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## Modernity, Gender and the Nation in Joseph O'Connor's *Star of the Sea*

One of the most notable trends in contemporary Irish fiction has been the appearance of historical novels that 'review the key events' of Irish history 'from ironic or marginal positions'.<sup>1</sup> These qualities of irony and subversion, evident for instance in novels such as *Star of the Sea*, Roddy Doyle's *A Star Called Henry* (1999) and Jamie O'Neill's *At Swim, Two Boys* (2001) mean that, according to Eve Patten, the contemporary historical novel in Ireland can be described in terms of 'ideological non-conformism'.<sup>2</sup> The exploration of historical fiction's subversive potential is usually traced to Linda Hutcheon, who observed in 1988 that 'postmodern fictions suggest that to re-write or re-present the past in fiction and history is, in both cases, to open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological'.<sup>3</sup> The 'openness' and rejection of teleologies that Hutcheon welcomes here is in contrast to the more usual insistence on a standard narrative that has characterised Irish historical understanding, an insistence that is often accompanied by what Roy Foster describes as 'the heat generated by competing versions of our island story, the dust kicked up when different interpretations collide'.<sup>4</sup> These more recent, subversive historical fictions have all appeared within the period now notoriously known as the Celtic Tiger, suggesting that the rapidly changing economic, social, political and cultural landscape of Ireland from the mid 1990s onwards provided the necessary conditions for the kind of opening up of history to which Hutcheon refers.

The transformed relationship between the past and the present is particularly striking in the case of *Star of the Sea*, given that a dramatic rise in living standards was one of the enabling conditions for a novel about the terrible and tragic

consequences of poverty. Sinéad Moynihan has for instance pointed out that ‘the appearance of the novel in 2002 is significant because it depicts the defining era in Irish emigration history – the Great Famine, and specifically “Black ’47”, at the precise moment when immigration *into* Ireland was at its peak.’<sup>5</sup> The previously unimaginable changes that took place in Ireland at the end of the twentieth century – the huge growth of the economy; the unprecedented experience of inward migration; the collapse of the moral leadership of the Catholic church, and the successful negotiation of a political settlement in Northern Ireland – transformed historical patterns that had been in place since the Great Famine. The famine has been referred to as ‘the defining event of nineteenth-century Ireland’<sup>6</sup> because afterwards, everything changed: the population fell sharply; emigration surged; farming and landholding practices changed; the Catholic church became increasingly well organised and influential; political attitudes hardened; the Irish language declined to the point of what seemed inevitable extinction, and the landlord-tenant system, for reasons both political and economic, was irretrievably damaged and weakened. The sudden and radical departures from these historical patterns in the late twentieth century therefore not only constitute a demand to re-examine the meanings of the Great Famine as a tragic, complex and formative event in Irish history, they beg much more fundamental questions about the relationship in the twenty-first century between Ireland as a nation and its past.

Colin Coulter has noted that although originally coined to describe the unprecedented and rapid economic growth that the Republic of Ireland experienced in the mid to late 1990s, the term ‘Celtic Tiger’ soon ‘slip[ped] its moorings’ and came to operate as a ‘master signifier’.<sup>7</sup> Central to this all-encompassing signifier is the concept of the modern, and, in particular, the belief that the economic boom marked

the point at which Ireland finally achieved not only material wealth, but also, belatedly, the condition of ‘modernity’.<sup>8</sup> The potent appeal of the Celtic Tiger as a concept lay to a considerable extent in the consciousness of Ireland’s ‘lag’ by comparison with its western and European counterparts, and the desire to overcome this seemingly intractable inferiority. Viewed from this perspective, the treatment of the Famine in contemporary historical fiction has a resonance that is quite distinct from that of other historical events or periods such as the 1916 Rising, which is the focus of *A Star Called Henry* and *At Swim, Two Boys*. As John Brannigan points out, the 1916 Rising is mythologized as ‘the single pure act of romantic heroism which compelled Irish nationalism from its dejected slumber into revolutionary consciousness’; it has moreover from the beginning been seen as an ‘aesthetic event.’<sup>9</sup> In stark contrast, the Famine is insistently characterized in terms of silence, wordlessness and inarticulacy – the ‘story’ of the Famine is that there is no story, and no means to articulate it. The claim of ‘silence’ around the subject of the Famine has been challenged by a significant body of recent research,<sup>10</sup> but David Lloyd points to ‘a complex of representations around the Famine and its psychological effects that echoes through virtually every account, journalistic, historical and fictional’ and thus cannot be ignored.<sup>11</sup> In this ‘complex of representations’ the Famine is figured through a juxtaposition between silence and the inarticulate sounds of lamenting. For Lloyd, crucially, this reiterated trope does not create an emptiness (the spatial equivalence of silence) but is filled with meaning:

Wordless, the wail is also anonymous, without any distinct agency to utter it: as a recurrent motif in representations of the Famine, it marks simultaneously the dissolution of the Irish as subjects of their own culture and history and the

historical emergence of a new kind of Irish subject whose elements are in many respects still with us.<sup>12</sup>

Of particular relevance to my concerns in this essay is Lloyd's claim that the trope of silence that adheres to the Famine should be understood as 'a guarantee of the finality of the transformation that the Famine and its administration finally achieved' and that 'the unwonted silence of the post-Famine Irish marks their shaken entry into modern times'.<sup>13</sup> If the Celtic Tiger period appeared to offer another point of access into modernity, how does a novel of this period reframe or reimagine the 'shaken' modern subject that is created by the Famine?

In this essay, I argue that in spite of an apparent concern to disturb received narratives of the Famine, *Star of the Sea* ultimately grounds itself in the paradoxical silence identified by Lloyd. As I will show, there is a very clear concern to construct a national subject position fully compatible with modernity, but one which is at the same time defined by the wordlessness that is a hallmark of the Famine in the Irish national imaginary. O'Connor's book appears at first to counter the trope of silence: it fairly bristles with words, and wears its intertextuality on its sleeve, quoting, referencing and copying all manner of texts and genres from the period of the Famine – novels, ballads, newspaper reports, diaries, letters, and so on. I consider firstly, therefore, the novel's positioning of itself in relation to what Linda Hutcheon calls 'the past of literature',<sup>14</sup> a positioning that seems to suggest very strongly that the modern Irish subject of the twenty-first century can lay claim to a much greater share of cultural capital than was available to the post-Famine subject. In cultural terms, the increasingly globalized and articulate Irish subject is therefore presented as more powerful and, literally in O'Connor's case, as possessing more 'authority'. In another significant engagement with articulacy, the novel's treatment of the Irish language

balances the cosmopolitan with an emphasis on 'rootedness'. The Irish subject of the Celtic Tiger is conferred with ownership of the Irish language, and is thus endowed with another form of cultural capital in terms of 'belonging'. As we shall see, the treatment of the Irish language is remarkable for its concern to divorce the Irish language from associations with orality, in order to make it fully compatible with a modern subjectivity. This authoritative, individuated and articulate subject is however ultimately defined through a feminized, silent other, in the figure of Mary Duane. Margaret Kelleher's analysis of twentieth-century representations of famine in Ireland concludes that 'the sacrificial death of a female famine victim is [...] one of the most frequent motifs in twentieth-century representations, her death deemed necessary for the survival of the community.'<sup>15</sup> Mary's unwritten life, a notable gap in the many-layered texts that make up this novel, performs a similar function. Her disappearance, her 'dissolution', to use Lloyd's term, functions as a guarantor of the authenticity of the articulate subject who emerges from the pages of the novel.

The opening of *Star of the Sea* announces its intention to engage with the crowded archives of the past, and to wade into what Foster describes as the 'dust kicked up' by different versions of that past. The title page features an illustration from the nineteenth-century journal *Harper's Weekly*, depicting the supposed racial differences between the 'Irish-Iberian', the 'Anglo-Teutonic' and the 'Negro' types. This is followed by a page of epigraphs from four writers: the radical nineteenth-century 'physical force' nationalist John Mitchel; the socialist republican James Connolly; Charles Trevelyan, the British civil servant who was tasked with administering the government relief effort during the Famine, and an anonymous writer in *Punch*. Trevelyan's assertion that the famine 'is a punishment from God for an idle, ungrateful and rebellious country' is met by John Mitchel's denunciation of

England as ‘a great public criminal’ who ‘must be punished’.<sup>16</sup> This in its turn is juxtaposed with a parodic description from a *Punch* article in 1862 of migrant Irish labourers as ‘THE MISSING LINK’ and ‘Irish savages.’ The final quotation, from James Connolly, offers the argument that ‘Providence sent the potato blight but England made the Famine’ and asserts baldly that ‘we do blame [the English]’ (n.p.). The extremity of the statements chosen, and the fact that they are juxtaposed with one another and ‘balanced’ in opposing pairs communicates a message of equal blame or culpability. The imperialist and nationalist ideologies that fuelled conflict in Ireland are thus very explicitly highlighted at a time in which, following the negotiation of the Good Friday Agreement, the bitter and belated epilogue of this conflict had finally reached a form of conclusion. This suggests that both these ideological extremes can be safely viewed as ‘historic’, and as having been superseded by a more enlightened perspective on both sides. These intertexts thus signal one of the most obvious features of O’Connor’s reimagining of the Irish past – its self-conscious differentiation from the highly divisive ideologies here constructed *as* ‘past’. This rewriting is consistent with the novel’s portrayal of David Merridith, the Anglo-Irish heir to the Kingscourt estate as a hybrid figure (he for instance learns to speak Irish as a child when he is nursed by a local woman, Margaret Duane). David is also portrayed as effectively powerless in the face of the historical process: when he inherits the estate, he finds to his shock that his father has mortgaged it to cover debts caused by speculative investments and mismanagement. This nuanced portrayal of the landlord figure, and the novel’s evident scepticism with regard to both imperialist and nationalist responses to the Famine have been highlighted by Matthew Schultz, who suggests that O’Connor ‘echoes [...] Frantz Fanon’s critique of the rhetoric of nationalism as simply the binary opposite of the rhetoric of imperialism’ and argues

further that ‘O’Connor conclude[s] that Irish history demands that Irish identity be grounded in dispossession’.<sup>17</sup> As I argue, however, although O’Connor’s novel does indeed undermine nationalist claims to sole possession of the ‘truth’ about Irish history, it makes other claims for possession, notably over cultural capital and over the means of articulation. In addition, I will argue in this essay’s conclusion that the novel reaffirms central national and nationalist tropes.

*Star of the Sea* displays many features associated with what Hutcheon has termed ‘historiographic metafiction’. The bulk of the novel purports to be excerpts from *An American Abroad: Notes of London and Ireland in 1847*, by ‘G. Grantley Dixon of the *New York Times*’. This pastiche text is interspersed with a large number of interpolated texts, some genuine, some fabricated, including the ship captain’s log, letters, ballads, extracts from newspapers, and official documents such as sworn legal testimony. In addition, each chapter is prefaced by reproductions of illustrations and cartoons from nineteenth-century periodicals including the *Illustrated London News* and *Punch*, and by extracts from genuine emigrants’ letters. The practices of quotation, layering and pastiche are however qualified by a simultaneous construction of a space that is free of these past texts. P. J. Mathews has suggested that *Star of the Sea* ‘offers itself as a lost epic of the nineteenth century – a missing link in the Irish literary tradition’.<sup>18</sup> In order to position itself as a ‘missing link’ the novel must therefore clear a space amidst the proliferating texts to which it draws attention. This is achieved through overt and extensive reference to the work of Charles Dickens and Emily Bronte, coupled with a near-complete disavowal of nineteenth-century Irish fiction. The surface-level erasure of nineteenth-century Irish fiction is however troubled by some deeply-buried structural and thematic allusions, conveying a highly ambivalent attitude to the nineteenth-century Irish literary canon.<sup>19</sup>



O'Connor's comments in interview suggest that he was inspired in a very straightforward way by the classic realism of the English nineteenth-century novel. Having hated Dickens as a student, rereading the novels as part of the research for *Star of the Sea* he found 'the sheer scope and bravery and capaciousness' of his work 'really inspiring'.<sup>20</sup> He goes on to say that 'the novel in the 1840s was still a very new form. [...] There was a sense that the novel could take on anything, no subject too big to defeat the novel. [...] I love Dickens for his faults as well. I just love the bravery and scope and the ambition of it all'.<sup>21</sup> O'Connor's characterization of the classic realist novel as a form that could 'take on anything' takes on a particular significance when read against his comments on the 'silence hanging around [the Famine]':

when you read [...] contemporary accounts, you're struck by the language of wordlessness – time and time again, people saying, 'Words fail me. I can't describe this.' Since then, it's also been a very convenient silence.<sup>22</sup>

The silence here referred to by O'Connor can also be seen as a gap which opens up the possibility of reproducing the 'ambition' of classic realism, and of writing something 'new' about the Famine. It represses the existence of the problematic nineteenth-century Irish novel, which, as David Lloyd has noted, is 'haunted by the acknowledgement of failure or of inadequacy in relation to models it seeks to emulate'.<sup>23</sup> In the place of this 'failure' and 'inadequacy' we are offered a reappropriation of the classic texts by Irish characters. In London, Pius Mulvey passes off his own ballad as an authentic piece of Cockney lore to a note-taking Charles Dickens; pressed for further details he claims to have learnt it from a Jewish pickpocket whom he then maliciously names for the parish priest he hated so much: Fagan (189-191). David Merridith, Pius's polar opposite, proves himself to be an astute and sophisticated reader. Praising 'Ellis Bell's' *Wuthering Heights* as

‘magnificent’ and ‘a work of bloody genius’ (138), he also offers an interpretation of it as a veiled or displaced representation of Famine-stricken Ireland:

Christ the *stoniness*, do you know. The nothingness. Well it’s so clearly Connemara despite the clever way it’s disguised. Connemara, Yorkshire, all poor places. And yet it’s something else again. A kind of universal philosophical state. Keatsian, in a sense. [...] The recurring motif of landscape as almost sentient; the way he’s characterised it, I mean. Where a second rate man would merely describe, like some Grub Street hack with the ability to raid a thesarus. (138)

Readers familiar with Eagleton’s *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger* will be aware – as O’Connor is – that this intertextual allusion functions interestingly as a means of further repressing existing Irish accounts of the Famine in particular, such as Carleton’s *The Black Prophet*.<sup>24</sup> The aesthetic inadequacies of nineteenth-century Irish fiction are thus banished in favour of an imaginative ownership of the classic texts of the English canon – an ownership that is confident and creative rather than reverential. One could even trace the assumption of this ownership in O’Connor’s own description of his transition from reluctant student to creative reader and rewriter to texts.

The confident reading (and writing) subject constructed through *Star of the Sea* is of course not confined to the characters within the text or even the author himself – it includes the readers of the text, who are assumed to share in the references and allusions with which it abounds. The contrast with the Famine-era subject could hardly be greater. The experience of the mass of the people in nineteenth-century Ireland lies for the most part outside of literary representation as a result of the combination of poverty, illiteracy and language change. The impact of

language change has created a particularly acute sense of loss, as there existed a significant group of people in Ireland in this period whose native language was Irish but for whom literacy was only accessible or available in English.<sup>25</sup> This was, moreover, the same group – the rural poor – who were the most likely to succumb to famine and disease in the 1840s. In this context it is striking that *Star of the Sea* includes among its many interpolated texts a letter written in Irish by a man experiencing extreme suffering as a result of starvation. Written by Mary Duane's husband Nicholas, it describes how, weakened with hunger, he walked through bitter winter weather to the home of his landlord to beg for a stay of eviction. The letter records dreadful scenes of suffering and death witnessed by the writer, and also his own terrible plight as he waits outside his landlord's house, before being ultimately turned away. The letter is presented in the text in English, but purports to be a translation, in a note added by Dixon:

Document written (in Irish) twenty-two months before commencement of the voyage of the *Star of the Sea*. Found by New York Police Officer in the cabin of the Merridith's maidservant, several days after the voyage's end. The translation is by Mr John O'Daly, scholar of the Gaelic language and editor of the *Reliques of Irish Jacobite Poetry* (1847) and *The Poets and Poetry of Munster* (1849). (38)

Given that this is not only a text that does not exist, but also a text that most scholars agree could never have been written, its appearance in the novel speaks on the one hand to the drive to 'restore what has been lost' which forms part of the programme of many postmodern historical novels.<sup>26</sup> But it also expresses discomfort with the indeterminacy of oral culture and the conviction that the modern subject is capable of individualised utterance. Through Nicholas's letter, the novel offers the reader an

authored text, and thus a true ‘individual’, in place of famine victims as an unspeaking mass. However, it should be noted that the ‘original’ of the letter is absent and it is clearly marked as a mediated text, translated by a fusty-sounding nineteenth-century scholar (in this case real, but of course not the real translator of this fictional text). This opens up once again the gap between a contemporary Irish audience and their nineteenth-century forebears, and reminds us that language policy and language politics continue to play an important and unresolved role in the Irish national self-image. The issue of language is moreover central to the sense of inadequacy that hangs over the nineteenth-century novel in Ireland.

Although David Lloyd has explored the radical potential of the concept of ‘minor literature’ in the Irish context, the asymmetric relations between English as a ‘major language’ in nineteenth-century Ireland and Irish as the vernacular language of its poorest and most disempowered people are more often seen as factors contributing to the inadequacy of the nineteenth-century Irish novel.<sup>27</sup> Relatively low levels of literacy in English and a small market for books are clearly material factors which hampered the development of the novel in Ireland. In addition, in many novels of this period standard English coexists uneasily with Hiberno-English and Irish, in what are seen as aesthetically unsuccessful attempts to represent the social and linguistic complexities of Irish reality. Given that William Carleton’s *The Black Prophet* is one of the most important predecessors of *Star of the Sea* as a famine novel, and, unlike the classic nineteenth-century novels of Dickens and Brontë, is never referred to in the text, it seems significant that his work is a particularly striking example of the textual encoding of social and linguistic hierarchies.

Carleton was a very rare figure in nineteenth-century Ireland: a writer and novelist from the Catholic lower classes whose parents were Irish speakers. He was

therefore potentially in a position to represent the lives of the majority Catholic lower-class population, lives otherwise very distant from literary culture, from an otherwise missing ‘insider’ position. Carleton himself made much of his apparently unique position, writing that ‘I come to a subject of such difficulty [the representation of the common people] with unusual advantages on my side’ and that ‘consequently, my exhibitions of Irish peasant life, in its most comprehensive sense, may be relied on as authentic’.<sup>28</sup> In spite, however, of Carleton’s own knowledge of Irish and of the literary and cultural traditions preserved in oral forms by his parents, the jarring discordance in his work between the determinedly educated, formal diction of the narrative voice and the rendering of the characters’ speech has been highlighted by Eagleton, for instance, as an aesthetic blight.<sup>29</sup> True to the speech of his characters, Carleton’s dialogue includes many phrases and expressions in the Irish language, which are rendered in his texts as transliterations, such as ‘Manim a Yea agus a wurrah’; ‘Dher a larna heena’; ‘be dhe huth’; ‘amin a Chiernah’.<sup>30</sup> These phrases would currently be written ‘M’anam a Dhia agus a Mhuire (My soul, God and Mary); ‘de réir an leabhair fhéin’ (according to the book itself/the very book, i.e. the Bible); ‘bí i do thost’ (Be quiet); ‘[In] ainm an Thiarna’ (in the name of the Lord). For many modern critics and readers therefore the effect of reading Carleton’s work is one of distortion and systemic inferiority, as the language of the characters, in both Irish and Hiberno-English, is marked by its deviance and strangeness in relation to standard English and the voice of the authoritative narrator. The painful effect of this distorted linguistic texture is magnified by the fact that Carleton was writing at a time in which Irish was nearing extinction as a living language and in which the status of the language was extremely low. As Helen O’Connell has noted, many writers in nineteenth-century Ireland, particularly those concerned with the ‘improvement’ of

the poor, regarded Irish as simply antithetical to their project of progress and modernization:

An improved English would provide the necessary set of terms for commercial transactions, the creation of a viable public sphere, and, the writing of a realistic literature which, it was assumed, the Irish language would have been unable to achieve.<sup>31</sup>

The change in status of the Irish language is therefore one of the most dramatic differences between the Ireland of 1847 and that of 2003. As a symbol of national identity, it has been accorded a central place in Irish life and in the institutions of the state.<sup>32</sup> This change is reflected in the treatment of the language in *Star of the Sea* in which it is, firstly, highly visible. The Connemara estate of which David Merridith is landlord and on which the Duanes are tenants is Irish-speaking, although many of the inhabitants are bilingual. On board ship, the majority of the steerage passengers are represented as being Irish speakers, and some sentences of their speech are rendered in Irish. As a result of his hybridized upbringing, Merridith is also a fluent Irish speaker and taunts Dixon, who represents himself as the champion of the people, with his ignorance: ‘*Ar mhaith leat Gaeilge a labhairt, a chara? Cad é do mheas ar an teanga?*’ (132).<sup>33</sup>

A striking feature of the use of Irish in the text is O’Connor’s concern with accuracy: in his ‘Sources and Acknowledgments’, he thanks a number of people including university lecturers for helping ‘an almost monolingual’ to avoid mistakes in his Irish spelling and grammar (409). The Irish in *Star of the Sea* is indeed admirably correct to the eyes of someone educated in post-independence, twentieth-century Ireland, and presents a very clear contrast with the erratic phonetic principles used in Carleton’s transliterations. O’Connor’s desire for accuracy and determinacy,

however, runs counter to the facts about nineteenth-century Ireland, in which there was no standard orthography or agreed standard grammar. The canon of existing written texts used a specialized literary language that differed very considerably from ‘caint na ndaoine’ (the speech of the people) and it was not until the twentieth century that agreement was finally reached on what the ‘Caighdeán Oifigiúil’ (official standard) of both modern spoken and written Irish was to be. To give just one example: in the late nineteenth century language revivalists argued over whether the name of language itself should be written as Gaedhilge, Gaodhailge, or even Galuing; it is now spelt Gaeilge.<sup>34</sup> O’Connor’s concern with accuracy expresses the desire to confer on Irish the authority of a standardized, printed language, to overturn the dominant nineteenth-century view of the language as ‘pre-modern and oral’.<sup>35</sup> His painstaking reproduction of perfectly ‘correct’ modern standard Irish is thus a clear exercise in reparation, in according to the language in the twentieth century the status that it lacked in the nineteenth. But it could also be argued that in this determination he also reveals himself as unwilling to confront the actual linguistic instability of Irish in the nineteenth century.

The high status of Irish in contemporary Ireland co-exists paradoxically with a very low rate of Irish-language competence and usage. Joseph O’Connor is far from being alone in his lack of competence in Irish: a recent study reported that 52.9% of Irish-born respondents (those who would have experienced instruction in Irish as a core element in school curricula) described themselves as understanding and speaking ‘only a little’ Irish or none at all.<sup>36</sup> These uncomfortable facts are however displaced in *Star of the Sea*. The ship’s captain (whose name is Lockhart, in yet another nod to *Wuthering Heights*), attempts to learn some words of Irish from the passengers, and we are provided both with his own garbled pronunciations transliterated in the text,

and the correct spelling of the words, together with scholarly definitions, in a note.

The captain's well-meaning efforts to repeat phrases such as 'Jee-ah gwitch' and 'tear mahurr' are glossed in the note: '*Dia Duit*: a greeting, "May God be with you" [...] *Tír*: land, dry land (as opposed to sea), a country (as in *Tír na nÓg*, the mythical land of youth, a Paradise)' (81). Dixon comments in this note that 'Gaelic is a language of lapidarian precision' (81) and goes on to list 22 words to describe land of different sorts (marshy land, ploughed land, fallow land, etc.). This note, which cites the help of officials and scholars, is a tribute to the depth and richness of Irish, including in its reference to the myth of *Tír na nÓg* its function as a cradle of memory and culture. It also implies the loss of much of that richness, as the particular example chosen to illustrate it relates to a rural, agricultural lifestyle and economy that has all but disappeared in twenty-first century Ireland. The metanarrative elements of O'Connor's text have an additional effect, however. In the main text, the Irishman Pius Mulvey instructs the English captain, whose ability to reproduce the correct sounds is clearly very limited. Significantly, his botched attempts are signalled through the use of the same kinds of transliterations that Carleton used to incorporate the language of native Irish speakers into his texts: O'Connor thus inverts the textual practices of nineteenth-century Irish fiction. In the note, the linguistic information is provided by Dixon, an American who as we know has no knowledge of Irish, and is therefore reliant on the scholarly source he cites. For an Irish reader, both main text and note displace the issue of competence, and the lack of it, on to non-Irish characters; whereas, as we have seen, over half the Irish population lack competence in Irish. Scenes such as these thus confer on the Irish reader a sense of ownership and authority in relation to the Irish language. This reflects the broad national position,



and the aspiration of many, but is highly problematic in relation to individual speakers.

The linguistic fractures of nineteenth-century Ireland concern issues far beyond simply those of who speaks what language. As we have seen, the unstoppable advance of English was deeply coloured by ideas about modernity. The fate and status of the Irish language also appears to mirror the fate and status of the poorest of its speakers in the nineteenth century – both exist to a considerable extent in the realm of the oral and hence the undocumented. The official state policy in relation to the Irish language after independence was firstly to establish Irish as the first official language of Ireland, thus focusing a huge amount of importance on language as a marker of national identity, in spite of the fact that English was the native language of the majority of the population. This fundamental contradiction is reproduced in *Star of the Sea*, in which ownership and mastery of Irish are claimed by numerous Irish characters, while the bumbling attempts to speak Irish which are the actual experience of many Irish people are associated with English and American characters. Post-independence language policy also focused on establishing Irish as a language of the public sphere – through for instance broadcasting, publishing subsidies, state examinations and official documents and signage. O'Connor's portrayal of Irish and Irish speakers in the nineteenth century shares a similar impulse: a desire to replace the instability and low status of the oral with the determinacy of writing and print. It could be argued, however, that O'Connor's use of standardization, literacy and print in relation to Irish reflects not only a desire for reparation, but a deep unease with the 'pre-modern' characteristics of the language and its speakers in the nineteenth century.

In *Star of the Sea*, the belated achievement of modernity that was associated with the Celtic Tiger period proves to be a point from which aspects of the pre-modern past of the Irish nation can be retrieved and recovered for the present. The present is constructed as a moment in which divisive ideologies have been recognised as false, replaced by a more 'mature' sense of historical process and the mixed motives of fallible individuals. A sense of cultural inferiority and belatedness is replaced by the confident possession of cosmopolitan cultural capital. Ireland as a nation is also validated by the reconstruction of the Irish language as a language compatible with modernity. However, as theorists of nationalism have pointed out, nationalism has a 'Janus face' and constructs itself as the emergence into modernity of a people whose existence extends back into a timeless past. These views on nationalism's relation to time, Anne McClintock points out, build on the insights of Walter Benjamin who proposed that 'the mapping of Progress depends on systematically inventing images of archaic time to identify what is historically new about enlightened, national progress'.<sup>37</sup> Further to this, McClintock argues that gender typically operates as a means whereby to resolve this seeming paradox:

Women are represented as the atavistic and authentic body of national tradition (inert, backward-looking and natural), embodying nationalism's conservative principle of continuity. Men, by contrast, represent the progressive agent of national modernity (forward-thrusting, potent and historic), embodying nationalism's progressive, or revolutionary principle of discontinuity. Nationalism's anomalous relation to time is thus managed as a natural relation to gender.<sup>38</sup>

With this in mind, the final section of this essay will focus on the character of Mary Duane and explore the extent to which she can, as McClintock suggests, be viewed as

the locus of the authentic and atavistic, the necessary counterbalance to the modernity of Irish nationhood as envisaged in *Star of the Sea*.

Mary Duane appears in the novel initially as the daughter of tenants on the Kingscourt estate, and more specifically the daughter of the woman who had acted as wet nurse and foster mother to David Merridith. The tropes of nursing and fosterage invoked here form part of the novel's network of submerged references to nineteenth-century Irish fiction (the primary reference point here being Edgeworth's *Ennui*, in which the Irish nurse substitutes her own child for the heir to the Glenthorn estate). Later, as teenage lovers, David and Mary also recall the enormously influential 'national marriage' plot, of which Sydney Owenson's *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806) is the best-known example. Like the trope of the nurse, the national marriage functioned as a means of figuring political and social reconciliation but these elements are given a significantly different flavour in O'Connor's novel by their troubling conflation: David breaks off his relationship with her on the orders of his father and it is later revealed that Mary and David are half-brother and sister as well as lovers. These disturbingly overlapped allegories create a powerful sense of overdetermination around the enactment of sexual desire.

In an early part of the novel, Mary and David's teenage sexual experimentation is presented lyrically, in a setting where 'new-mown grass' and the 'aroma of crushed ferns' (67) is a counterpoint to the physical encounter described. The evocation of the natural in relation to this expression of desire is however not only overwhelmed by the intertextual echoes of the cross-class romance, but also by the fact that the rigid disciplinary regime of the Catholic church very soon imposes yet another frame of meaning on this 'natural' expression. In spite of the fact that Mary 'feels no shame, no remorse of any kind' (67) about what she and David have

done, and that she also experiments through masturbation and fantasy, her partial confession to the priest introduces into the novel the rhetoric of sin and shame which shaped Irish Catholic attitudes to sexuality until very recent times. The priest reminds Mary of the special burden placed on women to act as the regulators of male sexuality: 'to ensnare some man in an occasion of mortal sin could have disastrous consequences for his soul and his body. The asylums of every city in England were howling with men who had been ruined by women' (73). Mary remains unconvinced, but the relationship founders following Lord Kingscourt's intervention and from this point on the reader loses sight of Mary and is only able to piece together her story at the end of the narrative. This marginalisation is not simply structural, it is also thematic, as it emerges that her life has been determined largely by the actions of the central male characters. By the time the reader re-encounters Mary, she has played almost every role available to a female character in nineteenth-century fiction – lover, abandoned woman, mother, servant, fallen woman and prostitute. Mary in fact moves from being a recognisable character, an individual with interiority constructed through the norms of realist fiction, to being effectively a metafictional construct, a commentary on previous representations of women in fiction. What remains constant throughout these multiple roles is the fact that she can never determine her own fate. This clearly positions her outside of modernity and modern subjectivity, given the centrality of 'biographical autonomy', whereby 'individuals are no longer constrained by those traditional forms of identity that arise out of the likes of nation, religion or class' in constructions of modernity.<sup>39</sup> The terrible plight of victims of disease and starvation in the 1840s in Ireland represents the most stark contrast imaginable to the autonomous individual of modernity. Interestingly, however, in O'Connor's text the opposition between autonomous modernity and the collective past is worked out

primarily in terms of gender and sexual desire, with the central female figure deprived of autonomy as a consequence of both her own desires and those of the male characters.

This gendered opposition is emphasised by the contrast between Mary and Pius Mulvey, the novel's peasant antihero, a man whose extraordinary biography gives heightened expression to the desire for autonomy. Pius is by turn a tenant farmer, a ballad singer, a migrant, a petty criminal, a beggar, a teacher, and a murderer twice over. He commits murder firstly to free himself from Newgate prison and secondly in a brutal act to ensure his survival, stealing the identity of a man with whom he has spent several weeks tramping the roads to Leeds. His two acts of murder illustrate both the strength of his desire for autonomy and the extent to which the poor struggled against what seemed overwhelming circumstances: '*No other choice* was the phrase in his mind' (214). However brutal Pius's choices are, he is characterized by the determination to make choices. Mary, on the other hand, is seemingly powerless to escape a destiny imposed on her by the combined forces of social circumstance and ideology. The novel's construction of the Irish peasant woman rather than the peasant man as the representative figure of the past of the Irish nation is underlined by the fact that Pius abandons Mary while she is unmarried and pregnant with his child – the second time that she has been abandoned by a lover.

Nancy Armstrong, arguing that 'the history of the novel and the history of the modern subject are quite literally one and the same' observes that the subject of the novel, in order to qualify *as* a subject, 'must [...] surmount the limits of an assigned social position'.<sup>40</sup> The difference between Pius and Mary, therefore, marks the difference between present and past, between the modern subjects of contemporary Ireland and the massed victims of the Irish past. This difference also has distinct

aesthetic dimensions: Mary's ultimate function as the symbol of the unarticulated and unindividuated past is mirrored by the novel's apparent rejection of the formal techniques of early nineteenth-century fiction, notably the allegorical female figures of Owenson and Edgeworth which, as we have seen, are both invoked and subverted by O'Connor. O'Connor short-circuits the central allegories of nineteenth-century fiction, those of fostering and the national marriage, by overlapping them and thus rendering them void; this signals his aesthetic departure from the nineteenth-century Irish novel and consigns these allegorical structures, like Mary, to the past. The novel cannot however forego the powerful symbolic potential of the female figure, and Mary, although driven to the margins of the plot, is ultimately endowed with the iconic status that her name suggests.

Mary is both a stereotypically common name for an Irishwoman and a reference to the Blessed Virgin Mary, who played an especially important role in Catholic belief and practice in Ireland. As we have seen, the hypocrisies and repressive ideologies of Irish Catholicism are critiqued in *Star of the Sea*, and form part of the 'past' as defined by the novel. However, this past, the past of excessive social control, censorship and the refusal to acknowledge uncomfortable aspects of reality, cannot be seen in the same way as the pre-modern past symbolized by the victims of the Famine. This is the past of the post-revolutionary Irish state, a past for which contemporary Ireland must take responsibility, and from which disturbing testimony and evidence continues to emerge, in contrast to the shattered and fragmented archive of the nineteenth century. *Star of the Sea*, however, could be argued to evade the many troubling questions which exist around the relationship between the Irish state and the Catholic church in recent history. Through its title, the novel establishes an intertextual link with Catholicism, and with the Marian devotions

so especially popular in Ireland. 'Star of the Sea', which in the novel is the name of the ship on which the passengers travel to America, is one of the many titles of the Blessed Virgin, who is also invoked as 'Mother most amiable', 'Virgin undefiled' and 'Tower of Ivory' amongst many other epithets in 'The Litany of the Blessed Virgin', a prayer universally known among Catholics in Ireland until the later twentieth century. The novel includes a text which superficially resembles 'The Litany of the Blessed Virgin' although O'Connor has rewritten the prayer, substituting other names for the Virgin Mary, with a focus on the more extravagant but still genuine titles. The titles of the Blessed Virgin, especially those featured in *Star of the Sea*, foreground metaphor: Mary is a 'tower of ivory', a 'spotless dove', a 'workshop of the incarnation' (270). By its nature, metaphor creates a proliferation of meaning and the 'litany' of metaphors here amplifies this proliferation. On the page, however, the text is arranged to form the shape of a veiled woman, thus producing a simple outline filled with multiple meanings.

The placement of this page is significant: it appears after a chapter giving an account of the ship's delayed arrival in New York, stranded because of fears of epidemic disease, and just before a chapter in which we are presented with a letter written by Mary Duane and addressed to a secret society (the 'Else-Be-Liables') in which she denounces Pius Mulvey and calls for his killing. In spite of the fact that the activity of secret societies in Ireland was usually focused either on issues of sectarian discrimination and tension (e.g. the Defenders) or on agrarian issues such as evictions and tenants' rights (the Whiteboys and the Rockites), her denunciation is equally focused on his crimes as a 'land robber, a seducer and a black guard' (275). Similarly, Pius's behaviour, although it includes grabbing his brother's land after his eviction, seems motivated by sexual jealousy: he returns to Galway and harasses his brother

and his former lover, but he also attacks their property and kills their cow, setting off a chain of events which leads to their eviction and to Nicholas Mulvey's maddened murder of his starving child and his own death. The consequences for Mary are equally devastating:

it was hard times i had after my husband and child died. it was the workhouse for me until I couldn't thole it no more. i went all the road to Dublin and lost another child on the way. i had to beg on the street for nigh on a year and do what no woman should ever have to do in that place. (275)

Mary's story of poverty and prostitution is juxtaposed with the idealized and sanctified figure of the Blessed Virgin Mary, to whom the desperate passengers pray as they await arrival in New York, in the 'Captain's log' chapter immediately before it:

They commenced to pray aloud, in that fervently incantatory manner that they have, the many strange names they give unto the Mother of Jesus.

I know from many years that this is a sign of their deepest dread. [...] I fell into a deep and very troubled sleep. And I dreamed I saw the ship as from a terrible height, its body crying out for mercy to the Queen of High Heaven. (268)

This then is not an ironic juxtaposition: Lockhart's vision of the ship as a wounded body creates a link between Mary and the desperate Famine refugees. The two passages are also linked by the figure of the veiled woman, blank and featureless, yet filled with endless meaning. Ultimately, this image can be read as a the novel's construction of its own icon of Mary (Duane): a permanently elusive figure of profound meaning.



Although Mary's letter testifies to her ability to narrate her own experiences, the novel ultimately shift its focus from her words and her specific experiences, to instate her instead as a purely symbolic figure, one whose significance, interestingly, lies in the unknowable and undocumented nature of her life. In his 'Epilogue', Dixon reflects on how Mary has eluded his attempts at representation throughout: 'Looking back over these pages, they seem to say almost nothing about her; it is as though she was merely a collection of footnotes in the lives of other, more violent people' (399). In his attempts to trace her in America, he receives reports of many women who match her description:

A sister in an enclosed convent in northern Ontario, a sweeper in a lavatory, a maid in a brothel, a cook in an orphanage, a frontiersman's wife, a scrubwoman on trains, grandmother of a Senator. As to which, if any, was Mary Duane from Carna, I simply cannot say and will never know. (399)

At the end of the novel, therefore, Mary Duane is both stripped of all individuality and endowed with the symbolic power to represent all those whose lives are undocumented and beyond the reach of textual representation. The inexpressible quality of Mary's life and suffering is, seemingly, related to its authenticity: Dixon claims that 'some things I have invented but I could not invent Mary Duane' (399).

*Star of the Sea* is a curious compound of revision, redress and reaffirmation. From the perspective of Celtic Tiger Ireland in the mid 2000s, it sets out to tell stories which, it is implied, have not been told before; it seeks to go beyond nationalist and imperialist ideologies which have shaped or skewed accounts of the Famine, but at the same time it also clearly marks out a subject position grounded in an Irish nation state which can reclaim markers of identity, most notably the Irish language, for modernity and the present. The function of much postmodern historical fiction is to remind us

that the past is not really ever past, that it informs the present, and that reshaping the past through text and narrative can in its turn reshape the present. In one major respect, however, *Star of the Sea* reaffirms a foundational element in the identity of the contemporary Irish subject, namely the origins of that subject in an experience of suffering that is outside of representation and thus unavailable for revision. In his use, moreover, of a female figure as the bearer of this authentic origin, an origin outside of history, he ultimately reaffirms the Irish national aesthetic and its most potent symbol.

## NOTES

1. Eve Patten, 'Contemporary Irish Fiction', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Irish Novel*, ed. by John Wilson Foster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp.259-275, (p.263).
2. Patten, p.263.
3. Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1988), p.110
4. R. F. Foster, *The Story of Ireland: Telling Tales and Making it Up in Ireland* (London: Penguin, 2002), p.xi.
5. Sinéad Moynihan, 'Ships in Motion: Crossing the Green and Black Atlantics', *Symbiosis: A Journal of Anglo-American Literary Relations* 12 (2008), 41-58 (p.42).
6. Cormac Ó Grada, with the collaboration of Andrés Eiríksson, Timothy Guinnane, Joel Mokyr and Kevin O'Rourke, *Ireland's Great Famine: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2006), p.1.
7. Colin Coulter, 'The End of Irish History?', in *The End of Irish History? Critical Reflections on the Celtic Tiger*, ed. by Steve Coleman and Colin Coulter (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), pp.1-33, (p.4).
8. Coulter, pp.14-15.
9. John Brannigan, "'The Battle for the GPO:': Literary Revisionism in Roddy Doyle's *A Star Called Henry* and Jamie O'Neill's *At Swim, Two Boys*", in *Kaleidoscopic Views of Ireland* ed. by Munira Mutran and Laura P. Z. Izarra (Sao Paulo: Humanitas FFLCH/USP, 2003), pp.115-132, (p.116), (p.118).
10. See for instance Chris Morash, *Writing the Irish Famine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995); Chris Morash and Richard Hayes, eds., *Fearful Realities: New Perspectives on the Famine* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1996); Margaret Kelleher,

- The Feminization of Famine: Expressions of the Inexpressible?* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1997); Melissa Fegan, *Literature and the Irish Famine, 1845-1919* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002).
11. David Lloyd, *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity 1800-2000: The Transformation of Oral Space* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p.50.
  12. Lloyd, p.50.
  13. Lloyd, p.52.
  14. Hutcheon, p.118.
  15. Kelleher, p.151.
  16. Joseph O'Connor, *Star of the Sea* (London: Vintage, 2003), n.p. Subsequent references are to this edition and are given parenthetically in the main text.
  17. Matthew Schultz, 'Narratives of Dispossession: The Persistence of Famine in Postcolonial Ireland', *Postcolonial Text* 7 No. 2 (2012), 1-19 (p.13).  
<<http://postcolonial.org/index.php/pct/issue/view/38>> [accessed 3 February 2013]
  18. P. J. Mathews, 'Joseph O'Connor', in *The UCD Aesthetic: 150 Years of UCD Writers*, ed. by Anthony Roche (Dublin: New Island, 2005), pp. 256-64, (p.262).
  19. Mathews notes allusions to Edgeworth and Carleton, pp.262-3.
  20. Robert Birnbaum, 'Interview with Joseph O'Connor', *Identity Theory*, 26 June 2003. <<http://www.identitytheory.com/joseph-oconnor/>> [accessed 10 October 2012]
  21. Birnbaum, 'Interview with Joseph O'Connor'.
  22. Judith Palmer, "'Some Irish made vast fortunes out of the Famine.'" Interview with Joseph O'Connor', *The Independent*, 4 January 2003  
<<http://worldpress.org/Europe/946.cfm>> [accessed 10 October 2012] (para 6)

23. David Lloyd, 'Afterword: Hardress Cregan's Dream – for another history of the Irish novel', in *The Irish Novel in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Jacqueline Belanger (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005), pp. 229-37, (p.232).
24. Eagleton argues that 'if the Famine stirred some to angry rhetoric, it would seem to have traumatized others into muteness' and in the absence of representations of the Famine in 'truly distinguished works' he offers a reading of *Wuthering Heights: Heathcliff and the Great Hunger: Studies in Irish Culture* (London: Verso, 1995), p.13. *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger* is listed by O'Connor in his 'Sources and Acknowledgments', p. 409.
25. The literary culture of Gaelic Ireland was aristocratic and scribal. The collapse of the Gaelic social order in the seventeenth century coincided with a period in history in which, in other linguistic vernaculars, literacy began to be democratized, especially after the print revolution. Literacy and print culture in Ireland, therefore, were almost exclusively accessed through the medium of English until the Gaelic Revival of the late nineteenth century. For commentary on the exclusively oral nature of Irish-language culture in nineteenth-century Ireland, see Cathal Ó Hainle, 'Ó Chaint na nDaoine go dtí an Caighdean Oifigiúil', in *Stair na Gaeilge*, ed. by Kim McCone, Damian McManus, Cathal Ó Háinle, Nicholas Williams and Liam Breathnach (Maynooth: Roinn na Sean-Ghaeilge, Coláiste Phádraig, Maigh Nuadh, 1994), pp.745-793; see pp.746-7 and pp.749-53.
26. Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1987), p.90.
27. David Lloyd notes the frequency with which 'the problems of language and of the oral bias of Irish culture' are cited as partial explanations for the perceived failures of the nineteenth-century Irish novel – although he of course questions this form of

‘explanation’. See *Anomalous States: Ireland and the Post-Colonial Moment* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1993), p.130.

28. William Carleton, *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry* [1844], 2 vols, pref. by Barbara Hayley (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1990), I, viii.

29. Eagleton, pp.208-9.

30. Carleton, *Traits and Stories*, I, 190; *Traits and Stories*, I, 190; *The Black Prophet: A Tale of Irish Famine* [1847] (Poole: Woodstock Books, 1996), p. 80; *The Black Prophet*, p. 79.

31. Helen O’Connell, *Ireland and the Fiction of Improvement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p.100.

32. According to Article 8 of the Constitution, Irish, ‘as the national language’ is declared to be ‘the first official language’; English ‘is recognised as a second official language’. Irish also has a privileged status in the educational system as a compulsory subject. For the largely positive attitude of Irish people to the Irish language, see Micheál Mac Gréil and Fergal Rhatigan, *The Irish Language and the Irish People: Report on Attitudes towards, Competence in and Use of the Irish Language in the Republic of Ireland, 2007-8* (Maynooth: Survey and Research Unit, Department of Sociology, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, 2009), pp.6-7 and pp.72-3 <<http://www.mayococo.ie/en/Services/OifignaGaeilge/Publications/>> [accessed 10 October 2012]

33. ‘Would you like to speak Irish, my friend? What’s your opinion of the language?’ (own translation).

34. Brian Ó Conchubhair, *Fin de Siecle na Gaeilge: Darwin, an Athbheochan agus Smaointeoireacht na hEorpa* (Indreabhán: An Clóchomhar/Cló Iar-Chonnachta, 2009), pp.169-214.

35. O'Connell, p.102
36. Mac Gréil and Rhatigan, pp.39-40.
37. Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (London: Routledge, 1995), p.358. ACLS Humanities ebook  
<<http://0-hdl.handle.net/library.ucc.ie/2027/heb.02146.0001.001>>
38. McClintock, p.359.
39. Coulter, p.7.
40. Nancy Armstrong, *How Novels Think: The Limits of Individualism from 1719-1900* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p.3, p.8.