

Shadows of the Gunmen:
Violence and Culture
in Modern Ireland

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Memory, History, Story: Between Poetics and Ethics

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In this paper I want to explore the relation between poetics and ethics as it pertains to the remembrance of time through place. I take as my guide here the hermeneutic model of 'exchanging memories' advanced by my friend and mentor Paul Ricoeur.¹ So doing, I will suggest that certain topographical memorials of historical trauma (and the violent histories behind such trauma) can epitomize an ethics of hospitality, flexibility, plurality, transfiguration and pardon. My chosen example will be the Irish Hunger Memorial in Battery Park in New York City, an interactive monument designed and installed by Brian Tolle in 2001 to commemorate the Great Irish Famines of the 1840s and the subsequent emigrations to North America.

Commemoration is a complicated act; it is imbued with ways of remembering that are neither straightforward nor simple. Commemoration takes shape in both verbal and non-verbal media and it is clearly the physical memorial or monument that elicits the most controversy. Because a physical memorial is basically static, because it has a solidity of presence, issues surrounding the meaning and interpretation of the object (as well as the experience of the viewer) are myriad. At root of the difficulty in commemoration – a difficulty most recently articulated in the struggle to plan a 9/11 memorial – is the question: what is to be remembered? Will the memorial speak to actions of people, or towards a different future? When commemoration is the result of trauma and/or an act of violence, then those root questions become much more ethically complex. The tension at the heart of the ethical difficulty resides in the possibilities of not remembering a significant, traumatic event at all, or remembering in an inappropriate way, a way that devalues or misconstrues the victims of trauma and violence.²

These ethical difficulties find a most potent and continuing articulation in ways of remembering the Holocaust. Films such as Stephen

Spielberg's *Schindler's List*³ and Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*⁴ and the Fortunoff Video Archive⁵ for Holocaust Testimonies are but three diverse ways of commemorating the Holocaust and none are without critical controversy.⁶ All planners, creators and viewers of Holocaust museums and memorials struggle with the need to recognize individual pain and loss, to become part of the memorializing impulse, but also to not ignore the political, historical and ideological conditions of the violent trauma. Commemoration of the Vietnam War is involved in similar difficulties. Interestingly, two scholars who write about the Holocaust and Vietnam celebrate those memorial projects that refuse closure. In 'The US Holocaust Museum as a Scene of Pedagogical Address' Elizabeth Ellsworth examines the pedagogical project of the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC.⁷ The memorial resists closure, a single narrative, a strategy for complete understanding. Ellsworth determines the very success of the Holocaust Memorial in its refusal to overcome the difficulties inherent in such a commemoration. The attempt of such memorials to teach understanding is identified as one of the main pedagogical problems. The permanent exhibit transcends the goal of simple perception by offering a place between the binary of history and memory. In refusing a single narrative, the project opens up the possibility to teach students a relation to the catastrophe that can generate many meanings. Ellsworth praises the memorial as a 'pedagogical masterpiece' in that it can avoid closure: it succeeds in drawing students into its moral imperatives without 'pre-scribed' responsibility. Like Ellsworth, Maria Sturken sees the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial as something that stands between the public and private discourse. Marita Sturken proposes the duality of the word 'screen' in exploring the place of the Memorial. In one sense the screen is a shield to protect American imperialism from the disastrous implications of a futile and violent reality. The other 'screen' is represented apolitically in the bareness of names on black granite. This screen reflects the individual pain and loss, and allows for a possible renegotiation of 'cultural memory'. Sturken's argument, set up in this way, exposes how the construction of a unique memorial provides the veterans with a new voice within the official, national discourse. So it is that issues of discourse, ethics, memory, aesthetics and politics all intertwine in any commemorative project. The Irish Hunger Memorial in Battery Park is no different.⁸

An invitation to mourning

First, a word about the memorial itself. The installation basically consists of an Irish stone cottage transplanted from the west coast of Ireland to Battery Park City at the very heart of downtown New York, not far from where the Twin Towers once stood. The memorial does not attempt some nostalgic retrieval of a quaint Irish past – so often represented by picture postcard versions of the traditional thatched cottage. On the contrary, it seeks to re-imagine the past in its present condition of destitution and ruin. As such, Brian Tolle's installation might best be described as a hybrid construct which serves as both 1) a commemoration of the great Irish famine of the nineteenth century and 2) a site-specific art installation in metropolitan New York in the third millennium marking the ongoing tragedy of world hunger. This double fidelity to separate moments in time provokes a sense of disorientation that prevents the act of memory regressing to some kind of sentimental fixation with the past (what Ricoeur calls 'blocked memory').⁹ By the same token it also prevents the exhibit from serving simply as an exotic curiosity of tourist voyeurism in the present.

This is a famine memorial with a difference. Whereas most conventional commemorations of the Famine featured 'people without land' (usually leaving on ships from Ireland or arriving off ships in the new world), we are confronted here with an uncanny experience of 'land without people'. Though the installation is located at the very heart of one of the world's most populous cities, there are no human beings represented here. As such it recalls the 'deserted village' of Slievemore in Achill Island, County Mayo, which was one of the artist's primary sources of inspiration for the work: a haunting depopulated row of abandoned and decayed stone huts facing out towards the Atlantic. And it is reminiscent in its way of other monuments of historical rupture and ruin – for example, the bare walls of Machu Picchu in Peru or the floating hulk of the *Marie Celeste*. It is a far cry in any case from the idealized portraits of rural Irish cottages by romantic landscape painters such as Paul Henry or James O'Connor.

Tolle's installation resists mystification and mystique by presenting us with a powerful and disturbing sense of material 'thereness'. As we enter the site we are confronted with a fieldstone cottage, transplanted stone by stone from Ireland, and here reconstructed on its own quarter acre of soil in New York City. But it is impossible to feel at home here. This could never be a dwelling for us, contemporary visitors to the cottage. The most obvious reason for this sense of homelessness is no

doubt the memorial's location at the core of a bustling metropolitan cityscape where it is clearly *out of place*, misplaced and dislocated literally and symbolically. And the fact that the cottage and surrounding potato drills are themselves planted on a suspended limestone and concrete base doubly confirms the sense of not belonging. This sentiment of spatial disorientation provokes us, in turn, to reflect on the paradox that our sense of identity and placement in the world often presupposes an acute sense of loss and displacement. As when the Irish Captain McMorris asks 'What ish my nation?' in Shakespeare's *Henry V*,¹⁰ his question betraying the fact that he is preoccupied with his national identity precisely because he has *forfeited* it – he is speaking in the English language and wearing an English army uniform. Likewise, it has often been noted by Irish critics such as Declan Kiberd, Roy Foster and Luke Gibbons that Irish tradition is in many respects an *invention* by modernity.¹¹ Just as our sense of the past is almost always constituted and reconstituted by our present historical consciousness.

This sense of spatial and temporal inversion is compounded here by the fact that the roofless cottage remains un-restored and is exposed to local weather conditions. Unlike most works of art, this installation is half construct and half nature – it is an artificially contrived synthesis of 'real' stone and soil and architectural-sculptural design. The underground tumuli and passageways, by which one enters the cottage from beneath, are further reminders that the cottage has a dark and buried history – recalling not only the Neolithic Irish burial chambers of Newgrange, Knowth and Dowth in County Meath but also the unmarked mass graves of thousands of famine victims in Ireland and elsewhere. The fact that these subterranean passageways are themselves panelled with glass panes covered in various texts and subtexts – historical, political, fictional, rhetorical, spiritual, apologetic, testimonial – further adds to the sense of a plurality of voices and interpretations. Tolle's memorial refuses to yield any quick fix. There is no single, assured access to this placeless place, this timeless time. It cannot be 'naturalized' in the sense of celebrating some literal recovery of a landscape. Yet it cannot be explained away either as a purely 'aestheticized' sculpture residing in some museum space – for the site alters continually with the surrounding weather and climate, one season covered with weeds, potato shoots and wildflowers, another with snow or mud, and at all times registering the odours, reflections, shadows and sounds of the surrounding city. We are thus palpably reminded of the passing of time, of historical fluidity and transience that no monumental fixation can bring to a full stop. The

myth of an eternal Celtic-Mist landscape is demystified before our very eyes.¹²

Not that there were not efforts by certain officials and politicians to perpetuate the myths. On opening the site, for example, Governor Pataki of New York spoke of the opportunity offered here 'to touch the sod of our heritage'; while Mayor Giuliani concluded his inaugural speech with the words: 'May this beautiful Memorial, like Ireland itself, be forever free, forever green.' And some members of the Irish Tourist Board praised the installation's capacity to evoke the 'rolling hills of old Ireland' – conveniently forgetting that the quaint potato field is planted over a slab of concrete and surrounded by High Rises! Certain Irish-American societies and groups were also quick to contribute their own gloss to this sentimentalizing process. Even the Irish government weighed in, at one point offering an authentic 'stone' from every county in Ireland (thirty-two in all, along with an ancient pilgrim standing stone). While Tolle initially resisted such appropriations, he soon came to acknowledge that these readings should not simply be dismissed as inappropriate or misguided. Instead he realized that any *interactive* installation of this kind must learn to incorporate such views into the actual process of the work itself as an open text of interpretation and re-interpretation. Tolle decided, accordingly, to inscribe the deep aspiration of many visitors to relocate the old counties of Ireland by accepting the stones and then placing them at random throughout the landscape. The stones scattered throughout the site thus served to reiterate the role of the stones in the walls and lintels of the cottage itself – that is, to function as 'indices' for the lost meanings and bearings of forgotten dwellers rather than as 'icons' that claim to restore the fetish of an original presence.

Tolle's installation is an invitation to 'mourning' (acknowledging that the lost object is lost) rather than 'melancholy' (refusing to let go of the lost object by obsessively fixating on it).¹³ By soliciting visitors' active involvement with the site, as part of an on-going drama of semantic and symbolic reinvention, Tolle manages to insure that the work remains a work in perpetual progress, intertextually open and incomplete by definition. The fact that new readings and reactions are regularly included onto both the audio-sound track of voices, which visitors hear as they traverse the underground tunnel, and the visual inscriptions on the glass panels, are powerful tokens of Tolle's determination to maintain a process of active and responsible memory. Robin Lydenberg captures this radically hermeneutical sense of Tolle's design in her essay 'From Icon to Index: Some Contemporary Visions of the Irish Stone Cottage' and is worth quoting at length:

Tolle designed the memorial to invite and incorporate the viewer's active engagement with the land and its history rather than with vague nostalgia or the iconography of fixed and sentimentalized stereotypes. One entrance into the memorial leads visitors through an underground passageway up into the ruined cottage . . . The walls of the passageway are constructed of alternating sedimented bands of stone and frosted glass on which official and unofficial testimonies from those who experienced the Famine are cast in shadows. This sculptured layering evokes the geologically and historically sedimentary aspect of the Irish landscape. Hunger is not naturalized or aestheticised here but contextualized historically and politically, giving forceful articulation, for example, to the failure of British officials to alleviate massive starvation. Entering the quarter acre of Ireland through this buried history, viewers cannot simply delight in the landscape as idealized icon: the cottage interior is cramped and exposed, the 'rolling hills' are the remnants of uncultivated potato furrows. Visitors may enter the installation by stepping directly onto the sloping earth and climbing up through the landscape to the ruined cottage and its prospect; there they discover, belatedly, the textual history buried below. Whether the memorial is entered from above or from below, the charm of the landscape and its violent history exist in productive tension.¹⁴

By deterritorializing the stone cottage from rural Ireland and reterritorializing it amidst the alien urban bustle of New York, Tolle is reminding us that the place of trauma is always haunted by a no-place of mourning. Such mourning calls for a letting go of the literal landscape of the past in order to give this past a future, in order to open it to new possibilities of interpretation. In this we could say that the artist is conjuring up the emancipatory potential of the 'Fifth Province'. Ireland, as everyone knows, has four provinces – Munster, Ulster, Leinster and Connaught – but the Irish word for province is *coiced*, meaning a fifth. So where, one might ask, is the fifth since there are only four actually existing as geographical places? The Fifth Province is a placeless place, a place of disposition rather than of position, of detachment rather than attachment. Since the beginnings of Irish myth and folklore it has been acknowledged that it is precisely this Fifth Province that provides a dimension of peace, wisdom and catharsis to the otherwise warring parts of Ireland.¹⁵ Tolle's memorial might thus be said to remind us that all our lives – whether we are Irish or not, emigrants or natives, survivors

or victims – are always haunted by an irretrievable sense of absence and loss, ghosted by a longing for some ‘irrecoverable elsewhere.’¹⁶

Tolle attests to the Fifth Province by insuring that his poetical text – the site as work of art – remains answerable to an ethical context of responsibility. And he brings this about by turning his famine memorial into an intertextual play of multiple readings and perspectives. The hold of a single Meta-narrative of Irish history is thus loosened and liberated into a polyphony of discontinuous and competing narratives. Tolle juxtaposes, in both the written and audio commentaries; statistics about the Irish Famine with equally perturbing facts and figures about other famines and world hunger generally. He mixes snatches of Irish history and politics with snippets of song and poetry. He blends together a variety of vernacular and postmodern art styles – Naturalism, Folk Craft, Conceptual Art, Hyper-Realism, Landscape Architecture, Theme Sculpture, Pop Art, Earth Art etc. Moreover, the fact that the installation can grow and mutate – thanks to the use of climactically sensitive organic materials, and to the deployment of flexible, alterable texts (silk-screened onto strips of clear Plexiglas) – illustrates Tolle’s conviction that historical memorials are themselves subject to change according to the addition of new and alternative perspectives. As Lydenberg writes:

This memorial makes no claim to enlighten visitors with a totalizing narrative of the Irish Famine; the texts create a mixture of facts, political propaganda, and personal experience – the imaginative work of fantasy, desire, and hope. Tolle’s design offers a transitional passageway through fragmented, often anonymous, voices in the embedded texts and an accompanying audio collage, both of which will be revised, updated and expanded periodically in response to continuing crises in world hunger. The narrative is discontinuous, full of gaps and silences; Tolle teases out multiple meanings by placing fragments in shifting juxtapositions rather than in fixed narrative sequence. A heritage industry presentation of history as a recoverable and repeatable past to be fixed ‘like a fly in amber’ is displaced here by . . . a ‘pre-posterous history’ that multiplies uncertainty and doubt. This alternative mode of history calls for an alternative mode of memorial, one that would . . . defy easy readability and consumer satisfaction to communicate instead dissatisfaction, complexity, and a sense of loss.¹⁷

The transatlantic exchange between Mayo and New York, between abandoned stone cottage and postmodern concrete megapolis, solicits a

response of profound questioning and curiosity in most viewers to the site, reminding us that if we pass *from action to text*, in entering this memorial, we return *from text to action* again as soon as we exit the installation – bringing the heightened poetics of remembering that we experience in this placeless place to bear on our ethics of remembering in the real life-world around us.

Finally, we might add that if Tolle's memorial is an intertext in so far as it brings together the diverse idioms of poetics and ethics, and the diverse disciplines of history and geography, it also functions intertextually by relating to a number of what might be termed 'counter-texts' in the immediate or not so immediate environment.¹⁸ One thinks of Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty visible to the south of the waterfront Memorial – both symbols of aspiration and expectation for so many Irish emigrant survivors of the Famine. One thinks of the giant Twin Towers, in whose shadow in lower east Manhattan the memorial was originally constructed and in whose wake it now stands vigil in commemorative commiseration. One thinks of the other Irish Famine memorials in Boston and different emigrant ports of North America, so different and so similar; or the memorials to other historical traumas and tragedies from the Holocaust to Vietnam – in particular the Museum of Jewish Heritage; A Living Memorial to the Holocaust also housed in Battery Park City; or Maya Lin's famous Washington Monument to the Vietnam War dead. One might, indeed, even extend the scope of intertextual reference to include the fictional testimonials of writers like Tomas O'Flaherty and Tom Murphy; or of filmmakers like Scorsese whose representation of Irish emigrant warfare in the *Gangs of New York*¹⁹ reminds us that within earshot of Battery Park stood the old site of tribal battle called the Five Points, a notorious battleground where blocked, fixated memories of vengeance and obsession played themselves out in bloody conflict in the 1860s – Nativists and Hibernians locked in hatred, impervious to the work of mourning, catharsis and forgiveness. It is just such a process of therapeutic working-through (*Durcharbeitung*) that, I would argue, Memorials such as the Battery Park City Famine installation solicit.²⁰

In sum, Tolle's memorial serves, I submit, as a model for a healing exchange of memories. The exchange in question here involves that between indigenous and emigrant, Irish and Irish-American, Irish-American and Anglo-American, Irish-American and non-Anglo American (Asian, African, Middle-Eastern, Hispanic etc). It also involves an exchange between home and abroad, between the old world and the new, between Achill Island and Manhattan Island. And

of course, to move from geography back to history, it involves an exchange – in both directions – between past and present. By refusing to either naturalize or aestheticize memory, Tolle keeps open a crucial critical ‘gap’ that prevents history from collapsing back into a frozen past. His memorial resists being obsessively reified and replicated. Instead, Tolle preserves the gap between Now and Then, Here and There, enabling both poles to transit back and forth between the everyday reality of New York life today and an imaginary place in the minds of those famine emigrants who left it behind over a century and a half ago. It is in this ‘between’ that contemporary visitors to the site may experience what we might properly call a *poetical ethics of memory*.

Ethics, narrative and memory

So how might we relate the case of the Famine Hunger Memorial in New York to a specifically hermeneutic paradigm of memory exchange, mentioned at the outset? In an essay entitled ‘Reflections on a New Ethos for Europe’, Paul Ricoeur outlines just such a paradigm. He shows, first, how this can provide a basis for an *ethic of narrative hospitality* that involves ‘taking responsibility in imagination and in sympathy for the story of the other, through the life narratives which concern the other.’²¹ In the case of memorials such as Tolle’s this takes the form of an exchange between different people’s histories such that we practise an art of transference and translation that allows us to welcome the story of the other, the stranger, the victim, the forgotten one.

Second, Ricoeur shows how this calls in turn for an *ethic of narrative flexibility*. Memorials face the challenge of resisting the reification of an historical event into a fixed dogma by showing how each event may be told in different ways by different generations and by different narrators. Not that everything becomes relative and arbitrary. On the contrary, acts of trauma and suffering call out for justice, and the best way of achieving this is often to invite empathy with strangers and adversaries by allowing for a plurality of narrative perspectives. The resulting overlap may thus lead to what Gadamer calls a ‘fusion of horizons’ where diverse horizons of consciousness may at last find some common ground.²² A reciprocal transfer between opposite minds. ‘The identity of a group, culture, people or nation, is not that of an immutable substance’, writes Ricoeur, ‘nor that of a fixed structure, but that, rather, of a recounted story’. A hermeneutic exchange of stories effectively resists an arrogant or rigid conception of cultural identity which prevents us from perceiving the radical implications of the

principle of narrativity – namely, ‘the possibilities of revising every story which has been handed down and of carving out a place for several stories directed towards the same past’.²³

This entails, by implication, a third ethical principle – that of *narrative plurality*. Pluralism here does not mean any lack of respect for the singularity of the event narrated through the various acts of remembering. It might even be said to increase our sense of awareness of such an event, especially if it is foreign to us in time, space or cultural provenance. ‘*Recounting differently* is not inimical to a certain historical reverence to the extent that the inexhaustible richness of the event is honored by the diversity of stories which are made of it, and by the competition to which that diversity gives rise.’²⁴ And Ricoeur adds this critical point:

the ability to recount the founding events of our national history in different ways is reinforced by the exchange of cultural memories. This ability to exchange has as a touchstone the will to share symbolically and respectfully in the commemoration of the founding events of other national cultures, as well as those of their ethnic minorities and their minority religious denominations.²⁵

This point applies as much to events of pain and trauma (like that commemorated in the Famine memorial) as to events of triumph and glory.

A fourth aspect of the hermeneutic exchange of memories is the *transfiguring of the past*. This involves a creative retrieval of the betrayed promises of the past, so that we may respond to our ‘debt to the dead’ and endeavour to give them a voice. The goal of memorials is, therefore, to try to give a future to the past by remembering it in the right way, ethically and poetically. A crucial aspect of reinterpreting transmitted traditions is the task of discerning past promises which have not been honoured. For ‘the past is not only what is bygone – that which has taken place and can no longer be changed – it also lives in the memory thanks to arrows of futurity which have not been fired or whose trajectory has been interrupted’.²⁶ In other words, the unfulfilled future of the past may well signal the richest part of a tradition; and the emancipation of ‘this unfulfilled future of the past is the major benefit that we can expect from the crossing of memories and the exchange of narratives’.²⁷ It is especially the founding events of a community – traumatic or dramatic – which require to be reread in this critical manner

in order to unlock the potencies and expectancies which the subsequent unfolding of history may have forgotten or travestied. This is why any genuine memorial involves a certain return to some seminal moment of suffering or hope, to the original events and textual responses to those events, which are all too often occluded by Official History. 'The past is a cemetery of promises which have not been kept', notes Ricoeur. And Memorials can, at best, be ways of 'bringing them back to life like the dry bones in the valley described in the prophecy of Ezekiel'.²⁸

A fifth and final ethical moment in the hermeneutics of memory-exchange is *pardon*. If empathy and hospitality towards others are crucial steps in the ethics of remembrance there is something *more* – something which entails moving beyond narrative imagination to forgiveness. In short, the exchange of memories of suffering demands more than sympathy and duty (though these are essential for any kind of justice). And this something 'extra' involves pardon in so far as pardon means 'shattering the debt'. Here the order of justice and reciprocity can be supplemented, but not replaced, by that of 'charity and gift'. Such forgiveness demands huge patience, an enduring practice of 'working-through', mourning and letting go. But it is not a forgetful forgiveness. Amnesty can never be based on amnesia. Amnesty remembers our debt to the dead while at the same time introducing something other, something difficult almost to the point of impossibility, but something all the more important for that reason. One thinks of Brandt kneeling at Warsaw, Havel's apology to the Sudeten Germans, Hume's preparedness to speak with the IRA, Sadat's visit to Jerusalem, Hillesum's refusal to hate her hateful persecutors. All miraculous moments where an ethics of reciprocity is touched by a poetics of pardon. But I repeat: one does not replace the other – both justice *and* pardon are equally important in the act of remembering past trauma. 'To the degree that charity exceeds justice we must guard against substituting it for justice. Charity remains a surplus; this surplus of compassion and tenderness is capable of giving the exchange of memories its profound motivation, its daring and its momentum.'²⁹

It is not difficult to see how this hermeneutical model of memory-exchange relates to the Irish Famine Memorial in New York that we analysed in the first part of this paper. The one thing to add perhaps is that Memorials that are located in places far removed from the original trauma, serve the extra purpose of seeking pardon not only from the victims and survivors of that particular event, but from all visitors to the site. This is where a poetics of narrative fantasy may usefully

complement a politics of historical judgement. For when we dare to visit the memorials dedicated to other peoples and communities (not our own), we are suddenly all famine sufferers, we are all Holocaust victims, and we are all casualties of the Vietnam War. At least for a special, impossible, fleeting moment.