On the Hither Side of Time: Tony Kushner's "Homebody/Kabul" and the Old English Ruin

55-69 minutes
**Figure 1.** Gardens of Babur Shah in Kabul, Afghanistan (left); Firdous Bamji and Maggie Gyllenhaal as Khwaja Aziz, Esperanto poet and guide, and Priscilla Ceiling, sitting in the ruins of Cheshme Khedre, in Tony Kushner's play *Homebody/Kabul*

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How can anything simultaneously be both immersed in history and drained of it?

—Terence Hawkes

*(Shakespeare in the Present* 141)

In 1948, Emmanuel Levinas published an essay in Sartre’s journal *Les Temps Modernes*, “Reality and its shadow,” where he made the provocative argument that

Art does not know a particular type of reality; it contrasts with knowledge. It is the very event of obscuring, a descent of the night, an invasion of shadow. To put it in theological terms . . . art does not belong to the order of revelation. Nor does it belong to that of creation, which moves in just the opposite direction. (132)

Because art, for Levinas, is essentially “disengaged” from the
world and real being, and also places its objects and subjects into the “non-dialectical fixity” of instants of immobile time (what Levinas termed “the intervals of the meanwhile”), art constitutes a “dimension of evasion” (139, 141). The artist “exiles himself from the city,” and there is finally “something wicked and egoist and cowardly in artistic enjoyment. There are times when one can be ashamed of it, as of feasting during a plague” (142). Levinas’s argument poses a great challenge to those of us who might want to argue for the ethical value, not only of literature itself, but also of literary criticism. This is not to say that Levinas perceived no value in art whatsoever. On the contrary, he believed that art’s value lay precisely in its status as myth:

the immobile statue has to be put into movement and made to speak. Such an enterprise is not the same thing as a simple reconstruction of the original from the copy. Philosophical exegesis will measure the distance that separates myth from real being, and will become conscious of the creative event itself, an event which eludes cognition, which goes from being to being by skipping over the intervals of the meanwhile. (142)

In other words, through critical interpretation, the artwork can escape the death of the “eternal instant,” because “criticism . . . integrates the inhuman work of the artist into the human world” (142).

Through an analysis of Tony Kushner’s 2001 play *Homebody/Kabul* and the Old English *Ruin*, this essay
explores the tension, anxiety, and isolation inherent in the aesthetic and philosophical enterprises of measuring the distance that separates myth from real being (a project that takes place, I would argue, against Levinas, not just outside of the artwork--as criticism--but also within it, in the relationship between the artist and his medium, and even within the medium itself).[2] This essay also ruminates, with reference to an extremely topical contemporary play and a densely opaque remnant of Anglo-Saxon poetry, the ethical dimensions of the use of the imagination to stage encounters between the present and the past, between being and history.[3] According to Levinas, being cannot be explained in its total reality without “the perspective of the relation with the other” (“Reality and its shadow” 143); therefore, following the ethical thought of Levinas, and also the historiographical thought of Michel de Certeau, this essay looks as well at the expression of heterology (or, a discourse on the Other) in both works--an expression, moreover, that, in Certeau’s words, “causes the production of an exchange among living souls” that “fashions out of language the forever-remnant trace of a beginning that is as impossible to recover as to forget” (47).

I. The Disembodied Homebody

The opening scene of Kushner’s play Homebody/Kabul is an hour-long monologue spoken by The Homebody, an eccentric, middle-aged London housewife who remains seated in her reading chair as she explains her obsessive fascination with
Afghanistan. Most of her knowledge of the country’s history--its ancient empires and tribal wanderings, gardens and ruins--comes from a 1965 tourist guide to Kabul as well as from the odds and ends of contemporary news reportage.[4] She explains her reading and research as “Impassioned, fluttery, doomed,” and in her searches for historical information, she prefers the outdated text over the contemporary one, because she can’t resist the “ghostly, the dreamy, the knowing what was known before the more that has since become known overwhelms” (9, 10). Out of the arcana of the secondhand bookshop and her own personal memories, she manages to weave a dizzying and linguistically virtuosic narrative about Afghanistan and her own personal unhappiness that powerfully conveys both the narcissistic dangers inherent in romanticizing the Other as well as the grief of the historical subject who is always helplessly solitary.

The Homebody’s name is telling, for she is very much not at home in her body--she takes a variety of antidepressants and imagines her brain as a “pink-beige walnut-wrinkled nutmeat within a crystalliform quartzoid ice-white hoarfrost casing” (15); furthermore, she feels that she is always “imploding and collapsing” (14). She is more at home in the ancient foreign landscapes of her books--the Hindu Kush valley and the gardens of Babur Shah--than with her barely tolerable husband and daughter. But the second implication of The Homebody’s name is that she is also bound to the interior of her London home, from which she launches escapes primarily
through books--the reader as traveler. At the same time, those very same books cross from somewhere *out there* into her psychic geography and stake their own claims, bringing about a kind of double-colonization, which is also a double-possession. The Homebody speaks in tongues and in hermeneutic languages. Early in her monologue, she tells us, 

*I speak . . . I can’t help myself. Elliptically. Discursively. I’ve read too many books . . . . exceeding I think my capacity for syncretism--is that a word?--straying rather into synchisis . . . . I blame it on the books, how else to explain it? My parents don’t speak like this; no one I know does; no one does. It’s an alien influence, and my borders have only ever been broached by books.* (12)

Here The Homebody imagines her mind as a country unto itself and her beloved texts--"outdated guidebooks . . . old magazines, hysterical political treatises written by an advocate of some long-since defeated or abandoned or transmuted cause" (9-10)--are the primary *impera* of her identity. In this sense, she is both an archive and a text, one that exists in a continual state of reading and writing without revision, a perpetual jabberwocky that, nevertheless, seeks a sensual attachment with the physical Real of Afghanistan and it ancient past--the rubble of its Buddhist temples, Genghis Khan’s river of blood, and the soil of Cain’s gravesite in Kabul.

Although her name (which is pointedly *not* a name) signifies reclusive homeliness--the intimate, enclosed *heimlich*--The
Homebody often interjects her monologue with such rapturous statements as, “Oh I love the world! I love love love love the world!” (12). For her, the “foxed unfingered pages” and “forgotten words” of the guidebook contain a representation of a Kabul that reflects its “sorrowing supercessional displacement by all that has since occurred. So lost; and also so familiar. The home away from home” (27). In her monologue, The Homebody psychically enfolds the “not-like-home” into the very heart of the “like-home,” in order to have the unfamiliar as the core of the familiar, to comfort herself with what is strange and foreign. This represents a striking reversal of Freud’s famous delineation of the relationship between the *heimlich* and the *unheimlich*, while at the same time still demonstrating the always collaborative relationship between the two terms. In his paper of 1919, *Das Unheimliche*, Freud called into question the supposed opposition between the *heimlich*, the “intimate” or “domestic,” and the *unheimlich*, the “strange” or “uncanny.” For Freud, “the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (220), and thus the uncanny always involves something “that ought to have remained hidden, but has come to light” (241). As Terence Hawkes has pointed out in reference to Freud’s later revision of these ideas, there is a “persistent sense that the one [heimlich] lies at the heart of the other [unheimlich]” and there is even “a potential obliteration of the distinction between the two” (12). But what The Homebody may ultimately be trying
to obliterate, is not the distinction that obviously inheres between her London sitting room and the Afghanistan of her guidebook, but the very home itself, within which she feels she is suffocating. For her, it is the *heimlich* which is frightening and strange, and the foreign country, with all of its historical atrocities, which is intimate and comforting. But this intimate foreign country also retains an uncanny ghostliness in the mind and words of The Homebody, who has never traveled to the place of which she speaks so rapturously.

The Homebody’s home is intolerable to her: she refers to her husband, a computer specialist, as an “It” who “knows nothing” and is always “gaseously effusing” (14). Her grown daughter, living at home after an attempted suicide, is someone who is “starving,” but from whom she withholds her affection (28). Even more to the point of her dis-ease with her dwelling, she is racked with guilt at her inertia and “Luxury” in the face of the world’s “awfulness” (24). Stuck somewhere in what she refers to as “the Rhetorical Colloidal Forever that agglutinates between Might and Do” (24), and driven to talk incessantly by her “absolute terror” of the world’s “censure and disdain” of her (24), The Homebody nevertheless does leave her sitting room on occasion, and it is the recollection of one particular excursion that forms the emotional core of her monologue.

Wanting to buy some festive hats for a party, and recalling a place where she had seen some “abbreviated fezlike pillboxy
attenuated yarmulkite millinarisms,” (16-7), she takes the subway to a place in the city where “there are shops with merchandise from exotic locales” (10), and she comes upon “a dusty shop crowded with artifacts, relics, remnants, little . . . doodahs of a culture once aswarm with spirit matter” (17). As her purchases are being rung up by a man whom she presumes to be an immigrant from Afghanistan, she notices that “three fingers on his right hand have been hacked off” (21), and this notice of his hand occasions an extraordinary fantasy: The Homebody “remembers” having been able to speak Pushtu, how struck she was by the man’s beauty, and how she asked him about his hand, to which he responded with a monologue almost as chaotic and dazzling as The Homebody’s. Of course, The Homebody is playing ventriloquist here, and his monologue-within-her-monologue is a random catalogue of all the bits and pieces of recent political history that The Homebody has picked up from various sources. Of his hand, the hat merchant tells her:

I was with the Mujahideen, and the Russians did this. I was with the Mujahideen, and an enemy faction of the Mujahideen did this. I was with the Russians, I was known to have assisted the Russians, I did informer’s work for Babrak Karmal, my name is in the files if they haven’t been destroyed, the names I gave are in the files, there are no more files, I stole bread for my starving family, I stole bread from a starving family, I profaned, betrayed, according to some stricture, I erred and they chopped off the fingers of my hand. (23)
Enlarging this fantasy a bit further, he offers her his maimed hand and leads her out of the shop where she finds herself on a road in Kabul, in sight of “the mountains, unreal as clouds,” and the gardens of Babur Shah from her guidebook. Surrounding the gardens is also the “shamelessly sweet. . . . wreckage rack and ruination” of Afghanistan, its “holocaustal effacement” (25). At the “memory” of Shah Shujah, “puppet monarch of the British Mission,” displaying himself to visitors, wearing a “green tunic over which are worked flowers of gold and a breast plate of diamonds,” she breaks down crying at the sheer beauty of it all, after which the hat merchant smiles a “shy smile which shatters his face into a thousand shards” (25-6), an indication of the aesthetic power but also the fragility of The Homebody’s fantasy. In another staggering imaginative leap, The Homebody and the hat merchant make love under a chinar tree, “beloved of the Moghuls” (26). Of this encounter, The Homebody tells us, “We kiss, his breath is very bitter, he places his hand inside me, it seems to me his whole hand inside me, and it seems to me a whole hand” (26).

It is precisely in the image of the hat merchant’s hand inside The Homebody, contained within the lush foreign scenery, that we witness her desire for an erotic encounter and intimacy with Otherness that she believes will somehow help her transcend her vacuous life as well as collapse the boundaries of two separate histories. In her mind, she is not just holding and restoring within her body one man’s ruined hand, but an entire country, and also, what she perceives as its catastrophic
historical ruptures, which she has been narrating aloud from her guidebook throughout her monologue. This is not an actual encounter, however, but a self-created artistic picture that calls to mind Levinas’s description of the aesthetic image as “the very event of obscuring” (“Reality and its shadow” 132). And this picture is an “event of obscuring” because it substitutes an image for being andclouds the possibility of a real living relationship between The Homebody and, say, the real hat merchant. This picture also exemplifies how The Homebody attempts to construct a new subjectivity by a radically anarchical gesture to the uncanny Other as constituting her inwardness.[6] It is a grandly selfless and empathetic gesture; nevertheless, by virtue of the imaginary nature of the world within which The Homebody spends most of her time--as a kind of spectator to pictures she herself has created--she lives, as Levinas might say, as a thing among things, and is ultimately existing on the outside of everything real and substantial.[7] Moreover, that which obsessively haunts her--the hat merchant with his “poor ruined hand,” who stands in for Afghanistan, and more largely, the East--is taken inside, made heimisch, but also, by virtue of his hand’s hidden-ness within her domestic body, he remains strange and unfamiliar. In fact, strictly speaking, he doesn’t exist at all.

Ultimately, The Homebody has lapsed into an erotic and racially-charged fetishistic objectification of the Other, in which the Other is not joined, but rather, overcome. This does not, however, negate her very real grief at her inability to cope with
the strangeness of her own body and even, her *location* in the West, from which she can only escape through the mechanism of reading and creating her own voluble and manic counter-text. Moreover, The Homebody is aware of the dangers of narcissism inherent in her “love,” not only for the hat merchant but also “the world,” and she tries, somewhat desperately, to differentiate her expression of that love from the type of love where, in Levinas’s words, “the other as other is . . . an object that becomes ours or becomes us” (*Time and the Other* 86). In The Homebody’s own words, her love is not “that overstretched self-aggrandizing hyperinflated sort of adulation which seeks in the outsized and the impossible-to-clearly-comprehend a reflection” (27), and this resonates with Levinas’s notion that the ethical gesture *par excellence* is the “caress,” but only when this caress is understood as

a mode of the subject’s being, where the subject who is in contact with another goes beyond this contact. . . . But what is caressed is not touched, properly speaking. It is not the softness or warmth of the hand given in contact that the caress seeks. The seeking of the caress constitutes its essence by the fact that the caress does not know what it seeks. (*Time and the Other* 89).

In reaching for the Other, who is always unknown, yet not absent, somewhere up ahead in the future, the ethical subject achieves a “wakefulness--or opening of the self,” and is “exposed to the other without restraint and without reserve”
(“God and philosophy” 68, 73). Further, “The openness of the I exposed to the other is the bursting open or the turning inside-out of interiority” (74).

Through her monologue, we witness The Homebody looking for a way to turn herself inside-out through an encounter with, and a subjection to, the foreign Other (and even, to a foreign history) which, nevertheless, brings her back again and again to herself. And this is because The Homebody’s “speaking” (which is also Kushner’s writing) constructs an artwork that, in Levinas’s words, “endures without a future,” and in which The Homebody’s history “is never finished, it still goes on, but makes no headway” (“Reality and its shadow” 138-9).[8] And because Kushner-the-writer is ultimately pulling The Homebody’s strings, she is not a being with freedom, but is trapped in the fate Kushner assigns to her (more bluntly, she is not a person, but a text). In the first act of the play, to paraphrase Levinas, The Homebody’s existence traverses a space of time as through a tunnel between two well-determined moments (“Reality and its shadow” 139). But in the shattering of the hat merchant’s face, we also have the image of what Levinas might have termed the “overflowing” of the Other’s expression (Totality and Infinity 297), which The Homebody’s (and even Kushner’s) language ultimately cannot contain. This “overflowing” implies the irreducible infinitude of his person--an infinitude, moreover, that no receptacle or image can contain, and that calls to mind Levinas’s warning that even the most lucid writer always “spills half the water he
is bringing us” (“Reality and its shadow” 143).

After describing how she left the hat shop and returned home, The Homebody tells us again, “I love the world. I know how that sounds, inexcusable and vague, but it’s all I can say for myself” (27), and then, more plaintively, she poses the question, “Where stands the homebody, safe in her kitchen, on her culpable shore, suffering uselessly watching others perishing in the sea, wringing her plump little maternal hands, oh, oh. Never joining the drowning. Her feet, neither rooted nor moving” (27-8). It is in her awareness of being “neither rooted nor moving” that The Homebody comes closest to understanding her own predicament--her inability to free herself from the burden of a too-material self-relationship, what she calls “the terrible silent gardens of the private” (28), in order that she might meet the Other in his own time (as opposed to the time she fixes in her instant of time for their encounter, which can only hopelessly obscure the Other’s real self). In The Homebody’s anxious worrying over the world and her own place in it, we see the tension that is created when her own desperate desire to be “moved through an encounter with the beautiful and the strange” (29) runs up against her own admission that “All touch corrupts,” and therefore, “The Present is always an awful place to be.” (11). But where, exactly--in what time--is The Homebody? According to Levinas, “an artwork reproduces a time that has stopped: in the general economy of being, art is the falling movement on the hither side of time, into fate” (“Reality and its shadow”
139). This is the time when everything has already happened, the time not only of art, but also of the historian.

In the second scene of Act One, we discover that The Homebody has done what seemed unthinkable from her Prozac-added monologue: she has actually gone to Kabul and gotten herself suitably chopped up while wandering in the landmine-riddled ruins of Cheshme Khedre where, legend has it, Cain, fatigued from his endless wanderings, stopped to die and was buried. The second scene opens with The Homebody’s husband and daughter in a hotel room in Kabul, listening to an Afghan doctor describing, in horrifically precise medical terminology, exactly how The Homebody was killed. Having apparently been beaten “with wooden planks and stakes and rusted iron rebar rods” (32), her left clavicle was separated, limbs shattered, three fingers shorn off, one arm and one breast torn off, her left eye “enucleated,” and part of her head “sheared cleanly off,” leaving the contents to spill out onto the ground. And all this because, according to the Taliban mullah also in the hotel room, “She have been informed upon to have not been clad in decent attire for street, not wearing burqua, uncovered” (33). Even more damning, she was carrying a portable CD player with a Frank Sinatra CD inside, “impious music which is a threat to Islam” (33). But then the play takes a Kafkaesque turn: even though Reuters has reported the murder, no one knows where her body is. The rest of the play is mainly taken up with the daughter’s obsession in finding that body, which she ultimately returns
home without, perhaps because, in the final analysis, as Gertrude Stein might have said, there was never any there there. At the same time, various hints are dropped throughout the second half of the play that The Homebody has faked her own death. At one point, an Afghan “guide-for-hire” who has befriended the daughter tells her that her mother wants to convey the message that “though she is not dead, you must think of her as dead; for she has relinquished everything of that life which you know to live in another world” (91). Later, believing her mother is, in fact, dead, her daughter will say The Homebody suffered from cosmolatry, “Idolatrous worship of the world. . . . She loved everything the world’s forgotten” (115). One could say, even to the point of death. Ultimately, the play seems to say, one cannot love history--the past--in this way, as a sensual object that can be touched. The past cannot be touched.

II. There’s No There There—The Old English Ruin

Just as Kabul and its ruined and ruinous history could not fully answer to The Homebody’s conception of it, so, too, the monumental Roman ruins invoked by the speaker of the Old English poem The Ruin do not necessarily answer to the speaker’s conception of them. At the same time, the poem creates an artwork that fixes the foreign ruins of an ancient regime in an instant of Anglo-Saxon time that ultimately produces its own reality, its own “stopping of being in the meanwhile” of the artistic medium, as Levinas phrases it
The Ruin is a poem about being bewitched by Otherness and a missed encounter with the foreign past, while also writing that strange past into the present in order to hold it and fix it and render it heimlich. The Ruin is also a poem that exemplifies, in the same way as The Homebody’s monologue, the anxieties and tensions entailed in the act of encountering the Other, not in real time, but on its hither side, in the time of writing.

Although The Ruin is often classed and discussed alongside the elegies of the Exeter Book, such as Wanderer, Seafarer, The Wife’s Lament, and Resignation, it is uniquely different from those poems in its absence of any distinct narrative persona or action, and many scholars have remarked upon its peculiar lack of the moralizing aspects so prominent in its closest analogues, especially Wanderer, which also includes a contemplation of ancient ruins. Alvin Lee has even remarked that the poem shares more affinities with modern imagist poetry than with Old English elegies (150-1). This is not to say the narrator of The Ruin does not profess any sentiments at all regarding the object of his contemplation: the rubble of an ancient stone city--its buildings, towers, and gates, and a high curved wall stained with lichen which the poet imagines must have “stood through many storms” (ofstonden under stormum; 11), all signifying “the work of giants” (enta geweorc; 2). R.M. Liuzza has written that the poem “neither exhorts nor mourns; it describes” (9). But the speaker is clearly in awe of what he is describing, and he
refers to the collapsed buildings as once having been the “bright city of a vast kingdom” (*beorhtan burg bradan rices*; 37). In addition, he does not fail to invoke the “mutability topos”: a preoccupation with transience that yokes together what Christine Fell has described as “wonder at the demise of earlier civilisations and regret for the brevity of human life and human joy” (172).

The poet’s sense of awe and his preoccupation with the theme of mutability is evidenced in the very first image he gives us of fate literally breaking down the wondrous stone walls: “marvelous is this stonework, shattered by fate” (*Wrætlic is þes wealstan, wyrde gebræcon*; 1). Also evident in this first line is a very compact example of the kind of juxtaposition of images of a powerful city with its utter destruction that cycles throughout the poem without ever settling definitively on a conclusive evocation of one at the expense of other. In other words, the poem does not explicitly draw the reader to a philosophical understanding that is somewhat generic in the other Old English elegies--that nothing human ever escapes time’s terrible maw (and even, God’s final judgment, or *dom*).

Following the first line, the poet details the general decay wrought “by age” (*ældo*; 6) and draws our attention to the fact that the builders now lie in the “grip of the earth” (*Eorðgrap hafað waldend wyrhtan*; 6-7), yet the high wall they built stood through many reigns; nevertheless, that wall is now crumbled (9-11). The poet turns next to invoking the “full joy of men” (*mondreama full*; 23) that must have once inhabited the “many
mead-halls” (*meodoheall monig*; 23), then quickly moves to conjuring images of “wide slaughter” (*walo wide*; 25) and “days of death,” or “days of disease” (*woldagas*; 25). But he then also returns just as quickly to imagining the better days when warriors flushed with wine must have gazed upon their silver and jewels and other treasures (32-37). Next, we get the description of how the city must have once looked with its stone houses and hot springs and baths (38-43), and then, due to the poem’s damaged condition, we are left at the end with an implosion of broken bits and pieces of language (44-9) that make critical analysis of a resolution an impossibility, although we can say that the words we are left with have either neutrally descriptive or positive connotations (i.e., *hringmere* and *bapu* at lines 45 and 46, and *pæt is cynelic ping* at line 48).[12] In this sense, the poem does not have a clearly delineated ideological coherence. There is no straight thematic line from days of glory to days of rack and ruin to a consideration of the soul’s more eternal evolution. Rather, the poem provides a kaleidoscope of images of power and waste, bright buildings and crumbled stone, in which, as Liuzza has written, “both moral and personal engagement are deliberately forsworn” (9).

It is true, as noted above, that we do not have a distinctly-shaped narrative persona, as we get with *Wanderer* and *Seafarer*: the generic exile who has been cut off from his liege-lord and tribe, and who sees in the landscape around him the traces of the memory of a materially rich and happy past as
well as the inevitable decay and passing of everything human, leading to gnomic and sermon-like pronouncements about keeping one’s misery close to one’s vest and one’s mind focused on the lord who is always high in heaven. What the poem does give us, however, is a past and present in tension with each other; moreover, the present only “appears” in the text by reference to “[what has] passed away” (geleorene; 7). In other words, the present of the poem comes into being, not through a figurative persona who walks and talks his way through that present, thereby inscribing it in his being present, but through the grammar of the poem itself, and therefore, the present is the blank space cleared by the poem’s demarcation of what is past. And this is also the space of writing, which in the case of The Ruin’s composition, is an occasion for encountering the strange and uncanny Others of the past, inserting those who are dead into time, and ultimately, keeping them buried in the interval so that the present can exist in its own time. Which is not to say there is no tension in the poem between the seemingly emotionally-neutral operation of “drawing” the ruins as utterly past and over, and the imaginative reconstruction of the luxury and sensual pleasures of the ruins’ former inhabitants, for in the unpunctuated grammar of the poet, the familiar and domestic living keep rising from the earth in which the dead builders have been consigned:

The ruin fell to the ground,
broken into a mound, where before many a warrior,
glad-hearted and gold-bright, adorned in splendor,
proud and flushed with wine, shone in [his] war-gear.

_Hryre wong gecrōng_

_gebrocen to beorgum, þær iu beorn monig_

_glædmod ond goldbeorht, gleoma gefrætwe[d],_

_wlonc ond wingal, wighyrstum scan._ (31-34)

The ruins create, therefore, a locus for the uncanny past, and
this past is “uncanny” because it is both familiar and strange.
And the poet is a kind of historiographer for whom, to
paraphrase Certeau, current events are the real beginning
_(The Writing of History 11)_.

Perhaps because, as Alan Renoir has written, “_The Ruin_
stands out from other Old English elegies insofar as it is a
series of tableaux rather than a narrative or philosophical
monologue” (149), and therefore is more about the place itself
than it is about a speaking subject’s self-discovery vis-à-vis a
contemplation of his location--his specific location _in time_ as
well as _in the landscape_--much scholarly energy has been
devoted to the probable place in England that the poem
supposedly points to and signifies. Because the poet notes the
remnants of what were once baths with hot streams of water
(38-41), many commentators of the poem have assumed the
city of Bath as a probable location, while others have argued
for Hadrian’s Wall, and even Chester.[13] Still other scholars
have pointed to the idea that the ruins invoked may be a symbolic stand-in for Babylon, or perhaps signify no one place in particular, but rather a combination of specific sites where a 10th-century Anglo-Saxon author might have stumbled upon Roman, or Romano-British ruins.[14] Renoir has written that “whereas [The Ruin’s] physical frame of reference is merely ambiguous and accordingly enables dedicated scholars to hold out for Bath or Chester or some other location, the emotional frame of reference is a total vacuum, which the modern reader must fill from his or her own reading of the text” (150).[15] What I want to suggest here is that the “emotional frame of reference” of The Ruin is not so much impersonal or purely descriptive or lacking in psychological insight, as it enacts a tension between two ways of seeing, and therefore, between two ways of articulating the ruin’s place--its very locus--in the historical imagination. More specifically, the poet’s architectural descriptions, in conjunction with his imaginings of their former inhabitants, enacts a tension between the marking-in-time, which is also the foreclosure, of a Romano-British past, and the placement of the Anglo-Saxon subject within the houses of that past, and therefore, the poem very much has an emotional content, one that partly results, from what Liuzza, writing about the topos of ruins in Old English poetry in his essay “The Tower of Babel: The Wanderer and The Ruins of History,” has described as a certain kind of historical anxiety. Of the ruins encountered by the deracinated speaker of The Wanderer, Liuzza writes that
they are the shattered vessels that once held the noisy social world of the noble warrior, from which the speaker is cut off and to which he cannot return. . . . Ruins represent the obliteration of memory, the end of the arc of civilization in a crumbling pile of forgotten rubble. They are a figure of the anxiety of history itself, of being forever perched on the mute lip of oblivion. (14)

But the poem itself, most likely written in a Latinate monastic setting, is also the technological means by which the poet attempts to calm this anxiety. In other words, in the act of writing the ruins and the past lives lived in those ruins--ruins that are, in the final analysis, pure text--the poem participates in a distinctly Anglo-Latin historiographical project, best summed up, as Liuzza reminds us, by Isidore of Seville’s statement in his Etymologiae that “History is a branch of grammar because whatever is worthy of memory is committed to writing” (Haec disciplina [sc. historia] ad grammaticum pertinet, quia quidquid dignum memoria est, litteris mandatur; qtd. in Liuzza 22). And whatever is not written down, of course, is not worthy of memory and is consigned to the trash heap of history.

The Wanderer, then, according to Liuzza, is a type of answer to the ever-present historical problem of the oblivion, not just of existence, but of meaning, which no longer resides primarily in the oral archives of the wandering tribes but in the inkwells of the emerging nation-state of an Alfred, or an Æthelred, and
the poem navigates a fine line between honoring an ancestral past while also marking the boundary lines of a new historical *locus*, in which, as with The Homebody’s monologue, the text *has its own time*. And this is a critical location, because, as Certeau has written of Western historiography, “each ‘new’ time provides the *place* for a discourse considering whatever preceded it to be ‘dead,’ but welcoming a ‘past’ that had already been specified by former ruptures” (*The Writing of History* 4). As Liuzza puts it, *The Wanderer* “responds in a deeply personal and carefully crafted way . . . to a transition at work throughout Anglo-Saxon history, the cultural shift from a world of oral discourse to a world of textual authority, from communal song to written chronicle” (22). The poem, then, marks the shift from a world ordered by stratified and stockpiled time to a world ordered by sequential and teleological time. Further, the poet is the writer of a new history who engages in the process of what Certeau calls a “scriptural economy,” whereby “an item of information received from tradition or from the outside is collected, classified, inserted into a system and thereby transformed” (“The Scriptural Economy” 161). Additionally, “what comes in is something ‘received,’ what comes out is a ‘product.’ The things that go in are the indexes of a certain ‘passivity’ of the subject with respect to a tradition; those that come out, the marks of his power of fabricating objects” (162). Inevitably, however, the bits and pieces of information that are left aside by the *Wanderer*-poet, remain on the edges of his alliterative
lines, and continue to haunt.

Likewise, the poet of *The Ruin* assembles the objects of the foreign alterity of the past--its fallen towers and rime-whitened mortar--into the engine of the *une marche* (“moving on”) of the present, but not without a certain nostalgia, or *desire*, for what has become lost in the pitch and tide of time.[16] Just as The Homebody brings her throbbing heart to the rubble of Cheshme Khedre, a place that attracts her (fatally) because it is Cain’s final resting place, and in the ruined landscape of which her daughter fruitlessly searches for the pieces of her missing body, so, too, does the poet of *The Ruin* bring his longing to the remains of the houses, which are also the graves, of the giants of the legendary past, from whom he does not get even a yawp, except for the *mondreama* (23) he invents for them. When The Homebody’s daughter, Priscilla, finally realizes that her mother’s lost body is a *corpus vile*, “a body, alive or dead, of no regard to anyone” (114), she turns in anger against the Afghan man who has brought her to the ruins at Cheshme Khedre, and he, in turn, tells her, “You have to take home with you the spectacle of our suffering. Make of it what you will” (114). The poet of *The Ruin* was faced with a similar challenge, and it is precisely in the contrastive structure of the poem that we can witness the desire to overcome the difference of the past, and even its destruction, by joining it, as well as the inevitable silence that redounds across the *caesura* the poem inscribes between that past and the present moment of the poet.
On one hand, we have the poet’s desire to merely describe what he sees, and the poem *does* contain some very precise references to building features typical of Romano-British architecture, such as towers, iron-banded wall-foundations, hot baths, and roof tiles (*torras, weallwalan wirum, burnsele, tigelum, and burnsele*; 3, 20, 21, and 30, respectively). Yet these descriptions are also an articulation of the desire to contain the past by writing it, and further, to set that past off from the present by the invocation of its strange Otherness—in this case, its “giant-ness.” The ruins are, quite literally, figured as the strange houses of the foreign Others of a lost kingdom. These are not the Saxons or Goths or Danes or Franks of the pseudo-Germanic past of a *Widsith* or *Beowulf*–ancestral figures who, in John Niles’s words, play an important role in “a discursive practice that connected a tenth-century social order to an imagined prior period that was associated with racial or tribal origins” (181). On the contrary, they are the powerful and nameless strangers-giants whose demise is not imagined, as is the usual case, as the result of a war between tribes, but rather, as the result of the more ambiguous “days of death,” or “days of disease” (*woldagas*; 25), indicating, perhaps, that the poet does not know what might have happened to the city’s inhabitants—their history has not been included, let’s say, in the chronicles of the poet’s ancestral yesteryears, but rather, resides in the dark clouds of giant-history.[17] Furthermore, similar to the actual Romano-British ruins that would have appeared in the tenth-century English landscape, and
standing in contrast to the smaller enclosed settlements built primarily of wood that were a hallmark of Anglo-Saxon architecture, the stone ruins described in the poem are also monuments to a foreign material history and to different ways of constructing spaces for political and social engagement, as well as for protecting the community and its property. On the other hand, the poet’s architectural ruminations contain language and also extended imagery that would seem to be more conversant with Anglo-Saxon life and culture. For example, in addition to the remains of hot baths, we also have the poet’s imaginative supposition that the city contained “many meadhalls” (meodoheall monig; 23), and other halls of the city’s past are described with language very similar to the way in which Hrothgar’s hall is described in Beowulf: they are “high” and “horn-gabled” (heah horngestreon; 22), and they are also the places where intoxicated warriors, adorned with gold and bright armor, make riotous soldierly noise (heresweg; 22), and gaze on their treasures (32-37)—one imagines, their battle spoils. In this sense, the poem also participates in a post-apocalyptic moment, whereby the speaker is not only a witness to a heroic past, but is also its survivor.

And all this indicates, perhaps, the speaker’s desire to use the ruins as a way to connect the strange and the familiar, to enfold the “like-home” into the “not-like-home,” and thereby see himself, as it were, in the fabric of the “giant” past, which is also heroic history. In this respect, the ruins serve as what Pierre Nora has termed a lieu de memoire, a site of memory
through which the historical subject can construct his identity and place in the present by understanding that present place vis-à-vis the totems of a symbolic, mythical past.[18] At the same time, the poet participates in what Certeau defined as a distinctly Western historiographical project: as opposed to, say, the process of coexistence with and reabsorption of the dead that structures much of Eastern history[19] (and even, we might imagine, Anglo-Saxon oral history), Western history takes for granted the fact that it becomes impossible to believe in this presence of the dead that has organized (or organizes) the experience of entire civilizations; and the fact too that it is nonetheless impossible “to get over it,” to accept the loss of a living solidarity with what is gone, or to define the irreducible limit. (The Writing of History 5)

Ultimately, the ruins are, as Certeau might have said, “the sands from which a presence has since been washed away . . . the unknown immensity that seduces and menaces” (The Writing of History 3), and because the ruins are essentially silent, if not entirely blank, they await the poet’s deciphering. The poet’s act of literally translating the strange ruins into his familiar language brings about a heterology--a discourse on the Other--that is “built upon a division between the body of knowledge that utters a discourse and the mute body that nourishes it” (The Writing of History 3). But, as Certeau also reminds us, by aiming at “understanding” the Other through “meaning,” the historical project really aims at “hiding the
alterity of this foreigner; or, in what amounts to the same thing, it aims at calming the dead who still haunt the present, and at offering them scriptural tombs” (The Writing of History 2). The Ruin is certainly a scriptural tomb, and the poet even consigns the dead non-Christian builders to the apocalyptic time of his own divinely-ordered revelatory history (the hund cnea, or “hundred generations,” of line 8). But because the poem does not conclude with a neat affirmation of the inevitable transience of the human world, and even shucks its contrastive structure after line 37 in order, as R.F. Leslie put it in his 1961 translation, to express without elaborate epithets a certain straightforward “astonishment” and “awe” at the remains of the baths (29), the poet, in the words of The Homebody, would appear to have been “moved only as one may be moved through an encounter with the beautiful and the strange” (29). And in this being moved, however slight, there is a slippage of identity and control, both historic and psychic. If only briefly, the poet gives himself over to the Other, and like The Homebody, he disappears.

III. Coda — “Look, look at my country, look at my Kabul, my city”

By way of summing up, I want to return to that moment in The Homebody’s monologue when the hat merchant delivers his own monologue, where he compresses decades of oppressive Afghanistan history, and also details his existence as an exile living in London, during which he implores The Homebody,
Look, look at my country, look at my Kabul, my city, what is left of my city? The streets are as bare as the mountains now, the buildings are as ragged as mountains and as bare and empty of life, there is no life here only fear, we do not live in the buildings now, we live in terror in the cellars in the caves in the mountains, only God can save us now, only order can save us now, only God’s Law harsh and strictly administered can save us now, only The Department for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice can save us now, only terror can save us from ruin, only neverending war, save us from the terror and neverending war, save my wife they are stoning my wife, they are chasing her with sticks, save my wife save my daughter from punishment by God, save us from God, from war, from exile, from oil exploration, from no exploration, from the West, from children with rifles . . . . (23)

What we have to remember here is that these are really The Homebody’s words, The Homebody’s imagined habitation of the consciousness of the Other and the Other’s history, a gesture simultaneously “both immersed in history and drained of it” (Hawkes 141), both grandly empathetic and also desperate. Likewise, the poet of The Ruin crafts a text as a site of engagement with the Other that both trembles with sympathy while also holding the real Other at bay. Yet it can be argued that these two artworks--The Homebody’s monologue (which is really an artwork-within-an-artwork) and the Old English poem--are also deeply invested in the admirable work of straining to hear the Other speak, to really
look and see, as the Other demands, and to give a face to the Other’s suffering and destruction, and even his joy. And this stands in stark contrast to the words of an American soldier stationed in Iraq in 2003 and assigned to a detail guarding the ruins at Hatra: “They’re impressive and everything, but ruins get old after awhile. It’s not as bad as guarding the mass grave site. Every day, we drive out into the desert about eight miles to check on it. Yup, they’re still dead” (qtd. in Horrigan B3).

FOOTNOTES:

I wish to thank Roy M. Liuzza for reading a draft of this essay and offering invaluable commentary and suggestions for revision. I would also like to thank the anonymous reader for Medieval Perspectives who also offered helpful advice and much-needed corrections. Any remaining errors are entirely of my own making.

[1] Kushner’s play originally premiered at the New York Theatre Workshop on December 19, 2001, and opened at Trinity Repertory Company in Providence, Rhode Island on March 15, 2002. Kushner has since revised and restaged his play in New York City, but for the purposes of this paper, I am using the 2001/02 version of the play-script.

[2] It may be that Levinas recognized that the artist could also be the philosophical exegete, for in the conclusion to “Reality and its shadow,” he acknowledges that the modern literary writer is more intellectual, “not because he wants to defend a
thesis or cause, but because he needs to interpret his myths himself” (“Reality and its shadow” 143).

[3] By way of briefly explaining what may seem to be an incongruous pairing of a modern play and an Old English poem, this essay is part of a larger project that seeks a relation with the Other of Anglo-Saxon history through a critical mediation between present and past works of art that take as their main subject the memory of traumatic history.

[4] At the time of the play’s first production, the Taliban was still in power in Afghanistan. The guidebook that The Homebody cites within the play (with some creative emendation from Kushner) is Nancy Hatch Dupree’s *An Historical Guide to Kabul* (Kabul: Afghan Tourist Organization, 1965).

[5] I am indebted to Hawkes for pointing out the relationship between historical notions of national “Englishness” (as an aggressive sense of being “at home” in a particular place) and the *unheimlich*, and for elucidating the ways in which a cultural “home” is ultimately only “the tamed and taming doll’s house we construct as a poor bulwark against the apparitions that permanently haunt us” (21).

[6] My thinking here is indebted to Homi K. Bhaba’s ruminations, in *The Location of Culture*, upon Levinas’s ideas about the “twilight existence” of the aesthetic image and its “externality of the inward” (1-18).

[7] In “Reality and its shadow,” Levinas writes that in “the
pathos of the world of imaginary dreams--the subject is among things not only by virtue of its density of being, requiring a ‘here’, a ‘somewhere’, and retaining its freedom; it is among things as a thing, as part of the spectacle. It is exterior to itself, but with an exteriority which is not that of a body” (133).

[8] Levinas writes that “The characters of a novel are beings that are shut up, prisoners. Their history is never finished, it still goes on, but makes no headway. A novel shuts beings up in a fate despite their freedom” (“Reality and its shadow” 139).

[9] Ultimately, for Levinas, art produces time as an “empty interval,” and the “eternal duration of the interval in which a statue is immobilized differs radically from the eternity of a concept; it is the meanwhile, never finished, still enduring--something inhuman and monstrous” (141).


[12] Further complicating the issue of the poem’s overall thematic structure is the fact that lines 12-17 are also in a highly fragmentary state, although Leslie indicates in his introduction to his edition that “the poet appears to be dealing with the antiquity of the ruins and the skill required to construct the buildings” (28).


[14] For these arguments, see Keenan, “The Ruin as Babylon” 109-17 and Lee, “The Ruin: Bath or Babylon? A Non-archeaological Investigation” 443-55. It is Greenfield, in his Critical History of Old English Literature, who suggests that what The Ruin describes is possibly the “imaginative amalgam of various locales” (215), and Krapp and Dobbie suggest that
“The poet may have had no particular place in mind . . . but may have introduced the mention of hot baths from his own knowledge of Bath, or from hearsay, to give more concreteness to his picture” (lxv).

[15] What Renoir himself ultimately argues is that the poem’s contrastive structure, regardless of the lack of a distinct speaker, favors a reading where the message that human affairs are evanescent predominates over the message that the past was a happy and opulent place, and further, the probable affective power of this message depends on the audience, whether medieval or modern, connecting the scene of ancient ruins the poem invokes with their own “store of . . . personal experience” of similar ruins (164-5). In that sense, for Renoir, the poem does ultimately work to convey a singular philosophical point, albeit with a certain dependence upon the reader’s psychic intervention into the text. In another sense (still following Renoir’s thinking), in the post-September 11th American landscape, this Old English poem still has the power to terrify.

[16] For the important role of nostalgia in writing and history in Anglo-Saxon culture, see Howe, *Migration and Mythmaking in Anglo-Saxon England*, and Liuzza 14-24. It should be pointed out here that the Anglo-Saxon poet, situated at the intersection of oral and literate cultures, likely possessed more ambivalence toward the social value and political power of the production of writing than the authors of the sixteenth- through
eighteenth-century histories, ethnographies, and mystic writings that were the primary objects of de Certeau’s historiographic inquiry. For a representative sampling of some of the important discussions of the transition between oral poetry and written texts in medieval culture and the complicated, dependent relationship between the two, see Clanchy, DiNapoli, Irvine, Lerer, Near, O’Keefe, and Stock.

[17] The _topos_ of “giant-ness” in Anglo-Saxon literature is a familiar one for demarcating the inhabitants of the strange, foreign past (who can be both inspiring and terrifying) as well as the artifacts they leave behind. To cite just one example, in _Beowulf_, Grendel and his monstrous, uncanny kin are described as being descended from Cain, who is the progenitor of giants (106-14), and the marvelous sword which Beowulf discovers in Grendel’s dam’s underwater lair and with which he slays her and beheads Grendel, is described as an old sword made by giants (1558). On the theme of “giant-ness” in medieval culture and its various attributes, see Friedman, Olsen and Houwen, and Williams.

[18] Nora designates as _lieux de memoire_ material and symbolic elements of French history and national identity--artistic objects, monuments and buildings, places, holidays and commemorative objects, historical events, figures, and periods--that have become invested by the cultural imagination with symbolic auras that are essentially opposed to their actual (if even recoverable) history, and the historian’s
task, in an era where “historicized memory” has overtaken history, and where “the past is a world from which we are fundamentally cut off,” is to interrogate the ways in which memory sites accrue and accrete symbolic value in order to peel away the layers of a culture’s forgetfulness about its own past (Nora, “Between Memory and History,” Realms of Memory, 12).


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