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# Reading Lessons: Famine and the *Nation*, 1845-1849

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Under the regular column heading of 'State of the Country' in the *Nation* of 1 July 1848, shortly before the suppression of the newspaper for sedition, a sub-heading appears advising the reader to 'Read, Mark, Learn, and Inwardly Digest' the contents of the following two columns of reports, which are all concerned with 'exterminations' (a term applied to both evictions and to famine deaths). The advice is worth noting because it draws attention to the ultimately pedagogic and utilitarian intentions of the paper. One is not merely to read, but to make *use* of the material presented, to absorb it into the bloodstream, so to speak, make it food for thought or action. The stories of death and suffering and cruelty and despair are more than brute facts. They are facts which have implications and latent power – for the editors of the *Nation*, the provision of news was a means to an end, not an end in itself. One might say that this small but representative item indicates an important difference between the *Nation* and many present-day newspapers; the contemporary media is more inclined to veer away from such open admissions of its polemic and ideological role, and is more likely to privilege the ideas of 'objectivity' and the reservation of judgement. If we think of this in literary terms, we might argue that where the nineteenth-century nationalist press recognises and accepts the affectivity of language – its power to evaluate, move, to activate and provoke – the media of the twentieth-century has tended to devalue affectivity and aspire instead to the supposedly descriptive and informative. To some extent this is also related to the impact of literary modernism on language and narrative in the twentieth-century. The nineteenth-century conventions of narrative copiousness, sentimentality, commitment, and so on, are the very values rejected by the modernist principles of minimalism, detachment, 'hardness', and objectivity.

Any attempt to assess the representation of an event like the Famine in the nineteenth-century press must bear this difference in mind. To comment in a genuinely useful way on these texts, we have to treat means of representation, discourse itself, as an object of investigation. We can't take language, even the language of journalism, at 'face value', since 'obvious meanings' and 'face values' are not immutable. Where the nineteenth-century audience reads a powerful and enabling expression of national feeling, a contemporary reader may read an overblown and hackneyed piece of propaganda. Both readings say more about their respective historical contexts than about the nature of the texts 'in

themselves'. The point is that we cannot assess discourse and representation apart from its material contexts – and this includes everything from the meaning of particular tropes and narrative conventions to the material conditions of production and transmission, such as the publishing trade, the function of the press, and the nature of the readership.

Thus we might begin to investigate the representation of the Famine in the *Nation* by briefly looking at the nature and function of the newspaper itself. The original slogan of the *Nation*, 'To create and to foster public opinion in Ireland – to make it racy of the soil', indicates the intention of its founders to use it as an instrument of national consciousness-raising, thus combining an Enlightenment notion of creation or building anew, with an apparently contradictory romantic belief in the authority of the 'soil' – a kind of uneasy juxtaposition of modernity and tradition. The first part of the formula, the 'fostering of public opinion', points clearly to the pedagogical function of the paper. But this is not just education for the sake of it; Ireland needed to be educated in order to free itself. Education and learning are understood as merely a prelude to action. In the paper's first issue of 15 October 1842, Charles Gavan Duffy writes: '[a newspaper's] slow and silent operation acts on the masses as the wind, which we do not see, moves the dust, which we do see.' Duffy sees the paper as a vehicle for the 'ablest writers in the country' to 'turn with us from the study of mankind in books, to the service of mankind in politics' – in other words, the *Nation* will enable the much needed connection of intellect and politics, of theory and praxis. The most important point here is that the *Nation* did not see itself in terms of neutrality or objectivity. It defined itself in terms of its efficacy.

This object of this efficacy was the production of no less than a unified national culture. In that same first issue, Gavan Duffy writes that the paper's first duty is to teach 'Nationality', but an inclusive one in which sect, party and class differences would 'combine for great and permanent change.' In a significant passage, he argues that:

With all the nicknames that serve to delude and divide us – with all their Orangemen and Ribbonmen, Torymen and Whigmen, Ultras and Moderados, and Heaven knows what rubbish besides, there are in truth, but two parties in Ireland; those who suffer from her National degradation, and those who profit by it.

For a national mind and body which is fragmented, a newspaper offers a means of producing unity, singularity; a voice for the whole nation. Political, religious, and social heterogeneity is here rhetorically transcended by the allegedly 'truer' and less complicated binary opposition of 'degrader' and 'degraded', with the latter group constituting genuine Irish nationality. This ideological move, made possible by a powerful rhetoric of transcendence and exclusion, meant

the displacement and obscuring of those very real and historically rooted divisions in the country, and proposed instead to subsume painlessly all under Wolfe Tone's 'common name of Irishman'. The homogenising character of the project was also reflected in a number of the paper's features: the convention, for instance, of reprinting reports from the local and regional press, thus assimilating them into this new, 'national' voice which transcends the local and regional. What is gained by this practice is the construction of a powerful ideal of cultural unity; but what is devalued or lost is the range of alternative identities – identities based on differences of locality, language, sect, or social class. The reader of the *Nation* is supposedly in the position of the idealised national subject: one who exists beyond the 'local' and 'regional', one who 'naturally' speaks English, one who appears on the face of it to belong to no sect or class at all. As David Lloyd has shown, this 'transcendental' identity-thinking is a common feature of nineteenth-century nationalisms, in Ireland and elsewhere. It belongs to the bourgeois ideology of the universalised subject, which is the dominant ideology informing the nationalism of Young Ireland itself.<sup>1</sup>

Deep contradictions underlie bourgeois ideology, of course, and the *Nation*, like any text, inevitably reproduced some of the contradictions of its informing ideology. Limited by its bourgeois liberalism, the paper decried oppression in general, but disclaimed republicanism, Chartism and socialism; it looked forward, Arnold-like, to a combination of classes, but rejected calls for 'combinations' of workers. It sought to speak for the idealised 'People', but spoke a language which was still alien to half the actual population. Most strikingly, perhaps, it called for the production of a national culture, but did so through the machinery of imperialism. A famous example is Thomas Davis's advice to aspiring poets to learn about the topography of their country from the military project of the Ordnance Survey<sup>2</sup> – it can even be argued that the newspaper trade itself was a development of the capitalist industrialisation of communication which was integral to nineteenth-century imperialism. This 'machinery' originating in the imperialist culture might also be taken to include narrative and representational conventions. The discursive features of the news reports and editorials of the *Nation* are no different in many ways to those of the bourgeois British press and literature of the period, though they are of course pressed into the service of what is ostensibly an anti-imperialist project. It is thus not surprising to find that the 'Young Irelanders', Davis and Duffy and Mitchel, were essentially urban-based, middle-class, English-speaking professionals, as were many of their contributors.

We might ask who precisely would have been reading the *Nation*, especially in a country where, on the eve of the Famine, less than half the population was

1 See David Lloyd, *Nationalism and Minor Literature: James Clarence Mangan and the Emergence of Irish Cultural Nationalism* (Berkeley, 1987), chapter 2.

2 'Ballad History of Ireland', *The Nation*, 30 November 1844.

literate.<sup>3</sup> The price of the paper was 6d. – in 1845, that would nearly buy two two-pound loaves of ‘lower quality’ bread in Dublin. But a better indication of its relative expense is the fact that in 1847, a labourer on a public works scheme might earn only 8d. to 10d. per day<sup>4</sup> – an amount which was often insufficient to feed a family. Clearly then the purchasers of the *Nation* were middle class; but of course one of the strengths of the paper was the fact that one need not buy it to read it – until the split with O’Connell, the *Nation* could be read in any Repeal reading room, and there is also a popular image of the *Nation* being read aloud to rapt but illiterate listeners in villages across Ireland. There is undoubtedly some truth to this image – Malcolm Brown estimates a figure of 10 readers for every single paper sold, which makes for a readership of perhaps 250,000 people per week.<sup>5</sup> But it may also be significant that the distribution of newsagents selling the paper was concentrated in Dublin, Leinster and southern Ulster.<sup>6</sup> All of this would suggest that the majority of *Nation* readers (or at least buyers) were middle-class, English-speaking, and inhabitants of the more economically advantaged and urbanised parts of the country. The experiences of those labouring and cottier classes who were to suffer most in the Famine would have been alien to those readers in terms of language and social class, and the provinces of Munster and Connaught, most devastated by the Famine, would have been literally and imaginatively remote. What’s more, the representational conventions employed by the paper’s writers, and expected by the paper’s readers, would have been closer to the representational models of bourgeois English culture than any other models.

So more precisely, what does the *Nation* tell us about the Famine itself? For one thing it provides, through its regular Saturday publication, a weekly chronology of the Famine, from the first reference to potato blight on 13 September 1845 to the despairing editorials of late 1849, penned by a disillusioned and exhausted Charles Gavan Duffy. It also serves as a convenient digest of the provincial press of the period, on whom it relied heavily for its often harrowing reports on the ‘State of the Country.’ Through these hundred and fifty issues of densely-packed columns of print, the Famine figures as one of the most potent and pervasive signifiers across a range of discourses, from the agricultural-scientific, to the political-economic, to the religious, to the literary, to the nationalist revolutionary. The *Nation*’s representation of the Famine can thus tell us something about the character of these discourses, and in particular the meaning of the Famine for nationalist thought in the period.

3 See J.W. Freeman, *Pre-famine Ireland: a Study in Historical Geography* (Manchester, 1957), pp. 133-9.

4 Cormac Ó Gráda, *Ireland Before and After the Famine* (2nd ed., Manchester, 1993), p. 131.

5 Malcolm Brown, *The Politics of Irish Literature* (London, 1972), p. 67.

6 Each issue of the *Nation* provided a list of newsagents selling the paper in Ireland and abroad.

It is poignant to follow the early reports of the blight itself, and the various proposals by agricultural and scientific experts to counter or alleviate its effects. In the early days of September and October 1845, the *Nation* gives considerable coverage to the scientific controversy over the cause of the potato disease, with speculation ranging from hot, damp weather, to poor cultivation practices, to excessive electricity in the atmosphere. The true explanation – the fungus – was not considered probable, and there are consequently lengthy proposals for remedies which proved to be of no use whatsoever. By November 1845 'The Potato Disease' is a weekly heading over a substantial range of texts, often occupying 10 or 11 columns of print, and including letters, reports of public meetings, advice on the storage and preparation of potatoes, news of the blight in England and abroad, and so on. The deeper ironies and problems in this discourse emerge when one considers it within the wider context of who was communicating to whom. The advice of scientific experts like Sir James Murray, which the *Nation* reported in great detail, looks tragically inappropriate to the majority of victims of the blight, firstly because it was based upon a misunderstanding of the causes of the disease, but also because it seems to misunderstand the resources available to a huge population often living in destitute conditions. One early piece of advice called for the baking of diseased potatoes at 180° F, advice which presumes the ownership of an oven. Another called for the household production of chlorine gas with which to treat the potatoes. In addition, the *Nation's* admirably exhaustive coverage of these proposals appears to construct a model which sets English scientific expertise against hapless Irish peasant ignorance, just one of the many points at which this bourgeois nationalist paper becomes more bourgeois than nationalist. The discursive surrealism produced by such contradictions is also reflected in the juxtapositions of reports of imminent starvation with weekly columns of 'Gardening Operations for the Week' (reprinted from the English *Gardener's Chronicle*), which on 18 April 1846 reminded readers, alongside reports of food riots in Tipperary, that

Scarlet runners and an early crop of French beans should now be sown. The first kidney beans will be as well raised in a hothouse or frame, and transplanted. Sow also a little early red beet, scorzoners and salsify. The globe artichokes should now be dressed.

As the months wore on, the reporting of the effects of the Famine on the Irish populace was to become central to the *Nation's* nationalist political-economic discourse. The language of 'starvation' was not new to either Irish nationalist or British bureaucratic discourse when the 1845 potato crop failed. For example, the *Times* Commissioner visiting Ireland in August 1845, a month before the blight was first noticed in the country, wrote that 'nearly all the crimes that are committed in Ireland are agrarian ... the cause which produces it is almost uni-

versal – namely, want of employment and consequent starvation and discontent' (30 August 1845). This is an argument found over and over again in the minutes of Repeal Association meetings so meticulously reported in the *Nation* every week, and represents the standard O'Connellite position at the outset of the Famine. The 'Great Famine' itself, as its ominous scale began to be recognised in the winter and spring of 1846, was, from this perspective, merely an unusually intense example of a recurring evil rooted in the country's defective economic structure. The Famine was easily put to use by the O'Connellite political-economic view of Ireland under the Union – the view, that is, that British governments inevitably mismanaged Irish affairs, particularly in maintaining an economic order which drained the country of resources and pauperised a large section of the populace.

Judging from his speeches as reported in the *Nation*, O'Connell, in the autumn of 1845, recognised almost immediately the impending disaster that the failure of the potato crop would cause among the poor (and indeed the rich, who, he argued, would become victims of the fever consequent upon famine). As early as October 1845, when the exact extent of crop failure was still uncertain, O'Connell was advocating a number of specific practical measures – some of which, like preventing exports of grain, import supplies of Indian corn, suspension of the distilling industry, and taxing landlords, were also part of his larger Repeal argument in favour of an Irish parliament. The establishment of the latter would enable the Irish themselves to deal with crises like potato failure in a more efficient way than heretofore. This discourse featured strongly in the *Nation*, both in the reported speeches of Repealers and in sympathetic editorials, which often took the form of prophetic warnings to the government and landlords – warnings that scarcity of food, should it occur, might provoke social revolution. As early as 25 October 1845, in an editorial entitled 'The People's Food', the *Nation* warns that unless urgent action is taken:

agrarian outrage ... will ... stalk, in blood and terror, over the land, leading to a general disorganisation of society and reign of terror which it is fearful to think of.

Reading this editorial more closely, we might also note that in this kind of discourse the term 'People' functions more as a signifier of a transcendental national identity than as a signifier of actual inhabitants of Ireland – who are the 'People' exactly? Is the editor himself a potato-eater? In line with the bourgeois character of the discourse, the text produces rhetorically what it hopes to find in actuality – an identity which escapes the heretofore recalcitrant divisiveness and heterogeneity of Irish culture. To the bourgeois nationalist, dedicated to the production of the unified and homogenous national cultural order, the prospect of uncontrolled revolution, of a kind which escapes the control of central au-

thority, is as terrifying as it is to the government and landlords. It is noteworthy that the *Nation*, while condemning landlord injustices, universally condemned assassinations as examples of 'outrage'. In general Young Ireland courted the gentry for support, and was not opposed to landlordism as such.

What is striking and perhaps liable to misinterpretation by the contemporary secular readers, is the apparently easy mingling of religious and political-economic discourse in discussions of the Famine. O'Connell's speeches in particular are exemplary of this – in one breath he will describe the potato failure as a 'visitation of Providence', with 'famine and pestilence now at our door', and in the next breath list seven practical measures for alleviation of the impending scarcity, including closure of the ports, reducing the allocation of oats to the cavalry, and so on (15 November 1845). Prayers that the 'Almighty may avert ... misfortune' are followed up by accusations of government 'culpable conduct' in the 'crime' of allowing the exportation of oats and 'aggravating starvation and famine' (22 November 1845). Divine causation, in other words, did not preclude administrative culpability – Mitchel was by no means original in his allegation that 'The Almighty, indeed, sent the potato blight, but the English created the Famine.'<sup>7</sup> This was more or less an implication that could be logically derived early on from the speeches of O'Connell and in the editorials of the *Nation*. Similarly, the expectation of divine retribution did not preclude nationalist agitation; in an editorial entitled 'The Last Resource' (17 April 1847), the *Nation* argues that:

children will grow up in the trodden nation, to pray to the Lord that no peace, no rest, no prosperity, may be vouchsafed to England till GOD's justice to suffering Ireland prevail, and be made manifest to all men. One more effort, then, for dear Ireland, *now*, while this generation may still be saved. Let us meet together – all ranks and classes of Irishmen – in some *National Council*, and take measures, once for all, for our redemption; that we, too, may not be thrown into coffinless graves, amid the bitter scorn and contemptuous laughter of mankind.

As a literary illustration of the same interaction of political and devotional, consider the work of the most popular *Nation* poet, Speranza. Her famous poem 'The Stricken Land' (23 January 1847) juxtaposes political accusation ('But the stranger reaps our harvest – the alien owns our soil') with predictions of divine retribution on these alien 'murderers.' But to read this as merely a plea to 'suffer and be still' in the hope of divine retribution is to fail to realise the power of the political rhetoric which also suffuses the poem. It is poor government – a human and therefore changeable reality – which provides the occasion for God's

<sup>7</sup> John Mitchel, *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)* (Glasgow, 1876), p. 219.

intervention. God intervenes only because humans have failed; the human and divine are interactive rather than mutually exclusive. Consider also the last stanza of the poem:

We are wretches, famished, scorned, human tools to build your pride,  
 But God will yet take vengeance for the souls for whom Christ died.  
 Now is your hour of pleasure – bask ye in the world's caress,  
 But our whitening bones against ye will arise as witnesses,  
 From the cabins and the ditches in their charr'd uncoffin'd masses,  
 For the Angel of the Trumpet will know them as he passes.  
 A ghastly spectre army before the great God we'll stand,  
 And arraign ye as our murderers, the spoilers of our land.

The imagery here is not merely symbolic. It bears a close resemblance to the imagery of the populist agrarian blood and terror which will rise up to stalk the land in O'Connell's speeches or Gavan Duffy's editorials – imagery intended to suggest actual historical possibility. The apocalypse is not merely something to be deferred to the 'end of history'; it may arrive in all-too-literal fashion in the near future. Indeed if we look at a poem by Speranza published in the *Nation* several weeks later (27 March) entitled 'France in '93 – A Lesson in Foreign History', we find her describing an almost identical political and moral cataclysm, this time in purely secular terms, warning of the bloody social and moral chaos which accompanies violent revolution.

The other obvious discourse at work here is the Gothic – the notion of the walking dead, the spectre army, the terror produced by violating the natural order. The use of the Gothic in this instance also indicates the mixture of horror and fascination which the prospect of violent revolution inspired for cultural nationalism – on the one hand a romantic excitement at the idea, and on the other a conservative fear of the collapse of political and social order. We can also see the language of the Gothic employed in the factual reports of the human consequences of famine and eviction in the period. Reports frequently tell of dead who 'are so changed by want as not to be recognised by their friends – their looks wolfish, and glaring as madmen' (2 January 1847). The *Nation* of 18 April 1846 carries a report on the eviction of 277 tenants from the estate of the Marquis of Waterford:

The faces of these people were subdued with hunger; pale, or rather of a ghostly yellow, indicative of the utmost destitution. They are starving ... We hurried with horror from these frightful visitations, which are *permitted* by Providence for his own wise ends, sick at heart, and out of conceit with the system of doing what one likes with one's own ... I have put nothing down in malice, but every thing in the spirit of truth and fair

play ... I need draw no moral from this; but you might call the attention of the Irish members to it, that they might use the FACTS against the coercion bill, and against traducers of the people.

Here the Gothic is pressed into the service of nationalist politics. It is not merely an indulgence in the fantastic, it is not mere sensationalism (though it is partly these) – here it is primarily a discourse designed to challenge *laissez-faire* economic and social policy, and to be useful in nationalist political agitation.

Many of the reports of actual deaths from famine are taken from inquest reports. These inquests are an important element of the discourse on the Famine, since they provide names, details, a sense of place, and personal histories which are lacking in the generalising famine discourses in poetry and politics. The issue of 2 January 1847 includes the following, from the *Mayo Constitution*:

the same coroner held an inquest on the body of Bridget Joyce, a widow with four children, who died in a small sheep house in a small field at Gleneadagh. It appeared in evidence that the deceased and her family were in the utmost state of destitution, and one of the children had nothing to wet the lips of its dying parent with but a drop of water or a little snow. The body lay for eight days before a few boards could be procured to make a coffin, in such a state of destitution was the locality. Verdict – death from starvation.

On the 23rd, same coroner held an inquest on the body of Edmond MacHale, a boy, at Caracirable, in Attymass, one of a numerous family. The evidence of the mother as to their destitution was truly melancholy. The last words of the dying child to his family were – ‘Mother, give me three grains of corn.’ A woman who was present at the melancholy scene, searched the pocket of his jacket and found three grains of corn. Verdict – died from starvation.

Here we see a combination of the conventions of the sentimental tale, especially in the evocation of lost innocence, extreme pathos, and the deaths of mothers and children, with elements of myth and folk-tale, complete with tragic irony and magical numbers. All six of the reports in this section are punctuated by the striking refrain of ‘Verdict – died from starvation’ which adds another level, the language of official, unemotive, statistical discourse. The cumulative effect of the refrain is to transform the named individuals we have just read about into anonymous dehumanised victims of a mass tragedy, a kind of blackly ironic version of nationalism’s ideal of common identity. The other irony is that such revelations, which are here being used as part of a nationalist project, are only made possible because of an imperial British bureaucracy which demands the holding of inquests. As a result, the *Nation* reproduces a perspective which in

some basic ways reproduces the perspective of the imperial culture it ostensibly opposes.<sup>8</sup> Such scenes as those described are mediated in a similar discourse for the Dublin reader of the *Nation* as they would be for the London reader of the *Times*. The bourgeois nationalist subject and the bourgeois imperialist subject begin to look like mirror images, though of course in other ways the *Nation* is asking the Irish reader to view these victims as fellow national subjects, thus working to overcome the 'distancing' effect of the mediation itself.

Apart from the fact that they are all features of bourgeois discourse, what links these discursive forms I have described – the religious, the Gothic, the sentimental tale – is their *affectivity*. They are narrative forms which are intended to perform things rather than simply reflect reality in some transparent way (as in the classic realist novel, or in modern journalism, or in scientific discourse). Yet at certain points, the writers of the *Nation* draw attention to language's apparent failure to reflect the reality of the Famine. On 19 February 1848, for instance, a report reprinted from the *Sligo Champion* is prefaced with the statement that 'The misery which the people here are now enduring beggars all description.' Gavan Duffy himself, in the first issue of the newly-revived *Nation* of 1 September 1849, writes that 'No words printed in a newspaper or elsewhere, will give any man who has not seen it a conception of the fallen condition of the West and South.'

But we must be careful about how we interpret these comments. Recent assessments of Famine literature which have stressed the importance of such statements appear to read them in the light of modernist reactions to the Holocaust. In the introduction to his useful anthology of poetry about the Irish famine, for example, Chris Morash quotes George Steiner's pronouncement that 'The world of Auschwitz lies outside speech as it lies outside reason.' Morash adds: 'The same could be said of the world of the Famine. But the attempt to contain that world within language, even if doomed to failure, had to be attempted.'<sup>9</sup> Margaret Kelleher also invokes Steiner in the opening paragraph of her essay on Famine literature.<sup>10</sup> While such a comparison is superficially attractive, there seem to me to be two very basic problems with it. Firstly, it assumes that Steiner's attitude towards the Holocaust is itself unproblematic. But to suggest, as Steiner does, that the meaning of human atrocity is outside reason and representation – 'outside the text' – merely mystifies and romanticises such events. To speak of a 'world' of Auschwitz is already to employ metaphor, to be *within* speech and reason – ironically one can only make claims about language's

8 See also Margaret Kelleher's related and very useful discussion of the audience-orientation of nineteenth-century fiction about the Great Famine in her essay 'Irish Famine in Literature' in Cathal Pórtéir (ed.), *The Great Irish Famine* (Cork, 1995).

9 Chris Morash (ed.), *The Hungry Voice: The Poetry of the Irish Famine* (Dublin, 1989), p. 37. The Steiner quotation is from *Language and Silence* (London, 1985), p. 146.

10 Kelleher, 'Irish Famine in Literature', p. 232.

inadequacy through the medium of language itself. The argument is not just sophistic – the point is that there is, as Derrida has famously written, no ‘outside the text’. Even irrationality is a signifier whose meaning is rationally comprehended, and every gesture toward some kind of non-linguistic ‘truth’ or reality is still a gesture, a sign which has real and often very powerful meanings. It is true that language can only give us constructions which are limited by history and material life, never an expression of ‘transcendent truth’ – but such a failure is only a problem if one believes the function of language to be merely the disinterested conveyance of some pre-existent ‘truth’ in a more or less accurate way. For the writers of the *Nation*, on the other hand, writing was much more reader-oriented, more dedicated to efficacy than accuracy, more an instrument for communicative action rather than a looking-glass (even a Joycean cracked one). The point was not necessarily to ‘contain’ the world of the Famine within language – it was primarily to write about the Famine in a way which would produce certain responses. The affective function of such discourse was strong, even if its representational function seems weak.

The second problem relates to the way we interpret the ‘indescribability’ of atrocity. To admit to the ‘indescribability’ of certain Famine scenes, as contemporary commentators on the Famine often did, is not simply to register an ultimate failure of all linguistic or representational conventions. The fact is that in certain forms of nineteenth-century bourgeois discourse, ‘indescribability’ is itself a trope, a convention, which is itself very meaningful. One finds it originally in the romantic discourse on the Sublime, where it functions to suggest emotionally overpowering experience, in which effect exceeds material representation. This trope of the ‘indescribable’ takes on a particular social and ethical meaning in the Victorian period, where writers like Dickens use it to signify a state of physical or material degradation which corresponds to a state of moral depravity (the conditions of urban poverty or prostitution, for example). It is also a central trope in another Victorian descendent of romanticism, the Gothic novel, whose conventions we have already seen at work in representations of the Famine. The ‘indescribable’ and ‘unspeakable’ are *de rigueur* for such narratives – the whole point of them is to evoke that which is suggestive, excessive, hidden, radically Other. For the bourgeois writer of the 1840s, in other words, there was a ready made set of discourses which lay to hand, and which had ‘indescribability’ as a built-in feature. To use the trope in the 1840s was not to register a Beckettian encounter with the void. Nor was it exactly the same as the modernist ‘unspeakable’ and ‘unrepresentable’ of Conrad and Forster. It does look forward to these modernist texts, it is true, but it is not identical to them.

I think it is also very telling that ‘indescribability’ of this sort does not appear to be a feature of the discourse on the Famine in the oral tradition, an alternative to the bourgeois discourse of the print medium. The gaps and ‘failures’ in the oral tradition seem to be more the result of willed silence rather than a break-

down of language. Cathal Pórtéir cites the account of one 'native informant', who felt that certain local accounts of the Famine, involving stealing or taking over the holdings of evicted tenants, were better left untold:

Several people would be glad if the Famine times were altogether forgotten so the cruel doings of their forebears would not be again renewed and talked about by the neighbours.<sup>11</sup>

The problem in this case is not the inadequacy of language but the very opposite – the *power* of language to reveal certain truths about the Famine, and to stimulate the production of more discourse. It is precisely because language can say *too* much that it causes a problem in such contexts. So, it seems to me to be too simplistic to argue for the fundamental unrepresentability of the Famine; this idea too needs contextualisation.

How efficacious were these representations, ultimately? The *Nation* certainly provided a set of images and perspectives on the Famine which would establish themselves in nationalist discourse for generations. Yet obviously, in the end, the tropes, conventions and exhortations did not do enough to assist a political and cultural revolution of the sort Gavan Duffy, John Mitchel and other Young Irelanders had aspired to. In the issue of 1 September 1849, Gavan Duffy admits that he is 'paralysed' in the face of the Famine's devastation. Faced with such shocking scenes as the ones witnessed during his trip to the West, Duffy's language constructs the victimised Irish men and women as a race beyond nationality, beyond even basic humanity:

The famine and the landlords have actually created a new race in Ireland. I have seen on the streets of Galway crowds of creatures more debased than the Yahoos of Swift – creatures having only a distant and hideous resemblance to human beings. Grey-headed old men, whose idiot faces had hardened into a settled leer of mendicancy, simeous and semi-human; and women filthier and more frightful than harpies ... *shrieking* for their prey, like some monstrous and unclean animals ... I have seen these accursed sights, and they are burned into my mind forever.

At the waning of the Famine, Duffy and the *Nation* are in despair, yet even under such conditions, Duffy never entirely loses faith in the potential efficacy of language. In the same editorial, he can still plead that '[t]he grounds of hope are various, but sure. Some of them are plain and clear enough. Plain, clear and eternal, for God has written them in symbols which no one can refuse to see,

<sup>11</sup> Cathal Pórtéir, 'Folk Memory and the Famine', in Pórtéir (ed.), *The Great Irish Famine*, p. 230.

although many are too blind and confused to interpret them aright.' The paper goes on to welcome the publication of the Larcom Report on Ireland in 1848, and in a brief foray into literary theory notes that the facts of famine and extermination which Larcom presents are all too familiar to Irish people – yet

facts with which one is too familiar need sometimes to be placed in a new light to attract attention. The very nature of some things seems changed by the varying of lights and shadows upon them ... The effects of famine seen in Captain LARCOM's statistics might cause some similar emotion in the dulled sensibilities of the Irish public.

Even here, still, cultural nationalism can express the hope of finding redemption through the powers of representation.