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Visual Representations of the Great Famine, 1845-2010

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In 1847, Elihu Burritt, an American social activist touring Ireland, declared: ‘*I can find no language nor illustration sufficiently impressive to portray the spectacle [of the Famine] to an American reader*’.¹ In the same year, another American traveler, Asenath Nicholson, first arrived in Ireland in 1844, wrote that although she had seen actual skeletons, ‘*imagination had come short*’ of a man ‘*emaciated to the last degree*’.² Widespread among eye-witnesses of the Famine was the idea that its ‘*fearful realities*’ exceeded human imagination.³ Recently, David Lloyd has underscored that even though the unrepresentability of the Great Famine has been repeatedly stressed,⁴ there is an abundance of haunting Famine images.⁵ This paradox need be further explained. What might be called a moral approach to the issue of the indescribable – i.e. witnessing and transcribing horrible spectacles inevitably entails condemnable voyeurism – overlooks complex artistic, cultural, ideological, and political stakes. A brief perusal of Western art would suffice to demonstrate that artists have never been reluctant to paint horrible scenes or disfigured bodies. However, the depictions of starved Irish people are seldom as grueling as textual or literary descriptions. What may account for the ‘*failure of artists to confront [Famine] history*’?⁶ A contextualized analysis is necessary to further the understanding of visual representations from the mid-1840s to the present day. Four types of representations will be scrutinized successively: 19th-century engravings with a problematic evidential status, 19th-century paintings tinged with romantic nationalism, and contemporary commemorative monuments and art works.

19th-century press illustrations

While few paintings were made at the time of the Famine, many engravings were printed in Irish or British papers⁷ – *The Cork Examiner* or *The Cork Reporter*,

¹ Turlough McCONNELL, *Ireland's Great Hunger Museum*, Quinnipiac University, 2013, p. 5.

² Asenath NICHOLSON, *Lights and Shades of Ireland*, London: Charles Gilpin, 1850, pp. 224-5.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 229.

⁴ See for instance Christine KINEALY, *A Death Dealing Famine: The Great Hunger in Ireland*, London: Pluto Press, 1997.

⁵ David LLOYD, *Irish Times: Temporality of Modernity*, Dublin: Field Day, 2008, p. 49.

⁶ Catherine MARSHALL, ‘Painting Irish History: the Famine’, *History Ireland*, Vol. 4, No. 3, 1996, pp. 46-50.

⁷ Web pages featuring the works discussed in this paper are listed at the end of the article.

Punch, *The Pictorial Times*, and more famously the *Illustrated London News*. Consequently, ‘newspaper woodblock engravings have emerged as the iconic visual images of the Famine’.⁸ Far from being unfiltered historical documents, these illustrations were shaped by artistic, commercial, ideological, and political commitments. They echo the shift from sympathy and charitable pity in the early years of the Famine to widespread criticism ‘as the famine persisted and as reports of food riots and agrarian murders became more frequent’.⁹ Gradually, as British readers became tired of Famine images, ‘British newspapers simply threw their hands in disgust’.¹⁰

During the Famine years, the Irish continued to be stereotyped as violent and indolent in anti-Irish newspapers.¹¹ In *Punch*,¹² a political paper famous for its satirical tone and efficient caricatures, starvation is treated from a political rather than a social point of view. The Famine is understood as the result of Irish seditiousness, potato-dependence, and stereotyped racial traits. An 1846 illustration by John Leech, *Union is Strength* (10 October), shows John Bull offering a poor Irish man some food as well as a spade to encourage him to earn his own living.¹³ The cartoon suggests that the Irish failed to be self-reliant owing to their deeply-rooted indolence. *The New Irish Still* (11 August, 1848) equally blames the Irish for being unable to turn their natural resources – here peat – into economic assets. Leech caricatured the Irish by portraying them in rags and, at times, with simian features as is the case in *Height of Impudence* (19 December, 1846).¹⁴ The cartoon emphasizes the differences between the fat elegantly dressed Englishman and the Irish man in rags with prognathic features emblemizing racial inferiority. In *The British Lion and the Irish Monkey* (*Punch*, 10 April, 1848), John Mitchell, the Irish nationalist leader, is caricatured as a monkey. Also displaying prognathic features, the fat Irish landlord in *The English Labourer’s Burden* (*Punch*, February 24, 1849) exploits the British middle-class worker. Anti-landlordism was widespread in Britain, particularly after the debates over the Poor Law Amendment. Many journalists blamed the Irish landlords for impoverishing tenants or cottiers.

⁸ Emily MARK-FITZGERALD, ‘Towards a Famine Art History: Invention, Reception, and Repetition from the Nineteenth Century to the Twentieth’, pp. 181-202 in David A. VALONE (ed.), *Ireland’s Great Hunger: Relief, Representation, and Remembrance*, vol. 2, Lanham and Plymouth: University Press of America, 2010, p. 184.

⁹ Michael DE NIE, *The Eternal Paddy: Irish Identity and the British Press, 1798-1882*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004, p. 90.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

¹¹ On such stereotypes see L. P. CURTIS, *Apes and Angels: the Irishman in Victorian Caricature*, Washington: The Smithsonian Institution Press, 1971.

¹² For an analysis of the *Punch* cartoons, see Peter GRAY, ‘Punch and the Great Famine’, *History Ireland*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1993, pp. 26-32; Edward G. LENGEL, *The Irish Through British Eyes: Perceptions of Ireland in the Famine Era*, Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002; Leslie WILLIAMS, *Daniel O’Connell, The British Press, and The Irish Famine*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003.

¹³ See DE NIE, *The Eternal Paddy*, op. cit., p. 96.

¹⁴ See Valérie MORISSON, ‘Les Irlandais : le maillon manquant de la chaîne de l’évolution’, pp. 133-144 in Michel PRUM et George LETISSIER (dir.), *L’Héritage de Charles Darwin dans les cultures européennes*, Paris : L’Harmattan, 2011.

In *The Pictorial Times*, a rival of the *Illustrated London News*, more nuanced yet explicitly critical condemnations of Irish rebelliousness during the Famine are substantiated by more realistic illustrations depicting the Irish way of life in picturesque views owing much to the genre-scene. Like most British papers, in the early years of the Famine, the *Pictorial Times* supported food relief. However, a depiction of food riots in Dungarvan, featuring a violent unruly mob accompanies an article accusing the Irish of wrongly blaming Britain for food shortage (10 October, 1846).

Even when the portraits of famished Irish peasants were conceived to elicit sympathy, the depiction of misery was visually codified: Irish misery is signaled through tattered clothes, disheveled hair, and dark complexion. Using easily identifiable visual codes, 19th-century press illustrations shaped people's perceptions of the Great Hunger.

None of the previously mentioned illustrations have acquired the iconic status of Mahoney's on-the-ground sketches, printed in 1847 in the best-known 19th-century illustrated publication at the time,¹⁵ the *Illustrated London News* (*ILN*), which was then pro-Irish.¹⁶ *Boy and Girl at Cahera* and *Woman Begging Clonakilty* are reproduced on a 1999 commemorative mural on Whiterock Road, Ballymurphy, Belfast, bearing the words 'An Gorta mor – Britain's Genocide by Starvation. Ireland's Holocaust 1845–1849'. Back in the 1840s, the *ILN* was eager to heighten its readers' awareness of the Famine and dared to evoke the responsibility of Britain.¹⁷ The sketches, commissioned to Cork-born artist James Mahoney (also Mahony, c. 1816 – c. 1859), were published in two articles, *Sketches in the West of Ireland*, narrating the artist's visit to Skibbereen, one of the most severely hit villages. Mahoney was accompanied by Dr. Donovan, who had previously written heart-rending accounts of the Famine.

The *ILN* prioritized images over text and prided itself on rich and varied artistic illustrations which were 'the hallmark of responsible journalism'.¹⁸ Targeting a middle-class readership, it promoted art as a conveyor of knowledge. Out of respect for its family audience, it praised the fidelity, discretion, and taste of its visual content.¹⁹ The *ILN* recruited well-known artists who were dispatched to distant places as eye-witnesses, hence the mention "sketched by our own artist" accompanying some images. However, the illustrations were not conceived as media-images and were influenced by the artistic training of the illustrators. Though, as a painter of genre-scenes, Mahoney was likely to pictorialize the scenes he witnessed, his sketches owe more to the identity and stance of the newspaper than to artistic canons. They were originally published as a set on double pages, their

¹⁵ It had a circulation of 67,000 copies by 1851. See Leslie WILLIAMS, 'Irish Identity and the *Illustrated London News*', pp. 59-93 in Susan SHAW SAILER (ed.), *Representing Ireland: Gender, Class, Nationality*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997, p. 59.

¹⁶ Its Irish sympathy waned in 1848: 'As the famine continued it was no longer seen as a hardship to be ameliorated, but as a senselessly redundant source of suffering', *ibid.*, pp. 75-76 and 91.

¹⁷ See the editorial of January, 16, 1847.

¹⁸ MARK-FITZGERALD, 'Towards a Famine Art History', *op. cit.*, p. 183.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

disproportionate size betraying their rhetorical importance. Viewed individually, they do not provide a precise context but, when considered as a series, they offer varied view points and convey the impression of a journey through the region. Overviews of villages alternate with close-ups offering the readers a varied visual testimony. Vaunting the factuality of its reports, the *ILN* had hired Mahoney to confirm previous press descriptions which had triggered skepticism or disbelief.²⁰ Endowed with an evidential function, the illustrations are said to have been sketched with ‘*unexaggerated fidelity*’.²¹ One of the paragraphs, alluding to a dead man lying unburied in an unhealthy hut, mentions that to sketch the scene, Mahoney had to ‘*stand up to his ankles in the dirt and the filth upon the floor*’. The absence of colors, the simplicity of the drawing, and the notes accompanying Mahoney’s drawings seemingly guarantee their truthfulness. The blunt angular lines and the absence of modeling heighten the tragic expressivity of the sketches. As Margaret Crawford contends, ‘*a precise representation of Famine was less important than the overall impression of misery that the engravings were seeking to portray*’.²² While photographic images evidence historical realities in an excessively detailed way, engravings were pedagogical. Despite their proclaimed evidential role, their function was mainly to stir the readers’ imagination²³ and to elicit an emotional and charitable response.²⁴ To this purpose, the visual rhetoric had to facilitate identification rather than indignation.

In his sets of sketches, Mahoney emphasizes the pain on the sufferers’ faces and allegorizes his depictions. More than other press engravings, his portraits induce eye-contact with the readers so as to bring forth a sharing of emotions. In *Boy and Girl at Cahera* (20 February, 1847), the children’s rags and the unfertile soil evidence misery while the boy’s expressive gaze moves the spectators. Printed in the top left-hand corner of the page, it is the most expressive picture in the spread. In *A Woman Begging at Clonakilty* (13 February, 1847), portraying a mother holding a child, the plain white background makes the grieved woman’s face stand out. The text accompanying this Famine icon makes for the absence of background: on the road from Cork to Skibbereen, Mahoney met a woman holding the corpse of her baby and begging alms to buy a coffin for the child.²⁵ The mother stares at the reader pleadingly; her cloak, hiding her emaciated body, is reminiscent of the Madonna’s. As Mahoney confides that neither pen nor pencil can truly convey the misery in Skibbereen, the utilization of Christian iconography as a vehicle for a shared sense of hopelessness enables him to transcribe the shock he experienced. Many subsequent representations of the Famine borrow from the Christian iconography of the Madonna and Child. Representing the Famine by synecdoche facilitated identification and interactive feelings. The scene narrated by Mahoney emblemizes

²⁰ Both the *London Times* and the *London Morning Chronicles* had expressed skepticism. See James Michael FARRELL, ‘This Horrible Spectacle’, pp. 66-89 in Lawrence J. PRELLI (ed.), *Rhetorics of Display*, University of South Carolina, 2006, p. 67, note 3.

²¹ *ILN*, February 13, 1847.

²² Margaret CRAWFORD, in MARK-FITZGERALD, ‘Towards a Famine Art History’, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

²³ MARK FITZGERALD, ‘Towards a Famine Art History’, *op. cit.*, p. 192.

²⁴ FARRELL, ‘This Horrible Spectacle’, *op. cit.*, p. 66 and Noël KISSANE, *The Irish Famine: A Documentary History*, Dublin: National Library of Ireland, 1995, p. 114.

²⁵ Many accounts mention uncoffined bodies.

the atrocity of the Famine and finds an echo in contemporary evocations of the Famine. In Colum McCann's *Transatlantic*, Frederick Douglass, who toured the Cork region at the time of the Famine, is deeply affected by his encounter with a starved woman begging to bury her dead child.²⁶ Portraits of mothers and children were in keeping with Victorian sentimentality and depictions of urban misery. A sketch in a house at Fahey's Quay, Ennis, shows the widow Connor in her hut, leaning over her dying child. The Pieta-like woman is drawn in the center while the child's body is partly hidden. The artist sees the scene as 'a Rembrandt scene' (*ILN*, 19 January, 1850) in which the mother is allegorized. Francis William Topham also painted a woman and child in a furnitureless hut (*Cottage Interior, Claddagh, Galway*, 1845) and the mother and child motif reappears in *Scalp at Cahuermore* (*ILN*, 29 December, 1849) and in the portrait of Bridget O'Donnel and her two children. The latter, one of the most iconic Famine images, features strikingly bony figures. The portrait supplements an account of Bridget O'Donnel's last weeks, during which she was evicted, gave birth to a dead child, witnessed the death of one of her boys, and suffered from fever and hunger. The portrait leaves no doubt as to the health of the homeless family while focusing on women and children as potent conveyors of pity. This group remains a source of inspiration for commemorative sculpture.

Margaret Kelleher has underscored the feminization of Famine images,²⁷ arguing that 'individual victims are characterized most frequently as female, by predominantly male observers'.²⁸ Gendered representations are equally connected to the rhetoric of compassion behind Famine relief. As to Stuart McLean, he keys the female figure in Famine representations to the archaic image of the Irish *banshee*, a female messenger of death associated with wailing and lamentations.²⁹ In the years following the Famine, many nationalist works turned the figure of the starving mother into a female national allegory.

Surprisingly perhaps, Famine images evoke bodily pain and diseases in a fairly muted way. Many illnesses (e.g. fever, dysentery, small-pox, bronchitis, cholera, etc.) were reported³⁰ but, while written accounts explicitly evoke the physical horrors of starvation,³¹ engravings never picture them. Famine images respected the aesthetic and ethic codes of Victorian illustrations emphasizing pathos, sentimentality, and imagination rather than showing real social circumstances.³²

²⁶ Colum MCCANN, *Transatlantic*, London – New York: Bloomsbury, 2013, pp. 69-70.

²⁷ Margaret KELLEHER, *The Feminization of Famine: Representation of Women in Famine Narrative*, Duke University Press, 1997.

²⁸ Margaret KELLEHER, 'The Female Gaze: Asenath Nicholson's Famine Narrative', pp. 119-130 in Chris MORASH and Richard HAYES (eds), *Fearful Realities, New Perspectives on the Famine*, Dublin, Portland: Irish Academic Press, 1996, p. 120.

²⁹ Stuart MCLEAN, *The Event and its Terror, Ireland, Famine, Modernity*, Stanford University Press, 2004, p. 131, 137-138.

³⁰ See Laurence M. GEARY, "'The Late Disastrous Epidemic': Medical Relief and the Great Famine", pp. 49-59 in MORASH, *Fearful Realities*, *op. cit.*

³¹ Quoted in George CUSACK (ed.), *Hungry Words, Images of Famine in the Irish Canon*, Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006, p. 31.

³² See Michael BELL, *Sentimentalism, Ethics, and the Culture of Feeling*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000.

Death beds, scenes of mourning, or funerals were commonly drawn but the ailing body was not shown in 19th-century engravings reaching an ever-expanding audience. In the textual accounts of Skibbereen and the neighbouring villages written by Daniel Donovan or Nicholas Cummins,³³ dead bodies are described in grim details and the specter-like appearance of the corpses, together with their pestilent smell, is evoked: *'the face and limbs become frightfully emaciated; the eyes acquired a most peculiar stare; the skin exhaled a peculiar and offensive fetor, and was covered with a brownish, filthy-looking coating, almost as indelible as varnish'*.³⁴ Mahoney's sketches of the same scenes never show death directly. His written testimony of the discovery of Mr. Leahay's body, following Dr. Donovan's description in *The Cork Southern Reporter*, is fraught with bodily references (i.e. *'putrescent exhalations from the body,' 'loud snarling of dogs,' or 'gnawed and mangled skeleton'*). Yet, the engraving illustrating the scene, *The Village of Mienies*, pictures a widow and her daughter outside the dead man's cabin. Much is left to the imagination of the readers as the artist refrains from depicting the wretchedness of the scene. Observers seldom entered the cabins of the dead for fear of disease. Besides, a realistic rendering of the dead body would have been inappropriate in the *ILN*. Likewise, the engravings printed in *The Pictorial Times* are often more tightly framed but seldom foreground dead bodies or skeleton-like figures in a naturalistic way.

Though the debates over Food Relief and the amendment of the Poor Law were divisive, the British press concurred to condemn ruthless evictions, which became frequent after 1846, and Irish landlordism. In 1847, the *ILN* castigated the dominant class in Ireland; the *London News* accused Irish landlords of having reduced peasants to serfdom; and *The Times* – often portraying the Irish as a nation of idle beggars³⁵ – compared the Irish system to Russian slavery.³⁶ Irish landlords were unanimously described as beggars, constantly asking for more money from Britain. They were held responsible for mass evictions and the ensuing migration of Irish paupers to British cities. Even when the evictions were deemed justified, clearances were described as inhumane.

Given the consensus over evictions, they could be pictured without the artist taking much political risk. Numerous eviction scenes accompanied articles discussing the issue from a political perspective. Again the misery of homeless families was said to be unimaginable. After evoking the hordes of homeless Irish wandering from house to house or living in holes or ditches, Capt. Arthur Kennedy wrote: *'The state of some districts of the union during the last fourteen days baffles description'*.³⁷ In the *ILN* mass evictions are overtly described as inhumane. The illustrations represent distress according to the artistic codes prevailing in history painting. The scenes are imbued with visual pathos as the poses and gestures of

³³ Nicholas CUMMINS, *London Times*, December 24, 1846. See FARRELL, 'This Horrible Spectacle', *op. cit.*, p. 79.

³⁴ *Dublin Medical Press*, February 2, 1848.

³⁵ See *Times*, 23 March 1847, 31 March 1847, 14 April 1847.

³⁶ James S. DONNELLY Jr, "'Irish Property Must Pay for Irish Poverty': British Public Opinion and the Great Irish Famine", pp. 60-76, in MORASH, *Fearful Realities*, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

³⁷ 1849, quoted by KISSANE, *The Irish Famine*, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

evicted small-holders or tenants signal their suffering. In *The Day After the Eviction*,³⁸ a homeless father is hiding his face with his left hand while his wife, curled up in a hole dug in an embankment, is holding a baby in her lap. Out of decency, the emotions are suggested rather than pictured. The artist emphasizes the living conditions or the exposure to weather rather than physical pain or starvation signs. In images of *scalpeens* – a makeshift hut made of straw – (*Scalpeen*, and *The Scalpeen of Tim Downs at Dunmore*, *ILN*, 15 December, 1849³⁹) more attention is paid to the hut than to physical signs of deprivation or hygiene. In spite of the outright condemnation of evictions in the article, the inhabitant of the *scalpeen* is stereotyped: ‘*It seems to have become more and more difficult for the ILN to represent the famine-struck Irish peasant as human*’.⁴⁰ The other illustration accompanying the article (*Cottages at Tullig with the Thatch Pulled Down*) shows a ruined village with a lone, very small figure. The strong contrast in light, the diminutive figure, and the repeated motif of the deserted ruin imbue the scene with a sense of romantic desolation and sublime tragedy. There is no attempt at explaining the process of eviction in the drawing which is more a romantic illustration than a social testimony. Despite the commercial, political, and artistic bias of this image, in the article, the artist claims: ‘*I assure you (he says) that the objects of which I send you Sketches are not sought after – I do not go out of my way to find them; and other travellers who have gone in the same direction (...) will vouch, I am sure, for the accuracy of my delineations*’.⁴¹ Other engravings, such as *The Ejection* (16 December, 1848), which features a woman and her daughter kneeling pleadingly in front of a landlord on horseback, address power relations.

Press engravings are complex documentary sources which have shaped the collective memory of the Famine. They hinge on synecdoches, tend to be allegorized, and are conceived according to perceptions of taste, sentiment, and decency. In some cases, the racial prejudices fashioning the discourse on the Famine, entailed a visual process of othering. The unrepresentability of the Famine is keyed to the immediate accessibility of visual images in 19th-century mass publications. No reader could have countenanced true-to-life representations of the dying body in a real-life context. This does not imply that moral reluctance to depict extreme misery had no role to play since ‘*there is, in a sense, nothing human to which the Famine Irish can be compared*’⁴². Interestingly, on entering a cabin where a dead person was lying unburied, Nicholson wrote: ‘*I did not, and could not endure, as the Famine progressed, such sights [...]. They were too real, and these realities became a dread*’.⁴³ Confronted to scenes of extreme misery and horror, the artists produced what Chris Morash and David Lloyd describe as an indigent sublime: ‘*the terror of the witness of Famine lies profoundly in what the spectacle of the skeletal, starving human reveals about the very minimum of humanity itself, the*

³⁸ *ILN*, 15 December, 1848.

³⁹ The image is placed in the middle of the page complemented by two overall views of villages in ruins.

⁴⁰ See WILLIAMS, ‘Irish Identity and the Illustrated London News’, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

⁴¹ <www.clarelibrary.ie/eolas/coclare/history/condition_of_ireland/condition_of_ireland_iln_dec22_1849.htm>

⁴² LLOYD, *Irish Times*, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

⁴³ Asenath NICHOLSON, *Annals of the Famine in Ireland*, ed. Maureen MURPHY, Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1998, pp. 117-118.

moment in which the human becomes the living dead, the mortal already beyond this world, and yet continues to interpellate us as a subject, in our subjecthood'.⁴⁴

Painting the Famine: towards nationalism

Contrary to press illustrations, works of art were not primarily seen as historical evidence though 19th-century realism, percolating in many genre-scenes, emphasized true-to-lifeness. In 1848, Courbet's *Enterrement à Ornans* opened the way for straightforward realism but in the 1850s, Irish artists, who were dependent on British art institutions and clientele, produced genre-scenes or academic artworks. The scarcity of Famine paintings is due to the painters' reluctance to paint un-idealized or un-flattering human figures and to the requirements of the art-market.⁴⁵ In painting, '*violence or distress was softened for the sensibilities of the rich—distanced in time, or cloaked in mythology or allegory. Artists were trained to paint in a classical manner, their skills honed in the antique class, before studying the life model, by which time they were tuned to see the human body in an idealized way*'.⁴⁶ Distorted or suffering bodies could be painted in religious, mythological, historical scenes, provided the painting was edifying, but not to document social realities. However, as cultural nationalism gained momentum, nationalist depictions of evictions became acceptable, especially when filtered through romanticism. Conceived as academic exercises in the depiction of emotions and pathos, eviction scenes testify to a shared perception of the Famine as a human tragedy regardless of political interpretations.

Given the constraints of the art market, artists eager to address the plight of the Irish population had to do so through the prevailing artistic canons.

Among the first oil paintings on the Famine are two works by Cork-born artist Donald MacDonald, *An Irish Peasant Family Discovering the Potato Blight of their Store* (c. 1847) and *Eviction* (c. 1850). The painter had moved to London, where he exhibited his paintings, when the Famine spread in Ireland. *The Discovery of the Potato Blight*, a scene cloaked in romanticism, is set in a sublime mountainous landscape. A child in tattered clothes is gazing at rotten potatoes while one of the women is portrayed in an attitude of utter distress. The expressive face of the male character, painted in a Gericaultesque manner, bespeaks his bewilderment. His disheveled hair and tattered shirt convey a romantic feeling of despondency. More emphasis is placed on extreme emotions of despair than on the political context behind the Famine. However, in *Eviction*, the social differences between the evicted family and the landlord are enhanced through the costumes although the Irish peasant, giving back the keys to his cottage to an elegantly dressed landlord, is not in rags. The painter took pains to avoid unpleasant representations of misery or violent opposition to the eviction: only broken objects in the bottom left-hand corner testify to the forced ejection. Like many Famine images, the scene explicitly condemns evictions though the artistic devices in the painting are pleasant to the eye. The mountainous landscape, the bluish hues of distant hills, and the winding

⁴⁴ Quoted in LLOYD, *Irish Times*, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

⁴⁵ MARSHALL, 'Painting Irish History', *op. cit.*

⁴⁶ McCONNELL, *Ireland's Great Hunger Museum*, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

road correspond to the canons of landscape painting, with the contrasted light triggering a sense of the Sublime. The thatched cottage is endowed with picturesqueness. Around the tenant, three women lament over the eviction. Their poses are academically contrived: the elderly woman is kneeling down, her outstretched arms raised in prayer; the younger woman is hiding her face and leaning on the shoulder of the ejected man; the mother, holding two young children in her arms, gazes upwards to heaven. The elderly figure is reminiscent of the figure of Saint Mary Magdalene in Annibale Caracci's lamentation of Christ (*The Dead Christ Mourned*, 1606, National Gallery, London). Such readily identifiable scenes of lamentation were worthy of artistic admiration. The women's upward gazes are congruent with providential explanations of the Famine. Exhibited in Britain, the painting was pleasantly moving without being overtly politicized.

Visual representations of evictions (Frederick Goodall, *An Irish Eviction*, 1850; Erskine Nicol, *The Eviction*, 1853) often feature prostrated female figures symbolizing hopelessness. George Frederik Watts' *The Irish Famine* (c. 1850), painted before the painter went to Ireland and in the gloomy colours which characterize his style, stages a woman prostrate with misery. The mother and child motif is used in an allegorical manner, the background offering no contextualization. The Irish Famine, largely illustrated in newspapers, was a suitable subject-matter for romantic or symbolist artists eager to explore human desolation.

Visual representations of the Famine, tapping into Christian iconography and conventional signs, became vehicles for an emerging collective memory which '*factors the past into structured patterns by mapping its most memorable features*'.⁴⁷ Famine motifs gradually emerged to constitute a depoliticized imagery. Contrary to press engravings, which are printed with texts contextualizing the scenes, paintings are self-sufficient representations. Working as allegories, romantic and affective depictions of the Famine were de-individualized. The pictorial language which filtered representations of the Famine proved both a distancing device and a tool for universalization, the condition for an emotional, here compassionate, response to the work of art.

Some Famine paintings should be considered within the framework of cultural nationalism. Some artists were influenced by cultural and political nationalism so that nationalist motifs surface in some Famine paintings. Early historical accounts (by Canon John O'Rourke, 1874) as well as anti-British interpretations (by P.S. O'Hegarty, George O'Brien, or John Mitchel for instance) show that the Famine has found a place in nationalist history.⁴⁸ In popular culture, it is often perceived as a genocide. Michael Davitt, a patriot and a Fenian, was the first to describe the Famine as 'holocaust'. The Famine was referred to in the rhetoric of the Land League in the 1880s.

⁴⁷ Patrick H. HUTTON, *History as an Art of Memory*, Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1993, p. 79.

⁴⁸ Mary DALY, 'Revisionism and the Great Famine', pp. 71-89 in George D. BOYCE and Alan O'DAY (eds), *The Making of Modern Irish History: Revisionism and the Revisionist Controversy*, London and New York: Routledge, 1996, p. 71.

The Marriage of Strongbow and Aoife, a monumental painting by Daniel MacLise (c. 1854), was first commissioned as a part of fresco decoration for the House of Parliament in London and exhibited at the Royal Academy. The painting, depicting Aoife's marriage to Strongbow, Lord of Leinster, in return for Anglo-Norman military assistance, was well-received by the British public (and later sold to Lord Northwick). This theatrically composed history painting, using the chiaroscuro to heighten the dramatic effect, is inspired from Thomas Moore's *History of Ireland* (1847).⁴⁹ Some critics have argued that this marriage scene, set in the ruined city of Waterford, is an allegory of the Famine and the resultant destruction of the native population:

*Cork was among the most devastated areas during the Irish Famine. Indeed the pile of bloodless dead bodies scattered across the Irish landscape and the dead being carried off for burial in the background would be a familiar scene to an audience aware of Ireland's recent cultural, physical, and economic history.*⁵⁰

The broken strings of the harp in the left-hand corner and the dark sky – as opposed to the rainbow which framed a previous watercolour on the same theme – may refer to the demise of Irish culture after the Famine. The painting offers a contrived and romantic vision of medieval Celtic Ireland which reflects the ideological complexities of the nascent field of ethnography.

Reflecting nationalist culture more straightforwardly, Lady Butler's painting, *Evicted* (1890), is based on a scene witnessed by the painter and described in her 1922 autobiography. The female figure standing alone in the mountainous landscape can be construed as an allegorical figure. By the 1890s, the red skirt that she is wearing was strongly associated with Gaelic Ireland and Western peasantry. The ruins painted in the middle ground testify to violent destructions and evictions during the Famine years. Lord Salisbury, to whom the painting was presented, commented: '*There is such an air of breezy cheerfulness and beauty about the landscape which is painted that it makes me long to take part in an eviction myself either in an active or a passive sense*'.⁵¹ Despite this misreading, the painting long remained unsold.

Harry Jones Thaddeus' eviction scene (exh. RHA in 1889) is endowed with unusual violence.⁵² Portrayed in a carravagesque chiaroscuro, the peasants are not conventionally Irish in appearance: '*Thaddeus did not present the viewer with poverty-stricken and emaciated figures that appear in contemporary photographs, illustrations, and writings, and who might have heightened further the emotional*

⁴⁹ See <http://www.nationalgallery.ie/Conservation/Strongbow_and_Aoife/The_Painting/Interpretations.aspx>

⁵⁰ Julieann Veronica ULIN, *Medieval Invasions in Modern Irish Literature*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 11.

⁵¹ MARSHALL, 'Painting Irish History', *op. cit.*

⁵² See Brendan ROONEY, *Harry Jones Thaddeus*, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003, pp. 179-180.

impact of his picture'.⁵³ Unlike other easel-paintings, Thaddeus' work plunges the viewers in the midst of the eviction scene, in the dark cabin, and offers the Irish peasants' view. This bold composition remains an exception as '*among the art buying public, regardless of their demographic, cultural, religious, or socio-economic background [...], Irish subject pictures of distinctively political content were not popular*'.⁵⁴

Coating their political opinions in academic hues and romantic sublimity, artists were careful to use distancing devices or to borrow from well-established styles. As Famine images circulated, the allegorical figure of the famished mother, the motif of the ruined thatched cottage, as well as the unspoiled hilly landscape became the hallmarks of an emerging nationalist construct.

Commemorating the Famine in public sculpture

The number of museums dedicated to the Famine (in Strokestown, Donaghmore, Ballingary, Cobh, or Skiberreen), as well as the number of contemporary artworks and academic publications on the Great Hunger, testifies to the crucial role it has recently acquired in Irish history. More than 100 public memorials have been erected in Ireland and abroad over the last 15 years.⁵⁵ The commemorations of the 1990s, evidencing a '*memory boom*',⁵⁶ have triggered fierce criticism and historiographical debates fuelled by revisionism.⁵⁷ Conversely, the centenary of the Famine had generated few commemorative projects: World War II was raging, Anglo-Irish relations were unsettled, and the 50th anniversary of the Easter Rising was in everyone's mind. This absence of commemorative impetus has been interpreted as a reluctance to address a painful episode of Irish history. The flourishing of trauma studies, in the wake of the Holocaust commemorations, has indeed generated a shift in the interpretation of Famine commemoration: '*the failure of the 1940s generation to foreground the Famine anniversary was increasingly characterized as "silence", "repression", or "amnesia" in the wake of a profoundly traumatic cultural memory*'.⁵⁸ Rowan Gillespie, who was commissioned the Custom House Quay group, recalls that his father talked him out of accepting the commission because he considered the Famine as too shameful⁵⁹. The silence over the Famine has largely been exaggerated but it sustained the perception of the Famine as a trauma, that is, something essentially unrepresentable which divides us from the past. The '*traumatization of the Famine*' therefore echoes the trope of unrepresentability long attached to the event.⁶⁰ In a Freudian perspective, psychologists Cathy Caruth and Bessel Van der Kolk argue that when the real is

⁵³ *Ibid*, p. 181.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 184.

⁵⁵ Emily MARK-FITZGERALD, 'The "Irish Holocaust", Historical Trauma and the Commemoration of the Famine', pp. 60-76 in Griselda POLLOCK (ed.), *Visual Politics of Psychoanalysis: Art and the Image in Post-traumatic Cultures*, London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013, p. 61.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p. 60.

⁵⁷ See Mary DALY, 'Revisionism and the Great Famine', *op. cit.*

⁵⁸ MARK-FITZGERALD, 'The "Irish Holocaust"', *op. cit.*, p. 62.

⁵⁹ <www.rte.ie/radio1/podcast/podcast_artstonight.xml> (podcast 18 February 2013).

⁶⁰ MARK-FITZGERALD, 'The "Irish Holocaust"', *op. cit.*, p. 74.

traumatic, it is unrepresentable and can only be represented indirectly in figurative or allegorical terms that distort reality.⁶¹

The reading of the Famine as trauma is keyed to the understanding of commemoration as therapeutic. In this discursive framework, public sculpture, which was a cornerstone of the memorialization of the Famine, was instrumental in repairing the alleged amnesia. Monuments paying homage to the victims made for the fact that many victims had not been buried properly or died on board ‘*coffin ships*’ and thereby operated like ‘*a proxy or sign for the vanished famine bodies*’.⁶²

Maurice Halbwachs’ seminal study on collective memory and Pierre Nora’s subsequent volumes on the ‘*lieux de mémoire*’ provide another theoretical framework for the understanding of Famine public sculpture. While the emotional response provoked by 19th-century engravings aimed at securing relief and solidarity from British readers, the emphasis on emotions in public commemorative sculpture consolidates the unity of the community or nation and ensures the transferability of the Famine experience.⁶³ Irish President Mary Robinson encouraged ‘*the moral and emotional responsibility of remembrance*’.⁶⁴ The works create a form of collective martyrdom unifying a community and a people. Although many commemorative groups were commissioned by rural communities and rooted in local remembrances, their allegorical visual idiom elicits a broader emotional response. In the figurative commemorative monuments, the emphasis on emotions, facilitating identification, the unmonumental size of the figures, and the smallness or absence of pedestal bridges the gap between Famine victims and the viewers. Moulded in bronze or stone, they translate misery and despondency in easily identifiable visual signs. Documentary evidence of suffering often complement the public homage paid to the victims and relate contemporary audiences to their forebears for individual narratives facilitate identification. The bronze group erected in Sligo in 1997 is made up of three bent forward figures going barefoot. It is complemented by excerpts from a letter dated January 2, 1850 evoking the plight of an evicted family and the death of several children. In Ennistymon, a sculpture by Alan Ryan Hall is equally complemented by an archival text excerpted from workhouse registries: ‘*There is a little boy named Michael Rice of Lahinch aged about 4 years. He is an orphan, his father having died last year and his mother has expired on last Wednesday night, who is about being buried without a coffin!*’⁶⁵ The names of the victims and texts in Irish may bestow historical authenticity upon the monuments.

⁶¹ Cathy CARUTH, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, London, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.

⁶² Emily MARK-FITZGERALD, ‘The Irish Famine and Commemorative Culture’, pp. 145-166 in Christian NOACK et al. (eds), *Holodomor and Gorta Mor: Histories, Memories and Representations of Famine in Ukraine and Ireland*, London: Anthem Press, 2012, p. 150.

⁶³ Pierre NORA, *Les Lieux de mémoire*, T. 3, *L’Ere de la commémoration*, Paris: Gallimard, 1984-1992, p. 174.

⁶⁴ MARK-FITZGERALD, ‘The Irish Famine and Commemorative Culture’, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

⁶⁵ See Valérie MORISSON, ‘Evocations de la famine dans l’art contemporain irlandais : une relecture de l’histoire’, pp. 137-160 in Sylvie MIKOWSKI (dir.), *Histoire et mémoire en France et en Irlande*, Reims: Epure, 2010, p. 141.

The rapid ‘*monumentalization*’ of the Famine,⁶⁶ has generated historical and generational continuity while the Famine had brought about depopulation, departures, cultural disappearance, in other words discontinuity. In public sculpture, historical continuity is achieved through stylistic continuity as the memorials borrow from 19th-century Famine imagery. Tapping into a fairly homogenous body of figurative representations, and favoring ‘*an intensively conservative visual approach*’,⁶⁷ many Famine monuments in Ireland and abroad echo Mahoney’s engravings and recycle Famine clichés. Elizabeth McLaughlin’s sculpture in Roscommon (1999) is very directly inspired from the *ILN* figure of Bridget O’Donnel and her children, though the bodies are more emaciated and the faces more expressive. The group is situated near Roscommon workhouse, which provides an implicit context for interpretation. Other figurative monuments, such as the group commissioned to Edward Delaney (St. Stephen’s Green, Dublin, 1967) and the one by Rowan Gillespie (Custom House Quay, Dublin, 1997) feature emaciated victims who are reminiscent of Mahoney’s figures. Gillespie’s figures, with their elongated skinny bodies and their irregular clay-like surface, bring to mind the specters of the Famine so often described in 19th-century literature. Some American monuments, among which Robert Shure’s memorial (Boston, Massachusetts, 1998) also borrow from 19th century imagery. The location for some groups draws attention to Famine-induced emigration. John Behan’s ship, erected next to Croagh Patrick (Murrisk, co. Mayo) on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the Famine, is made up of skeletons. It commemorates the coffin-ship which sailed to Canada or America.

The repetition of iconographic motifs, facilitating historical continuity, has constructed the collective memory of the event. In her analysis of post-memory, Marianne Hirsch confirms Aby Warburg’s prescient idea that a ‘*storehouse of pre-established expressive forms*’ transmits affects across generations⁶⁸. Halbwachs argues that commemoration strengthens the placing or localization of memory while freezing representations into immobile traditions. The frozen allegorized imagery of the Famine, and the resultant simplification of history, constitutes a ‘*point of convergence where individual reminiscences are reconstructed*’⁶⁹ according to pre-existing images. It eschews historiographical debates and privileges empathy, as Roy Foster complained.⁷⁰ Cormac Ó Gráda has also drawn attention to the vicarious victimhood and historical simplification entailed by the commemoration fever.⁷¹ Public monuments, which are commissioned by a city board or a citizen committee, and more rarely by development aid organizations,⁷² tend to be consensual rather than divisive: ‘*there is little evidence to suggest that the repetitive revisiting and representation of the “traumatic Famine experience” has*

⁶⁶ MARK-FITZGERALD, ‘The “Irish Holocaust”’, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

⁶⁸ MARIANNE HIRSCH, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2012, p. 42.

⁶⁹ HUTTON, *History as an Art of Memory*, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

⁷⁰ According to Roy FOSTER, the emphasis on suffering in the 1990s commemorations, and the empathy it fostered, were thought to elicit a therapeutic catharsis but in fact it obliterated historical analysis (*The Irish Story: Telling Tales and Making It Up in Ireland*, London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 2001, pp. 30-31).

⁷¹ ‘After the Famine Fever’, *Irish Times*, May 19, 2001.

⁷² The Swinford memorial (Co. Mayo) was commissioned by Action from Ireland.

done anything to alter historical understanding or repair old wounds,' Mark-Fitzgerald argues.⁷³ David Lloyd warned:

*if we could leave our dead and their sufferings behind and overcome our melancholy, we would shake off at last the burden of the past and enter modernity as fully-formed subjects. [...] The Famine dead are seen as a haunting of memory that we must throw off because it continues to hold us back.*⁷⁴

Re-presenting the Famine

There is very little stylistic unity in the works briefly presented hereafter: some works offer a political interpretation of the Famine, others provide a more poetic view. This diversity echoes the variety of historical approaches enlightening the event. Most contemporary artists evoking the Famine use multi-layered visual devices to interrogate its meaning in today's Ireland or to explore the relation between forgetting and remembering in the mourning process. A form of presentism, essential to their re-presentation, emerges.

A singularly political statement accusing the British, Michael Farrell's *Black '47* (1997-1998) stages Charles Trevelyan as the accused in a theatrical trial. Skeletons of starved Irish peasants emerge from the floor to testify to British negligence. The contrast between past figures plunged in the semi-darkness of the court room and the shaft of light coming from above suggest that by coming to terms with the past, the Irish may find a brighter future. Farrell drew his inspiration from photographs of the Holocaust, which confirms that Holocaust studies have had a bearing upon the understanding of the Irish Famine. Also interested in the colonial history of Ireland, Philip Napier conceived his 1991 installation/action, *Eat the Day*, as an evocation of Anglo-Irish relationships during the Famine. He filled the gallery space with suspended lines of potato suggesting the weight of the Famine in today's Ireland. Una Walker's *Pattern of Survival* (Ardleystown, Co. Down, 1992) is a large installation created in a village which disappeared in the mid-19th century after it had been entirely depopulated. The work is the outcome of research conducted by the artist in local archives and of interviews with inhabitants. It therefore weaves together past and present testimonies and accounts. Some partly buried photographic portraits evoke the problematic mourning of unburied victims and emigrants as well as the archeological uncovering of fearful realities. References to Irish folklore, place names and evocations of the landowning family who ordered the departure of the villagers – and whose castle is now a Heritage site – suggest a social and colonial reading of the Famine. This elliptical installation, like many others, raises questions as to the interpretation of the event.

Many contemporary artists resort to montage techniques to problematize history and enhance the intermingling of individual and collective memories, with the hybridity characterizing installation works echoing the hybrid and fragmentary nature of memory. Memory has recently been defined as the conflation of past and

⁷³ MARK-FITZGERALD, 'The "Irish Holocaust"', *op. cit.*, p. 75.

⁷⁴ LLOYD, *Irish Times*, *op. cit.*, pp. 30-31.

present, collective and individual recollections. Made up of fragmentary, imaginative reconstructions and emerging out of an encounter between past and present recollections, memory, as conceived by Halbwachs, Nora, and Didi-Huberman,⁷⁵ is hybrid and erratic. Multi-media art, made up of juxtapositions and overlayings, is therefore a suitable vehicle for memory issues.

Dorothy Cross video, *Endarken* (2000) addresses oblivion. It shows a ruined thatched cottage, similar to the one printed in 19th-century papers, being gradually obliterated by a black circle. The video is looped to question the haunting nature of the Famine. Whereas in *The Garden of Remembrance*, a local commemoration project in Newmarket (Co. Kilkenny), a reconstructed thatched cottage emblemizes the Famine, in *Endarken*, it stands for the emblemization process itself. The expanding black dot questions the meaningfulness of visual clichés, such as the cottage, by de-familiarizing the representation.

Alanna O'Kelly has produced several multi-media works on the Famine calling for remembering as conducive to healing. Her works, which are more metaphorical than figurative, address absence and silence through sound, images, and text. They juxtapose collective memory, conveyed through traditional funeral chants such as the *keening* or the *caoin*, and individual experience of grief and mourning. Sounds are crucial to the sharing, transmission and transfer of sorrow at the core of her projects. *The Country Blooms, A Garden and a Grave* is made up of a video (*No Colouring can Deepen the Darkness of Truth*, 1990) showing metaphoric photographic images of burial, and a photomontage with text (1992-1995). The latter comprises six almost abstract photographs of the western Irish landscape reduced to lines and folds which metaphorically evoke the scars left by the Famine. The texts offer Irish and British testimonies and lay bare interpretative divergences. The installation also includes *Ómós*, a poem recalling the experience of a young girl begging for money. The reading of the poem accelerates until it becomes an unintelligible lament sounding like a *caoine* and alluding to the silence over the Famine. The work was accompanied by the following statement by the artist: '*Our families' stories, memories / Unspoken pain, fear and hurt lie everywhere. / Patterns of history repeating themselves / Our story, yet hardly talked about / Displaced, unsettled, denied, and dispossessed*'.⁷⁶

The artist started working on the Famine after she noticed her family's reluctance to talk about the tragedy.⁷⁷ Some of the images that she uses are archetypal symbols decontextualizing the experience of hunger or sorrow. *A Baethu* (1996), a 17 minute-long film, is a close-up of a breast, shot like a crater, from which milk flows erratically. The sound track, a funerary *keening*, associates motherhood to bareness and death. The use of Gaelic reminds the viewers of the threat posed by the Famine to Irish traditions while the breast and the crater, illustrating the association between the mother and the land, are potent universal

⁷⁵ George DIDI-HUBERMAN, *Devant le Temps*, Paris: Editions de Minuit, 2000, p. 36.

⁷⁶ See MORISSON, 'Evocations de la Famine', *op. cit.*, p. 154.

⁷⁷ 'Intimate Spaces: Alanna O'Kelly talks to Mebd Ruane', *Circa*, Issue 77, Autumn 1996, pp. 20-22, and Kate DEEPWELL, *Dialogues: Women Artists from Ireland*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2005, p. 141.

symbols. Death is also evoked in *Sanctuary/Wastelands*, a montage showing a former monastic settlement in Teampall Dumach Mhor, at Thallabhawn (Co. Mayo). The site was used as a burial mound during the Famine. When O’Kelly walked there, she caught glimpse of human skeletal remains which re-emerged from the vegetation. The haunting presence of the Famine is once more brought to the fore. O’Kelly’s works often grapple with the forensic, archeological, and deeper psychological process of uncovering truth and enhancing memories for healing wounds. The dialogue between the past and the present in Alanna O’Kelly’s works may take on a political dimension. *Famine / Emigration* (1992), conceived after a visit to Skibbereen, includes primary documents evoking the indifference of the English and draws a parallel between the Famine and the contemporary ‘Irish question’.⁷⁸

The contemporariness of Hughie O’Donoghue’s canvases relies on a painterly technique. In his dark oil paintings, personal recollections and collective memories also intermingle. The painter’s mother, who had to leave Ireland in 1937, and his grand-parents transmitted him Famine stories during stays in Erris, on the West coast of Ireland, so that deprivation became part of the family’s collective memory.⁷⁹ His archetypal dead bodies buried in peat-like darkness conjure up images of the Bronze Age bog bodies, of Famine mass graves or photographs of WWII soldiers. Their ghostly presence, emerging from thick layers of paint, evokes the cyclical nature of history. In his recent *Baia* series (2013), faded photographs are partly blurred by thin layers of paint. The complementary process of remembering and forgetting is once again metaphorically evoked.

While public sculpture tends to freeze the past into stock images, contemporary artwork induce a temporal flow and a circulation of meaning reactivating the memory of the Famine and interrogating its relevance to today’s issues. The mixture of archeological or archival evidence and contemporary technology in some works is both a factor of continuity and transferability and a response to the chronological flatness induced by iconographic repetition. The juxtaposition of images and text mirrors interpretative intricacies.

Conclusion

As has been highlighted, the trope of unrepresentability surfaces in different times and contexts regardless of numerous visual evocations. Surprisingly perhaps, there are very few abstract evocations of the Famine; allegorical or metaphorical representations prevail and provide memorial continuity. If Freudian repression and trauma theories provide a convincing explanation for the ‘silence’ over the Famine, they overlook the material culture and the political or ideological discursive framework shaping Famine representations. Devices of distancing and identification are simultaneously at work serving various purposes as the event is reconstructed in different contexts and media. Famine imagery still provides an iconographic repertoire for contemporary artists, including those who are working

⁷⁸ See MORISSON, ‘Evocations de la Famine’, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

⁷⁹ James HAMILTON, ‘The work of Hughie O’Donoghue’, *Irish Arts Review*, Vol. 7, 1990-91, pp. 144-152.

on the 2008 economic crisis and the ensuing emigration. The ghost estates now dotting the contemporary landscape of Ireland have been compared to Famine era cottages,⁸⁰ which exemplifies the constant ebb and flow of visual icons in collective memory.

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