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FUNCTIONS OF IRISH FAMINE POETRY:
SPEAKING THE UNSPEAKABLE THROUGH THE WRITTEN WORD

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Abstract

The Irish Famine was one of the most unimaginable and unethical events in the history of the modern world. An estimated one million Irish died and another two million emigrated during the years of 1845-1849, and the Famine remains a critical event in Irish history: it altered the course of literature, religion, landscape, and various other aspects of Irish life. One of the aspects of life that shifted, but whose presence has remained constant throughout Ireland's history, is poetry. Poetry's role in the course of Irish history has taken various turns over the centuries leading up to the Famine; it is in the post-Famine years, however, that poetry takes on an increasingly important role in accounting for its nation's history and continuing to build a national literary identity. Poetry itself is a medium that speaks the unspeakable: elements such as metaphor, rhythm, form, and sound work to complement content while simultaneously evoking emotional aspects that are crucial to fully capturing certain events. Contemporary Famine poetry, specifically, breaches the silence of the Famine through its reimagining of people, places, and events. This thesis will demonstrate how the compositions of Irish Famine poets Patrick Kavanagh, Seamus Heaney, Tony Curtis and Eavan Boland capture elements of Famine history that present authentic portrayals of the national trauma. I will argue that Famine poetry speaks for those who could not speak – for the victims in Ireland during the Famine, for those forced to leave their homes and families behind, for the entire nation in the present day that can draw upon these compositions of witness to better understand the complexity and tragedy of the Famine.

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Preface

On the corner of Vessey Street and North End Avenue, amidst the modern-day construction and chaos of downtown Manhattan, lies a piece of raised land overlooking the Hudson River. The quarter acre of the Irish Hunger Memorial – a measurement of land representing the significance of the Poor Relief Bill -- stands in memory of the millions who suffered as a result of the nineteenth century catastrophe, many of whom starved to death or emigrated to the United States.¹ On top of the structure grows a field of native Irish grasses and shrubbery; a nineteenth century roofless cottage of imported limestone sits on one edge. Walking around the monument and through the tunnel that cuts under the grassy overhang, one will read over two miles of lyrics, poems, and accounts depicting the Irish Famine and world hunger. Through speakers inside the tunnel, recordings of Irish music and lament capture voices of the Famine that have otherwise died out. It is a remarkable piece of landscape art that encompasses various evocative media to memorialize one of the greatest tragedies in contemporary human history, what Prime Minister Lord John Russell accurately called a “thirteenth-century famine affecting a nineteenth century population.”²

¹ This bill was written by Lord William Henry Gregory, in which the “quarter acre clause” stated anyone seeking outdoor relief (food for themselves and family) had to surrender all his land save a quarter acre. See Thomas Gallagher, *Paddy’s Lament*.

² Thomas Gallagher, *Paddy’s Lament* 43. Hereafter cited parenthetically as Gallagher.

Introduction

*History may be servitude,
History may be freedom.*³

Art and poetry have played a central role in the development of culture, politics, and an Irish national identity throughout the past several centuries. Although aspects like subject matter and form have taken various turns, Irish poetry has always possessed certain attributes that make it conducive to playing a role in the public sphere and to accounting for the complex – often tragic – history of Ireland and its people. With every loss throughout Ireland’s history, poetry continues to function as a cultural record of historical trauma; as Thomas Kinsella observes, “there is support in a whole tradition, available back to the beginning.”⁴ This may help to explain why even today, over one hundred and fifty years after the Famine, contemporary poets continue to reshape the poetic tradition through a recapturing of that national trauma. If poetry can give voice to the unspeakable, its role in relation to the Famine is especially important – it speaks what other mediums cannot; it captures and evokes the emotional truths of the Famine. In this thesis, I will demonstrate how contemporary Irish poetry functions as an emotive portrayal of the history of the Irish Famine, and how the poetry accounts for aspects of the Famine that other historically accurate devices, such as maps and statistics, do not. I will draw on the work of four contemporary poets – Eavan Boland, Tony Curtis, Patrick Kavanagh, and Seamus Heaney – whose poems portray various aspects of the Famine that have otherwise remained just below the surface of an Irish national history. I will

³ For more on T.S. Eliot’s “Little Gidding,” quoted by Seamus Heaney in original introduction to *North*, see Cuda 154.

⁴ Thomas Kinsella, *The Dual Tradition* 33. Hereafter cited parenthetically as Kinsella.

then move towards demonstrating the role that these poetic accounts have played and continue to play in shaping an Irish national identity, and, (perhaps more importantly), how the poetry can work to aid in the public grieving process.

The role of poetry in Ireland has shifted over the past centuries, and those shifts are necessary for understanding how poetry functions in contemporary times. Irish poetry is a medium that encompasses history, myth, nature, religion, and culture to establish a national tradition that has transcended centuries of war, oppression, and devastation. The oral-turned-written tradition has created a “memory bank” of Irish history.⁵ The later bardic poets utilized the poem as a vehicle to record this change in tradition; they chronicled “the misery of the period ... observing their privileged world as it disappears and employing their obsolete skills in recording the new realities” (Kinsella 23).⁶ These poets attempted to account for the tragedy of their country and culture through the very art that seemed to be dying out. Mathghamhain O hIfearnain, last of the well-known bardic poets who died at the end of the sixteenth century, wrote primarily on the decline of his era of poetry. He expresses his concerns for the future of poetry in a final poem: “I ask who will buy a poem? / It holds right thoughts of scholars. / Who needs it? Will anyone take it?” (qtd. Kinsella 27).

Who will buy a poem? Who *needs* it? This turning point for the relationship between poetry and the Irish people marks the shift that would determine poetry’s role for the next four hundred years. Not only was oral tradition transforming into a written

⁵ Melissa Fegan, *Literature and the Irish Famine* 165. Hereafter cited parenthetically as Fegan.

⁶ The bardics were the dominating group of poets in Ireland from the middle ages through the sixteenth century. They underwent official schooling of the Irish poetic tradition and an occupational training that would prepare them for a life of composing and performing poetry to praise and entertain the aristocracy. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the bardic poet was considered a powerful figure in Ireland, as documented by various accounts of the time. For more on this, see R.F. Foster, *Modern Ireland* 28-30. Hereafter cited parenthetically as Foster.

tradition, but the previously ubiquitous Irish language was being displaced by the language of the British Empire, English: Irish and English, and the role and identity of the poet and poetry shifted as well. The seventeenth century marked the fall of bardic poetry because of the fall of the Irish aristocracy, and their displacement by English interlopers. In its place new poetry began to surface, “in new forms and in unprofessional voices” (Kinsella 27). The new poets were poor, sometimes homeless, and concerned primarily with the issues of ordinary people (like themselves). For them, “the pain of the times was directly in the nature of things, and not in the loss of a privileged past” (Kinsella 27). The shift of the poet from privileged to peasant is significant because it changed the composition of the poetry, the focus, and the intention. In writing and performing for the aristocracy, the bardic poets focused their poetry towards a mythic history that would entertain; they were detached from much of the Irish population and the goings-on of everyday life. It is clear why the bardic poets feared an evaporation of the poem in an Irish context; for them, the poetry served an aristocratic audience; composing and performing poetry was not just a vocation, but an occupation, for which the bardic poet was schooled and commissioned to do this work.⁷ But with the passing of the bard came a shift in poetry’s composition, subject matter, and audience. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the bardic’s fame had been replaced by poets like Antoine Raiefteiri, nicknamed “blind Raftery,” a well-known wandering poet and musician. Raftery is said to have completed the decline of Irish poetry from “a position of privilege...to that of outcast, a beggar singing to beggars” (Kinsella 46). The realm of poetry had expanded to include the peasants and the beggars, who would help move the Irish tradition onwards through the darkest time in the country’s history: the Famine.

⁷ For more on this, see Foster 28.

An Gorta Mor, translated “The Great Hunger,” descended upon the Irish with the potato blight of 1845, causing a famine “unprecedented in the history of the Western world” (Gallagher 8). Forced by union with Britain to depend solely on the potato crop, the vast majority of the Irish population – the tenant farmers - lost everything when the blight decimated Ireland’s potato crop for four consecutive years.⁸ Three quarters of the population was confined to one quarter of the land; the only crop they could grow in enough abundance to feed everyone was the potato. From 1845 to 1849, an estimated one million Irish died from starvation or Famine-related disease, while another 2 million fled their homeland to America or Australia. The horror of this period in history for the inhabitants of Ireland is unspeakable: hundreds of thousands were evicted from their homes and left to starve in ditches on the sides of the roads; parents watched children die, only to become so consumed with hunger that in some accounts they began to eat the bodies; millions severed ties with their families and homelands to board the infamous “coffin ships” to America, whose conditions were reported to be worse than African slave ships of the time.⁹ One woman, a Famine survivor, described in a handwritten memoir how the entire culture seemed to dissipate – how “sport and pastimes disappeared. Poetry, music and dancing stopped. They lost and forgot them all...the Famine killed everything” (Gallagher 27).

At the time, it must very well have seemed like the Famine killed everything. It killed bodies, minds, language, and hope. And yet, a literature continued to develop during the Famine that contributed to a national and literary identity; and the poet

⁸ About 6 million of Ireland’s population of 8 million at the time; for more, see Gallagher 29.

⁹ In Belmullet, County Cork, a woman was found next to her dead three-year-old son having gnawed the flesh of his feet and lower legs to the bone. For the detailed account, see Gallagher 113.

resurfaced as a figure of authority in Irish history.¹⁰ Kinsella claims that the poetry of nineteenth century Ireland is that of bad verse and rigid form that was not conducive to conveying an Irish feeling and identity: “it amounts, for a tradition or a ‘national’ literature, to very little” (47). While poetry certainly struggled to establish and maintain an ‘Irishness’ in the face of the Irish language’s nearly complete displacement by the English language and the wide circulation of Victorian poetic style, I disagree with Kinsella that the poetry amounts to very little in its contribution to a national literature.¹¹ The poetry that accounted for the traumatizing events of the middle nineteenth century was a poetry driven by the raw images and experiences of the vast majority of the Irish people; it was dominated by song and elegy and personal memoirs whose brutal portrayal of images and raw evocation of emotion account for a history that was not necessarily felt or portrayed by the majority of “poets” at the time.¹² A segment of literature produced during the Famine expressed an unadulterated reality whose primary concern was not politics, revenge, or blame, but an account of the experience of the trauma. It records the death of children by fever, of starving people traveling miles to dig up the nettles in church graveyards, of famine fever so debilitating it gives the living the look of the dead, and of coroners so greedy they bury the living along with the dead.¹³ The following is a passage from John Keegan’s “The Dying Mother’s Lament”:

To see my ghastly babies – my babes so meek and fair –
To see them huddled in that ditch like wild beasts in their lair;

¹⁰ Bernard O’Donoghue explores the authoritative role in-depth in “Poetry in Ireland” 177.

¹¹ Perhaps not much came of Irish poetry in the nineteenth century in a canonical sense, but that is not to say that it isn’t of literary and historical value.

¹² I choose to focus this thesis on modern/contemporary Famine poetry because it is less overtly polemical than the poetry of Mangan, Speranza, and Keegan during the Famine. For more of their works, see Fegan 172-180.

¹³ Two accounts in County Cork report of a boy buried with several corpses in a pit; only when the gravedigger’s spade broke his legs and the boy cried out was he confirmed as being alive. For the detailed account, see Gallagher 109.

Like wild beasts! No! the vixen cubs that sport on yonder hill
Lie warm this hour, and, I'll engage, of food they've had their fill.¹⁴

Keegan differed from his contemporaries in that he himself experienced the physical effects of the Famine. In 1849, one year after his poem, "To the Cholera" was published in *Cork Magazine*, Keegan died of the disease. His personal experience of the atrocities is perhaps what enabled him to take on the persona of Famine victims like that of the dying mother. This poetry of death paradoxically maintained what literary tradition Ireland had built up until the Famine, and it is precisely the same type of poetry that has resurfaced over a century later to recapture the events of the Famine that nearly wiped out Ireland.

The contemporary Irish poetry that I will examine functions as a reclaiming of history through the lens of raw experience characteristic of a segment of poetry written during the Famine. Famine history demands an account of its lived phenomena: the images, sounds, song, ceremony, tragedy, and grief. As the Irish poetic tradition continues to evolve into the twenty-first century, the role of poet evolves as well. At the turn into the twentieth century, when the agenda of the Irish Literary Revival dominated much of Irish literature, Yeats and Synge, among others, aimed to establish a modern national literature for Ireland and to reinhabit a literary identity that had gone somewhat dormant for the previous hundred years. The rise of modernism and a "revolution of the word" accounted for a creative explosion in other quarters, including the work of Joyce and Beckett. In Elmer Nolan's analysis, capitalism and nationalism offered an escape

¹⁴ For the entire poem, see Fegan 176.

“from the Famine, plague, and slaughter of the past” that could transform Irish literature into a “dream-world of modernity” (167).¹⁵

Now, in the twenty-first century, a number of Irish poets are using a variety of poetic forms to reimagine the experience of the Famine, to frame what cannot be framed in the language of prose, to bestow a revisionary voice on the wounds of collective memory, and to work that memory into the crevices of Irish national identity. This poetry explores the power of history to remain active in the present; it presents acts of “rememoration” that, in one critic’s words, “seeks transformation from the private to the public sphere, avoids internalizing notions of fate and destiny, and accepts responsibilities of the past.”¹⁶ Famine poetry is a vehicle with which to see more clearly this period in Irish history.

One poet whose work is saturated with affective resonance is Patrick Kavanagh, famous for his metaphorical invocation of the spiritual and emotional hunger haunting Irish rural existence in the century following the Famine. I will begin with a discussion of his long poem, “The Great Hunger,” and from there, I will turn to three living poets whose work revisits the Famine.

¹⁵ Many contemporary scholars and poets, of course, take issue with what they see as the inauthenticity of Revivalist literature and its immediate aftermath; I will discuss some of these critiques later in the thesis.

¹⁶ Coined by Toni Morrison, this term displays an awareness that “the act of imagination is bound up with memory.” Quoted in Kevin Whelan, “The Cultural Effects of the Famine” 152. Hereafter cited parenthetically as Whelan.

Patrick Kavanagh

Although Patrick Kavanagh did not compose a piece specifically about the Famine of 1845-1849, I feel it nonetheless necessary to include his work in a study of how Irish poetry captures aspects of the Famine that are crucial to understanding the event and its effects today. Arguably Kavanagh's most famous poem, a 756 line deconstruction of the Revivalist myth of the peasant, is appropriately titled "The Great Hunger" for its representation of the real Irish peasant's spiritual famine during the later nineteenth and early twentieth century.¹⁷ Through his rejection of "the thoroughgoing English-bred lie" of the Irish Literary Revival, Kavanagh created a break in tradition and a void in national poetry to be filled with a new sort of Irish poetry – a vernacular poetry of and for the people themselves.¹⁸ He turns inward to write of the life he knows: of the rocks, soil, parish, rain, flowers, roads, hills, and homes, while skillfully interweaving the personal with the universal, the harsh reality of the rural hills with the absurd mythic portrayal created by the Revivalists.

While some of Kavanagh's claims about Irishness and literature are admittedly extreme (e.g. his assertion that there isn't "any such thing as 'Irish' in literature"), his cynical perspective as a whole helped to shape the reality of rural Ireland in post-famine years, and this has proven to be a crucial step in acknowledging the full effects of the famine in contemporary life.¹⁹ Darcy O'Brien has argued that

¹⁷ Kavanagh published this poem in 1942, before Cecil Woodham-Smith's book on the Famine of the nineteenth century. The title most likely references the Famine, albeit indirectly, and Kavanagh has gone on record accusing Woodham-Smith of stealing the title for the later book's publication.

¹⁸ Kavanagh, *Self Portrait* 9, hereafter parenthetically cited as Kavanagh, *SP*.

¹⁹ It is important that this quote not be taken completely out of context. Kavanagh denounced the Revivalist construction of what it meant to be Irish – mainly, a pure and simple-minded peasant that lived a joyous natural life in the parish – but also addressed in various works what in his mind it meant to be Irish.

Kavanagh's work is the product of a very low, dispirited period in Irish life and literature, the sort of psychological slump that most nations emerging from colonial rule experience after the revival of the past fails and people become aware that they have to make do with the rubble left behind by the departed conqueror.²⁰

While the Protestant Ascendancy of Yeats and friends documented an imagined life of the Irish peasant, characterized by purity, natural affection, and an unyielding dedication to an otherworld, Kavanagh spent his literary career documenting the rural life he knew, and "The Great Hunger" serves powerfully to break down faulty Revivalist constructions and create in their place a space for the deromanticizing poetry that would follow. Kavanagh's existence alone mocked the mytheopic representations of the peasant in Yeats' and Synge's work; his poetry exploited it.^{21 22}

The first lines of "The Great Hunger" introduce the crucial themes of the Irish country poor that more or less determine the life of the protagonist, Paddy Maguire:

Clay is the word and clay is the flesh
Where the potato-gatherers like mechanized scarecrows move
Along the side-fall of the hill – Maguire and his men.²³

These lines capture the simultaneous degradation of Maguire and his men as well as the integral role religion plays out in this degradation. Kavanagh's comparison of the men to "mechanized scarecrows" implies a total loss of autonomy and humanity, not to mention a rustic barbarity. The first line, perhaps the most famous and recognizable of Kavanagh's, stems directly from the first and fourteenth lines of St. John's gospel: "In the

Darcy O'Brien makes the point that Joyce denounced Revivalist "Irishness" in such a way when he made the central character of *Ulysses* a Jew.

²⁰ Darcy O'Brien, *Patrick Kavanagh*, 18. Hereafter cited parenthetically as D. O'Brien, *PK*.

²¹ Often referenced in juxtaposition against Kavanagh's rural experience is Yeats' claim to attachment to the soil in "The Municipal Gallery Revisited": "John Synge, I and Augusta Gregory thought / All that we did, all that we said or sang / Must come from contact with the soil..." (D. O'Brien, *PK* 22).

²² Kavanagh grew up the total antithesis of Yeats' portrayal of the peasant. In Inniskillen in rural county Monaghan, he describes that his "childhood experience was the usual barbaric life of the Irish country poor" Kavanagh, *SP* 9.

²³ Patrick Kavanagh, *Collected Poems* 63. Hereafter cited parenthetically as Kavanagh, *CP*.

beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.”²⁴ Kavanagh’s substitution of “clay” for “word” emphasizes the role the earth plays in the peasant’s life: it is as real and important and determining as the word of God. Clay is the word, clay is the peasant’s god, clay is the law by which the folk live their lives. The god implied is a god whose creatures are the farmers of clay, and eventually made of clay themselves.

The poem contains fourteen sections and explores the various aspects that make up the peasant’s way of life in post-Famine Ireland. Kavanagh’s concern with capturing life as *he* knew it informs the stylistic elements of the poem: the colloquial meter, images stripped of sentimentality, repetition of the mundane, and an overall tone of bitter hopelessness. Thirty years of Maguire’s life pass by while not much of anything happens – a clear employment of the Joycean paralysis demonstrated in *Dubliners*.²⁵ This paralysis is echoed by Maguire’s absence of life or, rather, vitality: “Watch him, watch him, that man on a hill whose spirit / Is a wet sack flapping about the knees of time” (Kavanagh, *CP* 65). The images of emptiness, helplessness, and dehumanization flood the poem, emphasizing that Maguire’s famine – and the post-Famine Irish peasant’s famine – is actually a deprivation of intimacy, sexuality, intellect, and spirit.²⁶ This famine is never-ending, inescapable, and circular:

He was helpless. He saw his cattle
And stroked their flanks in lieu of wife to handle.
He would have changed the circle if he could,

²⁴ Quoted in Michael Allen, “Provincialism,” 18. Hereafter cited parenthetically as Allen.

²⁵ Kavanagh undoubtedly drew from Joyce for various pieces, as he admired Joyce for his antithetical approach to the Revival and listed *Ulysses* as his favorite book of all time, next to *Moby Dick*. For more on Kavanagh’s personal life, see Robert Garratt, *Modern Irish Poetry* 137.

²⁶ Kavanagh has said that “poverty is a mental condition,” and “real poverty was the lack of enlightenment to get out and get under the moon” (*SP* 10). The implication is not entirely clear as to what he means, but he certainly believes that the peasant is impoverished in ways that are worse than not owning many things; I will later look at exactly how these less tangible poverties are direct results of the Famine.

The circle that was the grass track where he ran.
 Twenty times a day he ran round the field
 And still there was no winning-post where the runner is cheered
 home. (Kavanagh, *CP* 70)

Maguire begins and ends his life cultivating relationship with animals and his farm “in lieu of wife to handle” while Kavanagh constantly compares him to an animal himself, devoid of characteristics one would deem fundamentally and essentially human.

Maguire’s greatest tragedy is that while he does claim to want to change this circular, meaningless life, he can’t: “Desperately he broke the tune / but however he tried always the same melody crept up from the background, / the dragging step of a ploughman going home...” (Kavanagh, *CP* 70). A tune, like the breath or the heartbeat or the foundation of any musical score, is the very pattern that establishes the beat of life; if Maguire cannot break the tune, there is virtually no hope for him breaking the circularity of his everyday life; hence he is helpless, and, as the poem continues, ever more hopeless.

The core of Revival thinking was that Irish poetry was in touch with some kind of deeply savage or primary Irish truth and that the Irish peasant was a metonymy for human nature. As Synge argued, “I felt that this little corner on the face of the world, and the people who live in it, have a peace and a dignity from which we are shut for ever.”²⁷ This is not only patronizing, according to Kavanagh’s work, but absolutely wrong. Paddy Maguire possesses practically nothing – especially not peace. His mother rules his house, his church rules his emotions, and the idleness of the parish as a whole leaves in him a tremendous void and sense of wasted time. This idleness is best represented in section VIII, rendered in verse that reads like a nursery rhyme:

Sitting on a wooden gate,
 Sitting on a wooden gate,

²⁷ Quoted in Edward Hirsch, “The Imaginary Irish Peasant,” 1127.

Sitting on a wooden gate,
 He didn't care a damn.
 Said whatever came into his head,
 Said whatever came into his head,
 Said whatever came into his head
 And consequently sang.
 While his world withered away,
 He had a cigarette to smoke and a pound to spend
 On drink the next Saturday. (Kavanagh, *CP* 74)

This powerful image is that of a childlike automaton: a grown man sitting on a gate, singing whatever comes into his mind, numbed to anything except smoking his cigarette and drinking (and gambling) on Saturday. It is as if rural Ireland has minimized Maguire's life to that of a boy's, who wastes it using adult pastimes: this is a tragic combination. The repetitions of the first and fifth lines reiterate the poverty and backwardness that Kavanagh establishes as the foundation of peasant poverty – the cutting-off of enlightenment. This is one of the few times in the poem that the rhyme and rhythm have a constant, specific pattern, which heightens the tension of the repetitive nature of Maguire's life with a child-like absence of autonomy and critical thought. The section ends with Maguire riding in “day-dream cars,” and finally

He locked his body with his knees
 When the gate swung too much in the breeze.
 But while he caught high ecstasies
 Life slipped between the bars. (Kavanagh, *CP* 75)

Again, the rhythm here imitates the action: the iambic tetrameter sets the movement of the gate swinging in the breeze and echoes the repetitive nature of the movement, and, by extension, Maguire's life. It is noteworthy that this stanza represents simplicity – just as the peasant poetry of the Revivalists does – but sheds a completely different light on it.

Instead of life pulsing with purity through the peasant's veins, it has "slipped between the bars" of the rural enclosures.

Dramatic cultural and religious changes in post-Famine Ireland contributed to this imprisoned sense of life. In the decades following 1850, the Irish rural population decreased substantially; the cultural formations and subsequent generations were marked by much stricter attention to religious dogma – a development known as the "devotional revolution" (Whelan 138). Pre-Famine Catholicism was considered a vernacular Catholicism: religious behavior was regulated by custom and tradition, and not so much by the strict word of the Church and thus did not require the structure that arose in post-Famine Ireland.²⁸ While the Revivalists may have regarded this newly disciplined way of religious life as a quaint feature of the Irish peasantry, Kavanagh offers an antithetical view: that the ways in which the Church plays a role in the parish and the peasant's life can have spiritually devastating effects:

Religion, the fields, and the fear of the Lord
And Ignorance giving him the coward's blow,
He dared not rise to pluck the fantasies
From the fruited Tree of Life... (Kavanagh, *CP* 70)

Religion has instilled fear in Maguire, so much fear, in fact, that he is unable to partake in any of life's pleasures – for that would be sinful. And yet, Kavanagh clearly differentiates between the Church's perception of sin and his own. He equates Religion with Ignorance, then plucking the fantasies "from the fruited Tree of Life" with the act of

²⁸ The strict religious structure that spread through even the most rural parts of Ireland in post-Famine years can be traced to the need for structure in general for the Irish people in such a time of chaos; Whelan makes an extensive argument for this on 139.

rising: to “rise” implies a positive act, while “fantasies” and “fruited” contradict the emptiness that plagues Maguire’s life.²⁹

Perhaps one of the most important fruits of Life that Maguire never picks is an intimate relationship with a wife. Instead, he takes his field for his bride and opts for lewd daydreams about schoolgirls, and masturbation over sex: “Pat opened his trousers wide over the ashes / And dreamt himself to lewd sleepiness” (Kavanagh, *CP* 72).³⁰ Alan Warner argues that the primary reason Maguire is a bachelor is because of the economic and social circumstances in post-Famine Ireland.³¹ To his argument I would add the more deep-rooted psychological/cultural aspect of Maguire’s bachelor status. As the poem goes on, Maguire gets older, but he nonetheless *waits* for life to happen to him: at the beginning of section IX, “he gave himself another year / something was bound to happen before then...and in it marriage is hung and money” (Kavanagh, *CP* 75); at the beginning of section XI, “a year passed and another hurried after it / And Patrick Maguire was still six months behind life” (Kavanagh, *CP* 78). In looking back on this pattern, Maguire “is not so sure now if his mother was right / when she praised the man who made a field his bride” (Kavanagh, *CP* 75). The climax occurs at the end of section XIII:

But the peasant in his little acres is tied
 To a mother’s womb by the wind-toughened navel-cord
 Life a goat tethered to the stump of a tree –
 He circles around and around wondering why it should be.
 No crash, No drama.
 That was how his life happened.

²⁹ Note the reference to the tree in Eden.

³⁰ In 1942, police showed up at Kavanagh’s flat after *Horizen* magazine published the poem; censorship was strict at the time, and this episode of masturbation (along with the general anti-Irish tone of the piece) slightly delayed further publication.

³¹ The land acts of the late nineteenth century left more and more peasants as owners of their own land; this, according to Warner, made marriage “a very important economic transaction, not to be entered on lightly” (51). Men might have to wait until their parents died to take over the farm, leaving them as bachelors late into middle age, and women might have to offer a substantial dowry of land and/or livestock to enter into marriage.

No mad hooves galloping in the sky,
 But the weak, washy way of true tragedy –
 A sick horse nosing around the meadow for a clean place to die.
 (Kavanagh, *CP* 86)³²

The peasant in this passage is twice compared to an animal: first a tethered goat, then a sick horse. In both cases he is imprisoned by his fields of existence and his spirit is constricted into subsistence. Life for the peasant is essentially passive, not created but undergone in whatever way happens. It is tempting at this point in the poem to ask who exactly is to blame for this dehumanized state of the Irish peasant, but I will sidestep this question by claiming that, in the end, blame is not the primary function of this piece. Instead it aims to give expression to a “hard buried life...denuded of ‘folk’ and picturesque elements, found its expression”; Kavanagh’s voice challenges dishonest portrayals of the lives of an entire people.³³

In the last three lines of the poem, Kavanagh draws in once more the echoes of the Famine in Maguire’s own famine: “The hungry fiend / Screams the apocalypse of clay / In every corner of this land” (Kavanagh, *CP* 89). The unsatisfied hunger for life turns Maguire into a fiend who associates the clay – the very substance of his body and mind – with ultimate doom. It is perhaps these lines that prompted Kavanagh to repudiate the poem years after its publication, insisting that “there are some queer and terrible things in ‘The Great Hunger,’ but it lacks the nobility and repose of poetry” (Kavanagh, *SP* 26). Kavanagh was not so much interested in using his poems as vehicles to denounce a certain politics or enforce another, although the strong overtones in this

³² “No mad hooves galloping in the sky” references Pegasus, a symbol of poetry employed by Yeats in his “Easter, 1916.”

³³ Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations* 116. Hereafter cited parenthetically as Heaney, *P*. Heaney also claims in *Preoccupations* 137 that while Kavanagh abjured the idea of Ireland as a ‘spiritual entity,’ his work touches the Irish people more immediately and intimately than does Yeats’.

piece certainly make definitive claims on aspects of religion, culture, and place. But “The Great Hunger” satisfies the hunger of a culture for authentic expression and image and remains a liberating “authoritative voice,” at least according to Seamus Heaney (Monaghan 115). This poem is packed with power because it reveals post-Famine life in the guise of a new famine: the unending deprivations of impoverished rural life.

Seamus Heaney

Seamus Heaney is arguably the best known and most respected living poet in Ireland. His work spans the second half of the twentieth century and demonstrates influences from Synge to Yeats to Joyce to Kavanagh; more crucial to his poetry, however, are his roots in a rural childhood in the North, and his inextricable ties to the natural world. In *Death of a Naturalist*, Heaney establishes his understanding of farm life, ecological consciousness and their centrality to his role as a poet. He is primarily interested in the role of the poet as an excavator, as the final lines of “Digging” express:

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it.^{34 35}

Heaney's intention is clear enough: he aims to dig with the pen into the dark and unseen world of the landscape and culture as his father and grandfather dug with the spade into the black rocky soil for the potato. Heaney sees poetry as “divination [- -], as revelation of the self to the self, as restoration of the culture to itself; poems [are] elements of continuity, with the aura and authenticity of archaeological finds, where the buried shard has an importance of the buried city; poetry [is] a dig, a dig for finds that end up being plants”(Heaney, *P* 41). The “plants” of the poet's excavations cannot be known in advance; Heaney implies that there are things in this dark, unseen world that are alive and growing, invisible to the naked eye but clear to the poet's. The hidden past is alive in the present.

³⁴ “Digging,” quite appropriately, stands as the introductory poem in Heaney's first collection. The first lines of the poem, “between my finger and my thumb / the squat pen rests; as snug as a gun” emphasize the power instilled in his pen; these coupled with the final lines emphasize that excavation can not only be powerful, but dangerous and violent; it can be both a productive and a destructive act. See Molino for an extended discussion of this aspect of the poem.

³⁵ Seamus Heaney, “Digging,” ll. 29-31, *Death of a Naturalist*. Hereafter cited parenthetically as Heaney, *DN*.

Heaney digs into explicitly historical topics in *Death of a Naturalist*, and specifically into the Famine in “At a Potato Digging” and “For the Commander of ‘the Eliza’.” The first concerns the presence of Famine history in the present day – how the soil and its digging constantly raise the living memory of the Famine years; “For the Commander of ‘the Eliza’” stages a first-person exploration into the refusal of an English officer to feed a starving boat of Irish refugees off the coast of Mayo. Both pieces provide accessible accounts of specific aspects of the Famine; Heaney weighs neither down with sentimentality or political overtones. He explains his own poetry’s inception: “words as bearers of history and mystery began to invite me” (Heaney, *P* 45), and he used this invitation to explore the history of the Famine.

“At a Potato Digging” is one of Heaney’s first excavations of Irish history; he uses the personal relationship that he’s cultivated with the land to convey an intimate portrait of the Irish landscape and its role in Famine memory. Comprised of four parts, the poem oscillates between past and present time, juxtaposing various images to convey both the similarities and differences in potato digging from Famine time to the present. The first section begins in the present, as the rhymed quatrains convey the redundant physicality associated with digging:

A mechanical digger wrecks the drill,
Spins up a dark shower of roots and mould.
Labourers swarm in behind, stoop to fill
Wicker creels. Fingers go dead in the cold.³⁶

The ominous tone and diction of these introductory lines seem to foreshadow a more threatening circumstance. The verbs “wreck...spin...swarm...stoop” imply chaos, infection, and destruction, while the adjectives “mechanical...dark...dead...cold” convey

³⁶ Heaney, “At a Potato Digging,” ll. 1-4, *DN*.

anonymity and disembodiment; the “dead fingers” draw upon the image of a grave site.

Heaney shows in the fourth stanza the source of the ominous feeling:

.....Centuries
 Of fear and homage to the famine god
 Toughen the muscles behind their humbled knees,
 Make a seasonal altar of the sod.³⁷

The Famine takes on religious connotations, demonstrating the intense strength of the reverberations it has caused through the years. Heaney composed the poem in 1966, over a hundred years after the Famine, but emphasizes that “fear and homage to the famine god” continue to determine the lives of the workers. That this fear goes so far as to “toughen the muscles” behind the knees, which work to bend at the dig but also kneel at the altar, demonstrates how the memory of famine inhabits the very body of the modern worker at the most fundamental level: through controlling the physicality of the body. The idea corresponds directly to the first lines of Kavanagh’s poem: “Clay is the word and *clay is the flesh*.”³⁸

Heaney’s exploration of the Famine’s resonance in the landscape continues in the second section while breaking apart the rhythmic and tightly structured stanzas of the first. The speaker shifts focus from the laborers to the potato, describing the tubers as “the petrified hearts of drills” that “show white as cream” (ll. 22-23). The first description signifies further the attachment of man to field, of the organic to inorganic; the use of the word “petrified” addresses the notion of a history being preserved through

³⁷ Heaney, “At a Potato Digging,” ll. 13-16, *DN*.

³⁸ See Kavanagh *Collected Poems* 75.

time.³⁹ The final stanza in the section further establishes the importance of the land to the people, as the speaker sets the scene of a birth:

The rough bark of humus erupts
knots of potatoes (a clean birth)
whose solid feel, whose wet insides
promise taste of ground and root.⁴⁰

The potato is fleshy and its excavation sacred; mother Earth, previously referred to as the “black / Mother” (ll. 11-12) in the first section, is acknowledged as a “rough bark of humus” that nourishes and births the food that provides sustenance for life. Heaney is especially skilled at personification, and the associative rhyme between the fertile Earth and a “clean birth” demonstrates the essential qualities of the Mother and the significance of the relationship between human and earth. Through his address of this relationship, Heaney draws on a crucial aspect of national identity: the relationship the Irish people have (had) with the earth.

In the third section, Heaney delves into the Famine years by imagining a reality of hunger and horror. The chiasmus between sections II and III establishes a connection between the excavated potatoes “to be piled in pits; live skulls, blind-eyed” and the starving people of 1845, “Live skulls, blind-eyed, balanced on / wild higgledy skeletons” (ll. 29-30). The potatoes and the people have the same fate: both came from the Earth, and both will be piled back into it.⁴¹ Heaney uses the oxymoronic function of “live

³⁹ “Petrified” in scientific terms refers to organic material that has been converted to fossilized, stony form and preserved for hundreds, sometimes thousands of years. Reference to “petrified hearts” also establishes a connection between the landscape and the human body, to be further explored in the following stanza.

⁴⁰ Heaney, “At a Potato Digging,” ll. 25-28, *DN*.

⁴¹ The overwhelming numbers of dying people during the Famine years caused a total breakdown of the ritualistic funeral and burying system. As hundreds of thousands collapsed in the streets, fields, the crumbles of their huts, many were collected and buried in mass graves, referred to by the people as “the pits.” A “pit” was open for about four days, during which families would toss their dead in with the other bodies. For more on this see Gallagher 110.

skulls” to emphasize the duality of life and death present in the Famine victims, furthering the description in the third stanza:

Mouths tightened in, eyes died hard,
 Faces chilled to a plucked bird.
 In a million wicker huts,
 Beaks of famine snipped at guts.⁴²

Their faces are masks of starvation, famine fever, typhoid, dysentery, and the other diseases that plagued the people of the time.⁴³ This cluster of images is the most powerful of the poem: the violence Heaney employs emphasizes the murderousness of Famine. The “chilled” faces echo the first image of the “dead fingers” in the cold; that they have been plucked emphasizes the torturous effect of famine and intensifies the idea that the victims have been plucked naked of essential comforts. The last line implies that the Famine itself is some sort of bird as well; Heaney’s use of the bird to represent both victim and tormentor emphasizes total embodiment: Famine is the Irishman and the Irishman is the Famine. The different meters also capture two distinct tones. Heaney switches mid-stanza from a primarily spondaic line of stresses to a more rhythmic trochaic meter; the effect is a hardened, slower rhythm that draws attention to the horrific faces of the victims followed by a faster rhythm that resembles the regularity of a nursery rhyme.

⁴² Heaney, “At a Potato Digging,” ll. 38-41, *DN*.

⁴³ Malnutrition and lack of sanitation caused various deadly diseases to manifest and spread rapidly, including scurvy, famine dropsy, and typhus. Scurvy, caused by a deficiency of vitamin C, causes a painful deterioration of the mouth that often ended in hemorrhaging, as well as deterioration of the organs. Famine dropsy began as a swelling in the lower legs, eventually working its way up until the body was completely waterlogged and the legs burst open from the pressure; Gallagher reports seeing a person burst open like this into a puddles of their own fluids was to experience “something like the end of comprehension” (58). Typhus, the most deadly and contagious of the diseases, left the victim with a yellowish, sunken-in face and bulging eyes and put the victim through a substantial amount of suffering before it took one’s life.

As Heaney jumps ahead to the present in the final lines, famine is no longer prevalent, but nonetheless alive in memory. Heaney references the continued memory of the stinking potatoes and stinking pits in the last line of the third section: “where potato diggers are, / you still smell the running sore” (ll. 48-49). The rhythm slows once again when “the rhythm deadens, the workers stop” to lead into the final scene:

Down in the ditch and take their fill,
Thankfully breaking timeless fasts;
Then, stretched on the faithless ground, spill
Libations of cold tea, scatter crusts.⁴⁴

These final lines are religiously charged and have what Eugene O’Brien calls an unresolved quality – “as if the image of the famine victims is an imaginative flashback, caused by associations of land and history” (14). These associations have become so engrained in the poem’s subjects that they act out their food break in a sacred way. The spilled libations of cold tea and scattered crusts work as sacrificial offerings to the previously introduced “famine god”; such is the strength with which the Famine lives on in the land and the memory.

“At A Potato Digging” certainly functions as a work that demonstrates Famine as a “running sore” that a century later has yet to mend and that the Irish Literary Revival did little to capture. This poem contains three key images that work together: the rotten potatoes themselves, the sores of the dead and dying, and the running sore of history. Unlike various Irish poets before him, Heaney is primarily interested in restoring what lies “hidden, neglected, or suppressed,” and he functions as somewhat of a spokesperson for certain aspects of Irish history (Andrews 2). In the second poem in *Death of a Naturalist* that concerns the Famine, Heaney transforms the prose of Cecil Woodham-

⁴⁴ Heaney, “At a Potato Digging,” ll. 54-57, *DN*.

Smith into a poetic account of an historically accurate scene: that of an officer in charge of inspecting boats off the coast of West Mayo during the Famine years. “For The Commander of ‘The Eliza’” captures the complicated tension between the ethics of being a human being and those of carrying out one’s duty, and it elaborates the crucial difference between the two in the context of the Famine.

Heaney draws directly from “The Great Hunger” in an episode that reveals the Famine’s various complications, one of which is the blatant breach of a fundamental human ethics. On June 22, 1846, an officer spotted 6 starving men in a rowboat approaching the relief ship *Eliza* in the remote Killeries district of Mayo and refused them food based on an order from British command.⁴⁵ The poem begins with a steady meter and objective tone but is soon disrupted by the speaker’s astonishment at the sight of the men:

I was conjecturing when, O my sweet Christ,
We saw piled in the bottom of their craft
Six grown men with gaping mouths and eyes
Bursting the sockets like spring onions in drills.^{46 47}

The interjection “O my sweet Christ” breaks the formality of language that precedes it; the change expresses a result of the speaker’s horror of the scene – a horror that formality of language and order cannot overcome. The tenth line introduces the vulgarity and violence of the men’s appearance: their eyes are the skewered onions, and a few lines

⁴⁵ The following is the specific passage that is the poem’s epigraph: “One man, stated the officer in command, was lying on the bottom of the boat, unable to stand and already half-dead, the others, with emaciated faces and prominent, staring eyeballs, were evidently in an advanced state of starvation. The officer in charge reported the incident to Sir James Dombain, the Inspector General . . . and Sir James “very inconveniently,” wrote Routh, “interfered.” For more on this, see Cecil Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger* 85. Hereafter cited parenthetically as Woodham-Smith.

⁴⁶ Heaney, “For the Commander of ‘the Eliza’,” ll. 6-10, *DN*.

⁴⁷ The “spring onions in drills” draw directly back to Heaney’s description of the mechanical digger in “At a Potato Digging”; the reference to “starving gulls” a few lines later also reference the “plucked bird” qualities of Famine victims in the previous poem.

later, they are the desperate animals whose “whines and snarls” rise and fall “like a flock of starving gulls” (ll. 12-13). It is noteworthy that the tone here is not that of condescension, as are the comparisons of men to animals in Kavanagh’s work, but one of awe, much of which can be explained by the speaker’s claim that “We’d known about the shortage but on board / They always kept us right with flour and beef” (ll. 14-15).

Heaney is exploring a part of Famine history that goes unaddressed in virtually any other Famine poetry: the role of propaganda in hiding the truth from English officers who perhaps would have felt sorrow and remorse for their country’s acts committed against the starving Irish people.

The officer has no mandate to relieve distress, though the scene of “those living skulls” disrupts his conscience. There is a clear tonal shift halfway through the poem, when we realize that the ultimate course of action the speaker chooses is that of avoiding the conflict:

When they drove at me with their starboard oar
 (Risking capsizе themselves) I saw they were
 Violent and without hope. I hoisted
 And cleared off. Less incidents the better.⁴⁸

These lines imply that the speaker recognizes the desperation of the situation, that the starving men are so close to death that they risk it with the miniscule chance of obtaining a bite of something to eat. And yet, I do not think that the speaker leaves the scene in apathy: the decreasing length of sentences and the increasing instances of stressed syllables leading to these lines imply a deep disturbance within the speaker at what he sees: he seems to brush the men off *as a result* of his essentially human conscience. The immediate human reaction to devastation is to block it out – and then immediately justify

⁴⁸ Heaney, “For the Commander of ‘the Eliza’,” ll. 22-25, *DN*.

one's own bad faith. The speaker consciously dehumanizes the starving men throughout the poem; they are, after all, visibly nearly inhuman – “violent and without hope” – so the captain acts inhumanly towards them.

By the next day, the speaker's feelings towards the men have gone from pity to apathy to annoyance at the “six bad smells” in the boat. He reports the sighting to the Inspector General, Sir James Dombain, who urges “free relief / For famine victims in the Westport Sector” (ll. 30-31). Although the situation is out of the speaker's hands after he reports it, he still seems to side with “good Whitehall” in terms of policy of how to handle Famine victims in general:

Let natives prosper by their own exertions;
 who could not swim might go ahead and sink.
 “The Coast Guard with their zeal and activity
 are too lavish” were the words, I think.⁴⁹

These last lines draw upon one of the (most absurd) mainstays of the English perception of the Irish: that the Irish are, in fact, an inferior race, and whatever comes upon them is either a determination of Divine Providence or a result of their own inferiority.⁵⁰ Before and during the Famine, English periodicals such as *The Times*, *Punch*, and the *London Specator* published scathing remarks degrading the Irishman in relation to the English, and going so far as to associate the Celt's condition with the laws of nature. In 1846, for example, the *Times* opined that “We do not doubt that, by the inscrutable but invariable laws of nature, the Celt is less energetic, less independent, less industrious than the

⁴⁹ Heaney, “For the Commander of ‘the Eliza’,” ll. 27-31, *DN*.

⁵⁰ What's more, it wasn't just the general press that emphasized this view of the Irish. Many scholars viewed the Famine as a god-sent solution to the Irish problem. One such exchange that took place between Oxford professor Nassau Senior wrote of having “always felt a certain horror of political economists, since I heard one of them say that he feared the famine...in Ireland would not kill more than a million people, and that would scarcely be enough to do any good” (Gallagher 85).

Saxon. This is the archaic condition of his race.” Meanwhile, *Punch* sardonically suggested that

Different nations have different representatives, derived from the animal creation. There is the British Lion, the Austrian Eagle, the Gallic Cock. The emblem of Ireland ought to be the Hyaenna, the creature – according to Wombwell’s natural history – ‘wot kindness cannot conciliate, nor hunger tame.’ (qtd. Gallagher 70-71)

Such things were written and accepted despite simultaneous depictions in the press of the detrimental effects of famine spread across the nation.⁵¹ The situation invites the question: how could a famine so widespread in a country under the rule of the most developed and powerful empire in the nineteenth century world be so mocked, and even justified?

I cannot offer a scholarly answer for this just yet, but I can say that it is the human condition to struggle with taking responsibility for one’s actions, and it is a political necessity for a nation to struggle with taking responsibility for its government’s actions. Abiding by a code of ethics based in the Levinasian concept of seeing the other – of recognizing oneself in the other – precedes any acceptance of singular responsibility and national responsibility. In the final lines of “For the Commander of ‘the Eliza,’” we see that the speaker and the other officials in the poem relegate the other – in this case the starving Irish – into a category that might be called “the unworthy”: “Let natives prosper by their own exertions; / who could not swim might go ahead and sink.” The Englishman’s dismissal of the victims as a breed of human distinct from himself demonstrates the underlying philosophy of the Famine and a breach in ethical code. I will look further into this concept in the following section, in which I draw upon Tony Curtis’s “From a Famine Journal.”

⁵¹ For further explanation of this phenomenon, see Gallagher 71.

Tony Curtis

Tony Curtis, a contemporary poet whose work has not received the scholarly attention of the other works in this thesis, has authored six collections of poetry over the past twenty years; in his latest collection, Curtis presents the sonnet sequence, “From a Famine Journal,” in which he works to capture the progression of the Famine in Western Ireland between the years 1845-1851 through an Anglo-Irish female speaker.

The most notable characteristic of Curtis’s poem is its sequential format: the sonnet sequence sets not only a frame for the narrative, but an inherently didactic tone. The form’s history of use holds significant implications for the purpose of the content.⁵² The sonnet form, historically, has served many purposes: a note to a lover, a struggle to understand the self, landscape description, philosophizing, and a vehicle of political agitation.⁵³ The sequence, also referred to as the sonnet cycle, can be defined as “a collection of poems, dominantly sonnets, linked together intentionally by something other than single authorship” (Spiller 16). In Curtis’s poem, the ten sonnets are linked by title, form, and content, and the form supports the main purpose of such a sequential construction. Each part works to convey a different perspective on specific Famine events, and the parts as a whole offer a multi-dimensional look into the hierarchy of Ireland at the time. As Spiller writes of the formal purpose of the sonnet sequence:

“it has always been associated with, and used for, the registration
Of [- -] *mood* – a word etymologically close to *mode* in both
general and musical senses. Expressing human moods

⁵² The sonnet sequence is known to have first originated in thirteenth century Italy in the form of argumentative exchanges among various writers. For the complete history, see Michael Spiller, *The Sonnet Sequence* 2-10. Hereafter cited parenthetically as Spiller.

⁵³ For more on detailed historical uses, see Spiller 3.

or (as the Renaissance would have called them) *passions* and tracing their connection with identity and self-construction has always been one of the functions of literature and particularly of certain genres within it.” (31)

As I will discuss, the mood of Curtis’ sonnet sequence is subtle, and the identity and self-construction of the piece concerns a public account within an imagined private one.

Curtis also deviates from strict sonnet form frequently; these characteristics, however work together to produce a prime example of the poetic imagination that is necessary to recapturing Famine history.⁵⁴

“From a Famine Journal” consists of ten sonnets, the last nine of which are a composition of an imagined journal kept by a woman of the Ascendancy during the Famine. The first sonnet in the sequence introduces the topic of Famine with a docket of exports leaving Cork Harbor in November of 1848, including

147 bales of bacon
120 casks of pork
135 barrels of pork
149 casks of miscellaneous provisions...^{55 56}

Similar to Eavan Boland’s approach in “That the Science of Cartography is Limited,” a poem to which I will turn shortly, Curtis begins with a scientifically objective structure and tone, but moves by the end of the section into a more poetic one as the speaker watches the ship “sail into a hungry wind” (Curtis 69). The speaker at this point is an anonymous narrator who introduces the next 9 sonnets, the imaginary journal of Mrs.

⁵⁴ The classic sonnet follows the form of 14 lines of iambic pentameter, composed of one octave and one sestet that involves a clear thematic or formal turn in the ninth line and some sort of conclusion at the end of the sestet. Curtis does not follow iambic pentameter and the stanzas vary between 13-15 lines; the sonnet form is clear, however – especially in the thematic changes and subtly didactic conclusions in each.

⁵⁵ Curtis, Tony, “From a Famine Journal,” *The Well in the Rain* 69. Hereafter cited parenthetically as Curtis.

⁵⁶ One of the doctrines of England’s political economy was that “there must be no interference with the natural course of trade.” In the first bad winter of the famine (1846-47), while 400,000 people were starving in Ireland, a reported seventeen million pounds sterling worth of food was exported from Irish ports; this was more than twice the amount needed to feed the 6 million men, women and children who made up the farm-laborer and tenant-farmer population at the time. For more on this, Gallagher 39-40.

Elizabeth Wyatt, residing in a Big House somewhere in the vicinity of Dublin in the year 1845.

Curtis establishes the uniformity of the sonnets through a chronological sequence of years, labeling each by number, and granting each a title. A unique element of the sonnet sequence is the establishment of simultaneous individual meanings (each sonnet can stand alone) and its meaning as a collective work.⁵⁷ By titling each sonnet, Curtis designates each as a separate chapter. In “First Impression,” the narrator introduces Mrs. Wyatt, who writes about a party in her journal:

We ate raised pies and ham, and apple tarts
with cream, Drank China tea all evening
from Mrs. White’s white China cups.
This potato famine is greatly exaggerated.
In Dublin the Polka is all the rage. (Curtis 70)

Curtis oscillates between four and five stress lines, emphasizing his use of the sonnet form. The list establishes a sense of the abundances in the speaker’s life and, more broadly, the lives of the Anglo-Irish who lived in the Big Houses at the time. In 1845, the Famine was just starting, and only affecting the very lowest rural classes. Life in the Big House was polished and pristine, evoked by the repeated use of “white” in these lines.⁵⁸

Over the next few sonnets, two years pass, and the speaker’s life and perspective change significantly; Curtis continues, however, to unify the parts through formal aspects. The speaker understands the Irish to be “idle, impudent louts / dependent on those whom they so badly abuse” (Curtis 71) while continuing to see her world through a

⁵⁷ Spiller uses the analogy of a photo album to describe this effect: each sonnet, like each photo in an album, has individual meaning, but the sequence as a whole – like a photo album as a whole – has a meaning unto itself as well.

⁵⁸ In the line that precedes this selection, the speaker remarks: “is there / anything so beautiful as delicate white hands?”

skewed perspective. She goes so far as to romanticize a scene of hungry workers eating soup on her estate in the concluding lines of the third section:

And the servants make a large pot of soup
Which we serve each day at one.
Yesterday, I thought it such a pretty sight
To see everyone eating in the kitchen. (Curtis 71)⁵⁹

The year is 1846, and at this point Curtis begins to establish a parallel between the increasing intensity of the Famine and the progression of the speaker's consciousness of suffering. In the fourth section, "Wasted Misery," the tone shifts from a somewhat blissful ignorance to wretched realization. Mrs. Wyatt witnesses some of the worst aspects of Famine:

Beyond the estate is a waste of misery.
There aren't the living to bury the dead.
I have watched them die in the ditches.
Seen them kneel down to curse their God. (Curtis 72)

The clear shift in syntax - from flowing sentences in the previous three sections to fragmented clips of thought and image in the fourth - demonstrates a shift in understanding on behalf of the speaker; this also, however, works to demonstrate how separate the speaker is from her surroundings. The misery is *beyond* the estate; the speaker has *watched* them die and played no active role in helping the situation. She doesn't seem to fully understand the implications of these miseries: most notably, the way they "curse their God." For Irish Catholics, to curse their God implies a total loss of hope - an element of suffering I will discuss presently.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ This scene draws on the image of a larger one of its kind that took place during Famine years. On April 5, 1847, the soup kitchens called for by the revised Poor Relief Bill and headed by famous chef Monsieur Soyer of the Reform Club in London opened to feed the extremely destitute. For the price of five shillings, the gentry could have the privilege of watching the poor eat - an experience they reportedly enjoyed, described further in Gallagher 97.

⁶⁰ The issue of suicide is an interesting one to contemplate in Famine Ireland. Suicide was by no means prevalent, despite the intense physical and emotional suffering, and this begs the question: why? Gallagher

From the fourth to tenth sections, Curtis employs a clear turn at the end of each sonnet that not only emphasizes the solipsism of the speaker, but establishes a link from one section to the next. The last statement of each sonnet always concerns the speaker's judgment or action: in the fourth, she knits petticoats for the wretched; in the fifth, she asserts (concerning the field from which the Irish steal) that "even I wouldn't be found in the fields at night" (Curtis 73); in the seventh, the Famine has "again ruined Christmas / for everyone" (Curtis 75). The events around the speaker are present but distant: the more they affect her own livelihood, the worse they are. From the speaker's point of view, this sonnet sequence entirely concerns the private self – it acts as a vehicle through which the speaker can work through a traumatic time. On the other hand, I think that this sequence's primary function is to demonstrate two key complications of the Famine: the refusal of the speaker's Anglo-Irish class to acknowledge the inhumane effects taking place outside their estates (but still within their nation), and the breakdown of an economy that has, until this point, constructed the Anglo-Irish lifestyle and identity.

I have discussed the diarist's staging of separation between herself and the starving poor in the romanticized scene of hungry servants eating soup together around her table; the next cluster of events for which the speaker places herself in an aloof position appears in the ninth sonnet, "Victoria Visits." The year is 1849, and Mrs. Wyatt "steel[s] [her]self" and goes "to see the young Queen promenade" (Curtis 77). The speaker is preoccupied with Queen Victoria's appearance in such a way that demonstrates a deep psychological shift: she seems to criticize for the sake of criticizing, and does so in spite of the general warm welcome given to the Queen by the people of Dublin:

asserts that, while the sick and starving Irish often begged for death, they resisted suicide in the belief that it would lead to eternal damnation.

[M]y day was spoilt by torrential rain,
 But I was more distressed to see her grown so fat.
 Her dress was far too plain, her skin almost dark.
 Though the papers have her down as beautiful. (Curtis 77)

The papers did, in fact, report the Queen as looking kind and beautiful in her visit to Dublin during the first week of August. Despite all odds, the Irish people – haggard and starving – seemed to take a liking to the Queen, and a substantial crowd was present for her arrival.⁶¹ That the speaker belittles the Queen signifies two things: she remains naive of the misery she once observed around her, and famine has started to eat away at her directly. The end of the section supports both positions:

On the way home we passed a family of five
 dead in a ditch. It seems cholera is spreading
 towards the mountains. But worse news was awaiting
 Our arrival, the blight has appeared on our potatoes. (Curtis 77)

Of the three pieces of information the speaker gathers en route home – a family dead, cholera spreading, blight on her potatoes – she lists the worst as the Famine finally reaching her estate. This thread of division between the speaker’s way of life and that of the majority of Ireland’s runs so deep that the sight of five dead people on the side of the road has little effect; she consistently fails to recognize the particularity of the suffering of others. The sight of the blight infecting her previously “floury and dry” potatoes, however, is the “worse news.”

The profound disconnect between the inhabitants of the Big Houses and the rest of the Irish population leads to significantly differing Famine experiences; while both are traumatic, the extent of the speaker’s trauma culminates in leaving Ireland – as opposed to that of the sick and starving, whose intense suffering is so far removed from the world of the speaker she can in no way imagine how comparably well-off she is. The tenth

⁶¹ For more on this event, see Woodham-Smith 398.

sonnet in Curtis's sequence, "New Australians," concludes Mrs. Wyatt's famine journal when she and her husband dock in Australia: "We docked last week in Sydney after eight months / at sea and left a ship I had grown to abhor" (Curtis 78).⁶² On the voyage, the speaker experiences genuine hardship first hand for more or less the first time: her friends die, she gives up her modesty, surrenders her youth. Upon arrival,

After a life of such worry, it's a great relief to be opening
a hotel in the city for respectable ladies and gents
or as Charles says, "The new Australians like ourselves." (Curtis 78)

Mrs. Wyatt is quick to relinquish her Irish identity: for it has now been tainted by "five wretched years of misery" (Curtis 78). A closer look at the poem as a whole, however, invites a more critical look at the structural breakdown within that "wretched misery" that forces the speaker to uproot and emigrate to Australia. Each sonnet in the sequence offers a perspective on some aspect of the speaker's daily life and how it changes as a result of the Famine's progression. Mrs. Wyatt does not understand that she is part of the people of a nation being affected until the blight shows up on her potatoes. She fails to recognize the structure that has supported her lifestyle and isolation in the Big House for so many years – a structure so strong and so embedded in national history that only the magnitude of the Famine has broken it down. The Famine destroys the peasant class that has made Mrs. Wyatt's existence possible, and therefore with the destruction of the peasantry comes the destruction of Mrs. Wyatt's very identity. With no one to rule over or dominate, how can there be a ruling class? The Famine forces Mrs. Wyatt and company to abandon her used-up nation in favor of a new one where there is "nearness in

⁶² The vast majority of Famine emigrants bought passage to Canada and the United States. Emigration to Australia, in terms of numbers, was negligible; passage was expensive, anti-Irish sentiment in Australia rather high, and no Irish community had yet to settle enough to send for relatives. See Woodham-Smith 206.

the sun's heat" and she can begin to build a new identity, this time as a member of the middle class. What Curtis shows us, in short, is the Famine's evisceration of both the rural Irish and their overlords through the perspective of a member of that crumbling class. I will look further into Famine poetry's multiple perspectives in the next section, where I discuss Eavan Boland's powerful accounts of the Famine delivered through speakers from various classes and backgrounds.

Eavan Boland

The ways in which the Famine unfolded into every aspect of Irish life demands a space in which selected elements of history can be accounted for all at once. Image works with sound and rhythm and metaphor to capture, simultaneously, image and sound and rhythm and metaphor of the Famine years. Eavan Boland's poetry, much like that of Seamus Heaney's, is marked by its straightforward use of imagery and nature, as well as an accessibility and absence of sentimentality in the face of the most tragic and emotional topics. This absence is crucial in accounting for those aspects of the Famine that demand utter honesty. Boland uses the craft of poetry to convey episodes of the Famine's human costs; she starts by creating her own map of the roads built during the Famine in "That the Science of Cartography is Limited":

-- and not simply by the fact that this shading of
Forest cannot show the fragrance of balsam,
the gloom of cypresses
Is what I wish to prove.⁶³

Boland uses the discourse of logic and the structure of a philosophical argument to emphasize that these famine roads *are* real, even though they don't exist on modern day maps. In a philosophical essay one must state what one intends to prove, set up logical, true premises, and then link those premises together to come to a valid conclusion. This poem simultaneously uses structure of the philosophical argument and the science of poetry to construct "what I wish to prove." Cartography's claims to scientific accuracy are limited, precisely because they cannot map the "fragrance of balsam, / the gloom of

⁶³ Eavan Boland, "That the Science of Cartography is Limited" ll. 1-4, *New Collected Poems*. Hereafter cited parenthetically as Boland, *NCP*.

cypresses” or “the line which says woodland and cries hunger”; poetry is the science that can map these things, as Boland demonstrates in the lines to follow.

The “famine roads,” as they came to be known, were a direct result of a Bill introduced by Sir Robert Peel in March 1846 to ameliorate the issue of unemployment in famine Ireland. The bill sought to set up various public work projects that would employ eligible men and pay them a small sum for their service that they could then, theoretically, use to buy food for their starving families. While the administration of this Act was to be put under the Irish Board of Works, it was soon taken over by Lord Charles Trevelyan, who claimed that the Board of Treasury, of which he was the head, had total power over the Board of Works and their projects. He went on to declare that all works were “not likely to be called for from any motive but the professed one of giving employment”; in other words, they were to be void of any practical use for the Irish.^{64 65} These rough roads that lead nowhere may still be discerned in the west of Ireland even today, and the end of the road may be literally the place where the last of the workers on that force dropped dead of starvation or fever.

Boland’s poem is a mapping of these roads: of things that aren’t there, that still in the end “will not be there” on the maps that fill books and hang in classrooms. The very roads that aren’t there are what create the poem; the presence of their absence serves as the framework. Boland supplements the use of a contemporary map of her island by introducing the aspects of a map that still do not account for the public works of 1847. In spite of the near technical perfection of cartography, it is a science that produces

⁶⁴ Quoted in Woodham-Smith 79.

⁶⁵ Despite a widespread belief that the Irish were an inferior race, the English government found it nonetheless necessary to create laws that would prevent them from prospering (which is interesting, because it implies a complete contradiction of the innate inferiority belief). Even when the country was starving to death, Trevelyan ordered that public works projects could not benefit the individual in any way.

the masterful, the apt rendering of
the spherical as flat[- -]

the line which says woodland and cries hunger
and gives out among sweet pines and cypress
and finds no horizon

will not be there. (ll. 19-28)

The shift from mathematical language – the language of the – to a more descriptive, emotive language demonstrates how Boland’s poem, and poetry more generally, accounts for truths that transcend the empirical. The compounded structure of the last sentence not only represents the end to a proof – the building of one statement on top of the next – but also evokes an overwhelming sensation; the map records not only one aspect of history, but many at once. She emphasizes that the “line” on the map has a voice that is not accounted for: it “says woodland and cries hunger,” but the map silences the cry through a lack of representation. Boland also introduces the landscape as she did in the first stanza, emphasizing the environment and the smells of Ireland for which the map also does not account. Ultimately, the line “finds no horizon,” expressing a sense of indefinite directionlessness. Indeed, today the roads continue, however faintly, to carve out the Irish landscape with no direction. Boland’s construction of this poem as a map brings into existence those historical significances, those roads and all they stand for in the course of history and their transcendence through one hundred and fifty years of neglect.

In her essay entitled “A Question,” Boland states that the writing of this poem was a “crisscrossing of memory and decision and private history” that marked for her a sense of empowerment.⁶⁶ Those who create maps are synonymous with those who create

⁶⁶ Eavan Boland, “A Question,” *The Literary Review*, n. pag. Hereafter cited parenthetically as Boland, “A Question.”

history – who decide what should and shouldn't be remembered or documented. Boland explains that there were no maps in her house growing up, and those she did see in the English convent classroom she attended throughout her childhood bore no marks of the famine roads of 1847. This poem's structure, its content, its voice are part of "a small diagram of an argument most poets enter at some stage or another: who makes the destination, who marks the way, where is authority, and who will contest it" (Boland, "A Question"). Boland contests exactly what her English schoolteachers were staying silent about – by registering in verse these roads "so powerful in their meaning and so powerless at their origin" (Boland, "A Question").

One might say that Boland's famine poems serve as maps of human suffering, and also, perhaps surprisingly, of love. One of her earliest works, "The Famine Road," may be one of her most complicated and provocative, as she compares infertility in a woman to the function of a famine road. Boland first documents the words of Lord Trevelyan, who calls the Irish "idle as trout in light" and instructs the Relief Committee to "give them no coins at all."⁶⁷ And so the committee deliberates, and give them "roads to force / from nowhere, going nowhere of course" (ll. 7-8). Boland opens the poem as the narrator of strict facts – the words from the letters exchanged between leaders during the public works projects of the Famine. She acts as an objective story-teller before seamlessly moving into mapping the rest of the story.

⁶⁷ Eavan Boland, "The Famine Road," ll. 1-2, *NCP*.

In the second stanza of “The Famine Road,” the speaker is a doctor addressing a woman unable to have children, and making assumptions about her worth just as the English officials do in the first stanza in judgment of the starving Irish:⁶⁸

‘..... Trevelyn’s
 seal bloodied the deal table. The Relief
 Committee deliberated: ‘Might it be safe,
 Colonel, to give them roads, roads to force
 from nowhere, going nowhere of course?’

*‘one out of every ten and then
 another third of those again
 women – in a case like yours.’ (ll. 3-10)*

The dehumanizing tone has many purposes: it immediately aligns the insensitive doctor with Lord Trevelyan, introduces the primary agency of the poem (and thus the situations of woman and famine roads), and builds to the stark contrasts of voice that take place in the third stanza, the one in which Boland takes over as speaker:

Sick, directionless they worked; fork, stick
 were iron years away; after all could
 they not blood their knuckles on rock, suck
 April hailstones for water and for food?
 Why for that, cunning as housewives, each eyed –
 as if at a corner butcher – the other’s buttock. (ll. 11-16)

This is a clear example of what Boland insists is a moment of becoming a poet, when “she undertakes not just the public part of her private self but puts together the outward and the inward...a release and a help and a commitment for a woman.”⁶⁹ Boland addresses two major issues here: history and womanhood. She uses her agency as a poet to show, in this poem, the tragedy and uselessness of the famine roads. By setting up a parallel between a barren woman’s purpose (or lack thereof) and the famine roads’ barren

⁶⁸ In an interview conducted by Marilyn Reizbaum, Boland reveals the difficult and complicated fusion that takes place between living as a woman and living as a poet, and although she claims that this took many years, her growth shows in the understanding of both personas in this poem.

⁶⁹ Eavan Boland and Marilyn Reizbaum, “An Interview with Eavan Boland,” 472. Hereafter Cited Parenthetically as Boland and Reizbaum.

purpose, Boland shows that while an objective, scientific perception would render each meaningless, a more compassionate and historically rooted approach offers a different perspective.⁷⁰

And yet, as the poem progresses, she shows that neither the famine roads nor an infertile woman are useless. It is the individual who holds the viewpoint that determines the meaning. This is to say that while Trevelyan may see the Irish as idle, Boland sees them as “sick, directionless” individuals (l. 11) who “suck / April hailstones for water and for food” (ll. 13-14). They could not help their condition, their starvation. And as they died, the roads ended – barren, fruitless, “going nowhere of course” (l. 7) just as the poem’s woman “never will” bear any child. She is forever “barren, never to know the load of this child” (ll. 36-37) in her womb – which is how Boland also comments on the brutal irony of these parallel situations.

In the third stanza of the infertility metaphor, the doctor instructs the woman to “grow / your garden, keep house” (ll. 27-28) as compensation for her own infertile womb. And yet, there is no garden to grow from a barren ground, a sterile womb; no meaning in a house to keep when that house is empty of a family. The tone of this speaker is, once again, distant and cold. Just as the tone of Lord Trevelyan and Colonel Jones rhymes with this medical one, the irony of their words and viewpoints rhyme those of the doctor’s as well. They create the famine roads as a project that demands those who have no strength to build roads that have no destination, all the while the “sedition, idleness, cured / in one” (ll. 30-31), claims Colonel Jones. This speaker talks as if death through overwork, illness, and starvation is a cure for the morally-corrupt identities of the

⁷⁰ This is to say that historically, the primary purpose of woman has been to reproduce, and the primary purpose of a road is to take one to a destination.

Irish people. Through quoting historical oppressors, Boland addresses the role of racism in the Famine and the system of blame that oscillates between God and the English government. Periodicals such as *The Times*, *The London Spectator*, and *Punch* published and circulated throughout England during the Famine years enforced the racist view that “by the inscrutable but invariable laws of nature, the Celt is less energetic, less independent, less industrious than the Saxon” (Gallagher 70). Boland *addresses* these issues, but in a subtle and ironically indirect way, so that while it certainly has political overtones, the authenticity of the poem is not compromised.

One of the extraordinary aspects of Boland’s technique in this poem, as well as her other Famine poetry, is the absence of sentimentality. There is no romanticizing the sick, the dying – no casting out of excess emotion towards this, one of the most tragic times in history for the Irish people. There are certain ethical standards to which Boland refers when writing poetry about any Irish history: standards that give the poet an “ethical obligation to de- and re-construct those constructs that shape literary tradition, bearing witness to the truths of experience suppressed, simplified, falsified by the ‘official’ record.”⁷¹ In “Quarantine,” just as Boland sets out to map the famine roads in a way that a cartographer cannot, she accounts for the sufferings of individuals during the Famine in a way only poetry can.

In “Quarantine,” Boland structures her five stanzas into specific patterns, immediately displaying the look of an act of quarantine. The poem describes a man and a woman, sick with famine fever, who leave their home in the winter of 1847 and are found

⁷¹ Patricia Hagen and Thomas Zelman, “We Were Never on the Scene of the Crime,” 443. Hereafter cited parenthetically as Hagen and Zelman.

dead the next day.⁷² The speaker describes the significance of the setting when they depart:

In the worst hour of the worst season
 Of the worst year of a whole people
 A man set out from the workhouse with his wife/
 He was walking – they were both walking – north.⁷³

She stays faithful to what she calls the “merciless inventory” (l. 16) and far from what she would call a traditional “love poem” (l. 13), even when describing their death with “her feet held against his breastbone” (l.11). Boland takes on the responsibility of mapping out her country’s history when she takes a stand as a poet: as she emphasizes in these stanzas, “there is no place here for the inexact / praise of the easy graces and sensuality of the body” (ll. 14-15). There is only fact, the details of love and death in the midst of catastrophe.

If a litany of facts were all it took to record history, however, there would be no need for poetry – especially those poems Boland crafts on the years and events of the Famine. As the cartography poem, “The Famine Road,” and “Quarantine” show, the elements of a poem play an integral role in capturing those incidents in history that books of facts cannot. In “That the Science of Cartography is Limited,” it is the images and scents and actual roads that the maps of Ireland do not capture; in “The Famine Road,” it is the connection to the human body and the tragedy of an unethical project; in “Quarantine,” it is the individual and his/her personal struggle, and how love with no trace of “easy graces” persists despite what they suffered in the winter of 1847. The structure of this poem sketches the state of being quarantined, as the second line of each 4

⁷² The winter of 1846-47 was the longest and “most severe in living memory” (Woodham-Smith 143). Evicted families were forced to roam the country-side freezing and starving to death in rags for clothes; many died this winter in the Public Works.

⁷³ Eavan Boland, “Quarantine,” ll. 1-4, *NCP*.

line stanza indents to show a separation, an isolation. The content of those indents also show Boland's emphasis on the exact in this poem. The five indented lines go as follows:

"of the worst year of a whole people

 "He lifted her and put her on his back

 "Of cold. Of hunger. Of the toxins of a whole history

 "There is no place here for the inexact

 "Also what they suffered. How they lived." (ll. 2-18)

This is about suffering. In the final line, Boland shows that it is about how love endured despite that suffering, how "what there is between a man and woman" (l. 19) resisted all this suffering. In fact, it is in such "darkness [that] it can best be proved" (l. 20). As in "Cartography," Boland aligns her facts so unambiguously that their existence and meaning become proof; by using elements of poetic style, she brings those proofs to life in a way that historical or philosophical proof cannot.

Sometimes Boland plays with the speaker's perspective to convey unexpected images of the Famine. We see this in "The Famine Road," when she switches from English official to cold doctor to herself, and again in a part of a sequence in *Writing in a Time of Violence*. The third poem in the sequence, "March 1, 1847. By the First Post," is constructed as a letter describing the disturbing images of the Famine, and detailing how the Famine itself has disrupted the speaker's life. Boland relies on concrete description because, as she recounts, "images are not ornaments; they are truths" (Hagen and Zelman 445). If the role of her poetry is to reconstruct history in a way that accounts for "the truths of experience suppressed, simplified, falsified by the 'official' record" (Hagen and

Zelman 443), these images must be exact. They must also be vivid without being superfluous. In this poem, the speaker starkly contrasts the beauty of her setting with the disruptions of the Famine:

The daffodils are out & how
you would love the harebells by
the Blackwater now.
But Etty, you are wise to stay away.⁷⁴

The speaker goes on to describe what her environment looks like compared to the unchanging beauty of the landscape, with “a cloth / sprinkled with bay rum & rose attar” (ll. 11-12) against her mouth and “A woman lying / across the Kells Road with her baby – / in full view” (ll. 20-22).⁷⁵ There is no flowery language, no sentimentality. The speaker does, however, display nostalgia for her lost world: the “picnics by the river...outings to the opera / & our teas” (ll. 14-17). Both tone and subject matter are strikingly similar to Curtis’s “From a Famine Journal.” Indeed, these images identify the speaker as a member of the Protestant Ascendancy – the opposite side of the spectrum from the two lovers in “Quarantine.” Boland deliberately displays the differences in Famine experiences instead of omitting them, thereby reconstructing her country’s history through images.

Boland’s poems not only account for the images, sounds, smells, and various speakers of the Famine, but they also address a crucial issue with which twentieth century Irish poetry has wrestled: imaginative possessions.⁷⁶ Boland argues that in order for

⁷⁴ Eavan Boland, “March 1, 1847. By the First Post,” ll. 1-4, *NCP*.

⁷⁵ In the Famine, along with physical decimation of the body came decimation of morals and propriety. This line describing a woman and baby “in full view” most likely references the fact that she is wearing little more than rags, and more of her body being exposed than would be deemed appropriate.

⁷⁶ Yeats references a community bound by “imaginative possessions” in his essay, “The Galway Plains” Quoted in Eavan Boland, “Can Poetry Console a Grieving Public?” This is an online forum run by *The Poetry Foundation*. Hereafter cited parenthetically as Boland, “Grieving Public.”

poetry to have an impact on community, the community must trust the private imagination of the poet; this trust did not entirely exist in the last century. Cultivating national and literary identities that are not mutually exclusive, but which instead overlap in their accounts of the past and their views of the present and future means establishing a trust between poet and audience; this is what Boland's poems work towards – a simultaneous recounting of fact and accounting of imagined detail. As a poet, she assumes the agency of a speaker of culture, and Boland uses that agency to construct the most authentic and striking of poems. As she describes in "Patchwork or the Poet's Craft," constructing the poem is nothing less than piecing together all the different elements that *must* be accounted for, and *do* fit together. Those elements "are not bits. / They are pieces. // And the pieces fit."⁷⁷ The pieces fit through the work of the poetic imagination, and they work together to speak the details of what Ireland looked, acted, and felt like during the Famine.

⁷⁷ Eavan Boland, "Patchwork of the Poet's Craft," ll. 39-41, *NCP*.

Conclusion

At the start of this thesis I laid out the proposal that contemporary Irish poetry functions as a recapturing of history that, by giving voice to the mute traumas of the Famine, opens the wounds of collective memory and works to make that memory a part of an Irish national identity. I demonstrated how Patrick Kavanagh's "The Great Hunger" set the stage for this recapturing of history and culture through an antithetical response to the Irish Literary Revival's romanticizing of history; how Seamus Heaney's "At a Potato Digging" and "For the Commander of the Eliza" offer emotive accounts of the significance of the Irish landscape and specific moments in Famine history; how Tony Curtis's "From a Famine Journal" exposes the chasm between classes and the effects of famine in breaking down the system that had built an Anglo-Irish identity; and how several of Eavan Boland's works fuse historical fact with imaginative accounts of human suffering. Now I will turn to the question of poetry itself: how, exactly, does poetry speak the unspeakable, and how does this Famine poetry contribute to a collective Irish memory and national identity?

The importance of poetry in Irish history cannot be overstated; it has played a continuous role in recording the history of the people, and its role is still strong – if not more intensified – in the present. Seamus Heaney has said of the tradition of poetry:

In Ireland in this century it has involved for Yeats and many others an attempt to define and interpret the present by bringing it into significant relationship with the past, and I believe that effort in our current circumstances has to be urgently renewed. (Heaney, *P* 60)

The "circumstances" to which Heaney is referring encompass a myriad of ethical historical issues, most of which have only begun to be accounted for in the twentieth century. It is crucial to recognize that Ireland's history was written by its conquerors; in

the extensive history of the British Empire, this nation is merely a chapter – and the Famine an unfortunate blemish in the course of centuries of domination. When a country is not a nation but rather some other nation's occupied territory, the official institutions of history-writing (and therefore history-making) have no concern in telling the story of that territory from the inside. Ireland's story has not and cannot be told through the empire that oppressed it; other Irish cultural formations, however, can and do tell those stories, albeit in fragments that can be joined together or persist across time: among the strongest of these are poetry and song. Through a reimagination of history, Famine poetry tells Ireland's story from the inside.

Recapturing Famine history is a challenging feat because it attempts both a deconstruction of history written by the conqueror and a re-imagining of the ethically unimaginable; the poetry outlined here achieves both. The poetic tradition in Ireland has indeed transformed since the Famine, and it continues to shift in the present; part of this shift, however, involves looking back at the past. Many contemporary Irish writers view their tradition in Michael Molino's words, "an ongoing fracture or wound that has been sutured and scarred but not healed" (22). I do not assert that healing necessitates fixing the past; healing, in this case, means recapturing the events of the past and everything they entail to aid in what several poets refer to as a process of public grief. As demonstrated by the poets I've presented, poetry is not necessarily a genre that resolves or diminishes the anguish of the Famine-struck Irish people. Ethicist Emmanuel Levinas asserts that justifying someone else's suffering is the core of immorality; while taking on the other's suffering can be the greatest exploration of subjectivity, one can never make sense of the other's suffering, only one's own. In other words, there is no way for any

one of us to make sense of or fully understand the suffering of those who endured the Famine, but it is possible (and ethical) to explore it. This is what the contemporary Irish poets achieve through composing Famine poems. Poetry does not resolve anguish, but it acknowledges it. Contemporary Famine poetry breaches the silence of the past to open opportunity for various truths to be spoken. Eavan Boland asserts that “if poetry does not address public grief in some way, it runs the risk of abandoning one of its great roles and one of its great genres, which is elegy” and that the origins of elegy, of course, “are not private: they are sacred and public. Those origins shaped the poet and gave poetry one of its historic identities” (Boland, “Grieving Public”). While none of the poems I selected for this thesis follow a strict elegiac form, each conveys a sense of mourning: each addresses a public sorrow that ties into a national identity.

As a medium, poetry demands honesty absent of sentimentality and overlying didactic intent. The poems discussed in the previous sections succeed because, while they certainly present various perspectives of the Famine and Ireland, each relies primarily on poetic elements to convey meaning. Kavanagh’s narrative, admittedly, carries a polemical thrust: his decidedly unromantic account of Irish country life implicitly attacks the Revivalist construction of the quaint Irish peasant while representing his own roots in his effort put to rest a mythical identity of an entire people: it is noteworthy, however, that he employs strong poetic elements to achieve this: the use of scattered rhythms of “the dragging step of a ploughman going home,” intense imagery – “a sick horse nosing around the meadow for a clean place to die”, and sustained metaphor (the “great hunger,” for example) work to deconstruct the mythic representation of the peasant’s “little lyrical fields” and reconstruct an authentic one rooted in his own

experience. He relies on form to emphasize content, as in the imprisoning repetition of Maguire “sitting on a wooden gate / sitting on a wooden gate / sitting on a wooden gate”; such is the work of a successful and powerful poem. Heaney does much of the same, drawing directly, at times, on Kavanagh’s diction and images (“a mechanical digger wrecks the drill”), but also layering Yeats’s mythic histories into his own meditations on the present. The poetic elements shape and inform the content, resulting in compositions whose evocation of meaning and emotion depend largely on the effectiveness of these elements. Specifically in “At a Potato Digging,” we see the repeating images that give life to the past in the present – the “processional stooping through the turf” that demonstrates “centuries of fear and homage to the famine god,” and to a collective memory that resides in the work and the landscape and is therefore inescapable. This acknowledgement works to break what some call the “famine silence.”⁷⁸

Breaking the silence that persisted through the Revival involves using poetry to exhume the substances of silence. Such is the case in the rise of Famine poetry. It is important to note that over one hundred years passed between the end of the Famine and the beginning of contemporary Famine poetry. Eavan Boland addresses a possible reason for this gap: “the problem is that poetry has, for almost a hundred years...guarded the rights to the private imagination fiercely, and resisted the obligations of the public one” (“Grieving Public”). In the aftermath of the Revival, Irish poets tended to turn inward to the private imagination. Kavanagh’s work is a prime example of such poetry: it read entirely about the self until, of course, “The Great Hunger,” which marked the start of a turn back towards the public sphere. The sustaining of an Irish literary tradition

⁷⁸ This term was coined during the Famine when, in the West especially, all sounds of life seemed to die out: the barking of dogs, cackling of hens, playing children in the roads. The silence gave visitors a feeling of devastation that informed the immensity of the situation in Ireland (Gallagher 67).

necessitated an acknowledgement of history; for Ireland, “art can no longer live without the history or the history without the art” (Deane 7). Seamus Deane asserts that Irish literary identity has risen out of historical conflict and acknowledgement of that conflict through art; as the most traumatic, nation-changing event in Irish history, documentation of the Famine through art is clearly a necessary aspect of this literary identity.

Giving a voice to this trauma, however, is not singularly a result of a shifting literary tradition in the 20th century: it is a collective act of representation that marks courage and maturity on behalf of nation and poets. Years may pass after an event before a poet can write a successful poem about it – a poem absent of overstatements and sentimentality even when dipping into the realm of imagination. Although the poets I have discussed live in the century following the Famine, their work acts as the documentation of witnesses willing to explore history on behalf of their country. These poems not only break Famine silence through probing the experiences of that unspeakable event, but in doing so refuse hopelessness in the wake of events that exuded hopelessness – for the people like those in “For the Commander of ‘The Eliza’,” who were refused help and common humanity when they were “violent and without hope.”

The loss of hope, contemporary philosophers argue, is an experience worse than death: without hope, there is no drive to live, to dream, to be spontaneous, to imagine life outside of one’s unassumable circumstances.⁷⁹ Refusing hopelessness in the case of the Famine necessitates someone – something – to play the role of witness. Contemporary philosopher Martin Matustik draws upon this idea in reference to storytelling and poetry: he calls compositions such as these “secondary witness” accounts that “break the

⁷⁹ For more on this, see Hannah Arendt’s account of hopelessness in “The Concentration Camps.”

suffocating silence.”⁸⁰ Poetry, he asserts, refuses hopelessness by invoking “a duty to speak, to speak endlessly for those who could not speak” (Matustik 34), and bringing all the gifts of the poetic imagination, the attempt to give faces to the numberless dead, so that we might look them in the eyes and honor their singularity – the singularity deprived to them by historical figures like the commander of the Eliza, the officials in command of the public works projects in “The Famine Road,” or imagined figures like those in the Ascendancy diaries of “From a Famine Journal.” These historical figures refused to recognize the other – refused to recognize themselves in the other – and therefore refused them any sort of meaning and individuality: refusing them a voice. Famine poetry speaks for those who could not speak – for the victims of the starvation and sickness during the Famine, for those forced to leave their homes and families behind, for the entire nation in the present day that can draw upon these compositions of witness to better understand – or at least acknowledge – the complexity and tragedy of the Famine.

Famine poetry is remembrance: it is the imagination bound up in memory, an exploration into the past and its retrieval into public memory. Public memory works to accept responsibilities of the past; by historicizing memory, it “restores agency and prevents the slide of memory into nationalist nostalgia” (Whelan 152). The medium of poetry itself refuses nostalgia to make room for the particularity of the lives lost, and for honesty in interpretation; it does not hold a premeditated agenda, but rather produces multidimensional meanings from kinesis of form and content. This is not to say, however, that the Irish poet does not have a specific role in the process of remembrance. As Evan Boland writes in reference to public mourning:

⁸⁰ Martin Matustik, *Radical Evil and the Scarcity of Hope* 33. Hereafter cited parenthetically as Matustik.

I, as an Irish poet, would certainly want to be there on that dock with the keeners. I would want to feel that those people...could count on a language for their loss. And if there's some aspect of poetic imagination, craft, or art which is compromised by that, it's not one that I recognize or understand. ("Grieving Public")

The ordeals change from generation to generation, but the use of a public grieving through art has stayed consistent in Ireland, where poetry is an acknowledged national form. In the present it is necessary to remember the past to move into the future, and Famine poetry functions as Ireland's vehicle to do so.

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