if we couldn't tell friend from foe.
- S2: In the end it wasn't us who harmed our own.
 Agamemnon had to pass on the blame,
 couldn't be seen to make a free choice,
 couldn't shoulder the guilt for his daughter's death.

S1: So the coin passed down, hand to hand.
 It was tarnished by the time it came to us,
 the rank and file. It always is.
 It turned our fingers black. (Shaughnessy *Anchored* 2015: 46)

Following Euripides' lead, I try to expose 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 real motives driving it, whether conscious or unconscious: the quest for power. The choice of form, where each character addresses the audience directly, giving their perspective on the events at Aulis, encourages a sense of audience involvement as we too become witnesses and onlookers. Our role in Iphigenia's sacrifice is argued forcefully by Agamemnon, who takes issue with his negative characterisation by Euripides:

Magic or moral high ground?
Time the playwright made up his mind.
He wants to keep the crowd happy
and still make them think, so he knocks them out
with his gimmicky goddess and expects them
to go home debating the deeper moral lesson of the tale.
He dresses me up as the villain of the piece
who slays his own child for blind ambition.
Not so blind. I've seen more blood than I'd like
but try as he might with his weasel words
to make the you hate me, you understand
what it is I have to do.
You know what happens to a conquered people
and you don't want it for your own.
So Calchas comes up with the perfect plan
that lets you off the hook: I let my child die
so you don't have to.

Child-killer?

You all know that and still you play along,
wave me off to war from the harbour wall,
me and every other soldier Greece will spew out
on seas, on plains and onto the pages of plays;
anything to keep the barbarian at bay. (Shaughnessy *Anchored* 2015: 56)

These final lines have gained a renewed resonance in the context of the recent migrant crisis in the Mediterranean. Like Euripides, Najlis and Reyes, I follow the version of the myth where Artemis intervenes and Iphigenia survives. But for what kind of life? The goddess transports her to Tauris, a strange country where she has no family, no history. Her memories are of a father and society that betrayed and chose to sacrifice her for the sake of military expansionism. There are survivors of violence and trauma the world over who live in a similar hell; not all survivors achieve peace. I have tried to capture something of the migrant and refugees' dilemma in Iphigenia's monologue from Tauris:

I miss my home. Thoughts of it bring a pain
that cuts deeper than the sacrificial blade.
I swallow back the bile that rises
when I think of Agamemnon, blink away

scalding tears when I recall my mother's face.
In my mind's eye I try to see only my home:
no family, no servants, no friends.
I walk through the empty rooms and courtyards
and touch each blessed object as I go:
the squeaking hinge of my bedroom door,
the little pewter cup cook used to give me
when I slipped into the kitchen
after quarrels with my sisters.

I don't understand what the birds are singing in this place,
I don't know what it is they are saying to me
and not one of them comes to my doorstep
when I scatter crumbs.
They will not share the little I have to offer.

The pictures of home in my mind will fade
and I don't know if that is good or bad.
I don't know if I want to hold onto them,
if they are the truth or a lie. (Shaughnessy *The Sacrificial Wind* unpublished)

Underlying these lines is another dilemma for our times: what do we expect the survivors of violence to do with their memories? Forget them? Or remember? Sometimes survival is not enough.

Mythical narratives have the capacity to communicate traumatic experiences with emotive power and immediacy. They do not seek to create coherent argument; analyses will follow, after the story has been re-told. In my creative and academic writing I have discovered that there is pleasure and learning to be extracted from both processes: participating in the ongoing evolution of the tale as a writer, and interrogating its relevance to the world we live in today as an academic. In *The Sacrificial Wind*, Euripides explains to the audience the quandary he faces in writing his play, *Iphigenia in Aulis*:

Is there a right ending for a story like this?
Either way she's a slave to someone else's will,
a young girl, barely visible
in the bigger schemes dreamed up by gods or men.
(Shaughnessy, *The Sacrificial Wind* unpublished)

The last lines in the play are his. Curiously, I found them in the poem I had written ten years previously 'Euripides writes to his pupil from exile in Macedonia'. They invite the audience to find its own re-tellings of the myth Iphigenia, its own interpretations.

This war has lodged itself
in my memory and in my lungs
and nothing I write seems to dock
in the safe harbour of conclusion.
Take this sad tale where you will,
raise its anchor from my heart
and cast it adrift. Clouds

darken the horizon. (Shaughnessy 2008: 44)

It is a dark ending. On hindsight, I suspect my fictionalised version of Euripides may be speaking for me when he poses the question: “Is there a right ending for a story like this?” I struggled to find the right tone, the right note, not wanting to gloss the tale with false hope, but rather challenge the audience to reflect on the ongoing relevance of Iphigenia’s sacrifice and our part, as citizens of a *polis*, in it. In this respect, Najlis’ poems are possibly truer to the spirit of Euripides than mine. Like Euripides, she acknowledges the horror and brutality of war, the ‘collateral damage’ of the sacrifice of civilian lives, but like Euripides, she leaves space for forgiveness and reconciliation. In his play, *Iphigenia among the Taurians*, the tragedian dramatizes the touching reunification of Iphigenia and her brother Orestes in Tauris. Iphigenia has been delivered from the sacrificial altar by Artemis but now she must serve the goddess as her sacrificial priestess and oversee the human sacrifice of any foreigners who intrude on the shores of Tauris. However, when her brother Orestes and his companion Pylades are brought to her to be sacrificed, she tricks the Taurian King and they escape. Just as she was spared the sacrificial knife, she now spares her brother. Such is the constancy of her love of family that she is prepared to forgive the unforgiveable, and return to what remains of a dynasty and society that was prepared to sacrifice her in the pursuit of power and wealth.

*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* (Najlis 2015: 121)

Iphigenia, in Tauris, fiercely continues
to save those she loves,
even if again
seventy times seven, she will place her white neck
on the sacrificial altar.

However, unlike Euripides, Najlis does not present their return to Greece as a happy-ever-after ending. The implication of the poem seems to be that while forgiveness is possible, there is no escaping self-sacrifice. Or perhaps, that love, by definition, will always demand it.

The myth of Iphigenia’s sacrifice gives Najlis, like many writers the world over, a narrative structure within which to explore the complexities and dynamics of sacrifice in all of our lives, whether as members of families, communities or nations. It is a myth that seems particularly suited to the nature of warfare in our times, where the advanced technology of weaponry keeps civilian and military victims at a safe, anonymous distance. The Greek tragedians understood the power of bringing public issues home into the intimate and domestic environment; all their kings and heroes are undone by family dynamics. For countries such as Nicaragua, Mexico and Ireland that lived through internal conflict in the twentieth century, these tragedies continue to touch a raw nerve. I met Michèle in February 2017 when I returned to Nicaragua after twenty-four years. We had exchanged a few emails in the intervening years, and I had sent her the work I had published on her *Songs of Iphigenia*. The depth of feeling and communication that was instantly reignited between us when we met again is difficult to rationalise. I have no doubt it has much to do with our shared experiences of having lived through a period of protracted political conflict and our obsessive need to keep analysing this, as well as our endeavours as writers to not only communicate but in some way transform those experiences. We both live in post-conflict countries that have not entered into formal processes

for justice and reconciliation; deeply divided countries that are still haunted by past mistakes and injustices. Sadly, if Euripides' Iphigenia plays offer a glimpse of a world where forgiveness and divine intervention can lead to reconciliation and peace, our Nicaraguan and Irish Iphigenias suggest that although we may forgive and be forgiven, we still inhabit a political world that is prepared, consciously or not, to sacrifice its children in order to justify its prevailing ideologies, and to present the ideologies and belief systems of others as 'barbarian'.

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