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Ireland, Empire and the Archipelago

By 1916 the British Empire was at a point of crisis. The beginning of the First World War marked the end of a half-century of expansion in trade and speculation that made the empire a global network for the exchange of capital. Consequently, the foundations of Irish separatism were built in movements antagonistic to world trade. Self-help, folk culture and native language were conceived as late compensation for human losses incurred by the displacement of local resources into the global flow. Irish culture had its own recent and bitter evidence for the decimation of an imperial attachment. The memory of the famine inhabited the same cultural space as the increasing import of traded goods in the second half of the ninteenth century and beginning of the twentieth. So it is that James Joyce's short story 'The Dead' pictures the legacy of hunger through the imagination of a meal, to which I will return. If this first wave of globalization came to an end in Britain with the declaration of war in 1914, it suffered fatal arrest in Ireland in 1916. Reaction to the global empire underpinned the cultural and political movements that fed the rebellion. The Easter Rising was a product of the old order and a siren of the revolutions still to come.

Today, I want to think about the condition of this Ireland of 1916 in context of empire and archipelago. Archipelago has become a critical tool in the study of literature following an extended conversation between historians about the limits of nationalism as a means to describe complex interactions between fragmentary interest groups over extended time. Its literary counterpart has been explored most richly in John Kerrigan's work on Shakespeare and reception. The larger debate grows from discussion of the island wars of the seventeenth century before its later extension into the wider Atlantic.

The four kingdoms of Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England were engaged in the period after the Reformation in a struggle for power and legitimacy. This conflict incorporated several modes. The colonization of land, the marginalization of cultures unwilling or unable to be assimilated to emerging orders and the expropriation of antagonistic populations were three strategies of conquest. In reaction there was outrage and rebellion, which simmered over the centuries, held to a low boil by the reality of injustice and oppression. Subsequent to this history was the commercial development of the empire as a trading bloc. The increased access to foods and goods for the home populations of the British Isles was a return on the export of human capital the maintenance of the world system required. That exchange was richest at the center. London was a hub of the merchant world. Dublin and the other Irish cities were distributed on its spokes. The railways, shipping, newspapers and telegraphs carried money and goods between them, and the imperial dividend was made real in the traffic of objects.

The imperial archipelago was a tangled and multiple structure, a connective medium between world powers through which objects passed in promiscuous exchange. Thinking of Ireland and Britain resists the reduction of cultural experience to the historical demands of nationalism. It tempers nostalgia for empire as an antidote to the deficiencies

of a society cast as self-sufficient. Importantly, the idea of the imperial archipelago opens the literature and culture of early twentieth century Ireland to a global reading.

This is crucial because 1916 was a year of profound transition for Yeats and Joyce, two pillars of the insular tradition of Irish literature. By the mid-point of the war Yeats had settled into the comfortable life of an establishment figure. He retained some of the Celtic otherness of his youth, but his company had broadened. He retained Ezra Pound as a personal secretary and lunched with the Prime Minister. London was open to him, as Dublin had been the decade before. The rebellion made the war inescapable to Yeats because it brought the world problem of imperial collapse to Ireland. The artistic and social consequences of this decoupling were problematic and unpredictable. Yeats's paradoxical response was to build the beginnings of a replacement elite. It is inviting to think of Yeats's purchase of his tower in the west of Ireland in 1917 as emblematic of this new phase. At once rooted and remote, Thoor Ballylee was a bold attempt to answer the challenge of change with the invention of a tradition. Ezra Pound was Yeats's private secretary at Stone Cottage in Sussex during 1916, where Pound educated Yeats in Joyce's writing. The war had challenged Joyce's already deprived circumstances in Europe. Pound encouraged Yeats to use his contacts in London society to secure Joyce a pension.

Yeats canvassed on Joyce's behalf, much to the amusement of Maud Gonne, who didn't believe Yeats had read Joyce's books, whatever the poet's claims to the contrary. Pound was in the habit of reading history, philosophy and literature to Yeats and he may have picked his passages from *Dubliners* with care. Pound too had been affected by the war. His tribute to Henri Gaudier-Breszka was tragic memorial to his sculptor friend who died in service with the French Army. Pound's enthusiasm for Joyce was genuine and original. He motivated Yeats to support a writer who was himself less than generous in admitting the debt he owed the older poet.

Joyce's public reputation was slender in 1916. *Dubliners* had sold barely any copies since its publication in 1914 and this after years of difficulty in getting the book to press, which seems to have resulted in a nervous collapse. Joyce was stuck with *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* for two years before it was published in December 1916. That it was issued in New York tells us something both of his peripheral relationship to Ireland, and of Ireland's own transatlantic purchase. *A Portrait*, like *Dubliners*, was a refugee from an imperial world that was destroyed by the time *Ulysses* was published in 1922. Both books engaged with a culture, a place and a time that was remote already by the middle years of the war. *A Portrait of the Artist* is a memorial and a farewell. The late imperial Dublin of Joyce's memory was as lost to his Irish readers as it was to him. *A Portrait* does not celebrate the British possession of Ireland, far from it. But its understanding of the material, cultural and psychological cartography of the early twentieth century world places Joyce's work firmly in context of Ireland's experience of empire.

Dublin, like Belfast and Cork, was a hub of global exchange. The impact and depth of this interrelation registers in Joyce's attention to objects. His realism is less a rendering of the world as it was than a sensorium of empire. Touch, sight, smell and hearing are fundamental registers of historical context in Joyce's work. This is true from *Dubliners* to *Finnegans Wake*. Up to *A Portrait* these sensations are bound in perceivable ways to the productive life of objects. Ivory, mahogany, sugar and tea impel their consumers to hold a picture of the world in their mind. That world was bound by the brutal execution of a global trade secured in part by military force and cultural colonialism. This was obvious in Ireland

as it was in the further colonies. But its sensual presence in the interior life of Ireland's kitchens, libraries and drawing rooms secured a perspective and a horizon that traditional categories of national identity cannot explain. Proof of this is the empty spaces in *A Portrait* where the reader has passed by the evocation of Dublin's imperial condition by the evocation of objects. By thinking about things, as Stephen reflects, you can understand them.

The interpenetration of the material world with the historical and the political has made it difficult to unpack the idea of empire in Ireland. Further, the attempt to consider any aspect of Irish culture as imperial can provoke the reaction that this is but another attempt to legitimize a British presence. There is merit in this argument, if only because the new British studies that precipitated the general debate about island histories coincided with a wider debate about devolution within what remained of the Union. Again this is fraught in context of Ireland because of the situation as it has been in the north. The killing and suffering there has been moderated by a peace agreement that has not to date changed radically the formal protocols by which the six northern counties are governed. It is ironic that Home Rule was the settlement many unionists agreed to by the close of a long-suffering twentieth century. Or it would be if so many had not died in the between time.

The words British and Empire carry such weight then that amendments like imperial and archipelago can bend under the pressure. The British Empire was a dynamic, and sometimes chaotic, mechanism by which the interests of a vast swath of territories and people were governed or, at best, managed. Ireland held a complex and multifocal relationship with the idea of Britain. So did India, Canada, Australia, and, perhaps, England. What was good at one point in time was not at another, as the war proved. Men died there for an idea of Britain that some would later have died to defeat. Many of the volunteers were trained by soldiers from the British Army and many members of the Irish Republican Army fought first in the Great War. Like their counterparts in continental Europe they found demobilization a first step towards radical politics.

The effect on public life of these individuals was often in gross disproportion to their actual number. Measuring their impact is another advantage of divorcing the cultural and political history of 1916 from the history of nations. Public debate about Ireland in rebellion and at war has suffered from the falsity of numerical equivalence. That few men and women comparative to the wider population served in the General Post Office, and fewer still fired a gun or killed another human being, is evidence on the one side of their select calling and on the other of their wanton disrespect for human life.

The Bureau of Military History witness statements suggest a different context for the revolutionary movement. There was widespread and professional preparation for violence as a means to instigate political change. This predated the formation of the Volunteers and was in part a product of the empire's martial culture. Poor children from the inner city districts of Dublin trailed British soldiers on manoevres, their quick wits copying the commands and actions of the men. One company of the first battalion of the Dublin Volunteers was so presentable that it marched from Beggars Bush Barracks to Trinity College Dublin, where it took part in a display before the Lord Lieutenant. They were complimented for their foot and arms drill. Afterwards they scattered in Parliament Street before their discovery.

Empire had faltered as a system of governance and possession after 1914. Hovering in the visible future were new systems of exchange. Liberal democracy, constitutional

monarchy and mutual aid offered invitations to consider. Perched on the edge of the Atlantic, Ireland part of the global transit of ideas. The actual scale of Ireland's participation, or not, in world wars and treaties was insignificant in terms of its resident population. Its laboratory status as an island half in and half out of the dominant world arrangement, which was Britain's shaky increase throughout the nineteenth century, and the long term dispersal of its population to America and the British colonies, made Ireland almost uniquely problematic. This does not confirm Ireland's exceptional status as an island. Rather, it establishes the possibility that due to circumstance and history, nineteenth and then twentieth Ireland operated in a world exchange whose motor was about to break. Caught nearest the churning cogs, and in no small part responsible for their malfunction, Ireland was remade rapidly and radically. Its imperial cities were connected to a network of other cities and empires, each of which was its own patchwork of local history and transnational association. Their imperial ties were not restricted to the British. They were also French, Habsburg, German and, with some license, American.

The lives of the artists bears out the point. James Joyce lived in Dublin before he moved to Trieste, a bustling port city of unsure nationality that was harbor to a small but significant immigrant population of Jews. So was Dublin, and the sweep of the train line round the northern spur of the Adriatic into Trieste is still evocative of the Irish coast, a connection for which we owe much to the brilliant work of John McCourt. Joyce began *Ulysses* in Trieste and wrote much of it there. It is a book of the imperial archipelago, an association of ports and trade that is at the foundation of Irish history. Joyce was joined in this world by that caste of writers usually sundered from him by the fiction of the Irish Revival.

William Butler Yeats, Lady Augusta Gregory and John Millington Synge were all participants in a culture that crossed between empires, carrying traces of nations with them like the flotsam of an island race. This context unburdens the careers of writers who do not fit into the mould of an Irish or British identity as now understood. Labelling Yeats as Irish ignores the ease with which he was accepted into the highest tier of British society; the audience for 'Easter, 1916' included Herbert Asquith as well as Maud Gonne. Calling him British underplays his support for separatist nationalism, which had waned by the time of the rebellion.

The evidence for Yeats's engagement with the late imperial archipelago is there in his biography. He spent 1916 flitting between Sussex, London, France and Dublin. In doing so he plugged into a global network, the context for which stretched back into the fraught history of the British Empire's expansion from the mid-nineteenth century on. He rehearsed the verses for 'Easter, 1916' on the beach at Colleville in company of the bereaved Maud Gonne, herself marked by her volunteer work as a nurse for the battered men streaming back from Verdun. Gonne had her own experience of imperial estrangement. Her father Thomas Gonne had considered resigning from the British Army during the Land War and had resisted doing so only to protect his daughter's social status. He accepted instead an appointment as Adjutant General in Dublin so that Maud might enjoy her coming out. She was devastated by his death from typhoid. The mild dissent of her father's feelings for Ireland grew in his daughter to a determination that saw Maud Gonne persevere through the independence and civil wars despite deep personal loss with the execution of her estranged husband John MacBride, who had served with the Irish Brigade in defence of the Boers during the South African War. Ideas of Ireland had been fought for on foreign

fields for centuries. In 1916 it caused suffering again on the western front and in the Mediterranean campaign. Dublin was wounded already from Gallipoli when the rebellion broke out. Mourning black was the colour of Spring, not the blood red of sacrifice.

The scale of suffering suggests the degree to which the British Empire had experienced a fundamental shift in its scope and ambitions in the half-century from the famine. Ireland was shaped by this change, which radicalized a part of the population that otherwise had subsisted on the edges of visibile society. The growth in foreign imports displaced already marginal trades, which in turn propelled the growth of self-help movements that evangelised the merits of a local economy. This global movement registered in the personal experience of Seamus Ua Caomhanaigh, a volunteer in the General Post Office. Ua Caomhanaigh grew up in Upper Bridge Street in a house owned by an aunt of his father and occupied by his extended family. His father and grandparents were comb makers, which were made by hand from horn or tortoiseshell. This business died out when fashion changed and cheap imports became available. The work was done in the basement and out the back was a dry closet and an ash pit. This is the malodorous landscape of Joyce's *Dubliners*, the city disconnected until 1906 from the imperial infrastructure of sewers and waste collection.

From the mid-nineteenth century there had been great expansion in trade across ever-greater territory. The accompanying debate about the nature of British values reflected the worry that so large a conglomerate could not reflect the traditions of decency and fair dealing that were believed to be at the heart of the enterprise, whatever the reality of domination. But if British possession promised a violent reckoning when its authority was threatened, as it did in the executions that followed the rebellion, its main force was symbolic. The small numbers of British administrators in possession of so large a territory as India suggests a natural limit to imperial tyranny. In Ireland the boundary of British influence can be seen from its far side. The arming of loyal militias in defiance of government policy in favour of Home Rule shows the way in which local disaffection could grow quickly and with unpredictable results. The mosquito press infected public discourse with extreme opinions, not all of which were sympathetic to the volunteer movement. D. P. Moran ridiculed the militarists as 'Tin Pike Men' in *The Leader*. Ireland had a green flag for a green people if they believed the separatists would ever strike. Moran regretted his mockery of Pearse after the rebellion and expressed often his wish to have had the opportunity to apologize for his wrongheadedness.

If a large part of the population experienced the imperial presence as symbolic and material, the urban population of Dublin knew Britain through the city's architecture. Dublin Castle, the jails and the barracks were familiar landmarks. Trinity College faced Grattan's parliament, which had been sold to the Bank of Ireland in 1803. This transaction heralded the coming of the nineteenth century empire. Education and trade were twin pillars of a global economy that promised unprecedented access to unclaimed wealth. There were equivalents in Belfast and Cork with their new universities and strong merchant princes. All of them depended on the sea as a conduit for global trade. Cork had been involved in a transatlantic business since at least the settling of the Caribbean colonies, which the province of Munster did so much to provision. Belfast took the opportunity one stage further and began to build ships. Edward Harland and Gustav Wolff transformed the industrial capacity of the northern city, the profits of which are still visible in the baroque grotesquerie of the City Hall.

British power was dressed in the senses. Empire was tasted, smelt and seen. It offered pleasure more than persecution, so long as there was happy access to the table. Its pathways were open to the experience of cultures beyond its borders. The Mediterranean and the Americas were the preserve of many powers. Participation in the British Empire gave access to a multiple world of experience that exceeded the drab conditions of life in the provinces, which was part of the allure of military service. Irish nationalists created their own propaganda in response to this trade expansionism.

They promoted a culture of national purity that was aggressively critical of the jobbery they associated with constitutional nationalists in the Irish Parliamentary party. In this formation an independent Ireland would return to its pre-invasion condition of utopic self-sufficiency. Whatever the reality of such a proposition, the ideal had immense imaginative appeal since it proceeded from the domestic familiarity through which Irish people were integrated into imperial culture.

For all the deprivation of war, Ireland in rebellion was a rampant exchange of things. The auction houses especially were a register of Ireland's long participation in practices of global acquisition. On the second of the month the house of Bennett & Son advertised the sale of the estate of a Major H. P. Chearnley, to be held on the fifth. The catalogue listed valuable antique and modern furniture, early French and Italian bronzes, twelve-hundred ounces of old English and Irish silver, Waterford glass, Oriental porcelain and a library of books. This colony of objects represents a map of sensation that details the long contours of imperial trade.

Even at the lower end of value, items at auction were made from materials collected far from Ireland's shores. Talbot Coall & Son of Kingstown advertised an auction for the same day as Bennett's that included hand-painted fire screens, coal vases, walnut sideboards and mahogany drawing room suites. The rebellion created new markets for the barter of goods. Some like postcards and books were subsumed into traditional channels for sale. Others were handed between volunteers as tokens of esteem. Survivors of the rebellion smuggled cap and collar badges of British regiments through imprisonment. Emblems of the Nottinghamshires, the Derbyshires, the West Kents, Wiltshires, Royal irish Rifles, Dublin Fusiliers, the Lancers and the Enniskillings were captured with the General Post office. The number of these insignia encouraged some of the men to think they were winning. On the other side there was confusion for priests called to administer the last rites to wounded men. British soldiers were in the habit of wearing religious medals as good-luck charms. Catholic priests found themselves attending the dying moments of superstitious Protestants.

I want to return here to *Dubliners* and move towards a conclusion that sets this muddled world of misplaced goods in context of the larger forms I have proposed as empire and archipelago. As I have suggested, Joyce grew up in Dublin as a city that subsisted on the fringe of imperial trade. *Dubliners* is, as Frank Shovlin has shown so brilliantly in his recent book about Joyce and the West, an unread book. This is especially true of its stories that touch upon capital and migration. Epiphany is a term reserved for Greta Conroy in traditional criticism but I think revelation emerges earlier in the book in 'An Encounter'. As the boys walk out towards the Pigeon House they reach the quays at noon:

> We pleased ourselves with the spectacle of Dublin's commerce—the barges signalled from far away by their curls of woolly smoke, the brown fishing fleet beyond Ringsend, the big white sailing-vessel which was being discharged on the opposite quay. Mahony said it would be right skit to run away to sea on one of those big ships and even I, looking at the high masts, saw, or imagined, the geography which had been scantily dosed to me at school gradually taking substance under my eyes. (14)

Later, 'After the Race' is a story of casino capitalism, the young Irishman in it losing his money to a cabal of European and American gamblers. Speculation is at the core of every transaction, and of every illusion. 'The Dead' is haunted by the ghost of Michael Furey, a young man dead of consumption, a disease inscribed with the language of economy. The splendor of the story's Christmas dinner is a ploy to provoke the imagination to picture the abomination of famine to follow. But it is also a map of the world that took shape in Dublin through the experience of objects, the Smyrna figs, the American apple, the pyramid shapes and ranks of stout bottles all points of trans-imperial trade.

For Joyce and his generation, the war turned this domestic world inside out. The regular notice of dead men in the trenches was followed by advertisement of their goods by auction in the newspapers of record. Mahogany tables and walnut sideboards had empanelled the interior of the Irish upper middle-classes with the scented texture of the far-east. Ivory piano keys and ornaments brought Africa to the drawing rooms. Watercolours of exotic landscapes entertained the imagination with daydreams of travel on a grey Dublin day. For the privileged, empire was a sensorium of objects arranged in the domestic space of the home. For the less well off it was still available in the public spaces of the museums and libraries. Its emblems were carved into the statuary and buildings of its cities. It permeated popular culture because it attached itself to every aspect of traded commodity, which by the turn of the twentieth century was the bedrock of the Irish economy.

The center of this world in *Dubliners* is the north wall, the quay where goods were shipped in and out as the empire grew. By the outbreak of war the north wall had incorporated its other historical use as a point of departure for soldiers and as an entry for the wounded. The numbers were so constant that a new covered gangway was constructed to shield stretcher cases from the weather as they were shifted into waiting ambulances. The war was visible in the streets of Dublin long before the ruins smoked in Sackville Street. Later, this same place was departure point for the surrendered volunteers for the boat to Wales from the Irish Steampacket Company's wharf sheds.

Rebels and soldiers alike were involved in a world system of local organization. The first binds that joined them were the mutual habits of military association. Later it was the rifles and ammunition they shared as volunteers replenished their supplies from captured weapons. After surrender the rebels were moved into jails that had better conditions than some of the soldiers' barracks. Aggression from prison staff stemmed from the general feeling in the establishment that whatever these men suffered they were still better off than the soldiers in Flanders. By their process through the justice system the imprisoned volunteers offer insight into the dark undergrowth of the imperial world. An unintended consequence of the witness statements is the creation of a record about prisons that is near

silent in histories of the war. The volunteers learned in the jails the lesson to resist *en masse* to institutional violence even as the other prisoners continued to suffer as before.

It is logical in this context to locate the rebellion and its aftermath in a longer narrative of war and mourning, of which it became part. The scale of suffering in Easter Week was of a different order than that of the Somme. But the cultural mechanisms for coping sprang from a shared place of grief. In the experience of Robert Gregory, son of the playwright and landowner Lady Gregory, the panorama of the war extended from the west coast of Ireland to the Italian front. His mother fretted over him as she chased the ghost of Hugh Lane through the underworld of London's mediums, engaged in a brisk trade as they tried to connect lost sons with their living families. Overwhelmed by the numbers of the talking dead, Gregory gave up when Lane could not be found.

By 1916, Ireland, England and France were connected by an imperial archipelago that harboured grief with hope. If the war was the end of a first phase of globalization that ended in the destruction of the world order that had been built up in the half century previous, the rebellion was half of the old world and half of the new. It was a corner around which the post-war settlement might be seen. The British government did all it could to forestall this outcome. Its constitutional convention in 1917 was a late attempt to reframe the imperial relationship. It failed. Meantime, other great powers stuttered under the pressure of internal revolt. France and Germany suffered military mutinies while Russia collapsed and withdrew from the war altogether. The Easter Rising was part of this wider rearrangement, no matter the narrowness of some of its participants' concerns. The arrangement of world power into the idea of archipelago allows for this condition of imperial permeability. It interprets migration inside and between early twentieth century empires as evidence of a global culture to which Ireland was connected. This is where the late genius of Yeats and Joyce resides, in the description of the world and its networks through the arragement of objects in art. This global animate is an assembly of traces that find their form in symbol and in history. 1916 is the end and a beginning, not, as we have thought, of empire and nation, but of empire and archipelago, a configuration that admits the organic and the imported to the world, the text, and the critic.

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