

Cities Without Citizens  
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RUINS/RUNES  
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They got indeed what they could hardly give, a time-honoured conception of humanity in ruins, and perhaps even an inkling of the terms in which our condition is to be thought again.

—Samuel Beckett, "The Capital of the Ruins"

What constitutes the charm of our country, apart of course from its scant population, and this without help of the meanest contraceptive, is that all is derelict....Elysium of the roofless.

—Samuel Beckett, "First Love"<sup>1</sup>

The story still circulates in Ireland that, on his presidential visit to the country, Ronald Reagan asked to be brought to the family home of his grandfather, who was believed to have emigrated from Co. Tipperary at the time of the Great Famine of the 1840s. The presidential calvacade arrived in tiny Ballyporeen, not so much even a village as a "townland" [*baile*], the vestige of an old form of Irish landholding which preserved into the nineteenth century forms of the commons wherein small strips of land were

regularly redistributed among the inhabitants. As was wryly pointed out at the time, Ballyporeen itself is Irish for "townland of small potatoes," and the president's place of origin could scarcely have appeared more humble. With due solemnity Reagan was led to a strip of bogland and shown a small mound that was all that remained of his grandfather's dwelling. Typically, the Irish peasant's home had been a single roomed hut built almost certainly of mud or turf and roofed with reeds or sods. In the course of time, after the departure or death of its destitute and derelict inhabitants, the dwelling would decay back into the bogland from which it had risen, leaving only a slight ridge or hump to mark its passing. Such, it seems, was the fate of Reagan's family home.

What is striking about this anecdote is not perhaps the comical picture of the president's disappointment at not finding there one of those stone thatched cottages that are the staple of tourist brochures, or the satiric or edifying image of power humbled by the sight of its origins in the common muck. It is, rather, the peculiar plausibility with which, in Ireland, local lore might well have retained the memory of what this insignificant bump in the landscape might have been and the names of those who had lived there. One may suspect the possibility that Reagan was being had, if only for reasons of state, in order that the desire of this returning emigrant, representative of his kind, be satisfied. Yet the aesthetic probability of the gesture is nonetheless underwritten by the knowledge that such local memory might indeed persist. While canonical narratives rapidly work to recuperate such an event into a moral history of immigrant success in the promised land of the new world, transforming it into a symbolic moment in a universal history, what lingers is that ineradicable trace, in the land as in local memory, of what has passed away. The trace of the passing is what does not pass on even in its gradual decay.

The Irish landscape is seeded with ruins, multifarious remnants of the disappeared: the contours of ring forts and the angular thrust of the dolmen; the stubs of round towers and shattered castles or abbeys; the

burnt-out shells of great houses and coast-guard barracks. One could even say that it is a landscape peculiarly composed of ruins, where even the grey stone walls that mark the legal fictions of use and ownership, imposing themselves on the older commons, have the appearance of decayed structures. These latter are, in fact, no less the marks and traces of historical violence than are the broken forts and towers whose materials they seem to echo. A landscape of ruins, if not in ruins, the country is intensely readable, littered with runic letters:

Apart from the more or less datable remains of church and rath, castle and cairn, the land is covered with the marks of man's toil. The history of rural Ireland could be read out of doors, had we the skill, from the scrawlings made by men in the field boundaries of successive periods. In them the unlettered countryman wrote his runes on the land.<sup>2</sup>

It is in these most vestigial of ruins—primitive marks and traces of the "unlettered," which seem to occupy the very threshold at which human artifact passes into nature and nature into the artifice of human readings, that we might equally apprehend the lapsing of those very categories that sustain the archaeological and historicist interpretation of landscape and its ruins. For the historicist—whether by profession archaeologist, anthropologist, folklorist or plain historian—ruins mark the foregone stages of a passage from the savage's primitive embeddedness in nature to the full emergence of human rationality expressed in the orderly organization of the land for production or in the complexity of advanced civic relations. Their at times barely perceptible jutting into the present is no more than the sign of an unequivocal pastness, of a being on the very vanishing point of historical time, lodged in an inertness in relation to the present and, by the same token, one with the inertia of a landscape defined by its subordination to human ends. Ireland, indeed, has long been viewed from such a perspective as one

immense ruin, a belated survival in the present of archaic social and cultural formations that have elsewhere been surpassed:

The importance of Ireland is that, thanks to the "time-lag," it has rendered to Anthropology the unique, inestimable, indispensable service of carrying a primitive European *Precivilization* down into late historic times and there holding it up for our observation and instruction.<sup>3</sup>

Held in suspension as a mere object for contemplation, this "Precivilization" is a harmless and passive archaism that puts up no resistance to the modernity that is its fate in the double sense of destination and nemesis. Accordingly, ruins that are the evacuated remnants of human activity dissolve back into natural forms in a landscape that is everywhere reduced to human domination and surveillance. As the actual and active presence of human agents is replaced by their inert residues, the historical narrative converges here with a tourist aesthetic that dissolves the violence of the past into the quasi-natural contours of a now pacified, picturesque landscape. The softened contours of masonry reduced to rubble, overgrown by vegetation and devoid of distinct military or cultic function, blend with those of the land itself to erase the memory of conflict.

The picturesque aesthetic of such a rendering of ruins has its counterpart in the image of the land evacuated of inhabitants that recurs with remarkable consistency in an Irish imaginary that is expressly linked to a reconciling historicism. In an aesthetic contemplation of that land—as if it were mere natural landscape rather than a terrain deeply formed by human labor and conflict—historically based antagonisms are laid in abeyance. The irony of such fantasies is not simply that, in seeking to erase the history of conquest and expropriation in which states, polities, and economies are founded, to dissolve it, so to speak, into the landscape, they in fact merely repeat a longstanding settler colonial myth. This attempt to erase history

also seeks, though with less evident violence than that of the state apparatus itself, to erase the refractory populations that continually remind us of what cannot be assimilated or reconciled to the state. In such moments, utopian longing reveals its roots in murderous desires. The insistence of the removal of the human figure from the landscape is indicative of a premature redemptiveness that would transform the actual "fallen" world of antagonistic difference and domination into an image of reconciliation, but can only do so by way of a symbolic eviction of unwanted human presences. The fetishism of the "cleared" landscape is the correlative of those declarations of *terra nullius* that are everywhere the alibi of settler colonialism.

The relationship between the land and the human figure is telling. Evacuated of human figures, the land becomes the most effective of symbols, an expanse unmarked by boundaries that nonetheless prefigures a reconciled social totality. Yet, at the same time, it marks the anxious failure of a symbolist discourse that is the aesthetic counterpart of historicism with which, formally and epochally, it has deep relations. Both the romantic tradition of symbolism and the notion of universal history "in which historicism culminates"<sup>4</sup> emerge toward the end of the eighteenth century around a related set of concerns with the development and unification of the human figure. It is no accident that this figure, which is the object of universal history, is also defined as the ultimate symbol, embodying and reconciling particularity and universality, matter and spirit, temporality and eternity. "This is," as Walter Benjamin puts it, "the voice of the will to symbolic totality venerated by humanism in the human figure."<sup>5</sup> The evacuation of the human figure and the positing of unmarked land as the primordial symbol of unity—which is a process which recurs with virtually neurotic consistency in colonial discourses—wins its victory over unreconciled historicity at the expense of betraying its incapacity to accommodate either the difference of humans or the inscription of those differences on the worked and divided landscape.

This recoding of the always-preoccupied land as a *terra nullius* performs an aesthetic naturalization of the catastrophic process of clearance

and depopulation that overtook Ireland from the mid-nineteenth century down even to the late twentieth century. Not only starvation but evictions that sought literally to clear the land of what was seen as a redundant population effected this reduction. Between 1845 and 1851, in the course of the Famine, the Irish population fell from around 8.5 million to around 5 million. Perhaps a million and a half people died in the Famine itself, while another two million emigrated to England, the United States, and to Britain's settler colonies. The flow of emigration continued for more than 130 years, with the result that the Irish population remained static at around four million until at least the late 1980s. Such bare and familiar statistics, together with the increasingly conventional appreciation of Ireland as a land of "scant population," natural emptiness, and pastoral wildness, belie the historical violence that underlies them. Neither the subsistence crisis that became the Famine nor the continuing outflow of emigration can be understood apart from the concomitant processes of enclosure, rationalization of capitalist agriculture, and eviction that were prescribed by the linked governmental discourses of political economy and anthropology.<sup>6</sup> The economic and administrative modernization of Ireland was undertaken across this period, and even throughout the post-colonial reaction of the nationalist state, in order to make up post-haste the "time-lag" that Irish cultural difference from Britain had come to represent. From the moment of the Famine itself, when Charles Trevelyan, the treasury secretary in charge of famine relief, declared in 1847 that the crisis had been providential, making way for the emergence of capitalist farming and the proletarianization of the rural poor as wage labor, the reduction of "surplus population" was programmatic. The transformation aimed at the eradication both of the population and of the modes of life and labor that sustained them. The tiny small holdings on which peasant families survived, the "scattered means of production" as Marx describes them in *Capital*, retained certain forms of common ownership and economic reciprocity that were profoundly recalcitrant to capitalist development and had to be destroyed to allow for the concentration of land

and the extraction of surplus value to take place.<sup>7</sup> Identifying the depopulation of Ireland as continuous with the violence of enclosure and consolidation that had, if at a slower pace, undergirded the processes of primitive accumulation in Britain, Marx recognized the savage relentlessness of this colonial desire to empty the country of its population:

The fact is that, as the Irish population diminishes, the Irish rent-rolls swell; that depopulation benefits the landlords, therefore also benefits the soil, and, therefore, the people, that mere accessory of the soil. He [Lord Dufferin] declares, therefore, that Ireland is still over-populated and the stream of emigration still flows too lazily. To be perfectly happy, Ireland must be rid of at least one-third of a million of laboring men...And as l'appétit vient en mangeant, Rentroll's eyes will soon discover that Ireland, with 3 1/2 millions, is still always miserable, and miserable because she is over-populated. Therefore her depopulation must go yet further, that thus she may fulfill her true destiny, that of an English sheep-walk and cattle-pasture.<sup>8</sup>

The relentlessness of Ireland's deliberate depopulation is an effect of the subjectless logic of capital, and there is no doubt that Marx's sardonic account of primitive accumulation and its motives in Ireland converges in this respect at least with historicism's narrative of modernity: the iron rationality of development, historical and economic, takes on the aspect of a determination without alternatives. Domination of nature and of the human becomes, as Adorno and Horkheimer suggested, a form of fate as terrible and inevitable as its archaic personification. Reason devolves into myth as human agency succumbs to impersonal forces.<sup>9</sup> The idyll of historicism that transforms ruins into picturesque landscape, like the idyllic myths of Marx's bourgeois economists, belies the violence that is its necessary condition. *Et in Arcadia ego*: the ruin is the mythic equivalent of a submission to the



fatality of history, a submission that is no doubt the interested celebration by the victor's representatives of the destruction upon which they rise.

Ruins, indeed, have the structure of myth, though not always in the same sense or with the same valence. And they are subject to the paradox of myth. Detached from a given moment of the past, they float free into relation with the present, fragments of an archaic past that continue to work in and on the present. The meaning of a ruin is thus not exhausted by whatever archaeology assigns to it a cause, a function, a date in the recorded time of historicism. Indeed, such an archaeology, as a science of origins, would miss, in its exact reason, the penumbral meanings that accumulate around the ruin that has been incorporated in the landscape, even as it peels back the layers and accretions of contingent time to lay bare the ruin in the purity and abstraction of its pastness. Similarly, the historicist mentality regards the mythic as archaic, as the recurrence of mental processes and attitudes that should have been developed out of culture by reason, and whose recurrence is the power of a baleful return of the past. Such thinking disavows the relationality of the ruin in the present, the form of its living on in the present, with the present. The ruin is that part of a past that lives on to find its place and meaning in a relation with the present, as myth is that element of the meanings of the past that find significance still in the present, if only, though not solely or always, by representing the dimension of loss.

Myth in this sense is not defined by its content, but by its temporal structure. That is, where Adorno and Horkheimer emphasize the anthropomorphic tendency that defines myth for them as against the abstraction of reason, I would stress, against that still historicist division of the mythic (as past and as a relation to the past) from the enlightened, precisely what historicism itself distrusts as myth, its appearance as the rhythmic return of the past in an uneasy haunting of progress by the ghosts of its unfinished business.<sup>10</sup> It is the persistence and insistence of the archaic that reason should have eradicated, exhibiting the tenacity of

irrational attachments and the violence of primordial drives. The putatively archetypal content of the mythic is less significant, however readily invoked, than its unruly capacity to return. In this, of course, the mythic shares the characteristics of the unconscious to which, on a social and an individual level, it is generally assimilated. In a certain sense, the content of both is subordinated to the rhythmic opening and closing that allows elements of a past that have been subject to traumatic repression to surface. It is damaged societies, as it is damaged individuals, that are thought to be driven by the unconscious forces that myth articulates. Insofar as historicism itself participates in the rationalization that represses the past and reduces its multiple forms to a single, serial narrative, it must perforce envisage the mythic as pathological. Where myth was, historical time must come, to lay the past to rest and to cure its violence with reason and progress. The therapeutic drive of historicism, which relates the universal narrative of civility, is thus peculiarly repressive, seeking less to release the past in the unruliness of its ever-present possibilities than to discipline it.

It is in such terms that Ashis Nandy theorizes the relation between myth and history after Gandhi. Far from representing an entrapment in a primitive and atavistic past, myth performs the constant reinscription of the possibilities contained in a past that is grasped as perpetually present and insistently unclosed. As against western historicism, with its determinate and singular unfolding of time as progress, myth allows for a continual recurrence of and to the past as a repertoire of redeemable possibilities:

In Gandhi, the specific orientation to myth became a more general orientation to public consciousness. Public consciousness was not seen as a casual product of history but as related to history non-causally through memories and anti-memories. If for the West the present was a special case of an unfolding history, for Gandhi as representative of traditional India

history was a special case of an all-embracing permanent present, waiting to be interpreted and reinterpreted....The idea of "determination" could apply to the present or to the future, as the notorious Indian concept of fatalism implies; in the past there are always open choices....Gandhi implicitly assumed that history of *itihasa* was one-way traffic, a set of myths about past time or the *atit*, built up as independent variables which limit human options and pre-empt human futures. Myths, on the other hand, allow one access to the processes which constitute history at the level of the here-and-now. Consciously acknowledged as the core of culture, they widen instead of restrict human choices. They allow one to remember in an anticipatory fashion and to concentrate on undoing aspects of the present rather than avenging the past.<sup>11</sup>

Myth continues to be active in relation to the present; indeed, it only appears at all in relation to the present. It is not the representative of dark psychic forces by virtue of whose necessary internment civility and rationality can dominate, forces through which the furies of the past return with violent effect, but rather the return of the *present* to its pasts.

Nandy's account of myth suggests that we need to displace the historicist prejudice that what returns from the past is always the not-yet-civilized force that precedes reason and civility, rather than the memory and the potentiality of that which was with violence arrested and put down. The singular and fatal course of history truncates as it proceeds the possible unfoldings of innumerable cultural and social formations, each one of which at some point opened out onto alternative potentials. To say this is not, as in some versions of the appeal to myth, to seek to superordinate any given past as a state that was already utopic, adequate to human desires, but to acknowledge that each cultural formation and moment envisages its own potential for transformation in its own materially available terms. Every culture imagines its own possible transfiguration in ways that cannot be

contained by a single historical narrative or canonical path to development.

In Adorno and Horkheimer's terms, enlightenment's singular imagination of the transfiguration of human conditions follows the track of a progressive emancipation from nature and from the mythic mentality that is, for enlightenment, the correlative of subordination to the terror of nature. The ecology of enlightenment pits the emancipated human subject against nature, separation from nature being the condition of the latter's domination by human reason and its techniques. Myth, insofar as or wherever it survives, represents the trace of the domination of humans by nature—a domination which, one might say, becomes increasingly internalized as *psychic*: at once the terror of superstition and the terror produced when forces relegated to the unconscious are unleashed in violence. The proper figures for the rational domination of the earth are the systematic enclosure of the land—its rationalization by measure and productive use—and the containment of the wilderness. The rational demarcation of the earth, the division of the humanly appropriated from unworked mere nature, is the condition for the exploitation of its potentials, whereas the mythic mentality fails to establish adequate boundaries between human and nature. And those who, partly human, adhere to myth become, being partly nature, proper objects of domination as the unemancipated remnants of an archaic world.

The state, as the regulative instrument of domination, is the ultimate antagonist of myth. In Ireland, for well over a century, the colonial state sought to extirpate what was at once an alternative ecology and an alternative mentality, alternative forms whose transgressiveness from the perspective of modernity was vividly figured in the glaring absence of proper boundaries. Not only did the rundale system, as a survival of ancient rights of commons, refuse and resist permanent and rationalized boundaries, knowing neither walls nor established hedges, but it also sustained social formations in the *clachan* that defied the norms of property and propriety. The houses themselves appeared as if scarcely emerged from the material

of the earth itself and abutted one another in ways that seemed irrational and disorderly, "as though the houses...had fallen 'in a shower from the sky':

As a visitor during the famine years wrote: "The villages in which the greater portion of the people [of Western Ireland] reside... consist of collections of hovels...grouped without regularity, formed of clay, or loose stone with green sods stuffed into the interstices."<sup>12</sup>

Miserable as Irish conditions may have appeared to outside observers, the adherence of the people to the forms of life they sustained was, by almost all accounts, tenacious and passionate. Precisely the material conditions that were regarded as irrational and as scarcely emerged from nature sustained not only an alternative ecology apparently unconcerned with extending domination over nature, but also a social ecology that has been characterized by the colloquial term "throughotherness."<sup>13</sup> The word describes both the spatial arrangement of land distribution and of dwellings in close contiguity with one another and the social relations that accompanied them: the mingling of work and pleasure in the rituals of shared labor, the collective culture of story-telling, and the music and dance that the close proximity of unwallled dwellings permitted. Only the catastrophic devastation of the Famine could have so drastically abolished such a culture. What went down in that disaster was not mere "surplus population," that abstraction of a political economy dedicated to transforming the peasantry into units of proletarian waged labor, but a concrete mode of life that stood in sharp antagonism to capitalist modernization.

Perhaps fittingly, then, the ruins that are the traces of that violently curtailed way of life are not the monumental forms of tower and fortress that still in places dominate the landscape, but scarcely more than ridges intersecting the pattern of more recently walled fields, merging with

the contours of the surrounding land as discretely as formerly they emerged from it. In the very ambiguity of the threshold they mark between human artifice and natural form, they memorialize the alternative ecology of a non-capitalist mode of life. Nothing utopian in itself, the product of centuries of dispossession and difficult survival, that mode of life looked towards another transfiguration than its violent reduction in the long and continuing process of primitive accumulation. The ruins that encrypt the unexhausted potentiality of a damaged form of life, as in places they literally encrypt the corpses of the famine dead on which cottages were collapsed as mass graves, speak as myth speaks to the indeterminate relation of the past to the present, to the pained and painful defiance of domination that accompanies survival in the no less damaged forms of the present. The relation of the ruin to the past, in the very dereliction that refuses to be subdued in an historicist picturesque but resonates with the continuing ruination of the present, is one in which lament and possibility are constellated, in which natural decay and human memory redeem and efface by turns.

That the ruin might embody the passage between lament and possibility, representing not the fixity of the past as past but the very opening of the past with the present by way of their mutual and unclosed damage, is a principle at work in the contemporary Irish artist Alanna O'Kelly's haunting visual "keen" or lament for the Famine and the dispossessed, "No Colouring Can Deepen the Darkness of Truth."<sup>14</sup> The work consists of slowly metamorphosing images and sounds, some human, some natural, that merge with and emerge from one another cyclically, threaded through by images of swirling, flowing water. Juxtaposed with and echoing the forms of a woman's breast expressing a cloud-like milk into the water that surrounds it is the mound of the Teampall Dumhac Mhor, the great sand chapel, an ancient church built on a pile of stone on the Mayo shore, that centuries later became the site of a mass famine grave that was eventually washed away by the storms and tides in 1993. [fig. 1] The formal echo of these merging images composes a constellation of cryptic histories and recurrences in



Alanna O'Kelly, *Teampall Dumhach Mhór*, photograph (fig. 1, top), and video still (fig. 2, below), from *No Colouring Can Deepen the Darkness of Truth*, from the series "*The Country Blooms...A Garden and a Grave.*" 1992-1995

which human images and shifting natural forms dissolve one another's boundaries just as, on the soundtrack, the human keening voice flows in and out of the sound of a whale's song. The installation composes a lament for the dispossessed that is at the same time a recuperative refusal of the rationale that justified their displacement by modernity. Simultaneously, the boundaries between human and natural objects and between apparently irretrievable pasts and the living on that is their survival dissolve and fade. In the midst of the series of gradual, almost painful metamorphoses that compose the video work, an image emerges that looks at first like an aerial picture of furrows in dark clay, only to reveal itself as that of fingers caked in thick mud, presumably as a consequence of long laboring in the earth. [fig. 2] The fingers seem at once organic, resembling first furrows or scaly, dark roots, and painfully, compassionately human in their vulnerability and dereliction. The human body, in its life and its labor, becomes itself the ruin that embodies simultaneously a pained lament for the losses that compose the past and the mythic image of an alternative possibility opened by the refusal to hold apart mourning and transfiguration. Across the work as a whole, the rhythmic process of metamorphosis, through which each of the images, human and material, flows in slow motion into the next, suggests the potentiality of a relation of the human subject to its past and to the natural world that defies an ecology of domination. The lament for the Famine dead refuses any elegiac adjustment to the violence of history, insisting rather on the ethical, no less than political, demand for a commemoration of past loss that refuses here and now the forms of domination that shape the ruins of the present.