

Literature, Memory, Atrocity

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[Scene: Pub interior]

Bull McCabe: Who would insult me by bidding for my field here in Carraighthomond?

Mick Flanagan: There might be outsiders, Bull.

Bull: Outsiders? Outsiders? Are these the same 'outsiders' who took the corn from our mouths when the potatoes went rotten in the ditches?

Flanagan: Ah, now Bull ...

Bull: Are these the same 'outsiders' who took the meat from the tables when we lay in the ditches with the grass juice running green from our mouths?

Flanagan: Take it easy ...

Bull: Are these the same 'outsiders' who drove us to the coffin ships and scattered us to the four corners of the earth? Are these the same 'outsiders' who watched whilst our valley went silent except for the sound of the last starving child?

Flanagan: The English are gone, Bull.

Bull: Gone. Because I drove 'em out. Me. And my kind. Gone. But not forgotten, Flanagan. No 'outsider' will bid for my field.¹

This scene from Jim Sheridan's 1990 film, *The Field*, is among the more recent (and, given the film's success, among the most widely distributed) representations of the Great Irish Famine of the 1840s. However, like many such representations, it can only invoke the Famine because of an almost invisible form of anachronism which becomes apparent when we focus on the language used by Richard Harris's character, the Bull McCabe: 'took the corn from *our* mouths'; '*we* lay in the ditches with the grass juice running green from *our* mouths'; 'drove *us* to the coffin ships and scattered *us* to the four corners of the earth'. When McCabe speaks of the Famine, it is as if it were something that had happened to him, something he remembered. And yet, as the pub owner, Mick Flanagan, reminds us, 'the English are gone' – that is to say, at the very least, the film is set after 1922; indeed, the car and clothes owned by Tom Berenger's

¹ Jim Sheridan (dir.), *The Field* (Granada Films, 1990).

character, 'the Yank', suggest that it may be set more than a decade later.² This means that in order to have an actual memory of the Famine, the Bull McCabe would have to be at least in his nineties – which he obviously is not unless he is an exceptionally spry ninety.

How do we explain this apparent anachronism? Has Sheridan slipped up in his chronology? Or is it naive to expect such verisimilitude in a film which tries so earnestly in its final moments to mythologise the past? Neither answer is fully satisfactory. Instead, we must think of 'memory' as it is used in this scene as the middle term in an equation connecting literature and atrocity.

Literature

When I first saw this scene in *The Field*, I was reminded of a passage dealing with the Famine in Canon Sheehan's 1905 novel, *Glenanaar*:

It is an appalling picture, that which springs up to memory. Gaunt spectres move here and there, looking at one another out of hollow eyes of despair and gloom.³

Although Sheehan claims that this image of the Famine 'springs to memory', 'memory' is here playing the same trick that we saw in *The Field*. Neither Canon Sheehan, nor the narrator-priest who is his fictional replacement, could, in fact, 'remember' the Famine. Sheehan was not born until 1852, when the Famine was, for all intents and purposes, over. So, as in the case of Bull McCabe, we have to ask: what is he 'remembering'?

We can begin to find an answer to this question by looking at the rest of the passage:

It is an appalling picture, that which springs up to memory. Gaunt spectres move here and there, looking at one another out of hollow eyes of despair and gloom. Ghosts walk the land. Great giant figures, reduced to skeletons by hunger, shake in their clothes, which hang loose around their attenuated frames ... Here and there by the wayside a corpse stares at the passers-by, as it lies against the hedge where it had sought shelter. The pallor of its face is darkened by lines of green around the mouth, the dry juice of grass and nettles.⁴

2 Sheridan deliberately strips *The Field* of the references to television and aeroplanes which occur in the John B. Keane play on which the film is based, thereby locating it earlier than the 1965 setting of the play.

3 Patrick Sheehan, *Glenanaar* (London, 1905; Rpt. Dublin, 1989), pp. 198-9.

4 *Ibid.*, pp. 198-9.

All of the images which appear in this passage can be found in earlier attempts to write the Famine. This suggests that what Sheehan is actually 'remembering' are other Famine texts. Indeed, in many cases, his memory extends to the vocabulary of those earlier texts, particularly in his use of the word 'spectre'. For instance, if we turn back to the Famine literature of the late 1840s, we will find poems such as 'The Spectre':

Far west a grim shadow was seen, as 'tis said,
Like a spectre from Famine and Pestilence bred:
His gaunt giant-form, with pale Poverty wed ...⁵

Employing a variation on this motif, the *Mayo Constitution* reported in 1848 that 'the streets of every town in the county are overrun by stalking skeletons'.⁶ Moreover, this image of the Famine as a 'stalking skeleton' or 'spectre' was still in use as Sheehan was writing in 1905. For instance, a Catholic Truth Society pamphlet from the turn of the century, entitled *The Famine Years*, contains the following passage:

The dread *spectre* of famine had already set foot on the shores of Ireland, and was making ready to *stalk* through the fruitful land, from north to south, from east to west [emphasis added].⁷

Later in the same Catholic Truth Society pamphlet, we find the image of the corpse with a green mouth, mentioned by both Sheehan and the Bull McCabe:

In Mayo a man, who had been observed searching for shell-fish on the seashore, was afterwards found dead, after vainly endeavouring to satisfy the cravings of devouring hunger with grass and turf.⁸

Once again, this image has a genealogy as an image of the Famine going back to the 1840s, and can be found in Famine-era texts such as 'The Boreen Side', by James Tighe, which first appeared in 1849:

A stripling, the last of his race, lies dead
In a nook by the Boreen side;
The rivulet runs by his board and his bed,
Where he ate the green cresses and died.⁹

5 H.D., 'The Spectre: Stanzas With Illustrations' in Chris Morash (ed.), *The Hungry Voice: The Poetry of the Irish Famine* (Dublin, 1989), p. 261.

6 'Death by Starvation' in *United Irishman* i, 5 (11 March 1848), p. 46.

7 Joseph Guinan, *The Famine Years* (Dublin, 1908), p. 15.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

9 James Tighe, 'The Boreen Side', in Morash, *The Hungry Voice*, p. 73.

In tracing the use of these images as representations of the Famine of the 1840s, I am not disputing that they correspond to a concrete reality, albeit an absent one. Their appearance in numerous newspaper reports, travellers' journals, and government documents of the period suggests that such horrific images were originally intended to be mimetic representations of things that actually existed. For instance, in a newspaper account of an inquest held in 1848, we find the image of the corpse with the green mouth:

A poor man, whose name we could not learn ... lay down on the roadside, where shortly after he was found dead, his face turned to the earth, and a portion of the grass and turf on which he lay masticated in his mouth.¹⁰

What interests me about such representations is not whether or not they were once empirically true; we can never fully answer that question. Instead, I want to focus on the way in which they were transformed in the process of textual transmission, which happens in and through language.

We must begin by recognising that even before the Famine was acknowledged as a complete event, it was in the process of being textually encoded in a limited number of clearly defined images. Indeed, for an event which we customarily think of as being vast, the archive of images in which it is represented is relatively small and circumscribed. As the nineteenth century progressed, these images became more and more rigidly defined, taking on the characteristics of Lyotard's 'rigid designators'. By the 1870s the Famine had become an increasingly potent element in the propaganda war which accompanied the struggle for land ownership, and as a consequence Famine images such as the 'stalking spectre' and the green-mouthed corpse were repeated in magazines like the *Irish Monthly Magazine* until they had the boldly defined outlines of religious icons. By the turn of the century, such images were so widely known that they could be said to constitute a form of collectively maintained 'memory'.

Memory

When I call these images from the archive of Famine literature 'memories', I am not thinking of memory here as passive recollection; instead, I am thinking of what memory theorists call 'constructive memory', which integrates past, present and future in such a way as to create the impression of a 'unified personal history'.¹¹ When constructive memories are shared by a group of people – as

¹⁰ 'Inquests' in *United Irishman* i, 14 (13 May 1848), p. 211.

¹¹ Gillian Cohen, *Memory in the Real World* (East Sussex, 1989), p. 219. See also Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory* (New York, 1980).

indeed they must be if they originate in a printed text – they create the impression of a unified collective history, in which the memories of the individual and memories shared by the literate members of society as a whole are the same. If we think of textually generated memories in this manner, it becomes apparent that they have an ideological function – indeed, they are almost pure ideology, insofar as they create an illusion of complete identity between the individual and society.

In order to understand the ideological function of these textually generated memories, it is necessary to understand something of their form. Like the Bull McCabe's account of the Famine, or the passage from Canon Sheehan's *Glenanaar*, most representations of the Famine tend to be made up of static, iconic tableaux, each existing in a single timeless moment. Even attempts at longer Famine narratives, stretching from William Carleton's 1847 novel, *The Black Prophet*, to John Banville's 1973 novel, *Birchwood*, incorporate these iconic representations of the Famine, but rarely use them as causal elements in the plot. In *The Black Prophet*, for instance, when the conventional blackmail story which gives the novel its form has been resolved, the Famine disappears. In the case of *Birchwood*, with its postmodern refiguration of cause and effect in narrative structure, the Famine is brought in as yet one more element in a shifting collage of public and family history. In these two very different Famine novels, and in others written in the decades which separate them, we find that there is no single metanarrative of the Famine in literature. Instead, we find that the Famine as a textual event is composed of a group of images whose meaning does not derive from their strategic location within a narrative, but rather from the strangeness and horror of the images themselves, as dislocated, isolated emblems of suffering.

The disconnected form of these images means that they are available for appropriation by other narratives, other forms of discourse. Reading through the literature of the Famine, one finds that such appropriation is rife. For instance, in John Mitchel's *Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)* of 1864 there is an often quoted passage describing the condition of the countryside after the failure of the potato crop. It appears, however, in the midst of his account of the nationalist attempt to win an election in Galway in 1847:

In the depth of winter we travelled to Galway, through the very centre of that fertile island, and saw sights that will never wholly leave the eyes that beheld them:— cowering wretches, almost naked in the savage weather, prowling in turnip-fields, and endeavouring to grub up roots which had been left, but running to hide as the mail-coach rolled by; ... groups and families, sitting or wandering on the high-road, with failing steps and

dim, patient eyes, gazing hopelessly into infinite darkness; before them, around them, above them, nothing but darkness and despair.¹²

With the Miltonic echoes of the final phrases, this is a powerful representation of human suffering; however, it appears in Mitchel's narrative only as an aside in a chapter that is primarily concerned with the campaign for the Galway election. Mitchel later makes a half-hearted attempt to suggest that in such extreme conditions, he was 'justified in urging so desperate a measure' as revolution.¹³ The passage, however, is not fully integrated in the text, and it is the failure of the nationalists to win the Galway election rather than the suffering of the 'cowering wretches' which becomes the rationale for taking up arms.

Moreover, this passage in *The Last Conquest* shares with a number of other Famine texts a detached perspective, as the narrator views the starving peasantry through the windows of a moving coach. For instance, there is an often reprinted account of the Famine by Father Theobald Matthew in which he describes travelling from Dublin to Cork by coach, and seeing 'the wretched people seated on the fences of their decaying gardens, wringing their hands and wailing bitterly the destruction that had left them foodless'.¹⁴ Later, in a 1937 Famine novel by Louis J. Walsh, entitled *The Next Time*, the hero, travelling by coach from Dublin to his home in Gortnanaan, sees 'cowering wretches, almost naked in the savage weather, endeavouring to grub up roots that had been left behind in the ground'¹⁵ in a passage which, like many others in the novel, shamelessly echoes Mitchel's *Last Conquest*.

Hence, the fragmentary way in which the Famine is represented makes it liable to appropriation by larger narratives, such as those of Mitchel, Fr Matthew, and Louis J. Walsh. Having no narrative of their own, put possessing a hard-edged clarity that has been refined through decades of repetition, these Famine icons are transmitted to us like something flashing by the windows of a moving coach – unforgettable glimpses of a narrative whose full development is always just beyond our line of vision.

Atrocity

We can begin to understand the resistance of these Famine icons to longer, sequential narratives by turning to two Famine texts. The first, a poem called

12 John Mitchel, *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)* (Glasgow, n.d [1861]), p. 147.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 150.

14 Theobald Matthew in John O'Rourke, *History of the Great Irish Famine* (Dublin, 1875), p. 149.

15 L.J. Walsh, *The Next Time: A Story of 'Forty Eight* (Dublin, 1919), p. 155.

'The Three Angels', was written in 1848 by a working class nationalist, John De Jean Frazer:

Some gathered their kith to a fugitive band
 And sought the stars of a happier land; –
 Themselves and their kindred, thro' sheer despair,
 Some slew, in belief that *to slay* was *to spare!* –
 A cannibal fierceness but ill-suppressed
 In many – made some – we must veil the rest!¹⁶

Frazer's poem can be read in the context of a passage from William Carleton's 1851 novel, *The Squanders of Castle Squander*, in which he describes a cemetery being desecrated by wild dogs:

Round about the awful cemetery, were numbers of gaunt and starving dogs, whose skeleton bodies and fearful howlings indicated the ravenous fury with which they awaited an opportunity to drag the unfortunate dead from their shallow graves and glut themselves upon their bodies. Here and there an arm; in another place a head (half-eaten by some famished mongrel, who had been frightened from his prey), or a leg, dragged partially from the earth, and half-mangled, might be seen; altogether, presenting such a combination of horrible imagery as can scarcely be conceived by our readers.¹⁷

These images of cannibalism and desecration of the dead constitute another of the memories which make up the archive of Famine literature. In the texts of both Frazer and Carleton, however, there is an inability to complete the image. 'We must veil the rest', writes Frazer; 'such horrible imagery', writes Carleton, 'can scarcely be conceived by our readers'. Commenting on representations of the Irish Famine, Steven Marcus notes: 'The constant refrain of those who observed the famine is, "It cannot be described". "The scenes which presented themselves were such as no tongue or pen can convey the slightest idea of". "It is impossible to go through the detail". "Believe me, my dear Sir, the reality in most cases far exceeded description. Indeed none can conceive what it was but those who were in it."' As Marcus points out, these are very modern voices, telling us that 'however mad, wild, or grotesque art may seem to be, it can never touch or approach the madness of reality'.¹⁸ They also help to explain

16 John 'de Jean' Frazer, in Morash, *The Hungry Voice*, p. 187.

17 William Carleton, *The Squanders of Castle Squander* (2 vols., London, 1852), ii, p. 138.

18 Steven Marcus, 'Hunger and Ideology' in *Representations: Essays on Literature and Society* (New York, 1990), pp. 10-11.

why the literature of the Famine contains so many iconic fragments. The unwillingness of these commentators to describe the scenes of Famine suffering is more than simply mid-Victorian prudishness or a conventional nod in the direction of an unspeakable sublime. After all, it was in the interest of Irish nationalist writers and those campaigning for greater government intervention to emphasise the suffering caused by the Famine; and yet a militant nationalist such as John De Jean Frazer is as inclined to 'veil the rest' as his imperialist, free market counterparts. Instead, we must consider structural incompleteness as a feature of the representation of atrocity.

'Atrocity' is a word to be used with the greatest of care in relation to the Famine, for it suggests elements of intentionality which simplify matters to an unacceptable degree. Nonetheless, Lawrence Langer's 1975 study, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*, provides a useful definition of the term when considering the writing of the Famine when he writes of a similar inability to construct sequential narratives among writers dealing with the Holocaust. 'The kind of atrocity at issue here', he writes, 'assaulted the very coherence of time and led to the breakdown of "chronology" as a meaningful conception'.¹⁹ When we are talking about atrocity – at least in Langer's sense – we are talking about suffering that is disproportionate to its causes: hugely, grossly disproportionate. Because atrocity upsets our sense of cause and effect, it hampers our ability to construct sequential narratives which follow the conventions of mimetic literary representation. It may well be as a consequence of this breakdown of literary convention that the literature of the Famine is constructed as an archive of free-floating signs, capable of incorporation in any number of sequential semiotic systems, including the constructive personal memory which seeks to unite past, present and future in the creation of an individual identity.

In an early essay, 'A Kind of Survivor', George Steiner attests to the ability of such textually generated shards of memory to become a part of an individual's sense of identity. Steiner begins the essay by describing himself as a 'kind of survivor' of the Holocaust:

Not literally. Due to my father's foresight ... I came to America in January 1940, during the phoney war. We left France, where I was born and brought up, in safety. So I happened not to be there when the names were called out ... But in another sense I am a survivor, and not intact ... If that which haunts me and controls my habits of feeling strikes many of those I should be intimate and working with in my present world as remotely sinister and artificial, it is because the black mystery of what happened in Europe is to me indivisible from my own identity.²⁰

19 L.L. Langer, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination* (London, 1975), p. 251.

20 George Steiner, 'A Kind of Survivor', in *Language and Silence: Essays 1958-1966* (London, 1985), p. 164.

The literature of the Famine provokes something of the same response; when we read a Famine text, we too feel that we are 'a kind of survivor'. It may be that when we encounter these shattered fragments of the past, we wish to complete them; and the only way in which we can do so is by internalising them, making them part of the narrative of our own memories.

When we do embrace these icons as part of our own past, however, we must undertake a project which Steiner's recent literary criticism has resisted with a stridency which makes his work look increasingly archaic; we must constantly remind ourselves that we are participating in ideology. In accepting these shared memories, we are enlisting ourselves as part of a group – a nation, a tribe, a race. In keeping these memories alive, we may be doing no more than bearing witness, trying to make whole that which the form of these images tells us can never be made whole. But such a longing for wholeness is not without its dangers; and it is here that the final mention of the Famine in *The Field* can act as a warning. As the Bull McCabe beats the 'outsider' to death by slamming his head repeatedly against a rock, he bellows to his son:

See this fella here? See this Yank? His family lived around here, but when the going got tough they ran away to America. They ran away from the Famine – while we stayed. Do you understand? We stayed! We stayed!! We stayed!!!²¹

This should serve to remind us that while memories created by literature and born of atrocity may often seem like a testimony of human decency, they nonetheless have the potential to perpetuate the atrocity which they memorialise by providing the justification for a future which is envisaged in terms of the iconic, clearly-defined narrative structure which the past so often lacks.