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Gable-ends and Che Guevara: Political Murals and Postcolonial Ethics

EÓIN FLANNERY

The ‘excess’ meaning conveyed by representation creates a supplement that makes multiple and resistant readings possible. Despite this excess, representation produces ruptures and gaps; it fails to reproduce the real exactly. Precisely because of representation’s supplemental excess and its failure to be totalizing, close readings of the logic of representation can produce psychic resistance and, possibly, political change.¹

Peggy Phelan’s comments on the ‘excessive’ potential of all modes of representation intersect with many of the concerns of recent, and ongoing, challenges to the governing narratives of modernity, western historiography and the nation-state itself. Of immediate relevance to our discussion, however, are the theoretical, ethical and historiographical questions raised by postcolonial studies. My consideration of political murals in Northern Ireland, then, is an effort to divine alternative theoretical and ethical vectors with which to confront imperial modernity in both its historical and contemporary guises. Such an undertaking, naturally, involves an interrogation of the rememorative procedures of the communities that are implicated in the striven history of the northern ‘Troubles’. While, at one level, Ireland possesses a limited visual history, in contrast to a prodigious verbal narrative history, the competing muralistic effusions that have manifested during the contested resolution of Northern Ireland’s late colonial experience are significant constituents of a ‘lived’ visual economy.²

Visions of the future perfect, or the perfect future

In his celebrated speech from the dock, Robert Emmet proclaimed: ‘When my spirit shall have joined those bands of martyred heroes who have shed

their blood on the scaffold and in the field in defence of their country, this is my hope, that my memory and name may serve to animate those who survive me.³ Emmet's aspirational sentiments should not be read solely as a self-conscious or vain attempt to insert himself into a naturalized pantheon of Republican martyrs. Despite the ethereal language of the invocation, Emmet's wishes reveal a complex awareness of the volatility, and vitality, of politicized social memory. His speech prior to execution is a valent performative act of resistance; both the impassioned speech and the *choice* of epitaphic silence belong to equivalent resistant languages. The unwritten epitaph remains as a testament to an alternative linguistic register, one that refuses the power differentials of the colonial dialogic exchange. But more significantly for my present purposes, the speech disinters itself from the repressive codes of the present tense, entering into what Seamus Deane calls the future perfect tense of Irish republican separatism;⁴ what amounts to an imaginative political and cultural linguistic declension. It is in this light that the Republican murals in both Derry and Belfast should be received, as evidential of the persistence, perhaps a visual conjugation, of the future perfect of Irish republican thinking. Effective political resistance does not necessarily operate within the same linguistic register or discursive codes as the oppression that is being resisted. Just as verbal oppression can legitimately be combated through the choice or achievement of silence, rather than through antagonistic verbal reaction, Republican political murals enact alternative historical, aesthetic and ethical registers. Their most immediate efficacy is realized *in situ*, but it is articulated in a shared and comprehensible alternative idiom of resistance. The articulation of revolutionary intent in the future perfect tense, then, does not represent a lapse into a facile or unrealistic utopianism; rather it permits levels of expectation and self-belief. The future perfect is the tense of a measured anticipation, in that it expresses a conviction in the probability of achievement. Ultimately, it subtends the assertion of resistant agency and the conviction in the legitimacy and viability of struggle.

Critics such as Bill Rolston have adequately treated of the enduring and changing symbolic content of political murals, but as Neil Jarman notes there has been scant consideration of 'the nationality of these paintings'.⁵ He maintains that to 'regard the murals essentially, or only, as images is therefore to restrict their power'.⁶ Ultimately, then, to confine a discussion of these political murals to the symbolic content, in terms of historical reference and genealogy, is to remain within a narrow temporal continuum and frame of reference. The murals are prime artefacts of a politico-cultural homology within these sectarian discourses and spaces. To the extent that they interact with both physical and social environments, the murals are implicated in the

social production of space and the spatial production of society.⁷ The significance of political murals is not that they constitute a means of endowing space with political import; it is rather in their 'role in the construction of sectarian space . . . [and] in symbolising resistance and opposition to the state'.⁸ We are not dealing with exclusive politicizing images, but with a particularly overt symbol/manifestation of virulently divisive politics. The locations of the murals are, therefore, synonymous with residential segregation. The murals come to represent boundaries – the space around is definitively marked by the presence of either Unionist/Loyalist or Nationalist/Republican images or symbols. The murals approach metonymic status as, for example, a mural of King Billy can substitute for an entire Protestant neighbourhood. The presence, then, of political murals constitutes an inherent facet of the locale's cognitive map; their locations are pivotal to the spatial coordinates of both the local community, and indeed through technologically reproducible media (such as photography and television) they are displayed to a broader, even global, audience. The murals represent variegated gestures of defiance, affirmation, promise and solidarity – the employment of the familiar images, colours and slogans of historical record ensure immediate recognition and more insidiously ensures the perpetuation of the homologies of differentiation. Political murals, as Jarman notes, 'present a comprehensive display of history, symbols, and icons that underpin the distinctive and opposing identities of the two groups'.⁹ Jarman's analysis situates the murals within the fabric of the antagonistic social memories of both the Nationalist and Unionist communities. This assessment, however, does not signal the radical subversive capacities of social memory.¹⁰ In this context, social memory is portrayed as 'a central facet of the ideological armoury of the group, helping to legitimise and rationalise difference by rooting it in the far-distant past and thus placing weight on the primordial or essential nature of the antagonisms or otherness'.¹¹ We can easily accept the memorial trade that underwrites the relationship between the past and the present, but it is more profitable, and my intention below, to consider the implicit futurity of the effective visual syntax of the republican mural tradition. The political murals do operate within the same commemorative continuum as alluded to, and entered, by Emmet, but to confine our perceptions of their complex visual vocabularies to the rigidity of nostalgia or atavism is to miss the radical memory braided within their imagistic enunciations.

Deprived/depraved art

Clearly the presence of political murals in such proximate and intimate public spaces has been met with criticism. The most vocalized criticisms

concern the excessive militarism of the political murals; hooded gunmen or violent sectarian taunts are rightly perceived as naturalizing the two communities into respective, violently opposed 'others'. Similarly, while the political murals can perform, and have performed, as effective pedagogical tools, members of the local communities read such pedagogy as simply an extension of the propaganda war that adhered to the northern dispute. It is contested whether or not the murals actually extend out from the communal will or sentiments, or have such sentiments didactically installed through a propagandistic visual economy.

Moreover, political murals are predominantly evident in working-class districts of Belfast and Derry. And some residents of these areas believe that the murals are, in fact, 'signs' of an area's working-class credentials. The sheer presence of political murals on a locality's walls or gable-ends affirms its position as a 'deprived' residential area, and for this reason some residents resent their presence. In a sense, the murals become indices of class distinction, a distinction that is, occasionally, met with chagrin. However, this is the most flawed of arguments against the painting of political murals; such a point reduces the murals to a commercial value. In accenting this aspect of the spatiality of the mural tradition, the conscious, affiliative ethic of Republican mural art is shallowly mutated into a suburban currency of market value. To maintain the commercial conceit, such an argument *devalues* the politically and culturally resistant import of republican murals.

The art of defiance

Painted in 1908, the first Loyalist mural appeared in Belfast and significantly predates the beginning of the production of Republican murals. Initiating an artistic style and a thematic concern, the 1908 mural portrayed a triumphant King William of Orange astride a white stallion at the 1691 Battle of the Boyne.¹² This singular imagistic referent became a constant thematic resource, and visual display, of the Loyalist political aesthetic over the next half-century. Coupled with the Orange Order marches and roadway arches, Loyalist murals represented political and cultural acts of defence. Loyalist political murals were, and are, elemental to the celebration and creation of political and cultural unity. As Rolston notes, 'it is likely that loyalist murals are unique in this century, emanating as they do from a political ideology committed to conservatism and the maintenance of the status quo rather than liberation, anti-imperialism and socialism.'¹³ In effect, they were symptomatic of a performance of entrenchment whereby the repressive state political apparatus was manifest in the, literally, concretized visual artefacts of

Loyalist defiance. Rolston continues: 'During the halcyon days when the King Billy murals predominated, the community for loyalists was in effect the state writ small.'¹⁴ The Loyalist murals serviced the consolidatory requirements of a sectarian and fundamentally disputed political entity. Although the triumphalist stability of King Billy's equestrian posture predominated, it did in fact belie the internecine tensions of the political statelet itself.

Rolston charts two later phases of loyalist mural painting; the 1970s and the early 1980s saw an increased range of symbolic reference, usually consisting of inanimate objects of Loyalist heritage, including flags and heraldic signs.¹⁵ Later still, specifically after the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement, loyalist murals assumed a much more militant and militaristic tenor. Ignited by the perceived political compromises of the Agreement, these overtly minatory images retain, and perpetuate, the political and cultural intransigence of loyalism. Despite the alteration of symbolic content, the Loyalist political imagination remained emaciated and univocal. Loyalist murals are agents of a broader politico-cultural arsenal, which through ritual performance creates, celebrates and, historically, enforced a sense of state-political integrity. However, in having found a Unionist state to defend, having produced homologies of political and cultural defence, one is left with a sense of loss or vulnerability at the core of the Loyalist political sensibility. While attaching itself to the defence of a political union, of an integral Northern Irish polity, loyalism betrays the sense of loss that is inherent to each new beginning. The limited imaginative vistas of the loyalist aesthetic are consistent with the needs of politically conservative containment. Defensive, anxious and aware of its own historical contingency, the infant statelet behaved as all forms of newly born institutional authority behave: performing its own permanence in order to inspire its present citizens. In other words, the triumphal tones of King Billy's image, of Protestant identity or of stubborn Orange Order parades bespeak a self-consciously transient statelet. In Joe Cleary's view, this accumulation of identitarian indices were reflective of a garrisoned community in a partitioned statelet: 'the whole rationale of the new state was identified with the protection of Protestantism and it was the most reactionary elements of British state iconography – the symbols of royalism, Protestant supremacy and Empire – that were appropriated by Unionists as the icons that mortared their sense of Britishness.'¹⁶

Once performed an act can never be completely reperformed; just as revolutionaries perform their own disappearance as revolutionaries, so too each performance is its own annihilation. But rather than reimagine the political and cultural languages of performance, Loyalist murals, in their defensive, attenuated idioms, reduce ritual to repetition and habit. The defiant stances

of Loyalist symbolism, ritual and muralistic performance operate in withering repetition. Deeply implanted within a backward projected imaginaire, these performances simply repeat the past in the present. While each cultural performance is its own annihilation, the visual iconography of traditional Loyalism merely disinters the annihilated for a repeat performance. The more laterally imaginative Republican vocabulary allows the past to inform or problematize both the present and the future, without succumbing to nostalgia or revenant politico-cultural rituals. It is a point supported by Rolston, who, writing on Republican murals after the 1994 ceasefire, points out that to 'first appearances this might seem to be an obsession with the past. But it must be stressed that it is a case of looking back in order to look forward.'¹⁷ Likewise, it has been argued that the later phases of Loyalist mural art, which saw a move towards militarism and a concentration on 'Ulster' rather than a lateral embrace of 'Britishness', are less historically embedded than earlier trends.¹⁸ Nevertheless, there is no escaping the profoundly insular and defensive posture of this artwork, and the underlying mentality that sustains such a viewpoint.

Inspired by a propagandistic myth-history, Ian Adamson's *The Cruthin* re-sketched the history of the northern part of the island and delivered a tripartite political message to Loyalism.¹⁹ Rolston summarizes this message as follows: 'it was a counterclaim to nationalist mythology . . . secondly, heroes and achievements claimed by nationalists were judged to have been "hijacked" by them . . . Third, and perhaps most important, the planters who went from Scotland to Ulster in the seventeenth century could be said to have been merely returning home.'²⁰ Numbered among the reclaimed Nationalist heroes were Cúchulainn and St Patrick, both of whom were now seen as defenders of the north from political and confessional antagonists from the south of the island. While these thematic flourishes represented dynamic mythico-historical gestures, they are, in truth, exceptions that prove the rule. This guerrilla-style mytho-historical revisionism may have punctuated Loyalist iconography, but it did not become widespread. Nevertheless, even in its brevity and within its obvious limitations, these appropriations recall David Lloyd's reading of the subversion of myths of authenticity through the recovery of kitsch. As these naturalized icons of the nationalist *imaginaire* are displaced and recalibrated to oppositional ends, their meaning becomes increasingly ambiguous. Equally their ability to adequately, and securely, represent a community's image of itself becomes more problematic.

The performance of kitsch

Although it may seem, indeed probably is, a cliché at this point, the continuity of Irish historical discontinuity leaves its trace on the thematic iconography of Republican political murals. In re-presenting or reappropriating what might be deemed 'traditional' Irish visual iconography (examples would include St Patrick, Cúchulainn or Mass rock scenes) we do not witness a sterile and containing regression into a safe nostalgic visual economy. Lloyd situates such representation as evidence of a school of political and cultural resistance within Northern Irish Republican discourse. Specifically the recovery of kitsch is adjudged as a proactive, resistant gesture by dominated political constituencies. To this end, Lloyd argues, 'the appeal is not to nostalgia for an unbroken spirit of Irish identity but to the fragmentary tableau that constitutes the memory of constant efforts to realise other ways of living in the face of unrelenting domination. Nor is it a utopian imagination withdrawn from actual social relations.'²¹ In fact, though the imagistic or iconographic content of Republican political murals may not always be a radical *vision* of the future, its very formal existence and procedures are suggestive of the alternative employment and seizure of public space. Confounding the state's monopoly on representation, Republican murals also appropriate local, yet public, spaces of representation through which there can be an articulation of discontent. And in this sense they retain a radical transformative capacity. On the other hand, early Loyalist murals were extensions of state policy; indeed they served as affirmations of the state's contested legitimacy and therefore were inherent to the state's political aesthetic. Later Republican murals are by their very nature recalcitrant to such politico-visual assimilation; the stable correspondence between the modern state's political dispensation and its aesthetic legitimation is disturbed, if not confounded, by the contestation of space by, and the contestatory spaces of, Republican murals.

Writing on the value of Irish Republican political ephemera, Laura E. Lyons concludes that such artefacts are, in fact, an alternative historiographical reservoir. The self-representational aspect of these political-cultural objects contributes to 'an alternative form through which marginalised groups make their own histories – that is, attempt to recognise and represent themselves as historical agents'.²² The Republican mural tradition has a much shorter genealogy than its Loyalist counterpart, and it not only began as an effort to reclaim representational public space, but also later extended both the formal and thematic contours of mural art. While traditional Loyalist murals and commemorations viewed history as a series of past events and personalities, there was little or nothing 'past' about the history confronting Republican nationalism in Northern Ireland. Murals are not static historical

artefacts but are moments of lived history; their creators and attached communities are aware of their memorial links to the past. In fact, much of the effectiveness of the murals is generated by a sense of transience, spontaneity or contingency. The republican murals are not monuments to their own permanence but arise out of the immediate 'dailiness of struggle'.²³ In a sense, the address of the imagistic enunciations is to their audience, who are thereby called into 'historical agency',²⁴ in terms of both resisting the legitimacy of the political status quo and contesting the mandate of the incumbent state authority. And though the visual images are often local or familiar, there is a keen awareness of historically and internationally resonant experiences. In Lloyd's terms, the alternative spaces and times of suppressed cultures inaugurate a revolutionary aesthetic, which is nourished by subversive, often ambiguous, stylization. In other words, 'the mural operates not as a means to ironise the inadequacy of atrophied aesthetic modes by juxtaposing them with contemporary commodity forms, for example, but as a way to emphasise the discrete but unhistoricised continuities of cultural resistance'.²⁵ Indeed, just as Rolston outlines the lateral thematic mobility of Republican murals, such solidarity is equally evident in the very form itself. The genealogy of political murals is traceable to the Renaissance period, during which such artistic creations were generally representations or articulations of the incumbent political or religious authorities. However, the appropriation of the mural tradition for radical political ends began in Mexico in the 1920s, and is evidenced in the work of Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros.²⁶ These murals were co-coordinated artistic celebrations of Mexico's revolutionary history, monumentalizing such figures as Emiliano Zapata and 'Pancho' Villa. In many ways, these early international twentieth-century murals segue with the efflorescence of muralists in revolutionary Cuba and Islamic Iran; with a degree of irony, perhaps hypocrisy, all three cases celebrate the triumph of the presiding revolutionary authority. These disparate contexts intersect with the revolutionary animus of Irish Republican murals, yet remain legitimate extensions of the state's revolutionary image of itself. In fact, while they ostensibly oscillate between the Republican and Loyalist mural traditions, in spirit they remain closer to the Republican strain. Simply, they may be state-sanctioned, but they are understood as revolutionary affronts to vanquished oppression.

Lateral mobility

In exploring the lateral ethical vista of republican murals, we might turn to Edmund Burke. Writing in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Burke concludes:

To be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of public affections. It is the first link in the series by which we proceed towards a love to our country and to mankind.²⁷

Burke's philosophy of sympathetic ethics prefigures recent discussions of postcolonial or cross-cultural solidarity. Evident in the work of Luke Gibbons, and the Latin-American historian Florencia E. Mallon, these notions of federated theoretical and ethical exchange subtend current approaches to subaltern resistance and representation. Extending from Burke's 'little platoon', such ethical conversations manifest in the visual, thematic sympathy of political murals. This lateral ethical imagination, then, both nourishes and is adequately expressed in the progressive conjugations of the future perfect. In his 1996 essay 'Unapproved Roads: Ireland and Postcolonial Identity', Gibbons offers a tentative, and potentially subversive, theoretical alternative to the normative 'vertical mobility from periphery to centre'.²⁸ Postcolonial theory has undeniably 'travelled', usually from a western-sanctioned centre to peripheral contexts. By invoking the *Distant Relations*²⁹ art exhibition, Gibbons gestures to the possibility of 'lateral mobility'. Through this cultural exchange, he identifies the seed for a cross-periphery solidarity, in which postcolonial cultures can interact in mutually edifying cultural exchanges. Indeed, the pursuit of such 'unapproved roads' can be extended to include not just artistic exchange, but equally to encompass the formulation of radical theoretical innovation.³⁰

Drawing on Kenneth Burke, Gibbons asserts that 'for culture to be effective as "equipment for living" . . . it has to be grounded in the material conditions of society'.³¹ Effectively, in underscoring the experience of culture at a local level, at the level of the everyday, Gibbons's argument coheres with Lloyd's delineation of a subversive economy of iconographic kitsch.

The creative imagination no longer retains a transcendent posture, and to conjoin Gibbons and Lloyd, the transcendent iconographic is materialized in the subversive tropes of visual kitsch. In representations of Celtic high-crosses or dramatic portraits of Cúchulainn, which are then juxtaposed with images of modern militancy, we can trace this labile idiom of protest. In other words, a recast visual theatre of resistance razes the rigid contours of nostalgized iconography. Gibbons diagnoses the Irish colonial experience as that of acute trauma, echoing both Geraldine Moane and Lloyd,³² and he encourages a constructive trans-geographical engagement with memory and tradition as a means of forging 'new solidarities in the present'.³³ These 'new solidarities' extend from his previous comments on the exigency for laterally mobile postcolonial criticism. Ireland's 'Third World memory'³⁴ should therefore operate within a polyvocal discourse of

egalitarian 'historically grounded cosmopolitanism'.³⁵ Indeed Gibbons is not alone in canvassing such a discursive trajectory. Mallon forwards the idea

of non-hierarchical cross-regional dialogue, where neither of the two cases is taken as the paradigm against which the other is pronounced inadequate . . . [such a dialogue] is not the application of a concept, part and parcel, without contextualization, to another area. Nor can it be framed in the assumption that one side of the exchange has little to learn from the other.³⁶

In calling for such 'non-hierarchical cross-regional dialogue', Mallon suggests a form of horizontal egalitarianism, a discourse that enlightens and processes experiences of mutually endured marginalization. This critical framework is emphatically not a matter of prospecting for cross-border correspondences or facile similarities, but allows the contextual specifics of previously colonized societies to work upon and through a store of politico-cultural theorization. It is through stimulating and nourishing such 'unapproved' conversation and by learning from the differential aggregates of this dialectic that postcolonial theory might evolve into a bona fide political praxis. Such an enabling animus underwrites Rolston's comments on the use of politically radical murals:

Politically articulate murals simultaneously become *expressions of and creators of community solidarity*. Although it would be far-fetched to argue that the propaganda war is won or lost at local level, there can be no denying the role the murals play as crucial weapons in that war.³⁷

Lateral mobility or new solidarities in the present do not constitute facile circuits of elegiac equivalence, rather they signal economies of moral indignation. Cross-periphery dialogue is not the 'talking cure' of puerile analogy wherein a correspondence on past oppression inures postcolonial societies to the exigencies of the present. The past or communal memories retain a contemporary and future valence.

By drawing attention to the validity of 'lateral mobility', or as Mallon terms it, 'non-hierarchical dialogue', Gibbons not only alerts us to the possibilities of cross-cultural exchange but also initiates an ethical drama. Just as we have spoken of the cultural mutualities of horizontal vectors in postcolonial studies, there is also a discernible ethical dimension to such horizontal exchanges. Postcolonial critique is founded on an ethical explication of the dynamics of colonialism and of postcolonial societies. However, much of the ethical energy of postcolonial reading is expended on negotiating the moral relativity of what might be termed vertical vectors of centre/periphery and colonizer/colonized: simply the ethical

responsibilities of the internally differentiated categories of colonizer and colonized. Indeed Gibbons's notion of international, cross-peripheral or horizontal critical/ethical solidarity is verbalized, albeit at a more localized level, by Ranjit Guha in 'The Prose of Counter-Insurgency'. Distilling Guha's thesis, Ripes Chakrabarty notes: '[In] the domain of subaltern politics, on the other hand, mobilisation for political intervention depended on horizontal affiliations such as "the traditional organisation of kinship and territoriality or a class consciousness depending on the level of the consciousness of the people involved"'.³⁸ Inherent to such lateral mobilizations is a deep incredulity at, or suspicion of, vertical or hierarchical political relations. Indeed, one of the most remarkable murals that conveys just such a message of borderless solidarity appeared on the Falls Road in Belfast in 1983. Entitled 'Solidarity between women in armed struggle', the image displayed three militarized female figures, one representative from each of the IRA, the PLO and SWAPO.³⁹ While it would be disingenuous to overplay the feminist concessions and/or implications of the mural, it does, again, evidence the lateral imaginative vectors of the Republican mural tradition. Perhaps with the embrace of colonially oppressed female constituencies, Republican murals further document the long historical tradition of Republican cultural inclusiveness, which manifested previously in the socio-cultural programmes of the United Irishmen and later appears in the gendered egalitarianism of the 1916 proclamation.

Likewise, Cleary evinces such a conscious, affiliative ethical economy. In an argument that is remarkably consonant with Gibbons's notion of 'lateral mobility', he points out that 'many Loyalist estates in Northern Ireland fly the Israeli flag and republican ones the Palestinian flag. In the segregated working-class districts of Northern Ireland the tendency to map the Northern situation in terms of other late colonial cartographies evidently endures...⁴⁰ Such cross-cultural affiliation is not only manifest in the flying of flags, but is evidenced in the long heritage of political murals in Northern Ireland. Jarman suggests that the murals are fixed 'in space but extended in time',⁴¹ but surely, as we have seen, Republican murals exhibit a much more dilated political vision. Their spatiality may be limited in terms of their concrete structure, but the imaginative space of these artistic-political canvases reaches beyond the contours of inner-city gable-ends. In particular Nationalist murals are acutely conscious of 'the spectres of comparison', invoking historical, revolutionary figures such as Che Guevara and Nelson Mandela, together with imagistic allusions to Palestine, South Africa and Cuba. Implicit in the resistant Nationalist murals, then, is the idea of performative subversion; the murals are elemental within the cognitive maps of the everyday, and likewise are part of the forms of communal and identitarian

representation. The invocation of 'foreign' oppression and histories heightens the critical voltage of the local context. While not blandly corresponding context with context, these disparate forms of ethical conversation, whether in disciplinarity, theory or popular culture, exercise what Gibbons calls 'the sympathetic sublime'.⁴² Behind the surface array of visual symbols, images, metaphors or allegories of the political murals, and of what Cleary briefly describes, I would suggest, lies 'the exercise of sympathy'.⁴³ The ethics of oppressed solidarity, as outlined by Gibbons through Burke, are evident in these political and cultural productions. They resonate in Gibbons's argument when he asserts:

The exercise of sympathy arising from the sublime is a complex, two-way process, made all the more difficult because it tries to establish solidarity in conditions that extend beyond the 'sameness' or common ground of our humanity . . . identification with the plight of others need not require stepping outside one's own culture, but may be intensified by our very sense of belonging – an intensity, moreover, that may have as much to do with pain as with more abstract, optimistic ideals of emancipation and justice.⁴⁴

In telescoping the United Irish accommodation of a radical subaltern and native cultural sphere within its international republican economy, Gibbons asserts the crucial dialogic relation between the local and the global in the ethical discourse of postcolonial studies. He notes:

In this juxtaposition of proximity and distance, familiarity and estrangement, it is possible to discern a version of the 'sympathetic sublime' that possesses the global reach of universalist theories of human rights, but without the calculus of abstraction, or the insensitivity to time and place, that characterized progress and universal reason in much mainstream Enlightenment thought.⁴⁵

In construing postcolonial or colonial relations in terms of lateral mobility, Gibbons is not blandly asserting a project of analogy or correspondence, quite the contrary. The impacts of colonialism are contextually differentiated experiences, with an entire raft of complicating factors, including geography, race, gender and time. But what Gibbons, and Lloyd, propose is that it is tenable to extract mutual lessons, sympathies, understandings and solidarities from the very differentials of colonial experiences. As Lloyd argues:

Differential analysis, however, marks the rhythmic insistence of cultural singularities that emerge in relation to colonial structures, so that the study of one given site may be profoundly suggestive for the understanding of another, without the two sites having to display entire congruence.⁴⁶

One of the most potent sites for the display of alternative solidarity is in the vocalization of equivalent histories and, importantly, memories of colonial oppression. But while history is often associated with the textual form, memory is affiliated with the rememorative register of the image. This is not to privilege one over the other, but merely to accent the ability of the image to bear the ethical and rememorative freight of shared suffering. Likewise, if control, surveillance, and indeed from an historical point of view, empire itself, is embodied within the textual, then perhaps one form of alternative resistant articulation can emerge through the power of the image. In contradistinction to arguments that, correctly, maintain that the image is complicit in the repression of history, my argument is that Republican mural art can be read as a radicalization of the visual for revolutionary ends.

But with every positive move towards a political compromise in the north, the function of the muralist alters; indeed, does it become precarious? In 1994 a series of murals appeared in Belfast urging the expeditious departure of the British army. Emblazoned across the top of one such mural in the Ardoyne was the Irish phrase 'Slán Abhaile', effectively 'goodbye'. While the mural displays several British soldiers marching along a tapering roadway, signposted as England, with their backs turned to foreground, 'Slán Abhaile' might well apply to the muralists themselves. Just as each critical-political theory of revolution or social change has its own obsolescence as its goal or achievement, the animus of Republican murals is to foment a situation wherein they are no longer necessary in their current form. However, the sectarian dispute in the north does not necessarily mark the limits of the mural tradition. It has been suggested, and indeed manifested in certain quarters, that a more localized or socially conscious mural practice might emerge. Following the success of Chicano muralists in Los Angeles, might the muralists of Northern Ireland engage, perhaps mutually, in such non-aligned political and cultural activities? Significantly, such measures might dissolve the resolute imaginative borders of Loyalist muralists, but it need not delimit the cross-cultural exchange thus far characteristic of Republican murals.

From a theoretical perspective, the murals navigate the often-contested terrain between filiation and affiliation, between a rooted concern for the local and the immediate ('the little platoon', to return to Burke), and the necessary aspirational detachment of constructive political and cultural critique. As Kevin Whelan argues at length, regression into the former can lead to an insular essentialism, while an obsession with the latter can lead to apathy towards the urgency of the local.⁴⁷ But, again, in espousing the ethical legitimacy of navigation between filiation and affiliation, Whelan is indebted to Burke. The expression of solidarity, in the form of the sympathetic sublime, extends, as I have noted, outwards from 'the little platoon'. This does

not, however, demand the abandonment of the local or the familiar to the universal or the foreign. Once more I defer to Gibbons, who traces this ethical subaltern consciousness through Burke to the United Irishmen and on to Benjamin. According to Gibbons:

Instead of being objects of proscription, subaltern cultures are endowed with the rights of prescription, which take on a new critical valency in redressing the injustices of the past. Nor is this account of cultural diversity limited by the solipsism of localism or relativism which led certain strands in romanticism to construe authenticity as *isolation*, a withdrawal from the outside world.⁴⁸

The critico-political consciousness of republican murals refuses 'isolation'; alternatively, such philosophical hermeticism has been more characteristic of Loyalist murals. In sum, the isolation, or containment, of nostalgia, of acquiescence, of resignation, of defeat and of the present tense is reneged. Equally, in figuratively challenging the aesthetic conventions of visual representation, republican murals question the figurative stability of history itself.

As the discussion of, and the distinctions drawn between, the competing visual economies of Northern Irish mural art reveal, telescoping the past to extract sustenance or guidance in the present may be a national pastime. But the imaginative voltages that infuse both politico-artistic traditions are not as easy to reconcile. The Republican murals, in particular, are facets of the cultural and intellectual history of the northern conflict. They represent conscious attempts to reclaim a stake in the representational spaces and times of the Northern Ireland. While they do mine the historical and mythical resources of Irish culture, they also serve as reminders, through their lateral political affiliations, of the breadth of modernity's failure to alleviate oppression. We only receive confirmation of modernity's irrevocable capacity for such tyranny in its efforts to sustain itself. However, from a practical perspective, perhaps we should turn to Bertram D. Wolfe's panegyric on the impact of Rivera's murals. Remembering that Wolfe was a close friend of Rivera, it is still worth considering his remarks:

So there are many aspects of a painting which can be conveyed with words, others not even with printed reproductions. If this is true of the single canvas, how much more is it true of a monumental mural, only fragments of which can be reproduced in the pages of a book, and only at the expense of their monumentality, of the qualities which come from scale, and relation to the architecture of which they are a part. All one can do is give a 'catalogue' notion of the work in question, falling back in the end on the inevitable truism that such a painting has to be seen to be felt.⁴⁹

This is not to elevate *all* murals to the artistic merit or visual-corporeal impact of Rivera's productions, but merely to encourage the *experience* of mural painting as a political, cultural, intellectual and memorial force.

Notes and References

- 1 Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 2.
- 2 On the history of Irish visual art, see Fintan Cullen, 'The Visual Arts in Ireland', in Joe Cleary and Claire Connolly (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Irish Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 304–21; and Fintan Cullen, *Visual Politics: The Representation of Ireland 1750–1930* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1997).
- 3 Leon O'Broin, *The Unfortunate Mr. Robert Emmet* (Dublin: Clonmore and Reynolds, 1958), p. 160.
- 4 Cited in Kevin Whelan, 'Robert Emmett: Between History and Memory', *History Ireland Special Issue: Robert Emmett Bicentenary* 11.3 (Autumn 2003), 50–54.
- 5 Neil Jarman, 'Painting Landscapes: The Place of Murals in the Symbolic Construction of Urban Space', available on the CAIN website at www.cain.ulst.ac.uk/bibdb/murals/jarman.htm. See also Neil Jarman, 'Troubled Images: The Iconography of Loyalism', *Critique of Anthropology*, 12:2 (1992), 133–65.
- 6 Jarman, 'Painting Landscapes: The Place of Murals in the Symbolic Construction of Urban Space'.
- 7 See Henri Lefebvre, *The Production Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001).
- 8 Jarman, 'Painting Landscapes'.
- 9 Neil Jarman, *Material Conflicts: Parades and Visual Displays in Northern Ireland* (Oxford: Berg, 1997), p. 3.
- 10 See Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992); and Paul Ricoeur, 'Memory and Forgetting', in Richard Kearney and Mark Dooley (eds.), *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 5–18.
- 11 Jarman, *Material Conflicts*, p. 6.
- 12 The image appeared on the Beersbridge Road in East Belfast.
- 13 Bill Rolston, 'Culture, Conflict and Murals: The Irish Case', in Trisha Ziff (ed.), *Distant Relations* (New York: Smart Art Press, 1995), p. 193.
- 14 Bill Rolston, 'Signs of the Times: Murals and Political Transformation in Northern Ireland', in Rosa González (ed.), *The Representation of Ireland/s: Images from Outside and from Within* (Barcelona: PPU, S.A., 2003), pp. 27–43. Also see Bill Rolston, *Drawing Support: Murals in the North of Ireland* (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 1992), *Drawing Support 2: Murals of War and Peace* (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 1995) and 'Changing the Political Landscape: Murals and Transition in Northern Ireland', *Irish Studies Review*, 11:1 (2003), 3–16. Other interventions on the Northern murals include: Jeffrey A. Sluka, 'Domination, Resistance and Political Culture in Northern Ireland's Catholic-Nationalist Ghettos', *Critique of Anthropology*, 15:1 (1995), 71–102; Jeffrey A. Sluka, 'The Politics of Painting: Political Murals in Northern Ireland', in Carolyn Nordstrom and Joann Martin (eds.), *The Paths to Domination, Resistance and Terror* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), pp. 190–218; and Oonagh Woods,

- Seeing is Believing: Murals in Derry* (Guildhall Press: Derry, 1995).
- 15 Rolston, pp. 28–30.
 - 16 Joe Cleary, *Literature, Partition and the Nation State: Culture and Conflict in Ireland, Israel and Palestine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 68.
 - 17 Rolston, 'Culture, Conflict and Murals', p. 197.
 - 18 Jeffrey A. Sluka argues: 'The new wave of Loyalist murals is much more present-oriented; the focus is on paramilitary organizations – their armed actions, "martyrs" and prisoners – and on the symbols of local community identity such as marching bands' ('The Writing's on the Wall: Peace Process Images, Symbols and Murals in Northern Ireland', *Critique of Anthropology* 16:4 (1996), 385).
 - 19 Ian Adamson, *The Cruthin* (Belfast: Pretani Press, [1974] 1986).
 - 20 Bill Rolston, *Politics and Painting: Murals and Conflict in Northern Ireland* (Cranbury, London and Mississauga: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1991), p. 35.
 - 21 David Lloyd, *Ireland After History* (Cork: Cork University Press/Field Day, 1999), p. 98. For a recent discussion of Irish kitsch that draws on Lloyd's work, see Stephanie Rains, 'Celtic Kitsch: Irish-America and Irish Material Culture', *Circa* 107 (Spring 2004), 52–7.
 - 22 Laura E. Lyons, 'Hand-to-Hand History: Ephemera and Irish Republicanism', *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 5:3 (2003), 407–25.
 - 23 Ibid.
 - 24 Ibid.
 - 25 Lloyd, *Ireland after History*, p. 97.
 - 26 Laurence Hurlburt, *Mexican Muralists in the United States* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989).
 - 27 Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* ([1790] Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p. 135.
 - 28 Luke Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish Culture* (Cork: Cork University Press/Field Day, 1996), p. 180.
 - 29 As Trisha Ziff, the curator of the *Distant Relations* exhibition, writes:

The artists, authors, and composers participating in this project come from different sides of the world: Ireland and Mexico; England and the United States. What they share in common is how their work has been marked by the experience of colonialism, whether as members of a dominant culture, whether they emigrated and became part of a minority culture far from home, or whether they were born in a country where the dominant culture was not theirs . . . This project is about identity, culture, and colonialism, a dialogue relevant to the Irish and Mexican experience.

('Identity/Hybridity: Ideas Behind This Project', in Trisha Ziff (ed.), *Distant Relations: Chicano/Irish/Mexican Art and Critical Writing* (New York: Smart Art Press, 1995), pp. 26–7).
 - 30 Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish Culture*, p. 180.
 - 31 Ibid., p. 9.
 - 32 See David Lloyd, 'Colonial Trauma/Postcolonial Recovery', *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 2:2 (2000), 212–28 and Geraldine Moane, 'A Psychological Analysis of Colonialism in an Irish Context', *The Irish Journal of Psychology* 15:2 and 3 (1994), 250–65.
 - 33 Luke Gibbons, 'The Global Cure? History, Therapy and the Celtic Tiger', in Peadar Kirby, Luke Gibbons and Michael Cronin (eds.), *Reinventing Ireland: Culture, Society and the Global Economy* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), p. 105.
 - 34 Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish Culture*, p. 3.

- 35 Gibbons, p. 100.
- 36 F.E. Mallon, 'The Promise and Dilemma of Subaltern Studies: Perspectives from Latin American History', *American Historical Review*, 99:5 (1994), 1493.
- 37 Rolston, *Politics and Painting*, p. 124 [my emphasis].
- 38 D. Chakrabarty, 'Subaltern Studies and Postcolonial Historiography', *Neplanta: Views from the South*, 1:1 (2000), 16.
- 39 To view a reproduction of this image, see Bill Rolston, "'When you're fighting a war, you've gotta take setbacks": Murals and Propaganda in the North of Ireland', *Polygraph* 5 (1992), 124. Lyons includes a reference to a political poster disseminated by the Sinn Fein Foreign Affairs Bureau in the late 1970s and early 1980s which provides a European context for the armed struggle for national self-determination in Ireland. On a map of Europe flanked by images of masked insurgents, the Irish are equated with the Catalans, Sardinians, Manx, Bretons, Cornish, Corsicans, Basques, Scots, Welsh and Galicians. The top of the poster reads 'FREE THE SMALL NATIONS', and the bottom of the poster bears a quotation from James Connolly . . . 'The internationalisation of the future will be based upon the free federation of free peoples', 'Hand-to-Hand History, 410.
- 40 Joe Cleary, 'Postcolonial Ireland', in Kevin Kenny (ed.), *Ireland and the British Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 251–88.
- 41 Jarman, *Material Conflicts*, p. 18.
- 42 Luke Gibbons, *Edmund Burke and Ireland: Aesthetics, Politics and the Colonial Sublime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 237.
- 43 Ibid.
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 Ibid, p. 13.
- 46 Lloyd, *Ireland After History*, p. 3.
- 47 Kevin Whelan, 'Between Filiation and Affiliation: The Politics of Postcolonial Memory', in Clare Carroll and Patricia King (eds.) *Ireland and Postcolonial Theory* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2003), pp. 92–108.
- 48 Gibbons, *Edmund Burke and Ireland*, p. 228 [my emphasis].
- 49 Bertram D. Wolfe, *The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera* (1961; New York: Cooper Square Press, 2000), p. 172.