

**The Trembling Image  
Jonathan Miles on the work of Ailbhe Ní Bhriain**

*"All memories are like the bog that fills the hollows of the cemetery, or the cold, muddy waters of ruins. The totality of the memories of the world can ignore destruction, but we have only a fragmentary grasp of the memories of the world. All that remains are moments and incidents."* Proust, Remembrance of Things Past

For some time now these apparitional faces have been advancing toward me. Or sometimes I might be falling into them. They infiltrate, and then evade, as if they are more like a trembling than an actual entity. They are, in this sense, in a state of undoing. I do not know from which point they come from or equally the point of their destination, only that they are movement, a naked, trembling opening that might be grasped from moment to moment. Perhaps we are witness only to a flash of light that is captured on the inhale, answered in turn by a fading on the exhale, light and breath in pulsation and inter-penetration. Anyway, what is the human subject other than this passing into and passing away?

Usually images are marked by stillness or the gentle suggestions of passage. Occasionally images tremble though (as they invariably appear to in this case), as if informed by an immanent desire to leave the condition out of which they appear. Such images appear to circulate around lack or negativity and inform of dissolution. Thus photography and film are aligned with the process of destroying identity. Hegel said in the preface of his "Phenomenology" that the subject "wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself." This famous section could of course be made to stand as a vehicle of comprehension for this series of photo-moments, because, on its most abstract level, it almost induces within its own indices a form of trembling<sup>(1)</sup>. The subject is never really in one place at any one time, but is much more a series of traces that are left in the route of its travels. This would lead us to say that the subject, in some special way, is always outside of its self.

Much of the work is in the form of series. Between each image there is a mere interval or spacing. This separation is either an interruption or it constitutes a rhythm. If the image might be understood as arcing towards descent, then it would be an interruption, but if descent, it would be a rhythm. All the works appear to be touched by either a sense of late arrival or delay. This is, in certain respects, strange work because it seems to possess a form of gravity, which suggests to me words such as heavy, dense or bleak, but then, equally, it embraces conditions relating to floating, lightness and dispersal. Any work capable of holding such contradictory, or contesting characteristics, contains a capacity or reserve that enables a perception of both force and form to occur.

Ailbhe has written about a childhood reverie of being able to slice away the surface of an image, as if it had a depth that would facilitate layer after layer being revealed with each progressive slicing. Perhaps this expressed a desire, at least on the level of imagination, that the image should possess a depth, and that this depth in turn might have a physical dimension. When I looked at these images they held a feeling of distance within them, something related perhaps to another time and after that another more distant time still.

At the same time I feel they might also be timely, because they resonate in a way that is proximate to me. Another way of speaking about this is to say that they usher us into a new sense about our relationship to time, disrupting, in the process, a continuum through which the indices of representation are secured. In the wake of this, the boundaries between things might appear to drift apart and this in turn loosens the appropriated hold over the principle of reality. Saying such things makes me think that I am pursuing a vaporous trail, which will vanish at any moment, like words constantly going missing. The phrase "slow motion decentered apocalypse" comes to me, itself like a vapour trail. Yet the work

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has this slow motion element, an apocalyptic element as well, much by way of a suggestion of decentering. But when you make a chain of association it becomes like a lump in the throat. The whole point is that the work has a sense that is direct, but then is equally elusive because it is never quite in the place that might lead to an easy process of naming.

For a moment I close my eyes. The series of images of faces in flight come toward me yet again, like hallucinations, but at the point they might wish to gain entry deep into my interior, they escape back into a dark reserve from which they appeared in the first place. It is not really a case of having an imagined face to face encounter in which there might be a semblance of a meeting or even confrontation. I wonder if we could call them portraits, or even, for that matter, subjects. It is difficult to think that such semblances are speaking subjects, and in turn even more improbable to think of them as in any way sites of identity that might be named. Instead they might be seen as the departed, even though to say this too easily evokes the condition of ghosts or spirits. Ghosts are an event that occurs as a form of shiver between the finite and the infinite, whereas these images are much closer to brute matter and the uncertainties of the index. This is why I might experience a sinking feeling in regard to them. Perhaps we are lead into a space of decomposition. Is this feeling of decomposition related to a sliver, or fraction of life moving towards the space of death, a mode of asymmetry that tilts away from us, or another side of things, that is not strictly speaking part of a representational network? The work suspends me in a series of questions that do not appear to be answerable, alongside a series of viewpoints that do not stabilise.

Things of course do not always appear as if self-knowing of their own finality.

In an aphoristic essay called "The Face" Giorgio Agamben said that inasmuch "as it is nothing but pure communicability, every human face, even the most noble and beautiful, is already suspended on the edge of an abyss. This is precisely why the most delicate and graceful faces sometimes look as if they might suddenly decompose, thus letting the shapeless and bottomless background that threatens them emerge." <sup>(2)</sup>

When I look at works composed out of landscape images I start to think about bodies, when I see portraits I think of stones, buildings make me think of ghosts (this is not quite the case but I am reaching toward the possibility that such switches in identity can occur), so I think that I must be in a state of constant misrecognition in relation to what I am attempting to see. Partly we are being invited into an unstable realm touched by different degrees of metamorphoses in which all the various elements are circulating within states of distress or release.

I heard someone say that this a dark work. "Really dark work" was the phrase I remembered. Apocalyptic, severe, intense, these are the words that might follow. If we say the word serious, we also imply work that stimulates an abstract relationship to gravity, but then I might equally feel that the work has qualities of lightness. This lightness comes from air, water and light being constituted as a medium through which things are in passage. Somehow the usual binary oppositions have been arrested and replaced by mediums that lie in-between. We can no longer say earth and sky, day and night, forest and opening with the certainty of a secured horizon. If I start to be attached to the idea of "really dark work" then I could then miss a trace of rapture running in the veins, intervals and breath of the work. It is this curious after-taste that I want above all else to savour because it is the sap through which we can think of other potentialities.

"Able to produce the effect of strangeness, the image therefore effects a kind of experiment by showing us that things are perhaps not what they are, that it falls to us to see them otherwise and, by this opening, render them first imaginarily other, then really and entirely other." <sup>(3)</sup>

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Is this opening leading me towards the ideas of Romanticism? In some ways we have heard too much about post-Romanticism recently as though it is a perfumed medium that can infiltrate work and thus incline it towards the cultural otherness of hyper-modernity. It is curious how we appear as a culture to invest so little in the process of understanding Romanticism as a philosophical project, and yet still insist on our own short hand versions of it. In some respects it is not necessarily fruitful to enlarge upon this discussion, for we might only be left with the claims issuing out of true and false Romanticism, when the reality might have been that Romanticism was for a short interval so profoundly elevated as a project that its aftermath was condemned to disappointment and failure. So, in this instance, it might be better to claim that this work is willing to risk the extremities of failure, but that it does this through entry into spaces that hover in a nether region between intimacy and distance. I think that this in turn is secured through the eraser of those border regions that mark out differences between inside and outside, dream and waking, near and far, ascent and descent, slow and fast and so on. Possibly more

important than these erasers is a closer between the inscriptive power of the word and the realm of fascination that embeds the image. This could instantly make one think then that it is a case of considering work that has a literary turn, but I think that it might be more productive to claim that its relationship towards such a turn is instead one of compelling abstraction that is spaced in between such a difference of condition. We are transported through a web that leads into a dulled region of inaccessible utterance, a reserve of automatic language, and images that congeal but in doing so retain the force to repel.

The work of art is "neither language nor knowledge" in the words of Levinas and this is the basis of it being outside of being-in-the-world and thus lending to it a quality that Blanchot describes as "the intimacy of distress."

In the late sixties a French collective made a film called "Far from Vietnam." We are no longer far from Vietnam but instead far from the sense that dreamed of the possibility of a politics of resistance. Within the proximity of access we have abstracted regimes that install a madness of vision. Everyday decisions are often extreme. Formerly we would have used a term such as surreal. A roadway is extended or expanded and houses are sliced in half to facilitate the passage of vehicles. These are images brought back from a border region. They speak of a severed life, but lives that continue with a new sense. If it were possible we would just be in a state of continual transport because we would always be defined by economic imperatives. Mallarmé's second child Anatole died just before his eighth birthday and over the years that followed he wrote a series of 202 poetic fragments that remained unpublished in his lifetime. Paul Auster translated these fragments into English and in his introduction he wrote that "he would take it upon himself to give the boy the one indomitable thing he was capable of giving: his thought. He would transmute Anatole into words and thereby prolong his life. He would, literally, resurrect him, since the work of building a tomb – a tomb of poetry – would obliterate the presence of death. Here, however, the work could not be written. In this time of crises even art failed Mallarmé." I am composing this passage because of this relationship between times of crises and the possibility that art might fail in finding its measure to this. If the work appears to hover between its own visual manifestation and that which is beyond representation, it is because there is an awareness of not having the adequacy of means to properly capture the play of revealing and concealing that are evident in the thematics of the work.

Edmund White, in speaking of the writing of Jean Genet said that his "strategy is to devise a book for a ghostly civilisation." Perhaps this is in accord with the notion that poetry for Genet served as the rupture between the visible and the invisible. Sartre expressed this when he said "Genet's art does not aim, will never aim, at making us see... the avowed aim of his magnifying attempts is to annihilate the real, to disintegrate vision." Genet takes us outside of history into underworld spaces such as prison

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cells, torture chambers, and brothels. Imagination is the vehicle for a transformation in these worlds in which eyes might both caress and touch. The employment of montage is not employed in order to make a pattern of meanings visible as much as to sink the image back into the murky depth in which it might have lurked before the power of naming made pristine. Perhaps the pigments or dyes floating away from surfaces that would secure indexical certainty, sky and water appearing to coalesce, moving and still inter-penetrating, and so many other co-extensive boundary transformations all indicate the desire to reposition an awareness of ephemeral composition of memory in regard to the seeming certainty of matter and its display within visibility.

I think of these works as being in the possession of an almost ancient mode of mobility. Everything simply flows or is blindly animated, and with this is a potentiality of transformations within states of being, as if part of a chain of becoming. In this imaginary cosmos of (ancient) mobility, light does not signify knowledge, so in turn matter and spirit are not bound by the intersections of separation. This might of course suggest a desire to discover an archetypal space that is now buried or repressed within the order of reason, but then this would then be an articulation of a mythic affect, whereas as the works themselves contain gestures that are held instead within tone, mood and circulation. In this respect they concern themselves with swelling, fading, stagnation, entropy, softening, detachments, palpation, dissolution and forgetting. Such features might of course indicate decadence, but decadence is not in evidence because many of the qualities I listed are linked with urgency.

This is a form of paradox because the motion is invariably slow, the focus soft, the optic broad, so in itself these features would then offer little by way of didactic, urgent discharge. Yet the sense of urgency that I would claim for the work is there by virtue of the extent of the disguise, because the period we are in turns our sensibility toward indirect speech or allegory. Art is not so much in a margin, as radically split from the means that might enable it to offer anything but a condition of damaged possibility.

Shock is absorbed into the fabric of the living. The surfaces of the earth have shock running through them like a second nervous system. These are art-works defined partly through shock, indicating in turn both reflection and division against themselves, presenting, in the passage, a heterogeneous force. We are pressed into points which are outside, blinded in turn by this being our condition of facing up to things and emptied by the vacating of time that slips away from us.

Jean-Luc Nancy sees our time as an epoch in which time itself abandons us, with history in turn marked by a desperation to hold onto time in the face of its own ending <sup>(4)</sup>. Continuity is thus broken and time skips or stutters and in the process begins again as disjunction, marked by textures born out of both loss and difference. What relates to darkening in the work is an attempt to discover within the image a rhythm that addresses modes of seizure or halting. In this respect we might understand these images as issuing out of a state of seizure, a disintegration congregating within the realm of shadows, spluttering and emitting dark bile that obscures the representational frame in the process. What distinguishes these images is that they are without destination, briefly touching limits that cannot be endured before electing to drift across the plane of their own dispersal. This is, in all of these attributes, an art cast with an imaginary order of ruination.

I think there is a concern in these works for the nature of history or at least the sense that Joyce bestowed upon it when he described it as a nightmare from which he wished to awake. Falling asleep and waking up with a suspended sense of history in-between. Somehow the series enters into the spacing born with suspension.

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“Entering and exiting, that is what makes the image: appearing and disappearing. Not first representing, but first being or making “a time, une fois,” a first and last time, the time (temps) of making or taking an image, the time of time itself, which opens the eyes. The time, la fois (from vix, vice: succession in turn, the moment as access or as success-succession), that is what exits the no-time, the sans-fois, to return to it immediately.

Scansion, eclipse, spark of imagination.”<sup>(5)</sup>

Walter Benjamin said that history was to ruin, what allegory was to thought. For him, allegory was a form of actuality that made “visibly palpable the experience of a world in fragments.” These cultural fragments assumed for him a strange after-life, like fossils that take us back into prehistoric spaces. Benjamin, in effect, placed the history of modernity under the sign of allegory and thus in relationship to ruin and fragment. Allegory, for Benjamin, prohibits myths of continuity by opening out a view of history as a process of montage and thus aligning us with the fragmentary realities of modern life.<sup>(6)</sup>

Modernity, in freeing itself from what it perceived as the ruin of tradition, created in turn the ruin of representation. Post-modernity is the articulation of the doubled over echo of ruination and as such is able to recast the world as a process of ruination. The ubiquity of rubbish, transgression, abjection, catalogues of catastrophe, dysfunctional spectacles, and boundary disturbance all testify to this. Nancy describes this as “a world slumped in upon itself”. There is something strange in this because the very project of reason, which founded the idea of understanding or figuring a coherent passage through time, has no longer the means to articulate a relationship between idea and image. Instead we are left with, or opened to motions, passages, comings, that no longer evoke continuity but rather a disarticulated mode of time from which measure itself is lost. In the wake of this we are now witness to a strange kind of aesthetic presentation or passage that could be characterised as apparitional modernity or at the very least a modernity of the backward glance. This idea of an apparitional modernity corresponds to the notion of history revolving in a state of suspension.

Visual images contain seeds of understanding because they gesture beyond themselves, and in so doing take us outside of smooth historical narrative. Images exist at the very threshold of thought, displaced and in a state of oscillation between life and death, memory and erasure. The image becomes a place where something interrupts or breaks, a moment of caesura that enables a new departure to occur.

Perhaps in all of this the tone of the writing leads toward some grim dead-end sense, a weary hunching of the shoulders followed by the sound of a sigh. Partly this is the case but this would ignore the persistence of the vision that is evident within the fabric of this work. Here we find a vestige of the “terrible beauty” that was evoked by Yeats after the Easter uprising. It is not so much the literal thematics of the works that are in themselves compelling, or even of importance, but rather the way in which gestures and figures of thought are contained within them. The work is found in its passages away from itself, its “unworking”<sup>(7)</sup>. Its suggestion rather than completion, its withdrawal from itself, the meeting arrangement of its forms and finally its acknowledgement of silence, without the surface rhetoric that usually accompanies it. Somehow we can find in all of this the signs of modesty, but also a touch of something that is splendid and yet-to-be.

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### End Notes

- <sup>(1)</sup> I have used Blanchot for the relationship of trembling and the image from *The Infinite Conversation* "The image trembles, is this trembling of the image, the shiver of that which oscillates and vacillates: it constantly leaves itself, for always outside itself and always the inside of this outside, there is nothing in which it can be itself..." (p.324) The image in Blanchot of course refers in turn to the order of the imaginary and thus signifies a mental event that poses itself as enigma, doubling and betrayal. See also Jean-Luc Nancy *Hegel*, Minnesota, 2002 "We could register in Hegel a whole series of tremblings – religious or aesthetic, for example. It is always the trembling of the finite seized by the infinite: it is the sensibility of the infinite in the finite. We would also have to notice that Hegel does not properly give the concept of this image. It comes to him in those places where categories fail and themselves tremble." (p.44)
- <sup>(2)</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without Ends*, Minnesota, 2000
- <sup>(3)</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation* (p.364) Minnesota, 1993
- <sup>(4)</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *A Finite Thinking*, Stanford, 2003
- <sup>(5)</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Ground of the Image* (p.98) Fordham, 2005
- <sup>(6)</sup> Walter Benjamin's discussion on allegory is embedded in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, NLB, 1977
- <sup>(7)</sup> "On Unworking" essay by Marie-Claire Ropars-Wuilleunier in Carolyn Bailey Gill, ed Maurice Blanchot, Routledge, 1996