

Narratives of Dispossession: The Persistence of Famine in Postcolonial Ireland

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The Great Famine is often referred to as the most haunting event in modern Irish history and the memory of the Famine continues to inform one of the more contentious debates about both the Irish historical narrative and the Irish national character. Few dispute that approximately one million people died as a result of malnutrition and starvation, and nearly one million more emigrated during the Famine years. There is, however, a bitter argument over the attribution of blame, which has continued to rage since the late nineteenth century. Arguments have largely played out in historical representations of the Famine, which typically adhere to one of two ideological perspectives: the Irish nationalist argument that British mismanagement of the potato blight caused the Famine, and the British loyalist argument that Ireland's underdeveloped social and economic structures simply collapsed when one-third of the population's only food source was destroyed by disease.

At the turn of the twenty-first century two thematically and structurally similar novels, Nuala O'Faolain's *My Dream of You* (2001) and Joseph O'Connor's *Star of the Sea* (2002), complicate popular uses of Famine narratives in arguments on both sides of the debate concerning the Irish troubles. By exposing both intentional and unintentional misrepresentations of the Famine, *My Dream of You* and *Star of the Sea* establish an expanded sense of how the Famine might be used in new ways, to new ends.

O'Faolain and O'Connor are among a number of recent novelists such as Jane Urquhart (*Away*, 1993), Helen Humphreys (*After Image*, 2001), and Peter Behrens (*The Law of Dreams*, 2007) as well as a host of writers across the disciplines who have shown a renewed interest in depictions of the Famine, and have begun to blur the distinctions between its historical and aesthetic representation. Famine scholar Christine Kinealy observes that the surge in Famine-related scholarship coincides with its 150-year anniversary in 1995:

The anniversary of the Great Famine has demonstrated a massive interest in that defining event in Irish history. Apart from historians—who ignored the Famine for so long—the Famine has started to attract the interest of folklorists, geographers, demographers, linguists, political activists, and Third World specialists. (“A Dangerous Memory” 250-51)

Among these Irish intellectuals who have renewed their interest in the Famine are a number of contemporary political figures and novelists writing after 1995 that complicate both extremist lines of argument.

O'Faolain and O'Connor complicate dominant ideological renditions of Ireland's Famine narrative by challenging oversimplified historical 'facts.' Both novels construct a spectral architecture, layering disparate historical moments and spaces over one another to produce a narrative effect in which contemporary events are recognized as the re-appearance of previous occurrences, but have been complicated to the point where they can no longer be definitive. This structure, wherein contentious ideological perspectives of the Famine are organized into a cooperative and collaborative narrative, urges the reader to apprehend the ways in which ambiguous representations of the Famine (its causes and outcomes) yield a more nuanced and complex literary vision of the Irish national condition than that offered by historical records.

In *My Dream of You* and *Star of the Sea*, each protagonist is an historian who has set out to write a definitive account of a local event that took place during the Famine years. Kathleen de Burca, in *My Dream of You*, researches and writes about the alleged Talbot affair in Roscommon, Ireland (O'Faolain draws upon the actual divorce case document, *A Judgment of Talbot v. Talbot*, 1856). In *Star of the Sea*, G. Grantley Dixon documents the lives of passengers aboard the titular fictional trans-Atlantic cargo ship. Each protagonist's research uncovers diverse, and often antagonistic, accounts of the events they are trying to definitively record. Both protagonists come to realize that writing an "accurate" or "definitive" account of these events would be impossible; therefore, they ultimately turn to fiction as a more appropriate medium for authentically representing historical complexity.

By systematically breaking down and overturning perceived truths about the Famine, both novels resist widely accepted and wildly oversimplified historical depictions of the nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Irish as fundamentally poor, senseless, and anti-colonial, by establishing the Irish population—both during and after the Famine—as economically motivated, socially aware, and politically complex. To this end, the various narrative structures and convoluted plotlines in *My Dream of You* and *Star of the Sea* parallel the haunted landscape of a physically disjointed, and psychologically dispossessed, Irish nation. Yet before they could undertake this important task, Ireland had to be summoned to the front.

Us and Our Diaspora

On February 2, 1995, Mary Robinson, then President of Ireland, delivered an address to the Houses of the Oireachtas entitled "Cherishing the Irish Diaspora: On a Matter of Public Importance." Her address focused on

sesquicentennial Famine commemorations in both Ireland and abroad, and asked that those commemorations resist traditional ideological bias that had previously led to physical and psychological violence in Ireland. She began by pointing to the value in retaining and increasing Irish diversity:

Four years ago I promised to dedicate my abilities to the service and welfare of the people of Ireland. Even then I was acutely aware of how broad that term the people of Ireland is and how it resisted any fixed or narrow definition. One of my purposes here today is to suggest that, far from seeking to categorize or define it, we widen it still further to make it as broad and inclusive as possible. (1)

Robinson maintained that Ireland must embrace dispossession as a diversifying yet unifying element of Irish identity. The aim of this lecture was to call for stronger ties to the global community through participation in transnational humanitarian efforts—especially in nations suffering from Famine.

Robinson calls into question historical oversimplifications of the Famine narrative by both nationalist and loyalist propagandists, and attempts to move beyond simply re-imagining the Irish past for some political gain towards finding a meaning for that past in the present:

We cannot want a complex present and still yearn for a simple past. I was very aware of that when I visited the refugee camps in Somalia and more recently in Tanzania and Zaire. The thousands of men and women and children who came to those camps were, as the Irish of the 1840s were, defenseless in the face of catastrophe. ... We cannot undo the silence of our own past, but we can lend our voice to those who now suffer. To do so we must look at our history...with a clear insight which exchanges the view that we were inevitable victims in it, for an active involvement in the present application of its meaning. ... One of the common bonds between us and our diaspora can be to share this imaginative way of re-interpreting the past. (Robinson 13)

Robinson's comparison between dispossessed victims of the Irish Famine in the 1840s and victims of more recent famines in Somalia, Tanzania, and Zaire, asks artists to engage with the Famine narrative in new ways that do not fall back upon tired generalizations, "angry rhetoric," or "traumatized muteness" (Eagleton 13).

A prime example of ideologically driven fiction that relies heavily on angry nationalist rhetoric is Maud Gonne's 1904 one-act play, *Dawn*. According to Angela Bourke, Gonne wrote the play in response to waning nationalist fervor in the Irish theater. Gonne was deeply invested in nationalist theater from 1900 when she founded Inghinidhe na hEireann, played the title role in W.B. Yeats's and Lady Gregory's co-written play, *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902), and served as vice-president of the National Theatre Society before resigning over its staging of J.M. Synge's *The Shadow of the Glen* (October 1903) which she saw as a withdrawal from nationalist interests (Bourke 913). In *Dawn*, Gonne identifies English occupation and Famine evictions as the origin of Irish troubles, and advocates violent insurrection for what she sees as malicious evictions of poor Irish farmers by wealthy English landlords. During the period in

which *Dawn* was composed, Irish artists often cultivated direct relationships between literary texts, revolutionary political events, and constructions of Irish national identity. In her play, which echoes Yeats's and Lady Gregory's nationalist drama, *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, Gonne argues that the Famine created the modern Irish condition: desolate, poor, and anti-British. During the Literary Revival, many authors and politicians worked to promote Irish Republican nationalism, and hoped to influence revolutionary resistance to British imperialism by drawing upon past colonial abuses.

Though there is no record of it ever being staged, *Dawn* was published on 29 October 1904 in the *United Irishman*, the very paper in which—upon Queen Victoria's final visit to Ireland in 1900—Gonne had written, "However vile and selfish and pitiless her soul may be, she must sometimes tremble as death approaches when she thinks of the countless mothers who, shelterless under the cloudy Irish sky, watching their starving little ones, have cursed her before they died" (Gonne, "The Famine Queen," 184). As we will see, contemporary authors, writing in a postcolonial environment, complicate such rigid ideological reactions to the Famine.

One method by which O'Faolain's and O'Connor's novels highlight ambiguity within the Irish historical record is the prominent addition of spectrality to the Famine narrative. In *Specters of Marx* (1994), Jacques Derrida explains that reality, and the historical writing that attempts to document past reality, follows a logic of the specter, meaning that reality is comprised of nothing but contradiction and ambivalence. Derrida maintains:

If we have been insisting so much since the beginning on the logic of the ghost, it is because it points toward a thinking of the event that necessarily exceeds a binary or dialectical logic, the logic that distinguishes or opposes *effectivity or actuality* (either present, empirical, living—or not) and *ideality* (regulating or absolute non-presence). (italics original 78)

For our purposes, Derrida's "logic of the ghost" illuminates the ways in which *My Dream of You* and *Star of the Sea* employ a similar spectral logic that subverts clear this-or-that binaries in favor of more genuinely complicated historical representation. It follows that if the Irish historical narrative is bereft of certainty, national identity based upon that narrative would remain equally dispossessed and protean.

Mary Robinson, looking back at that period of hunger, insists upon imaginatively re-interpreting the Famine at later commemorations. She calls for debating historians and politicians to acknowledge that the act of assigning blame for Famine-related hardship stands in stark contrast to her contemporary understanding of Irishness (via famine) as fundamentally diasporic. In short, she argues that contemporary Irish identity is the product of dislocation and uncertainty. For Robinson, and indeed for the historian-protagonists in *My Dream of You* and *Star of the Sea*, the Irish

diaspora personifies such dispossession, and offers insight into appropriate Irish responses to similar present-day suffering throughout the world:

I am certain that [our diaspora], too, will feel that the best possible commemoration of men and women who died in that famine, who were cast up on other shores because of it, is to take their dispossession into the present with us, to help others who now suffer in a similar way. Therefore I welcome all initiatives being taken during this period of commemoration, many of which can be linked with those abroad, to contribute to the study and understanding of economic vulnerability. I include in that all the illustrations of the past which help us understand the present. (Robinson 14)

Robinson's address builds upon her recognition that the Irish nation transcends the geographical space of Ireland (largely because of the Famine) to draw an explicit connection between mid-nineteenth century Irish and late-twentieth-century Somali hunger. She insists that the most appropriate commemoration for those who suffered during Ireland's Great Famine in the nineteenth century is to offer relief to those affected by the Somali drought at the end of the twentieth century. Her address, therefore, establishes dispossession as a defining theme for international Famine commemorations, thereby introducing a third dimension to the otherwise reductive representations of the Famine produced by politically influenced historians and literary authors. Robinson calls for these simplifications to be re-evaluated, urging commemorators to move beyond socially and politically reductive divisions in order to organize cooperative international famine relief efforts.

In *The Great Irish Famine: Impact, Ideology and Rebellion* (2002), Christine Kinealy reinforces the timeliness of Robinson's address. She maintains that after the peace process had begun in the North, historical writing became decidedly less vested in "British versus Irish" debates since each side had at least begun to come to terms with the other politically. She explains,

The relations between the two islands have now reached a maturity which allows us to look at our history objectively and to tell the story as it was...After all, the Famine is not just an Irish event, it was just as much a British event, a shared experience. (ellipsis original 4)

Robinson's address comes on the heels of the Provisional Irish Republican Army's (PIRA) August 31, 1994 ceasefire in Northern Ireland. Kinealy suggests, therefore, that lingering effects of the trauma caused by political divisions that may or may not have contributed to the Famine, but certainly intensified because of it, continue to haunt the contemporary Irish understanding of what it meant to be England's Other during the Famine.

Mary Robinson's reference to Ireland's diaspora affords the opportunity to both hear with a new perspective the echoes of Irish history and speak with a new significance of Ireland's proper place in the contemporary global landscape. Because of Ireland's turbulent past and

the widespread dispersion of those who claim Irish heritage, Robinson maintains that Ireland's place is at the fore of international humanitarian and globalization efforts; therefore, Irish intellectuals must move beyond narrow definitions of what it means to be Irish. The Great Famine serves as an ideal backdrop for narratives seeking to de-essentialize definitions of Irishness because it was the moment at which the Irish nation became dispossessed via dispersion. Historical records and literature that narrowly define the Irish as provincial, isolated agrarians fail to recognize the worth of an ambiguous national identity. Robinson maintains that the Famine provides historians a useful backdrop for examining national complexity:

After all, emigration is not just a chronicle of sorrow and regret. It is also a powerful story of contribution and adaptation. In fact, *I have become more convinced each year that this great narrative of dispossession and belonging, which so often had its origins in sorrow and leave-taking, has become—with a certain amount of historic irony—one of the treasures of our society.* If that is so then our relation with the diaspora beyond our shores is one which can instruct our society in the values of diversity, tolerance and fair-mindedness. (emphasis added, Robinson 5)

Her 1995 address on Famine commemoration and Irish humanitarian efforts against world hunger, however, has more clearly influenced a contemporary literary trend in which recent Irish writers offer complexity in place of ideological certainty, and embrace dispossession as empowering, rather than traumatic.

The historical novels that follow in the wake of Robinson's speech prove to be a useful medium for developing the themes of dispossession Robinson emphasized in her speech to the legislature about international humanitarian efforts. This is because they blend historical realism and imaginative reinterpretation by introducing intricate, variegated narratives that capture the ambiguities of Irish historical reality via spectrality.

My understanding of these two novels' spectral architecture, and their reliance upon the re-emergence of the Famine narrative, draws upon Jacques Derrida's logic of the specter, which he observes as "what one imagines, what one thinks one sees and which one projects—on an imaginary screen where there is nothing to see" (125). The specter of the Famine, the ever-present memory of the Famine's traumatic dislocating consequences in the Irish collective consciousness, always informs Irish cultural and political identity construction. And when the specter is visible, for instance in Maud Gonne's play or during the sesquicentenary commemorations in 1995, what is seen is a projection of whatever one wants to see. The Famine, in other words, can mean whatever one makes it mean. For instance, a number of Irish historians and political commentators, such as Eoghan Harris and Conor Cruise O'Brien, claimed that Famine commemorations in 1995 would instigate a return to nationalist fervor for violence against Britain (Kinealy "A Dangerous Memory" 251-53). Of course their claims are also projections of their fears over the reemergence of sectarian violence in Northern Ireland. It is important to keep in mind, however, that spectrality is never simply

mimetic. The past does not return exactly as it was; it returns in a different guise. One of the differences gleaned from reading *My Dream of You* and *Star of the Sea* against one another is a broadening of the Famine narrative so that it does not fit neatly into a political allegory, even as such allegories are evoked in the course of dispossessing them.

Reading Irish history through the lens of spectrality allows readers to see revision in these novels not as corrective measure but as a challenge to the possibility of presenting an accurate historical record. In both novels, ostensibly following in the wake of Mary Robinson's call to "take [Famine victims'] dispossession into the present with us, to help others who now suffer in a similar way" (14), revision is not about factual accuracy, but about breaking down the distinction between accuracy and inaccuracy. I use the terms 'accuracy' and 'complexity' to differentiate between two types of precision that historical and fiction writers attempt to achieve in their work. I understand 'accuracy' as the process of trying to create a definitive, precise account of an event—a report of what happened. The inherent difficulty with such reports is that while they can be factually true, they tend to be one-dimensional. Therefore, another term is necessary to describe historical documentation that aims at multi-dimensional reportage: complexity. Such accounts are more ambiguous and resist definitive conclusions.

Reading for complexity rather than accuracy is valuable because *not* drawing any definitive broad-scope conclusions allows us to actually use the smaller, more complicated, personal lessons of history to greater advantage. Literary theorist Linda Hutcheon, for instance, draws upon Jean-Francois Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1979) to posit that historical fiction promotes a skepticism of factual truth by calling into question the "facticity" of history's grand-narratives through an "interrogati[on] of the nature of representation in historiography" (50). Her observations lead her to suggest that readers be suspicious of the pose of broad historical accuracy and the assumed authenticity of fact (67). As the following close readings will illustrate, *My Dream of You* and *Star of the Sea* unveil the process of producing an historical study, and thereby undermine the pose of implied historical accuracy, while retaining history's worth as a fictional narrative that can shape individual and national identities.

My Dream of You: Space, Text, Time

Nuala O'Faolain (1940-2008) spent much of her literary career—as a columnist for the *Irish Times*, as memoirist, and as novelist—negotiating the problematic intersections between collective and individual Irishness. Dividing her time between London, New York City, and Dublin, O'Faolain was a migrant Irishwoman, much like her ostensibly homeless protagonist in *My Dream of You*—a constantly on-the-move travel writer

named Kathleen de Burca (Caitlín de Búrca). However, the sense of homelessness shared by writer and character is more a state of mind than a lack of actual physical space. In her search for what it means to be Irish, O'Faolain often threads together disparate spaces, texts, and times to challenge narrow definitions that have traditionally defined 'true' Irishness as provincial and homogeneous. *My Dream of You* is constructed as a frame around actual historical documents and Kathleen's embedded historical fiction, *The Talbot Book*. By amalgamating Irish and English settings, multiple historical genres, and past and present events, the novel resists narrative clarity, and thereby challenges normative categorizations or definitions of Irishness.

My Dream of You follows Kathleen's present-day quest to uncover the truth about an alleged affair that took place during the Famine between Marianne Talbot, the malnourished and abused English wife of Anglo-Irish landlord Richard Talbot, and one of their Catholic domestic servants, William Mullan. Kathleen's project simultaneously serves as a way for her to re-engage with her own dislocated Irish identity. We learn that before returning to Ireland in order to research the Talbot case, Kathleen had been living in self-exile in England for more than a quarter century. She claims her emigration was solely due to Ireland's suffocating parochialism, which she sees as a lingering consequence of the Famine.

While, as Mariam O'Kane Mara helpfully observes, the mirrored troubles of Kathleen de Burca and Marianne Talbot draw useful parallels between women's political roles in the Famine era and mid-twentieth Century, I believe that Kathleen's interest in Marianne Talbot stems not simply from a sense of similarity, but from her recognition of hunger and silence as traumatic forms of dispossession in Ireland. Furthermore, I contend that it was the Famine that invited and allowed Richard to both systematically starve and silence his wife, dispossessing her of class and respectability. This act, played out on a local level, has become a dominant theme in national definitions of Irishness. Kathleen maintains,

I put the two things together, home and the Famine, and I used to wonder whether something that had happened more than a hundred years ago, and that was almost forgotten, could have been so terrible that it knocked all the happiness out of people.
(5)

She goes so far as to identify her present-day depression as an extension of her miserable Irish childhood, which forced her to leave the island. Furthermore, Kathleen identifies her Father's melancholy and rage as reactions to colonial oppression: "The only feeling he showed about the Famine was rage against England. There was no pity in him" (71). Her personal memories are conflated with spectral stereotypes as she explains that Ireland's violent nationalism and fervent Catholicism drove her to London. She recalls,

My family has been the same size and shape in my head since I ran out of Ireland. Mother? Victim. Nora and me and Danny and poor little Sean? Neglected victims of

her victimhood. Villain? Father. Old-Style Irish Catholic patriarch; unkind to wife, unloving to children, harsh to young Kathleen when she tried to talk to him. (21)

While her father's stereotypical abuse drove Kathleen out of Ireland, an interest in a similarly abusive nineteenth century Anglo-Irish patriarch brought her back.

Though true that Kathleen was initially drawn to the Talbot case, as Mary Fitzgerald-Hoyt argues, not because it occurred during the Famine, "but because its suggestion of grand passion in the most improbable circumstances attracts her" (91), I will now map how both Kathleen's *The Talbot Book* and O'Faolain's *My Dream of You* turn on a keen historiographical awareness. To be sure, I am indebted to Fitzgerald-Hoyt's convincing argument that *My Dream of You* is primarily concerned with Irish history's "multiple players, multiple narratives," which serves as a strong point of origin for broader studies into contemporary historical novels about the Famine. My reading extends Fitzgerald-Hoyt's observations by focusing on Kathleen's writing process to illuminate how *My Dream of You* imbues its readers with this sense of historiographical awareness. Further, by pairing the novel with O'Connor's *Star of the Sea*, we can begin to see a wider historiographical movement in contemporary, postcolonial Irish literature of which *My Dream of You* is an essential part.

Kathleen originally conceives of her project as a comprehensive history of the Talbot affair and the resulting divorce case. She plans to construct her historical narrative using, as a starting point, fragments from the actual court proceedings heard in the House of Lords in 1856: *A Judgment of Talbot v. Talbot*. This document, however, only provides her with Richard Talbot's accusation against his wife, and the details of her conviction. Marianne has no voice in this document. Kathleen's hope is to record the facts of the actual affair between Marianne Talbot and William Mullan, including its origin, development, and discovery. In order to unearth this information, Kathleen engages in traditional research methodologies: she looks in British and Irish archives for letters; works with Miss Leech, a research librarian in Ireland, to locate Estate reports; and does field research in Roscommon, where she talks with locals who have knowledge about local lore concerning the Talbot estate.

Each of these more traditional research methods yield very little information, and the little evidence that Kathleen does uncover offers her multiple and contradictory versions of the event. She is unable to locate accurate records from which to construct a definitive history of the affair, of the Famine, and of Irishness in the nineteenth century. Her aggravation with being unable to draw a definitive conclusion about the alleged affair leads her to abandon her fact-based historical project for a fictional one. Kathleen writes, "Imagination of others doesn't go very far even when you're trying.... Yet here I was, trying to imagine a whole nation in the time of an unimaginable catastrophe!" (72). She convokes the traumatic memory of Famine, but finds that she cannot call up a clear image: "The trauma must be deep in the genetic material of which I was made. I cannot

forget it, I thought, yet I have no memory of it. It is not mine; but who else can own it?" (72-73). In order to gain a more complex understanding of the event, she turns to a less traditional mode of historical research—she invites the ghosts of Marianne Talbot and William Mullan to haunt her: "It wasn't people I was thinking of. It was a shape, a blurred image—me outside somewhere, calling, and tragic ghosts listening to me and waiting for me to free them—that settled inside me" (22). Kathleen's request to be haunted calls attention to her hope of productively borrowing memories from the past to inform her research, and to recalibrate her own sense of contemporary Irishness, which she identifies as the lingering specter of early twentieth-century nationalism: parochial, patriarchal, abusive.

Kathleen's fruitless search for historical documents or convincing oral narratives illustrates how limiting a search for definition can be for a historian. She comes to the conclusion that her project will have to rely less on discoverable facts and more on imaginative reinvention. Ultimately, her inability to uncover a definitive account of the Talbot affair calls into question other Famine narratives that claim to be based upon factual evidence. O'Faolain highlights the incomplete historical records and the biases of local folklore that both nationalist and loyalist arguments employ as evidence for their claims concerning union with Britain. *My Dream of You* suggests that Irish history and the characters that populate it are significantly more complex than the ideologically influenced histories that both groups of writers produce. It reminds us that crooked landlords, Gombeen men, and lazy peasants are stereotypes that have been stripped of their contextual nuance in order to make political arguments. There were certainly generous landlords, honest tradesmen, and diligent peasants in Ireland in the 1840s, but not until the twenty-first century do they begin to populate nonsectarian Famine narratives.

My Dream of You complicates the historical record of the Famine by showing how a lack of historical accuracy affects the ways in which both individual and collective identities are constructed. Tracing Kathleen's interpolations of past into present, the novel illustrates how citing history says as much about the moment of citation as it does the cited moment. As another contemporary Irish novelist, 2005 Man Booker Prize winner John Banville observed in a 1979 interview,

Since I've started writing novels based in historical fact I've realized that the past does not exist in terms of fact. It only exists in terms of the way we look at it, in the way that historians have looked at it. (Sheehan 84)

My Dream of You incorporates a historiographical understanding similar to Banville's observation concerning critical perspective. By drawing on an actual historical document from the House of Lords (*The Talbot Judgment*), Kathleen's fiction intimates the significance of re-imagining the past, borrowing from it, in order to reconstruct the present. For Kathleen, ghosts are imagined not as things to be exorcized, but rather convoked and borrowed from in a productive manner.

The novel enacts a dialectical relationship between past and present in which we see Kathleen using her traumatic personal history to understand Marianne's story even as Marianne's story influences Kathleen's identity reconstruction. Kathleen imagines Marianne as a distortion of herself, and therefore reads Marianne's story through her own futile attempt to define herself as other-than-Irish. In *My Dream of You*, historical moments are layered, producing a spectral effect in which readers can see how past and present amalgamate to complicate one another. In "(Re)producing Identity and Creating Famine in Nuala O'Faolain's *My Dream of You*" (2007), Miriam O'Kane Mara highlights the connections that O'Faolain draws between the Famine and more recent oppression of women in Ireland. Though her main focus is on women's bodies and their fertility as symbols for the health of Ireland, Miriam O'Kane Mara briefly observes the ways in which O'Faolain's novel lays bare the methods of (re)constructing history:

O'Faolain's text allows the narrative of the past to change direction in retellings. As new information about Marianne's divorce case comes to light during Kathleen's research, she revises her developing novel. Such rewriting suggests an unreliable narrative, a shifting story without prevarication or misleading intent from its creator. ... O'Faolain's entangling of past and present indicates the constructed nature of history and the importance of the present day to the representation of the past. Her protagonist's continuous revision and reconstruction of the embedded story represents the difficulty of looking to the mid-nineteenth century for authority. In focusing on the ways that history is constructed and refashioned, the text hints at the difficulties of knowing history and of identifying authentic Irish identity. (199)

And thus, I contend, by extension, *My Dream of You* challenges the use of a simplified history as a means of defining a true Irish identity via an accurate Irish historical narrative. What Mary Robinson, Nuala O'Faolain, and Joseph O'Connor seem to suggest is that the authenticity of Irishness is predicated upon its inauthenticity, its dispossession of any concrete, universal characteristics. In other words, Irish identity is a spectral identity. Like Derrida's specter, Irishness is "an unnameable or almost unnameable thing: something, between something and someone, anyone or anything..." (Derrida 5).

Through its demonstration of the ways in which writers interpret, invent, and falsify the past, the novel undermines the claimed accuracy of historical reportage. By slowly unveiling Kathleen's writing process—which includes an imaginative reconstruction of fragments from the Famine narrative—O'Faolain's novel breaks down the nationalist/loyalist belief in the possibility of accurate historical representation. And though Kathleen approaches revision as a way of updating her fact-based novel to be more historically accurate, her inability to arrive at a satisfactory conclusion concerning Marianne Talbot's guilt or innocence highlights the unreliability of both her fictional narrative as well as the Irish historical record. A closer look at the ideological valences in the three historical documents that Kathleen's research uncovers (the court proceedings, a

pamphlet, and a tabloid), and her negative response to those subjective documents, illustrates O’Faolain’s resistance to similar ideologically influenced presentations of Irish history and identity.

The Famine represents a turning point in Irish history, but rather than focus only on what was lost or destroyed—and by whom—*My Dream of You* uses the Famine as a backdrop to illustrate the limits of historical ‘facts.’ As O’Kane Mara observes, “[b]y reacting to the Great Famine in particular, [Kathleen] provides another insight into why accessing the past is so difficult. . . . it depicts the site of loss, when old ways were destroyed” (200). In this way, many Irish writers’ requests to be haunted by the specters of historical moments in Irish history appear with greater intensity at the end of the twentieth century, after the Republic of Ireland entered into a peace process with Northern Ireland, which required an acceptance of Irish heterogeneity. Writers turn to the past in order to establish patterns of ambiguity in the traditionally ideological narratives that were in part responsible for many Irish conflicts. For instance, postcolonial cultural theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak maintains:

Now when a Jacques Derrida deconstructs the opposition between private and public, margin and center, he touches the texture of language and tells how the old words would not resemble themselves any more if a trick of rereading were learned. *The trick is to recognize that in every textual production, in the production of every explanation, there is the itinerary of a constantly thwarted desire to make the text explain. ... [T]he will to explain [is] a symptom of the desire to have a self and a world.* In other words, on the general level, the possibility of explanation carries the presupposition of an explainable (even if not fully) universe and an explaining (even if imperfectly) subject. These presuppositions assure our being. Explaining, we exclude the possibility of the *radically* heterogeneous. (105)

The counter-hegemonic, postcolonial texts addressed in this essay are not innocent: they too harbor a “desire to have a self and a world.” Their self and world, however, aim at radical heterogeneity. Despite ideology’s aim at simplification through standardization, another postcolonial cultural theorist, Homi K. Bhabha, states quite clearly: “[c]ulture abhors simplification” (303). Bhabha’s observation stems from his understanding of colonialism as an agenda of obfuscation and post-colonialism as an embrace of uncertainty, ambiguity, and absurdity as ways of resisting ideological simplification.

O’Faolain’s spectral conjuration of a Famine-era sex scandal illustrates how, in Ireland, looking backwards often uncovers oversimplified and readily accepted historical narratives. By transgressing geographical and temporal borders, uncovering little known documents, and unmasking the process of historical writing, *My Dream of You* offers a more complex rendering of the alleged Talbot affair than has been previously attempted, thereby arguing that similar questions be posed about the broader context of Famine. As Robinson points out, de-essentializing Famine narratives, dispossessing them of familiar

ideological frameworks, challenges the perceived accuracy of historical writing, which can in turn lead to a more creative remembering of the past.

Star of the Sea: Undermining Mythologies

In his novel *Star of the Sea*, Joseph O'Connor also presents a clear division between accepted historical representations of the Famine and more ambiguously imagined alternatives that have begun to appear in contemporary works of fiction. In a 2004 interview, O'Connor argues that fiction is capable of a more nuanced representation of wide-ranging Irish responses to the Famine than historical writing in Ireland has allowed. He suggests that moving beyond politically motivated attempts to assign definitive blame for mismanagement of the potato blight can give new meaning to the event. Echoing Mary Robinson's 1995 congressional address, O'Connor maintains:

Star of the Sea is a novel and not at all a textbook about the Famine; but one thing I do hope it reveals is that the mythologies about the disaster on both extremes of the historical debate are reductive, disrespectful, and wrong, both morally and factually. ... The lesson to be drawn for modern Ireland, I believe, is not that we should hate the English (or anyone else), but that we should do more to help those many millions of the world's poor people who are suffering and dying from famine today. If our history means anything, it must mean that. (Estévez-Saá 165-166)

O'Connor's use of fiction as an argument for Irish humanitarianism moves beyond the nationalist/loyalist divide in Ireland. He echoes post-colonial theorist Frantz Fanon's critique of the rhetoric of nationalism as simply the binary opposite of the rhetoric of imperialism in that it revises history to suit political ideology. O'Connor and Robinson both conclude that Irish history demands Irish identity be grounded in dispossession. To this end, *Star of the Sea* reconsiders definitive nationalist and loyalist claims about the Famine that tend to underscore Irish insularity. In short, it is a novel about re-evaluation.

In "'Everything is in the Way the Material is Composed': Joseph O'Connor's *Star of the Sea* as Historiographic Metafiction," Maeve Tynan argues that *Star of the Sea* draws attention to the various ways in which fiction "mediates and constructs history" (80). Tynan interprets O'Connor's borrowing from Victorian generic conventions as a semi-parodic postmodern pastiche aimed at recuperating the past, and concludes—by quoting Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*—that the novel "both inscribe[s] and undermine[s] the authority and objectivity of historical sources and explanations" (Hutcheon qtd in Tynan 89). While I offer a parallel reading of *Star of the Sea*, my contextualization of the novel and the examples I draw upon for elucidation gesture beyond Tynan's textual observation that "craftiness [is] involved in all forms of composition" (94). Spectrality, as a theoretical lens, heightens our awareness of re-emergent cultural factors

(colonial trauma, gender and sexual discrimination, and political insularity) that originally led to the Irish artist's dual aesthetic and political identity during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and gives us a glimpse into how contemporary Irish writers use fiction to respond to the longstanding identification of the Irish artist as politically vested.

The titular ship of *Star of the Sea*, en route to deliver five thousand pounds of mercury to an American manufacturing company, also carries a cargo of Irish émigrés seeking refuge from the Famine. O'Connor's text argues, however, that escaping the Famine's consequences is impossible, even in the interstitial waters of the Atlantic. Famine is aboard the ship, and its presence exposes the various ways in which different classes of Irish emigrants were affected by, and dealt with, its wide-ranging and far-reaching consequences: displacement, starvation, and death. In fact, "[o]ne pictured the *Star* as a colossal beast of burden, its rib-timbers straining as though they might burst; flailed by an overlord into one last persecution, the hulk half dead already and we passengers its parasites" (xiv). The more precise metaphor, the one O'Connor alludes to throughout the text, is the ship as Ireland's famished landscape, pox-marked with failing estates.

Like many estates, there exists on the ship a clear division between aristocracy and peasantry, between upper- and lower-class passengers, though here the difference between bankrupt lords and their servants is in title only, a fact that is highlighted because of the close quarters they are forced to share aboard the *Star*. The stench of poverty aboard the ship plagues both the evicted landlords and their displaced tenants. There is no escape from "rotten food, rotten flesh, rotten fruit of rotting bowels...tobacco smoke, vomit, stale perspiration, mildewed clothes, filthy blankets and rotgut whiskey" (xvii). This observation both overlaps with and diverges from Sinéad Moynihan's recent study of the intersections between Irishness and Blackness in *Star of the Sea*. For Moynihan, "O'Connor establishes a fundamental connection between the Great Famine and American Slavery" (48) to highlight "the transatlantic transition undergone by countless Irish of the period: from oppressed race in the Old Country to oppressing race in the New World" (55). When we look through the lens of spectrality, however, we are provided with a palimpsestic intersectionality of social and cultural categories that complicate Moynihan's reading of the novel. For at least one passenger aboard the ship undergoes the opposite transition: he is expelled from his role as oppressor in Ireland and is destined for a life of oppression in America.

O'Connor's juxtaposition of lord and servant illuminates the ubiquity of suffering caused by the Famine. His description of the fall of "The Right Honourable Thomas David Nelson Merridith, the noble Lord Kingscourt, the Visicount of Roundstone, the ninth Earl of Cashel, Kilkerrin and Carna" (4) lays bare the often omitted effect that Famine had on the aristocracy. From O'Connor's perspective, Merridith was as powerless as his tenants to combat the horrors of Famine, and it is on the

Star that this fact became most apparent. Yet *Star of the Sea* does not simply equate landlords with their tenants, it actively transitions them from oppressors to oppressed:

‘You’ll remain at New York for some time, Lord Kingscourt?’
It took a moment for Merridith to realize whom the Captain was addressing.
‘Indeed,’ he said. ‘I mean to go into business, Lockwood.’
Inevitably Dixon gave him a look. ‘Since when did the gentry stoop to working for a living?’
‘There’s a famine in progress in Ireland, Dixon. I assume you stumbled across it on your visit there, did you?’
The Captain gave an apprehensive laugh. ‘I’m sure our American friend meant no offence, Lord Kingscourt. He only thought—’
‘I’m quite aware of what he thought. How can an Earl be fallen low as a tradesman? ... Yes. So you see my predicament, Dixon. Not a man on my estate has paid rent for four years. My father’s death leaves me with half of all the bogland in southern Connemara, a great deal of stones and bad turf, a greater deal of overdue accounts and unpaid wages. Not to mention the considerable duties owing to the government’ (7-8).

This is our introduction to Merridith, but as the novel progresses, and more of his back story is filled in, we learn that he was evicted from his estate twice: once by his father for choosing to marry Laura Markham rather than fulfill his duty as Viscount by marrying a neighboring countess (Amelia Blake), and once by the Liability Collection Office for not paying his mortgage.

O’Connor’s depiction of Merridith therefore complicates simpler nationalist and revisionist interpretations of the Famine era in which either Irish peasants suffer and the English are to blame for their difficulties (nationalist), or Irish peasants suffer and the mismanagement of the natural disaster by the Irish government is responsible for their hardship (revisionist). O’Connor brings into focus others who are effected by the blight, each of whom is simultaneously sympathetic and damnable, thus exposing the problems with traditional historical writing and proving the need for historical fiction to ensure, at the very least, that one-dimensional conceptions of these events and the characters who populate them are replaced with more complex representations.

As I have already pointed out in the previous section, constructing a more politically, culturally, and geographically diverse Irish population is contingent upon breaking silences that reinforce the oversimplified nationalist/revisionist perspectives that guide the majority of Famine representation. Both *My Dream of You* and *Star of the Sea* participate in the recent trend of calling attention to the ways in which Famine victims have been used to manipulate socio-political thought concerning the union between Ireland and England. *Star of the Sea* highlights the disparity between what actually happened in Ireland during the Famine and what is reported to have happened. Like *My Dream of You*, O’Connor’s novel employs a narrative frame that exposes the ideological underpinning of competing Famine stories collected within that frame. *Star of the Sea*

therefore rejects the pose of historical accuracy by illustrating the ways in which the genre can be manipulated.

O'Connor's novel serves as a frame for his author-protagonist's historical writing. In an embedded narrative—*An American Abroad: Notes of London and Ireland in 1847*—O'Connor's fictional author, G. Grantley Dixon, attempts to document the Famine's effect on a broad spectrum of individuals aboard the titular ship transporting emigrants from Dublin to New York. For the duration of the novel, the *Star of the Sea* is suspended between Ireland and America, dislocated from either place. Its dislocation parallels the displacement of individual passengers as well as collective conceptions of Irishness at that time. The broad range of dispossessed characters brought together on this trans-Atlantic voyage—including landlords, servants, politicians, businessmen, and women—demonstrates how particular difficulties arising from the Famine forced individuals from all economic backgrounds to leave Ireland, illustrating that the overarching Famine narrative is significantly more complex than previously acknowledged. In the same interview cited previously, O'Connor observes:

Ireland is a country where events which happened a long time ago are narrated as though they took place last week. The local people would point things out to us: deserted villages, Famine graves, ruined cottages. It was as though the landscape was a text. Some read it through a prism of nationalism or Anglophobia, others through a narrative of local tragedy. And, of course, others simply refused to read it at all. ... And I find the silence around the disaster quite fascinating. ... It's notable when you look at contemporaneous, eyewitness accounts of the Famine how very often the language of wordlessness features. ("I can't describe what I saw," "language fails me," et cetera.) And subsequent writers have felt similarly dumbfounded by the sheer biblical scale of the disaster. (Estévez-Saá 163-64)

Whereas *My Dream of You* succumbs to this "language of wordlessness," *Star of the Sea* explicitly challenges silences that fail to question politicized uses of the Famine. O'Connor juxtaposes the wordlessness of Famine victims with the sheer verbiage of politicized historical writing of his protagonists. The novel's framed structure complicates each individual character's interpretation of their Famine experience, thereby illustrating the subjectivity of politicized historical records that pose objectivity.

Star of the Sea subverts such oversimplified binaries by collecting a number of diverse yet inter-related documents that combine to create a narrative pastiche: the captain's register, newspaper articles, a number of letters (written before, during, and after the voyage), traditional and re-imagined ballads, a fragment from Dixon's own abandoned novel (*The Blight*), and a commemorative epilogue written by Dixon in New York City on Easter Saturday, 1916, to be included in the 100th edition of *An American Abroad*. This is similar to the layering technique employed by O'Faolain in *My Dream of You*. However, whereas the slowly emerging documents uncovered by Miss Leech and Kathleen de Burca continually overturn historical "facts" established by previously disclosed records,

Star of the Sea juxtaposes these contentious narratives to show how authors adapt their texts to support a specific argument.

Both O’Faolain and O’Connor foreground the historian’s subjective use of the past that haunts them. Each protagonist-historian borrows ideological myths from the Famine narrative to illustrate the divergent ways in which that narrative has been (re)imagined. In *Star of the Sea* in particular, two of the passengers aboard the ship, Pius Mulvey (a balladeer) and G.G. Dixon (a journalist), meditate on the constructedness of historical writing: its agendas, posed accuracy, and malleability. Mulvey at one point admits that “[h]e had discovered the alchemy that turns fact into fiction, poverty into plenty, history into art” (101). Paying special attention to each of these characters’ narrative theories and writing processes illustrates the fictional elements of historical representation. And like O’Faolain’s novel, *Star of the Sea* challenges ideologically produced historical writing and conceptions of Irishness on the basis that they are politically and socially motivated. For as Dixon observes of his own writing, “I would like to think I am objective in what I have put down, but of course that is not so and could never have been. I was there. I was involved” (373). Both the ballad-maker and the storyteller admit to the subjectivity of historical “fact” by highlighting the convoluted, incomplete, and falsified nature of their own Famine narratives—they act as historiographers.

Conclusion

My Dream of You and *Star of the Sea* resist oversimplification of the Famine by releasing it from its mythology and presenting it as the founding moment of dispossessed Irishness—another version of the myth, to be sure, but one that is decidedly more nuanced than previously offered. Both novels, invested in actively dismantling homogenous versions of Irish history, define Irishness via dispossession. Spectrality offers a way of understanding the textual mechanism by which both texts attempt to represent Irish history as a narrative of dispossession:

The legend of the specter, the story, the fable (*Märchen*) would be abolished in the [act of writing it down], as if the specter itself, after having embodied a spectrality in legend and without becoming a reality, came out of itself, called for an exit from the legend without entering into the reality of which it is the specter. (Derrida *Specters* 130)

The legend of a definitive, anti-colonial Irishness, which emerged from consequences of the Famine, is challenged in these two novels that depict Irishness—both during and after the Famine—as something other than definitive or even locatable.

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