

Reviews

David Lloyd's *Irish Times: Temporalities of Modernity*

By Viviane Carvalho da Anunciação (1)



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*"The poet is like that Prince of Clouds, who soars above the/ archer and the hurricane:
Great Auk/ Brought down to earth, his gawky, gorgeous wings impede his walking"
(“The Albatross” Ciaran Carson)*

Taking an unflinching look at the ambiguous portrait of a country whose past is rooted in the ‘experience of incongruity’ typical of postcolonial societies, the cultural critic David Lloyd perspicaciously scrutinises Irish history, producing an unsparing analysis of its antinomies and contradictions. According to the Brazilian Literature professor Roberto Schwarz, this experience comes into being when dependent cultures seek to address their issues according to intellectual mythologies developed somewhere else and whose bases are utterly distinct from the place that they are transplanted to. Thus, this process is one of the features that enable a particular social structure to be reflected in cultural formation as an artistic paradigm. In spite of the fact the author does not seem to be acquainted with Schwarz’s theories, the Brazilian author’s insightful remarks bear comparison to Lloyd’s mainly because the author, grounded in a postcolonial outlook, examines how the residual features of pre-colonial formation are out of joint with modern ideas of cutting-edge advances and

state-of-the-art techniques. In other words, he is referring to the manner in which modernisation has forced its way into post-colonial Ireland and, therefore, forged an incomplete fractured society and industrial system. In his words:

The failure of the modern state to fulfil even its quite limited emancipatory promises: the promise to counter the accumulative greed of capital with some semblance of just distribution of its goods; the promise of that security it offers to private property might in some degree be balanced by the welfare offered to its citizens in the various forms... the promise that it would sustain and respond to a critical and participatory citizenry. (p. 8)

In an acutely critical tone, Lloyd summons his readers to approach discreet points in Irish history when it was actually possible to envision the uncertainties brought about by the modern, especially imperialistic, attitude. According to the author these moments of multiple temporalities are of the utmost importance, since they show how Irish times are

orchestrated by the rhythm of agrarian and industrial capitalism. With the intention of offering his readers a broader view on how utopian promises turned to dust at the height of their project, the author examines key moments: the Irish famine and its victims, James Joyce and medievalism, James Connolly and national Marxism and, finally, Allan de Souza photographs. Through a precise analysis of such motives the critic seems to be 'brushing history against the grain', as Walter Benjamin, one of the most prominent critics of the Frankfurt school of knowledge, would have suggested. Nevertheless, his intentions are likely to go beyond that, for he effectively states that his aim is to do justice to the past in its successes and disappointments. Therefore, the writer wishes to develop a conceptual historical point of view that would open up 'the diverse and divergent human and natural ecologies' (p. 9) that are in abundance in society. One of the features he uses to do that is the notion of ruins and the multitudinous layers of the Irish political scene.

As a running theme throughout the book, and ingeniously exploiting the theme of ruins, David Lloyd makes a pun with the idea of runes - the characters of ancient alphabets that also had the function of foretelling a person's destiny or casting spells. Through this analogy, the author embraces the concept of ruins, as an ancient landmark of a past that is still latent and current in the reality of the present, and by doing so he transforms history, and the memory of a traumatic event that refuses to become the landmark of nostalgia, into a rune that can guide somebody's outlook to a more compensatory future. The main issue the author takes with traditional studies regarding this subject is that anthropologists and historians do not consider the mythical effect as an important factor in the critical potentiality of ruins. However, following Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, the scholar comprehends the myth as the return of a past that is still haunting the present - it is the return of spectre-victims to settle unfinished business.

When Lloyd highlights the theoretical legacy of the myth in the light of the *Dialect of Enlightenment*, he also points out what he considers to be its major flaw: the schism between human and natural instances in the emancipatory project of humankind. In the light of such observations, the author proposes the viewpoint that the archaic structures that entailed the harmonious coexistence of nature and humanity - and which were very much present in the ancient world - are of the upmost significance in understanding contemporary post-colonial resistance. As an example, he recalls the culture of the *clachan*, where a collective mode of farming did not entail unfair hierarchy and division of property among huge landowners. Nonetheless, already establishing a line of thought that will be improved upon in the first chapter, the writer mentions that this different form of living was destroyed by what is believed to be the Achilles heel of Irish history: the Great Famine.

In the first chapter of the book Lloyd has the objective of renewing the ordinary use of the notion of trauma in the interpretation of post-colonial sites. To him, it is essential to go beyond a common psychoanalytic use of trauma - the silence of the victim as the desire to forget his or her sorrows. In this sense, it is necessary to 'indicate... what is to be produced of an apprehended loss and its perpetuated damage to a subject whose very condition is a transformation' (p. 25). Thus, while mapping the formation of Western subjectivity from the Romantic philosophy of Schiller to the disenchantment proposed by Baudelaire, the writer believes that it is fundamental, in the interpretation of the Famine, to overcome melancholy, for it is within the fractured post-colonial individual that there is potential for renewal and recovery. Without entering the debate between melancholy and nostalgia, - a division that could have been made by the critic, since Walter Benjamin explains thoroughly that melancholy is the feature that enables subjectivity to make past and present connections - he analyses Sean Crowley's report on the Irish famine, as recorded in the Folklore Commission. Carefully applying the pragmatic parameters mentioned above, he views the

allegory as a central literary device to trace the naturalisation of the tragedy as the will of God. Even though the author sees melancholy as a negative point, what should be accounted for is that Benjamin's Angel of History is melancholic in the sense that it wishes to go back and wake the dead. This is the very same procedure Lloyd that puts into practice in the second chapter of the book – even though he denies it vehemently.

Notwithstanding our disagreement with the author in terms of melancholy, the second chapter ought to be recognised as a new ground for post-colonial studies mainly because it turns to the concept of the sublime, as conceived throughout philosophy, in order to demonstrate how the imperial mentality represents and reproduces images of the famine as a catastrophe, or even a necessary evil, that enabled Ireland to reach its cutting-edge economic system based on international capitalism. With regard to scholars who have produced ground-breaking studies on the matter, such as Chris Morash and Margaret Kelleher, the author demonstrates how *clachan* farming was transformed into guilt, as, owing to that, the population received the famine as a form of punishment for their savage acts.

Along these lines, it can be perceived that this was highly convenient for Britain since it facilitated more comprehensive control of the empire and avoided major rebellions. Furthermore, instead of being lost within the feeling of the inexplicability generated by the sublime, the post colonial Irish individual is haunted by a spectre of the dehumanisation of the victim which justifies his or her tragic fortune. Accordingly, between the ghost that 'seeks redress for the injustice of its negation', or the 'ghost of hopes that are the afterlife of lost imaginary futures', the author calls for a ghost that acknowledges the Imperial ideology and displays its prejudices and manipulations, like a widow refusing to mourn and forget. This is less associated with Adorno and Horkheimer (1972) and more with Benjamin (1996), for this is the premise of the philosopher when he wishes to remind us that civilisation is forged at a barbaric expense. All in all, this does not

diminish the brilliance of the chapter, which is followed by another that examines the central theme of James Joyce: the epiphany.

Once more, going against progressive notions of a heroic modernity, Lloyd does not hearken back to the *avant-garde* movements of the beginning of the twentieth century, but to the medieval teaching of Saint Thomas Aquinas whose theory helped him to develop the form of his narratives. In order to buttress his claim he associates the rise of capitalism with the end of the Middle Ages and the pursuit of new markets and lands. As a stance that 'designates at once the possibility of development and the failure of that development to occur' (p. 82), the capitalist mentality dissociates itself utterly from medieval society. Nonetheless, the point that the author seeks to address is that those seeds of resistance are actually what feed the failed promises of the modern age. Consequently, the main argument of this specific part of the volume is that Joyce falls back on a special kind of magical aura typical of medieval times in order to expose how they are intertwined with the movements of capital. In short, the writer's plurality has to do with his perception of Irish history as a disjunctive time that constantly disinters buried pasts anew – such as the objects analysed in the epiphanies.

Contrary to the mainstream criticism that dismisses James Connolly's Celtic Marxism as anachronous and out-of-date, the fifth chapter of the book is dedicated to his theoretical insights that are still relevant to the contemporary world. For the most part, Lloyd's analysis on Connolly's treaty are deeply involved with his material and historical examination of Ireland, which refused to correlate aristocracy and nationality – such was the view at that time – and to his reservation as to whether material expropriation was the right path to reproduce Irish stereotypes. In the critic's words Connolly's

Version of national Marxism, far from representing a model outmoded by transnationalism, is embedded in the longer history of colonial capitalism and offers the possibility of alternative histories and alternative futures that

might sidestep the logic of developmental historicism. (p. 126)

To sum up, Lloyd, through the lens proposed by his reading of Walter Benjamin, takes his readers through a quick exhibition of the photographs taken by Allan de Souza and makes a quite definite point about history and culture. His main point is that it is possible, within the frames created by the dialectical image, to conceive a future whose utopian ideals would acknowledge and take on board the popular modes of memory and knowledge. That is to say, after rejecting Benjamin's idea, but recognising the historical period in which he wrote, he reveres his critical oeuvre. Perhaps then, the merit of this final part of the book is to bring to the surface one of the most brilliant texts by the writer that is not widely known: the 'Critique of Violence', which exploits how juridical borders perpetrate a sanctioned violence that, through its different tonalities, becomes a mythical one. The photos are indeed a landmark of the ruins not only of the torn-up landscape of Ireland but of its inhabitants' fragmented subjectivity.

Whether revealing hidden histories of the past or raising the spirits of the famine, the truth of the matter is that Lloyd's *Irish Times: Temporalities of Modernity* comprehends not only culture and memory, but also history, with its shadows and illuminations, losses and gains, and, of undeniable importance, without losing hope that there is still room for improvement and that the emancipatory project of modernity must be radically reviewed in order to offer other alternatives for the present. Indeed, it is high time for post-colonial critics, following the footsteps left by the writer, to look more closely at the body of work left by the Frankfurt critics. Maybe the final words that best summarise Lloyd's intent is Baudelaire's albatross in the voice of the Northern Irish poet Ciaran Carson, although its gawky wings impede him from walking in the land of the living, perhaps in the land of the dead and their memory there is still hope of remedying the near future.

Viviane Carvalho da Anunciação

Notes

1 PhD student at the University of São Paulo and full-time researcher, Viviane Carvalho da Anunciação holds an MA on the theme of exile in the poetry of Seamus Heaney, and now studies the theme of the city in the poetry of Northern Ireland.

Author's Reply

My thanks to Viviane Carvalho da Anunciação for her rich engagement with *Irish Times*. It is unusual for me to be invited to respond to a reviewer, especially when the review is so generous and comprehensive in its embracing of the book. Yet it does give me an opportunity to clarify a couple of points that were, perhaps, not as well expressed in the book as they might have been and which, therefore, may have given rise to misunderstanding.

Ms. da Anunciação comments that *Irish Times* shows 'how the residual features of pre-colonial formation are out of joint with modern ideas of cutting-edge advances and state-of-the-art techniques. In other words, he is referring to the manner in which modernisation has forced its way into post-colonial Ireland and, therefore, forged an incomplete fractured society and industrial system.' I would like to clarify this issue. My argument throughout *Irish Times*, as in my other recent work, is not that Irish culture is one to which modernisation comes or on which it is in any simple way imposed, but that Irish culture is the laboratory and crucible for certain forms of modernising institutions. In that respect, Irish society - like other colonial societies - is in fact one term in a differential structure of modernity: its subaltern formations are no less an aspect of colonial modernity than are the police force or national schools. Its cultural practices that proved recalcitrant or resistant to colonial projects were

indeed targeted for destruction in part by labelling them as ‘traditional’ or pre-modern. I argue, rather, that they are moments of modernity whose counter-cultural force lives on even in the damage that they register.

For that reason, it is not the case that I believe ‘that it is fundamental, in the interpretation of the Famine, to overcome melancholy, for it is within the fractured post-colonial individual that there is potential for renewal and recovery.’ Rather, as I argue in several essays, we need to rethink the relationship of mourning and melancholy in the colonial context. Mourning is understood in Freudian terms as a letting go of loss, as a moving on into recovery and reconciliation with the violence of some taking away. Melancholy is usually understood negatively as the process of unreconciled mourning, of a refusal to mourn and let go; melancholy is a form of bad narcissism that clings to unreality or dead relations. But it can also be understood as a refusal to let go of the past, a refusal to reconcile to a violence that has not yet ceased, and a determination to keep open the possible alternatives to colonial capitalism whose outlines live on in those damaged but obstinate forms of counter-culture that persist in colonised societies. To ‘move on’ is to consign the victims of the past to oblivion and even, all too often, blame: they did not survive because they were not worthy of it, or, as Adorno and Horkheimer put it in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, to survive is to be mature. However, within that relationship to the past is an implicit relationship with present violence: it suggests that those cultural formations that today are targeted by accumulation or domination are ‘fit to be destroyed’. The ethical claim of *Irish Times* is that such a reconciliation with past violence spells indifference to the violence of the present, an attitude all too evident in the lately deceased Celtic Tiger.

David Lloyd

