

Continuous Hunger

Poetic Representations of Irish Identity and the Great Famine in Seamus Heaney’s “At a Potato Digging” and Desmond Egan’s “Famine, a Sequence”

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Abstract: The Great Irish Famine (1845–1851) necessitated processes of collective identity reconstruction and re-narration. Scholars have traced literary transformations of the event up to the period of Modernism, leaving poetry and texts from later generations underexplored. This article examines how Seamus Heaney’s “At a Potato Digging” (1966) and Desmond Egan’s “Famine, a Sequence” (1997) reimagine a persisting cultural wound to redefine the Irish present. In an attempt to approach the ‘missing signifier’ to an inexpressible but palpable reality, Egan’s poem portrays the famine as an unending presence embedded in Ireland’s landscape, language, and collective psyche, using fragmented syntax and pared-down diction to mirror deprivation and the struggle for recovery from cultural trauma. Heaney’s poem, by contrast, explores competing causal narratives and intertwined dependencies by excavating the emblem of the potato, revealing a previously overlooked polysemy of divine, natural, agricultural, and colonial causes. Through poetic reimagining, both works militate against oblivion and advocate asserting the Famine as a foundational and continuing force in Irish self-understanding to enable processes of cultural healing.

Keywords: Irish identity, Great Famine, poetry, cultural trauma

1. Introduction

“The ‘land of song’ was no longer tuneful”, writes folk music collector George Petrie in 1855 in reference to post-famine Ireland (21). Several contemporaneous and subsequent sources have connected *An Gorta Mór*, the Great Irish Famine (1845–1851), to an absence of sound and communication (Falc’her-Poyroux 2014, 162); some argue that the silence was not interrupted until 1995, the year of the 150th anniversary commemoration, others claim it has still not been broken entirely (Cioséin 1995, 7; O’Doherty 2012). This “awful unwonted silence” is a silence that speaks (Petrie 1855, 21): the extent of the horror stunned survivors into muteness (Fin 2024, 60); the collapse of social intercourse, traditions and moral standards exacerbated feelings of shame and culpability (Orjuela 2024, 265); the large number of victims seems impossible to register, let alone appropriately express (O’Malley 2015, 132).

However, a discursive recovering of the “unspeakable or inexpressible reality” is essential not just to commemorate the victims, but also to embed the destabilized worldview in collective memory to enable transgenerational processes of identity revision, re-remembering and reconstruction (Kelleher 1997, 3; Boersema 2013, 234; Eyerman and Sciortino 2020, 209). A “traumatized society” is therefore not bogged down in the past; it is attempting to redefine the present (Madigan 2020, 49). To do so, narratives—socially mediated representations of trauma—need to be developed and upheld in a sociological struggle over meaning (Zhukova 2016, 336). After all, cultural trauma is “made, not born” (Smelser 2004, 37). In this process, literature often plays a prominent role (Madigan 2020, 46). Through literary imagination, the gaps of expression can be filled or at least approached more closely (Kelleher 1997, 3). Irish literature can thus be considered a fruitful framework for examining attempts at identity reconstruction during and after the Great Famine. Both contemporaneous and second-generation texts, mostly novels, have been subjected to scholarly analysis, resulting in a relatively well-established body of criticism up to the period of Modernism (Pitrone 2013; Percich 2016;

Fegan 2002). However, texts of later generations, as well as Famine poetry more broadly, remain underexplored. This paper seeks to address both gaps by analysing two Irish poems from the second half of the 20th century in order to explore how they attempt to define contemporary Irish identity through a literary representation of *An Gorta Mór* (Heilmann 2010, 285).

Seamus Heaney's "At a Potato Digging",¹ published in 1966, has generated critical responses, but mostly from the perspective of his oeuvre rather than the aspect of traumatic identity reconstruction (Sharratt 1976; De Leo 2019; Klitzing 2019; Parker 1993). Notably, scholarly attention tends to concentrate on sections one and three of the poem, leaving the second and last section—together with the structural interplay among all four sections—largely overlooked. This paper attempts to complement and link these insights by providing a close-reading of all sections. I argue that "At a Potato Digging" portrays the multi-faceted dependency of the Irish peasants on the potato crop and, by doing so, engages in the contentious discourse on causality and responsibility. As Zhukova (2016, 366) notes, this facet of discourse poses central questions for the trauma narrative: "Who or what can be blamed for causing the calamity, and who can be responsible for dealing with its aftermath?". The poem defies a monosemous reading, as its complex structure intertwines political, providential and agricultural viewpoints that alternately reinforce and counteract prevailing causal explanations of the catastrophe. As such, Heaney poetically layers the complex relationship between the Great Famine and the present in a metapoetical act of 'digging'.

In 1997, Desmond Egan published an entire poem collection on the impact of *An Gorta Mór* entitled "Famine", which has received little attention in academia to date. This paper provides the first thorough interpretation of the poem "Famine, a sequence".² Egan's representation is a poetic diagnosis of the present: it situates the famine in a resultative relation to contemporary conditions to re-remember and

¹ All references to "At a Potato Digging" are made to Heaney 1966, 31–33.

² All references to "Famine, a sequence" are made to Egan 1997, 15.

reconstruct the (linguistic) gaps of the post-famine generations, for whom firsthand memory is no longer accessible. I argue that the poem both contemplates and approaches the ‘missing signifier’. This reveals a central logic of the Famine discourse: the therapeutic potential embedded in revisiting the traumatic past. In both texts, a cultural wound is tentatively bound through its reimagining in poetic form; in the conclusion, I compare the stylistic and thematic choices Heaney and Egan make in their efforts to do justice to this aspect.

2. Voicing the Great Silence: Desmond Egan’s “Famine, a Sequence”

The title ‘Famine, a sequence’ signifies the poem’s formal and thematic core principle. The Great Famine is treated as an element of continuity inextricably tied to the Irish present. This sense of persistence is reinforced in the speaker’s tense usage. The poem contains no preterite verb form, which would mark a temporal separation from the speaker’s zero point, because to the speaker, there is no sense of discontinuity. The Great Famine is not over, even though the potato blight ended in 1851; its consequences and impact are still present at the time of speaking, which precludes the use of the past tense. In other words, the speaker, who defines itself collectively as “us”, does not *recall* the famine—it perceives, smells, hears and feels its presence. Consequently, all verbs are inflected either for the present or present perfect tense. This frame of reference is immediately established in the first line: “The stink of famine | hangs in the bushes still”. Formally, the “stink of famine” literally “hangs” on top of this poem; the subject cascades down the lines, both syntactically as well as graphically (enjambment), tinting all following elements and verses in its wake. Interestingly, the speaker does not refer to the “stink” of the blight, but the stink of “famine”, which creates latitude to evoke the characteristic smell of the rotten potatoes, the putrefaction of the human bodies, but also other intricate, olfactory sensations of the catastrophe. By assigning elements of the present-day Irish topography to the signifier

famine, the speaker concretizes the relatively abstract to an enduring reality: as such, the signifier becomes a stand-in for the all-embracing impact of *An Gorta Mór*:

2.1. *The Omnipresence of the Catastrophe*

The famine cannot be escaped because it manifests itself in bodily sensations: smell (“the stink of famine”), taste (“its taste on every meal”), sound (“there is famine in our music”), vision (mien: “famine behind our faces”), orientation (“down the line of our landscape”; “it is only a field away”). Crucially, the experiencer (“us”) does not *act* to achieve these sensations—instead, the experience is inevitably triggered by the object (“famine”). This sense of intrusion is reinforced by the prepositions: the famine is “*on* every meal”, “*in* our music”, “*behind* our faces” (my emphasis), invasively staining elements of life, evoking the fungus that blighted the potato crop. The catastrophe is thus translated into the modern world, or—to be precise—it endures, creating a sequence. All human necessities that nourish people with life and identity are tainted by the famine. Nature is no longer a place of fertility and well-being, but of decay and unpleasantness (“stink”). The landscape is subject to isolation and estrangement (“sad Celtic hedges”). Eating is a burden as the foul taste seeps into every dish (“get its taste on every meal”), spoiling nourishment and commensality, the age-old habit of sharing food to create and maintain social bonds. Other cultural bonds have been ruptured as well (“separate us *from* language”, “cut us *from* our culture [my emphasis]). The desire for aesthetics (fashion, art) cannot be accommodated without crippling feelings of shame (“ashamed to be seen walking out beauty so honored by our ancestors”). Ultimately, even the most primal feeling of existence itself is overshadowed by survivor’s guilt (“guilty for having survived”). The people ‘blighted’ by the famine are thus unable to experience autonomy and self-determination. This is also evident in the syntactic structure of the poem: in 9 clauses, the noun “famine” and its anaphora (“it”) are the subject, while expressions referring to the Irish people (“us”, “our”) only appear in object position (e.g. “[it] has made *us* all immigrants”| “[it] left *us* on our own” [my emphasis]). Being the constituent that

controls the objects, the famine—metaphorically speaking—governs the Irish people. This has an important implication: the Irish do not actively seek to ‘uncover’ its presence in a commemorative confrontation; rather, they are incessantly confronted by it.

Yet, despite this constant confrontation, the Irish as represented in the poem seldom give it voice. While the speaker makes ample use of words of perception to describe the living conditions of “us”, it does not refer to acts of communication within this cultural sphere: the famine is not ‘in our words’ or ‘in our language’; on the contrary, the famine “has separated us from language.” The *separation* from language mentioned by the speaker implies both an inability to communicate with others, which further exacerbates isolation (“left us on our own”), as well as an inability to translate the experiences of catastrophe into (foreign) linguistic material. The latter aligns with the paradigm of the “death of the signifier”, which postulates that the harrowing extent of the tragedy “strains the limits of the articulable” (Eagleton 1995, 13). When words fail, other modes of communication need to take over. Indeed, the only type of communication the speaker explicitly mentions is music: “listen | there is famine in our music.” However, there is, once again, a sense of intrusion implied: the music is not meant to be *about* the famine; instead, the famine is *in* the music, as if nesting within the art, tainting it with poignance. This reading is further amplified by the imperative verb “listen”, which connotes that it takes conscious effort to notice its presence.

This sense of covert intrusion is explored throughout the poem to distinguish between what appears on the surface and what lies beneath. The famine manifests itself not on the surface of objects, but *within* their structures: its presence in plants and food cannot be seen, but only smelt and tasted; moreover, the famine resides “behind our faces” and in “our” behaviour (“ashamed to be seen walking out beauty”), as well as beneath the ground (“unearthing bones by accident”). In this light, present-day Ireland is hidden behind a façade: speaking with the imagery of Seamus Heaney’s “Bogland”, one must ‘dig’ through the surface of Ireland to uncover its subliminal and perpetual elements of identity (Heaney 1972, 43). Consequently, an assertion of Irishness

bracketing out its sublayers for the sake of ‘leaving the past behind’ would be destined to fail as creating nothing more than a semblance.

2.2. *Identity and Confidence: Failure of Historical Detachment*

The syntax of the poem pursues a path of detachment from the primary signifier, yet it never reaches a fully contained conclusion. In this way, it mirrors the fissure within an assertion of national identity that attempts to bracket out the famine from discourse and, by doing so, fails to recognize the conditions of the present. The foundation, the word *famine*, is explicitly mentioned only three times throughout the poem: “the stink of *famine*”, “there is *famine* in our music”, and “*famine* behind our faces” (my emphasis). The speaker then substitutes the noun with its anaphoric pronouns. In the second stanza, the word is replaced with the pronoun *it*: “you can catch it [...]; get its taste”; this pattern is reiterated in the fifth stanza: “*it* is only a field away” (my emphasis). Interestingly, after the ninth line, the word *famine* is not explicitly mentioned again—neither the antecedent *famine*, nor the function word *it*. The remaining 13 lines are ellipses: “has separated us from language | cut us from our culture | built blocks around belief”. None of these clauses introduce a new subject—the verb phrases are still governed by the anaphoric pronoun “it” in line 10, which refers to the famine. As the poem progresses, however, this referential expression moves further away into the distance, which obscures reference resolution. It seems as if the speaker is attempting to avoid the term, echoing a sense of denial which lasted in Irish society for over one hundred years: many people refrained from using the word *famine*, and, if the topic was discussed at all, opted to use euphemisms like *Drochshoal* instead, which roughly translates to ‘bad times’ (Falc’her-Poyroux 2014, 160). In an attempt to develop syntactic independence from the referent (*famine*), the lines end up complicating the syntax but fail to introduce a new subject. The penultimate stanza postmodifies the noun “us”, but since the clauses involved are all non-finite, the main subject still is “it”, the *famine*: “[the famine] left us on our own | ashamed to be seen | walking out beauty | so honoured by our ancestors”. This is no different in the final stanza, which consists of an elliptic main clause introduced

by the coordinator *but*: “but fostered now to peasants | the drivers of motorway diggers | unearthing bones by accident | under the disappearing hills”. Here, “the drivers of motorway diggers” appear in post-posed apposition, that is, after the participle clause. This creates a sense of confusion because the reader has to momentarily process the clause without knowing who or what the subject is. If one recovers the omitted subject, it turns out that the phrase “peasants | the drivers” is the complement of the passive construction (fostered to X), while the grammatical subject is still “it” (famine), carried over from 13 lines earlier. The effect of the subject syllepsis is that the seemingly independent lines are unable to create a stable unit—a full sentence—on their own; the reader must complement the ellipses with the subject to recover a meaningful whole. Similarly, only an assertion of Irish identity which *includes* the tragedy of the Great Famine can be deemed comprehensive and complete.

A suppression of the famine not only leads to a defective sense of independence, as conveyed by the elliptic syntax, but also threatens to erode Irishness. The final stanza states that the famine has been “fostered to peasants | the drivers of motorway diggers”. Since agricultural automation is concomitant with a sense of detachment from manual labour, the speaker depicts the “drivers of motorway diggers” as modern workers who are estranged from the historical hardship involved in digging up the potato drills. This is reinforced by the non-finite verb *fostered*, which connotes that the caregivers in question are not the child’s legal parents: metaphorically speaking, the present-day workers do not preserve the cultural memory surrounding the potato crop with the same reverence as their predecessors—the peasants who, for centuries, harvested the potatoes needed for subsistence in hard, mechanical work. The motorway diggers, symptomatic of a progression of time, thus embody the tendency of moving forward in time and leaving the past behind. Once again, this desire fails due to the famine’s omnipresence: they are depicted “unearthing bones by accident”. During *An Gorta Mór*, thousands of bodies were buried in mass graves—often on hillsides—with neither a funeral nor a coffin. As such, the ‘pits’ are considered an emblem of the breakdown of the foundations of

social intercourse during the famine, as illustrated by the following quote from William Wilde:

the very rites of sepulture, the most sacred and enduring of all the tributes of affection or respect, have been neglected or forgotten; the dead body has rotted where it fell, or formed a scanty meal for the famished dogs of the vicinity, or has been thrown, without prayer or mourning, into the adjoining ditch (Wilde 1979, 10).

The soil is simultaneously the breeding ground for potatoes and the burial site of dehumanized, famished bodies; the harvesters thus dig out the tuber, which nourished the Irish for centuries, in the same spot where they accidentally disinter remains (“bones”) of a devastated people who died because of the blighted potato, which at the same time references the fatal Irish dependency on the vegetable.

Since “bones” constitute the frame of vertebrates, the Irish are metaphorically grounded in famine, just like their landscape is. This is echoed in line 9, which states that “there is famine behind our faces”. Behind the face lies the skull: if the famine resides where, anatomically, the bony enclosure around the brain is, then the famine can also be considered a hard, rigid protection of the Irish people’s collective mind and memory. In this light, the famine not only preserves tragedy and death, but also a sense of truth. After centuries of political as well as social oppression, Irish identity faces the threat of erosion: the hills, a defining element of the Irish landscape, are attributed with the participle “disappearing” and the “Celtic hedges” mentioned by the speaker seem out of place and neglected (“sad”)—indeed, the word “Celtic” is the only explicit reference to Ireland’s cultural and linguistic roots in Gaelic, in a poem entirely written in the English language. The famine sticks to these objects of continuity and turns them into landmarks of a poignant past, but by doing so, provides a historical grounding for what Irishness once meant and continues to mean (“sequence”). The traumatic past is depicted as an integral, undecomposable part of Irish identity. Any attempt to (linguistically) suppress it would thus leave an inexpressible but palpable gap, and accelerate the erosion of Irishness that the poem gestures toward, whereas confronting it promises a

chance of renewed cultural understanding. Like the poem's syntax, one must return to the impact crater to rediscover the segments of Irishness in its wake of destruction.

2.3. Breaking Through the Silence

A prerequisite to a “healing process for Ireland and the Irish diaspora” would therefore be an active discursive confrontation with the past (Kinealy 1999, 244). But since the famine “has separated us from language,” communication seems to be largely absent. The ‘Great Silence’, an “alleged absence of cultural responses to the Great Hunger in art, popular culture, literature, history and even in the educational curriculum” is a core feature of the famine discourse (Steiner 2021, 26). Although Eagleton’s claim that the event “traumatized [Irish authors] into muteness” has been refuted by literary scholars, “the silence-crisis” continues to shape contemporary discussions of the Famine (Eagleton 1995, 13; Steiner 2021, 30). The poem alludes to this absence, and, even more importantly, meta-poetically fills this gap. “Famine, a sequence” is a form of consolidation via lyric expression: an act of verbal guidance (“you can catch it” [my emphasis]) which evokes the aftermath and effects of the famine in the addressee’s mind. The speaker is able to look beyond the surface, disinter the famine’s presence and express that which would otherwise remain covert and unseen: it verbally points (“There is...”, “you can catch it”) to places and features of the Irish landscape and forces the addressee to look behind the façade (“listen”, “behind our faces”, “it is only a field away”). By doing so, the poem itself engages in the traumatic “reconstruction of national identity” as it offers a sense of “who we really were all along” (Alexander 2004, 23; Madigan 2020, 51).

Because the poem as a work of art is ultimately an aesthetic response, it also faces the problem of representation, i.e., the question of how to express the inexpressible not just in words, but in *English* poetry. The “language of wordlessness” observable in recollections of tragic famine events, with phrases like “I can’t describe what I saw” and “words fail me”, is amplified by the fact that these harrowing events need to be couched in English to ensure, first and foremost, linguistic

understanding by the majority of Irish (and non-Irish) people (Estévez-Saá 2005, 164). In other words, an unfiltered retrieval of cultural memory is inevitably distorted since the linguistic framework through which the traumatic events were processed in the past is no longer (predominantly) accessible as a cultural resource in the present. The speaker refers to this with the lines “has separated us from language | cut us from our culture”. Indeed, the Great Irish Famine accelerated the decline of Irish, as countless native speakers perished and mass-emigration to English-speaking places further eroded its use (Kinealy 2006, 9).

This tension between linguistic loss and the necessity of expression directly informs the stylistic choices of the poem. Its lexicon is simple. Most lines contain only 3 to 4 words; the longest line has 6 words (“down the line of our landscape”), the shortest line only one (“listen”). The scant lines underscore the deprivation and scarcity that marked the living conditions during and after the Great Famine. While the ancestors hungered for food, the poem hungers for words: the lexicon is emaciated and sustains itself only at the subsistence level, containing just enough words to stave off silence.

The speaker also makes ample use of monosyllabic words, most of which are of Germanic origin and thus appear ‘earthy’ and tribal (“stink”, “bush”, “hedge”, “meal”, “field”, “hill”, “bone”). There are fewer words of Romance origin (“famine”, “Celtic”, “culture”, “belief”, “ancestors”, “beauty”), but none of them are indexical of a particularly formal register. The simple vocabulary rejects the embellished, artificial style often associated with poetry, as it would constitute another layer of façade. Instead, the language evokes basic, quotidian concepts to convey the far-reaching consequences of the catastrophe: the Great Famine destroyed the most fundamental areas of life and subsistence, and, in particular, damaged the poorest areas of Ireland (Kinealy 1995, 105). As English, the native language of the most industrially developed country in Europe at the time, was the language of the oppressors and therefore likely associated with politics and pretence, the speaker chooses the ‘earthy’ register to extract the highest form of authenticity and atavism possible.

Just as the poem's diction strips language down to voice an authentic response to catastrophe, so too does its fragmented structure embody rupture and deprivation. Instead of conventional quatrains, most stanzas consist of odd numbers of lines (one or three). The poem as a whole totals 23 lines, a number that also resists neat symmetry. The only couplet appears in the third stanza, where the subject is music, yet the pairing feels more like an interruption than a resolution: the preposition implies intrusion ("*in* the music"; my emphasis) and the following stanza (which consist of only one line) explicitly points out isolation rather than unity: "left us on our own". Similarly, the only quartet, which appears in the final stanza, does not convey organic closure, but a façade: it describes the modern motorway diggers desecrating the very fields once cultivated by Irish peasants; for the first time, a whole unit has been created, which puts a restored future into perspective—however, the act of leaving the past behind fails with them "unearthing bones by accident". Thus, the even numbers in the poem do not seem harmonious, but spurious: the poetic speaker is unable to, or rather, refuses to construct harmonious quartets within the confines of English, a language associated with estrangement. The connective element is missing as the Irish have been deprived of harmony and unity. Any attempt to merge fragments into an artificial whole would ring false, for at the heart of this assertion of Irish identity lies the devastating legacy of the Famine and centuries of oppression that "left us on our own". The poem's fragmentation enacts this reality formally: the stanzas shrink from three lines, to two, to a final solitary line, as the poem disinters the 'core' of Irish identity it portrays. The solitary lines function formally as "unearthed bones," which—echoing the discussion above—expose the tragic yet enduring foundations on which, in this poem's view, Irish culture rests. To the speaker, irregularity and broken form are the necessary conditions of meaningful expression.

3. Modes of Dependency: Seamus Heaney’s “At a Potato Digging”

Ní hé Dia a cheap riamh an obair seo, Daoine bochta a chur le fuacht is le fán.
'It wasn't God's work, sending out poor people to cold and wandering.'
– *Amhrán na bPrátaí Dubha* (“The Song of the Black Potatoes”)

At the core of “At a Potato Digging” lies Heaney’s notion of poetry as earthy work. He first established this imagery in the opening poem of his collection “Death of a Naturalist”, entitled “Digging” (Heaney 1966, 13). There, Heaney places poetry in continuity with Irish heritage and tradition by committing the art not to the observation, but the *preservation* of passed-down, intangible value in sensory, authentic language (Clutterbuck 2021, 105). This language is governed by the same work ethics of precision, determination and effort that shaped Heaney’s ancestors, and thus bridges the gap between manual and imaginative work. The rhythm, grit and persistence of manual labour is converted into words, but the poems attempt to surpass the mere representational description of the skills, crafts and rituals: steeped in immediacy, these quotidian tasks convey essential insights into the “human spirit” that have largely been submerged in the modern world (Kroll qtd. in Ram 2024, 2). Digging for this essence, Heaney elevates the naturalistic poem into a transfiguration of cultural knowledge. The scenery evoked by the title “At a Potato Digging” must therefore be considered, first and foremost, the setting of a poetic excavation. The present-day automatized harvest, which bridges the first and final section of the text, is the surface level through which the speaker digs for imagery and memories of the past, using language as a tool. It breaks up observation (what can be seen) and representation (what is said) to unravel the inherited values and Ireland’s traumatic collective memory embodied in the potato—the “emblem of a nation’s suffering” (Parker 1993, 69).

The biological terms surface not only in their literal sense but also as anthropological metaphors: the drill’s “roots” can be assigned both a botanical and a cultural sense as traces of (social) origin, and the “mould”, organic material from organisms that are or were alive, can be read as a cultural repository which unites living and deceased mem-

bers of the Irish (farming) community. Metaphorically, the soil has been *enlivened* by centuries of work and imbued with cultural significance; it is the place where potatoes grow as a source of sustenance, where human knowledge and experience surrounding the harvest are stored, and where the bodies of those who died as a result of crop failures decay. The mechanical digger, which ploughs the drill destructively (“wrecks”), uncovers these immaterial and organic “roots” by spinning them up in a “dark shower”, leading to an overlap of past and present. Traditional elements (“wicker creels”) and crafts (manually collecting potatoes) are introduced, which seem anachronistic compared to the modern technology (“a mechanical digger”). Crucially, the past encapsulated in these elements is not depicted as nostalgic or glamorous, but as “dark” and painful. The harvest now evokes images of death and dehumanization: “fingers go dead in the cold”, and the labourers form a “higgledy line”, which is later echoed in the image of “higgledy skeletons”. The poetic excavation at hand, observed by speaker and reader, is not merely agricultural, but a retrieval of traumatic experience retained in Ireland’s cultural memory: observing the mechanical harvester wrecking the potato drill, the speaker unearths the painful past of the Great Irish Famine encapsulated in the ridges. Trauma, according to memory studies, re-emerges in “delayed, and uncontrolled, repetitive occurrence”, mirrored in the sudden resurfacing of the ‘spectre’ of the Great Hunger, which establishes a traumatic “portal between the past and the present” (Caruth 1996, 181; Corporaal 2022, 305; Trigg 2009, 99). While the dark past obtrudes on the speaker’s mind in the first section of the poem, it vanishes in the final section. The scenery is picked up again, also reflected in the identical form (crossed rhyme; quatrains), but the spectre of the past has disappeared: the potato diggers no longer work under “a dark shower of roots and mould”, but “under a gay flotilla of gulls”. To arrive at the poem’s meaning, it is therefore crucial to dissect and compare the imagery and content of the first and final section of the poem.

3.1. *Famine God: Potato Harvesting as Religious Subservience*

In the traumatic presence of the past, the speaker recognizes the crafts of planting and harvesting potatoes as acts of spiritual subservience aimed at propitiating a wrathful God. The labourers (who are replaced with “workers” in section IV) are subject to a reduction of individuality (Harmon 1987, 32): the speaker does not describe autonomous individuals but a chaotic, disorganized mess (“higgledy line; “fumble”); the people are compressed in the third-person plural pronoun “they” and only referred to with plural nouns: “labourers”, “some pairs”, “heads”, “hands”. Their lack of agency (“mindlessly”) and independence is reinforced in animalization tropes: “swarm in”, “like crows”, “wolfed the blighted root”, “faces chilled to a plucked bird”. This rhetoric of de-humanization and de-individualization establishes the workers as devotees of the “famine god”, a pagan deity the peasants attempt to propitiate with sacrifices (“a seasonal altar of the sod”) and rituals of submission (“processional stooping through the turf”; “hum-bled knees”); verbs: “stoop”, “stumble”, “bow”, “bend”).

These religious implications are contradicted in the last section of the poem. While the “labourers” under the “dark shower of roots and mould” were faced with privation, suffering, and death in an incessant work-cycle, the present-day “workers” under “a gay flotilla of gulls” can relax for lunch. Death has lost its presence and meaning. While the starved peasants were dropped dead into the ditch due to lack of nutritional energy, the exhaustion of the present-day workers is mundane and temporary, making the adjective *dead* a mere hyperbole: “Dead-beat, they flop | down in the ditch”. The ditch is no longer associated with mass graves but has turned into a relaxing spot. This reading is solidified by the fact that ‘dead-beat’ is polysemous and can also refer to a person unwilling to work, especially in American English (“Deadbeat” 2025). The phrase “The rhythm deadens” would signify a death sentence for the submissive peasants: if their processional stooping—performed as an act of ritual propitiation—were to cease, the “famine god” would punish them in wrath for committing sacrilege against the divine order. In the present, however, the workers face no fatal consequences. They appear as the active subject of the sentence

and deliberately choose to lay down their labour, which yields not famine, but abundance: “brown bread and tea in bright capfuls | are served for lunch”.

The religious sacrifices of earlier are ironized, too. The workers “thankfully break[] timeless fasts”. Whereas fasting is the practice of deliberate abstention from food for spiritual purposes, the potato diggers are not depicted as renouncing goods at all but only as “taking their fill”; moreover, the act of fast breaking, which is traditionally a sacred moment, is not situated within a spiritual context as the ground is “faithless” and the participants of said ‘rite’ are simply hungry labourers stopping for lunch after backbreaking work to satisfy the physical need of filling their empty stomachs. Stretched on the “faithless ground”, they “spill” their drinks, which the speaker ironically describes as “libations of cold tea”. The verb “spill” connotes an *accidental* flow, much like the way “crusts” often fall to the ground when a piece of bread is being eaten; the mundane reality clashes with the elevated, religious diction (“libations”, “fasts”), which implies that this is, in fact, an involuntary ‘sacrifice’. The speaker is aware of the sacredness the site once accrued through tradition and rituals—the transfer of this system of belief to the present-day situation, however, reveals that the potato field has been deconsecrated. The present-day workers do not believe in it anymore, that is, they no longer sanctify it with services of veneration and blessing. As its presence is no longer spiritually evoked, the famine god has vanished in the minds of the workers, but not of the speaker. This is ultimately reflected in the poem’s parody of the holy communion: wine and bread are replaced with cold tea and crusts—leftovers of an indulgent feast. What was once the sacred act of consuming bread and wine in transubstantiation to affirm and recognize Christ’s presence is here a mere remnant of the profane reality of simple hunger.

The juxtaposition of consecration (section I) and deconsecration (section IV) challenges providentialist interpretations of the Great Famine. In both Ireland and England, a widespread belief was held that the potato blight was a divine retribution (Gray 1996, 91). The British government, most notably its colonial administrator Sir Charles

Trevelyan, seized on this interpretation to legitimize and fuel the ideological policy that the Irish economy and way of life required transformation along British lines (Gray 1996, 92; Henderson 2006, 138):

I think I see a bright light shining in the distance through the dark cloud which at present hangs over Ireland... The deep and inveterate root of Social evil remain[s], and I hope I am not guilty of irreverence in thinking that, this being altogether beyond the power of man, the cure has been applied by the direct stroke of an all wise Providence in a manner as unexpected and unthought of as it is likely to be effectual. God grant that we may rightly perform our part and not turn into a curse what was intended for a blessing. (qtd. in Gray 1996, 93)

Dissecting the religious imbuing of the potato crop, the poem reveals that a providentialist stance cannot convincingly explain the catastrophe. The hard-working labourers in the first section of the poem are described as subservient, obedient and reverent; they bow to the deity and offer ritualistic sacrifices. Still, they are haunted by a devastating famine in the 1840s, which is described by the speaker in section III. The almost idyllic shift to the “gay flotilla of gulls” in the present (IV) clearly indicates that a change has taken place—a drastic improvement in quality of life, and, even more importantly, a change in belief. The ground has become faithless, the workers seemingly self-indulgent and atheistic—they no longer appease the famine deity. Nevertheless, the excessive, blasphemous present-day workers are not punished with famine. If the potato blight was truly a divine intervention, why did it strike Ireland in the 1840s and not in the present, when the workers no longer acknowledge and praise the famine god? At the same time, the poem simultaneously evokes and undermines the colonial stereotype of the ‘idle Irish character’, which, allegedly, needed divine reformation (Kinealy 1999, 245); the ‘dead-beat’ workers have always (“centuries”) engaged in physically gruelling labour to ensure subsistence (“a people hungering from birth”) and are thus characterized by the speaker as hardworking and struggling. The exhausted workers flopping into the ditch are spiritually condemned but humanized: they are finally able to

reward themselves for accomplishing their work with the satisfaction of basic human needs; they can eat their fill and rest.

3.2. *Nature's Autonomy and Monocrop Agriculture*

Section II examines the potato in a naturalistic style to strip the “emblem of a nation’s suffering” down to its biological core (Parker 1993, 69). The speaker describes the vegetable’s biological development and thoroughly evokes its sensory quality: colour, smell, texture. The spiritual vocabulary of the first section is reduced to a minimum, and when it does appear, it is rationalized. The tubers only “seem” like petrified hearts and the idea of a “clean birth” as a spiritual allusion to the virgin birth is marked with parentheses, which creates a sense of distance. Essentially, the potato crop is not depicted as a religious miracle but as a natural product of cultivation. It is “native | to the hutch of clay”. This seemingly banal argument proves to be crucial. The origin of an intact potato exuding “good smells” and looking “white as cream” lies not in the hands of the famine god, but in the “halved seed” planted in the soil. In other words, section II argues that it is not upon a (wrathful) deity to decide whether a potato crop fails or not but to favourable environmental conditions, which are naturally prone to fluctuation: even when the halved seeds have shot, there remains an inevitable amount of uncertainty involved in cultivating potatoes. During the 1840s, section III informs us, the potato suddenly “putrefied when it had lain | three days in the long clay pit”. The same seeds, a different outcome—the speaker refers to this uncertainty using the verb *promise*: “knots of potatoes (a clean birth) | whose solid feel, whose wet inside | *promises* taste of ground and root” (my emphasis). Neither a spiritual insurance nor the hardest agricultural work *guarantee* that a crop will bear fruit: “The reward from such backbreaking work could be destroyed by nature itself, by a parasite, or a climatic event like an excessively cold winter, or a storm” (De Leo 2019, 29–30). The speaker is aware that human’s dependency on nature is one-sided, and nature follows its own laws. This perspective is elemental to Heaney’s debut volume, *Death of a Naturalist*, in which the poem was first published. The collection can be understood as an *aemulatio* of

pastoral writing: it tinges the idyllic landscape of the bucolic tradition with “images of death, of rot, of decay, of frightening and monstrous sexuality” that serve to depict nature as an autonomous force which in its elemental rawness cannot be domesticated by human-made structures (Krassenstein 2014, 11). The potato blight is a striking example of the fatal consequences that nature’s autonomy can inflict on the anthroposphere—however, this is only one part of the poem’s argumentation. Ultimately, the fungus that putrefied the potatoes cannot solely account for the vast extent of the catastrophe. Section II must therefore also be read as the causal foundation of the preceding section: precisely because the peasants could not fully influence the outcome of a harvest, they consecrated the potato field and sought to secure their existence under the aegis of a deity. “God’s wrath can be appeased through prayer; the climate as a natural phenomenon or the sudden onset of an epidemic cannot” (Lobenstein-Reichmann 2022, 291, my translation). If the “black mother”³ fails to bear fruits, the dependents face no other out-come than famine and death—as such, the religious imbuing of the crop becomes an indication of dependency.

With this, the poem engages with a strand of the blame discourse that attributes the catastrophe to “agricultural practices” (Schultz 2014, 23), in particular, the alleged Irish dependency on a monoculture. The core argument is that in the years before 1845, Ireland’s weak social and economic structures fostered an agricultural system based on partible inheritance, which bound the impoverished and rapidly increasing Irish population to crops that could be cultivated on small plots of land (Hallissy 2016, 64). The potato became the staple of a monotonous diet, with estimates suggesting that each member of an Irish family consumed, on average, eight pounds of potatoes per day (Parker 1993, 69). When the fungus *Phytophthora infestans* appeared in Ireland by the late summer of 1845, this system was doomed to collapse: what exacerbated the development was the fact that for decades the peasants had been planting only a single variety, the Irish Lumper, which was

³ The *Pachamama*, the concept of Mother Nature, stems from Peru, where the potato was first domesticated (De Leo 2019, 34).

susceptible to the blight, so there were no genetically diverse plants that could have mitigated the spread of the rot (Powderly 2019, 130).

Throughout the poem, the speaker establishes a dependency between the Irish people and the potatoes by binding both to the same linguistic material. The second section begins with the indefinite pronoun *they* (“They lie scattered like inflated pebbles”), whose referent the reader has to recover; since the pronoun was earlier used to refer to the labourers (“they stretch | a higgledly line”), there is a brief moment of confusion as both humans and potatoes can be potential antecedents. This pattern is repeated in the anadiplosis “live skulls, blind eyed”, which first designates the potatoes before shifting its reference to the starving people. “Millions rotted along with it” simultaneously designates the other vegetables of the ensuing crop and the humans who perished with it. The parallel is further reinforced by personification of the vegetable (“the petrified hearts of drills”, “clean birth”, “blind-eyed”; “live skulls”) and phytometaphors with human tenors (“grafted with a great sorrow”, “grubbing, like plants”). Finally, the speaker describes “a million wicker huts” where the peasants live, similar to the potatoes that are kept in “wicker creels” (Klitzing 2019, 31).

Crucially, a shared material (of words) does not relate to a shared sense. While potatoes, when healthy, appear like “live skulls, blind-eyed” the same characteristics associated with humans characterize them as the walking dead (“balanced on | wild higgledly skeletons”). When potatoes start to sprout, small bumps (‘eyes’) appear on their surface which contain stem cells capable of producing new potato plants. The ‘blind eyes’ of the potato are thus a symbol of fertility. The blind eyes of the Irish, on the other hand, signify death as symptoms of starvation.⁴ This juxtaposition is reinforced in the clause “to be piled in pits”. Thousands of people were buried in mass graves during the Great Famine. Their bodies were left to decompose in the same material in

⁴ A lack of essential vitamins and minerals damages the optic nerve (Woon, Tang, and Pardo 1995, 195f).

which potatoes grow; the soil as a womb for potatoes can only mean a grave to humans.

Indeed, the poem repeatedly characterizes the monocrop dependency as fatal, supporting the agricultural-failure theory. In the first section of the poem, the speaker describes the potato diggers with the simile “like crows attacking a crow-black field”. Crows are considered agricultural pests, as they damage crops. Since the noun *crow* is used both in reference to the field (“crow-black field”) as well as the peasants (“like crows”), the poem suggests that this type of farming is considered troublesome and prone to destruction in itself. The botanical simile “A people hungering from birth | grubbing, like plants, in the bitch earth, | were grafted with a great sorrow” emphasizes that the people (“like plants”) died on and due to the ground they had built their lives upon. When the “bitch earth” undernourishes its plants, they wither; since the Irish practically restricted their nutrition to the monocrop potato, the poem suggests that they were fated to suffer the consequence of dependence once the soil turned hostile.

3.3. *National Identity: Implications of Colonialism*

The statement in the poem that the Irish “were grafted with a great sorrow” reflects its understanding of modern Irish identity. The poem suggests that there is an insoluble bond of dependency and pain which still persists in modern Ireland. Crucially, since the situation of grafting is expressed in the passive voice, the subject—the *doer* that grafted the Irish—remains hidden. Arguably, this gap could be filled with ‘the potato blight’ but within the natural-causes framework, this is not particularly convincing. After all, a natural disaster cannot be considered a deliberate or conscious act (it would not be ‘natural’, then). The act of grafting a tree, however, is an *artificial* fusion made by gardeners to create a new variety. An unconscious, natural force can thus be ruled out. In its place, the poem implicitly allows a political interpretation. England’s politics and language can indeed be said to have been planted onto the Irish root. Nationalist uprisings were—repeatedly—brutally subdued; the Irish legislature was abolished in the Act of Union; the Catholic Church was contained by making the mino-

rity Anglican Church the state church of Ireland; the Irish language was suppressed with the establishment of the National School system in 1831. The desire to create a new Irish ‘variety’ under the British model can also be traced back to Trevelyan’s notion of transforming the supposedly idle and primitive Irish way of life, as well as to the popular belief at the time that Ireland needed to be cleared of a perceived surplus population, which was seen as a threat to British prosperity (Kinealy 1995, 104). The disastrous scale of the Famine has been repeatedly attributed to “belligerent governmental practices” (Schultz 2014, 23). Irish nationalists utilised this argument to advocate the necessity of Irish independence from England (Steiner 2021, 19); some even went so far as to accuse the British of genocidal intent by referring to the Great Famine as the “Irish Holocaust” (Hallissy 2016, 66). Heaney, who is known for being an “accomplished tightrope walker” critical of one-sided opinions and politicalization of poetry, clearly refrains from openly adopting such biased accounts in his poem (Allison 2021, 231, 236). The speaker does not explicitly mention historical actors like landowners and governments, but Bernard Sharratt is mistaken when he says that the speaker “occludes” their responsibility (Sharratt 1976, 315–316). Rather, the poem is tinged with images that allow a political enrichment of interpretive gaps. At the end of section III, for example, the speaker describes the crisis of the Famine as an enduring infection:

Stinking potatoes fouled the land,
pits turned pus into filthy mounds:
and where potato diggers are
you still smell the running sore.

Pus is an exudate formed during infections. In the poem, it signifies the Irish response to British oppression (Parker 1993, 270). The British government is considered an infection, a foreign political system that harmfully invaded the Irish system. The pus, in turn, symbolises the Irish people that died under the British influence, including the victims of the Famine. Pus consists largely of the remains of neutrophils (white blood cells) that have undergone cell death during the immune response. The parallel can be drawn based on the fact that anti-Irish

polemics often portrayed the Irish people as ‘blighted’ with unnaturally white and pale skin, mirrored in the deceased white blood cells. Nevertheless, Heaney crucially reevaluates this discourse: the ‘blighted’ Irish become a symptom of an immune resistance and are recast positively as a collective effort to expel the infection. Crucially, the Famine (signified by the *pits*, the contemporary term for the mass graves of the starved) did not cause the infection, but exacerbated it. The colonial wound had long existed, but after the Great Famine, it took up an even larger amount of space and depth in the Irish sphere: the “pits turned pus into filthy mounds”. The metaphor implies that the desire and biological need to expel British rule solidified within the Irish collective mind post-famine. The resulting damage to the Irish organism was so severe that it can still be smelt when uncovered by the potato diggers, who are emblematic of people engaged in collective memory (artists, historians, politicians). Moreover, the infection has not healed; with Northern Ireland belonging to the UK, the legacies of generational trauma, and Irish culture eroded by centuries of oppression, it is still a “running sore” (Salih 2017, 10).

Within this framework, the de-individualization and subjugation of the Irish labourers in the first section can also be read as symptoms of colonialist oppression. British polemics repeatedly depicted the Irish as primitive and unreasonable peasants; in popular British magazines such as *Punch* and *Illustrated London News*, for example, they were often sketched in grotesque caricatures of ape-like creatures, which stripped the average Irish person of their human features (Curtis 1971, 3). Through the lens of colonial trauma, the speaker re-enacts the polemics of animalization by referring to the labourers as “plucked birds”, “crows”, “wolf[s]”, and insects (“swarm in”); their characterization as irrational (“mindless”; “fumble”) and disorganized (“higgledy line”) echoes loyalist accusations of the Irish as lacking economic structure and rational order (Steiner 2021, 21). Their “humble knees” can be read both as gestures of subservience and humiliation—they “bow”, “stoop”, “stumble” and “bend” as the system suppresses liberty and self-rule. Moments of self-consciousness and victory are short: they “stand tall for a moment but soon stumble back”, which echoes the circular history

of Ireland with its numerous attempts at revolution and resistance subdued by the British. In the final stanza, the workers' ability to satisfy basic human needs (sustenance and autonomy) can thus be read to have been caused by achieving political independence. The workers no longer bow to a sovereign and no longer suffer from deprivation. Still, the cultural memories remain and resurface "where potato diggers are", as exemplified by Heaney's poem, which fulfils the vision proclaimed in his debut "Digging": it digs, not with a spade, but with a pen.

4. Conclusion

Both Heaney and Egan situate their poetic exploration of the entanglement of Irish identity and the Great Famine within a present-day scenery which is interpreted "by bringing it into significant relationship with the past" (Heaney 1980, 60). This perspective is crucial to collective identity revision, "for memory is not only social and fluid but deeply connected to the contemporary sense of the self" (Alexander 2004, 22). Mechanized potato harvesters have changed the rhythm that long defined Irish agriculture, effecting a disconnect from nature and tradition. Both poems suggest that a detachment from manual labour is concomitant with an erosion of Irishness, whose historical grounding must be preserved and re-affirmed in the collective mind to ensure a coherent, viable perspective for the present. The poems pursue such an exploration of the depth of Irishness, and by unravelling its traumatic memory, aim to make the wounds present in order to secure their meaning and enable recovery.

Egan's poem semanticizes the signifier *famine* to articulate the omnipresence of the transgenerational trauma of the Irish in a linguistic material that is impeded by the constraints of the 'Great Silence': a communicative gap created by the barriers to expressing the catastrophe in a) a cultural environment of traumatic memory suppression, b) the communication system 'language' itself, and c) in English, the language of the oppressors. As verbal consolidation, poetry cannot undo the aftermath of the Great Famine, but the poem enunciates the essence of

discursive confrontation—any attempt to ignore or suppress the traumatic memory counteracts the formation of Irish identities, which, having undergone “significant revision, re-remembering and reconstruction”, might promise cultural healing (Madigan 2020, 50). As the poem’s title suggests, only an understanding of the Famine as a “sequence” can sustain a continuous and coherent self-representation.

Heaney’s “At a Potato Digging” challenges the causal discourse of the Great Famine to express the intricate and multi-faceted connection between the Irish and the potato. The poem offers textual evidence to support polysemous readings of the Great Famine. Providentialist views of the Famine as a divine retribution are countered with modern deconsecration, exposing a system of dependency, de-individualization and oppression, conveyed with rhetorical strategies that echo anti-Irish propaganda of the British colonizers. The peasants’ spiritual insurance through ritualistic paganism can thus be read as signs of both spiritual and political subservience. At the same time, naturalistic descriptions desacralize the potato and emphasize its biological fecundity. Through the fusion of anthropological and phytometaphors, the poem suggests that Ireland’s mono-crop agricultural practices embedded in weak economic structures were too precarious to weather the fluctuations of nature, which follows its own laws and can be hostile towards humanity. As such, the poem addresses both loyalist and nationalist perspectives on the catastrophe. Crucially, Heaney does not take sides. His imagery oscillates between multiple perspectives—the ultimate reason remains unresolved, just as in real life. Alongside its depiction of the complex emotional turmoil surrounding the emblem of the potato, the poem thus transcends being “a mere vehicle for ideas” (Allison 2021, 236) and instead becomes a mythical landscape which stratifies the intricate wound of the “running sore”.

Heaney’s and Egan’s poems demonstrate that confronting a painful past is not simply a response to an event but an event in itself. When fundamental assumptions about a group’s identity come into conflict with a traumatic occurrence that is “inherently unassimilable”, they must be reshaped and re-narrated in such a way as to assert a new version of collective identity which absorbs the event and renders it

intelligible (Madigan 2020, 51). This process requires a continual, reflective re-engagement with the relationship between the past and the present. Both poems adapt this perspective and break the 'silence'. Because if the past is pushed aside to avoid pain, an even greater suffering threatens: forgetting.

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