Tragic traces on the Rhodian shore

David Lowenthal

Islands commonly harbour both castaways and conquerors, along with suitable moral lessons for each. Shipwrecked on the desolate coast of Rhodes, and seeing geometrical figures drawn in the sand, the Socratic philosopher Anaxagoras cried out to his companions, "let us be of good cheer, for I see the traces of men". Other human traces in Rhodes were less cheering. Vitruvius tells us, Queen Artemisia of Halicarnassus laid the island waste in her conquest of the Aegean. "After taking Rhodes and killing its leading men [she] put up in the city of Rhodes, as a trophy of her victory, a bronze statue of herself. Though the Rhodians in time regained their freedom, the hated statue stayed put. "Labouring under the religious scruple which makes it a sin to remove trophies once they are dedicated, they [instead] constructed a building to surround the place, and thus...covered it so that nobody could see it'." Theirs was a fastidious if costly way of coming to terms with a record of violence.

Self-contained miniature worlds, islands serve as prime sites of imagination. More than half the entries in Manguel and Guadalupe’s Dictionary of Imaginary Places are islands. Greek civilization emerged from the distinctively singular islands of the Aegean. Homer’s Iliads wandered among many of these, including Scylla and Charybdis; in Ogygia, Calypso’s island, he spent seven years of commingled bliss and nostalgic angst. On Patmos, St. John’s island of exile and epiphany, the apostle penned his Revelation. Few doubted the dread reality of islands peopled by demons, troglodytes, satyrs, and cannibals. The sixteenth-century French cosmographer André Thevet’s conception of the globe, set forth in the hundreds of charts of his never-completed Grand Insulaire et pilotage, was based entirely on Islands, mostly imaginary; some of Thevet’s inventions are said to still appear on British Admiralty charts. This is as it should be, for ‘for even known islands remain unknown’, José Saramago reminds us, ‘until we set foot on them’.

Islands as envisaged since the Renaissance often mock or invert an existing social order. The mechanical rosewood king on Delmotte’s 1835 Island of Civilization could sign up to 30 decrees at a sitting, cost only 50 francs a year to maintain and get rid of the trauma of dynastic succession; the island’s parliamentarians were all deaf and dumb, hence unable to give long speeches or to raise contentious issues. More’s Utopia and Shakespeare’s Tempest exemplify extremes of human behaviour. Wild and savage places whose settlement was sanctified by Scripture, islands also gained notoriety as sites of shipwreck and castaways. Defoe’s Crusoe, who once disgraced descendants now lend them low-life chic. But Tasmania’s icon, the ugly, smelly, vicious devil, remains a reminder of traditional ill repute and self-imposed stigma. Traits common to many islands lend force to such stereotypes. Places like Pitcairn, overseen from New Zealand 3000 miles away, are not only hard to reach but truly remote. The lonely Kerguelen or Desolation Islands in the Indian Ocean seem lost in a space-time warp. Many inbred islanders become heirs to congenital afflictions.

Fictional islands continue to be preferred locales of both despair and ecstasy — Aldous Huxley’s Island, Austin Tappan Wright’s Islandia, William Golding’s Pincher Martin (a thinly disguised Rockall) and Lord of the Flies. In Julian Barnes’s England, England, an ‘Olde Britain’ theme-park takes over the Isle of Wight, while mainland Britain itself degenerates into pre-industrial squalor. D. H. Lawrence’s The Man Who Loved Islands, a cautionary tale on the folly of island ownership, mirrors Compton Mackenzie’s actual acquisitive trajectory, from Herrn and then Jethou in the Channel Islands to the Shiant Islands in the Outer Hebrides.

Utopian and dystopian ways of life are often transplanted from islands of fancy into actual islands. Columbus viewed the Caribbean through the lens of Homer’s Aegean, a classical reprise echoed five centuries later in the West Indian poet Derek Walcott’s Omeros. Another Nobel laureate, José Saramago, envisions a Pyrenesian geological rupture, the Iberian peninsula becoming an island that floats off into the Atlantic. Emulating the Portuguese noble who set out to look for the imaginary island given him by Dom João II, Saramago’s Iberia sails away in search of imaginary man. A similar meander pushes Australia, fed up with being remote and neglected by the Western world, across the Pacific and the Panama Canal to the North Atlantic, pulverising other islands in its oceanic wake.

Antithetical stereotypes of paradisiacal sea, sand, sun, and sex (Gauguin, Stevenson, South Pacific) and of poverty, misery, and abandonment (Easter Island, St. Kilda, Nauru) dominate island literature, now as millionaires’ haunts (Necker, Mustique), now as dead-end dumps (Pitcairn, Chagos). For ‘happy Britain! highly favoured isle, and Heaven’s peculiar care!’ every insular reference is positive; for the West Indian island of Antigua, Jamaica Kincaid’s corrosive A Small Place itemizes negative after negative, the taxi guides pointing out ‘this monument to rottenness, that monument to rottenness, [having] made the degradation and humiliation of their daily lives into their own tourist attraction’.

Tasmanians long had a schizoid self-image, part demonic, part Edenic. As Tasmania’s agent-general said at the London launch of the Truganini film, ‘we have the most beautiful country in the world – and a history of which none of us can be proud’. Tasmanians today are less tormented by their history, whether of aboriginal eradication or of convict descent; convict forebears who once disgraced descendants now lend them low-life chic. But Tasmania’s icon, the ugly, smelly, vicious devil, remains a reminder of traditional ill repute and self-imposed stigma.

Circumscribed and confined by the sea, islanders have to huddle within their own little worlds. Being thus encompassed gives rise to the illusion that islands are manageable, easy to control. Hence they also become epitomes of tyranny and of a lust for sole possession, like Lawrence’s ‘Man Who Loved Islands’: ‘He was born on one but it didn’t suit him, as there were too many other people on it beside himself. He wanted an island all of his own... to make a world of his own’. He had
neurotic love of 'not so much islands but I-lands, where the
inflated self smothers and obliterates all other forms of life'.

Being isolated, remote, and circumscribed puts islands often at
risk, just as limited size and resources leave their inhabitants
little margin for error. To survive all must paddle their island
canoe in unison; as in Singapore, those in control seek to
minimize dissension and unrest. But no degree of control can
overcome the threat of global warming, likely to inundate most
atolls within this century. Already calamitous is tourism, on
which more and more islands depend, at the cost of peoples
and life-styles swamped by visitors.

Isolation, remoteness, enclosure, and containment also make
islands exemplary prisons: Sarah, Schouten, and Grummet off
Tasmania, Cockatoo in Sydney Harbour, Pearl Island quarantine
station, Rottnest off Perth, Stradbroke, and Melville are among
many infamous Australian examples. For ill-repute Norfolk
Island vies with Devil's Island. Dry Guillotine, Isle of the
Damned, Fifteen Years among the Living Dead, Isle of Doorn,
Hell on Earth typify tracts that festooned French Guiana with
imprisoned murderers, rapists, and criminal lunatics said to toil
fifteen hours a day chained with leg Irons in the broiling sun,
felling giant trees with penknives and building the notorious
Route de la Mort. In reality, Devil's Island itself was a relatively
pleasant reserve for pampered political prisoners. Similarly
benign, save for arsenic poisoning, was Napoleon's St Helena.

Modern monsters of Infamy include Mandela's South African
Robben Island, Asinara off Sardinia, a lethally pestilential prison
until 1997, and San Francisco Bay's penal Alcatraz; so
mesmerized are tourists by Alcatraz' annals of crime that Indian
efforts to reclaim their tribal island heritage go ignored. To this
day, islands make newsworthy prison camps - witness the
confinement of terrorist suspects in the American base at
Cuba's Guantamano Bay, explicitly referred to as 'our Devil's
Island'.

How do we cope with sites of sorrow - with heritage that
hurts? Five tactics: to ignore; to erase; to celebrate; to
transmute; to commemorate. None is wholly effectual; all have
some merit. Here are instances of each.

Ignoring

Many who endure Infamy, whether as unique trauma or as
persisting saga, simply let it be - not forgetting the injury but
shrugging it off and getting on with life. Consider Malta, a rock
striped of vegetation, scant of soil, short of water, scorched in
summer, drowned in winter, periodically pirate-raided, invaded
and pillaged, fortified and besieged over four millennia. To
recurrent disasters the Maltese adapt by turning hedgehog, in
Nicholas Monsarrat's image, 'At the first sound or smell of
danger they roll themselves into a protective ball and let the
warlike world thunder past above their curved backs. A
hundred times in the past, the Maltese hid their heads,
asorbed the shock, and learned to outlive it altogether'. So
do the people of Dominica, that most entrancing yet recalcitrant
of West Indian islands, make light of repeated enterprises gone
wrong. As each promising new venture founders, they shake
their heads and sagely aver, 'It must be the Arawak curse' or
'that’s just typical Dominica, typical Dominica'.

Erasing

The routine remedy for a loathsome legacy is to get rid of it.
During the iconoclastic fervor of sixteenth-century monastic
dissolution in England, soldiers were enjoined to 'make utterly
extinct and destroy all shrines, so that there remain no memory'
of them.1 When Hollywood's film of Marcus Clarke's His
Natural Life in the 1920s rekindled nightmares no Tasmanian
wanted to remember, they similarly urged Port Arthur's
annihilation. 'Everything connected with Port Arthur should be
scraped forever', thundered the Bishop. 'Sweep away every
relief of those sad old times, whether in stone, in paper, or in
film', exhorted the Hobart Mercury, for they 'just perpetuate
memories better forgotten, creating nothing but hatred'.

But root-and-branch obliteration is not usually needed.
Obnoxious or shameful legacies are more often bowdlerized,
sanitized, hidden, or renamed. Thus the portrait of Cromwell
above the high table at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge,
was turned to the wall to spare Princess Margaret the
embarrassment of dining under the gaze of the regicide. Thus
American place-names that include 'Squaw', offensive to tribal
Indians, now get replaced by politically correct monikers. The
mere passage of time may render a once-valued heritage cutre
or vulgar - almost nude 1930s statues, the Spirit of Justice
and the 'Majesty of Law', were draped by the U.S. Justice
Department at the behest of Attorney General John Ashcroft,
often photographed with them; the Wesley hymn 'How blest
the man whose bowels move' is sung no more, for bowels
have ceased to be the seat of emotion (save for 'gut feeling')
and become a butt of coarse jest. Buildings and statues that
fall out of favour are more apt to be moved or encased, like
Artemisia inside her stony carspace, than to be scraped.

Celebration

Redemptive rather than regretful are sites of sorrow made
luminous in memory. Inverting the Infamy of their causal events
converts seats of tragedy into scenes of triumph. Immortalized
in the Iliad, besieged Troy is the archetypal locale of heroic
resistance to a doomed cause. Putative heirs of Abigianens
Cathars, Highland Scots, Maori warriors, the Warsaw Ghetto
dwell on last-ditch stands evocative of Troy and Carthage.
Israel continues to deploy Masada, where Jewish holdouts
succumbed to Roman troops two millennia ago, as an iconic
front of national identity. On this rock scouts sing Yitzhak
Lamdan's 'Masada Shall Not Fall Again' and tour guides intone
the speech Josephus invented for the last besieged survivor
'rather than be taken as slaves, 967 zealots committed
suicide'). Like the forged Protocols of the Elders of Zion and the
faked Donation of Constantine, the Masada fable has lost none
of its potency by being shown false. Visitors come to Masada
for the man whose bowels move' is sung no more, for bowels
have ceased to be the seat of emotion (save for 'gut feeling')
and become a butt of coarse jest. Buildings and statues that
fall out of favour are more apt to be moved or encased, like
Artemisia inside her stony carspace, than to be scraped.

Not all Infamy is impervious to redemption, however. A striking
inversion of a saga of shame into one of fame occurred on the
small island of Barbuda, long vilified as the only place in the
West Indies where slaves were deliberately bred. This hideous
practice - common in continental America but not in the
Caribbean, where slaves were cheaper to bring in from Africa
than to breed — was a crowning atrocity of human bondage.
But plantation letters newly brought to light revealed Barbuda's
unique Infamy to be a myth, promoted by the avarice of the
island's proprietors and the misreading of nineteenth-century Colonial Office memoranda. Nothing of the sort had ever taken place. Present-day Barbudans were happy to learn this but refused to relinquish the myth; for them slave-breeding was no degrading stain but a source of pride. Thanks to eugenic selection, they were fond of arguing, they had become the strongest, most handsome, and most intelligent of West Indians. Rather than a cause of humiliation, Barbudans' stuf-farm past is a triumphal founding saga.27

Mutation
Sites of sorrow are often made tolerable by extending or elaborating on their grievous origins. Buildings laid waste gain dignity as ruined fragments, like Coventry Cathedral after the Second World War and New York's World Trade Center after September 11th. Port Arthur's 1975 management plan envisioned something along similar lines; to cater for tourist nostalgia, the site should keep the 'romantic flavour' that had charmed honeymooners a century earlier, with some structures 'maintained as ruins'.28

The grimness of some histories is alleviated by ironic jest — a notably Australian vogue. At Old Sydney Town amusement park, a convict about to be lashed to death is asked, 'Any last wishes? 'I'd like some chloroform.' 'You can't; chloroform hasn't been invented yet.' 'That's all right; I'll wait.' But black humour is readily debased into gruesome kitsch — the macabre Catharama Torture Museum, London Dungeon, Dracula Castle Hotel.29

Righteous victimhood today remakes sites of glorious victory into sapotiches of contrition chic. People who've led miserable lives and died miserable deaths are reincarnated as heroes. In America the Battle of Wounded Knee, Custer's Last Stand, the Alamo are re-envisioned by Indian and Mexican underdogs; historic plaques are rewritten to stress the injustices of the winners. Australian apologies for kidnapping Aboriginal children, British governmental regrets for the Irish Famine, American presidential remorse for African slavery, papal repentance for the butchery of the Crusades compel the revision of countless landmarks. (Atonement gratifies the postscripts, corollaries, epitaphs to the Vietnam tragedy. Over 400 villages burned and stayed to laud it for heightening historical awareness, black and white. 'Pain had a face, indigence had a body, suffering had tears. We saw all of that'.30

To be sure, the "auction" was too decent, too decorous to be authentic; indeed, it deeply affected modern viewers largely because historical reality was consciously skewed. In like manner, the film Holocaust owed its huge success to being 'deliberately made bearable; its manipulated history and prettified characters offered an easy way out to millions who had felt vaguely guilty for their own resistance to the subject; 31

Commemoration
Sites of sorrow are perhaps most poignant when they simply underscore the inhumanity that happened there. Utterly compelling is Oradour-sur-Glane, in western France, where in reprisal for partisan resistance nearby, the German SS rounded up all 400 villagers one day in 1944. The men were taken away in groups of 20 and shot at various village crossroads. The women and children were herded into the church, which was then set on fire; all but one perished. The few away on some task returned to find their village a mortuary. France has aimed to keep Oradour just as it was after the massacre, adding only small signs that say 'Here 20 men were shot; remember' and, at the remnants of the church, a placard reminding visitors of the 250 burned to death. The empty houses remain; a few cars and motorbikes sit rusting on the roads and paths; vegetation in the front yards is kept down but otherwise untended — a timeless stasis not easy to maintain against the ineluctable effacements of rust and moth and decay. There is nothing else around but the huge cemetery and, below ground, a plain one-roomed building, with every victim's name, age, and calling inscribed around its walls. On the floor are eight display cases; one holds needles and thread and scissors gathered from the houses, another pens and chalk, rulers and schoolbooks, a third kitchenware, a fourth shoes. There are no words. It is unbearable moving.34

The Vietnam War Memorial in Washington embraces commemoration not by official fiat alone but by visitors' own spontaneous acts. To Maya Lin's underground trench on the Mall they have brought a million souvenirs — army dogtags, purple heart medals, bubble gum wrappers, wedding rings, photographs, bottles of beer. The park service preserves it all, most in a Maryland warehouse, many items on display at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. This dynamic collection collects itself as an ever-changing vernacular commentary on the original professional memorial. Visitors' offerings serve as footnotes, accretions, codicils, postscripts, corollaries, epitaphs to the Vietnam tragedy. Over time, they come to memorialize not only the fallen servicemen but also the donors.35

Iconoclasm apart, all these takes on residues of terror share an awareness that horrific pasts, like all pasts, inevitably alter as time distances them from us. Each passing generation is
increasingly detached from bygone traumas. That is why communities deeply dependent on collective memory strive desperately to immortalize them against the fading of memory. Monuments to those who have fallen in battle and those who later die in the shadow of their sacrifice are erected to replace those who are no longer around to tell the tale. As eyewitnesses to victimhood pass away, we generate a host of surrogate reminders, lest our descendants forget or disown what Auschwitz and Hiroshima, Masada and Port Arthur have meant to our ancestors and ourselves.

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