

Working with Dirt – an introduction to Rubble

James Joyce enunciates a particular notion of freedom in a letter to his brother, dated 1905. He writes: ‘I am sure the whole structure of heroism is, and always was, a damned lie and that there cannot be any substitute for individual passion as the motive power of everything’. He speaks in some ways to the dawning of a new era, one expressed later by James Ellroy and later again by Hiroaki Samura. It is an era he will not live to see.

Here, Joyce opposes traditionalist loyalties to ideological structures, with a kind of highly mobile atomic theory. It is the structure of heroism with which is to be done away. Failed in the same sense that all concepts are already failed. In its stead we find an offering of personal resources and a strangely mobile power that courses through ‘everything’. It is perhaps this moment that is the conceptual articulation of Ulysses; a strangely powerful work that re-produces the mythic as the corporeal, destiny as the shockingly mundane rise of the inevitable.

After an effect this is the same notion that Ellroy expresses in his opus, American Tabloid. He writes: ‘It’s time to dislodge [Jack Kennedy’s] urn... It’s time to demythologize an era and build a new myth from the gutter to the stars. It’s time to embrace bad men and the price they paid to secretly define their time’. Or again with Samura in On Silent Wings; ‘...We live in a peaceful age, and yet the number of sword schools continues to grow. But that has nothing to do with the flowering of the way of the sword. Far from it! Their schools exist only to pad their pockets... When I think about this system I’m torn by doubts. And that’s why we... we of the Ittō-Ryū don’t give a damn... as long as it’s you against them... one on one... We do not lose our warrior souls!’

Each of these writers find themselves confronted with a society awash in a flood of demolition of their ideological structures. In response they offer up the inner resources of the self. ‘I was much stronger than I realized’, Arnold Schwarzenegger said upon his inauguration to governor of California. What Joyce sees as ‘individual passion’, Ellroy names as ‘bad men and the price they paid to secretly define their time’. While for Samura the warrior soul is only perfected once it ‘...is driven by the simple desire to destroy [its] enemies’.

In many ways, the true heritage of the September 11th attacks in New York City is this exchanging of the ideological for the personal. Immediately following the

demolition of ideological edifices of military and finance, we see the rise of the personal. Lovers jump to their death from the North Tower, holding hands as they attempt to escape the collapsing wreckage. A woman in headscarf is attacked while walking to her university campus in California, as is a Sikh in Times Square. Firefighters race into the South Tower, their bodies will never be found.

In some senses this exchange of the ideological for the personal can already be seen here in South Africa, ten years later. The shift in foreign policy from gunboat diplomacy in Zaire in 1998 and Lesotho in '99, to non-interference in Zimbabwe since 2002 can be read as a marker of exactly this exchange. More and more the stories that reach us are stories of individual South Africans; as human shields in Baghdad before the hail of missiles, as collaborators in a coup attempt to overthrow a sovereign government, as prisoners taken on foreign soil in the so-called War On Terror, as pioneers in spaceflight.

'Rubble' explores precisely this link, between the sudden explosion of the ideological, on the one hand and on the other, the rise of personal identity. What happened in New York is anthem for what is already happening. It is integrally tied to the production of dirt, from what was the monolithic and the reproduction of this dirt as canvas for the minor, the highly mobile. This is perhaps what Walter Benjamin saw in his Angel of History; a being who perceived the triumphs of history as nothing more than rubble.

In this regard, Samura's work is the most pressing. Not only because it reaches us like Shakespeare's and Dumas's, over a great distance, speaking of earlier worlds that have a historical bearing on their own, but also because Samura reaches by the medium of comics. In a very real sense comics are built from the rubble of former ideologies. It is no longer sacred, as it once was in classical Egypt, nor is it historicist as it was to the Aztec of meso-America, nor religio-instructive as it was in Feudal Europe. **Today the genre of comics greets us as an element of popular culture already receding from popularity, in a time when popular culture is already the trash-heap of literature. But dirt is no longer to be read merely as the result of a clash of cultures, rather we approach it as the healthy product of a necessary receding of ideologies.**

In this sense, Working With Dirt is not a return to signification in any Freudian sense. Instead it is a creative process of the highest order. The words with which Alan Moore closes V for Vendetta append here; 'Anarchy wears two faces,

both creator and destroyer/ Thus destroyers topple empires;/ Make a canvas of clean rubble where creators can then build a better world./ Rubble, once achieved, makes further ruins' means irrelevant...'. Or perhaps Eliot, at his most stirring, at the very end of 'The Waste Land', '...these fragments have I shored against my ruin...'

shathley Q
Cape Town, 2004

Pull Quotes:

Each of these writers find themselves confronted with a society awash in a flood of demolition of their ideological structures. In response they offer up the inner resources of the self.

Today the genre of comics greets us as an element of popular culture already receding from popularity, in a time when popular culture is already the trash-heap of literature. But dirt is no longer to be read merely as the result of a clash of cultures, rather we approach it as the healthy product of a necessary receding of ideologies.