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Famine, Ghosts and Trauma in James Joyce's Works[1]

JOSÉ MANUEL ESTÉVEZ-SAÁ

Abstract

Terry Eagleton stated in *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger: Studies in Irish Culture* that "If the Famine stirred some [Irish writers] to angry rhetoric, it would seem to have traumatized others into muteness," and he wondered "Where is the Famine in the literature of the Revival? Where is it in Joyce?" (13). The present article intends to study where and how Joyce approaches or avoids this dramatic episode in Irish history. An analysis of the references to Hunger and Famine in

Joyce's works proves that the socio-historical tragedy figures in the Irish author's fiction as a spectre that haunts the writer and his texts, a ghost that has not been exorcised or, in Jacques Derrida's words a *revenant*. The reflections and methodology proposed by trauma studies and intergenerational trauma theory will help me to demonstrate that the Great Hunger figures in Joyce's fiction as an unassimilated inheritance that lies beyond traditional ways of conception and consequently defies conventional representation.

Keywords: Famine, ghosts, West, trauma studies, James Joyce.

Stephen Dedalus, in one of the diary entries at the end of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, refers to the West of Ireland, and to the rural world of the isle and its peasants in a certainly half-mocking tone:

> *14 April:* John Alphonsus Mulrennan has just returned from the west of Ireland. (European and Asiatic papers please copy.) He told us he met an old man there in a mountain cabin. Old man had red eyes and short pipe. Old man spoke Irish. Mulrennan spoke Irish. Then old man and Mulrennan spoke English. Mulrennan spoke to him about universe and stars. Old man sat, listened, smoked, spat. Then said:
>
> —Ah, there must be terrible queer creatures at the latter end of the world.
>
> *I fear him. I fear his redrimmed horny eyes. It is with him I must struggle all through this night till day come, till he or I lie dead, gripping him by the sinewy throat till … Till what? Till he yield to me? No. I mean him no harm*. (*P* 274, emphasis mine)

Stephen begins the entry mockingly but ends it in a much more ambiguously somber tone, and the reader detects the difficulty that young Stephen has when trying to come to terms with his native Ireland, or at least with part of it, the West, the country, and its history. The "redrimmed horny eyes" that Stephen is afraid of turn the old peasant into a sort of vampire, a ghostly figure that haunts him and which he cannot exorcise. It can be even considered that this ghostly presence is part of that nightmare of history from which Stephen is still trying to awake in *Ulysses*. David Lloyd has carefully explained this passage, and the evolution from the longer version of it that appeared in *Stephen Hero,* concluding that "The past ceases to

be a matter for externalization, alienated from the subject, and becomes a kind of internal threshold or border, a sill that divides rather than defines the subject." (89)

Similarly to his fictional alter-ego, James Joyce had his own nightmares that were crowded by ghosts he could not exorcise. One of those ghosts that traumatized the Irish author was, as I intend to demonstrate, the Great Hunger, the tragic episode of Irish history that haunted Joyce and that appears in his fiction as a revenant that makes multiple spectral apparitions.

I began working on the topic of the representation of the Irish Famine in Irish literature after reading Joseph O'Connor's brilliant novel *Star of the Sea* (2003). O'Connor asserted in an interview that he kindly gave me in 2004, that Joyce was one of the Irish authors who had certainly influenced him although he also mentioned the ambiguous, and occasionally problematic, spell he has cast over Irish literature. This is the context in which two of my most recent research interests began to develop. Therefore, I began to write a series of pieces on the influence of James Joyce's figure and work on twentieth- and twenty-first-century Irish writers. My other interest, the representation of the Irish Famine in literature, resulted in a research project funded by the Spanish Ministry of Education. One of the objectives of the project was the analysis of the renewed general interest in this episode in Irish History that can be perceived in the last decades of the twentieth-century, as well as the hidden reasons for the literary silence that can be detected in the literature written in Ireland since the 1870s till approximately the 1970s.

I took as a starting point the idea that the Irish Famine, despite being one of the greatest human and economic catastrophes in the history of Ireland, has not been a recurrent or even a frequent topic in literature in English in the twentieth-century. This had been already acknowledged by

critics such as Terry Eagleton who, in his well-known book *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger,* asserted that "There is a handful of novels and a body of poems, but few truly distinguished works" (13) and wonders "Where is the Famine in the literature of the Revival? Where is it in Joyce?" (13).

Eagleton dealt with this same issue again, on occasion of a review after the publication of the already mentioned novel by Joseph O'Connor, *Star of the Sea*. In the review that appeared in *The Guardian,* on January 25th 2003, Eagleton alluded once more to the surprising fact that there is little literature dealing with such a decisive and traumatic event not only in the history of Ireland but also of Europe:

> The Irish famine of the 1840s was the greatest social catastrophe of 19th-century Europe, yet inspired surprisingly little imaginative writing.
>
> There is a powerful novel by Liam O'Flaherty and a starkly moving drama by the contemporary playwright Tom Murphy. But in both Yeats and Joyce it is no more than a dim resonance. It is as though African-Americans were to maintain an embarrassed silence about the slave trade. (1)

Notwithstanding, Eagleton pointed out some plausible sociological, political and historical reasons that can help us to understand this unprecedented literary silence:

> Shame and trauma may have played a part in this reticence. In recent years, however, there has been a political motive as well. Brooding on the one million dead and the one million who fled the famine is hardly much in vogue in an Ireland keen to play down its colonial past and flaunt its new-found modernity. With Ireland

> and the UK now cheek by jowl in the EU, it is not exactly politic to recall the bungled British relief effort, which sped a good many dead to their graves. Or to recall that quite a few eminent Britons, including the man in charge of the relief project, regarded the famine as God's way of punishing the feckless Micks for their congenital indolence. Moving in his usual mysterious way, the Almighty had chosen potato blight as a means of converting Connemara peasants into Boston politicians. (1)

Taking into account this state of things, I began working on literary texts that focused on the tragedy. Among others, I analysed Nuala O'Faolain's *My Dream about You* (2001), a novel that certainly offers a new way of dealing with the immediate aftermath of the Irish Famine, and Joseph O'Connor's novel *Star of the Sea,* set in the tragic year of 1847, when a varied group of Irish embark towards America.

I also became concerned with other Irish authors who had certainly avoided the topic or dealt with it in a more indirect way in their fiction, as it is the case of James Joyce. Therefore, it is my intention to reflect here on Joyce's traumatic treatment of this episode from Irish history that haunts his texts as a specter.

Similarly to Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, where we detected his unease with the peasant and his redrimmed horny eyes that frightened him, Gabriel Conroy in "The Dead" does not seem ready to go to the West of Ireland and, when invited by Molly Ivors, he chooses Europe for his holidays. Gabriel's rejection of the West leads him to quickly disregard his own wife's Western provenance that he is not yet ready to assume:

> —O, Mr Conroy, will you come for an excursion to the Aran Isles this summer? We're going to stay a whole month. It will be splendid out in the Atlantic. You ought to come. Mr Clancy is coming and Mr Kilkelly and Kathleen Kearney. It would be splendid for Gretta too if she'd come. She's from Connacht, isn't she?
> —Her people are, said Gabriel shortly. (*D* 164)

Gabriel's final retort to Miss Ivor's entreaties are "I'm sick of my own country, sick of it!" (*D* 165). The West of Ireland, as we all know, is the part of the isle that suffered more critically the devastating consequences of the Great Hunger. There are even nowadays many traces in the landscape that inevitably refer to the tragic episode: wide deserted areas, multiple famine graves, scattered ruined cottages, etc. We could even interpret in this light Gabriel's reflection on "that region where dwell the vast hosts of the dead" (*D* 194). This is part of the view of their native Ireland that both Stephen and Gabriel are stubbornly rejecting. Gabriel asserts that he is "sick of his country" and Stephen declares in *Ulysses* that history is a nightmare from which he is trying to awake. And both characters are portrayed in Joyce's fiction as aspiring artists or, at least, as intellectuals.

We should avoid identifying these characters with their creator and interpreting their words in light of Joyce's vital experience. Nevertheless Joyce's own relationship with the West of Ireland was certainly an ambiguous one. A very recent study by Frank Shovlin, entitled *Journey Westward: Joyce, "Dubliners," and the Literary Revival* documents in the "Introduction" Joyce's "abiding fascination with the west of Ireland" (2) that, according to Shovlin was "historically grounded" (3) and certainly "more ambiguous than many critics have allowed" (131). Even though this recent analysis of *Dubliners* offers very a convincing reading of Joyce's nationalist sympathies that can be related to the Irish author's attraction to the West of

Ireland, I miss the inevitable connection between the area and the tragic episode of the Great Famine that James Joyce could not have averted and that, in fact, can be detected in his works albeit in an oblique and ambiguous way.

Understandably, it must not be easy for the artist or the intellectual to deal in his or her work with this dramatic episode of the history of Ireland. Joseph O'Connor judiciously acknowledged the difficulty of dealing with the event on occasion of his writing *Star of the Sea*:

> I think the silence Eagleton mentions in relation to the Famine is partly a consequence of the ethical risks and inescapable compromises involved in attempting to write imaginatively about such a terrible event. The danger exists of trivializing the experience, or of distancing it in a way that turns it into mere historical "background," like stage scenery in a play. There is also the risk of overfamiliarizing it, thereby filtering out the trauma. Some events reduce us to silence, or to rhetoric (which is another form of silence, since effectively it says nothing). This is understandable, of course, but silence is not the answer. (Estévez-Saá 163)

James Joyce did not choose silence but we detect that he was not able to write straightforwardly about the Famine. One of the basic principles or lessons of trauma studies is precisely that the traumatic experience is usually expressed in a non-realist, non-linear narrative, by means of a language that is literary, indirect, symbolic, and that presents irruptions as well as omissions (Balaev 159). Later on I will go back to the usefulness of recent trends in trauma studies in order to understand the possibilities and limits of representing

individual as well as collective traumas. Let us first see some examples of how Joyce refers to the Irish Famine in his works.

It is in *Ulysses* where the reader finds more allusions to the tragedy. Thus, potatoes and the potato blight that caused the tragedy are recurrently and symbolically mentioned, and the terms hunger and famine also appear on several occasions.

In "Calypso," "Lestrygonians," and "Circe," Leopold Bloom, who forgets to carry with him the keys of his own home, will make sure that he does not forget the potato that is his talisman and fetish. This vegetable is, as Robert Merritt demonstrated a "useful, poslysemous symbol in *Ulysses*" (269), and as Karen R. Lawrence reminded us, is associated by Bloom to his own mother "poor mamma's panacea" (*U* 15.201-202). Carrying the potato, Bloom acknowledges his matrilineal inheritance, that is, his Irishness, and symbolically welcomes all the associations that the object inevitably conveys, including the tragedy occasioned by the potato blight. It is highly significant that the character who is considered a foreigner in the novel is precisely the one who associates his fate to that of one of the symbols of Ireland.

Stephen Dedalus's attitude is quite different. In "Nestor," Mr Deasey mentions the Irish Famine to an uninterested Stephen, "—You think me an old fogey and an old tory, his thoughtful voice said. I saw three generations since O'Connell's time. I remember the famine in '46" (*U* 2. 268-269), and some lines later Stephen discards the man's account when he pronounces his famous statement "—History, Stephen said, is a nightmare form which I am trying to awake" (*U* 2.377). Nevertheless, it will be in "Circe" where the reader discovers that Stephen has not got rid of this nightmare, and one the ghosts that haunts his dreams, reappears again, in the form of Old Gummy Granny wearing the "deathflower of the potato blight on her breast" (*U* 15.485):

STEPHEN

> (*tries to move off*) Will someone tell me where I am least likely to meet these necessary evils? *Ça se voit aussi à Paris.* Not that I... But, by saint Patrick ...!
>
> (*The women's heads coalesce. Old Gummy Granny in sugarloaf hat appears seated on a toadstool, the deathflower of the potato blight on her breast.*)
>
> Aha! I know you, gammer! Hamlet, revenge! The old sow that eats her farrow! (*U* 15.485-486)

Stephen had already mused over this traumatic heritage in "Proteus" when he recalled his ancestors at the beach:

> Galleys of the Lochlanns ran here to beach, in quest of prey, their bloodbeaked prows riding low on a molter pewter surf. Dane Vikings, torcs of tomahawks [...] Then from the starving cagework city a horde of jerkined dwarfs, my people, with flayers' knives, running, scaling, hacking in green blubbery whalemeat. Famine, plague and slaughters. Their blood is in me, their lusts my waves. I moved among them on the frozen Liffey, that I, a changeling, among the spluttering resin fires. I spoke to no-one: none to me. (*U* 3.37-38)

We can see that, contrary to Stephen, Leopold Bloom is able to evoke the episode in a less traumatic tone and in "Lestrygonians," for instance, he mentions that "They say they

used to give pauper children soup to change to protestants in the time of the potato blight" (*U* 8.148), and he immediately associates this circumstance that, as we have seen, he links to a matrilineal legacy by means of the potato, to the other aspect of his inheritance that equally troubles him, his paternal Jewish ancestry: "Society over the way papa went to for the conversion of poor jews. Same bait. Why we left the church of Rome" (*U* 8.148). Bloom, as we can see, is more or less able to assume the two problematic identitary legacies received from his parents with a quite resigned attitude.

Therefore, James Joyce is, despite the scarcity of references to the tragic event of the Irish Famine to be found in *Ulysses*, displaying two very different ways of dealing with a traumatic legacy, being Stephen's an example of the non assimilation of the trauma and Bloom's an instance of a more conciliatory stance that at least attempts at learning to live with the trauma.

Besides Stephen's and Bloom's references to the Great Hunger, there are other ways of tracing Joyce's uncanny treatment of this topic in *Ulysses*. Thus, it is very interesting for instance, the relationship that James F. Wurtz has established between Joyce's traumas and the modernist Gothic style that he employed in *Ulysses* and that Wurtz describes as relying "upon the more internal, sublimated sources of memory and history" (103). Wurtz explains the influence of the Irish writer James Clarence Mangan and of Mangan's ghostly figure and Gothic aesthetics on some episodes of the novel that employ the trope of the ghost and the vampire so as to link the tragedy of the Famine with the paralysis that affects the Dubliners, "a condition in which the past's grip over the present transforms the living into the undead" (109). This use of Gothic tropes and ghostly images is most clearly seen, as Wurtz explains, in "Lestrygonians" where Bloom is thinking about food and imagines the hungry Irish during the Famine as vampires, as "Famished ghosts" (*U* 8.140). Therefore, the

tragic episode of Irish history features in Joyce's *Ulysses* at different levels and is dealt with by the Irish author by diverse means.

In *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce's book of the dark night, the spectres of past Irish Famine and hunger reappear with new intensity and we find numerous references interspersed throughout the whole work. Among others, we find "behind faminebuilt walls" (*FW* 71.02); "killed his own hungery self in anger as a young man" (*FW* 126.22-23); "the blind blighter, praying Dieuf and Domb Nostrums foh thomethinks to eath" (*FW* 149.02-03); "repopulate the land of your birth and count up your progeny by the hungered head and the angered thousand" (*FW* 188.35-36); "the blighty blotchy" (*FW* 263.09); "their faminy" (*FW* 340.15); "Blighty perishers" (*FW* 347.25); "Faminy, hold back" (*FW* 441.02-03); "let ye not be getting grief out of it, though blighted" (*FW* 453.27); "Hungry the Loaved and Hangry the Hathed" (*FW* 539.32-33); "famine with English sweat and oppedemics" (*FW* 539.36); "the whole blighty acre" (*FW* 553.08). The proliferation of allusions to the tragic episode in *Finnegans Wake* deserve a separate study of the different occasions in which they appear and a careful analysis of the meaning and function of these references in the text. Notwithstanding, for the purposes of the present article, a mere compilation of some of the most obvious references should be enough to prove that in Joyce's last text we find that the Great Hunger is mentioned more frequently than in the rest of his works put together.

We could assert at this point that, as James Joyce's work develops and his style becomes obscurer and more fragmented, and as he progressively abandons realism, allusions to the tragic event become frequenter. This circumstance can be better understood if we take into account the explanations offered by trauma studies.

Trauma studies have offered us very appropriate and sound reflections on the literary treatment of personal and collective traumas, and the Irish Famine is, undoubtedly, an example of an intergenerational trauma. Michelle Balaev has rightly noticed that the traumatic experience maintains "the ability to interrupt consciousness and maintains the ability to be transferred to non-traumatized individuals and groups" (151). This, of course, applies very well to the case of Joyce, of Ireland and the Irish, and the traumatic legacy of the Great Hunger for the new generations. David Lloyd, for instance, has commented how "The Famine reappears as a kind of displaced memory that haunts the afterlife of Irish culture, not directly but in images and tropes that form its traces." (7)

The first lesson that trauma studies have offered us is related to the imperious need of recreating, of repeating the traumatic episode. This effort is carried out once and again even though it has been also noticed that the traumatic experience precludes knowledge and, hence, representation: "The origin of traumatic response is forever unknown and unintegrated; yet the ambiguous, literal even is ever-present and intrusive" (Balaev 151). Therefore, theorists on trauma have pointed out this inherent ambiguity, the almost compulsive need of repetition and representation of the traumatic experience and its unavoidably unspeakable and unknowable nature (Caruth, Balaev, and others).

This seems to be the stance and the conclusion reached by James Joyce. On the one hand, he did not or could not avoid the legacy of the Famine; he inherited the intergenerational traumatic experience and it haunted his work. Joyce earnestly tried to exorcise this phantom by conjuring it with words, but words and language faltered him. He did not contemplate as particularly appropriate the use of realist representational narratives and he had recourse to a more indirect, fragmented and symbolic type of narrative that would enable him to deal with and express the ghostly quality of the experience, and the

haunting effect it produces. This explains why if we trace the allusions to the Great Famine throughout his works, the number increases when the author progressively abandons the realist discourse from *Ulysses* onwards.

Finally, trauma studies have taught us that intergenerational traumas are not easily overcome but that one learns to live with them by means of repetition as a first step towards liberation. This is precisely my intention, to study how Irish writers, James Joyce in this case, learnt to live with this legacy.

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Note

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