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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 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 immigrations to North America.

I

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 of the World Trade Center once stood.² (Fig. 1) 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 (a) a commemoration of the great Irish famine of the nineteenth century, and (b) a site-specific art installation in metropolitan New York in the third millennium marking the on-going tragedy of world hunger. This double fidelity to separate moments in time provokes a sense of disorientation which prevents the act of memory regressing to some kind of sentimental fixation with the past (what Ricoeur calls “blocked memory”).³ 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—e.g. 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 like 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. (Fig.2) But it is impossible to feel at home here. This could never be a dwelling for contemporary visitors to the cottage. The most obvious reason for this is its location at the core of a bustling metropolitan cityscape where it is clearly out of place, misplaced and dislocated literally and symbolically. The cottage and surrounding potato drills, planted on a suspended limestone and concrete base, doubly confirms our sense of not belonging. This sentiment of spatial disorientation provokes us, in turn, to reflect on the paradox that our awareness of identity and placement in the world often presupposes an acute sense of loss and displacement. For example, when the Irish Captain McMorris asks “What is my nation?” in Shakespeare’s Henry V, his question betrays 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 like Declan Kiberd, Roy Foster and Luke Gibbons that Irish tradition is in many respects an invention by modernity, where our sense of the past is almost always constituted and reconstituted by our present historical consciousness.⁴

This sense of spatial and temporal inversion is compounded here by the fact that the roofless cottage remains un-restored and thus exposed to local weather conditions. Unlike most works of art, this installation is half artifice and half nature—a contrived synthesis of architectural-sculptural design with rubble and soil. The underground tumuli and passage ways, by which one enters the cottage from beneath, are reminders that the cottage has a dark and buried history—recalling not only the Neolithic Irish burial chambers of Newgrange, Knowth and Dowth in country Meath but also the unmarked mass graves of thousands of famine victims in Ireland and elsewhere.(Fig. 3) The fact that these subterranean passageways are themselves paneled 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.(Fig. 4) 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 aestheticised 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 odors, reflections, shadows and sounds of the surrounding city. We are thus palpably reminded of the passing of time, of historical fluidity and transience which no monumental fixation can bring to a full stop. The myth of an eternal Celtic-Mist landscape is demystified before our very eyes.⁵

Not that there weren’t 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. 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.⁶ 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” which claimed 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).⁷ 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 installation remains a work in perpetual progress, intertextually open and incomplete by definition. That new readings and reactions, regularly included on the sound track of voices (which visitors hear as they traverse the underground tunnel) and the visual inscriptions on the glass panels, is a powerful token 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”:

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 also 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.⁸

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 Ireland’s “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* 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. And it has been acknowledged since the beginnings of Irish myth and folklore that it is precisely this Fifth Province which provides a dimension of peace, wisdom and catharsis to the otherwise warring parts of Ireland.⁹ 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”.¹⁰

Tolle attests to the Fifth Province by insuring that his poetic 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, in both the written and audio commentaries, juxtaposes statistics about the Irish Famine with equally perturbing facts and figures about other famines and world hunger in general. Snatches of Irish history and politics mix with snippets of song and poetry. He blends together a variety of vernacular and postmodern art styles such as naturalism, folk craft, conceptual art, hyperrealism, landscape architecture, theme sculpture, pop art, and earth art. Moreover, that the installation can grow and mutate—thanks to the use of climactically sensitive organic materials, as well as the deployment of flexible, alterable texts (silk-screened onto strips of clear plexiglass)—illustrates Tolle’s conviction that historical memorials are themselves subject to change according to the accumulation 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 “preposterous 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.¹¹

The transatlantic exchange between Mayo and New York, between abandoned stone cottage and postmodern concrete megalopolis, solicits a response of profound questioning and curiosity in most viewers to the site—reminding us that if we pass from action to text upon entering this memorial, we return from text to action again as soon as we exit the installation. The heightened poetics of remembering that we experience in this placeless place bears upon our ethics of remembering in the real life-world around us.

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.¹² 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 the Hunger 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 other 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 by Kevin Roche, John Dinkeloo and Associates also housed in Battery Park City; or Maya Lin's famous Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington. One might even extend the scope of intertextual reference to include the fictional testimonials of writers like Tomas O'Flaherty and Tom Murphy; or of film makers like Scorsese whose representation of Irish emigrant warfare in the Gangs of New York reminds us that within earshot of Battery Park stood the old site of tribal battle called the Five Points. Here Scorsese depicts the 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) which, I would argue, installations like Tolle's Hunger Memorial solicit.

Tolle's memorial serves as a model for a healing exchange of memories. The exchange involves that between indigenous and emigrant, Irish and Irish-American, Irish-American and Anglo-American, and Irish-American and non-Anglo American (Asian, African, Middle-Eastern, Hispanic, etc). It also involves an exchange between geographies—home and abroad, old world and new, Achill island and Manhattan island—as well as histories past and present. By refusing to either naturalize or aestheticize memory, Tolle keeps open a crucial "gap" which prevents history from collapsing back into a frozen past. His memorial resists being obsessively reified and replicated. Instead, Tolle preserves the critical 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.

II

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 which involves "taking responsibility in imagination and in sympathy for the story of the other, through the life narratives which concern the other".¹³ In the case of memorials like Tolle's this takes the form of an exchange between different people's histories such that we practice an art of transference and translation which 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 a 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 through a reciprocal transfer between opposite minds.¹⁴ "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”.¹⁵

This entails, by implication, a third ethical principle—that of narrative plurality. Plurality 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”.¹⁶ 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”.¹⁷ 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 endeavor to give them a voice. The primary goal of memorials is, therefore, to give a future to the past by remembering it in the most appropriate way, ethically and poetically. A crucial aspect of reinterpreting transmitted traditions is the task of discerning past promises which have not been honored. 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”.¹⁸ 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”.¹⁹ 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 potency which the subsequent unfolding of history may have forgotten or erased. 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”.²⁰

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. This is not, however, a forgetful forgiveness. Amnesty can never be based on amnesia. Forgiveness 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 was 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”.²¹

It is not difficult to see how this hermeneutical model of memory-exchange relates to the Irish Famine Memorial in New York which we analyzed in the first part of this paper. The one thing to add perhaps is that memorials which 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 judgment. 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, we are all casualties of the Vietnam War. At least for a special, impossible, fleeting moment.

NOTES

¹ Paul Ricoeur, "Reflections on a New Ethos for Europe," in Paul Ricoeur: The Hermeneutics of Action, ed. Richard Kearney (London: Sage Publications, 1996), 3-14.

² I am very grateful to my Boston College colleague, Robin Lydenberg, for her illuminating and instructive essay on this work, "From Icon to Index: Some Contemporary Visions of the Irish Stone Cottage" in Eire/land, ed. Vera Kreilkamp, (Chestnut Hill, Mass.: McMullen Museum of Art, Boston College, 2003), 127-33. Lydenberg also kindly brought my attention to the following relevant literature on the topic: Philip Nobel, "Going Hungry," Metropolis Magazine, November 2002; Margaret Kelleher, "Hunger and History: Monuments to the Great Irish Famine," Textual Practice, 16:2 (2002): 249-76; Yvonne Moran, "Taking Mayo to Manhattan," The Irish Times, 1 September, 2001; David Dunlap, "Memorial to the Hunger," The New York Times, 15 March, 2001; Marita Sturken, "The Wall, the Screen and the Image: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial," in The Visual Culture Reader, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (New York and London: Routledge, 1998), 163-78; Daniel Libeskind, "Jewish Museum in Berlin: The Uncanny Arts of Memorial Architecture," in Jewish Social Studies, 6:2 (2001): 1-23; and, Vivian Patraka, "Spectacular Suffering: Performing Presence, Absence and Witness at U.S. Holocaust Museums," in Spectacular Suffering: Theatre, Fascism, and the Holocaust (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 109-32.

³ Paul Ricoeur, La Memoire, L'histoire, L'oubli (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2000) 82ff.

⁴ Declan Kiberd, Inventing Ireland (London: Vintage, 1996); Luke Gibbons, Transformations in Irish Culture (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996); and see R. F. Foster's critique of famine heritage parks and the cult of "Faminism" for foreign export in, The Irish Story: Telling Tales and Making it up in Ireland (London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 2001), 23ff.

⁵ Lydenberg, "From Icon to Index," 131.

⁶ It is worth noting here that discontinuous readings of the Irish Famine in terms of rupture and trauma are always dialectically linked to continuous readings of the Famine in terms of an unbroken historic past which is still somehow present, or at least representable. Whereas romantic interpretations tend to stress the later approach, and postmodern interpretations the former, most contemporary memorials (including Tolle's) signal some sort of balance or tension between the two.

⁷ Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholy," in The Pelican Freud Library, vol. 2 (London: Penguin, 1984), 251-68.

⁸ Lydenberg, "From Icon to Index," 131.

⁹ See "The Fifth Province" in Richard Kearney, Postnationalist Ireland (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 99-100: "Some claim that all the provinces met at the Stone of Divisions on the Hill of Uisneach, believed to be the mid-point of Ireland. Others say that the fifth province was Meath (mide), the 'middle'. Both traditions divide Ireland into four quarters and a 'middle', though they disagree about the location of this middle or 'fifth' province. Although Tara was the political centre of Ireland, this fifth province acted as a second centre, which if non-political, was just as important, acting as a necessary balance. The present unhappy state of our country would seem to indicate a need for this second centre of gravity. The obvious impotence of the various political attempts to unite the four geographical provinces would seem to warrant another kind of solution . . . one which would incorporate the 'fifth' province. This province, this place, this centre, is not a political or geographical position, it is more like a disposition." For an illuminating application of this concept of the Fifth Province to contemporary Irish-British literature and politics, see Aidan O'Malley's doctoral dissertation In Other Words: Coming to Terms with Irish Identities through Translation (Ph.D. diss., European University Institute at Florence, 2004), esp. 20-41.

¹⁰ Lydenberg, "From Icon to Index," 132.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 131.

¹² I am grateful to Joel Gereboff of Arizona State University for this notion of "counter-text".

¹³ Ricoeur, "Reflections on a New Ethos," 7.

¹⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method (London: Sheed and Ward, 1975).

¹⁵ Ricoeur, "Reflections on a New Ethos," 7.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 11.