

**“To eat one’s words”:  
Language and Disjunction  
in Joseph O’Connor’s *Star of the Sea***

*Aidan O’Malley*

(University of Rijeka/University of Zagreb, Croatia)

**Abstract:**

Joseph O’Connor’s 2002 *Star of the Sea* represents a significant attempt to work through the lingering trauma of the Irish famine (1845-52) that has been held responsible for disabling accounts of the event. The disjunctions of the novel – its polyphonic presentation of different perspectives on the famine – embody the consternation occasioned by Ireland’s brutal encounter with modernity in the mid-nineteenth century. In particular, the shock of this engagement is inscribed in the attitudes to language in the text. This essay further suggests that the ruptures embodied in this novel raise questions about the ambit of neo-Victorian studies, which have generally focused on more continuous cultural traditions than those found in Ireland. Working to make these disjunctions understandable by, amongst other things, reframing them in terms of contemporary experiences of globalisation, it is argued that this novel gestures towards ways of coming to terms with the spectre of the famine.

**Keywords:** disjunction, globalisation, historiography, Irish famine, language, neo-Victorian studies, Joseph O’Connor, spectrality, *Star of the Sea*, trauma.

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After docking at Queenstown (present day Cobh), the ‘Star of the Sea’ took on its final consignment of a hundred tired, poor, huddled and starving passengers before facing the rigours of an 1847 winter Atlantic crossing to New York. One of the travellers, an “elderly woman, little more than an agglomeration of rags,” expired the moment she set foot on the ship (O’Connor 2003: xvii). Her husband had not even made it that far, and lay dying of famine fever on the quayside. Her family now faced an anguished quandary: having no money to pay for a burial, they could nonetheless not countenance simply dumping her beside her husband; amongst other things, “[h]e could not be asked to witness that sight as one of his last sights on earth” (O’Connor 2003: xvii). After impassioned negotiations with the captain, it was decided that the body should be discreetly consigned to the

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sea once the ship had left the port. But before dispatching the corpse, family members “disfigured her face terribly with some kind of blade, fearful that the current would drift her back to Crosshaven where she might be recognised by her former neighbours” (O’Connor 2003: xvii).

This disquieting vignette, which is recounted in the prologue to Joseph O’Connor’s 2002 *Star of the Sea*, brings the horrors of the Irish famine (1845-52) into an unblinking light. For contemporary witnesses, such as the Cork artist James Mahony who was commissioned to provide an illustrated report on the horrors wracking Ireland for *The Illustrated London News* in February 1847, nothing spoke so clearly of the disintegration of the frayed fabric that held this society together than its inability to take care of its dead. Perhaps the most powerful embodiment of the population’s distress in his account was the figure of a harrowed woman he encountered in Clonakilty begging for the means to bury the dead baby she still carried. Indeed, as he later notes, this inability to accommodate the deceased had destroyed the essential *cordon sanitaire* between the living and the dead, so that in hovels one found “the dying, the living, and the dead, lying indiscriminately upon the same floor” (qtd. in Kissane 1995: 115). In short, the boundary that gives life its basic definition was crumbling.

Scenes of failed or inappropriate burials have been prominent in subsequent literary narratives set in this period, most notably perhaps in Liam O’Flaherty’s 1937 novel *Famine*. Throughout it, the *paterfamilias* Brian Kilmartin struggles to maintain the funeral traditions of his community in the face of the depredations of the famine, and ultimately expires attempting to scratch out a grave for his wife (O’Flaherty 2012: 358-359). Accounts of “inadequate burials” have also been a striking feature of histories of the famine, as Ian Baucom notes (Baucom 2000: 132), because nothing gives as clear an idea of its extremes. At the same time, however, drawing attention to the excessive, unaccountable number of corpses also registers the impossibility of capturing the famine itself: it is, in Christopher Morash’s words, an event that “eludes definition. There is no single, clear consensus as to what constituted the Famine” (Morash 1995: 2-3). This quantitative and descriptive failure can be read as a symptom of cultural trauma: as the episode in *Star of the Sea* indicates, the failure to inter these corpses generated a fear of the humiliated past returning, and a commensurate anxiety has marked Irish literary and scholarly accounts of the tragedy. For Cathy Caruth, trauma returns in a haunting form precisely

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because the traumatic event defies comprehension: “its very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on” (Caruth 1996: 4; original emphasis). As such, the question of how to place the unburied corpses speaks importunately of the relationships that obtain between the past and the present. It unveils how, as Stuart McLean argues, for “modern historical scholarship [...] the dead are not so easily dispensed with”, not least because

[t]he writing of history, for all its conceptual investment in linear chronology and the homogenous, empty time of progress, is made possible only by the continuing (if unrecognized) interinvolvement of pasts and presents, of the living and the dead. (McLean 2004: 11-12)

The issue, therefore, for those who write of the famine is an ethical one: how to accommodate these dead in the present. How, in other words, might the famine dead be recovered and re-buried more appropriately? In many respects, this is the task O’Connor sets himself in *Star of the Sea*.

However, the ways in which this might be achieved are not straightforward: as Sophocles’s *Antigone* testifies, the issue of correct entombment is liable to provoke an *agon* between what is political and what is just. Up to the late twentieth century, finding the most appropriate way of rendering the famine dead had similarly engendered concerns about justice and political expediency in Irish historical and fictional accounts of the period. While the unfathomable cultural trauma and, indeed, shame that clung to the survivors and their descendants maintained the famine as a polymorphous spectral presence that resisted closure, the event also received precautionary disfigurement from politicians, historians and others who, rather than seeking to come to terms with it, were concerned about the form in which it might return. What worried them, in brief, was how the famine might be recognised in the light of Irish nationalist aspirations and Britain’s role in the world.

An illuminating example of this tendency can be traced in the fate of the history of the famine that was to commemorate the centenary of the tragedy. *The Great Famine: Studies in Irish History* was commissioned by the Irish Taoiseach Éamon de Valera in late 1943/early 1944, but only appeared in 1956. As Cormac Ó Gráda put it in his scrupulous account of

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this project, it was ultimately an unsatisfactory effort: “far from being [a] comprehensive history of the famine [...] it reads like an *administrative* history of the period” (Ó Gráda 2006: 242; original emphasis). Irish historians in this period were trained to rely on ‘official’ archival sources and also tended to avoid dealing with events that might have had a too-immediate political salience.<sup>1</sup> As such, they were ill prepared to deal with the famine. These limitations, indeed, prompted one of the editors, Robin Dudley Edwards, to question his methodological procedures: in an 1952 entry from his diary he recognises that if “the historiography of the famine [is] to state the real (as opposed to the administrative) position”, other literary and polemical voices need to be heard, not just the ‘authorised’ voices that find their ways into archives (qtd. in Ó Gráda 2006: 248). Clearly, the famine pushed at and overwhelmed the disciplinary boundaries of historical scholarship of the time and called for a more literary-style supplement. As Margaret Kelleher has noted in her critical survey of histories of the famine written since 2000, this has now become a fairly well established practice: most of these studies have employed “narrative and fictive tropes [...] as a means of establishing greater intimacy” (Kelleher 2013: 3). This may well be because, as Caruth has observed, literature can capture something of the experience of trauma precisely as it “is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing” (Caruth 1996: 3) – a greyer area than traditional histories have allowed themselves to inhabit.

Having said that, there have been debates about the number and role of literary perspectives on the famine, and these have echoed many of the concerns regarding historical accounts. In 1997, Kelleher argued that “famine literature has, to some extent, fulfilled the role of history” (Kelleher 1997: 110). For Terry Eagleton, though, Irish literature, like Irish history, has tended to avoid facing up to the famine for the same reasons. Literature’s silence was expressive of a form of national trauma – “the event strains at the limits of the articulable, and is truly in this sense the Irish Auschwitz” – and this was compounded by the political quietism of Irish historians, who “re-enact[ed] the mental habits of the Victorian political economists, who similarly assumed that the frame of capitalist relations in Ireland fell beyond the bounds of criticism” (Eagleton 1995: 13, 22). However, just like the historians who formed a partial view of the famine based on ‘authorised’ sources, Kelleher has pointed out that Eagleton’s

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argument is based on canonical figures – W.B. Yeats and James Joyce, in short – and has shown that the famine featured more regularly in the Revival period in less established texts, particularly in works written by women (Kelleher 1997: 5).<sup>2</sup> What cannot be doubted, though, is that there has been a desire in twentieth-century Ireland to learn something about the famine, to hear its voices, as literary and historical accounts that explicitly deal with the event have sold remarkably well, a fact that could also be read as symptomatic of cultural trauma. O’Flaherty’s *Famine*, as Kelleher has pointed out, “remains one of the best-selling Irish novels” (Kelleher 1997: 135), and Cecil Woodham-Smith’s 1962 *The Great Hunger* has been one of the most popular history books published in Ireland despite being roundly attacked by many historians for its florid style.<sup>3</sup> Its approach to the famine was more politically populist than that adopted by Robin Dudley Edwards and Desmond Williams in *The Great Famine*, and de Valera preferred it to the volume he had commissioned. Nonetheless, despite its limitations, *The Great Famine* also sold well and was re-issued by Lilliput Press in the early 1990s (Ó Gráda 2006: 243).

In sum, the famine was, as Whelan points out, “the single most important event in Ireland in the modern period” (Whelan 2005: 137) and, notwithstanding these examples, it is still the case that it remained underexplored in academic accounts and that it generally operated in a silent or subterranean fashion in Irish literature. This situation changed in the mid-1990s, in a manner that reflected the shifting political landscape in Ireland and, to some extent, in Britain. The first IRA ceasefire in twenty years was called in 1994, and this played a crucial role in the evolution of the Northern Irish peace process that culminated in the Belfast (or Good Friday) Agreement of 1998. The effective cessation of the ‘Troubles’ meant that the need to monitor how every account of the Irish past might reflect on, and potentially provoke, the Northern Irish crisis was lessened. In 1997, as part of this process, Tony Blair offered an official apology for the British role in the famine. This coincided with the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the famine, which was commemorated in the mid to late 1990s and generated considerable renewed attention to the topic. While aspects of the commemorations were problematic, in general they produced a more open public discourse about the famine, which was regularly framed in a broader, international perspective that linked it with contemporary famines in Africa and Asia. As is argued here, this sort of globalisation of the experience of the famine

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directly informs the style of memory that is ultimately called for in *Star of the Sea*.

In the same period, a considerable amount of academic work that also reflected a political unburdening was produced. A new generation of literary, cultural, economic and migration historians, such as Christopher Morash, Margaret Kelleher, Cormac Ó Gráda, Joel Mokyr and Kerby Miller, to mention but a handful, began to uncover a wider array of more interesting and informative findings from different archives and by employing a variety of approaches. Local histories, reassessments of the Irish Folklore Commission's archive of oral histories of the famine (collected in 1945), migrants' correspondence and contemporary fictional accounts of the famine are just some of the sources that have been explored, while the analytical methods that have been utilised would include those indebted to cliometrics. As the recent publication of the massive interdisciplinary *Atlas of the Great Irish Famine* (Crowley, Smyth and Murphy 2012) suggests, this academic interest has been sustained and continues to burgeon.

What did not emerge in this sesquicentennial period, though, was a new raft of literature set in the context of the famine. O'Connor has spoken of how he read Eagleton's observations about the lack of literature on this topic as a "challenge" (qtd. in Estévez-Saá 2005: 163) and, in doing this, he positioned his novel as an intervention into the traumatic silence that enveloped the famine. However, as he noted in the same interview, "putting the immensity of such a cataclysm into words" without "misappropriating or simplifying historical pain [...] is not easy" (qtd. in Estévez-Saá 2005: 164). Inevitably, this ethical challenge had to be risen to on a formal level, and O'Connor decided that the "capacious spirit and sense of liveliness" of a nineteenth-century novel provided an appropriate structure (qtd. in Estévez-Saá 2005: 169), both historically and in terms of providing sufficient space for a wide array of different perspectives on the event to be articulated. In *Star of the Sea* historical sources interplay with fictional creations in ways that generate harmonies and disjunctions that allow the reader to get a broad, complex understanding of the period. As becomes clear from the 'Sources and Acknowledgements' at the end of the novel, O'Connor benefited from the renewed, more sensitive academic work on the famine period, and *Star of the Sea* weaves a variety of different historical sources into its multifarious warp and weft – polemics from different political

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vantage points, newspaper accounts, folk memories, letters to and from immigrants, and ballads, to mention just a few. But it also overlays these with a metafictional mantle that does not allow any of these accounts to maintain an exclusive grip on the event; instead, the novel’s structure constantly foregrounds the constructed nature of all narratives and histories. In doing this – ultimately presenting the novel itself, in Mikowski’s words, “as one possible narrative among others” (Mikowski 2010: 190) – it injects a radical uncertainty into the text, so that it embodies the “knowing and not knowing” experience of trauma that Caruth identified.

At first glance, there appears to be a rather neat demarcation between the fictional and the historical in the novel: in general, citations from historical documents are given as epigraphs before chapters and sections, while the action of the piece is performed by fictional characters. However, this arrangement is constantly subverted. Historical characters intrude into the narrative, both directly and as sources of inspiration. Charles Dickens, for instance, has a walk-on role while the characterisation of the merciless Commander Blake is presumably informed by the notorious Blake estate in Galway, where evictions took place that were so brutal they provoked questions in the House of Commons in 1848 (see Kissane 1995: 148-149). On the other hand, what is fictional is occasionally placed where we have come to expect historical documents: a note on penal reform, written by the character Merridith, is inserted as an epigraph to Chapter XXII (O’Connor 2003: 221), and an excerpt from one of his school essays is similarly employed at the start of the ‘Epilogue’ (O’Connor 2003: 386). Moreover, the whole novel is also, at the same time, a would-be journalistic account of the period (and a personal confession) entitled “*An American Abroad: Notes of London and Ireland in 1847* by G. Grantley Dixon of the *New York Times*” (O’Connor 2003: ix). Or, more accurately, it is a “*Commemorative One-Hundredth Edition. Revised, Unexpurgated and with Many New Inclusions*” (O’Connor 2003: ix), completed, portentously, on “Easter Saturday, 1916” (O’Connor 2003: 405). In other words, it is not simply a fictional document assuming the guise of an eyewitness account, but instead it is presented as one that has been rethought and rewritten from the more distant vantage point of historical reflection. As O’Connor has said, he “wanted it to be one of those big, noisy books you can get lost in [...] [with] the same events told from different points of view, because a book about how history gets written depends on who’s telling the story” (qtd. in Palmer

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2003). By posing questions about the boundaries between history and fiction, this polyphonic, ironic echo chamber, reverberating with fictional and historical voices, constantly focuses attention on who is doing the writing, who is telling the tale, and from what perspective. It does not allow for anything approximating a single, authoritative, fictional or historical, narrator and, in doing so, it brings something of the confusion of the famine home to the twenty-first century: amongst many other things, the inexpressible distress of the victims of the famine, the cruelties of the political and economic systems, and the ineffectual hopelessness of landlords like Merridith who wanted to ameliorate the lot of their tenants can all be discerned in this medley.

Talking about the research he undertook for this novel, O'Connor has highlighted "the language of wordlessness" that was a striking feature of contemporary eye-witness accounts – "time and time again, people saying, 'Words fail me. I can't describe this'" (qtd. in Palmer 2003). Thought of in this light, the metafictional devices register the slippery hold language has on these events, with the result that at the eye of the tornado of voices and historical perspectives in *Star of the Sea* there is a profound silence – a palpable inability to account for the unburied dead.<sup>4</sup> Put differently, O'Connor's skilful eloquence speaks of a condition of dumbness, as all these voices enact a melancholic return that calls forth ghosts that tell of the inability to articulate what is happening.<sup>5</sup> This is registered through the issue of language itself, as the novel's struggle to mourn is always already an expression of coming to terms with what Kiberd has called "the traumatizing effect of the loss of Irish on the personality of citizens" (Kiberd 1995: 649).

*Star of the Sea* records the period in which Irish ceased to be the first language for the majority of the population of Ireland. In a recent interview about the new bilingual stage adaptation of the novel by the Moonfish Theatre Company, O'Connor has admitted that the lack of Irish in the text is one of its defects (O'Connor 2014). Instead, the Irish language functions as a spectre that pervades this narrative – its cryptic (non-)presence indicated by the surfeit of attention devoted to the issue of language throughout the novel. The Irish language, as it were, constitutes silence and yet provokes utterance: it is always just off the page of the narrative, operating as something that is commented upon rather than acting as the vehicle of commentary. Captain Lockwood, for instance, exhibits a benign curiosity



about Irish and the ways in which it modulates the English spoken by the passengers on his ship. At one point Lockwood attempts to reproduce a phrase the translator, Pius Mulvey, employed to communicate his instructions to the passengers – “[s]hay dear on buddock knock will bresh beah lefoyle” (O’Connor 2003: 176) – and this occasions an explanatory academic footnote from Dixon. Citing the noted nineteenth-century Ulster poet and translator, Samuel Ferguson, as an authority, he suggests that this Anglicised phonetic rendering would read in Irish as: “[s]é *deir an bodach nach bhfuil breis bia le fail*” (O’Connor 2003: 176). Translated thus back into Irish, Lockwood would appear to have been the butt of this joke, as Dixon suggests that Mulvey may have been calling him a fool in a language he did not understand. However, as Dixon further notes, this is only a possible construction: the exact words have been lost, and so their meaning has had to be tentatively remade from Lockwood’s imperfect Anglicised repetition of their sound.

One of the few times Irish directly intrudes into the text (as opposed to via the mediation of transliteration and translation), it tellingly does so in a cryptic and maternal manner, as that which articulates mourning.<sup>6</sup> David Merridith’s mother, Lady Verity, has died, having given her life in a *Countess Cathleen* fashion for her beleaguered tenants. Piling on the Yeatsian references, her funeral is presided over by a Reverend Pollexfen from Sligo and after his “sombre words of the Psalms” have died away and her coffin is lowered into the grave, “another sound” joins that of the wind in the trees:

A single voice, from the crowd behind her. An old woman’s voice. And then another.

Soft at first, but quickly loudening: spreading out around the crowd in twos and threes. Men, now: and small children. Rising as people took it up, as a new part of the crowd began to add itself to it. Growing in volume, swelling like a wave, echoing against the granite-stone walls of the church until it seemed to Mary Duane that the sound was coming up from the wet, black earth and never be stopped.

The Hail Mary, spoken in Irish.

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[...] David Merridith [...] staring into the open grave, praying in Irish with his future tenants, mumbling the words as though speaking in his sleep [...].

*Anois, agus ar uair ár mbáis: Amen.*

Now, and at the hour of our death. (O'Connor 2003: 58)

In contrast to the incomplete burials of so many of the dispossessed in Ireland, Lady Verity's funeral is rendered all the more appropriate by the ghostly supplement of their language, of Irish, which gives voice to the inexpressible. Represented as a spirit that is an inherent, natural, element of the local landscape, it seeps through, and ecumenically unifies, this group of people. If it no longer represents an expression of agency, it nonetheless continues to function as that which goes beyond words.

This is the most striking example of the various attempts in the novel to register the emotional power of the mother tongue while writing in another language, English, which is now most Irish people's mother tongue.<sup>7</sup> Rather problematically, this ghostly presentation of Irish and the fact that it is hardly ever directly present on the page tend to bestow an essential, spiritual role on the language. However, while the novel constantly skirts this danger, it is much more emphatically interested in hybridity – namely, the fascinating compromises that Irish speakers had to make in their encounters with the hegemonic Anglophone world. As such, the novel registers their responses to enforced modernisation. The famine, it should be recalled, was understood precisely as a necessary stage in Ireland's transition into economic and cultural modernity by members of the British establishment; for instance, Anthony Trollope's pithy conclusion (from his *North America*), cited in the novel, was that, "Ireland's famine was the punishment of her impudence and idleness, but it has given her prosperity and progress" (qtd. in O'Connor 2003: 151). While the beginnings of the language shift preceded the famine, it was greatly accelerated by the brutal confrontation with modernity that was an intrinsic element of that tragedy.<sup>8</sup>

The cultural nationalist Thomas Davis declared in 1843 that: "[t]o impose another language on [...] a people is to send their history adrift among the accidents of translation" (Davis 1843). In the novel, this dynamic is enacted through the character of Pius Mulvey, whose life is a rendition of the language shift that Ireland underwent through its disjunctive encounter

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with modernisation. While his career revolves around an inventive use of a language that is and is not his own, by the end of his journey, on board the ‘Star of the Sea’, his lifetime of liminality has left him little more than a “Ghost” (O’Connor 2003: xii), the apt sobriquet given to him by the other passengers. But this is just the last of the many aliases he has assumed in a life spent continuously remaking himself.

An English dictionary his father salvaged from his landlord’s midden precipitates the unmooring of Mulvey’s life. This was one of the few things he inherited from his father, and his fascination with deciphering its contents, with how words function and with what can be done with this other language propels him out of the miserable Connemara hovel where, along with his more pious brother Nicholas, he scrapes out something that falls well short of a living. Enchanted by what he sees as the wizardry of this ability to create and recreate, he fashions ballads and learns how to deliver these effectively in local shebeens – a skill, he quickly discovers, that attracts the attention of women. But if there is a touch of the resentful subaltern arrogance of Stephen Dedalus in Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist* (1916) in this image of an Irishman rescuing the language of the British empire, Mulvey makes no claims for Connemara as the site where the best English is spoken;<sup>9</sup> rather, his use of the language is, from the first, inventively subversive and hybrid. In one of the many moments in the novel where the reader wonders who is, or is supposed to be, speaking, Mulvey, or Dixon commenting on Mulvey, invokes the term ‘macaronic’ to describe a song he learnt from his mother: “[m]acaronic’ was the word for a song like that, its lyric alternating between Irish and English” (O’Connor 2003: 95).<sup>10</sup> Inhabiting a macaronic universe, one formed by the English of the songs that he sang in the evenings and the presumably Irish life he conducted at home, both breaks his relationship with his brother, Nicholas, and provides him with some minimal preparation for the odyssey through Ireland and Britain upon which he embarks.

Lying, as George Steiner has claimed, is one of the ways in which language unveils its genius: “the uses of language for ‘alternity’, for mis-construction, for illusion and play, are the greatest of man’s tools by far” (Steiner 1992: 234). Mulvey is a master translator and his progress through the archipelago is a voyage through the resources of language as much as it also constitutes an account of the always-equivocal possibilities and limitations the colonial/globalised context affords the subaltern. For his

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Belfast audiences, Mulvey performs retooled versions of his Connemara ballads to accommodate their sectarian prejudices. Multicultural London appears as a Garden of Eden, where the abundance of languages and peoples provides a rich soil in which to develop his life of song and crime: “[h]e walked the noisy city like Adam and Eve, reaching out his grateful hand to pluck the fruits” (O’Connor 2003: 187). Even when he disastrously overreaches himself and ends up in the grim depths of Newgate Prison, his powers of dissemblance are so well honed and formidable that he ekes out a position for himself between the sadistic guards and the hostile prisoners through a series of precipitous double-bluffs that ultimately opens up an escape route. He joins a circus, a liminal site of hybridity and pretence, where he thrives until a lion savages his foot. Subsequently he meets the gentle Welsh schoolmaster Swales, who invites Mulvey to join him on his walk to his next posting near Leeds – an arduous journey through the winter, during which they both starve.<sup>11</sup> Their main source of sustenance is words and literature: to keep themselves warm, “[t]hey burnt their way through the history of English literature, from *The Dream of the Rood* to Keats’s *Endymion*, sparing only Shakespeare from execution by fire” (O’Connor 2003: 213). Swales is also able to derive nourishment from lengthy descriptions of meals – he “seemed to eat his words literally” (O’Connor 2003: 212) – and so enacts in another form Mulvey’s mode of life: surviving on words, language and imagination.<sup>12</sup> But as this episode illustrates, this is not a sufficient form of life; on the contrary, it is a method of survival when other, more tangible, options are closed off.<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, alongside the enchantment with the ability to fabricate the self through language that is expressed in this novel, there are constant warnings that this is also a perilous act. “The man who could put together could also take apart” is Mulvey’s reaction when he first muses on “the English verb ‘to compose’” in the dictionary his father had bequeathed him (O’Connor 2003: 99), and his self-recreations are accompanied by brutal acts of dismemberment (he loses his foot to a lion), disfiguration (on the ship, we learn that paramilitaries have carved their symbol into his chest and that this “was suppurating badly and his skin was turning black with gangrene” [O’Connor 2003: 299]) and murder: aware that imagination alone cannot keep him alive in the dire situation he finds himself sharing with Swales, Mulvey cruelly kills his companion. He buries Swales under the name of Mulvey, takes his name and profession, and spends an enjoyable

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eighteen months acting as a schoolteacher, only leaving when he knows his deception will be exposed. He returns to Connemara, where he is known and where, as a consequence, his skills as a translator and fabricator have no place, and so he flounders badly. A man with many names is also, perhaps, a man with no identity, and we learn at the novel’s conclusion that Mulvey dies in New York and is buried in an unmarked grave in a site known as “Traitor’s Acre” (O’Connor 2003: 401): an apposite resting place for someone who so thoroughly embodied the role of *traduttore traditore*.

On first gaining money and women through his use of language, Mulvey felt as if “[h]e had discovered the alchemy that turns fact into fiction, poverty into plenty, history into art” (O’Connor 2003: 103). If language provides him access to experience, David Merridith, on the other hand, filters all his experiences through language. Looking at his father’s grave which had been desecrated with the hybrid Hiberno-English daubing “ROTTIN BASTARD”, Merridith, who has inherited the collapsing estate, cannot but wonder about the words: “[d]id they mean that his father was rotten or rotting?” (O’Connor 2003: 11). As a landlord, he is not under the same pressures as Mulvey, and so the word games he plays seem trivial by comparison. Yet, as with Mulvey, his ability to refashion the self through language is intimately connected to physical decomposition and murder. Merridith also assumes different personae when he takes to frequenting prostitutes, who in turn dub him “Lord Lies” (O’Connor 2003: 239). These encounters are presumably the source of the syphilis that is eating through him on the ship. “Doohulla”, the crossword-type game he plays with his sister – rearranging the letters of words cut from newspapers and other documents (O’Connor 2003: 115) – plays a crucial role in his own murder. Nothing, indeed, is what it first appears to be in this novel in which literary-styled deceptions, inventions and transformations abound. On the boat, the Maharajah turns out to be yet another con man and the female harpist is the second engineer; more seriously, in terms of the *dénouement* of the plot, it is uncovered that Mary Duane is Merridith’s half-sister, and that Dixon is not just the would-be author/observer whose account we are reading, but also the murderer. These twists and revelations are in keeping with the tradition of Victorian sensation novels that are invoked in this text.<sup>14</sup> But there are additional Irish factors at work here that, amongst other things, set this novel apart from British neo-Victorian texts and raise questions about the global reach of neo-Victorian studies.

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For Marie-Luise Kohlke, in order to be classified as neo-Victorian, a text must perform as “cultural happening, as socio-political critique, as reinvigorated historical consciousness, as memory work, as critical interface between the present and past” (Kohlke 2008: 1). Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn echo these sentiments and maintain that a neo-Victorian text “must in some respect be *self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 4; original emphasis). As such, this genre has long been concerned with recalibrating the historical record of the nineteenth century through a redistribution of agency – generally by bestowing it on figures and types that had failed to gain a purchase in official and given versions of the period. This precisely describes *Star of the Sea*’s ambition and achievement. It has also been a very successful novel: besides the many awards it has garnered, it was the biggest selling literary novel in the UK in 2004 (O’Connor n.d.; Blake Friedman n.d.). Furthermore, it has gained a considerable readership elsewhere: by 2009 it had been translated into twenty-six languages (Birnbaum n.d.). But if *Star of the Sea* illustrates the global reach of neo-Victorian literature, it could also be thought to raise some questions about the ambit of neo-Victorian scholarship. As this article’s bibliography makes clear, this novel has been the subject of an ever-increasing number of readings emanating from the fields of Irish studies, diasporic, migration and transnational studies, and Gothic studies. To be sure, there are clear thematic overlaps between these articles and neo-Victorian studies; indeed, the term “neo-Victorian” is mentioned (in reference to A.S. Byatt) in Maeve Tynan’s essay, which analyses *Star of the Sea* as an example of Linda Hutcheon’s considerably broader category of “historiographic metafiction” (Tynan 2009: 83, 79). To date, however, Melissa Fegan’s 2011 overview of the novel in *Neo-Victorian Families: Gender, Sexual and Cultural Politics* represents the only notable, explicitly neo-Victorian engagement with the text. Despite the fact that the introduction to Heilmann and Llewellyn’s important survey of the field, *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009*, speaks directly to themes in *Star of the Sea*, it is not one of the novels examined in this text.<sup>15</sup> In short, *Star of the Sea* seems to disappear into the gaps between a set of literary texts and thematic concerns that are repeatedly analysed in this field. Even a book that sets out to widen this discourse by exploring the concept of the neo-Victorian-at-sea, Elizabeth

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Ho’s 2011 *Neo-Victorianism and the Memory of Empire*, does not deal with O’Connor’s novel or with the Irish famine, as Eckart Voigts notes in his review of this monograph (Voigts 2012: 205).<sup>16</sup>

Kate Mitchell’s 2010 *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction* provides a possible insight into why *Star of the Sea* might have been overlooked in neo-Victorian studies. Again, the novel does not feature in Mitchell’s discussion, which has at its heart a belief that “the Victorian period has played a central role in our representations of ourselves, to ourselves” (Mitchell 2010: 177). No doubt the influence of the Victorian period on contemporary life is important, but it may not be central to every culture, and this makes the employment of the possessive pronoun ‘our’ here anything but inclusive. It can be surmised that it refers to the same group Robin Gilmour assumes he is speaking for in a quotation employed elsewhere in Mitchell’s book: “[we] look back on our Victorian ancestors with conflicting feelings of envy, resentment, reproach, and nostalgia” (Gilmour qtd. in Mitchell 2010: 40). The discipline of neo-Victorian studies has, to a very considerable extent, devoted its attention to explorations of these feelings towards the Victorian period and the nineteenth century generally. Nostalgia is perhaps the most important of these, and Mitchell expends considerable energy attempting to resuscitate it as a viable mode of critical cultural memory. This runs against the grain of most neo-Victorian scholarship which has generally been concerned with loosening what Llewellyn has called “the ‘nostalgic tug’ that the (quasi-)Victorian exerts on the mainstream identification of our own time as a period in search of its past” (Llewellyn 2008: 168). However, even these disavowals propel a lot of neo-Victorian studies. In contrast, nostalgia, no matter how redefined or problematised, has no role to play in any treatment of the famine – it simply has no meaning in this context.

Rather than nostalgia, O’Connor’s novel could be thought of as articulating a version of the “anti-nostalgic” attitude that Emilie Pine notes in contemporary Irish writing (Pine 2010: 77). This disposition, she argues, is a consequence of the fact that the past constitutes a “space of trauma” for many Irish writers, with the result that they have had to “surmount” the “dislocation” of their pasts (Pine 2010: 77). In contrast, neo-Victorian studies has had, for the most part, a sense of a continuous and known or knowable history as its focus of study. Lytton Strachey’s comment that “[t]he history of the Victorian Age will never be written: we know too much

about it” (Strachey qtd. in Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 21) speaks directly to this perception and, for Heilmann and Llewellyn, neo-Victorian literature should uncover the elisions that mould such a conception of British history. O'Connor's novel works under a different historical and literary imperative: to forge an Irish past that is, to a very large extent, unknown or traumatically unknowable. Rather than functioning in terms of a discourse of continuation, Irish history is, in Eagleton's words “too palpably ruptured and discontinuous for the tropes of a sedate English evolutionism to take hold” (Eagleton 1995: 7). So rather than unveiling disjunction, a novel set in the Irish nineteenth century has the task of rendering seismic fractures understandable to its readers.

A similar disjunction also configures the Irish literary landscape. P.J. Mathews has suggested that “*Star of the Sea* offers itself as a lost epic of the nineteenth century” that sheds light on Irish “cultural experience” in that century (Mathews 2005). This indicates an important difference between this text's inheritance and those of British neo-Victorian novels: there is not a substantial archive of nineteenth-century Irish novels to draw upon, with the result that, to a considerable extent, an Irish neo-Victorian novel has to create its predecessors.<sup>17</sup> There were, of course, nineteenth-century writers who wrote novels that articulated a wide variety of perspectives on the divided political, religious and cultural colonial context of Ireland – Maria Edgeworth, Lady Morgan, William Carleton, the Banim brothers, Charles Kickham, Edith Somerville and Martin Ross, and George Moore – but while this body of work has been undergoing reassessment in recent years by scholars in the interdisciplinary field of Irish studies, novels by these writers largely failed to create a national tradition that later Irish writers might utilise. At least, this is O'Connor's attitude, as he makes no attempt to recuperate any of these Irish writers – notably, as Ó Gallchoir points out, Carleton's famine novel *The Black Prophet* finds no echo in *Star of the Sea* (Ó Gallchoir 2013: 351). Instead, *Star of the Sea* fundamentally reiterates Thomas Kinsella's 1971 judgement that “silence on the whole is the real condition of Irish literature in the nineteenth century [...]; there is nothing that approaches the ordinary literary achievement of an age” (Kinsella 2000: 810). Mathews, who cites this passage, appositely comments:

[a] society recovering from catastrophic famine and in the process of replacing one language with another [...] does not



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have much energy to invest in literary endeavour. Nor, indeed, does a dispossessed peasantry leave even the most rudimentary of written archives behind it. (Mathews 2005)

Thought of in this light, the silent ghost of the Irish language in this novel also speaks of the lack of these texts, and the cacophony of discordant voices this ghost generates can also be understood as the reverberations of an attempt to patch together a tradition. Indeed, in three overlapping ways O’Connor forges a tradition of sorts for Irish literature in *Star of the Sea*: by borrowing from native resources that had resonance in the twentieth century, by positioning the novel in such a way that it appears to map out the would-be *terra incognita* that preceded the efflorescence of twentieth-century Irish writing in English, and by inventively intruding into the fastness of nineteenth-century British literature. Through these means the novel charts a tradition of disjunction – one that is distinctively Irish and, at the same time, bonded to global experiences or, more precisely, to the experience of globalisation.

If, for the most part, nineteenth-century Irish novels failed to make the transition into the twentieth century, Irish music effected a considerably more successful passage. From the *Melodies* (1808-1837) of Ireland’s national poet Thomas Moore to Thomas Davis’s nationalist rallying cries ‘The West’s Asleep’ and ‘A Nation Once Again’ (1845), nineteenth-century ballads are still being performed and rearranged. And these, as Mulvey realises in an epiphanic moment, are also the places where one might go to learn about subaltern Irish experience: “[s]ingers”, he discerns, “were admired by almost everyone; they were the annalists, chroniclers, biographers. In a place where reading was almost unknown they carried the local memory like walking books” (O’Connor 2003: 98). Lacking the authority of ‘authorised’ histories and the grand European tradition of nineteenth-century novels, this is a record that functioned in a macaronic fashion, slipping between languages and merging Irish forms with English lyrics. Emphatically not definitive statements, ballads are entirely open to rewriting, and the success or failure of these versions depends on the aesthetic and political judgements of their audiences. Mulvey’s multifarious career fundamentally revolves around his abilities as a re-maker of ballads, and the novel never lets the reader forget that he excels at this precisely because of his inherent insincerity: as Mulvey notes,

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“[t]he main thing in balladry was to make a singable song. The facts did not matter: *that was the secret*” (O'Connor 2003: 102; original emphasis). Therefore, considered as an available nineteenth-century Irish resource, ballads do not provide O'Connor with a narrative; rather, the novel incorporates their open-ended, hybrid form.

Thought of in this manner, ballads speak of a disjunctive culture, and a sense of disjunction is perhaps the most important inheritance the nineteenth century bequeathed to twentieth-century Irish writers. At the heart of this, once again, is the language shift, and Kiberd has linked Irish reactions to nineteenth-century linguistic dislodgement with the subsequent flowering of Irish literature in English:

[m]ost [Irish] people congratulated themselves on their eloquence in English, while remaining dumb in Irish. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that even the brilliance of the Irish literary performance in English may have had about it some element of determined compensation. (Kiberd 1995: 649)

This compensation was also an enactment of the predicament of the language shift as, in a variety of different forms, the works of writers such as Yeats, Joyce, Samuel Beckett and Flann O'Brien can be read as coming to terms with being Irish in English: a fascination with the possibilities and limitations of language deriving from a context in which the relationship between word and thing is not unambiguous. Believing that there is a lack of viable Irish Victorian literary predecessors, O'Connor anachronistically summons up these twentieth-century Irish masters to act in their place; as Eagleton noted in his review of the novel, “its structure is that of Irish literary experiment” (Eagleton 2003). Some of the Joycean and Yeatsian notes in the text have already been pointed out, while it might be argued that Beckett informs the desolate silence at the heart of the novel. Crucially, by linking these writers thus, through language, to nineteenth-century Irish experience, *Star of the Sea* also traces a disjunctive cultural context for them and does not allow them to be regarded simply as deracinated explosions of genius.

Finally, O'Connor also playfully trespasses on the ground of British nineteenth-century literature, employing Irish experience to queer its sense

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of tradition and inheritance. Writers such as Trollope are directly cited; others like Alfred Tennyson are given silent minor parts in Laura Merridith’s literary *soirées*; and Mulvey comically provides the plot for Dickens’s *Oliver Twist*. *Wuthering Heights*, though, plays an even more important role in the novel, one informed by Eagleton’s conjectures about Heathcliff’s and the Brontës’ Irish backgrounds – amongst other things, Eagleton suggests that “Heathcliff is a fragment of the Famine” (Eagleton 1995: 11). Having read Ellis Bell’s text, Merridith connects its Yorkshire landscapes with those of Connemara, and a link between the novel and Ireland plays a crucial, semantic, role in his murder. It is the source of the cryptic warning note Merridith supposedly received from the paramilitary nationalist group, the ‘Liabes’: as Dixon explains in his confessional ‘Epilogue’, “GET HIM. RIGHT SUNE. Els Be lybill. H.” was an anagram of “WUTHERING HEIGHTS by Ellis Bell. With the ‘M’ in ‘get him’ an inverted W” (O’Connor 2003: 394-395). Symbolically, one of the key texts in English literature is dismembered and recomposed into a bastardised form of Hiberno-English. This was done by Merridith himself, who assembled the note in order to ensure his family’s inheritance through a form of mis-direction: he wanted it to appear that he had been murdered by the Liabes, as his syphilis and suicide would have voided the relief his family was due from the Royal Naval Relief Trust. Inheritances are always fabricated, and as *Star of the Sea* looks to forge a nineteenth-century cultural context for twentieth-century Irish literature that relates it to the trauma of the famine, it does so in a manner that suggests that all literatures have, to some degree, concocted their ancestry. In doing this, it also gestures towards the interwoven nature of Irish and British literatures: if Irish literature has emerged from the exposure of Irish experience to the English language, British literature has also been informed by its relationship with Ireland. Importantly, while the novel fashions a west of Ireland ancestry for *Oliver Twist* and *Wuthering Heights*, this site cannot be considered a secure origin; after all, in this novel it functions not as the location of an unproblematised Irish identity (a role it assumed in some Irish Literary Revival texts), but as the place where burial is problematic and, thus, as the launching pad for the spectral experience of globalisation. In other words, relating these national literatures to this region is a way of putting them in motion in the world.

This trajectory also describes how the literary histories (not just the histories of literature) that this novel creates point towards a possible way of

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coming to terms with the trauma of the famine. At stake here is a redeployment of the significance of the unburied famine dead in the present. In common with other neo-Victorian texts, *Star of the Sea* inhabits at least two temporal planes simultaneously, which grants it an inherently spectral character that, moreover, speaks of the condition of trauma: haunting, as Kohlke notes, “can be read as indicative of personal and cultural trauma” (Kohlke 2008: 9). But *Star of the Sea* not only embodies the melancholic, repetitive dynamics of trauma, it also seeks to disrupt this motion in an enabling fashion by framing the famine in terms of other and contemporary reiterations of the impact of modernity and globalisation.

As David Fitzpatrick notes, the “scale of [...] flight [from the famine] was unprecedented in the history of international migrations” (Fitzpatrick 1995: 175), and if this text exists between temporal zones, it is also mainly set on a ‘coffin ship’ – a heterotopic site traversing a liminal space between home and an uncertain future (Corporaal and Cusack 2011: 352; Beville 2014: 38). For Baucom, such an unsettling setting speaks to the state of anxiety, which is “both the loss of *a* place and the loss of place itself, the terrorism of the global” (Baucom 2000: 138; original italics). Set thus in motion, this “nation afloat” (Sally 1995: 220) enacts a spectral dispersal that might be specifically related to the trauma of the famine and, at the same time, this unfixed mobile site embodies a general experience of deracinated globalisation. The ship is where the majority of these Irish passengers encounter the difference of the global for the first time: as the captain notes, its crew are from various locations around the world, such as the Chinese cook Henry Li and the “sailor, Thierry-Luc of Port au Prince” (O’Connor 2003: 153). Such a ship becomes a site upon which the passengers can begin to negotiate “their pending assimilation in the New World”, as Marguérite Corporaal and Christopher Cusack point out in their analysis of nineteenth-century novels set on famine ships (Corporaal and Cusack 2011: 345). Furthermore, just as the experience of globalisation calls for a more hybrid conception of identity, the ship, like almost every other element in this novel, including the novel itself, has an alternative identity: it was formerly a slaver and hence incorporates a confluence of the so-called Black and Green Atlantics (see Moynihan 2008). Rather than standing as an exclusive source of trauma, the famine is thus also framed as the repetition of another traumatic experience of migration. Disjunction, the novel underlines, is not an exclusive Irish phenomenon, and Irish people

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have not been the only ones who have had to adapt to new linguistic landscapes and undergo the disorientating experience of negotiating their identities between the ghostly demands of the mother tongue and those imposed by the new culture. In fact, in contemporary Ireland many immigrants are confronting the same dilemma as the Irish-speaking characters in O’Connor’s novel: of having to come to terms with a hegemonic Anglophone culture.

For many days on the voyage, an untraceable stench shrouds the ‘Star of the Sea’ and is ascribed a spectral origin by a large number of the passengers. Eventually its horrific source is discovered: the decomposing bodies of two stowaways – a young couple, locked in an embrace, who had hidden in one of the ship’s sewerage culverts. Reading this, as O’Connor noted, “it’s hard not to think of the poor Pakistani boys frozen to ice last year [2002] under a jumbo jet’s wheel carriage” (qtd. in Palmer 2003). This is how the ghostly emanations of the famine physically manifest themselves in the contemporary world and call for an ethical engagement. Reflecting on the dead stowaways, Captain Lockwood writes in his log:

if the world were somehow turned downside-up, if Ireland were a richer land and other nations now mighty were distressed; as certain as I know that the dawn must come, the people of Ireland would welcome the frightened stranger with that gentleness and friendship that so ennoble their character. (O’Connor 2003: 279)

In the late-twentieth century the world was “turned downside-up” and Celtic-Tiger Ireland became a destination for immigrants from around the world. Yet, as O’Connor emphasised in a number of interviews, the welcome there was not as forthcoming as it might have been: “[y]ou’d think because of our history we’d be incredibly welcoming and nice to them, but we have the same levels of racism and xenophobia as any other country in Europe – it’s as if our history means measurably nothing” (qtd. in Palmer 2003). Rephrased in terms employed here, O’Connor would appear to suggest that the inability to mourn the famine, to process its meaning, has meant that postcolonial Irish society has melancholically re-enacted what was known: in this case, the sort of ‘modernising’ free market philosophy that was responsible for exacerbating the catastrophe of the famine. In short,

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this has resulted in Ireland becoming what O'Connor has termed "a rather Thatcherite society" (qtd. in Estévez-Saá 2005: 173); Thatcher, of course, was a politician who advocated an unproblematised return to a 'mythical' (in the Barthesian sense) version of Victorian society.

In her work on the politics of memory in contemporary Ireland, Pine unveils and critiques a culture of remembrance that tends "to focus on the traumas of the past without elucidating the implications for the future" (Pine 2010: 17). This, she holds, should be replaced with a more enabling "ethical form of memory" that "move[s] on from being haunted by trauma" and that "learn[s] to reconcile the past with the future" (Pine 2010: 17). Just such a mode of coming to terms with the famine was called for in 1995 by the then Irish President, Mary Robinson, in an address to a joint sitting of both houses of the Oireachtas (the Irish parliament) – one of the major events of the sesquicentennial commemorations. Robinson urged a re-evaluation of the famine's history of dispossession that would allow for it to be "take[n] [...] into the present with us, to help others who now suffer in a similar way" (Robinson 1995). Citing her visits to refugee camps in Somalia, Tanzania and Zaire, Robinson called on Irish people to engage with their past by articulating the plight of these people: "[w]e cannot undo the silence of our own past, but we can lend our voice to those who now suffer." (Robinson 1995) Fundamentally, this demands an active mode of remembrance that operates in the context of what might be called an enabling globalisation: a reimagining and rephrasing of what the Irish experienced 150 years ago in terms of what many elsewhere continue to endure. O'Connor works to articulate a commensurately ethical, global perspective on how to come to terms with the famine in *Star of the Sea*. If Captain Lockwood's anachronistic note is somewhat ungainly, it is nonetheless the most overt example of how this novel's reconfigurations of the dislocations of the famine gesture towards "more viable ways of living with one another in the future" (Kohlke 2008: 9). Inscribed throughout *Star of the Sea*'s history of this period is the suggestion that accommodating, and showing hospitality to, in particular, contemporary immigrants might be a way of working through the trauma of the famine, mourning it, and finding places for its unburied dead.

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**Notes**

1. One of the clearest examples of this reluctance to engage with politically charged issues is to be seen in the pages of *Irish Historical Studies*. Founded in 1938, this journal has been widely associated with the professionalisation of Irish historical practice. Remarkably, in its first fifty years it published only “five articles on topics related to the famine”, as James S. Donnelly Jr. points out (Donnelly, Jr 2001: 12).
2. Moreover, in a 2013 lecture, Kelleher also pointed out that “a turn to the subject of the famine is a striking feature of scholarship on James Joyce and more recently W.B. Yeats” (Kelleher 2013: 6). Margu rite Corporaal’s ongoing ERC-funded research project, ‘Relocated Remembrance: The Great Famine in Irish (Diaspora) Fiction, 1847-1921’, is also uncovering forgotten literary accounts of the famine (see Corporaal and Cusack 2011 and Corporaal, Cusack, Janssen and van den Beuken 2014).
3. Summing up the reactions of “Irish academic historians” to *The Great Hunger*,   Gr da has contended that they “have been less than fair to Woodham-Smith. Roy Foster’s memorable but cutting depiction of her as a ‘zealous convert’ captures the condescending professional consensus” (  Gr da 2006: 245).
4. Maria Beville has located this silence in terms of O’Connor’s postmodern engagement with the Gothic, arguing that “[t]he most pervasive aspect of Gothic writing is its capacity for dealing with that which cannot be said and that which is unsayable” (Beville 2014: 37).
5. There is an allusion here to Seamus Deane’s essay ‘Dumbness and Eloquence: A Note on English as We Write It in Ireland’ (Deane 2003). This is an excellent and forceful introduction to the ways in which the famine changed Irish perceptions of the Irish language and so radically reshaped Irish self-perceptions.
6. Building on Kelleher’s work on the ways in which women were employed to embody the inexpressible in accounts of the famine (Kelleher 1997),   Gallchoir has provided an account of how this novel links women with the Irish language and, thus, with the ineffably authentic (  Gallchoir 2013).
7. The question of language was not prominent in interviews conducted around the time of the novel’s publication. When it was raised in the later interview published in *Contemporary Literature*, O’Connor expressed the ambivalences that have characterised the reactions of many Irish people to the language:

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[e]veryone in Ireland speaks and understands at least a little Gaelic: it is a compulsory subject in all Irish schools. I respect the language deeply and find it beautiful. I also love other aspects of Gaelic culture, especially the music and storytelling. I strongly support our government's efforts to support Gaelic, and especially to support the people who live in the Gaeltacht areas of Connemara and elsewhere. But I do not consider Gaelic my native language. I was brought up in the 'Anglosphere', and English is my mother tongue. (Estévez-Saá 2005: 174)

8. As Robert Scally points out, the language shift was already in train before the famine, but that event nonetheless administered a *coup de grâce* to the culture that employed Irish as its main means of communication: "[t]he long-standing barriers of language, economies, social conventions, values, and even of religion were being eroded with increasing speed in the generation before the famine, although it was that cataclysm that did more than anything else to bring the 'old regime' of the Irish peasantry to an end" (Scally 1995: 20).
9. In the famous 'tundish' scene with the dean of studies in *A Portrait*, which explores the ambivalences of the history of English in Ireland, Dedalus jokingly claims that "they speak the best English [...] in Lower Drumcondra", the neighbourhood in Dublin where he resided (Joyce 2013: 211).
10. This macaronic rendering of English contrasts with O'Connor's concern to render Irish in an accurate and standard fashion in the novel, something that Ó Gallchoir points out. As she contends, by doing this O'Connor

expresses the desire to confer on Irish the authority of a standardized, printed language, to overturn the dominant nineteenth-century view of the language as 'pre-modern and oral'. His careful reproduction of modern standard Irish is thus an exercise in reparation, [...] according to the language in the twentieth century the status that it lacked in the nineteenth. But it could also be argued that in this determination he also reveals himself as unwilling to confront the



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actual linguistic instability of Irish in the nineteenth century. (Ó Gallchoir 2013: 353)

Perhaps the metafictional structure of the novel needs to be blended into this argument, as Dixon is presented as not speaking Irish. Similarly, as is clear from the excerpt of his interview with Estévez-Saá cited above (see Note 7), this could also be read as an expression of O’Connor’s unfamiliarity with the Irish language.

11. O’Connor has suggested in an interview that “had the famine happened in Yorkshire in England, for example, I don’t think the British government would have done much more to help its victims” (qtd. in Croft 2004).
12. The citation in the title of this article is taken from this episode (see O’Connor 2003: 211).
13. In her astute analysis of the gender dynamics operating in this novel, Ó Gallchoir notes that “[t]he difference between Pius and Mary [Duane] [...] marks the difference between present and past, between modern subjects of contemporary Ireland and the massed victims of the Irish past”, because while Mulvey possesses “the determination (and the ability) to make choices, Mary [...] is seemingly powerless to escape a destiny imposed on her by the combined forces of social circumstance and ideology” (Ó Gallchoir 2013: 357, 356). But if Mulvey’s story speaks of the experience of modernity and, indeed, globalisation, it must also be underlined how his range of choices is fundamentally circumscribed by his subaltern status.
14. This sensationalism sets O’Connor’s novel apart from Peter Behrens’s 2006 novel *The Law of Dreams*, which also deals with a famine victim’s odyssey, culminating in an 1847 voyage to Canada. While the exceptional circumstances of the famine compel the protagonist of Behrens’s novel into uncharted territories, his adventures have less of the fantastic about them. Compared with *Star of the Sea*, *The Law of Dreams* highlights how O’Connor’s sometimes heavy-handed use of the sensational is related to his political concern to underline, time and again, the necessary hybridisation of identities in a globalised world. Furthermore, it becomes apparent that this melodramatic tactic tends to emphasise privileged or exceptional perspectives. There is no Dickens or an Irish-Portuguese character posing as an Indian Maharajah in Behrens’s work; rather, more time is spent below deck with the passengers in steerage than there is in *Star of the Sea*, where this experience is frequently explicitly mediated through Dixon and Lockwood’s chronicles.

15. Heilmann has written about the Irish famine via its traces in Nuala O'Faolain's work (see Heilmann 2010).
16. Having said this, Ho's work does speak to O'Connor's novel, especially her analysis of the experience of the loss/shift of languages in the "contact zone" that the ships constitute (Ho 2012: 180).
17. To be sure, some Irish writers – especially those associated with the Gothic tradition (C.R. Maturin, Sheridan Le Fanu and Bram Stoker) and Oscar Wilde – are considerable neo-Victorian presences, but as their works do not speak directly about Irish experience, they tend to be located at some distance from their always-contested Irish contexts in discussions of neo-Victorianism.

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