

Daria Steiner

Representing the Great Famine in  
Contemporary Historical Fiction

Narrative and Intertextual Strategies  
in Joseph O'Connor's Irish American Trilogy

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## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In 2011, long before I officially started to work on this dissertation, I learned about a horrendous famine that raged in Ireland in the 1840s. Coming from a country that has undergone Holodomor, a devastating mass starvation that killed around four million people, I instantly felt connected to the similarly complex and devastating event of the Great Irish Hunger. Often reduced to silence in historiographic records, the unimaginable numbers of hunger victims in Ireland and Ukraine were the profound motivation for this study. Drawing on the idea of historical duty, which will be discussed in the following pages, the aim of this study is to represent a modest attempt (and a step among other cultural projects) to commemorate the little-known victims of famine across the world. This thesis has been written in devotion to the many lost voices from Ireland, Ukraine, and to victims of those unfortunate countries such as Yemen that are struck by famine even today.

My interest in the Famine would have probably never materialised so strongly were it not for the works of Joseph O'Connor. O'Connor's poetic talent, the beauty of his language and the exquisite ways in which he tackles the most complicated subjects, fascinated me to an extent that I was determined to carry out an academic study on his work. After conducting an informal interview with O'Connor in Dalkey, Co Dublin in 2017, I was genuinely impressed by his kind heart and exceptional intelligence. This work would not be possible without its object of analysis, and I would therefore like to wholeheartedly thank JO'C for his creative work, which has never failed to deliver new complicated and insightful layers of material for my study: *Go raibh maith agat!*

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Finally, I am incessantly grateful to my husband, Dr. Felix Steiner, for his kind and gentle support during the most difficult phases of this project. Our long and numerous discussions on the most complex of topics have helped me to systemise my, at times disorientated, ideas and thoughts. His selfless readiness to give without taking is truly incomparable. This project would never have been possible without his resourceful support, love, patience and integrity. As a humble acknowledgement of his crucial role for the completion of this work, I would like to dedicate this thesis to him.

Daria Steiner

Frankfurt am Main, February 2021

## I. INTRODUCTION

### 1. The Great Famine in Contemporary Irish Culture: Breaking Silences and Joseph O'Connor's Trilogy as Literary Mission (Im)Possible

Of all topics with which a modern author might deal, none is more daunting than the Great Famine. It reduced most of those who survived it to silence. [...] O'Connor has done what many would have considered impossible. (Kiberd 2018: 419–421)

Irish author Joseph O'Connor can be assigned an especially significant role in the challenging cultural project of representing the Great Famine in contemporary fiction.<sup>1</sup> This notion is visible in the above diagnosis of O'Connor's work by established literary and cultural critic Declan Kiberd. However, O'Connor's literary contribution to the modern conception of the Famine has so far been acknowledged only in relation to his internationally bestselling novel *Star of the Sea* (2002) – a book that received unprecedented critical acclaim for its innovative ways of addressing the history of the Great Irish Hunger. Zooming in on this novel, which provides enough material for a separate analysis in its own right, the study at hand also traces famine tropes and modes in O'Connor's subsequent novels, *Redemption Falls* (2007) and *Ghost Light* (2010). Though popular and praised for their generic experimentation, these novels are to this day excluded from Famine scholarship. Unofficially labelled the 'Irish American trilogy', the novels in question are structurally different and are loosely connected on the plot level. Yet, this study illustrates that all three of them portray and problematise the cultural narrative of the Great Hunger.<sup>2</sup> I argue that the trilogy not only explores new narrative ways of rep-

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- 1 In this study, the capitalisation of the word 'Famine' is only applied as a reference to the Great Irish Hunger of 1845–1852. 'Famine' is used synonymously to 'the Great Hunger' and 'the Great Irish Hunger'. In all other cases, related terms such as 'famine', 'starvation', 'hunger', 'malnutrition' and 'famine walks' are used in a more general sense; terms that are not capitalised are used without specific reference to the aforementioned event in Ireland.
  - 2 In an interview with O'Connor in *The Irish Times*, Arminta Wallace describes *Star of the Sea*, *Redemption Falls* and *Ghost Light* as a "loose Irish-American trilogy" (2007). Existing responses and mentions vary on the question of hyphenating the title; the three novels in question are also sometimes labelled as the "Irish American trilogy". The latter title is borrowed from Sinéad Moynihan's review on Joseph O'Connor's official website and will be used in this study henceforth (Moynihan 2008: 361; cf. [www.josephoconnorauthor.com](http://www.josephoconnorauthor.com)). For more information on the trilogy's marketing, see the 'Desiderata, Central Questions and Aims of the Study' part of this introduction (1.3). In this study, I intentionally do not hyphenate the terms that relate to identity: henceforth, Irish American and Black American identities are spelled without a hyphen. The use of the hyphen, as Margaret Hallissy argues, "is not trivial, as it makes statements about identity" (2006: 17). In this case, my use of these notions without the hyphen relies on the assumption that the unhyphenated definition of identity places equal emphasis on the ethnic origins and the current cultural and geographical position of an individual.

resenting and discussing the complex phenomenon of the Famine, but that it also engages in the bigger cultural project of raising awareness of the history of the Great Hunger. Outlining this multidirectional cultural work of the trilogy through a systemic model of narrative worldmaking, this study investigates what exactly underlies the specifics of O'Connor's contribution to a notably expanding corpus of 21<sup>st</sup>-century Famine fiction.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the fact that the year 2020 marks the 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Great Irish Famine of 1845–1852, the discussions and commemorations of the event are so extensive in contemporary Irish culture that it might seem that the notorious hunger occurred less than a decade ago. Ireland experienced several critical periods of food shortages and mass migration before and after the 1840s. However, it is only the latter period that is widely associated with *An Gorta Mór* – the Great Hunger – a title implying that its duration, international reverberations and politically ambiguous causes and effects distinguish ‘the Famine’ from other episodes in Irish history (Mark-FitzGerald 2018: 2). In the summer of 1845, the then-unknown fungus *phytophthora infestans* caused potato blight, which damaged the majority of Ireland's main crop. In the seven years that followed, around one million people died as a result of recurring crop failures and another two million left the country in pursuit of salvation from hunger, poverty and eviction. Referred to as “a watershed in Irish history and the last major European famine”, the mass starvation of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century is continuously addressed and negotiated within current cultural, historical and socio-political debates (Póirtéir 1995b: 9). Emily Mark-FitzGerald, one of the most prolific contemporary Famine scholars, mentions that “hardly a week goes by” without Irish and Irish American media featuring “some Famine-related story” – an observation she substantiates by noting an average of three mentions every week (2018: 13). Besides ongoing references in the press, the theme of the Famine is omnipresent within numerous other cultural responses, such as Declan O'Rourke's 2017 music album *Chronicles of the Great Irish Famine*, art exhibitions like *Coming Home: The Art and the Great Hunger* (O'Sullivan 2018) as well as commemorative famine walks organised annually by initiatives like Action from Ireland (Afri).

None of these responses to the Famine history, however, have been as abundant and internationally acknowledged as literary fiction and, in particular, the historical novel. The last three decades can be associated with a boom of fiction that revolves around the Great Irish Hunger. Remarkably, the majority of the most recent novels became international bestsellers: Sebastian Barry's *Days Without End* (2016), Emma Donoghue's thriller, *The Wonder* (2016), Paul Lynch's prize-winning *Grace* (2017) and Marita Conlon-McKenna's most recent book, *The Hungry Road* (2020), are just several significant examples of this trend. In fact, historical novels turn to the theme of the Great Famine so often that critics, such as scholar Bernhard Klein, suggest implementing the label “the Famine novel” to describe this proliferating kind of contemporary historical fiction (2007: 42).

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3 Regarding the particular use of the terms ‘Famine fiction’ and ‘Famine novel’ in this study, see the last part of this introduction.