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Irish Hunger / American Eyes: The Great Famine in Antebellum American Literature

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by

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On July 3, 2010, while attending Philadelphia's Independence Day fireworks celebration, I visited the Irish Famine Memorial at Penn's Landing. The space was packed with tourists and merchants, buying, selling, and sweating together under the late afternoon sun. Coming closer to the Memorial, I noticed a scene that stays with me and, in part, drives me to write this dissertation. A middle-aged African American woman, dressed patriotically in red, white and blue, set up an informal vending station on the Memorial itself. As pop music rang out from her stereo, she began selling various Independence Day items, T-shirts, horns, and other trinkets. Several passers-by seemed perplexed by the display, uncertain whether to purchase something from the woman or to ask her to vacate the area out of a sense of propriety. I overheard one man walking past mutter, "That seems a bit offensive." Later, as the afternoon dragged on and the crowd filled in, the Memorial became a jungle gym; numerous children (and even a few adults) of various sizes and diverse backgrounds began climbing all over the bronze statue, pretending to be pirates or superheroes. Bothered as I was by this apparent disregard of the statue's solemnity, I remain fascinated by how this site is such a living space, a symbol of the American process of assimilation, through which an irrepressible memory becomes a place of commerce and recreation.

More practically speaking, this dissertation is the product of the undying support I have received from colleagues and friends, teachers and family. To them I give my utmost thanks. Ultimately, and most importantly, to Mary Ellen, Leo, and Nora, I owe all the credit. Thanks for putting up with me and for making it matter!

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines how the Irish Famine (1845-1852) and its concomitant hunger were viewed by a diverse selection of American writers from the antebellum era. Selected texts from the following figures are analyzed: Frederick Douglass, Herman Melville, Asenath Nicholson, Fitz-James O'Brien, and Henry David Thoreau. Viewed collectively, their works show how antebellum American notions of individuality and nationhood were challenged by Irish hunger. Hunger could not be easily accommodated in the antebellum period because many Americans preferred to think of themselves as self-sufficient and strong, never hungry. Thus, sympathy for the hungry Irish called into question the very notion of being American. Famine hunger was an Irish problem, but it became an American opportunity, a credit to a nation that viewed itself as exceptionally able to identify, alleviate, and capitalize upon such suffering. By showing them what they could not imagine themselves experiencing, the Famine forced Americans to engage with the trauma of hunger at the core of the nation and to become even more grateful for the *land of plenty* in which they lived. Indeed, some Americans saw hunger, in addition to whiteness, as an ironic marker of Irish privilege. This examination of the literary representation and rhetorical manipulation of Irish hunger highlights the hypocritical nature of American attitudes towards immigration. The Irish who survived the Famine and emigrated to the United States were able to *Americanize* because their hunger was viewed, along with their whiteness, as a qualification for potential citizenship. Ultimately, Famine hunger became a harbinger of assimilation, paradoxically demonstrating that the immigrant Irish had the self-reliance and independence expected of them as potential Americans.

PREFACE

Through historicist inquiry and close reading, "Irish Hunger / American Eyes" addresses the ways in which a diverse selection of antebellum American writers responded to the Irish Famine (1845-1852) and to the starving Irish immigrants who came to the United States as a result. Because of the severity of the Famine—"an event with something of the characteristics of a low-level nuclear attack" (Eagleton 23)—many Irish in the nineteenth-century U.S. were marked by hunger. In other words, they were *radioactive*. I envision the chapters of this dissertation, then, as a catalogue of the *fallout* associated with the Famine. One of the reasons why some antebellum Americans were able to accept Irish immigrants into the United States was that hunger—in addition to whiteness—marked the Irish as worthy of both sympathy and, ultimately, national citizenship. America in the nineteenth century was viewed as a "land of plenty" eager to receive the "huddled masses" of the Old World. However, there was also a competing national ideology of Americans as a hardy, independent people whose principal qualification as Americans was that they were able to provide for themselves. Irish hunger reveals the tension between these two ideologies: while hunger identified Irish immigrants as worthy of U.S. sympathy (and the national citizenship that may accompany such sympathetic identification), hunger also marked them as weak (not hardy), dependent (not self-reliant) and, therefore, un-American. In other words, the Irish failed the first test of citizenship: self-sufficiency. Sympathy was simply not enough for them to assimilate as Americans. "Irish Hunger / American Eyes" thus aims to expose these productive tensions in how selected American writers characterized Irish Famine hunger; therefore, it reveals how antebellum Americans saw themselves.

Through a variety of different texts—memoirs, adventurous seafaring novels, travel narratives, Gothic fiction, and personal essays—each of the writers selected here feels something for the Famine Irish, but their reactions spread across a spectrum of sympathy, which each of the four main chapters illustrates. In chapter one, entitled "Sustaining Sympathy, Transcending Hunger," I contrast selected nonfiction writings of Asenath Nicholson, the American missionary who worked hand-in-hand with Irish people both in the slums of New York and in the fields of Ireland, with Henry David Thoreau, the Transcendentalist who also spent time among Irish Americans in New England. Thoreau had much to say about the Irish he encountered, but his overall response to Irish Famine immigration and its associated hunger is one of detachment and condescension. His pairing with Nicholson shows the breadth of reactions to Irish hunger even among similarly situated middle-class Americans. The middle chapters of this dissertation further illustrate this spectrum of sympathy by considering selected fiction from Herman Melville and Fitz-James O'Brien. Like Nicholson, Melville sympathizes more willingly with the Irish, but he emphasizes how such sympathy must be seen as part of the larger structural inequities that create hunger in the first place. Chapter two focuses primarily on *Redburn*, one of Melville's lesser-known adventure novels that takes on the subject of Irish Famine immigration. In this novel, Melville demonstrates an ambivalent combination of sympathy and anxiety towards the Irish characterized by what Melville himself terms the "strange feeling" of witnessing another person's suffering. O'Brien—the subject of chapter three who was himself an Irish immigrant to the U.S.—seems to agree with Melville that a sympathetic reaction to Irish hunger is too simplistic. After making admirable attempts to depict Famine suffering through his sentimental poetry,

O'Brien seems to internalize his shame as a proximate witness of the Famine who could not do much to relieve it. His Gothic short stories thus express the complicated processes of sympathy and shame that many antebellum Americans experienced in the face of Irish Famine hunger.

Finally, this spectrum of sympathy turns to Frederick Douglass, whose revisions of his 1845 *Narrative* reflect a range of reactions to Irish Famine immigration in the U.S. From his perspective as an African American writer and orator who had visited Ireland during the Famine, Douglass saw hunger—in addition to whiteness—as an ironic marker of Irish privilege in America. Initially, he sympathized with the Irish in Ireland and wrote eloquently of how their responses to suffering mirrored that of slaves he had encountered in the American South. The closeness of his identification with the Irish made his later turn towards ambivalence about them that much more difficult. Once Irish Americans and African Americans became rivals in a quest for equality, Douglass could not maintain the sympathy he once felt for the Famine Irish. Most interestingly, however, he did not put the blame for his struggles on the Irish alone. In addition to their race, which undeniably privileged them, the American Irish learned how to take advantage of their hunger as a way of distinguishing themselves from African Americans in competition for economic opportunity and access to citizenship. Douglass thus shows how African Americans, no matter how much they were themselves starving for freedom, were not considered by most white Americans to be as hungry, and therefore as worthy of sympathy, as were the Irish.

In the end, "Irish Hunger / American Eyes" initiates closer consideration of this paradox of Irish privilege. Once they got to the U.S., the "huddled masses" of hungry

Irish immigrants were, for the most part, expected to fend for and feed themselves. This focus on Irish hunger thus reveals a tension between ideologies: What is one to think or do about a hungry Irish immigrant, especially when the very notion of hunger contrasts so drastically with the American worldview of self-reliance and fecundity? In such an environment, how could something as awful as Famine hunger come to serve as a claim to citizenship? While no consensus can be established about how to resolve this tension between sympathy for Irish immigrants and their perceived failure to live up to American expectations, the efforts of these writers to account for the impact of the Famine remain admirable and important even in our own time. I am trying, then, to open up this dialogue to critical consideration. I offer this project as a testament to the work of these writers who began by seeing the Irish and by trying to represent and understand the complex relationships between hunger and sympathy, self-reliance and shame, revealing a legacy of Famine literature that thrives even outside of Ireland. As much as I am indebted to those silenced, *radioactive* Irish who suffered and died of hunger and disease during the Famine years, I am also grateful to those Americans who wrote of their witnessing with such skill and authenticity. The work that has been done here speaks of and to a nation that needs to hear some of these messages again, for its own good. From this study may emerge a greater appreciation for the Famine as a key event for both Americanists and Irish Studies scholars to reconsider. If Walt Whitman was right to exclaim in his Preface to *Leaves of Grass* (1855) that "American bards shall be … hungry for equals night and day," the diverse writers selected here show what happens when the inequality of hunger arrives on American shores.

Irish poverty has a special and exceptional character, which renders its definition difficult, because it can be compared with no other indigence. Irish misery forms a type by itself, of which neither the model nor the imitation can be found anywhere else.

~ Gustave de Beaumont, *Ireland* (Part I, Chapter I, 130)

Literature was more than a useful venue for the contest of political ideas; it was also a forum for protesting present conditions, for glorifying the past and formulating visions of the future, and for challenging the oppressors' legitimating narratives of persecution and conquest. Even more fundamentally, it was in part through literature that the notions of group coherence and distinctiveness upon which nationality rested were maintained.

~ Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Special Sorrows* (96-97)

I think the real link between food and literature is that they both satisfy, not only an appetite, but a *hunger*. A hunger for words. A hunger for the lives of others, a hunger to transcend our own small selves and enter the bodies of others—different from us, yet the same—across the divide of centuries or class or culture or gender or race.

~ Brad Kessler, "One Reader's Digest: Toward a Gastronomic Theory of Literature" (165; *emphasis* in original)

In Robert Shure's *Boston Irish Famine Memorial*, pictured above, starving figures slump in despair and shame as three members of a proud, confident family move towards a future bright with hope and free of hunger. Such keen and compelling images tell a tale of Irish assimilation in the United States that is too simplistic, implying that the process was one of easily forgotten hardship and almost immediate acceptance. The narrative of Famine immigration is not one of rags to riches; instead, it is a story of definitive defeat and painful progress. During a time of otherwise incredible modernization in much of the transatlantic world, the Famine generation was punctuated by primordial hunger, reminding us that "[a] historical negative space of absolute loss exists, a limit that theory cannot transgress, that ethics cannot redeem" (Whelan 152). Thus, one turns to the writers of the time, to those who witnessed the Famine, from different distances and diverse perspectives, but with a shared sense of it as an important transatlantic event. This dissertation, then, looks to selected American texts to find traces of Irish hunger, moments of critical insight and ethical redemption that fill the silences of Famine memory and remind us of its impact upon subsequent generations. Collectively, the four chapters of this dissertation emphasize the ever-present ways in which the history and literature of the Famine reflect concerns with social justice within the United States and across the transatlantic world. Although the Famine is well in the past, its impact remains indelibly imprinted in the numerous images of hunger—architectural, literary, and otherwise—found on both sides of the Atlantic and elsewhere. Memorials of the Famine placed in numerous American cities continue to express this ongoing effect of Famine hunger, providing a mythical image of Irish-American assimilation that deserves further

explanation and analysis. In this sense, memories of the Irish Famine mingle a spirit of celebration and success with an aura of guilt and shame.

In the antebellum era, especially during the years of the Irish Famine (1845-1852), the transatlantic problem of hunger became more visible in American culture, prompting many to reconsider their own places within the republic. Beryl Rowland discusses the importance of the so-called *hungry forties* in the modernizing transatlantic world of the nineteenth century, noting that "[m]atters of food, labour, housing, health and infant mortality rate among the American poor … became highly topical" (72). Among the numerous areas of interest to socially-conscious Americans in this period, the incidence of hunger among them most challenged their notions of the U.S. as a *land of plenty*. Whereas most British had encountered hunger both on their own shores and abroad well before the Victorian era, many Americans in the mid-nineteenth century could still claim ignorance regarding Irish hunger, and most would not learn the extent of the crisis until at least 1846.[1] Some Americans excused or justified hunger through misguided, destructive beliefs—shared by many Britons—"that major long-term economic gains could not be achieved in Ireland without a massive amount of short-term suffering and sacrifice" and that the blame for Irish suffering lay upon individual sufferers themselves (Donnelly 61). As will be highlighted in the upcoming chapter summaries, the texts selected in this dissertation show how antebellum American notions of individuality and nationhood were fundamentally challenged by Irish hunger, which

[1] Joep Leerssen acknowledges the broader European view—going back to the Enlightenment era and the years of the French Revolution—that "the parallel between France and Ireland, both characterized by hunger, by a demographic power imbalance and by potentially violent disaffection, was obvious to all" (53). Such associations were not immediately translated to the American continent; however, this lack of recognition would change drastically as more than 1.1 million Irish immigrants "thronged to the United States between 1847 and 1854" (Joyce 30).

meant something different in Ireland and England than in the United States. In addition to factors of "'race,' 'nature,' [and] 'history'" rightly emphasized by Matthew Jacobson, one may add hunger as a distinctive marker "upon which nationality rested" (97). The Famine Irish were, in Jacobson's words, both "insiders and outsiders" in that their hunger in Ireland solicited sympathy, but concerns about their desperation distanced them from full recognition as Americans. Famine hunger thus calls into question certain tenets of the Protestant work ethic—such as "thrift, sobriety, industry, self-control" (O'Neill 132)—the very values that the immigrant Irish struggled to exercise amidst their complicated acculturation as Americans.[2]

In addition to cultural studies and historical revisions of the Irish impact in America, full comprehension of the Famine's myriad effects is possible only with the imaginative capacity of literature—along with the continued efforts of literary critics—to trace these effects within and especially beyond Ireland itself. The term "Famine" will be written here with an uppercase *F* to denote the seriousness of an event during which, most scholars agree, at least 1 million people died and between 1.5 and 2 million emigrated. Others choose to place "famine" in lowercase in order to de-emphasize its significance or to remind readers, often with the goal of revisionism, that it was not the only famine to occur in Irish history. "Despite the broadly circulating narratives of people dying in droves of actual hunger," writes Hasia Diner, it was not the only type of suffering experienced during the Famine (88); however, *hunger* remains the key term

[2] Use of the term *acculturation* is meant primarily to convey how the nineteenth-century Irish-American experience was one of incomplete adaptation to the majority American culture. In many cases, Irish Americans maintained their distinctive identity while refusing to fully assimilate and thus to give up what it was that made them *Irish*, including their claim upon the ostensibly exclusive experience of hunger engendered by the Famine.

denoting the most memorable and rhetorically significant form of suffering in Famine memory. In Irish Gaelic, the Famine is known as *An Gorta Mór*, or 'The Great Hunger,' a phrase that emphasizes its association with the experience of hunger at the root of this dissertation's interests. By isolating selected literary representations of hunger, this work aims to supplement an impressive collection of history and criticism that does much, but not all, to explain the impact of the Famine in the transatlantic world. While writing from American perspectives, each figure selected in this dissertation has unique transatlantic interests. None should be divorced from either side of the Atlantic, especially from his or her concern for the emigrant/immigrant Irish. In other words, their selected writings should be seen as examples of transatlantic literature influenced most particularly by their commentary on the Famine Irish experience of hunger. In addition to this emphasis on its transatlantic dimensions, this project further strives towards what Paul Giles terms "a critical narrative on international American studies" that "would seek to locate precisely those junctures where the proximate and distant illuminatingly converge and diverge" (258). The Famine's immanent hunger is one such "juncture" that can be seen in England, America and even beyond the Atlantic rim in places like Australia. Although, as contends Kevin Whelan, "Ireland remained culturally comatose in the immediate post-Famine period" (137), its effect upon cultures around the world was ultimately more productive than debilitative. What follows, then, is an explanation of this dissertation's cognitive structure as it works to think through the complex social phenomenon of the Famine, encountering, in turn, silence, sympathy, and shame.

Quite simply, the issue of food (and the lack thereof) was not discussed among most Irish as they struggled to move on from the Famine, leaving to others the

complicated tasks of definition, explanation, and analysis. "When [the Irish] struggled for national and cultural renewal," asserts Diner, "they did not include food as an element of pride in their distinctive communal and folk culture" (101). Instead, Diner continues: "Part of their identity was forever fused with memories of hunger. By giving up those memories, they would have given up much of what they constructed as authentically and profoundly Irish" (145). As Diner's claims demonstrate, hunger has the paradoxical power to both silence and unite communities. It is a marker of identity just as real and perhaps as complex as race and ethnicity. Because the Irish suffered their hunger in relative silence, some Americans considered them more deserving of support. Their silence about Famine hunger need not preclude them, however, from asserting a proactive, political voice. Even though the notion of silence seems opposed to the trope of having a voice, this study of the American reaction to the Famine highlights the ways in which silence itself can be used as a marker of rhetorical and emotional efficacy. "As far as the Famine goes," Terry Eagleton asserts, "we are dealing with the most important episode of modern Irish history and the greatest social disaster of nineteenth-century Europe—an event with something of the characteristics of a low-level nuclear attack" (23). Thus, the contrived notion of the Famine as a source of silence is belied by its sheer volume, prompting reconsideration of the ways in which the Famine is represented within and beyond the Famine era. Those who experience hunger—and can survive it through silent stoicism—are precisely those whom some American witnesses of hunger may deem worthy of eventual acceptance.

But this apparent paradox prompts a central question of this dissertation: How does one sympathize with—and thereby begin to understand and assimilate—the

traumatic experience of hunger, especially in a nation intent on viewing such hunger as anathema? Simply put, hunger could not be easily accommodated in the antebellum period because many Americans thought of themselves as self-sufficient and strong. However, modern American ambition could claim to solve almost anything, even the problem of hunger. In the February 18, 1847, edition of *The National Era*, an article entitled "Public Meeting for the Relief of the Suffering Poor in Ireland" notes how "[n]ew improvements in communication" deserve credit for allowing "the cries of suffering Ireland" to be heard across the Atlantic. If not for nineteenth-century advances in connectivity, the article implies, concerns about charity and morality could not be transmitted and sympathy itself could not be sustained. The ability to sympathize with the hungry thus challenged the very notion of being American in the nineteenth-century transatlantic world. The Honorable W.J. Duane's contemporary remarks about the Famine Irish still ring true today "that even we, who are separated from them by a mighty ocean, are aroused to a just sense of our duties to Heaven, to humanity, and to ourselves … but a general sympathy has not prevailed" (13). To many, the Irish were "'one or two stages behind the whole of the Western world'" (qtd. in Rosenberg 182), but by showing what many could not (and did not want to) imagine experiencing themselves, the Famine forced Americans—including many American Irish who may themselves have emigrated from Ireland—to witness and engage with the trauma of hunger at the core of the nation. The Famine was an Irish problem, but it was considered by many Americans to be a credit to the United States that, through its advanced technologies and capacities for sympathy, it could identify and alleviate such suffering.

Even though it does not fit comfortably into American ideals of self-reliance within a supposed land of plenty, hunger has the potential to create sympathy, which, according to Elizabeth Barnes, "converts otherness into sameness, organizing sentiments around the perception of familiarity and constructing a community of like-minded individuals" (115). If sympathy has such power, then this sense of sharing one's hunger makes the sympathetic American witness feel more familiar to—if not the same as—the Irish Famine victim. Obviously, not every American felt this way towards the Irish; thus, there was something other than sympathy at work in the broader reaction to Famine immigration. In order to be *converted* "into sameness," Famine Irish hunger had to be considered fully *other*. Their hunger marked them collectively as an utterly dependent people in a nation built on ideals of independence. Sympathizing with Irish hunger, then, required Americans to recognize the inescapable state of dependency within themselves.

Such ambivalent sympathy is prompted most specifically by the peculiarity of hunger as an experience of suffering that seems counter-intuitive within modern economic systems. While witnessing hunger, in person or in print, may affect even the most hardened individuals, sympathy alone does not suffice as an explanation for the ways in which the witnesses of hunger respond to it. As a "shared feeling," *sympathy* is a complicated term that, according to Adam Smith, "works precisely like a market relation" (Schocket 6), meaning that it functions like a commodity. Thus, the effects (and affects) of sympathy are, in part, the results of modernization: "It was capitalism, in other words, that created the cognitive sphere within which it made sense for individuals to feel emotionally linked to others with whom they had little or no previous contact" (5). As much as it can unite different people across cultural divides, sympathy can also be used to

separate them through socioeconomic hierarchies. "It is not just sympathy," says Robert Solomon, "but a whole complex of mutually perceiving and reciprocal passions that tie us together" (208). Hunger is seen here as one of these *passions*. Within the transatlantic milieu of the nineteenth-century, especially in the United States, hunger had a problematic yet invigorating potential both to solicit sympathy and to further distance individuals from the suffering of others. Thus, hunger is seen here as a specific marker of human suffering that invokes sympathy but is not beholden to it.

As a specific marker of suffering, hunger prompts more than sympathy or acceptance from its witnesses. In addition to its emphasis on the rhetorical efficacy of Famine hunger, this inquiry also considers hunger as an issue of social justice and an element of discourse that lies "in between" nature and culture, literature and economy, us and others who are "different from us, yet the same" (Kessler 165). An event like the Famine, which is of so much importance to Irish and European history, cannot be assimilated in American culture without careful attention to detail and adequate evidence. For instance, in a letter from famous Irish novelist Maria Edgeworth to the "*Ladies of America*," sympathy and suspicion go hand in hand: "[B]efore you yield to your feelings of pity, and pour forth your bounty, you wish to have credible assurance that the accounts which you have seen in the public papers of these distresses are true representations, and not exaggerated pictures" (288). Such *assurance* was especially difficult to provide even in the modernizing American economy. The Irish were thus viewed with suspicion; some Americans could not help but feel for them while others would only turn away in disgust and doubt about the reality of hunger in their midst. During the Famine years, the Board of Health in New York State reported that "'the low Irish suffered the most, being

exceedingly dirty in their habits, much addicted to intemperance and crowded together into the worst portions of the city'" (qtd. in Rosenberg 62). In the eyes of some Americans, the Famine Irish were initially too desperate to be of much use to the developing nation. "[F]or a long time," writes Oscar Handlin, they "were fated to remain a massive lump in the community, undigested, undigestible" (55). On the other hand, their hunger was the primary reason many thought they would be willing to work hard and, thus, to earn appreciation as "much-needed labor for the nascent American economy" (O'Neill 120). This socioeconomic impact of the Famine remains to be addressed in more depth by historians and literary critics alike. Jenny Edkins, for one, notes how "survivors [of the Famine] had often profited at the expense of those who died or were evicted from their land" (114). Such profits most often were kept in Ireland among those landlords whose estates and acreage could now be converted towards more modern, efficient uses. In the United States, Famine-related profits came most directly through the creation of a cheap labor force made up of men and women forced to leave Ireland for economic opportunities. The Famine was thus a tragic transatlantic event—exceeded perhaps only by the horror of slavery—that had far-reaching impact not only upon individual migrants, but also upon complex social systems. At least economically speaking, Irish hunger could be seen both as a catalyst of economic opportunity and as a bellwether of social devolution.

While hunger was very much a concrete social condition in the nineteenth century, its reality was denied by some Americans who refused to believe (or chose to ignore) that such hunger could happen here in the land of rugged individualism. Even when they appeared to doubt certain tenets of their own supposed exceptionalism, many

nineteenth-century Americans shared a persistent belief in the ideal of self-reliance, with which hunger contrasts. As claims David Lloyd in his provocatively entitled article "The Indigent Sublime," "[T]he starving Irish come to present an alarming counterfigure that troubles the spatial discriminations that progressive economic narratives mobilize, the proper divisions between inner and outer, private and public, reproductive and productive" (168). Although hunger is itself a sign of conservation—a form of austerity at once heartrending and admirable—to be hungry is to be constrained by lack yet propelled by desire. One who is hungry likely wants to consume as much as possible to satisfy such desire, but he or she is simultaneously weakened and worn down by the debilitating effects of hunger both physically and psychologically. Irish hunger thus challenged American conceptions of individual responsibility and economic opportunity.

This complex relationship between hunger and opportunity is furthered by the fact that most immigrants to the United States were neither entirely comfortable nor completely impoverished. "Rather," says Diner, "they represented in food terms not so much the starving as the hungry" (227). Evidence suggests that attitudes about food consumption differed drastically among the Irish on either side of the Atlantic. In 1850, while Ireland was still in the throes of the Famine, one Irish immigrant "described New York as a place where 'no man or woman ever hungered or ever will'" (Diner 115). While few would dispute that the Irish were hungry, it was generally anathema in the nineteenth century to think critically about hunger in the supposedly fecund United States of America, where even in the so-called "hungry forties," the prevailing belief seemed to hold that there were not such things as hunger. In this social construction, hunger was almost exclusively an *Irish* phenomenon. Of course, such a view is problematic since

hunger persisted for many Irish immigrants well after they arrived. As Diner notes, "Even in America, although they ate better than they had at home, the Irish had little disposable income and often ate poorly" (120). Many American Irish thus stood out for their hunger, which marked their memories of the past and threatened to undermine their hopes for the future. However, it is not that they were so extremely destitute and hopelessly distraught as to be beyond the reach of sympathy. Instead, Irish hunger provided evidence to some of their potential Americanness by showing how much they wanted and needed it in order to survive and eventually improve their lives. The Famine Irish offered established Americans an opportunity to sympathize with the experience of hunger and thus to be even more grateful for the "land of plenty" in which they lived.

Although the writers selected in this dissertation may appear irreconcilably diverse and separate from the Famine Irish, reading their representations of hunger offers readers insights into the Famine's literary impact within antebellum America. With the conspicuous exception of Henry David Thoreau in chapter one, each figure included here is willing to engage in what Leerssen terms "cultural encounters," which "cross borders in the real world and in our head" (60). Leerssen continues: "On the basis of an anthropological constant (we must all eat and drink) we register cultural differences (what and how we eat and drink is different from place to place), and turn these into formulas of what we consider representative or 'typical' of a nation or society" (60). Irish hunger thus highlights the limits of American nationhood in that it prompts questions about whether or not a people so apparently destitute have the ability to exercise the rights and responsibilities of being American. What one eats (or does not eat) determines how one fits (or does not) into the nation. Although the simple, sympathetic lives of the

Famine Irish seemed contrary to mainstream American ideals of self-reliance and individualism, their hunger was of utmost interest to several diverse writers because they saw within the Irish something to admire; furthermore, their witnessing of Irish hunger forced them to reconsider what qualified themselves as Americans.

Chapter one, entitled "Transcending Hunger, Sustaining Sympathy," considers nonfiction texts by the well-known Transcendentalist radical Henry David Thoreau, who encountered the Irish within the relative comfort of his native New England, and the lesser-known Asenath Nicholson, a Protestant missionary who spent substantial time in Ireland both before and during the Famine. Thoreau and Nicholson are placed together because they offer divergent examples of the problematic American response to Irish Famine immigration. Nicholson's writings offer a clear example of the sympathetic and sentimental prose common of Famine depictions in the antebellum era, and she is among the most astute and authentic commentators on the Famine overall. Likewise, her travels around Ireland show an astounding capacity for transatlantic literary engagement (most similar to that of Frederick Douglass, the principal figure of the fourth and final chapter). In order to further explain why there were such different responses to the Famine Irish, the first chapter also investigates Thoreau's sparse yet telling references to the Irish in *Walden* and *Cape Cod*, which were composed mostly during the Famine years. Neither Nicholson's nor Thoreau's efforts in representing the Famine are singular. They write within cultural and historical contexts that precede and postdate the Famine itself. While Thoreau "may have been particularly concerned to distinguish himself from [the Irish]" by viewing them as outsiders (Lojek 292), Nicholson offers a more refreshing perspective

that emphasizes the humanity and worth of those Irish suffering from hunger. Nicholson's "effort to relieve and to remove" the Famine was a never-ending process that required literary representation as much as it demanded political action (Donnelly 74). What Nicholson adds to Famine discourse is a sense of action that she codifies as "American," a marker of identity that Thoreau assigned to himself with such conviction. Unlike Thoreau, who wishes mainly to ignore the problem of hunger by aestheticizing it, Nicholson deals directly with the Irish on both sides of the Atlantic, thus avoiding the trappings of colonial "othering" which mark Thoreau's mostly condescending view of the Famine Irish. Nicholson views Irish hunger as both a burden and an asset, a source of sorrow yet a point of pride. Nicholson's writing thus reflects upon the potential of sustaining sympathy in the presence of hunger, which Thoreau seeks to transcend by choosing to view the Famine Irish as archetypes of suffering whose experiences are important only for how they affect him and his fellow American witnesses.

Chapter two focuses on Herman Melville's 1849 novel *Redburn*, which employs the memorable, provocative phrase "strange feeling" to express this complicated process of responding to the suffering of others. *Redburn* says much about the Irish but also about the American conception of Irish hunger in the antebellum era. Melville's consistent use of hunger imagery connects to his explicit concerns with Irish immigrants in *Redburn*. Even though Melville was among "the most savage critics of America," he also contributed to the aptly labeled "rhetoric of the melting pot," which as Sacvan Bercovitch argues, "opened the way with unsurpassed generosity to massive immigrations, and as self-proclaimed 'Mother of Exiles' it [the United States] welcomed those immigrants not

only as Americans-in-the-making but as *exiles*" (xxv). Although Melville was not initially sympathetic to Irish nationalism, which he satirizes as "deranged, filial revolt" in his novel *Mardi* (Rogin 53), his political affiliation with the exiled, hungry Irish is expressed in *Redburn* through the explicit mention and implicit imagery of *strange feeling*, a deliberately vague, provocative, and ambivalent combination of sympathy and anxiety caused by one's witnessing of another's suffering. *Strange feeling* is prompted most systematically and effectively in *Redburn* by Melville's use of hunger imagery as a means of persuading Americans to reconsider their views of the Famine Irish. Melville's writing moves beyond broad concerns about poverty and sympathy towards more specific connections to hungry Irish emigrants and exiles. His skill in plotting Redburn's journey from New York to Liverpool (and back) reminds us that movement across the Atlantic was not one-way and that the lives of others affect our own whether or not we sympathize with them. In order to influence his American reader to consider accepting the Famine Irish as fellow citizens (as he does towards the end of *Redburn*), they are linked most specifically and ironically to hunger. Therefore, the Irish occupy a prominent position within Melville's re-envisioning of an American social hierarchy which has been corrupted, not by those who suffer from hunger, but by those who witness it yet care little or do nothing about it. Melville does not see hungry people as a problem; instead, he seems to think that they have the potential to push other Americans out of their comfort zone, making them feel their strangeness in common with others whom they would otherwise deem outcasts. As in Nicholson's work, hunger in Melville's *Redburn* tests the limits of sympathy while offering paths towards solidarity. Differently from Thoreau's reductive perspective on the Irish, Melville's *strange feeling* for them offers a way of

envisioning hunger as a singular form of suffering that unfortunately undermines most attempts to solicit sympathy. While sympathy in the sense of *fellow feeling* may not lead to immediate cultural or political change, in Melville's deft hands *strange feeling* can be seen as a step towards acculturation, a recognition of difference that is welcomed if only because it is so *strange*.

Chapter three, entitled "Irish-American Gothic," turns from these considerations of narrative sympathy and social inclusion towards even more subtle, savvy methods of engaging with Famine hunger. Through its focus on Fitz-James O'Brien, known as the "Celtic Poe," this chapter also initiates a more specific consideration of the Famine's impact upon Irish America, as represented well through O'Brien's singular persona. The chapter argues that this impact played out most provocatively through the creative outlet of O'Brien's Gothic fiction, which allows the trauma of the Famine (upon victims and witnesses) to be exorcised. Irish Americans like O'Brien dealt with their experiences of the Famine in varied, sometimes contradictory ways, and as an Irish immigrant living in New York, he was near the front line of Famine memory. Unlike other Irish Americans such as John Mitchel and Mary Anne Sadlier, O'Brien was not always explicit in his concerns with Irish history and culture. However, its association with hunger clearly piqued his social conscience and prompted his literary development. Born in Cork, living later in Limerick and London, O'Brien was a man at once esoteric and all-inclusive, whose gift of imagination pushed beyond the status quo and offered an alternative perspective from (and of) the Irish-American generation that struggled most to overcome the trauma of the Famine. O'Brien's worldview was also similarly framed by several psychological and social hardships, including shame and ambivalence about his Irish

identity, but the truth about O'Brien's ethnic identity is certainly more complex and likely more sanguine than some have claimed. Even as he assimilated into antebellum America, O'Brien's Irishness marked him; his best writing is rooted in his witness of the Famine in Ireland. O'Brien's background in Ireland, however privileged, is no less impacted by the Famine's reach. Even his Bohemian lifestyle among fellow artists at Pfaff's Bar in New York City could not shield O'Brien from his troubled past. His eclectic, insightful works—including poetry, prose, and drama—deserve to be appreciated and analyzed for their direct uses of hunger imagery, and his short stories especially portray a psychological concern with hunger that reminds one of the Famine's inexorable impact even upon those who escaped its physical trauma.

While O'Brien certainly sympathized with Famine victims and survivors, his representations of hunger move beyond simplistic notions of sympathy towards a darker engagement with the loss at the core of the Famine experience, what Terry Eagleton terms its "atavistic nature" (14). Similar to the ways in which Melville uses sophisticated representations of hunger to comment on misguided notions of American self-reliance, O'Brien offers a view of hunger that deconstructs faulty conceptions of Irish inferiority on both sides of the Atlantic. He shows that we Americans are not as far removed from the trauma of hunger as we like to think. Likewise, O'Brien's writing adds to Nicholson's through its deeper engagement with the power of hunger not only to solicit sympathy, but also to make one more aware of one's humanity, which the Famine caused O'Brien to become by showing him the limitations of sympathy. The Famine and its associations with hunger broaden conceptions of what it means to witness human suffering, and O'Brien's poems and short stories open up representations of Famine hunger to literary

and psychological analysis. By employing hunger as a central trope within his Gothic fiction, O'Brien reveals that the memory of the Famine is fluid and transgressive, based as much in storytelling as in history.

Finally, in order to clarify the complicated ways in which these selected American writers reacted to the Irish Famine, this project turns its attention to an African-American view of Famine hunger. As Peter D. O'Neill argues, "The transformational transatlantic journey of the Famine Irish is crucial to understanding the role of the state in determining a racial hierarchy" (120). In a nation based constitutionally upon racial injustice, Irish hunger serves as a marker of privilege that broadens an emphasis on race. Their hunger places the Irish apart from African Americans, whose suffering, for mostly racist reasons, was not considered as worthy of sympathy by the broader American public. White, middle-class American citizens (which Melville and Nicholson were and O'Brien could essentially "pass" as) were conditioned to view the Irish as hungry. However, the Irish also benefited from certain prejudices and stereotypes: they were considered worthy of sympathy not only because they were white, but also because they were assumed by many to be capable of the very sympathy to which some considered them entitled. In an 1847 speech in Congress during debates regarding relief to Ireland, the Hon. Robert Dale Owen, Congressman from Indiana, imagines a transatlantic world flipped on its head, with a famine in "our own republic," continuing, "would not the Irish, think you, with their warm hearts, and their quick sympathies, do as much for us as we now propose to do for them? They would, they would; I know them well. They are emphatically the nation of the open hand and the open heart" ("Public Meeting"). Such views of Irish capacity for compassion undoubtedly tempered the sort of negative prejudices they

otherwise encountered. Others, especially African Americans, may not have suffered as much from hunger, but they had to contend with overt forms of racial injustice that the Irish could navigate much more successfully.

In the final chapter, "Entitled to Hunger," the focus is on Frederick Douglass, whose career encapsulates a broad view of the immigrant Irish from the 1840s through Douglass's final revisions of his autobiography in the 1880s. Douglass repeatedly discusses his goals of abolition and enfranchisement for African Americans in relation to the Irish, whose "hunger and color," in Douglass's view, "entitle [them] to special favor" (*Life and Times* 367). Even after the Civil War, Douglass hoped to achieve his goals by deconstructing Irish entitlements and thereby promoting those needed and deserved by his fellow African Americans. Ultimately, this chapter asserts that the revisions of Douglass's autobiography demonstrate, as much as is possible, the connections between Irish hunger and racial privilege. Irish hunger solicited sympathy from many, including some African Americans. Overall, nineteenth-century African Americans viewed the Irish ambivalently, often as adversaries but occasionally as partners, doppelgangers in a nation of unfulfilled promises and dreams deferred. A focus on hunger, then, allows readers to more effectively interrogate the privileges of whiteness along with other markers of racial and ethnic identity in antebellum American culture.

At its most problematic root, hunger disconnects individuals, forcing them to feel ashamed. Thus, it is through the more sympathetic lens of literature that one may best explore complex connections to issues of social justice and individual experiences of shame. Although one's witnessing of another's hunger may lead to sympathy, such shared feeling is difficult to sustain given that, in a most practical sense, one must eat. *We*

cannot afford to starve with *them*. While sympathizing with those who are hungry does not mean that you must starve with them, it does necessitate a certain level of investment in the lives of others. However, such commitment is difficult to sustain, in the case of the Famine Irish, due mostly to the shame associated with hunger. As Joseph Roach contends, "Part of the experience of starving to death is the shame of it … the starving seem to disappear both before and after they die" (40). Among the other uncomfortable emotions prompted by one's witnessing of hunger, shame is paramount. Brad Kessler notes that "shame and eating have a long-linked history in Western culture" (159); if "eating equals *shame*," as Kessler exclaims, then hunger must be something to be proud of. Whereas the self is constituted through the process of relating to others, shame should be considered "the affect that most defines the space wherein a sense of self will develop" (Sedgwick and Frank 6). Shame thus offers room for critique of both self and other in that it may allow individuals to see themselves in relation to how others see them, for better or worse. To witness hunger is to come closer to its utter vulnerability. Because it is such a fundamental human experience, hunger has the capacity to universalize the experiences of sufferers and witnesses alike. On some level, anyone can pity those who are hungry. However, it takes a skilled writer to convey the experience of hunger through the page, to turn passive witnesses into active readers intent on (or at least interested in) alleviating victims' suffering and shame. Asenath Nicholson, Herman Melville, Fitz-James O'Brien, and Frederick Douglass have in common an ability to identify and engage with the Famine's shamefulness and, furthermore, to provide compelling accounts of its transatlantic effects. The Famine is present in their

imaginative imagery of hunger yet curiously absent from most of the critical texts written about these writers up to this point. This dissertation seeks to remedy that absence.

While the Famine was indescribably traumatizing, the hunger it engendered played a crucial role in framing Irish access to American identity. Hunger complicates simplistic assumptions about who qualifies as an American. The Irish experience of hunger paradoxically proved them capable of self-reliance. It was not sympathy alone that assisted the Irish in their acculturation as Americans. Instead, because of the Famine, many Americans could not help but consider hunger, in addition to race, as an entitlement to sympathy, however fleeting it may have been. Irish hunger thus shows the apparent arbitrariness at the root of ideas about who and what qualifies as American. The hypocrisy here has to do not only with the challenging idea that a form of suffering could be a good thing, but also that it is something Americans say they care about. The Irish who survived the Famine benefited because their hunger was viewed, along with their whiteness, as a qualification for future American citizenship. The reality of hunger remains a central part of American life. It did not just disappear after the Famine; rather, in unfortunate and mysterious ways, it became a form of suffering that many Americans thought they could control if only by pretending that it did not exist. Fortunately, most of the writers selected here do not pretend the same. Instead, they offer ways of understanding the impact of Famine hunger upon Americans and others both within and beyond the nineteenth century. They encounter the precarious power of silence and its complex relationship to sympathy and trauma. For the most part, they do not succumb to simplistic representations of Famine suffering that diminish the human complexity of both its victims and its witnesses. They recognize that one's ability to sympathize with

the trauma of others, and thereby accept them as equal, is determined by both history and culture.

Chapter 1:
Transcending Hunger, Sustaining Sympathy:
Henry David Thoreau, Asenath Nicholson, and the Famine Irish

Ah, what can I say, to give an American, in that land of plenty, the faintest idea of a famine. Yes, a famine and pestilence! Have I lived to see it? And was this my sad errant to Ireland to witness scenes like these? Yet, I am glad I am here—I am glad that God gives me strength to do a little—to save now and then one from the jaws of death by hunger. ~ Asenath Nicholson's "Correspondence"

An honest, hard-working, but shiftless man plainly was John Field; . . . I tried to help him with my experience, telling him that he was one of my nearest neighbors, and that I too, who came a-fishing here, and looked like a loafer, was getting my living like himself; . . . that I did not use tea, nor coffee, nor butter, nor milk, nor fresh meat, and so did not have to work to get them; again, as I did not work hard, I did not have to eat hard, and it cost me but a trifle for my food; but as he began with tea, and coffee, and butter, and milk, and beef, he had to work hard to pay for them, and when he had worked hard he had to eat hard again to repair the waste of his system . . . and yet he had rated it as a gain in coming to America, that here you could get tea, and coffee, and meat every day. ~ Henry David Thoreau, from the "Baker Farm" chapter of *Walden*, 1854.

Each epigraph above refers either directly or indirectly to the popular notion of America as a "land of plenty." While Asenath Nicholson seems to take this notion for granted, the "Baker Farm" section of Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* presents a more skeptical view of this American myth. Thoreau's writing overall stands in sharp contrast to the capitalistic impulses embodied in the behavior of the Irishman John Field, who would eschew conservation for the sake of consumerism. Field's love of the United States is based primarily in his belief that it is free from hunger. As Thoreau wishes to emphasize the need for self-restraint amidst such ostensible bounty, his tone towards Field specifically—and the Irish in general—is marked by occasional condescension and self-satisfied pity. Thoreau's ideal American is supposed to be in control of his or her desires, including the need to eat. Thoreau sees Field as decidedly un-American in that

could not properly manage his insatiable hunger. It is as if he eats simply because there is so much abundance in the United States. Although Asenath Nicholson shares in the opinion that austerity and self-reliance should be basic values of American democracy, she reads the Irish much differently than Thoreau and thus seeks to remedy his incomplete representations of them. Rather than depict individuals like John Field as gross, tactless consumers incapable of conservation or sophistication, Nicholson makes space throughout her texts to recognize the Irish as potential Americans. Her view of Irish hunger fits into an idea of America that can accommodate such suffering without looking down upon it. Comparing the stance of these two writers towards the Famine Irish, then, allows for an enlightening perspective on the ways in which hunger was linked to notions of inclusion within (and exclusion from) the antebellum United States.

While Thoreau laments the apparent wastefulness of Irish Americans like Field—"with his inherited Irish poverty" ("Baker Farm")—Nicholson considers Irish hunger in less circumscribed dimensions. Irish people, in Nicholson's representation, do not consume merely to make up for wastefulness, nor are they meant merely to inherit the hunger of their predecessors. Instead, they can be seen as conservative consumers who recognize values of self-reliance and simple living. Nicholson's view is thus transatlantic in scope. Unlike Thoreau, Nicholson saw the Irish in both Ireland and America, and she represents the ways in which their experiences with hunger in Ireland affected how they saw themselves (and were seen by others) as potential Americans. Rather than viewing the Irish as alien threats, Nicholson recognizes various cultural, economic, political, and even psychological reasons to view them favorably. She ties sympathy for Irish suffering with her duty as a Christian and with her identity as an American. Whereas Thoreau

imagines the Atlantic as a natural barrier that prohibits Irish acceptance in America, Nicholson crosses such boundaries herself and makes it clear in her writing that the Irish should be treated with sympathy and optimism. Her view of the Famine Irish, unlike Thoreau's, identifies hunger as an element of suffering that supersedes other hardships along the path to assimilation. Through her sustained sympathy for the Irish, Nicholson counteracts arguments against their acceptance. Ultimately, Nicholson depicts the Famine Irish as ideally austere Americans deserving of her audience's sympathy. Similarly to Thoreau, Nicholson critiques her overfed nation for inconsistent support of its own values, yet she does so by respecting rather than deriding the Irish experience of hunger. If Thoreau's intention in *Walden* was, in part, to encourage simple living, Nicholson's goal in celebrating the Irish was to simplify their path to acceptance as Americans. Each critiques the idea of America as a "land of plenty," but Nicholson sees Irish hunger as a qualification for inclusion in the nation while Thoreau sees it as a reason for rejection.

This chapter compares and contrasts Thoreau and Nicholson's attitudes towards the Famine Irish, along with their related representations of hunger. After analyzing Thoreau's depiction of the Irish in selected chapters from *Walden* and *Cape Cod*, the chapter provides important background information on Nicholson and continues with an analysis of her *Annals of the Famine*. Begun as a series of lectures during the midst of the Famine years, which "coincided precisely with the rise of Transcendentalism and the literary outpouring of the American Renaissance," *Cape Cod* was better received than Thoreau's ultimately more famous *Walden* (Morgan 47). While both texts offer mostly unsympathetic, reductive depictions of Irish suffering, Nicholson's works make heartfelt, explicit, and thorough representations of Irish hunger. Although Nicholson offers perhaps

the most noble and thorough attempt to solicit sympathy for the Irish cause, she encounters the same emphasis on individuality that Thoreau prizes so highly. For Thoreau, self-reliance stands in the way of sympathy; for Nicholson, on the other hand, self-reliance is impossible without social engagement, meaning that one cannot maintain one's individuality without serving one's community. What Thoreau misses is precisely what Nicholson grasps: the singular, yet universal power of hunger to solicit sympathy and to serve as a sign of belonging in a nation otherwise prone to exclusion. The concluding section of this chapter contrasts Thoreau's "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience" with Nicholson's *The Bible in Ireland* to show how both texts intersect upon hunger as a critical juncture "where," in the words of Paul Giles, "the proximate and distant illuminatingly converge and diverge" (258). Whereas Thoreau implies that only self-reliant, responsible Americans like he can handle hunger, Nicholson shows that the Famine Irish manage their hunger in ways that deserve sympathy and acceptance.

"[T]hey grew more and more imposing": The Famine Irish in *Walden* and *Cape Cod*

Some of Thoreau's fellow Transcendentalists looked with indifference on social concerns of the 1840s, leading some historians and literary critics to see them as "unconscious allies" of the capitalist elites of New England (Woodson 21). In a letter to Thoreau from September 1843, preceding by only two years Thoreau's decision to move to Walden Pond, Ralph Waldo Emerson writes, "Now the humanity of the town [Concord] suffers with the poor Irish" (qtd. in Harding and Bode 137). While *Walden* contains biting critiques of the Protestant work ethic and other condescending ideological perspectives, it also refrains from sympathizing directly with those who have been

exploited by materialistic excess and misguided economic policies. Although he views poverty for the most part as a societal evil, "more often in *Walden* Thoreau gives 'poverty' a positive, creative meaning" (Woodson 22). In other words, Thoreau finds hungry people to be aesthetically useful. He looks to the poor not with sympathy, but with what Walt Whitman terms "a want of imagination" (qtd. in Woodson 29). His concerns about broad economic exploitation and chattel slavery notwithstanding, Thoreau lacked the ability to acknowledge directly the hunger extant among even some of his nearest neighbors: "there was something about the Irish immigrants—their Catholicism, their proximity, their anti-British sentiments—that blocked his sympathy" (O'Connell 383). Thoreau's transcendentalist and self-reliant project in *Walden* perceives Irish immigrants as having bought wholly into America's materialist ethos. In addition to the possible religious, social, and political reasons for Thoreau's antipathy towards the Irish, it was their hunger—a sign of overt materialism and necessary consumption—that most unsettled him.

In most of Thoreau's texts, being Irish means being poor and hungry. Thoreau's journals show that he interacted with the Irish, on occasion, in positive ways: sharing clothing, writing letters, and even raising money to assist with immigration. In a letter to Emerson dated October 17, 1843 [from Staten Island], Thoreau professes, almost nostalgically, "Methinks I could look with equanimity upon a long street of Irish cabins and pigs and children reveling in the genial Concord dirt" (qtd. in Woodson 21). Thoreau worked intentionally—"with notable lack of success" (Lojek 279)—to impress upon the Irish his own approach to simple living. Thoreau's dissatisfaction with John Field's materialism in *Walden*, then, is justified by the argument that the Irish are simply lacking

"the Thoreauvean skill of wanting little" (Lojek 284). In other words, what the Irish are missing is control over their hunger. Although there are several Irish characters in *Walden*, they never seem to form into a collective unit. Although it is acceptable for Thoreau himself to look "like a loafer" ("Baker Farm"), an Irishman like Field cannot afford such luxury. Thoreau's articulation assumes that all Americans can and must take care of themselves. If you are hungry, you simply have to eat, but you should not have to eat any more than necessary. Although Thoreau "was getting [his] living like himself," he has access to opportunities that Field, who is "not to rise in this world, he nor his posterity," lacks ("Baker Farm"). In this construction, Field will never be free from hunger no matter how well he provides for himself and his family. He is caught in a reinforcing cycle of hard work and hunger.

Even his initial meeting with Field and his family betrays Thoreau's pessimism about their prospects. In the "Baker Farm" chapter of *Walden*, Thoreau takes special note of "the wrinkled, sibyl-like, cone-headed infant that sat upon its father's knee as in the palaces of nobles, and looked out from its home in the midst of wet and hunger inquisitively upon the stranger, with the privilege of infancy, not knowing but it was the last of a noble line, and the hope and cynosure of the world, instead of John Field's poor starveling brat." Here is one of only two times the word "hunger" is used in *Walden*. Its purpose seems to have a deeper significance than elsewhere in Thoreau's writing. Thoreau expresses ambivalence about Irish prospects in America; he seems torn between optimism and doubt about the prospects of the Field family. The infant is a source of both sympathy and fear; its "sibyl-like" inquisition conveys an intimacy of which Thoreau is wary, especially as it is witnessed "in the midst of wet and hunger." In the Field family,

Thoreau sees "the hope and cynosure of the world," but he laments the ignorance of this "poor starveling brat." The Field family, along with many Irish Americans like them, may never escape the trappings of hunger that Thoreau and others associate with them. Their only hope is to manage it (or make it disappear) as other Americans like Thoreau appear to have done. Thoreau's point, then, is to maintain American fecundity by not only refraining from eating more than we need, but also excluding those who cannot do so.

While Thoreau's call for conservation may be an admirable goal, he seems to underestimate the point that Irish hunger, as exhibited by John Field, derives in part from Irish immigrants' ability and willingness to work hard. While Thoreau should not be unduly criticized for his cursory perspective towards the Irish, his paradoxical phrasing in the "Baker Farm" chapter betrays a resentment towards John Field, whose "leisure mocks Thoreau's and unsettles him" (Lojek 292). Thoreau seems to be uncomfortable with the notion of the Irish becoming responsible stewards of the land. After calling Field "honest," Thoreau also describes him as "hard-working, but shiftless," two adjectives which appear contradictory but can be linked to Thoreau's complicated attitude towards hunger. While one cannot be simultaneously diligent and lazy, Thoreau's point here is based in his anti-materialistic mindset. Overindulgence in any form—in food or in work—is anathema to Thoreau. As an American of relatively privileged background, Thoreau has the luxury of viewing life in such terms. Thoreau's charge against Field, then, is less about laziness than it is about inefficiency, a central bugbear of *Walden* overall. Even though Thoreau claims that "I tried to help him with my experience," his disdain for what he perceives as "the waste of [Field's] system" overwhelms Thoreau's

statement that "he was one of my nearest neighbors." For whatever other reasons Thoreau dislikes Field, it is clear that Field's inefficient use of food is paramount. Field's lifestyle does not exhibit the sort of behavior that Thoreau wishes to see in his fellow Americans. Although Field "rated it as a gain in coming to America" for its easy access to food, his perceived wastefulness cancels out his qualifications for acceptance by the broader community of which Thoreau is a keen, discerning representative. Barring a miracle of some kind, Field and his family thus remain immanently "Irish," not properly American. Most notably, Thoreau encapsulates Field in a sort of no-man's land, an in-between space from which he cannot escape: Field is either too Irish—"born to be poor" and "not to rise," not only in the United States, but "in this world"—or he is too American, overly reliant on the "land of plenty" for his sustenance and too distracted by hard work to understand how his hunger reproduces itself.

Thoreau deserves some credit for his inclusion of Irish immigrants in his writing. After all, one would find it hard to imagine another American of Thoreau's stature at the time deigning to depict himself on such familiar terms with an Irishman. However, Thoreau's denial of his "neighbor" John Field is as condescending and final as it is nonsensical and abrupt. Thoreau has Field pegged on both ends: he is too Irish by nature, too American by culture. Field's hunger is seen by Thoreau as hereditary; meanwhile, his habit of working hard only reinforces his hunger. Thoreau's view subsumes Field and his fellow Irishmen and Irishwomen in an ineluctable cycle of hunger. The more Field does to escape, the more trapped he becomes.

Another Irishman in *Walden*, Hugh Quoil, identified as "[t]he last inhabitant of these woods," adds to Thoreau's rather negative view of Irish potential in the United

States. Similar to the way in which Field is trapped within a paradigm of hunger, Quoil seems to be stuck in the past. The chapter's title in which Quoil appears, "Former Inhabitants and Winter Visitors," reads as if all has happened already and will never recur. If the "former inhabitants" return, it will be in winter, hardly the most conducive time in New England for enjoyable visits. Thoreau's further comments read as if Quoil's time in America never took place: "Rumor said that he had been a soldier at Waterloo. If he had lived I should have made him fight his battles over again. ... All I know of him is tragic." Thoreau again provides evidence of his encounters with the Irish; however, his focus remains negative. The only knowledge he claims to have of Quoil's character is "tragic"; however, his prior comment about Quoil's trade indicates not only that Thoreau knew something more, but also that he looked down upon a "ditcher" like Quoil. As elsewhere, the Irish for Thoreau remain mere laborers, capable of hard work but nonetheless wracked by shiftlessness. Even though Quoil may have fought at Waterloo, Thoreau would "have made him fight his battles over again," intimating that it was Thoreau's prerogative to solicit such efforts from a purportedly inferior Irishman. As with John Field in the "Baker Farm" chapter, Thoreau's perspective on Hugh Quoil is dominated by a lack of confidence in Irish prospects in America.

Although he is identified as "distinctly non-Hibernophile," Thoreau, according to Clifton Johnson, "liked the companionship of men who were in close contact with nature," including a "half-wild Irishman" (qtd. in Morgan 50). Having "a very pronounced antipathy to the average prosperous city man," Thoreau was famously tied to rural New England and, more specifically, to his native Massachusetts and its tiny hamlets (Johnson). *Cape Cod* (published posthumously in 1865) is a collection of

Thoreau's observations while walking the length of the peninsula over the course of several visits between 1849 and 1857. Most relevant here is the fact that *Cape Cod* begins with an account of "The Shipwreck." Beginning *Cape Cod* with an account of the suffering of Irish men and women seems odd for someone of Thoreau's nativist tendencies, but it makes sense given his fondness for "those of a more primitive sort" (Johnson). If it is peculiar that Thoreau would include accounts of the Irish in his work, one must consider that his reasoning moves well beyond a basic interest in ethnicity. His writings overall critique simplistic ideas of America as much as they promote them. Thoreau's view of the tragedy of the *St. John* is distinctly impersonal. The signs of respect he shows towards the unfortunate Irish victims are balanced by derision towards their suffering. For most Americans, including Thoreau, sympathy simply did not exist for the Famine Irish as a collective group. Thoreau begins *Cape Cod* with the "'lives lost at Cohasset'" in Massachusetts, where the *Saint John*, bound from Galway to Boston, was wrecked around 7 a.m. on October 7, 1849. Although Thoreau places the death toll at 145, the official number of dead was 99, many of them from county Clare. According to contemporary accounts in the *Boston Daily Bee*, several witnesses "imagined that they could hear the cries of the victims as they were swept away" ("Shipwreck"). Thoreau continues his narration: "We found many Irish in the cars, going to identify bodies and to sympathize with the survivors, and also to attend the funeral which was to take place in the afternoon." Beginning with the first-person plural subject pronoun *we*, as opposed to the singular *I*, sets up an intriguing point-of-view through which most of *Cape Cod* is composed. By *we*, Thoreau is likely referring to himself and Ellery Channing, the poet, friend, and biographer with whom Thoreau spent much time during their walks recounted

in the text. In addition, this provocative *we* could be intended to align Thoreau's narrative voice with other Americans who share his occasionally xenophobic views. Although the *we* of *Cape Cod* may not be purely anti-Irish, its Americanist sympathies are belied by the initial declarative statement: "We found many Irish in the cars." In this passage and elsewhere in *Cape Cod*, the Irish are separated from the speaker's *we*. They, not we, "sympathize with the survivors" of the *St. John*. We find them, not vice-versa. As Thoreau moves on to describe the scene of the tragedy in more detail, it is clear that these Irish emigrants are not to be mistaken for Americans. Ultimately, Thoreau's account of "The Shipwreck" lacks the sort of sympathetic perspective one might expect of someone with his professed attachments.

Clearly, it is not with the Famine Irish where Thoreau's sympathies lie; rather, as seen in parts of both *Walden* and *Cape Cod*, he cares primarily about notions of American individuality and self-reliance. After reading "The Shipwreck" chapter in *Cape Cod*, one is left with a sense that the tragic loss of mostly Irish lives is significant only because of how it affects the American witnesses, not the victims. Thoreau's view is one of aesthetics over ethics, meaning that his concerns are not for people but for concepts and abstractions. He writes:

> Yet I saw that the inhabitants of the shore would be not a little affected by this event. They would watch there many days and nights for the sea to give up its dead, and their imaginations and sympathies would supply the place of mourners far away, who, as yet, knew not of the wreck. Many days after this, something white was seen floating on the water by one who was sauntering on the beach. It was approached in a boat, and found

> to be the body of a woman, which had risen in an upright position, whose white cap was blown back with the wind. I saw that the beauty of the shore itself was wrecked for many a lonely walker there, until he could perceive, at last, how its beauty was enhanced by wrecks like this.

The ”inhabitants of the shore” in this passage are clearly meant to be Anglo-Americans who share in Thoreau’s impressive capacity for sympathy aestheticism. They are witnesses to tragedy, not victims of it. The rhetoric here implies that they are so caring as to ”supply the place” of the Irish relatives of the deceased; it is as if those Irish simply are not necessary or relevant to this scene. The wreck becomes more important to those who watched it than to those who went through it and are directly affected by it. As Thoreau notices “the body of a woman,” identified solely by the white cap she was wearing, he does not feel sympathy; instead, he seems to disdain how the shore “was wrecked for many a lonely walker.” Then, without clear reason, Thoreau switches perspective and notes how, “at last,” the shore’s “beauty was enhanced by wrecks like this.” Unlike Nicholson, Thoreau has not the capacity to see beyond suffering and to welcome those sufferers as precisely the sort of self-reliant individuals America requires. In this passage, the very exceptionalism of America is “enhanced” by the loss of Irish lives.

As he continues his account of “The Shipwreck,” Thoreau claims that it “had not produced a visible vibration in the fabric of society,” but such claims are belied by the facts on the ground. In this reference to “society,” Thoreau once again excludes the Irish, for they are otherwise depicted as very much affected by the horrors of the recent tragedy. Other observers in the text seem more concerned with the damage to the Cape’s stockpile of seaweed than with the human catastrophe taking place before them. “I

witnessed no signs of grief," says Thoreau, "but there was a sober dispatch of business which was affecting." Here, *Cape Cod* begins to show some signs of sympathy for the dead, but Thoreau's word choices in describing this "business" are most indicative of his general indifference towards the Famine Irish:

> I saw many marble feet and matted heads as the cloths were raised, and one livid, swollen, and mangled body of a drowned girl,—who probably had intended to go out to service in some American family,—to which some rags still adhered, with a string, half concealed by the flesh, about its swollen neck; the coiled-up wreck of a human hulk, gashed by the rocks or fishes, so that the bone and muscle were exposed, but quite bloodless,—merely red and white,—with wide-open and staring eyes, yet lustreless, dead-lights; or like the cabin windows of a stranded vessel, filled with sand. Sometimes there were two or more children, or a parent and child, in the same box, and on the lid would perhaps be written with red chalk, "Bridget such-a-one, and sister's child."

In this detailed passage, Thoreau's perspective on the Irish reveals itself again to be concerned more with his aesthetic experience than with their physical suffering. He is more attentive to the "marble feet" of the dead than he is to their actual identities—"'Bridget such-a-one.'" It is as if he sees the Irish as examples of classical sculpture rather than as human beings demanding of his sympathy. His careful attention to color—"merely red and white" bodies, "red chalk"—conveys a sense of the scene's serenity, but Thoreau remains emotionless and detached in his description of the "wide-open and staring eyes, yet lusterless, dead-lights." The phrase "dead-lights" is particularly telling in

that it shows his concern with aesthetic properties like light and color rather than with dead people. The "drowned girl" is depicted as a servant whose place "in some American family" will never be taken. Clearly, the term "American" here means *non-Irish*. Not only is this emigrant girl denied American identity, her very humanity is diminished by Thoreau's use of the third-person pronoun "it." Describing her body, Thoreau uses "its swollen neck" as an objectifying image of her death. Such apparent dehumanization is especially striking given that so much was known of the ship's passengers, with a manifest of the killed published as early as October 12, 1849, in the *Boston Post*. Although one can expect some disinterest from Thoreau given that he does not know the victims of "The Shipwreck" personally, the tone of the chapter reveals how his aesthetics sometimes prevented him and others from appreciating the reality of suffering among them. The tragedy impacted many members of the Cape Cod community; for instance, one young woman spoke later of a "'profound sadness' that seemed to never leave her" (Smith, par. 13). While others were left reeling from the experience of witnessing the tragedy, Thoreau remains mostly interested in the Irish victims of the *St. John* as aesthetic, rather than ethical, subjects. Although he must be credited for recording this historical tragedy for posterity, one remains disappointed by his apparent lack of sympathy in the moment.

Thoreau's primary concern in narrating "The Shipwreck," then, is to comment on the ways in which a scene of such suffering can become an image of sublimity. He writes:

> On the whole, it was not so impressive a scene as I might have expected. If I had found one body cast upon the beach in some lonely place, it would have

> affected me more. I sympathized rather with the winds and waves, as if to toss and mangle these poor human bodies was the order of the day. If this was the law of Nature, why waste any time in awe or pity?

With these lines, Thoreau's dismissive view of the Famine Irish comes into focus. Although it is not clear precisely what he "expected" to see on the beach, whatever would have *impressed* him exceeds easy understanding. Thoreau's commentary here is difficult to read due to the harshness of his perspective, which seems to question the very need for sympathy itself. On a more useful note, however, this passage offers access to the side of America with which Asenath Nicholson and others sympathetic to the Famine Irish struggle. After witnessing the loss of dozens of Irish lives, Thoreau's foremost thought is not with them and their loved ones, but rather with those Americans whose casual enjoyment of the seashore may be affected. After all, for Thoreau, it is "the individual and private that demands our sympathy." While some critics see Thoreau's sympathy for the Irish as "extensive and arresting" (qtd. in Lojek 279), his comments in *Cape Cod* belie the point. Whatever sympathy he expresses in his work remains with single figures rather than with the masses. In order to emphasize his ideas of radical individualism, Thoreau fetishizes the individual over the many. He sympathizes, it seems, only with the self. A mass of starving or drowning immigrants are of less interest to Thoreau than "a lonely walker."

But the collective, public suffering of the Famine Irish was staring Thoreau and other Americans in the face, and even he does not remain completely unaffected. While Thoreau maintains some belief that the Irish "have the chance to become good democratic citizens," says Ryan Schneider, "he needs to affirm the existence of multiple

gaps—cultural, intellectual, material—that stand between the Irish and class advancement" (468). Thoreau's need to maintain such "gaps" is unfortunate yet understandable. While he sees something to admire in John Field in *Walden* and the other Irish in *Cape Cod*, Thoreau refuses to recognize them directly as fellow Americans (as Nicholson would do). In Thoreau's account, the Irish do not hold up to comparison with other past or future Americans. Most of Thoreau's comments about the Irish in *Cape Cod* concern only the dead. "Why care for these dead bodies?" Thoreau asks:

> They really have no friends but the worms or fishes. Their owners were coming to the New World, as Columbus and the Pilgrims did,—they were within a mile of its shores; but, before they could reach it, they emigrated to a newer world than ever Columbus dreamed of, yet one of whose existence we believe that there is far more universal and convincing evidence—though it has not yet been discovered by science—than Columbus had of this. (ch. 1)

Although his implied answer is a negative one, Thoreau's initial question about "these dead bodies" leaves open the possibility that one could care for them. He credits the victims for having been "owners" of their bodies--thus assigning them at least a modicum of agency--and even seems to admire those killed for having "emigrated to a newer world" than the America Thoreau holds so dear. This brief vision of acceptance is attenuated, however, by Thoreau's comments later in *Cape Cod* when he comes upon "some bones with a little flesh adhering to them" (ch. 6, "Beach Again"). He comments that "they grew more and more imposing" (ch. 6). While he can compare them to potential Americans like "Columbus and the Pilgrims," Thoreau does not treat the living

Irish as equal adherents to his vision of America. He views Columbus and the Pilgrims as exemplars of determination and sacrifice, but he does not see the same virtues in the immigrant Irish. Thoreau makes no mention of accepting the Irish in this world; he seems amenable only to making room for them in the afterlife. While he claims that "[t]here was nothing at all remarkable about them," his comments belie the ways in which the Irish, even in death, *impose* upon Thoreau and his American customs.

Ultimately, Thoreau's concern for the Famine Irish lies mostly in those whose bodies wash ashore even months after "The Shipwreck." It is easier for him to focus on the dead than to deal with the living hungry. Upon witnessing a near skeleton washing up on the beach, Thoreau becomes enthralled with the bones before him: "I was impressed as if there was an understanding between them and the ocean which necessarily left me out, with my snivelling sympathies. That dead body had taken possession of the shore, and reigned over it as no living one could, in the name of a certain majesty which belonged to it." Here, Thoreau seems jealous of the "understanding" that he imagines between the bones of a likely Irish emigrant and the environment in which she perished. His "sniveling sympathies" are not only inadequate for a scene of such "majesty," but his very command of language almost fails him. For instance, one notes how the pronoun "it," used twice in the passage above, refers to both the "dead body" and the "shore." While it is clear from Thoreau's wording that the body "reigned over [the shore] as no living one could," it remains uncertain which antecedent corresponds to the final "it." Although this ambiguity could be deliberate on Thoreau's part, it nonetheless betrays a flaw in his view of the American shore. Sympathy with the living does not suffice for Thoreau; he is capable of ceding immigrant access to the American shore only upon

death. Thus, Thoreau looks past the hunger of the Famine Irish by neglecting to discuss it other than through his reductive representation of John Field in *Walden*. Asenath Nicholson, on the other hand, recognizes hunger as the primary element of Irish suffering and, therefore, permits more room for sympathy and acceptance, which Thoreau denies.

Nicholson's *Annals of the Famine* and *The Bible in Ireland*

A relatively unknown American missionary and social activist, Nicholson is surprisingly one of the most prolific and provocative commentators on the Famine. Both "sympathetic and *participatory*," Nicholson is, in the words of David Lloyd, "one of the few who constantly crosses thresholds" ("Indigent Sublime" 168). Influenced by Presbyterian temperance crusaders (Murphy 9), Nicholson opened a school in New York in the early 1830s and was moved especially by the suffering of Irish immigrants in the Five Points section of the city, claiming, "It was in the garrets and cellars of New York that I first became acquainted with the Irish peasantry and it was there that I saw that they were a suffering people" (*Ireland's Welcome*, *iii*). Other accounts of Five Points were less sanguine about the area's dire poverty: Charles Dickens called it "'loathsome, drooping and decayed'" while Bishop John Hughes remarked that the slum dwellers were "'the poorest and most wretched population that can be found in the world—the scattered debris of the Irish nation'" (qtd. in Hershkowitz 20). In 1844, just before the devastating Famine years, Nicholson travelled to Ireland for the first time and spent several months observing and interacting with Irish people of "all classes . . . for the purpose of illustrating the principle of mind as it develops itself in the varied changes through which it is called to pass" (*The Bible in Ireland*, 59). She also actively distributed food "in

gratis" among the impoverished inhabitants of Dublin before moving out to the even more desperate areas of Ireland's west coast (Murphy 12). Nicholson went on to publish several texts based on her trips around Ireland, including *Ireland's Welcome to the Stranger or Excursions through Ireland in 1844 and 1845* (published by Gilpin in London in 1847, with a Baker and Scribner American edition the same year); *Lights and Shades of Ireland* (1850); *Annals of the Famine* (first published as the third part of *Lights and Shades* in 1850 and separately in 1851); and *The Bible in Ireland* (edited and excised by Alfred Tresidder Sheppard and published posthumously in 1927). Overall, Nicholson's concentration "on the nature of human suffering" (Murphy 13) has been lauded by many, and few would argue against her authentic achievement in seeking to experience, understand, and represent the hunger associated with the Famine.

Critics of Famine literature broadly note the integrity and earnestness of Nicholson's writing, along with her skills of social critique, but readers interested in Nicholson's life and works are indebted primarily to two Irish scholars, Maureen Murphy and Margaret Kelleher, whose works offer informative overviews and insightful analyses. While Murphy's account—namely, the introduction to an edition of *Annals of the Famine*—is thorough in biographical detail, it is comparatively lacking in literary analysis. Kelleher's *Feminization of Famine*, on the other hand, is somewhat limited in historiographical insights but offers a critical account of Nicholson's negotiation of Famine imagery. Perhaps the only modern critic to take seriously both the political and literary quality of Nicholson's Famine narratives is Kelleher. Writing from a feminist perspective, Kelleher notes the "emotive potential" of Nicholson's writings and argues that they are a "'singular spectacle', both in the details of famine conditions and in the

character of their observer" (119, 130). For Kelleher, Nicholson's viewpoint is significant in that she writes both as a woman and as a foreigner: "both the female protagonist/narrator and the women she observes possess an active role" (125). By offering close readings of Nicholson's previously overlooked and undervalued Famine representations—she is also keen like Lloyd to point out Nicholson's uses of imagery indicating the crossing of thresholds—Kelleher initiates an important critical investigation that this chapter builds upon by considering more closely the transatlantic implications of Nicholson's work. Missing in both Kelleher's and Murphy's texts, however, is a sense of Nicholson as an American. Murphy, for one, firmly places Nicholson in the canon of Famine writing without paying much attention to her American counterparts and audience, while Kelleher's book moves further away from an American context by comparing Irish Famine imagery to the more recent famine in Bangladesh. However else she is depicted, it is clear that Nicholson's engagement with the Irish offers a way of viewing them within an American "land of plenty" populated by many who would prefer that their hunger did not exist.

Brought up in the first Congregational Church of frontier Vermont, Nicholson was keen on notions of individual freedom and self-sufficiency, not unlike Thoreau. In addition to her upbringing--her first name deriving from a Biblical wife of Joseph whose task it was to manage famine resources (Murphy 5)--Nicholson's experiences as a teacher proved her to be a socially-conscious, ethical woman who practiced what she preached. Murphy observes that Nicholson "lived on a diet of cocoa and bread and continued to ask herself whether she was doing enough to economize" (13), leading one to assume that Nicholson would have survived quite well in the woods at Walden. As she turned her

efforts more directly towards social reforms, Nicholson's controversial approaches often led to conflict, such as her expulsion from multiple missionary colonies (Murphy 6). Throughout her writing, Nicholson is disturbed especially by "idleness and indulgence," and she goes to lengths to clarify that her sympathies lie not only with those who have little, but mostly with those who make the most of what they have and share as much of it as they can. Nicholson's representations of hunger emphasize how the sympathies she solicits offer evidence to her readers of Irish hospitality and adaptability. Moreover, the Americans viewing these representations are meant to infer that these skills are the very ones needed in the United States.

Nicholson's most sympathetic characters are hungry, like Thoreau's, but not hungry enough to give into desperation, which she could understand and he would disdain. Nicholson's representations of the Famine Irish ultimately redefine the American virtue of self-reliance. Instead of seeing it as a skill of independent living, Nicholson views self-reliance as an ability to recognize one's dependence and to withstand the suffering it entails. Nicholson's Irish are not threatening; instead, they suffer their hunger, for the most part, in admirable, "uncomplaining silence" (*Annals* 36). Nicholson sees within the Irish a remedy for the various excesses—moral, verbal, and material—of antebellum America. Like Thoreau, Nicholson is insistent that others live within their means as much as possible. However, her perspective is not condescending or simplistic in its treatment of the Irish. Nicholson does not blame them, as Thoreau seems to do, for their participation in a cycle of excess. Her interests are not only in feeding the Irish hungry, but in helping them realize that their hunger does not determine their fate as Americans.

As indicated in her correspondence published in several American newspapers during the Famine years, there was a side of Nicholson that felt herself called by God to the work of Famine relief. While she cared deeply about the tenets of Protestantism, however, Nicholson "wanted conversions to be the result of conviction not hunger" (Murphy 16). As spiritually drawn as she was to such work, she nevertheless recognized the utterly foreign concept of famine for her American audience. There is incredible *gravitas* in Nicholson's writing. She was *there*, in Ireland, both before and during the Famine. Not only did she witness the victimization of the Famine, she sought to save people from it. Most striking in the epigraph that begins this chapter is Nicholson's repetition of the phrase "I am glad," which connotes both her unselfishness and her pride in doing God's work. Unlike Thoreau in his condescension towards the Irish, Nicholson acknowledges that she has the "strength to do a little" for them. While she remains separate from her subject, she does not blame the Irish for their hunger, nor does she accuse them of wastefulness. Nicholson understands the limitations of her control over the all-encompassing power of hunger, and she does not claim falsely that she can save any or all from its grasp. While one can detect a hint of condescension in Nicholson's claims to speak for "the wretched" Irish, they also offer a taste of Nicholson's authentic belief in her own cause of representing Irish suffering. She tries to accept suffering as it is. By calling on her fellow Americans and other readers in the transatlantic world to take a stand in support of the Irish cause, Nicholson complicates the virtue of self-reliance. Her repetition of the phrase "I am glad" also reinvigorates her readers' sense of responsibility for others.

Throughout her works, Nicholson recognizes the sympathetic problem of hunger. She employs rhetoric that activates her readers' sympathies while carefully placating their preconceptions about the causes of hunger. Unlike Thoreau, whose utilitarian perspective excludes the Irish with prejudice, Nicholson views them as having proven, through their hunger, a capacity for anti-materialism and a desire for simple living. In her view, the Irish have learned from hunger the value of sympathy and have proven themselves worthy of being welcomed as Americans. Not only can they overcome hunger, they can maintain it as necessary in order to achieve their ravenous desires for better lives. Having worked with the poor in New York City, Nicholson had direct access to them and thus was able to engage better than most American writers with the reality of poverty. This engagement with the poor and hungry not only elicited a broad sense of sympathy from Nicholson but also provided her with a fuller appreciation for the subtleties among the classes of poor that she encountered. Nicholson agrees to some extent with a writer like James Ebenezer Bicheno, who says, "The most compassionate class will always be the poor themselves, not only because they can sympathize . . . with want, but among them the affections of the heart are the chief medium of communication" (qtd. in Diner 107-108). However, Nicholson's view takes this rather paternalistic interpretation of the "social contract" further by specifying how the Irish experience of hunger helps them handle the power of sympathy. The Irish hungry, including mostly lay Catholics, serve as ideal Americans not only because they can sympathize with those in need, but also because they have put into practice precisely those economic lessons that poverty and hunger so viscerally demand.

On both sides of the Atlantic, Nicholson elicits and sustains sympathy for the Famine Irish. Nicholson's identification with the hungry of Ireland is also based in part on her self-consciousness as an American in the face of condescension by Europeans. As much as the United States was beginning to manifest its destiny in the 1840s, there remained an inferiority complex among many Americans regarding their relationship to "the Continent." The Famine Irish, as fellow outsiders to European aristocracy and culture, offer social activists like Nicholson a way to make themselves feel elevated by their sympathy. However, one should hesitate to label Nicholson's concern as basic self-serving pity; rather, Nicholson's sense of responsibility for the Famine Irish is based in broader concerns about social injustice. For Nicholson, the impoverished and hungry Famine Irish represent the future, while the overstuffed aristocracy (with few exceptions) is stuck in the past. Furthermore, Nicholson's tales about the all-encompassing suffering brought about by hunger include implicit warnings that such pain could be felt even in the New World.

During the narratives of her travels in Ireland, Nicholson's status as an American allows her to solicit sympathy even from those she is there to help. The respect she receives is based both in her sympathy for the Famine Irish and in their concern about her hunger. Even from the beginning of *Annals*, Nicholson is preoccupied with (and proud of) representing the characteristics of hunger. Several chapter titles convey a sense of the role hunger plays in the lives of the Irish: "Chapter II: *First Starving Person, and Means of Preserving Him*; Chapter IV: *Mistake in Character of a Starving Man*; Chapter V: *Manner of Burying the Starving*." Such encounters with the hungry and "starving" make up the bulk of Nicholson's narrative, which she labels as prophetic for its time: "The

reader of these pages should be told that, if strange things are recorded, it was because strange things were seen; and if strange things were seen which no other writer has written, it was because no other writer has visited the same places, under the same circumstances" ("Preface"). In this passage, Nicholson proudly lays claim to witnessing the unique trauma of the Famine and its aftermath. As she says, only witnesses like her can "understand" and "*feel*" the "*realities*" of the Famine (Nicholson's *italics*). While she recognizes some limitations in her ability to record everything related to the Famine years, she errs on the side of including almost everything rather than omitting anything. Hunger becomes an all-encompassing trait of her texts themselves. While travelling near Kilkenny, Nicholson stands out as "the American stranger," and the townspeople go to great lengths to see that she is well-fed: "'What will she ate, the cratur? It's not the potato that raired her'" (53). In addition to their concern over her well-being, the Irish people quoted here are implying that their own capacity for withstanding hunger--having themselves been "raired" on potatoes--must be superior to that of an American woman: "All went away sorrowful that so 'nice a body should be so trated,' and all asked me to visit their cabins, 'though they were not fittin' for such a lady'" (53). The juxtaposition between humility and pride in such passages shows how much the Irish were ashamed of their inadequate supplies, especially in the presence of a stranger. However, it is evident from Nicholson's comments that the Irish deserve to be admired for their perseverance and conservation since they were able to subsist on so little, ironically not unlike Thoreau at Walden Pond. Thus, the Irish (in Ireland) are seen by Nicholson as almost Thoreauvean in their ability not only to withstand hunger, but also to maintain social proprieties even in its midst.

Nicholson's writing also avoids devolving into a purely negative portrayal of hunger and its related evils, which make up so many other accounts of the Famine. Although the opening chapter of *Annals* includes mention of the murder of a landlord who had mistreated his tenants, Nicholson's narrative is mostly devoid of Famine-related violence. In Nicholson's representation, the thing to be most afraid of in Ireland is not the hungry Irish, but hunger itself:

> There was no fear of violence, but the dreadful importuning, falling upon their knees, clasping their emaciated hands, and their glaring eyes fixed upon me, were quite too much. … Hunger, in its incipient stages, never sleeps, never neglects its watch, but continues sharpening the inventive faculties, till, like the drunkard's thirst, intrigue and dissimulation give startling proof of the varied materials which compose the entire man. (*Annals* 45)

Hunger has undying sublime power, in Nicholson's view, to overwhelm both sufferers and witnesses. In this passage, hunger is seen as a form of surveillance, watching over all with its incessant gaze. To their credit, the Irish only rarely appear to allow hunger to turn them towards violence; if anything, they are undyingly reserved and patient even amidst the worst temptations caused by the Famine. Nicholson suggests that these "inventive faculties" are based in the notion that "famine was always in Ireland in a certain degree" (37), yet she intimates that the years of suffering inculcated complacency among the Irish. If people are hungry, they are less likely to maintain the energy required to fight for improvements in their living conditions. However, there is still something powerful and

dangerous about hunger in Nicholson's description. It reveals "the varied materials" of the Irish to be useful, not threatening.

The passivity prompted by hunger also commands much of Nicholson's attention in *Annals*. In Chapter II, she poses a troubling, yet telling question that gets to the heart of the helplessness felt by both sufferers and witnesses of the Famine. Likewise, this question instantiates Nicholson's nonjudgmental stance towards the Irish:

> Was it their hereditary suffering that had become a second nature, was it the peculiarity belonging to hunger alone or was it their religion that had produced that submissiveness which overcame the natural propensities, and brought them into passive obedience, when the hand of affliction pressed them sore? (51)

The options suggested in this question say much about particular views of the Irish as well as more general prejudices about the poor. Nicholson wants the Irish to stand up for themselves more than she has seen them do; she cannot help but wonder if the Irish suffer simply because it is "natural" for them to do so. Another connection to Thoreau's view of the Irish arises here. Like him, Nicholson engages with the idea that the Irish are just inherently inferior to full-blooded Anglo-Saxons. However, a significant difference in Nicholson's consideration is that fact that she asks a question, rather than assume Irish inferiority like Thoreau does. Likewise, even in her supposition that Catholicism is to blame for Irish "submissiveness," Nicholson does not offer a definitive answer, suggesting that "the peculiarity belonging to hunger" builds up her capacity for sympathy. She recognizes something "peculiar" about hunger that seems distinctively Irish. As much as Nicholson expresses genuine sympathy for Irish suffering, she is not

averse to making moralistic judgments about their behavior. While she emphasizes the dehumanizing effects of hunger, Nicholson leaves open the possibility of Irish agency. Her comments on "the *fearful, sinful* use of all kinds of intoxicating drinks in Ireland" portray not only her sense of rectitude, but also her feeling of disappointment in a people whose morals she otherwise praises (88). In contrast to Thoreau, who views most Irishmen as shifty and shiftless, Nicholson values the humanity of the Irish. Some of them make poor choices, but most of them are identified (and even excused) by the limitations placed upon their choices.

At times in *Annals*, Nicholson is very hard on herself for misjudging individual Irish Famine victims. In chapter IV, she becomes annoyed at an "out-of-way companion" whom she suspects of "taking whiskey." "[H]e did not look like one in the last stages of starvation," Nicholson writes, later lamenting, "My severity upon myself was equal to my surprise when we found that it was exhaustion occasioned by hunger. . . . O, *shame! shame* on my wicked suspicions; how should I be thus deceived? I *could not*, I *would not* forgive myself" (83). Nicholson initially allows herself to prejudge this Irishman as a drunkard but then blames herself for her false assumption. As elsewhere in her writings, Nicholson is careful to discount most stereotypes about the Irish and about the poor in general. Over and again through her representations of the Irish Famine, Nicholson exemplifies the ways in which the American public was made to negotiate the realities and fictions of the Irish. Their preconceptions of what it was to be hungry could not be merged with their ideas of America as a "land of plenty." Since hunger did not fit comfortably in this view of America, her readers had to be reminded of it through Nicholson's texts. Furthermore, they were left with the implicit message that even though

the Irish were hungry, they could still be seen as acceptable Americans because they_had undergone suffering not of their own accord—as in the case of intemperance—but out of hunger, for which they could not be blamed.

Nicholson's voice travels farther than the voices of those she represents. Amidst her impassioned emphasis on the horrors of hunger, Nicholson also stresses the capacity of the Irish to suffer their plight quietly: "Sleep departs from my eyes, while the imploring supplicants haunt my imagination like spectres; and what is quite remarkable, not a word of reproach or fretfulness falls from their lips. They suffer in patience and die in silence" (68). Not only is Nicholson impressed by the Irish ability to withstand hunger, but she is also fascinated by their admirable willingness to do so without verbalizing their suffering. While patience and silence themselves do not qualify the immigrant Irish as Americans, each trait allows for Nicholson to insert herself as their advocate, on both a spiritual and national level. The way the Irish suffer qualifies them, in Nicholson's eyes, as both proper Christians and potential Americans. She places the Famine Irish deliberately in between the British and American governments, continuing:

> The sight of a starving person is unlike any death scene whatever; the prominent eye—the shriveled black skin, and the imploring silence would melt any heart but that of the (shall I say it?) British Parliament, and Irish landholders. … But shame on a government—a proud monarchy, that will starve her subjects, so that a young republic must come to her relief. ("Correspondence")

In such descriptions, Nicholson moves beyond descriptions of mere hunger towards a rhetoric of starvation. As a form of death, starvation takes on visual and aural

components above a normal register. “Part of the experience of starving to death is the shame of it,” says Joseph Roach, “the starving seem to disappear both before and after they die” (40). In Nicholson’s representation above, the starving Irish are thus muted. Their condition implores the readers’ sympathy, but they themselves do not speak. This silence strengthens their right to sympathy in Nicholson’s view. Because they do not speak out, they are more deserving of American support, thus reinforcing Nicholson’s notion that Americans should care proactively about issues of injustice. The “young republic” must speak for the Irish and serve as an antidote to the damage inflicted by the British Parliament and Monarchy. With their “shriveled black skin,” the starving Irish become England’s slaves in this depiction—they are Britain’s ‘Blacks’—and Nicholson takes pride in the idea that her own country “must come” to support the cause of starving Ireland. Nicholson’s readers see the Irish as silent sufferers whose demands, however imminent, do not threaten American life but instead reinvigorate it. The Irish are hungry, but their silence ensures that their hunger will not challenge American ideals of individualism and self-reliance. American readers must relieve Irish suffering not only because they are starving, but because the British cannot do the job themselves. By making do with very little and barely ever talking about it, in Nicholson’s view, the Irish gain access to Americanness. She thus leaves open the possibility that the Irish can not only gain access to American identity, but can also shape it by showing how hunger can be coordinated with abundance.

In order to achieve acceptance by (and eventually as) Americans, the Irish must successfully overcome their hunger, and Nicholson believes that they can. Not unlike other progressive commentators of her era, Nicholson even compares the suffering Irish

to American slaves: "The bare-faced, heaven-daring oppression of the peasantry of Ireland can only find a parallel in American Slavery; and even in that, there are some loop-holes which a poor Irishman has not" ("Correspondence"). Nicholson's diction here—"bare-faced, heaven-daring," and "only"—indicates the passion of her feeling and her willingness to prioritize her concerns for the Irish over other social issues. Elsewhere in *Annals*, Nicholson is careful to stress that the American Irish "strengthen the hands of the avaricious oppressor, and help him to bind the chains tighter about the poor black man" (271). Such points about the unfortunate history of Irish/Black racial relations are otherwise mostly subordinated to more immediate concerns about the Famine in Nicholson's writings. Nicholson attempts to overcome "the ignorant and too often malicious injustice of writers" who view the Irish in a negative light (121), but she occasionally overreaches in making essentialist claims about the Irish case. Even when she is misguided in comparing Irish and African American suffering, Nicholson is nevertheless clear in asserting that a key difference lies in the way the Irish are associated with hunger. Hunger becomes a marker through which the Irish can successfully lay claim to Americanness.

The most telling scene concerning this link between the Irish cause and abolitionism comes early in *Annals*. This scene also exemplifies the ways in which concern for the Famine Irish is directly linked to notions of American exceptionalism. While discussing various remedies for Famine relief, Nicholson identifies some "American recipes" and writes:

> These, with all due credence, were accepted as the one thing needful, for they possessed these redeeming qualities: first, they were from America,

> the land which they loved for many of their 'kin' were there; next, that though they thought that nobody but negroes ate it—yet negroes *lived* on that food and 'sure the Americans wouldn't hurt em'. (36; Nicholson's *emphasis*)

In this passage, Nicholson highlights Irish naivete about American slavery and racism. Their conjecture that "the Americans wouldn't hurt" slaves is rooted in a problematic idea of the United States as a place of moral responsibility. In the Irish mindset depicted here, hunger simply does not happen in the U.S.; even slaves are able to *live* on the food provided by their white benefactors. The Irish "loved" America not only because their "kin" had emigrated there, but also because even the poorest of the poor would supposedly be free from hunger upon arrival. Nicholson's American audience could read such lines as evidence of their "redeeming" nature, proof that they lived in a land of plenty blessed by God. In witnessing how the hungry Irish view America, American readers could see themselves as saviors. It matters not that specific foods, other than corn, are not identified in this scene; more important is the notion that hunger could be eradicated. If even "negroes" were fed, then the Irish could become just as American as any.

In a letter included in Chapter V of *Annals*, dated October 30, 1847, Nicholson further outlines the state in which she sees the Irish amidst the Famine's worst year. Here, her admiration for their humanity in the face of hunger faces its sternest test:

> My heart sickens at looking over the utter wasting of all that was once cheerful, interesting, and kind in these peasantry. Hunger and idleness have left them a prey to every immorality; and if they do not soon practice

> every vice attendant on such a state of things, it will be because they have not the power. (101)

Nicholson knew her subject well. Her experiences before, during and after the Famine allow her to describe more authentically than most the terrible circumstances concomitant with hunger; however, her comments about Irish susceptibility to "every immorality" portray her occasionally restrictive sense of Irish fortitude. Similar to Frederick Douglass, who understood poverty as an effect of intemperance, Nicholson limits notions of Irish agency in overcoming the dangerous effects of Famine. Her logic here both laments Irish 'idleness' and predicts that it may lead to immorality, thus invoking the proverb: "Idle hands are the devil's plaything." Her confusion is further exemplified by the final phrase after the semicolon above; it is uncertain exactly how Nicholson views Irish "power" in managing their own circumstances. To paraphrase, Nicholson seems to be saying that if the Irish hungry act immorally, it will not be due to their own fault. Their ability to make more decisions has been taken away by their hunger; thus, they need to be fed in order to exercise their fullest agency as Americans.

In yet another darkening scene from her accounts of the Famine, Nicholson shows how hunger, along with an absence of sympathy, can lead to the destruction of the family. She includes a report from the *Dublin Medical Press* by Dr. Daniel Donovan, who says: "'I have seen mothers snatch food from the hands of their starving children; known a son to engage in a fatal struggle with his father for a potato; and have seen parents look upon the putrid bodies of their starving offspring without evincing a symptom of sorrow'" (qtd. in Pack 20). Here is the ultimate result of hunger. Not unlike scenes in the end of Herman Melville's *Redburn* in which the narrator is simply overwhelmed by the suffering he sees,

Nicholson seems to succumb here to the debilitating power of hunger. Such despair makes sense, as these are scenes not just of hunger, but of starvation. As Nicholson herself clarifies, this sort of scene appeals to American family values:

> This is an illustration not only of the state into which famine has thrown the country, but the apathy of feeling which the most tender-hearted people on the globe manifested—a woman compelled to go out in a most perilous storm, upon a wild sea-coast, unprotected by clothes, and without a morsel of food for twenty-four hours, to procure a coffin for her husband who had died by starvation! (95)

Nicholson laments, perhaps above all else, the loss of "feeling" among the "tender-hearted" Irish. However, even in the example above, feeling seems to be all that remains. It is not just with hunger that these Irish are struggling; it is "starvation!" As David Lloyd contends, "[T]he starving Irish come to present an alarming counterfigure that troubles the spatial discriminations that progressive economic narratives mobilize, the proper divisions between inner and outer, private and public, reproductive and productive" ("The Indigent Sublime" 168). This woman whose husband had died, instead of attending to her own needs of shelter, clothing, and sustenance, spends her time searching for a coffin she certainly cannot afford. She has lost all sense of propriety. Ironically, even while Nicholson claims an "apathy of feeling" brought on by famine, the woman in this scene feels so much as to be beyond sympathy itself.

A moment is needed here to clarify the ways in which sympathy operates specifically within Nicholson's paradigm of Famine representation. "Even as it produces an affective connection between individual subjects …" writes Glenn Hendler,

"sympathy threatens to negate their individuality by confusing the *analogy* it posits between subjects with a fictional and dangerous *coincidence* between them" (5). As her narratives unfold, Nicholson begins to worry that her sympathetic representations of Famine horrors may do nothing to relieve them. She realizes that sympathetic identification with those suffering from hunger may only exacerbate their pain, making them objects of pity rather than individuals with pride. The hungry Irish, as Nicholson tries to represent them, are doers, not takers. Unlike most of the "genteel Irish" who lack the ability to "do anything when difficulties present themselves" (*Annals*, 97), Nicholson's poor are as active as they can be in overcoming the challenges of hunger, thus reinforcing their potential as Americans.

In another provocative scene from chapter V of *Annals*, Nicholson tells a tale of a "young lady" who "knew no possible way of escape" from the hunger around her. In contrast to most other upper-class archetypes in Nicholson's texts, however, this woman "assumed a magnanimity of spirit and complained not, only expressed much pity for the poor tenants on the land about her and begged us if possible that we would send some relief" (97). Such scenes manifest the depth of Nicholson's investment in the Irish. She does not oversimplify or romanticize their suffering as does Thoreau. The universalizing element throughout her works is hunger. It ineluctably strikes the poor, but it likewise afflicts even those well-to-do, yet modest Irish, British, and Americans who are left in its wake. Ultimately, *Annals of the Famine* shows how hunger is infused into Nicholson's larger project of representing the Famine and seeking to solicit sympathy, which says Elizabeth Barnes, "converts otherness into sameness, organizing sentiments around the perception of familiarity and constructing a community of like-minded individuals"

(115). Thus, Nicholson makes room for hunger as a sign of universal suffering that need not separate individuals, but can unite them in their collective desire for independence.

The Irish experience of hunger, in Nicholson's view, proves that they can become successful in America. Her take on the Irish allows Nicholson's American audience to contemplate their plight and come closer to accepting them as suitable Americans. Like the British, who had a long history of anti-Irish bias, both governmental and social, many Americans gave in to prejudices that precluded them from recognizing the full effects of the Famine before it was too late. The so-called "old political economy" considered hunger and starvation to be divine punishments for Irish laziness and overpopulation. However, Nicholson argues for Irish suitability in a new economy. She is optimistic that the Irish—with the assistance of sympathetic outsiders like her— can overcome their hunger by using the very lessons it has taught them: economy, thrift, and ambition. Nicholson, then, is a conduit through which the Irish can gain political sympathy and Americans can assuage moral discomfort. For writers like Thoreau, sympathy is insufficient as a means of social change. In Nicholson's view of the Famine Irish, however, the impact of sympathy is maximized by their experience of hunger. In other words, hunger is seen by Nicholson as a marker of the genuine, universal and political power of sympathy.

"Enviable content!": Thoreau's "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience" and Nicholson's *The Bible in Ireland*

This comparison of works by Nicholson and Thoreau overall points to some fundamental differences in antebellum American views of the Famine Irish: they were

seen as objects of both sympathy and fear, overt and guarded admiration, blatant yet subtle ridicule. While both writers offer a similar vision of America as a "land of plenty," each considers the Irish in different dimensions. This culminating section considers Thoreau's famous essay "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience" in connection with Nicholson's *The Bible in Ireland*, two texts whose juxtaposition points to the ambivalence within American culture which was prompted in part by Famine Irish hunger. Nicholson accommodates hunger through her narratives of the Irish Famine, allowing it to be seen as an acceptable element of life that can be overcome with sympathy and action. Conversely, Thoreau's sense of what it is to be American cannot incorporate hunger. Because he claims control over the power of hunger, Thoreau cannot rationalize its consuming nature. For him, hunger is simply something that individuals must avoid by not working too hard. Such a view falls in line with Thoreau's comments elsewhere about the importance of individuality to the United States. As he says in "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience," "There will never be a really free and enlightened State until the State comes to recognize the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its own power and authority are derived, and treats him accordingly." Thoreau is not impressed by the scale of the Famine's devastation, let alone a shipwreck off the coast of Massachusetts, because such an event exceeds his focus on the individual. By aestheticizing sympathy in the face of collective suffering, Thoreau sets up a view of Irish hunger that Nicholson opens up to interrogation in her Famine narratives.

Although it is clear that Nicholson's personal concerns for the Famine Irish outweigh Thoreau's rather harsh treatment of them in *Walden* and *Cape Cod*, his "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience" is worth considering for its mention of hunger as a form of

suffering that solicits sympathy from even the most hard-hearted persons. In the closing paragraphs of this famous essay, Thoreau encapsulates his long deliberation about his rights and responsibilities as an individual American citizen. He writes:

> Again, I sometimes say to myself, When many millions of men, without heat, without ill-will, without personal feeling of any kind, demand of you a few shillings only, without the possibility, such is their constitution, of retracting or altering their present demand, and without the possibility, on your side, of appeal to any other millions, why expose yourself to this overwhelming brute force? You do not resist cold and hunger, the winds and the waves, thus obstinately; you quietly submit to a thousand similar necessities.

In the penultimate sentence above, Thoreau's question could be paraphrased thus: "Why should we care about the suffering of others?" Nicholson's answer, as presented in *Annals of the Famine* and *The Bible in Ireland*, is that we should care not only because those others deserve our support, but that we ourselves will benefit from giving it, that there is in all of us a desire for sympathy that may never be fulfilled but must be pursued. This is a moral imperative, but also an intellectual one. We cannot think through the problem of hunger without addressing it directly, without feeling for its subtleties and working as hard as possible towards its termination. "[T]his overwhelming brute force" of hunger will make its presence known whether we like it or not. Whereas Thoreau likes to think that "[i]t is not a man's duty, as a matter of course, to devote himself to the eradication of any, even the most enormous wrong," Nicholson never questions that such

duties are part and parcel of her own identity. Unlike Thoreau, she does not "quietly submit" to hunger; she welcomes it and the Irish suffering from it wholeheartedly.

The contrasts between Thoreau and Nicholson prefigure similar debates about the efficacy of narrative sympathy in the face of social injustice. Many critics question the sociopolitical efficacy of sympathy while others remain confident in it as a tool of assuaging suffering. Thoreau's doubts about sympathy stem in part from a concern he shares with Nicholson that it may be more beneficial for the witness than for the victim. Even Thoreau seems to soften, as final line from the passage above indicates. Many Famine Irish were forced by hunger into quiet submission. Nicholson recognizes this condition of Irish suffering repeatedly in her texts of the Famine, while Thoreau "please[s] himself with imagining a State at last which can afford to be just to all men, and to treat the individual with respect as a neighbor." Although the Irish could fit Thoreau's image of the ideal American, he does not see how their experience of hunger proves them worthy of recognition as "neighbors." Nicholson, to her great credit, does. *The Bible in Ireland* shows ultimately that the experience of hunger is one that Americans share in as much as the Irish.

Nicholson's concern about her Americanness continues throughout *The Bible in Ireland*, yet she comes to realize the interdependence of identity and hunger. Nicholson seems almost always to be eating or to be talking about doing so. She, according to many of the Irish people she meets, is more often the hungry one. In one memorable instance, Nicholson tells of a trip to an impoverished town in the west of Ireland:

> Never could be seen a more miserable group, and never was more kindheartedness shown. As we passed on, the whole hamlet was in motion;

> the kind salutations, the desire to know everything about America, and the fear that I was hungry, almost overpowered me. One old woman, who told me her age on her fingers, approached, put her hand upon my stomach, made a sorrowing face, and said in Irish, 'She is hungry; the stranger is hungry.' (257-258)

Such concern for her own hunger is typical amid Nicholson's many encounters with Irish peasants throughout her books. These potential immigrants are desirous of information about the United States—as undoubtedly many of them had relatives living there—and they are more concerned with Nicholson's potential hunger than with their own. It is as if they seek to turn the tables on Nicholson, to place upon her all the typical fears she has about them, to show that they are no more foreigners than she. Nicholson admits to being 'almost overpowered' by the concern of these Irish, and it is notable that this "fear" belongs neither to her nor to them. She is not afraid that their hunger will overpower her; rather, she acknowledges that their focus on her hunger could somehow destabilize the differences between them and her. In this scene and in others like it, Nicholson's Irish prove that they know hunger. However, they are not merely nameless or silent victims of it, nor do they lose their sense of sympathy with those who may also be hungry. In other words, they demonstrate for Nicholson (and for her readers) how to be a better American.

In several scenes in *The Bible in Ireland*, Nicholson depicts want of food as beneficial rather than detrimental to the Irish as a whole. "[H]ard as is the fate of the laboring man," she writes, "I think he is greatly indebted to the potato for his flow of spirits and health of body" (92). To be at constant risk of hunger is not necessarily something to be lamented for Nicholson. Instead, part of her attraction to the Irish is

based in her sense that the threat of hunger is precisely what makes them otherwise healthy. As a vegetarian herself, Nicholson may have overvalued the health benefits of the potato, but she also takes care to emphasize the differences between an Irish lifestyle and an American one: “It must be remembered that a sup of sweet milk among the poor in Ireland, is as much a rarity and a luxury as a slice of plum-pudding in a farmhouse in America” (63). Through her emphasis on the proud penury of Ireland, Nicholson critiques the luxury of the United States, which she sees as an over-fed, unhealthy, and immoral nation. It is what and how the Irish eat, not so much what they say, that makes them worthy Americans in Nicholson’s eyes. Thus, Nicholson privileges the Famine Irish, especially the poorest among them, because of the way they react to hunger.

While detailed descriptions of hunger are included in many of her texts, Nicholson exhibits a clear sense throughout her work of the Famine’s impact on all classes, not only the starving poor. In chapter VI of *The Bible in Ireland*, Nicholson describes a scene in which a “dandy with whip and cap” drives by:

> as he turned to go, a young woman remarked to me, 'He's a humorous fellow; he's always the same, as full of fun as ye see him now.' I asked who he was. 'The priest of the parish--a Catholic, to be sure, ma'am.' 'He seems to be very well fed,' I remarked. 'And why shouldn't he?' was her reply, 'when he has a large domain, and everything in his house--money and attendants in plenty?' (66)

In this scene, an Irish Catholic priest stands out as the figure of a dandy. He is ‘very well fed’ and thus is distinguished from the impoverished and hungry (and therefore more sympathetic) Irish people around him. Part of Nicholson’s purpose in depicting this

dandified priest may be to reinforce a common American perception of Catholics as undemocratic, surreptitious aristocrats. The dandy, a gentleman of leisure, did not fit well into a notion of America as a land of opportunity based in hard work. The lingering anti-Catholic sentiment in this scene—which should be juxtaposed to Nicholson's otherwise insistent claims of Irish industriousness—is important primarily because it demonstrates Nicholson's ongoing negotiation of hunger as a stereotypical trait of Irish life during the Famine. Nicholson's emphasis on this priest's misfit status among the Irish shows that her intentions are based in differentiating potentially dangerous Catholics from otherwise acceptable Americans. The hungry Irish, not the "well fed" dandies among them, are deserving of her readers' sympathy and are therefore worthy of welcome as immigrants to the United States.

Hunger, for Nicholson, is consistently linked to the character of the people proffering food. In a subsequent scene from *The Bible in Ireland*, Nicholson meets with an Irish lord, Sir Richard Musgrave, near Youghal, County Cork. After comparing his "kindnesses" unfavorably to those of the peasants on his land, Nicholson describes their encounter during tea:

> As I was going into the hall, he said, 'Maybe you would take something to eat.' 'I am not hungry, sir,' replied I. My heart rejected this coldly proffered bread. Then did the cabin woman's potato look doubly valuable, and I blessed God that He had left some poor in the world, that every vestige of humanity and kind feeling might not be swept from the earth. I had travelled a distance of twenty miles for the privilege of being treated

> with the coldest indifference by a titled gentleman. Yet I was not sorry. I at least learned something. (84)

To be hungry, in this instance, is to understand the value of food and to become closer to God. In the presence of someone like Sir Richard, Nicholson cannot bring herself to admit to hunger. His offer of "something to eat" is half-hearted at best. Evidently, the offer of bread from someone who does not appreciate the gift that it represents is not acceptable for Nicholson. Sir Richard's offer only increases the value of the humble potato. Most of the Irish Nicholson encounters, not including most landlords, show genuine concern for others even though they themselves are in desperate need. In the spirit of the Matthew's Gospel 26:11, Nicholson is grateful for the poor because it is through them that she realizes the value of her daily bread. While this sort of "social contract" contains an unsophisticated view of the poor as a source for sympathy, it is important to emphasize that Nicholson's interests are not simplistic. Even as she extols the "[e]nviable content!" and "[h]appy misery!" of the suffering Irish (197), she is also looking to learn "the true nature of their hospitality; for invariably when I told them I could not reward them for their potato or lodgings," they replied, "'And didn't ye crass the ocean to see the poor? Ye may stay as long as ye will'" (144). Nicholson's Irish are not just looking for a handout; in fact, they take pity upon her. In another scene from *The Bible in Ireland*, Nicholson contrasts the hospitality of Sir Richard with her treatment by one of the monks at an Irish monastery: "Learning that I took no butter, 'What shall we get for you, then?' he cried, 'you are worse than ourselves. Why should you live so?' … I assured them that I should make a good dinner on bread and an apple, and they left the room" (77). Here again, the Irish capacity for sympathy is on fullest display. Not only is

Nicholson sympathetic to these Irish monks, but they are also sympathetic to her. The Irish here are a lot like Nicholson; they are concerned for her wellness. Like her, they are capable of subsisting on very little; thus, they serve as models of self-reliant Americans. Nicholson is paid respect not only because she is respectable, but also because she may be hungry. Although these monks are Catholic, they demonstrate anti-aristocratic and ideally democratic behaviors. To Nicholson, their capacity for sympathy means that they are self-reliant.

Unlike Thoreau, Nicholson is willing to recognize the limits of self-reliance. Even she, the *de facto* heroine of her own tales, is not free from dependence upon others. These scenes selected from *The Bible in Ireland* emphasize Nicholson's appreciation for Irish hospitality, especially because it was not often presented to her by the landlords whom she visited. Time and again, the hungry Irish peasants in Nicholson's representations are more hospitable and generous with what they have than are the aristocratic classes who could more afford to be so: "Had my reception among the higher and middle ranks been as Christian-like and as civil as among the poor, it would have been one monotonous tissue, and Ireland's true character would have been hidden" (270). For Nicholson, "Ireland's true character" is bad news for Ireland but good news for the United States: "America, faulty as she may be, will extend the cordial hand to the Irish stranger; and if he be poor, she will give him bread and clothing; she will pay him for his toil, and will allow him to stand erect, and call himself a man" (270). Because she took the time to visit and learn about the "true" Ireland, Nicholson now can construct an argument for accepting Irish immigrants into America.

By looking beyond the surface of Irish hunger, Nicholson recognizes its class-based subtleties and thereby acknowledges its universal implications. Unlike Thoreau, she calls upon her nation to care about Irish hunger, not to fear it or simply pretend that it does not exist. Nicholson sees hunger as a qualification for eventual citizenship, not exclusion from it. Whereas Nicholson is open to Irish American social climbing, the Irish association with poverty and hunger will never change for Thoreau. In *Walden* and *Cape Cod*, Thoreau's antipathies towards the Irish overwhelm his occasionally positive depictions of them. Overall, his view of America, even as expressed in "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience," is not large enough to include those like John Field, who will never be free from hunger in Thoreau's representation. For Nicholson in *Annals of the Famine* and *The Bible in Ireland*, sympathy is sustainable no matter how cumbersome conditions become. Ultimately, this consideration of these writers' works of non-fiction sheds important light on the texts left to be analyzed in this dissertation. Together, Thoreau and Nicholson initiate a discussion of the Famine's impact on America, especially the ways in which hunger is infused into the competing discourses of sympathy and self-reliance.

Chapter 2:
"Strange Feeling":
Herman Melville's Transatlantic Epistemology of Hunger

In *Emigrants and Exiles*, a seminal work of Irish immigration history, Kerby Miller argues that the sense of alienation among nineteenth-century Irish Americans, many of whom immigrated during the Famine years, led them "to perceive or at least justify themselves not as voluntary, ambitious emigrants but as involuntary, nonresponsible 'exiles,' compelled to leave home by forces beyond individual control" (556). Although not an Irish American himself, Melville is similarly affiliated with nonresponsibility and exile in many of his texts. Written and published during the midst of the Famine, Melville's *Redburn* (1849) depicts the emigrants and exiles of the transatlantic world as nonresponsible victims, allowing his readers to map out their collective sympathies. Exile and nonresponsibility are paradoxically liberating traits for Melville, and his eponymous narrator's *strange feeling* for the exiled and nonresponsible Irish depends upon their hunger. Ultimately, Melville's representations of hunger—which for him is intimately connected to exile—deserve to be read as part of an emerging transatlantic canon that continues to interrogate questions of nationality, race, and ethnicity within and beyond the nineteenth century.

This complex idea derives in part from the peculiarities of the Famine Irish themselves. Perhaps exceptionally among 19th-century immigrant groups, the Famine Irish were associated with hunger, and their specific experience of that hunger, for Melville at least, qualifies them for potential acceptance as Americans.[3] Through his

[3] The point is not that the Irish were the hungriest, nor that they should have been singled out. Of course, other peoples around the world suffered similar hardships during and beyond the nineteenth century. (One

eponymous narrator and protagonist in *Redburn*, Melville views the Irish as *transatlantic citizens*, an oxymoronic yet apt phrase that implies support for their American nationhood while recognizing their precarious "in-betweenness" as immigrants and exiles in need of sympathy and socioeconomic assistance.[4] Although Irish hunger was seen by many as a menacing alien presence within the American body politic, *Redburn* challenges such assumptions and emphasizes that hunger, in both physical and psychological senses, may be a sign of access to citizenship rather than a reason for rejection. While there is no single American response to the Famine, *Redburn* offers a provocative and informative sample of the ways in which Irish immigrants were seen by mainstream readers and canonical writers of the antebellum period. Melville's view of the Famine Irish as victims of hunger, along with his desire to sympathize with them, contrasts with, yet ultimately reinforces, the supposed self-reliance and individualism at the center of nineteenth-century American ideology. The paradox here is between either rejecting the Irish because they are hungry (and, therefore, not self-reliant individuals) or accepting them because they are deserving of sympathy. While Melville knows he does not belong among the Famine Irish, he identifies with them in *Redburn* as members of an imagined community. He desires to share in their "in between" status as exiles and emigrants, yet he reserves distance for himself so that he can remain a witness and thus maintain a comfortable middle-class point of view. Among other racially and ethnically diverse

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could note the indigenous populations of the Americas as a prime example, not to mention the experiences of Indians and Africans, among others, before, during and after the nineteenth century.) Instead, hunger came to be identified with the Irish above and beyond most other immigrants in the United States, and this association is precisely what Melville grapples with in *Redburn*.

[4] This critical notion of in-betweeness is prompted in part by Gavin Jones's work on poverty in the context of American 19th and 20th-century literature. See "Poverty and the Limits of Literary Criticism," *American Literary History* 15.4 (2003): 765-792, as well as *American Hungers: The Problem of Poverty in U.S. Literature, 1840-1945*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 2008.

figures in the novel, the Irish characters are the most transformative of Redburn's way of thinking. His emotional epistemology depends upon the Famine Irish, who serve a peculiar role in *Redburn* as a population "in between" empathy and pity, recognition and blame, self-reliance and independence, hunger and satiation. Thus, *Redburn* emphasizes the multinational dimensions of hunger and shows how witnessing hunger challenges one to think differently about related issues of poverty, immigration, and class.

Building upon the uncertain history of the Famine Irish and their reception in the United States requires careful attention to text and context, reality and symbolism, especially Melville's use of the key phrase *strange feeling*.[5] In chapter VII, Redburn uses the phrase merely to describe the physical sensation he experiences after the ship rolls for the first time. However, in chapter XLI, entitled "Redburn Roves About Hither and Thither," the phrase takes on more important social and psychological dimensions as Redburn experiences anxiety and alienation while wandering the shady streets of Liverpool, England. *Strange feeling*, the very vagueness of which gives it personal gravitas and political potential, is a fundamental concept for this dissertation's investigation into the American literary response to Irish Famine immigration. The fundamental claim here is that Melville engages in *strange feeling* through his literary representations of hunger. By tracing the Irish presence in *Redburn*, one can learn more about Melville's *strange feeling*, which describes both the physical and psychological effects of witnessing suffering. Melville is fascinated with the figure of the exile, and in *Redburn*, his exiles are Irish, and most of them are hungry. *Strange feeling* involves more than just the Irish, but it begins with them in *Redburn*. Hunger, then, is both a

[5] The phrase *strange feeling* is used twice in *Redburn* whereas it does not appear in Melville's other major works except once in chapter 10 of *Moby-Dick*.

universalizing and individuating force for Melville. It unites him with the Irish while simultaneously separating him from them; no matter how much he feels for them, he will never be as hungry as they. Ultimately, *strange feeling* is best defined as an ambivalent, anxiety-ridden combination of alienation and sympathy with those who suffer, and it is best understood through *Redburn*'s American perspective of Irish hunger. For Redburn (and for Melville) *strange feeling* is non-sentimental and nonresponsible; it represents a new transatlantic epistemology based on his witnessing of hunger and its association with the Irish Famine.

To some Melville scholars, his progressive politics were admirably ahead of his time; to others he remains an ambivalent individual whose views on important issues are masked through his complicated narrative techniques and ambiguous uses of symbolism. This "beggarly *Redburn*," as Melville called it, is considered by many to be an admirable failure, emblematic of Melville's youth as a writer not yet come of age (Breitwieser 100). Melville himself disparaged the novel as a "job," a "thing," "a plain, straightforward, amusing narrative of personal experience … nothing but cakes and ale" (qtd. in Baker 81). *Redburn* was written to make money—as were the greatest works of writers like Charles Dickens—and some would say that such ambitions hardly produce the stuff of great literature. In contrast, those critics who consider the artistic merits of *Redburn* also recognize its political engagement and social commentary. One cannot dispute that *Redburn* represents a departure from the exoticism of Melville's novels of the South Seas, nor can critics deny the progression of Melville's social interests in later works like *The Confidence-Man* and "Bartleby, the Scrivener." Despite Melville's somewhat tongue-in-cheek protestations, *Redburn* should be read less as a narrative of personal

initiation—as most twentieth-century critics contend—than as a story of social dissatisfaction invested in the imagery of hunger. Written rather hastily—and justly criticized for its somewhat abrupt concluding chapters—*Redburn* is nonetheless a novel of real social engagement, in which the relatively innocent narrator encounters the vices of the larger world around him and undergoes a self-revelation regarding the poverty, corruption, disease, and hunger that were so much a part of nineteenth-century Atlantic migration. It is at once both romantic and realist, moving ineluctably more towards the latter as it proceeds. In the end, *Redburn* represents Melville's transition towards a more deliberate intervention in the social issues of his day, and the Irish immigrants whom Redburn meets at sea and in port play a pivotal role in the development of this social conscience.

The following pages of this chapter set out to prove, through close reading of *Redburn* and consideration of other sources relevant to the novel's social engagement, that Melville's representations of hunger connect directly to his concern for the Famine Irish. The initial, larger section, subtitled "The Spectacle of Strangeness," focuses in deliberate and stark detail upon hunger imagery and specific mention of the Irish in order to better understand Redburn's *strange feeling* for them. This section is organized around the categories of class, race/ethnicity, and nationality in order to provide a clearer representation of *Redburn*'s use of hunger as a marker of identity that cuts across such social concerns. In addition, this initial section culminates with a discussion of the character Harry Bolton, Redburn's rather privileged yet ill-fated friend whose own hunger offers a telling contrast to the hunger of Irish immigrants and others within the novel's preceding chapters. In the closing section, entitled "To Eat or Not to Eat, That is

the Irish-American Question," I consider *Redburn* as part Melville's mid-career engagement in the social issues of his day, and I show how *Redburn*'s specific concern for Irish hunger fits within Melville's larger oeuvre and reflects upon his other important texts. To complement my analysis of *Redburn*, relatively succinct but nonetheless meaningful mention will be made of the South Sea tales *Typee* and *Omoo*, along with "Bartleby, the Scrivener," "Poor-Man's Pudding," *The Confidence-Man*, and *Moby-Dick*. One can witness among Melville's texts several examples of *strange feeling* for the suffering of others, but above all, *Redburn* offers the clearest and fullest exploration of Melville's concerns for social justice due to its singular emphasis on Irish hunger.

The Spectacle of Strangeness

At 20 years old, Melville joined a merchant ship bound for Liverpool—likely the *St. Lawrence*—forming the basis for the voyage depicted in *Redburn* aboard the fictionalized *Highlander*. This journey predated Melville's more popular travels through the Pacific, which prompted such texts as *Typee*, *Omoo*, and *Mardi*. Redburn, who hails from a once well-to-do family that had fallen on hard times (like Melville himself), is put in uncomfortable economic circumstances that cause him to question his place as an American in a transatlantic world hardly suitable to a middle-class lifestyle. Seemingly incapable of sympathy, "Redburn is a 'demoniac' 'misanthrope' at first," writes Michael Paul Rogin, further asserting that Redburn is "helplessly angry at the world" (65). In refusing to romanticize Redburn's experiences on board the *Highlander*, Melville makes room for realism that reflects serious social problems and calls for sympathy on the part of his readers. He seeks to educate not in a didactic sense; rather, he hopes to solicit

understanding through identification. As Gavin Jones puts it, "Redburn's subsequent journey becomes an education in poverty as a flexible, transnational, and multicultural condition" ("Poverty"). Melville is not simply presenting a coming-of-age story in which his narrator undergoes difficulties only to come through the better for it, reinforcing his own sense of self; rather, Redburn comes to realize, as do Melville's readers, that poverty is a social disease determined more by structural relationships than by any notion of individual morality. This sort of realism, if not singular in Melville's canon, is certainly significant in its use of genuine anger about the social injustices of his day.

"To understand *Redburn*, then," writes Michael Davitt Bell, "is to understand the complex ways in which Wellingborough's belief in authority is undermined. … Redburn cannot resolve or escape his own personal dilemma without dealing first with the larger question of social inequality" (561; 566). One of Melville's biographers calls *Redburn* "a literary joke" in that it manipulated popular genres while reflecting the "[a]lcoholism, insanity, disease, sexual tension, poverty, and sudden death [that] gnawed at the edges of Melville's mind like rats in the corners of a ship's dark hold, making *Redburn* a far better book than he seems to have realized" (qtd. in Novak). Redburn comes to learn much about the transatlantic world into which he's initiated, but this wisdom forces him to question any simplistic notions of equality or justice, including those supposedly endemic to an American upbringing. Even his early comments are devoid of typically youthful idealism; instead, Redburn professes pessimism about his ultimate prospects: "I had learned to think much and bitterly before my time; all my young mounting dreams of glory had left me; and at that early age, I was as unambitious as a man of sixty" (chap. I). Like Bartleby, Redburn lacks typical American ambition; he does not desire much other

than to go away, make a bit of money, and then go home. Even though he remains lonely for much of the novel, Redburn seems hardly self-reliant, and he becomes only more socially conscious as the novel proceeds. Redburn is well suited for his role as a witness to hunger and an active advocate for social justice. There is an attraction and repulsion at the heart of Redburn's encounter with poverty; he is especially interested in engaging with others as a way to know himself better. What prompts this desire to know most specifically is Redburn's recognition of hunger. Unlike many in a harsh transatlantic world, Redburn is initially not hungry; however, he is cognizant of his role as a social agent, and his very awareness of that role depends upon his engagement with the Famine Irish and others suffering from hunger.

While wandering around Liverpool, Redburn takes a "lonely satisfaction" in "speculating upon the strangers." His gaze, although directed outward, is not unaware of itself. Redburn says, "I was stared at myself, to be sure: but what of that? We must give and take on such occasions" (ch. XLI). This "give and take" is an important element of the *strange feeling* described by Melville's narrator; he is simultaneously witnessing poverty and being seen by its victims. After "speculating" a bit more about the conditions in Liverpool, Redburn comes upon a coachman and his footmen, symbols of the old English aristocracy against which the beggars of Liverpool contrast so noticeably, eating a sumptuous meal. He says, "I was particularly struck with the red cheeks of these men: and the many evidences they furnished of their enjoying this meal with a wonderful relish." Once again, Redburn's attention is drawn most directly to an experience of hunger, in this case one of satiation. "[T]hese men" are taking pleasure in their food in a way that Redburn seems incapable of experiencing for himself. Redburn stands out here

not just as a less fortunate outsider to British high society, but as an individual identified by his association with hunger or, more specifically, with the hunger that others are having fulfilled. Redburn's hunger is palpable yet disconcerting; he wants what they have but he struggles to see just how he may go about getting it.

Liverpool does not accommodate Redburn, nor is it a place where poverty of any kind seems destined to be ameliorated: "Poverty, poverty, poverty, in almost endless vistas: and want and woe staggered arm in arm along these miserable streets." In the midst of such suffering, Redburn's anxieties become more pronounced and noticeable. He begins to experience a similar sort of objectification that the impoverished people of the transatlantic world are themselves experiencing: "While thus standing, I all at once perceived, that the objects of my curiosity, were making me an object of their own; and that they were gazing at me, as if I were some unauthorized intruder upon the British soil" (ch. XLI). Becoming aware of himself as an "object" forces Redburn once again to suffer from *strange feeling*. He feels alienated in Liverpool, but this experience increases rather than diminishes his capacity for sympathy. In this case, his initial attention to this sumptuous meal turns almost immediately to an encounter with hunger and its most visceral form. While the satisfied Englishmen could seem to care less about Redburn's presence, the hungry poor around him force Redburn to feel that he, like them, is being watched. Thus, the witness of hunger comes to identify with its sufferers much more than with those who are satisfied.

As Redburn continues his transatlantic and inter-class encounter with the hungry, he compares Liverpool and New York, proclaiming "the humiliating fact" that the two cities share much in common as places with class discrepancies and "heartless-looking"

inhabitants. Redburn stands between the two places but cannot seem to handle his discomfort in witnessing the ubiquity of poverty as both cities contained large numbers of Famine emigrants. His *strange feeling* here includes a sense of ambivalence but is not itself ambivalent. In other words, Redburn is certain of his humiliation but unclear about why he feels humiliated. Such *strange feeling* is precisely the experience brought about by witnessing hunger. When Redburn, as an American, views hunger abroad, he cannot help but compare it to the suffering he has seen in his own country. His sympathy, then, is wrapped up in his nationalistic pride as well as his sense of disappointment that "we" Americans could be as culpable in permitting hunger as the English. Melville masterfully places his protagonist "in between," not unlike the Famine Irish whose circumstances forced them away from home yet who never completed an emotional disconnection from the land of their birth. The risk here, from a literary perspective, is that Melville's protagonist does not establish a connection to place that is often so essential to a character's development. However, it is this contradiction between Redburn's desire for connection and his inability to achieve it that sustains most of the novel's plot. Redburn's witnessing of hunger in Liverpool, along with his comparisons to the similar poverty experienced in New York, prompts him to identify not with either place, but rather with the *lack* in both places. It is, ultimately, hunger that fills Redburn's transatlantic world and that characterizes him most effectively.

Redburn further identifies with the impoverished because he is seen as such by the middle-class cabin passengers on board:

> They were certainly a cheerless set, and to me they all looked stony-eyed and heartless. I could not help it, I almost hated them; … but after dinner

> the few passengers, waked up with their roast-beef and mutton, became a little more sociable. Not with me, for the scent and savor of poverty was upon me, and they all cast toward me their evil eyes and cold suspicious glances, as I sat apart, though among them. I felt that desperation and recklessness of poverty which only a pauper knows. (chap. II)

Most noticeable in this chapter, entitled "Redburn's Departure From Home," is Redburn's visceral and rather extreme reaction to these passengers with whom one expects he would feel some sympathy. His claim that he "almost hated them" belies his fascination; it seems he doth protest too much. More importantly, Redburn's response redirects his expected sympathies for those of the "respectable" class to those on the margins. After watching the middle-class passengers enjoy their beef and mutton, Redburn begins to yearn for inclusion; he is made more aware of his body and begins to feel, and thus to know, what it is to be hungry. This epistemic breakthrough comes directly through his visceral experience of hunger. The telling phrase, "only a pauper knows," emphasizes Redburn's developing *strange feeling* for the hungry. Redburn does not simply hate these middle-class passengers; instead, he recognizes that they become "a little more sociable" after eating. This brief allowance for their sociability doesn't last, however, as Redburn grows increasingly reactionary. Juxtaposed to the ambivalence of words like "almost" and "a little," Melville's narrator becomes more confident in his dissociation. Not some but "all" of the cabin passengers come to view Redburn with derision. They are "suspicious" of him, and he reacts with equal scorn: "however it was, I cherished a feeling toward these cabin-passengers: not at all: but only because they seemed the most finical, miserly, mean men and women, that ever stepped over the

Atlantic." Redburn's reaction here, however personal, is also indicative of something much more social. He has made a decision about where he stands in relation to the wealthy Americans and others he had been conditioned to admire; he is now "apart, though among" them. As a seaman, Redburn now identifies more with the passengers in steerage rather than with those in the cabin. However, his antipathy is not merely natural; it comes instead out of his personal experience and cultural observation. Redburn must come to grips with broader issues of social responsibility before dealing with his own specific circumstances. His experience at sea thus far has helped Redburn recognize the pretensions of class that were more difficult to determine at home. Moreover, Melville uses this passage as a way to move Redburn away from class-based preoccupations towards more direct engagement with the plight of the poor. Although this is still early in the novel, one can read here the seeds of sympathy from which Redburn's emotive capacity will grow. Through *strange feeling*, Redburn comes to understand what "only a pauper knows." His is an epistemology of hunger.

As this scene demonstrates, hunger serves as a precursor to Redburn's intellectual and emotional growth. As his voyage continues, Redburn becomes even more frustrated with the pretensions of the fifteen or so cabin-passengers on board the *Highlander*, and he begins to resent their requests for special treatment: "to protect this detachment of gentility from the barbarian incursions of the 'wild Irish' emigrants, ropes were passed athwart-ships, by the main-mast, from side to side … the cabin-passengers themselves were the most urgent in having this regulation maintained" (ch. XLVII). Subtly but discernibly, Redburn passes judgment upon the wealthier passengers aboard ship for thinking themselves better than the rest. Thus, he continues to identify with the poor Irish

passengers and others suffering from maltreatment. In several passages throughout the novel, Redburn also speaks profusely about his own hunger, which unites him with impoverished classes. In one telling scene from chapter V, the night before his ship was set to sail, Redburn decides to spend the night on shore. He chooses a "mean liquor shop" as his bed "for fear of being driven out" from a more respectable institution. He says: "Here I sat till I began to feel very hungry; and seeing some doughnuts on the counter, I began to think what a fool I had been, to throw away my last penny … I never saw doughnuts look so enticing before; especially when a negro came in, and ate one before my eyes." This passage reveals Redburn's reluctant investment in hunger; whereas he initially seems to desire the privileges of middle-class life, his hunger leads him to reject such desires and engage directly with those in need. When the "negro" eats a doughnut, Redburn wants one too; thus, through this basic bodily desire for food, Redburn recognizes his shared interests with his shipmates and others suffering with hunger. In witnessing another person's hunger, Redburn realizes his own. Because he sees another's wants, he wants more for himself. While he still struggles for some time to admit his needs, saying, "I could not bring myself to confess that I was suffering for want of food" (chapter VI), he slowly allows himself to want outwardly what he truly craves inwardly. Redburn's honesty after the fact is indicative of his character development as well as Melville's skillful use of irony. After all, what, exactly, are Redburn's innermost desires? If it is true that he "never" wanted doughnuts so much in his life, why is his desire amplified "especially" when a black man eats in front of him? This passage and others like it suggest that Redburn's hunger depends upon the hunger of others, and those

"others" with whom he identifies most specifically and fully include the black sailors and Irish emigrants around him.

The racial implications of this passage, particularly how Melville's use of "negro" characters connects to his depictions of the Famine Irish, deserve further consideration. Among the better-known writers of his time, Melville stood out for his ability to push beyond racial stereotypes. In the late 1840s and early 1850s, Melville moved towards an egalitarian and progressive view of racialized others. The black characters he represents in *Redburn* are not caricatured and one could read the text without applying racialized determinations to them. Arguably, it is less important in *Redburn* how one looks than it is how he or she feels. To see and feel is to come closer to knowing. The fact that the "negro" desires a doughnut, like almost anyone would, is more important than the fact that he's a "negro." For Redburn, hunger is a human condition that unites different people through the shared experience of desire; it is almost contagious in its ability to affect both those who experience it and those who come close to its experience. *Redburn* accomplishes what few texts of the time could: it forces Americans to question their presuppositions about the impoverished inhabitants of the transatlantic world. Through Redburn, Melville does not simply observe the facts of poverty in Liverpool; rather, he opens up ways of reviewing such poverty that begin to deconstruct elements of mainstream American attitudes towards blacks and Irish.

But race remains a fascinating and frustrating category for Melville as he weaves together the story of *Redburn*. As much as Melville is aware of his American readers and their stereotypical expectations, he is also willing to call those expectations into question

through Redburn's ingenuous observations about England and his forthright comparisons to the United States:

> And here, I must not omit one thing, that struck me at the time. It was the absence of negroes; who in the large towns in the "free states" of America, almost always form a considerable portion of the destitute. But in these streets, not a negro was to be seen. All were whites; and with the exception of the Irish, were natives of the soil … This conveyed a strange feeling: and more than any thing else, reminded me that I was not in my own land. For there, such a being as a native beggar is almost unknown; and to be born American citizen seems a guarantee against pauperism.

Instead of allowing his American audiences to assume his tacit support of their patriotic yet racist expectations, Melville, through Redburn, initiates a feeling that American (white male) exceptionalism is hardly what it claims. It is clear that poverty is not the reserve of the slave; although Liverpool is free of the overtly racist class hierarchy that so defines the United States, it suffers with similar poverty and hunger. Likewise, although this passage seems to reinforce the idea that American citizenship provides some sort of protection against poverty, Melville reserves room for caution: such safeguards are "almost unknown" and thus only *seem* to protect against a descent into poverty. Unlike the "negroes" Redburn does not find on the streets of Liverpool, the Irish fall into a space of *strange feeling*. Like most blacks, they are "native" neither in England nor America. While considered "whites," the Irish are juxtaposed with American blacks as stereotypical victims of poverty. In this case, hunger combines with race to prompt Redburn's *strange feeling*, which remains a useful phrase for precisely this sort of

alienating, uncanny encounter with poverty. Because Redburn does not witness the presence of "negroes" in Liverpool, he becomes more aware of his own alienation. Ironically, the presence of hungry, white, mostly Irish beggars makes him feel that much more at home.

Redburn goes on to acknowledge his own progress away from a mainstream American worldview towards a wiser, albeit subtle critical stance against American racism:

> Being so young and inexperienced then, and unconsciously swayed in some degree by those local and social prejudices, that are the marring of most men, and from which, for the mass, there seems no possible escape; at first I was surprised that a colored man should be treated as he is in this town; but a little reflection showed that, after all, it was but recognizing his claims to humanity and normal equality; so that, in some things, we Americans leave to other countries the carrying out of the principle that stands at the head of our Declaration of Independence.

Here, Melville (through Redburn) critiques the democratic pretensions of American culture. In Liverpool, the "colored" population is seemingly treated better than the Irish, and real egalitarianism that disregards race seems possible. This surprises Redburn but also prompts him to construct a political critique of American hypocrisy. After only "a little reflection," Redburn revises his notions of race and class; thus, Melville criticizes not only his country, but also his common reader. One cannot read *Redburn* without acknowledging its sophisticated representations of poverty and its conscious call for social awakening. Redburn's experiences lead not only to his sympathy for the poor and

hungry, but also to his larger critique of American racism and xenophobia. It is not that *Redburn* is merely didactic or sentimental; rather, it is a realistic and deliberate exposé of transatlantic poverty that emphasizes both the capacities and limitations of sympathy to effect social change. Moreover, the novel does not simplify questions of social justice; instead, it makes known the myriad difficulties of achieving such justice given the racial restrictions of American society. In Liverpool at least, *strange feeling* can lead to some recognition of political and social responsibility, but such progress remains unfortunately slow in the United States.

As in his other texts dealing with questions of social justice, Melville does not provide simple solutions to problems of social and cultural import in *Redburn*. Instead, he lets his narrator speak for himself. The point of the novel is not to see poverty and race only in specific settings or among particular populations; rather, the message is one of universality: poverty is something that occurs anywhere and everywhere, and those Americans who think otherwise must revise their ways of thinking to accommodate uncomfortable social truths. As Redburn's voyage continues and he becomes more self-reflective, Melville makes room for a real transformation in his character's social conscience precisely through his appreciation of aesthetic beauty. Redburn's first sight of Ireland infuses him with purple prose exemplary of his fascination: "Ireland in sight! … what, exactly, I had fancied the shore would look like, I can not say; but I had a vague idea that it would be something strange and wonderful." Thus, the strangeness of Ireland becomes something "wonderful" for Redburn, so much so that he is "astonished" to find that "one of the seamen, a remarkably robust and good-humored young man from Belfast in Ireland, was a person of no mark or influence among the crew; but on the contrary was

hooted at, and trampled upon, and made a butt and laughing-stock." This passage from chapter XII further emphasizes Melville's connections between hunger and the Irish. As Redburn becomes more aware of his hunger, he also makes connections to his shipmates and others marginalized by poverty. Interestingly, Redburn considers it remarkable that an Irishman could be "robust," thus betraying a common assumption before and during the Famine that almost all Irish people were starving. He goes on to consider the complexities of the Irish experience, spread as it was around the transatlantic world in the antebellum era:

> When I thought of the multitudes of Irish that annually land on the shores of the United States and Canada … and when, added to all this, I daily saw these hordes of laborers, descending, thick as locusts, upon the English corn-fields; I could not help marveling at the fertility of an island, which, though her crop of potatoes may fail, never yet failed in bringing her annual crop of men into the world. (ch. XL)

Redburn's fascination here is typical but profound. Like many Americans of the period, he initially thinks of the Irish Famine from a Malthusian perspective that overemphasizes the impact of population. However, he also praises Irish persistence and celebrates their resolve in an era otherwise marked by bigotry and blame. In another example of his evolving *strange feeling* for "the poor emigrants," Redburn includes a substantial meta-narrative regarding the realities of commerce in the transatlantic world. More specifically, hunger becomes the keystone that holds together Melville's evolving concerns with class. Hunger in *Redburn* is the product of people; they are responsible for both its existence and its amelioration. In chapter XLVII, entitled "Homeward Bound,"

Redburn laments the practice of "unprincipled agents" who "do not scruple to deceive the poor applicants for passage," which "often induces the emigrants to provide a much smaller stock of provisions than they otherwise would." Thus, Redburn once again comes to sympathize with hungry immigrants whose only crimes are gullibility and unpreparedness; meanwhile, he chastises those who would capitalize upon others' material poverty and cultural naïveté. Although there are instances in which Redburn's own condescension shows through—for instance, he once refers to the Irish as "the most simple people I had ever seen"—he maintains a forthright and respectful stance towards the "nonresponsible" emigrants (and an antagonistic attitude towards most middle-class characters) throughout much of the novel.

Redburn's interest in the Irish on board the *Highlander* stems most directly from his concerns about their hunger or, more specifically, their difficulty accessing food. He comments regularly on their cooking accommodations and eating habits. Additional encounters aboard ship also influence Redburn to acknowledge the strength of his sympathies for others like the Irish. Although at times he seems to fear those that are hungry, he eventually comes to appreciate the common bonds he shares with shipmates and passengers alike. In the tellingly titled chapter LVII, "Almost a Famine," Redburn offers another glimpse of his *strange feeling*, which once again includes anxiety related to hunger. After many days at sea, the ship's stocks were running low and passengers were complaining of food scarcity. Each passenger, "whose destitution was demonstrable," was to be given a biscuit and two potatoes daily,

> But this scanty ration was quite insufficient to satisfy their hunger: hardly enough to satisfy the necessities of a healthy adult. The consequence was,

> that all day long, and all through the night, scores of the emigrants went about the decks, seeking what they might devour. They plundered the chicken-coop … They made inroads upon the pig-pen in the boat, and carried off a promising young shoat: him they devoured raw, not venturing to make an incognito of his carcass … they beset the sailors, like beggars in the streets, craving a mouthful in the name of the Church.

These emigrants are hungry and angry, and Redburn is afraid yet fascinated. Melville's choice of the pronoun "they" conveys an uncomfortable disconnect from the emigrants' actions. No longer is Redburn able to observe the hungry from afar; their hunger is visible and they don't care that he sees. One is reminded here of Redburn's foreignness, or, more specifically, his Americanness. He seems to view these "emigrants" from a place of condescension; however, he places the blame for their unruly, violent behavior at the feet of the ship's authority who provided such "scanty ration." Once again, Redburn's experience as an object of another's gaze initiates him into the process of *strange feeling*, which moves from witnessing, to feeling, to knowing what it is like to suffer. Hunger is a trigger not only for *strange feeling*, but also for direct action. He goes on to describe an unforgettable scene involving a "pale, ragged man," his wife, and their children, who "conjured him not to desert them." In passages like these, Redburn struggles to breach the class divide between himself and the impoverished people around him. The *strange feeling* he experiences is both sympathetic and fearful; likewise, it prompts readers to recognize the very real and present experiences of hunger all around them.

Slowly but surely, Redburn moves away from reductive description and frightened narration towards a more socially engaged subject position. Here, the political

possibilities of *Redburn* begin asserting themselves. Through his experience with the violence of hunger, Redburn comes to recognize the profound social effects and personal impact of poverty upon even the most admirable people:

> Nor did a single day pass, but scores of the poor people got no chance whatever to do their cooking. This was bad enough; but it was a still more miserable thing, to see these poor emigrants wrangling and fighting for the want of the most ordinary accommodations. But thus it is, that the very hardships to which such beings are subjected, instead of uniting them, only tends [*sic*], by imbittering their tempers, to set them against each other; and thus they themselves drive the strongest rivet into the chain, by which their social superiors hold them subject.

Here one sees not reductive ambivalence about the causes of hunger, but honest and harsh narration about its debilitating effects. Hunger causes bitterness beyond the ordinary hardships of poverty, and it leads not only to failed solidarity but also to inexorable objectification. Redburn does not simply espouse sympathy for the poor; instead, he questions who is responsible for their hardships. He also recognizes the limitations placed upon their agency by the "social superiors" upon whom they depend. Moreover, while he positions himself as an observer of the poor, his interactions with them and experiences of their hunger lead him to make a call for political action; thus, he engages wholeheartedly in the issues of his day, and he stands in support of Irish immigration, which few Americans were willing to do before, during or after the Famine. As Melville writes, "Let us waive that agitated national topic, as to whether such multitudes of foreign poor should be landed on our American shores; let us waive it, with

the one only thought, that if they can get here, they have God's right to come; though they bring all Ireland and her miseries with them." In lines like these, *Redburn* exemplifies the power of literature to solicit real change in the political arena. Melville's words, though written through the voice of his flawed character Redburn, ring loud and true with real emotion and political implications far beyond the reach of the novel. He says outright what has been implied all along: that the Irish and other immigrants seeking asylum on American shores deserve acceptance, if not citizenship, upon their arrival in the United States. However, even though Melville advocates specifically for immigration reform and for a broader acceptance of the rights of "transatlantic citizens," some signs of ambivalence and doubt remain. The phrase "if they can get here" reminds one of just how costly and rife with danger is the journey that would take the Irish across the Atlantic.

Aside from such geographical considerations, Redburn's political opinions seem to rest on religious and cultural grounds. His attitudes about immigration, a controversial topic in nineteenth-century America as it is today, portray a narrator (and his author) very much aware of the facts on the ground. In the late 1840s, "'Irish' … became synonymous with a disloyal 'Catholic' at home and abroad … Religion, not national origin or social class, now determined who was Irish in the New World" (Nolan). Thus, when the beggars in *Redburn* crave 'a mouthful in the name of the Church,' they are doing so as Catholics. For typical nativists like Lyman Beecher, fear of papist infiltration would trump any questions of social responsibility. Not so for Melville, however, whose capacity for sympathy, particularly for those suffering from hunger, challenges his era's racial and religious prejudices. For Melville and for Redburn, the Famine Irish "have God's right to come" to America, and the hunger that they bring with them should be

seen not as a reason to reject them, but to accept them. Such a call for action deserves special admiration given the fact that it was made during a time in which violence and fear-mongering held considerable sway in much of the transatlantic world.

Perhaps the most memorable and violent fear-monger among the *Highlander* crew is Jackson, who "was a near relation of General Jackson of New Orleans" (chap. XI). Jackson "seemed to be full of hatred and gall against every thing and every body," and Redburn admits, "Sometimes I thought he was really crazy." More interesting than Jackson's personality, however, is the way in which Redburn makes room to understand him. Jackson is known among the men as a threatening yet knowledgeable and even trustworthy sailor. He is identified as an Irish-American, yet he is not religious (neither Protestant nor Catholic), nor does he sympathize with any emigrants or Irish on board ship. "According to his own account," says Redburn,

> [Jackson] had passed through every kind of dissipation and abandonment in the worst parts of the world … *he* was being consumed by an incurable malady, that was eating up his vitals, and was more fit for a hospital than a ship … I noticed, that those who did the most for him, and cringed the most before him, were the very ones he most abused. (chap. XI; Melville's *emphasis*)

Once again, Melville's characterization here depends upon hunger imagery and its connection to *strange feeling*. Although Jackson is neither hungry nor sympathetic, Redburn's relationship with him is invested in both aspects of his humanity. Jackson is a specific example of what hunger can do to any attempts at achieving social justice. Jackson is "being consumed" and Redburn seems to be the only one who knows and

cares about what is "eating up" Jackson's "vitals." "Every day this Jackson seemed to grow worse and worse, both in body and mind," says Redburn, "But there seemed even more woe than wickedness about the man … for all his hideousness, there was that in his eye at times, that was ineffably pitiable and touching; and though there were moments when I almost hated this Jackson, yet I have pitied no man as I have pitied him" (chap. XXII). Here, Redburn's pity is so singular as to belie itself; pity is simply insufficient to express the deeper emotions Redburn experiences in regard to Jackson. Melville deliberately reserves room for *strange feeling* towards this complex character. Jackson, who is also compared to "a devil who had lost his appetite" (chap. LXII), is a sympathetic figure principally because of Melville's uses of hunger imagery. Redburn does not want to lose his appetite like Jackson seems to have done; through Jackson, he realizes the importance of staying hungry. Jackson serves for Redburn (and for Melville) as a source of personal growth and social conscience. Thus, even though Jackson is a roguish sailor who may have deserved his unfortunate fate—he falls overboard during a storm—he is also a key component in Melville's motif of hunger, and he plays a linking role in setting up the novel's overarching messages of sympathy and solidarity among the sailors and others both aboard the *Highlander* and within the cities visited by Redburn. Jackson himself "was being consumed," and his hunger most directly connects him to the experience of *strange feeling* that is so important to Melville's related concerns with sympathy and social justice.

Although questions remain about the authenticity and political viability of Redburn's concern for the poor, it is his engagement with hunger in its most striking form that prompts the most heartfelt feeling from Melville's narrator. In chapter XXXVII,

Redburn wanders the dirty streets of Liverpool, specifically "a narrow street called 'Launcelott's-Hey,'" and encounters "the figure of what had been a woman," later named "Betsy Jennings," along with her daughters, "two shrunken things like children," and a "meager little babe." After imploring neighbors for information and assistance, Redburn meets fierce resistance; it seems that the English don't want any Yankees doing their dirty work for them. Although no motives for their attitudes are given, this depiction of English mores seems to fit Melville's rather unromantic notion of England as a place ill-suited to any sort of sympathy towards the hungry. The scourge of racism doesn't appear in Britain as it does in the United States, but prejudice against the poor is a truly transatlantic phenomenon in *Redburn*. Finally, after several attempts, Redburn succeeds in obtaining some bread and cheese for the four, and he lowers the food down to them in the vault that is their makeshift shelter. His description of the ensuing events displays the culmination of Redburn's development from an eager, yet frightened American sailor to a concerned, if not yet fully compassionate transatlantic citizen. Although he is not de-nationalized, Redburn's sympathetic reaction to this tragedy emphasizes his developing idea of democracy. In Redburn's maturing mind, poverty and hunger need to be actively combated on both sides of the Atlantic.

Once again, Melville's choice of diction for his narrator reveals their shared sympathies: "The woman refusing to speak, eat, or drink, I asked one of the girls who they were, and where they lived; but she only stared vacantly, muttering something that could not be understood." Here, although the voices of these unfortunates are not heard, one is left to make the educated guess that they are Irish Famine victims, thus invoking the traditional notion of the Famine as a harbinger of silence. Were it audible, the

"something" spoken by the girl could very well have been Irish, understood by few outside Ireland but commonly spoken among Famine emigrants, many of whom would have gone through Liverpool on their way to the United States or elsewhere. Many immigrants who were able to leave Ireland were neither able to return nor could they afford the longer, more expensive transatlantic voyage. As Kerby Miller notes, "Between 1845 and 1855 several hundred thousand of the most destitute Irish—'bringing pestilence on their backs, famine in their stomachs'—inundated British ports and settled permanently in the working-class slums and cellars of Glasgow, Liverpool, London, and other cities" (294-295). Likewise, the woman's refusal could represent a protest about the inadequacy of Redburn's charity. If they were Irish, an occasional handout from an American sailor would hardly be enough to sustain these family members in a nation unwilling to recognize their full rights as citizens. Although one cannot be certain of these victims' country (or county) of origin, Melville offers too many clues to ignore throughout *Redburn*. The narrator's fascination with Ireland, along with his sustained engagement with the poor and hungry, leads one to link the Famine with the hunger imagery used in the novel. The poignancy of this passage, then, is that it implicitly connects the objects of Redburn's sympathy with actual victims of the Great Hunger.

This does not mean, however, that Redburn is fully compassionate towards these impoverished figures. "I crawled up into the street," writes Redburn, "and looking down upon them again, almost repented that I had brought them any food; for it would only tend to prolong their misery." Here again is an example of how *strange feeling* suits Redburn's experiences. He pities this starving family but remains ambivalent about sympathizing more fully with them because he recognizes its potential to do more harm

than good. His attitude here appears disturbingly similar to that of Charles Trevelyan, the most senior figure at Her Majesty's Treasury during the Famine years, whose agenda included teaching the Irish "'to depend upon themselves'" (qtd. in Gray 40) and who "seemed more concerned that charity might demoralize the Irish than that starvation might kill them" (Miller 283). Redburn goes on to consider the unthinkable by 19th-century standards, if not 21st: "an almost irresistible impulse to do them the last mercy, of in some way putting an end to their horrible lives" (ch. XXXVII). Euthanasia, of all solutions, comes out of Redburn's reasoning. Distrustful of the law, he seriously considers stepping in to help these victims not out of their terrible circumstances, but into the afterlife. Utilitarian or moralistic judgments aside, one cannot but be affected by such narration; Melville successfully balances any simplistic and sentimental pleas for sympathy with a socially conscious, sometimes extreme form of realism. Compassion alone cannot shelter Redburn from an engagement with hunger. Just because Redburn cares so deeply for these likely Famine victims does not mean that he can do anything for them, nor even that he will. Thus, Melville critiques the social, legal, and moral restraints that would prevent any real assistance for the poor. While Redburn looks "down upon them again," his decision to feed them, even though he "almost repented" it, provides another instance of *strange feeling*. Redburn sees now how he is helping to perpetuate suffering through the very act of wanting to help end it. The answer to this dilemma, of course, is not to excuse such suffering; rather, by emphasizing the terrible end for these victims, Melville condemns any simplistic form of charity which may only lengthen their suffering. He does not condone the perspective of a figure like Trevelyan, but he is also careful not to dismiss such perspectives as inhumane or even monstrous. Through

Redburn, Melville recognizes the risks and pretensions of charity and philanthropy. He does not oversimplify the problem for theoretical purposes but complicates it in a way that makes it more memorable and open to potential political solution. He recognizes both the possibilities and the pitfalls of *strange feeling*.

Although Redburn is not able to effect any real change in the lives of the poor he encounters, he does give his audience ample food for thought. At the end of chapter XXXVII, Redburn returns to the vault on Laucelott's-Hey, at first finding it empty: "In place of the women and children, a heap of quick-lime was glistening … my prayer was answered—they were dead, departed, and at peace." Redburn's reaction here is less one of expectation than acceptance. He cares enough to inquire after the women and children even after all those he implored for help turned their heads. Melville could have stopped here and had Redburn move on from this scene with his sense of self-righteousness intact; instead, Melville has Redburn witness a horror that makes him question the very foundations of Christian charity and social responsibility:

> But again I looked down into the vault, and in fancy beheld the pale, shrunken forms still crouching there. Ah! what are our creeds, and how do we hope to be saved? … Surrounded as we are by the wants and woes of our fellowmen, and yet given to follow our own pleasures, regardless of their pains, are we not like people sitting up with a corpse, and making merry in the house of the dead?

In this most famous passage from *Redburn*, Melville captures his character/narrator's coming of age as a self-aware and socially conscious human being. He is not only appalled by the wretched poverty around him, but is also eager to question the morality of

a transatlantic world that could let such suffering happen. Even though this scene takes place in England, the "we" in this passage seems intended to mean "Americans." However, as an American, Redburn does not consider it his work to do much more at this point than to continue his narration. As much as he sympathizes with those he meets, his role is little more than curious observer. Redburn operates at times more as a transatlantic witness than as a concerned citizen. "Roving about hither and thither," Redburn represents a typical middle-class American, sympathetic to suffering but more concerned with his own social mobility. As he tells himself in chapter XLIII, "Can't beg your way, Wellingborough; that would never do; for you are your father's son, Wellingborough; and you must not disgrace your family in a foreign land; you must not turn pauper." Such self-interest and fear for his social status seem to belie any genuine sympathy Redburn shares for the plights of others, but one can justifiably read this expression of *strange feeling* as evidence that Redburn's relationships with the impoverished and hungry people around him have affected his personal psychology and piqued his social conscience. He has come to establish his own epistemology of hunger through which he bases his judgments of others. He condemns middle-class Americans and British as "people sitting up with a corpse" while "the dead" around him include Irish emigrants and others suffering from hunger. He has become so close to the hungry that he fears becoming just like them, yet he admires them nonetheless. Melville not only is able to see the starving around him, but also is willing to call for their assistance amidst a society predisposed to ignore the plight of others in favor of its own interests. *Redburn* refuses to allow the hungry to go unseen, and it asks us to ask ourselves as Americans who we are and where our real sympathies lie. *Redburn*'s representations of hunger prompt readers to

engage in *strange feeling* and thus to consider alternate ways of approaching seemingly intractable social problems like hunger.

Although few would dispute that *Redburn* ends on a rather hasty note, no analysis of the text should ignore the closing chapters, especially Redburn's relationship with his English friend Harry Bolton. To complete an argument regarding the impact of hunger upon Redburn's social conscience, one must include consideration of Harry, who "kidnaps" Redburn for a silly, surrealistic side-trip to London and dies after joining an ill-fated whaling expedition. Unlike the Famine Irish and other impoverished poor whom Redburn encounters during his voyage, Harry is ostensibly free from hunger. A "handsome, accomplished, but unfortunate youth," Harry Bolton is every bit the dandy, and Redburn is charmed by "this incontrovertible son of a gentleman" (chapter XLIV). However, even Redburn has suspicions about Harry's checkered past and "never could entirely digest some of [Harry's] imperial reminiscences of high life" (chapter XLIV). Lines like this employ the sort of gastronomical terminology with which much of *Redburn* consists; hunger is always menacing in the background of the text no matter its surface concerns. Redburn's anxiety about Harry—along with Harry's anxieties about food—serves as a fitting example of what it is like to be part of a precarious middle class in America. Likewise, the novel's seemingly incomplete conclusion serves as a fitting metaphor for the dynamic, developing relationships of the transatlantic world. As an Englishman, Harry seems right at home during their jaunt through London, but his place on board the *Highlander* is questionable at best. As Redburn recalls, the other sailors "maintained toward my friend [Harry] a cold and unsympathizing civility" (ch. L). Only Redburn himself seems capable of caring for Harry. Upon arrival in the United States,

Harry succumbs to his own anxiety, as Redburn narrates in chapter LXI: "Left to himself [in New York], the strange streets seemed now to have reminded him [Harry] of his friendless condition; and I found him with a very sad eye; and his right hand groping in his pocket. 'Where am I going to dine, this day week?' he slowly said. 'What's to be done, Wellingborough?'" In such questions, one can read the multiple anxieties on display in *Redburn*; Harry's Englishness supposedly entitles him to special favor in the transatlantic world, but even he is susceptible to worry about hunger and other uncomfortable realities. It is as if anxiety about hunger on the American side of the Atlantic has supplanted actual hunger from the English/Irish side.

Although his experience with poverty is not immediate like that of others in the novel, Harry's emotional hunger is both debilitating and pathetic. His sufferings are meant to elicit sympathy, and although *Redburn* ends abruptly and mysteriously, Harry's death complements the novel's overarching concerns with hunger. Compassion cannot save Harry from his unfortunate fate, nor can any simplistic sense of sympathy improve the lives of hungry Irish immigrants. Instead, readers are left with *strange feeling*, which depends upon readers' interpretations and actions to achieve any lasting social impact. Through his encounters with the starving poor in Liverpool and the emaciated emigrants on board the *Highlander*, Redburn learns the real value of *strange feeling* even before he hears of Harry's downfall. Ultimately, Redburn's treatment of Harry, which is initially awkward and becomes rather paternalistic, cannot be separated from his *strange feeling* for the hungry. Redburn realizes that Harry's anxiety about hunger is sad yet insignificant when compared to the real suffering of the Famine Irish and others in the transatlantic world.

"But yet I, Wellingborough Redburn, chance to survive, after having passed through far more perilous scenes than any narrated in this"; thus ends Melville's memorable narrative of transatlantic travel. His story cannot be simply defined as a coming-of-age tale as Redburn undergoes his experiences of *strange feeling*. Amidst his superficial sentimentality, Redburn displays cognitive development; in fact, the affective outcomes of Redburn's experience matter most of all. He comes to know what hunger is supposed to feel like. Through *Redburn*, Melville recognizes the universal impact of poverty and successfully complicates his readers' conceptions of hunger and sympathy across the transatlantic world. For Melville, to know hunger is to understand the possibilities and limitations of sympathy across categories of culture and race, fiction and reality, Irish and American. Knowing hunger requires traversing of borders, national and personal; hunger touches all either through physical actuality or psychological anxiety. One can read *Redburn* as a romantic, didactic, or realist text, but one cannot dismiss its thorough engagement with concerns of social justice. Among the central issues of his time, the Irish Famine sits as the unseen specter in several of Melville's popular works. *Redburn*, in particular, offers a lesson in what it means to be hungry (and to witness hunger) within and beyond antebellum American literature and culture. The *strange feeling* expressed in *Redburn* unites Melville's specific concerns with the Irish to his broader interrogation of American ideology.

To Eat or Not to Eat … That is the Irish-American Question

If Sacvan Bercovitch is correct in asserting that ideology has a "capacity to conserve and acculturate, and in that process to mask the mechanisms of constraint and

incorporation," then hunger can do much the same. Whatever one does not eat is conserved and left for another to consume; one's hunger feeds another's satiety. To acculturate in the United States, an immigrant must prove him or herself figuratively hungry enough (but not too hungry) for inclusion in the "process." Likewise, hunger can be seen as both "constraint and incorporation"; to go hungry is to be constrained by forces outside of one's control, yet such control can be asserted through one's own agency. To become incorporated into American culture, then, one must prove one's ability both to consume and to refrain from consuming. The Irish did this. Through their experience of the Famine and the hunger it brought on, the Irish proved their "capacity to conserve and acculturate." Although Melville would not have thought in such terms, his view of the Irish is comparable to Bercovitch's assertions about American ideology. The most effective phrase through which to label Melville's perspective on the Famine Irish and his sympathy for them is *strange feeling*. Such *strange feeling* is precisely what readers are left with after reading *Redburn* and reviewing Melville's uses of hunger. His texts do not promise more than they can deliver. Through his socially-conscious writing, Melville investigates the potential of narrative sympathy to activate social action, and although sympathy ultimately comes up short, this is not to say that Melville fails to achieve his ends. In fact, Melville's aim is precise: through his uses of hunger imagery in *Redburn*, Melville conveys his specific concern for the Irish. The Famine Irish allow Melville to develop his motif of hunger, which is itself a consequence of modern transatlantic civilization. While one cannot completely pin down Melville's personal stance towards the social and political realities of Irish Famine immigration, one can witness within his texts (and among elements of his biography) several examples of

strange feeling for the Irish and others suffering from hunger. Ultimately, hunger offers a framework for Melville's investigation into the problems of American ideology, which he deconstructs in several of his later works, and his concern for the Irish is essential to its success. The pages that follow seek to show how Melville's imagery of hunger, as best expressed in *Redburn*'s depiction of the Famine Irish, has repercussions in some of his better known works, including "Bartleby, the Scrivener," *The Confidence-Man*, and *Moby-Dick*, which will be discussed thematically (not chronologically) in order to emphasize the development of Melville's *strange feeling*.

Melville's interests in the Irish extend even beyond his professional life. Herman's brother, Gansevoort Melville, responded passionately to transatlantic calls for Irish freedom in the 1830s and 1840s, and it is possible that Herman was influenced to take an interest in the Irish due to his brother's leadership. "[R]egardless of the fact that he and his family had no special interest in Ireland" (Parker 318), Gansevoort made a name for himself as a spectacular orator and "a hero to the New York Irish" (319). In one memorable speech from September 1843, Gansevoort proclaimed his support for Irish independence and repeal of the 1801 Act of Union with Great Britain:

> And now, when we turn to Ireland itself, what eye is there that does not sparkle? … Ireland has just toiled from out the Valley of the Shadow of Death. The sunshine is around her and upon her … and the shining city is in full view. That shining city is Repeal—the total repeal of the miscalled, tyrannical, and accursed union between Great Britain and Ireland. (qtd. in Parker 319)

While Herman himself may have been unconvinced by such rhetoric, Gansevoort's popularity as a budding politician, who "had first made the cause of the 'butchered, martyred' Irish his own" (Rogin 55), certainly left its mark on his younger brother. It is not that Herman aspired to be an advocate for his brother's particular issues, which included support for American expansionism as well as Irish independence, but it is probable that Gansevoort's popularity among Irish Americans was acknowledged, if not envied, by his brother. As Rogin writes, "Gansevoort Melville demanded the political emancipation of Irish and Americans. He spoke for a united nationalist democracy … His people were an abstraction, invoked in the service of imperialism." Herman Melville, on the other hand, "saw the actual condition of working sailors above deck, diseased, starving emigrants below, and beggars ashore. His Irish and other immigrant poor raised the social question" (Rogin 70). Going further, one could say that *Redburn* not only raises "the social question," but also offers insightful answers about the Famine Irish and about the ways one views hunger as an element of the immigrant experience. Unlike his initially more popular brother, Herman sought to explore such political and social concerns through the medium of literature.

Melville's famous desire for adventure may also go some way to explain his fascination with the Irish in the antebellum era. Known as the "man who lived among the cannibals," Melville capitalized on his access to the exotic in early novels like *Typee* and *Omoo*. His experiences as a sailor in the South Seas not only fed his early fiction but also linked him indelibly to hunger and its related phenomena of cannibalism and violence. Melville's early representations of exoticism, especially his depictions of cannibals, serve as initial experiments with the *strange feeling* that would become explicit in *Redburn*. As

Mitchell Breitwieser contends, "Cannibalism's power to shock involves more than a reminder of mortality. … Rather, cannibalism reminds one that one is meat … that individuality is a mirage … and that cannibalism expresses only unrestrained hunger." Time and again in his novels of the South Seas, Melville's protagonists—specifically Tommo in *Typee* and Paul in *Omoo*—are confronted with hunger in its most savage form. Their experiences change them from relatively naïve Westerners into more worldly and socially aware individuals. Tommo, through his engagement with savage cannibals and the hunger that they embody, develops a deeper understanding of self. As witnesses to hunger, Tommo and Paul recognize themselves both as potential victims and as essential threats. They come to realize that hunger is not a product of nature but a result of civilization, of which they themselves are members. Even in these early novels which were written before Melville's encounter with the Irish experience of hunger, he shows sympathy for those suffering from hunger and begins questioning what it means to witness hunger from a perspective of relative comfort and satiety.

The late 1840s were filled with stories of hunger and cannibalism—accounts of the infamous Donner-Party broke as early as 1847 (Crain 28)—and news about the Famine in Ireland included scenes of starvation and hunger-related disease.[6] As Crain writes, "What is disturbing about cannibals is not a matter of reason, but a matter of feeling" (34). Although cannibalism represents an extreme example of the possible repercussions brought about by famine, it is not unrelated to the rhetorical use of hunger as a means of soliciting sympathy. To borrow further from Crain (whose work goes on to

[6] Images of cannibalism—incidentally a favorite plot element of Melville's tales of sea travel—made an especially big impression upon American readers. "According to Keith Huntress, close to fifty compilations of shipwreck narratives were published in English between 1800 and 1849 … almost every one contains accounts of famine cannibalism" (Sanborn 40).

compare American perspectives on cannibalism and homosexuality), hunger sits uncomfortably "between identity and desire; between self and other; between what we want, what we want to be, and what we are" (34). One could look to Melville's *Typee*, *Omoo*, and even *Moby-Dick* as examples of texts in which the main character, each an exile in his own fashion, confronts hunger and, thereby, becomes more sympathetic to the reader.[7] Readers are excited by, if not obsessed with hunger, whether depicted in news of the Famine or in tales of cannibalism. Hunger, however it is presented and seen, says something important to and about those who view it. Whereas "cannibalism reminds one that one is meat … and that individuality is a mirage" (Breitwieser), hunger likewise sends a humanist message that we are simultaneously singular and universal in our bodily experience of the world.

In his early work, Melville opens up spaces for interpretation and sympathy through his engagement with hunger. Hunger is a key that opens doors of cultural interchange between sailors and savages, *bourgeoisie* and *proletariat*. Ultimately, hunger becomes a universalizing force for Melville. It is depicted as a by-product of civilization that deserves social and political remedy. "Of all the preposterous assumptions of humanity over humanity," Melville writes in the diptych "Poor Man's Pudding, Rich Man's Crumbs," "nothing exceeds most of the criticisms made on the habits of the poor by the well-housed, well-warmed, and well-fed." Melville invests himself in the discourse of hunger so that its impact upon American life and literature, even beyond national borders, can be better understood. As his political position develops, Melville's representations of hunger become even more individualized. In the most memorable

[7] As Crain puts it, "once Ishmael sees Queequeg is a cannibal—and not a belligerent drunk, a renegade, or a Satanist—he is willing to sleep with him" ("Lovers" 46).

example of "Bartleby, the Scrivener," Melville individualizes hunger so that its collective capacity can be better understood. One is left to question at the end of that tale whether or not Bartleby's starvation is deliberate and/or inevitable. Through Bartleby, Melville's *strange feeling* for others is prompted by and dependent upon hunger as a literary trope and historical reality. Sympathy with the poor and hungry is simply not sufficient for Melville. He is interested most earnestly in exploring the limits of sympathy and emphasizing its deceptive tendencies in order to advocate for real social change. Think of how much Bartleby accomplishes by doing nothing. It is through his investment in hunger and exhaustion of sympathy that Melville processes his own ambivalence about issues of social justice, as well as the charities which are supposed to address such issues.

In "Bartleby," hunger is an essential element in Melville's use of characterization. Moreover, hunger seems endemic to the entire workforce, including the legal clerks "Turkey," "Nippers," and "Ginger Nut." Such names signal not only Melville's investment in hunger and food imagery more generally, but also his willingness to parody the very foundations of that investment. Aside from Bartleby, the other workers in the story are humorously hungry. Turkey, whose very name hints at his character, "was apt to be altogether too energetic" and known to "gobble up" cakes provided by Ginger Nut (par. 6; par. 14). Meanwhile, Nippers, "a whiskered, sallow, and, upon the whole, rather piratical-looking young man," is considered "the victim of two evil powers—ambition and indigestion" (par. 11). These characters are hungry, yet, unlike Bartleby, they eat too much. As the narrator continues:

> there was something about Bartleby that not only strangely disarmed me, but in a wonderful manner touched and disconcerted me … He lives, then,

> on ginger-nuts, thought I; never eats a dinner, properly speaking; he must be a vegetarian then; but no; he never eats even vegetables, he eats nothing but ginger-nuts. (par. 52)

This concern for Bartleby comes down to a fragmentary consideration of his diet. The narrator is experiencing *strange feeling* based primarily in speculation about what Bartleby does (or does not) eat. Bartleby's hunger, then, becomes something that the narrator cannot accommodate; his *strange feeling* moves from "pity into repulsion" (par. 93). No matter his efforts, however, Bartleby will simply not go away, and the narrator turns to the law for assistance. Upon entering the "Halls of Justice," he and Bartleby are greeted by the aptly named "grub-man" or "Mr. Cutlets," to whom the narrator slips "some silver" and requests "the best dinner" for Bartleby. Following Bartleby's typical response of "'I prefer not,'" he says, "'I am unused to dinners'" (par. 235). Ultimately, one is left to read "Bartleby, the Scrivener" with the *strange feeling* that Bartleby's choice of starvation is neither deliberate nor inevitable. In preferring not to eat, he chooses to reject the limited choices placed in front of him. He "[l]ives without dining" in order to emphasize the subversive presence of hunger in antebellum America (par. 247).

This is not to say that Bartleby's story is sympathetic or sentimental, nor is the narrator really invested in caring about Bartleby. "Rather than console," writes Sheila Post-Lauria:

> this sudden, final retreat of the narrator disturbs. It points out the limitations of sentimentalism. … Melville demonstrates that his narrator's sentimental approach to narrative is a means of extracting himself from a highly challenging situation that would necessitate an ideological change,

something that this comfortable narrator is clearly unwilling to consider. (202)

A question remains, however, about precisely how much "ideological change" Melville himself is willing to consider. Some would read subversive (even anarchical) tendencies in a character like Bartleby, but there is little evidence that Melville would have advocated such revolutionary behavior. While one can admire Bartleby for his refusal to conform, one cannot deny that his decisions lead to a tragic and ineffective end. Bartleby starves to death because he will not eat. Moreover, Melville shows how the narrator's misunderstanding of Bartleby's hunger cues the hero's demise. One is left to ponder not only why Bartleby goes hungry, but also how and why the narrator contributes to his starvation. Sympathy and sentiment are not enough to save Bartleby, nor will they suffice to assist others, such as the Famine Irish, suffering from hunger.

As Melville moves away from *Redburn*'s particular representations of Irish immigrants, one can trace a negative progression of his hunger imagery in works like "Bartleby" and *The Confidence-Man*. These classic texts concern more than hunger, but such concerns can be better appreciated and understood through a reading that considers hunger as a key part of Melville's multicultural interests. Hunger, for Melville, is an essential element of civilization, which requires a simultaneous satisfaction and perpetuation of hunger in order to sustain itself. In other words, because hunger cannot be eradicated in Melville's conception of reality, it must be accommodated in his fiction. The Famine Irish were an especially impoverished and hungry group during the most productive years of Melville's literary output. Although this fact does not necessitate that Melville be sympathetic to them, it, combined with the existence of extensive hunger

imagery, leads one to conclude that the transatlantic phenomenon of the Famine factored into Melville's literary imagination and changed how he thought about sympathy and sentiment. His *strange feeling*, like that of his most important characters, is prompted by and dependent upon hunger as a literary trope and historical reality.

Poverty and hunger, Melville comes to realize, persist in part because the systems ostensibly intended to ameliorate them fail to tackle the root causes of social inequity. In chapter XXXIX of *The Confidence-Man*, subtitled "The Hypothetical Friends," Melville tackles this problem of ineffectual charity through the pseudo-Platonic dialogue between Frank and Charlie. After Frank asks for a loan of $100, Charlie, whose character may be based loosely on Nathaniel Hawthorne, questions the "friendliness" of such a loan, saying, "Look, Frank, a loan of money on interest is a sale of money on credit. … Few men in their senses, except operators, borrow money on interest, except upon a necessity akin to starvation." Here, once again, Melville employs a metaphor of hunger to exemplify a related social problem. As initiated in *Redburn* and continued through other texts, Melville regularly links his concern for social justice with the imagery of hunger. Although his characters like Charlie seem to approach such concerns with sarcasm, Melville is nonetheless serious in representing the complexities of charity in the face of suffering and want of all types. Hunger, however, remains the key element of his interrogation into the experience of *strange feeling* introduced in *Redburn* and reemphasized in subsequent texts. In *The Confidence-Man*, hunger is depicted almost entirely as a monetary phenomenon; to be hungry is to take unnecessary risks, and even to make foolish decisions, in the name of hope.

As the conversation in *The Confidence-Man* continues, the scene invokes *strange feeling* through Charlie's circuitous response to Frank's direct request for monetary assistance:

> "Help, help, Charlie, I want help!"
>
> "Help? to say nothing of the friend, there is something wrong about the man who wants help. There is somewhere a defect, a want, in brief, a need, a crying need, somewhere about that man."
>
> "So there is, Charlie.—Help, Help!"
>
> "How foolish a cry, when to implore help, is itself the proof of undesert of it."

Although one is left puzzled by how seriously to take Charlie's attitudes towards charity and money-lending, it is clear that he finds "something wrong about the man who wants help." His vagueness here falls into the category of *strange feeling*, in that he is describing precisely the experiences of witnessing suffering and feeling called upon to respond. Charlie's initial response is to speak in platitudes and to give nothing of substance away about his true feelings. Although he ostensibly denies Frank's request, Charlie then goes on to tell the story of China Aster, which exemplifies the problems of money-lending among friends. After the tale, Charlie asks Frank a serious of questions which once again rely on hunger imagery to achieve their effects: "And what more meddlesome between friends than a loan? … And creditor and friend, can they ever be one? … And were there nothing else, who shall answer for his digestion, upon which so much depends? … Why talk of necessities when nakedness and starvation beget the only real necessities?" (ch. XLI). Terms like "digestion" and "starvation" clearly fall among

the hunger images that make up so much of Melville's commentary on charity and friendship. It seems that the only way to know what Melville's characters mean in *The Confidence-Man* is to read for the subtle associations with hunger that are scattered throughout the novel. While *The Confidence-Man* employs hunger using such images, it ultimately asserts Melville's view that engaging with hunger is better than being force-fed through the means of charity, friendship, or some other form of sympathy. Once again, this engagement with hunger returns to *strange feeling*, which is expressed through Charlie's subsequent denial of Frank's request for money: "If you turn beggar, then, for the honor of noble friendship, I turn stranger" (ch. XLI). Thus, in *The Confidence-Man*, Melville expresses the negative implications of *strange feeling* as a response to suffering; if such suffering is presented too directly, it will be met with estrangement rather than sympathy.

Sympathy is possible, however, as long as one's encounter with suffering includes distance that allows for reflection and friendship apart from any ulterior motive. As shown in *Moby-Dick*, hunger is once again the trigger for a positive sense of *strange feeling* that Melville makes room for after its initial presentation in *Redburn*. Whereas Melville's investment in hunger is best expressed in *Redburn*, it neither begins nor ends there. Published in 1851 towards the end of the Famine years, *Moby-Dick* is a work whose breadth and depth defy simple or laconic analysis; however, its importance here is due most directly to its representation of hunger as a means of establishing *strange feeling* across seemingly impregnable divides. In *Moby-Dick*, Melville furthers his *strange feeling* for the hungry in interesting ways: from the first chapter, Ishmael is eating, and his relationship with the friendly cannibal Queequeg is based very much in a

consideration of what he eats and how hungry he is. Through Ishmael's view of Queequeg in the early chapters, one notices his fascination not only with the savage's appearance, which "makes a stranger stare," but also with his "countenance" which "yet had a something in it which was by no means disagreeable" (ch. 10). Ishmael even goes so far as to compare Queequeg to George Washington, only that he was "cannibalistically developed." Likewise, Ishmael assesses Queequeg's apparent independence and self-reliance: "He looked like a man who had never cringed and never had had a creditor." Such admiration is tinged, however, with Ishmael's wariness about Queequeg's strangeness and apparent "indifference" to Ishmael's desire to know him better. Nevertheless, Ishmael comes to realize an attraction to Queequeg that is as much physical as emotional:

> As I sat there in that now lonely room … I began to be sensible of strange feelings. I felt a melting in me. No more my splintered heart and maddened hand were turned against the wolfish world. This soothing savage had redeemed it. There he sat, his very indifference speaking a nature in which there lurked no civilized hypocrisies and bland deceits. Wild he was; a very sight of sights to see; yet I began to feel myself mysteriously drawn towards him. And those same things that would have repelled most others, they were the very magnets that thus drew me.

This passage reflects what Jamey Hecht terms the "prolixity and bounty" of the novel, which "is generated by Ishmael's hunger for the object-world" (119). Although his hunger is not literal here, the "strange feelings" he experiences derive most directly from

his attraction towards those "very magnets" that best define Queequeg's cannibalistic nature. In effect, Queequeg's hunger becomes something that Ishmael wants.

As the epic novel continues, Melville continues to make subtle suggestions about hunger, culminating in a memorable meal on board the *Pequod* in chapter thirty-four, entitled "The Cabin-Table." The monomaniacal Ahab essentially controls the eating habits of his crew: "these cabin meals were somehow solemn meals, eaten in awful silence; and yet at table old Ahab forbade not conversation; only he himself was dumb." It is a lesser known character, however, who best fits a reading of Melville's uses of hunger imagery: the ship's third mate, Flask. As Ishmael exclaims:

> [P]oor little Flask, he was the youngest son, and little boy of this weary family party. His were the shinbones of the saline beef; his would have been the drumsticks … And had Flask helped himself, the chances were Ahab had never so much as noticed it. Least of all, did Flask presume to help himself to butter. … Flask, alas! was a butterless man! (ch. 34)

Flask knows his place; he is "made to clinch tight and last long." His is a particular antebellum American type: white, male, loyal, neither too poor nor too wealthy, willing to work for (and to wait on) for others. Most relevant here is the fact that Flask's work places him in a position of hunger. Always "the last person down at the dinner," as well as "the first man up," Flask's entire existence is based in hunger. He must wait to eat until his commanding officer Stubb, "who is but a peg higher," has eaten, and if he "happens to have but a small appetite, and soon shows symptoms of concluding his repast, then Flask must bestir himself, he will not get more than three mouthfuls that

day." For from the moment Flask had risen to his current position, "he had never known what it was to be otherwise than hungry, more or less. For what he ate did not so much relieve his hunger, as keep it immortal in him" (ch. 34). As depicted here, Flask's "immortal" hunger is a symptom of American social hierarchy. His job requires that he always remain hungry. Among a crew "chiefly made up of mongrel renegades, and castaways, and cannibals," the "pervading mediocrity in Flask" is significant for what it implies about the "normal" American of Melville's imagination. Although Flask has achieved considerable status, he wishes only to return to a position of less responsibility. He wants to satisfy his hunger "as [he] used to when [he] was before the mast" (ch. 34).

The irony of Flask's hunger is multi-fold: he cannot assert himself enough to be satisfied, yet if he could, it is likely that none would begrudge him his right to eat. Hunger is essential to Flask's identity, whether he likes it or not. Amidst *Moby-Dick*'s other concerns with American ideology, Flask's hunger provides a keystone for interpretation. Hunger is one of Melville's most useful literary tropes to describe the evolving social and economic norms of the antebellum era. Unlike the Famine Irish who saw themselves as nonresponsible victims of hunger, Flask's hunger is intimately linked to his sense of responsibility. Because he has more responsibility, he is hungrier. Hunger here becomes associated less with being Irish or "other" than it was simply part of being American or "normal." Flask does not choose to go hungry; he has hunger thrust upon him by the very fact that he is a middle-class American.

But Melville's principal interests do not lie with such workers; he is more concerned with "those inferior fellows" on board the *Pequod*. "While their masters, the mates, seemed afraid of the sound of the hinges of their own jaws," says Ishmael, "the

harpooneers chewed their food with such a relish that there was a report to it" (ch. 34). There lies an important difference in Melville's depictions of hunger among his characters. He likes those, such as Queequeg and Tashtego, who actively seek to satisfy their "portentous appetites"; in contrast, Melville depicts "the great negro" Daggoo as "wonderfully abstemious, not to say dainty" in satisfying his hunger. Observing Daggoo's eating at the cabin-table, Ishmael doubts that "such comparatively small mouthfuls … could keep up the vitality diffused through so broad, baronial, and superb a person. … Not by beef or by bread, are giants made or nourished." It is not through eating alone that satisfaction comes for Melville's characters in *Moby-Dick*. Whereas some characters are as hungry cannibals, others exhibit hunger in less blatant fashion. However, it remains their hunger that best defines them.

The American response to the Irish Famine immigration cannot be labeled simply sympathetic or not; instead, events like the Great Hunger force witnesses to question the very terms with which one defines and categorizes the emotional responses that literature is best suited to represent. What lies in between the lines of Herman Melville's *Redburn*, among his other texts dealing with poverty and hunger, deserves to be acknowledged not only for what it implies about Melville's specific interests, but also for what it says about the conditions of his time, especially concerning the American response to the Irish Famine. Irish hunger should be read in *Redburn* as a transnational phenomenon through which American notions of sympathy and identity can be explored. *Redburn* is just one example of the complex responses within American writing to the physical and psychological horrors of the Famine and to the socioeconomic realities of immigration in the nineteenth century. However, Melville's capacity for *strange feeling*, especially for

the hungry Irish immigrants he presents in *Redburn*, stands admirably alone among antebellum American novels.

Unlike many Americans of his day, Herman Melville saw hunger not as a product of some moral or racial defect, but as an effect of poverty. Thus, Melville is able to make room for representations of poverty and hunger that deconstruct overarching assumptions about the Irish and other impoverished groups. In Melville's mind, the Irish aren't the only people suffering from hunger, nor do they suffer due to their own failings; rather, their hunger is indicative of broader inequalities and international relationships that deserve careful attention and astute analysis. Melville is able to view hunger from a transatlantic perspective that emphasizes America's role in its amelioration, however difficult (if not impossible) of a project that may be. The Famine Irish fill the spaces left for interpretation in *Redburn*. They appear on land and at sea; they accost Redburn in port and accompany him aboard ship. They lay in between a partially paternalistic view of poverty and an authentically sympathetic stance of social responsibility. The Famine Irish fill the space between sympathy and separation; *Redburn* cannot *not* represent the Famine Irish, nor can the novel satisfy the real hunger with which they are suffering. Ultimately, no one in *Redburn* is immune to the effects of poverty, and hunger lies on the horizon for Irish and others alike. Melville's point of view is complex and progressive; however, his limited perspective tells only part of the story. Other writers, including African Americans like Frederick Douglass and Irish Americans like Fitz-James O'Brien, offer even more nuanced ways to view the American response to the Famine. To answer how the Irish Famine affected American witnesses requires a real engagement with issues of

social justice and responsibility that go well beyond even the greatest canonical American writers.

Chapter 3:
Irish-American Gothic:
Fitz-James O'Brien's Great Hunger

At another time, when he was not strictly sober, O'Brien found himself out of funds. He wandered into a publisher's office and asked for $25. This was refused him. Angrily seizing a placard, O'Brien reversed it and made in big letters on the blank side:
ONE OF HARPER'S AUTHORS.
I AM STARVING.
Cited in Francis Wolle's *Fitz-James O'Brien: A Literary Bohemian of the Eighteen-Fifties* (55)

Because of the Famine, Irish society undergoes a surreal speed-up of its entry upon modernity; but what spurs that process on is, contradictorily, a thoroughly traditional calamity. Part of the horror of the Famine is its atavistic nature—the mind-shaking fact that an event with all the premodern character of a medieval pestilence happened in Ireland with frightening recentness. This deathly origin then shatters space as well as time, unmaking the nation and scattering Irish history across the globe. That history will of course continue; but … there is something recalcitrant at its core which defeats articulation, some 'real' which stubbornly refuses to be symbolized.
~ Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger* (14).

Writing the Famine will always, whether by inclusion or exclusion, inscribe the dead in discourses other than that of famine per se. The literature of the famine thus exists as a series of tangents to the elusive event itself.
~ Christopher Morash, *Writing the Irish Famine* (187)

For very good reason, hunger is not often associated with humor. Leave it to Fitz-James O'Brien, a "Literary Bohemian" and Irish-American patriot, to link the two. As the initial epigraph above demonstrates, O'Brien was an active, provocative character in his own right, but his death during the Civil War prematurely ended his promising career. Even though his own expectation of posthumous fame—"after I'm dead I may turn out a bigger man than when living" (qtd. in Winter, xliv)—was not realized, O'Brien's "works have a claim upon the American people" (Stephens, lxii). While some of his poetry "has been dismissed as 'mere tinkle,'" O'Brien's fiction "assured him of an important place in

the development of the American short story" (Hayes 11), earning him the nickname "The Celtic Poe." O'Brien undoubtedly saw much suffering in his Irish environs. Born in Cork in 1828, O'Brien lived relatively well there and in Limerick for most of his childhood. Whatever Famine-related horrors O'Brien internalized (before moving to England in 1849) certainly piqued his social conscience and impacted his literary development. As Terry Eagleton claims, the Famine's "atavistic nature" results in a process of "unmaking the nation," and O'Brien was part of the generation whose history was thus scattered by the Famine's impact. While there remains, in Eagleton's words, "some 'real' which stubbornly refuses to be symbolized" about the Famine, O'Brien's socially conscious poetry and Gothic short stories make the process of symbolism possible. His work should be classified as "literature of the famine" that, in the words of Christopher Morash, "exists as a series of tangents to the elusive event itself" (*Writing the Irish Famine* 187). By using images of hunger as markers of injustice, O'Brien contributed to Irish-American cultural memory of the Famine. His work shows both the physical victimization and psychological manipulation of Famine hunger.

One of this chapter's primary aims is to reconsider the Famine as a central event within Irish-American cultural history. In addition to his Gothic tales of starvation, O'Brien wrote poetry representing the lives of poor laborers and other urban dwellers, many of whom emigrated from Ireland during and after the Famine. Such works show how profoundly the Famine impacted the production of literary culture beyond Ireland. Although O'Brien came of age during the Famine years, only his poetry was published during that time while his works of fiction took longer to materialize. O'Brien produces images of hunger and starvation that remind us how, in Morash's words, "the metaphors

through which the Famine appear to us are sometimes blatantly ahistorical, … reminding us that we are not confronting the Famine itself, but something which performs the function of 'standing for' the Famine" ("Afterword" 305). O'Brien's encounter with the Famine helps him to reshape the discourse of silence that had surrounded it for so long. Although his poetry sits in the second tier among world-class writers like Whitman and Poe, O'Brien's Gothic short stories, several employing images of hunger associated with the Famine, stand out as "extraordinary creations of imagination" (qtd. in Winter, xxxix). O'Brien was keenly aware of the Famine's alienating effects, both upon individuals and upon Irish culture at large. Although what we call the Famine remains difficult to locate and define precisely, O'Brien's writing makes it possible to witness the Famine's particular impact on Irish-American culture. O'Brien is thus able to sympathize with the Famine Irish while making room for their hunger to be digested by the broader American public.

To understand Irish assimilation into American society during the nineteenth century (and even into the twentieth) requires recognition of the Famine's complex effects, both on those who barely survived it and on those who prospered after it. As Mary C. Kelly claims, "The brutal effects of the Famine on the immigrant *mentalité* include social, political, and cultural ramifications still virtually untapped" ("The Famine" 124). For most American readers in the nineteenth century—even for many Irish Americans themselves—the Famine may have seemed like a distant event, separate from their experiences. "The squalor of the Great Famine," writes Jack Morgan, "manifested nature in brute form, the very thing Americans were determined to overcome" (47). This clash of cultures clearly concerns O'Brien, whose socially-conscious poetry and romantic

fiction take on these very same forms of "abjection brought to the fore by the Famine," which "embarrassingly clashed with the ideology of a quaint rural Ireland to which the American Irish themselves often clung, and which they wished to perpetuate" (Morgan 47). For many Irish Americans, the Famine did not fit comfortably within their worldview. It was often couched in anger directed towards the role of British policy in perpetuating Irish suffering. Although memories of the Famine were passed on through song and story, it was often considered a subject best left in the past: "Not all those who could bear witness did so … Some sought to banish the memories, fleeing from even any shadow that invaded their minds" (Lee 19). In contrast to many of his fellow Irish-Americans, O'Brien admirably sought to represent the Famine in ways that allowed for the ambiguity of the event—as well as the silence surrounding it—to be acknowledged and understood.

The remainder of this chapter is broken into two distinct sections: the first, subtitled "A Hungry Bohemian Poet," considers selected poems by O'Brien and places them in the context of the Famine, the event from which the poems' subject matter explicitly derives. Likewise, this section considers other details of O'Brien's biography, particularly his struggles with shame about his Irish identity and, more specifically, his witnessing of the Famine. The final section, subtitled "The Celtic Poe," analyzes three of O'Brien's Gothic short stories—"The Diamond Lens," "The Pot of Tulips," and "What Was It?"—for their more subtle, yet ultimately more meaningful and engaging representations of hunger and the related hardships of emigration associated with the Famine Irish. From O'Brien's short fiction emerge the most profound representations of hunger's impact upon its witnesses. The chapter concludes by linking the impersonal

melancholy of O'Brien's narrators to the relatable experience of witnessing the trauma of the Famine. O'Brien, whose "sympathies were naturally with the weaker side" (Stephens, lxi), was clearly concerned with his Irish brethren, who were often seen as dependent and weak. "[O]n [some] occasions," contends Thomas E. Davis, "[O'Brien] would become subdued to such exquisite softness by the deep pathos of his words,--arousing the delicate, womanly sensibility which formed a large part of his hidden character" (xxxiii). Clearly, O'Brien was a man affected by feelings of sympathy that he kept secret from others and perhaps even repressed from his own consciousness. Whatever shame O'Brien felt for being Irish must have been mixed together with compassion for them as a people long oppressed and downtrodden. Ultimately, O'Brien's curious ambivalence about the Irish—a *strange feeling* not unlike that mentioned by Melville—expresses itself explicitly in his socially conscious poetry and serves as the fuel for his Gothic fiction.

A Hungry Bohemian Poet

Knowledge of O'Brien's personal life is incomplete yet provocative. Descending from an Anglo-Irish landholding family in the southwest of Ireland—his father was an attorney as well as a coroner—Michael Fitz-James de Courcey O'Brien lived a profligate lifestyle, inheriting approximately £8000 from his maternal grandfather yet squandering most of it before the age of 23 (Kime 15). Thus privileged, O'Brien also had a sensitivity for social issues and was "so stirred" by the "stricken wretchedness" of the Famine that he turned early on to writing passionate and patriotic poetry (Wolle 11). Prior to emigrating, O'Brien, who lived only a few miles from the infamous village of Skibbereen, published in an 1846 edition of the *Nation* a poem entitled "The Famine,"

which demanded immediate relief for those suffering around him. The poem begins with intriguing, if somewhat trite simile and personification: “Striding nearer every day, / Like a wolf in search of prey, / Comes the Famine on his way” (O’Brien, lines 1-3). The poem proceeds with “a Voice,” presumably of the Famine itself, predicting that “‘Ye shall starve for want of bread’” (line 9). In a poem so explicitly about the Famine, the mention of starvation over lack of bread seems odd, given the fact that the Famine was caused primarily by a fungal blight of the potato crop. Nevertheless, O’Brien, whose pseudonym for the publication of “The Famine” is Heremon, goes on to deliver meaningful lines, particularly when his speaker laments the apparent inaction of the Irish populace in the face of starvation:

> ‘Tis a fearful sight to see,
>
> Man, the equal and the free,
>
> Kneeling at a Brother’s knee;
>
> ……..
>
> Why then does he wail and weep?
>
> Why does he supinely sleep,
>
> And nor food nor vengeance reap? (lines 28-30, 34-36)

While similar charges of passivity were placed upon many victims of the Famine, O’Brien balances his claims with compassion and explanation for the lack of physical response from the Famine Irish amidst such unspeakable suffering: “‘Tis not base and slavish fear / Makes him shun the sword and spear -- / ‘Tis the Faith he holds so dear” (lines 37-39). Thus, O’Brien admires the nonviolent tenets of Irish Catholicism while questioning their usefulness, if not “the Faith” itself. This links him to American writers

like Asenath Nicholson, whose advocacy for the Irish also included prejudicial comments about their Catholic passivity. In such lines, "The Famine" interrogates some of the foundational institutions upon which Irish society would rely in the aftermath of the Famine.

Although O'Brien's poem antedates the so-called Devotional Revolution—a reinvigoration of post-Famine religious fervor that made the Irish into practicing Catholics—his willingness to challenge the sanctity of the Church during the midst of the Famine is forward-thinking. It is as if O'Brien questions the ideology of Catholic Ireland itself; such interrogation was not unusual for Irishmen of O'Brien's primarily Protestant stock. Kerby Miller emphasizes some key contrasts between the Irish Catholic and Protestant worldviews:

> [T]he Catholic Irish were more communal than individualist, more dependent than independent, more fatalistic than optimistic, more prone to accept conditions passively than to take initiative for change and more sensitive to the weight of tradition than to innovative possibilities for the future. (107)

O'Brien, whose apparent Protestantism remains very much below the surface of his exterior identity, clearly differs from most Catholic Irish for his fierce individualism and independence. Although he seems to have had his share of fatalism and sensitivity to tradition, O'Brien is certainly not passive in his attempts to represent the Famine as an event of incalculable importance to the very soul of Irish life. In the closing lines of "The Famine," O'Brien's speaker directly addresses "[m]en of wealth" and admonishes them to ignore the plight of Famine victims at their own peril; he then predicts that if his

readers offer charity even in the face of others' negative judgments that they will find real, everlasting happiness. Thus, "The Famine" ends with optimism and a taste of "the joy that has no end" (line 68). It is an early example of O'Brien's developing engagement with broad issues of social justice and with specific concerns about the Famine in Ireland.

Although O'Brien's poetry lacks rhetorical sophistication at times, it remains worthy of critical consideration, especially for its uses of Famine imagery and progressive commentary on hunger and poverty. In "Oh! Give a Desert Life to Me," O'Brien pens a piece of work that is telling in its explicit support of emigration, a topic anathema to many nationalistic-minded thinkers of the time:

> Oh! give a desert life to me,
>
> Where I no tyrant's law need fear;
>
> For there, indeed, I may be free,
>
> Nor live a slave as I do here—
>
> For here we're born,
>
> For England's scorn.
>
> ……..
>
> Oh! then a desert life for me,
>
> Dependent I will live no more;
>
> My soul is longing to be free,
>
> Without the weight of chains it bore— (qtd. in Wolle 12)

As these lines indicate, self-reliance is a key element of O'Brien's world-view, thus linking him as much with American writers like Thoreau as to those of his own generation in the United Kingdom. O'Brien labels England as a scornful "tyrant," a

relatively dated yet nonetheless meaningful depiction; and his speaker is considered "a slave," a term still very much relevant in the 1850s. Such tropes fit well within nineteenth-century America. O'Brien's desire for freedom is clear, but one detects a sense of apprehension in the speaker's professions: he only "*may* be free," and his soul is still "longing" for freedom and explicitly for a "desert life" that only sounds appealing when set against the prospects of remaining in Ireland. Thus, exile is chosen over "chains." Such sentiments reflect O'Brien's own position as an immigrant, at home neither in Ireland nor in America. He refuses to be dependent like those starving Irish around him were considered to be.

Although his sympathies were very much with those affected by the Famine, O'Brien's ostracism from the broader movements for Irish independence led to anger and alienation. Neither O'Brien nor his politics were "Irish" enough for full inclusion in the nationalist camps, which had already split into factions in 1846. Still a teenager when the Famine began, O'Brien submitted numerous pieces of patriotic verse to the Irish nationalist periodical, the *Nation*, edited by Charles Gavan Duffy, who had his own ambiguous role in the 1848 uprising as he was imprisoned when it took place. In the spirit of inclusive Irish national identity, Duffy and other leaders of Young Ireland would go on to wage an ill-fated revolution against British rule in Ireland in 1848. Although O'Brien appeared to espouse the ideals of Young Ireland, he wasn't fully accepted among its most ardent nationalists. Although Duffy published some of O'Brien's submissions, he did so with prejudice, best exemplified by Duffy's offer to publish "Oh! Give a Desert Life to Me" only if it were retitled "The Coward's Resource," a jibe at O'Brien's supposedly callow theme. Following the poem, which ends with the speaker's promise to

return to his "dear land" of Erin, Duffy comments: "We recommend our friend *not* to come again when the work is over. He will get a cold welcome from the men he left to bear the heat of the harvest" (Woole 12; *emphasis* in original). Thus sets up O'Brien's estranged political position relative to other Irishmen and many Irish Americans of the 1840s and 1850s. After trying unsuccessfully to start his own publication in England—with roughly £8000 he had inherited—O'Brien left the British Isles almost penniless, ultimately settling in the United States and becoming "so much an American," claimed *The New York Leader*, "that his foreign birth and education would never be recognized in his writings" (Wolle 60). Like millions of others, O'Brien emigrated from Ireland during this time, and he expressed anger at having to leave his home; however, his decision to emigrate in 1849 was viewed unfavorably by others, including Duffy, whose own support for revolution either before or after 1848 was itself circumspect. On one hand, O'Brien's ostracism from Young Ireland and the *Nation* is understandable given the divisions that had consumed the movement since 1848. On the other hand, there is an unfortunate irony here in that the similar interests of figures like Duffy and O'Brien were turned against each other amidst the chaos of the Famine years.

Further problematizing O'Brien's reception is the fact that most of his texts deal with themes ostensibly foreign to identity politics; however, much that is known of O'Brien's personal life is indeed linked to the motif of hunger. Like others who have had "to work under the stress and strain of writing for bread, [O'Brien] produced things that had no value beyond the moment, and some that were below the level of his own standard of taste" (Winter, vi). Many critics have ignored O'Brien's complicated circumstances as an immigrant, and those who address elements of his biography do not

make many useful connections between O'Brien's work and his Irishness. William Winter, O'Brien's friend and principal biographer, writes:

> He was at times haughty and combative, partly because of his Hibernian blood, and partly, no doubt, because of his resentful conviction that he deserved—by his powers, his achievements, and the possibilities of his mind and future—a higher position in literature than had ever been accorded to him. (xxiv)

Even in his more sympathetic portraits of O'Brien, Winter fails to explicate the impact that O'Brien's experiences in Ireland during the Famine had on his development as a writer, if not also upon his ego. In some instances, Winter falls back on clichés when describing O'Brien; however, even within these stereotypical descriptions, there are indications that the Famine affected O'Brien in subtle yet telling ways. Winter describes an occasion when O'Brien was "on a rock" and, therefore, had to stay with Winter for two nights and a day: "In the course of that time he slept only about four hours: I could not induce him to taste either food or drink: he would not even eat a little fruit that I obtained and contrived to leave in his way" (71). This is not the only instance where O'Brien's behavior is linked curiously to food and, subsequently, to the imagery of hunger. Winter also cites O'Brien's letter to Thomas Bailey Aldrich, to whom O'Brien sends one of his poems, writing: "The one I send you is a ballad, horrible and indigestible" (103). As eagerly as O'Brien sought to control his appetite, he could not allow himself to succumb to hunger, vacillating between excessive eating and near starvation.

In both his personal life and literary work, O'Brien dealt with complex imagery of the Famine. Even his personal correspondence was couched in gastric imagery, marking O'Brien with stereotypically "Celtic" features, but also linking him to the traumatic hunger of the Famine, which, in turn, became one of the most important markers of his literary production overall. The anecdotes of O'Brien's biography veer wildly from indulgence to paucity. His lifestyle embodies Terry Eagleton's contention about the ways in which "Irish society undergoes a surreal speed-up of its entry upon modernity" (Eagleton 14). O'Brien had trouble rationalizing the relative privileges bestowed upon him in a time of such suffering. The "traditional calamity" of the Famine kept coming back to O'Brien in ways that his sentimental poetry could not contain. For instance, in "The Ballad of the *Shamrock*," O'Brien's speaker, a mother whose son was forced to emigrate during "the black year of famine, of sickness, and woe" (*Poems and Stories*; 28; line 2), suffers her loss in ways that reflect O'Brien's own position as a witness of the Famine. Implicit in this poem is a desire to return to an idyllic, pre-Famine past juxtaposed with the stark reality of Famine emigration and hunger. There are comparisons also to be made between O'Brien's emigration and that of Donal, the son in "The Ballad of the Shamrock." Although Donal "was no scholar with the pen" (29; stanza 5), he sets out like O'Brien to "seek a fortune out in the wide, wide West, / Where the honest can find labor and the weary rest" (28; stanza 3). In the end of the poem, Donal's death leaves the speaker wondering "why it is that [she] can't die" (31; stanza 10), thus mirroring the dejected feeling of fellow Famine witnesses. In the sentimental stanzas of "The Ballad of the Shamrock," one can see O'Brien struggle to articulate something that eludes him in most of his poetry. It is to O'Brien's fiction, then, that one

must turn to better understand how and why the Famine "defeats articulation" and "stubbornly refuses to be symbolized" (Eagleton 14).

Even O'Brien's much famed Bohemian lifestyle in New York City could be seen as a cosmopolitan cover for his complicated feelings about the Famine and its impact upon his Irish-American identity. On one hand, the crowd who frequented Pfaff's Bar in New York during the 1850s likely lessened O'Brien's prestige in the eyes of some readers; on the other, his time among personages like Henry Clapp, Ada Clare, and even Walt Whitman undoubtedly impacted O'Brien's ego and sense of connection to American literary circles. Called the "most striking figure of the group," O'Brien was also considered "the most representative Bohemian writer" (Winter 66, 95). Among his other stage Irish traits, O'Brien was credited with a "Celtic alacrity for combat" and was considered Pfaff's "chief fighter" (Kime 22). "But Bohemia is a land of violent contrasts," says Francis Wolle, placing O'Brien "in the midst of the growing, spreading city of New York, in which bodies become hungry, and food costs money" (97). It may be that the Bohemian lifestyle offered O'Brien a way to be comfortable both as an Irishman and an American, and Pfaff's was a place where he could process his past experiences, including the anger their memories elicited, while embracing the present and forming his own cultural and literary identity. Most Bohemians were pro-northern and thus pro-Union, so O'Brien fit well among them. While O'Brien's stereotypical Irishness remained one of his principal identifying traits, his membership in the group at Pfaff's offered him an opportunity to be not only Irish, but also Bohemian. Although he could not escape his Irishness at Pfaff's, he could, at least for a time, refrain from remembering the Famine as explicitly as he had done in much of his poetry. O'Brien's associations

with other Bohemians allowed him to put his Irishness aside, to let it lie beneath the surface of an alternative American identity while he worked out his ambivalence about being both Irish and American, devoutly cosmopolitan yet fiercely patriotic. However, the memory of the Famine never went away for O'Brien; reminders of it were evident even within the modernizing city of New York amidst his Bohemian comrades.

His desire to be an American was very much a part of O'Brien's personage, as he proved ultimately in his avid, ill-fated support of the Union during the Civil War. Citing O'Brien's attempts to form a volunteer regiment, Frank Wood compares him to a "caged eagle … impatient for active service in the field" (xl). After several administrative delays in seeking a position within the Union ranks, "O'Brien was instantly lifted from the depths of melancholy to the acme of joy" upon receiving a commission (Wood, xli). O'Brien's adamant desire to join the army and serve his new nation was hardly rare among Irishmen who came to the United States during the antebellum era. There was something special, however, about O'Brien's transformation from Irish emigrant to American patriot. As Winter notes of O'Brien even before the outbreak of war, O'Brien was "considerably changed from what he had been when he came to America":

> Mental toil and bodily privation, the hardships of a gypsy life, the reactionary sense of being in false positions and of being misunderstood … had done their work upon his nature, and made him, in some of his moods, as lawless, arrogant, and truculent, as in others he was gentle, resigned, affectionate, and almost forlorn. (xx)

While the attempts to achieve a snapshot of O'Brien's state of mind as he composed his most important works are somewhat speculative, there remains a desire to coax the truth

out of his contemporaries' acknowledgments of his complex personal struggles. The "bodily privation" he suffered let to difficulty managing his emotions and maintaining a healthy psychological balance. While the trauma at the heart of O'Brien's singular personality defies detailed description, it is clear that his attempts to mask it revolve around the imagery of hunger, which one cannot help but link to his witnessing of the Famine.

When O'Brien wrote, he seemed to many observers to be working out something that only he could approach; the symptoms of this struggle showed themselves through his embrace of hunger and its concomitant senses of depression and shame. As O'Brien adopted American nationality, he seems to have discarded many markers of Irish identity as he had to handle assaults on his personal character. "I never saw him so deeply depressed as he was then"—while writing his poem "The Sewing Bird"—"and with good reason, for he was destitute, cheerless, and hungry; and whenever that was his case he would not share with a comrade, and even when food was left in his way he would not take it" (Winter, xxii). This indication of self-deprivation, if not atypical of struggling writers, links O'Brien even more closely to the motif of hunger and the impact of the Famine. Although one must continue to wonder about O'Brien's disturbing physical and psychological states of being, a consistent affect of shame shows itself time and again both in his biography and in several of his creative works. Whereas O'Brien had much to be proud of in his career, his self-doubts and problems with eating often surfaced when he was on the cusp of a literary achievement. O'Brien's shame in his identity as an Irishman—and in his perceived failures as a writer—connects to the shame of eating itself. Eating, in this problematic construction, is seen as self-sabotage, and hunger thus

becomes a source of pride, a means of maintaining a sense of identity in the face of ambivalence and shame. However the Famine impacted O'Brien, it is clear that his own experiences of hunger were intimately linked to his sense of identity as an American writer and, thus, with shame about his Irishness.

On both sides of the Atlantic, O'Brien struggled with shame, which was likely amplified by his witnessing of the Famine. According to Augustus Maverick, one of his colleagues at the *New York Times*, O'Brien "'was absurdly ashamed of his Irish birth' … and certain it is that he held himself distinctly aloof from the hordes of Irishmen who during the decade of his life in New York crowded into the American ports" (Wolle 26). Perhaps this sense of shame both attracted O'Brien to Irish nationalism and distanced him from it. His attempts to write for Young Ireland's the *Nation* seemed to be motivated by his desire for conformity and escape from loneliness. As an immigrant American, however, O'Brien could not bring himself, and perhaps could not afford to, identify with other immigrant Irish. They represented a past from which he had only recently escaped, yet which he likely wanted to put well behind him.

O'Brien's experience of shame deserves an even closer look, however, as it calls into question his ability to sympathize with something so profound as the Great Hunger. Although it is uncertain whether or not O'Brien was fully able to empathize with his fellow Irish emigrants affected by the Famine, his capacity for sympathy should not be understated. Like Melville, O'Brien can be said to have experienced *strange feeling* in that his witnessing of hunger brought about an ambivalent experience of sympathy. Rather than disconnect him from them, however, O'Brien's shame allowed him to sympathize with the Famine Irish. Thus, his very sense of self became defined not by his

Irishness broadly, but by his specific interaction with the related hardships of hunger and shame.

"The Celtic Poe"

Like the Famine itself, what the Gothic *is* remains uncertain. As Eagleton notes, "[T]here is something recalcitrant at [the Famine's] core which defeats articulation, some 'real' which stubbornly refuses to be symbolized." Unlike O'Brien's poetry, the motivation and intent of which are relatively straightforward, his Gothic fiction should be considered a hybrid form that "instability and adaptability have made … a transnational and transhistorical phenomenon" (Edwards, xx). While his poetry deals more matter-of-factly with issues of hunger, O'Brien's short stories, as forms of gothic discourse read in the context of the Famine, are capable of disrupting seemingly stable categories of history and national identity. Although specifically Irish or American themes are not manifested directly in O'Brien's stories, they should be read for how they emphasize the Irish as the "excluded other" in American Gothic literature. As Luke Gibbons argues, scholars on both sides of the Atlantic must account for the ways in which cultural and national identities manifest themselves through specific literary forms. "It is no longer possible to sequester questions of race, class, and gender within conventional national boundaries, Irish, American, or otherwise," writes Gibbons, continuing, "Part of the Irish contribution to the negotiation of "the other" in the early republic was to reinstate memory in the public sphere, even if it materialized after its passage across the Atlantic in the form of American gothic" (47). For Fitz-James O'Brien, Gothic fiction offered an outlet for the inexpressible, for an Irish past that remained present in Irish-American collective

memory. Like Edgar Allen Poe before him, Fitz-James O'Brien, famously known as "the Celtic Poe, gave voice to the uncanny through his Gothic stories. "Indeed," writes an anonymous "Mystery" critic in 1886, "O'Brien's fancy was altogether more fertile" than Poe's. Considering O'Brien's biography along with his fiction, the critical understanding of Irish-American identity as experienced and expressed in the antebellum United States is augmented. The fertility of O'Brien's fiction takes root, most ironically, in the hunger of the Famine.

Images of hunger helped O'Brien to realize and represent the effects of the Famine, both for himself and for others. O'Brien's tales, like other forms of Gothic literature, connect to collective memories of trauma by singling out spaces in which such memories could be contained and processed. "[P]erhaps the most significant aspect of a literary famine text," writes Margaret Kelleher, "is its potential to individualize the crisis" (6). Indeed, O'Brien's fantastic tales express individualized experiences of hunger most often through mysterious creatures, such as the provocative miniature woman in O'Brien's most famous story, "The Diamond Lens." Likewise, through the story's narrator, a young man not unlike O'Brien himself, one identifies the lone witness of hunger, privileged and sympathetic, yet helpless to do anything about the suffering he sees. It is this individual that O'Brien feels for the most. Through tales like "The Diamond Lens," O'Brien warns Irish Americans and others about the dangers of ignoring or misinterpreting the traumatic effects of the Famine and of other causes of hunger and poverty more broadly, even upon those who merely witness them.

Originally printed in *The Atlantic Monthly* in January 1858, "The Diamond Lens" is a picaresque yet sentimental (arguably tragi-comic) tale of the pseudo-scientist, Mr.

Linley, who, after murdering an acquaintance in order to obtain the coveted diamond lens, discovers a microscopic humanoid female creature, later named Animula, living within a water molecule.[8] Parts of Linley's backstory seem to be versions of O'Brien's own; like O'Brien, Linley inherits "a small fortune" and insists on making his own way (15). More publicly, after "The Diamond Lens" was published, O'Brien was accused of plagiarizing the work of William North, "a young man of wonderful genius, who came to [the U.S.], and after struggling awhile with poverty and his hopes, committed suicide." In fact, North and O'Brien had a mysterious past that came under scrutiny in "Literary Intelligence" circles. As seen in this submission by Thomas Picton, the controversy surrounding the authenticity of "The Diamond Lens" was linked to O'Brien's Irishness: "Any person acquainted with the two parties cannot fail to draw a disparaging distinction between the scholastic attainments of the late Mr. North and the Hibernian pretensions of the ever-present and somewhat pertinacious Mr. Fitz-James O'Brien, whose sole merit in Saxon literature must be derived from his apocryphal descent from the Kings of old Erin" ("Literary Intelligence"). Although the accusations against O'Brien were eventually forgotten, they are worth revisiting because they were linked, however speciously, to O'Brien's Irishness. This identification shows itself most skillfully in the Gothic short stories for which O'Brien is deservedly most famous.

Although he is arrested and tried for murder, Linley escapes punishment for this dastardly deed, and O'Brien moves the story along to Linley's amazing discovery through the diamond lens. After meeting the mysterious Frenchman, Jules Simon, whom he supposes is Jewish, Linley converses with the spirit of a famous scientist named

[8] "'The Diamond Lens' was, in fact, prompted by a suggestion made to [O'Brien] by Bellew, the artist, or by Dr. A. L. Carroll, respecting the wonders concealed in a drop of water" (Arnold, li; note).

Leeuwenhock, who aids Linley in his search for the ideal microscope. Upon discovering that Simon has the particular diamond necessary for the microscope's lens, Linley drugs him with laudanum and stabs him so that his death looks like suicide. One is struck by the intensity of Linley's desire to obtain the diamond lens, which is less motivated by monetary reward than by the opportunity merely to witness all that it may uncover. Three months pass and Linley works tirelessly until his lens is complete. Finally, he realizes the result of his endeavors, discovering a microscopic life form with human characteristics living inside a droplet of water. He then falls madly in love with Animula, distrusting his own ability to account for his feelings: "I cannot, I dare not, attempt to inventory the charms of this divine revelation of perfect beauty. … Her long, lustrous hair following her glorious head in a golden wake, like the track sown in heaven by a falling star, seems to quench my most burning phrases with its splendours" (31). As he observes and describes her microcosmic world, Linley's narration is riddled with similar expressions of Animula's inexpressible beauty. The sentimental language of the narrator's description borders on bathos, but O'Brien's word choices are important to appreciate. Although Linley declares repeatedly that words cannot describe the beauty of Animula, he goes to considerable lengths to do so: "I watched her, as she made her repast, with the most profound attention. The suppleness of her motions sent a thrill of delight through my frame; my heart beat madly as she turned her beautiful eyes in the direction of the spot in which I stood" (32). Becoming obsessed with Animula, Linley is disturbed by the attention she pays him. More importantly, this disturbance occurs after he watches her eat, and eventually starve, thus linking O'Brien's narrator to the motif of

hunger and deepening his identification with Animula while reminding readers of the historical reality of the Famine.

As he watches Animula, Linley is fascinated with her form. Becoming wary of his obsession and in need of a break, he decides to remove himself from his observations and attends the performance of Signorina Caradolce, "a celebrated *danseuse*" (34). However, he finds that real human women can't compare to the graceful beauty of Animula, so he hurries back to watch her. Tragically, upon his return, Linley notices a "terrible change" in his miniature love: "Her face had grown thin and haggard; her limbs trailed heavily; … She was ill!—ill, and I could not assist her! I believe at that moment I would have gladly forfeited all claims to my human birthright, if I could only have been dwarfed to the size of an animalcule, and permitted to console her from whom fate had forever divided me" (35). Linley's sudden desire to be "dwarfed" comes in response to his view of Animula's suffering. He pities her yet wishes that he be "permitted to console" his unlikely love. Rationalizing this mystery, Linley hints that he is to blame for having abandoned his microscope. The story ends as Animula "seemed absolutely to wither away" before Linley's eyes (35):

> Suddenly I remembered that I had not looked at the water-drop for several days. In fact I hated to see it; for it reminded me of the natural barrier between Animula and myself. … They say now that I am mad; but they are mistaken. I am poor, for I have neither the heart nor the will to work; all my money is spent, and I live on charity. "Linley, the mad microscopist," is the name I go by. I suppose that I talk incoherently while I lecture. Who could talk sense when his brain is haunted by such ghastly memories, while even and anon

among the shapes of death I behold the radiant form of my lost Animula! (35-36)

One is struck by the viscerally tragic death of Animula—"that final struggle of the blackening form"—especially by how her loss prompts the narrator's supposed madness and apparent melancholy. Although Linley is hardly a noble character, he seems sincere as he laments Animula's death. Most important is how his observation of her—or lack thereof—is connected to her death and is partially excused by what Linley terms "the natural barrier between Animula and myself." Whereas he had watched her eating well and prospering earlier in the story, by the end he's allowed his attention to wane and neglects to notice her lack of sustenance. This ending disappoints on several counts: along with Linley, the reader is saddened at the loss of Animula; more critically, O'Brien's contrived conclusion simply avoids the impossibility of Animula's unity with Linley. While Linley seems to recognize the ridiculousness of his fascination with a microscopic woman, his sadness seems genuine. Thus, Linley goes "mad" both because he is genuinely depressed and because O'Brien does not seem to know how else to end the story. "The Diamond Lens" reminds one of narratives of the Famine, especially since the victim of suffering remains silent. In essence, the story of Animula never ends, for she will live on forever in Linley's mind as he laments her loss and blames himself for his role in her suffering. However, we will never get to hear directly from her, nor will her suffering and death be seen as in any way preventable.

As indirectly indicated in the closing lines of "The Diamond Lens," Linley's mourning process is prevented by his persistent ambivalence about his "lost Animula." Although the symptoms are subtle—he has "neither the heart nor the will to work" and he

speaks "incoherently"—it seems that Linley is suffering from melancholia, defined most usefully as "a mode of grieving in which a bereaved person is unable to acknowledge consciously the nature and object of the anger that has accompanied the experience of loss" (Moglen 159). It is not just that Linley "lost" Animula; rather, he is still "haunted" by her, or, more specifically, by the "ghastly memories" with which she is associated. These "shapes of death," although not explicitly deemed as such, remind one of the specters of the Famine witnessed by O'Brien before his emigration to the United States. Whereas Linley seems to be conscious of the loss he has suffered, an unacknowledged emotion persists within the very punctuation of his closing narration. One may read the ending exclamation point as an indication of unresolved anger, not towards those who would call him "mad" but perhaps towards Animula herself. Her loss, although not ostensibly Linley's fault, was caused most obviously by his lack of attention to her suffering. Notice that he does not regret his inaction as much as his inability to watch. He simply was not there to witness her death; all that remains of his feeling for her is the device through which he witnessed her suffering. Thus, his melancholia arises both out of self-hatred and out of resentment for her utter weakness.

Animula's ultimate weakness, however, must be set against Linley's initial view of her as a "perfect beauty" whose "eyes of mystic violet, dewy and serene, evade [his] words" (31). Linley cannot properly mourn for Animula because of his ambivalence about his feelings for her. From his perspective, words are inadequate to describe the way he really feels. Although he admits that he "loved an animalcule" (32), Linley lacks the ability to connect with her. Animula is essentially flawless in his eyes, but her apparent perfection blinds Linley to the truth: not only is she inhuman, she is microscopic and, as

if that is not obstacle enough, “forever imprisoned” in a tiny droplet of water (31). The absurdity of this scenario ironically adds to its drama. Linley is truly enraptured with Animula. Even though he knows that he cannot be with her, he wishes for a sympathetic attachment: “Could I for one moment pierce the mystical walls that so inexorably rose to separate us, and whisper all that filled my soul, I might consent to be satisfied for the rest of my life with the knowledge of her remote sympathy” (32-33). Linley’s stated desires are thus belied by the unfortunate realization that “it could not be. No invention of which human intellect was capable could break down the barriers that nature had erected” (33). Ultimately, the blame for Linley’s unrequited love relationship with a microscopic creature is laid at the foot of technology, which cannot (at least not yet) create a way for humans and animalcules to be together.

More interesting than the logical leaps in O’Brien’s “The Diamond Lens,” however, is its connection to the Famine, particularly in the ways it depicts Animula’s suffering and death as “natural.” Taking the figure of Animula as a link to the Irish past, one sees some haunting connections between her plight and that of those who suffered and died during the Famine. The “horrible” sight of Animula’s “limbs once so round and lovely shriveling up into nothings” (36) reminds one of similar horrors witnessed and described during the Famine. The Famine’s connection to “The Diamond Lens” also requires that one link Linley as narrator to Fitz-James O’Brien himself. For Linley and O’Brien, Animula represents a lost ideal. Because her death—which was watched closely yet inconsistently by Linley—is one of wasting away, she remains linked to the Famine and to the Irish past that might be best forgotten in the eyes of many Irish themselves. To properly mourn for an overwhelming trauma like the Famine requires “the vigorous effort

to raise to consciousness one's ongoing libidinal investments in what one has loved and lost" (Moglen 162). Although Linley fails to fully realize his own "libidinal investments" in the loss of Animula, there is hope that O'Brien has within him the "vigorous effort" it takes to recognize and make conscious much that has been lost through the trauma of the Famine. "The Diamond Lens," which should appear prominently in the canon of Irish-American writing, both naturalizes and nationalizes its subject by linking the tragic story of Animula to the real tragedy of the Famine. It is through the eye of Linley that we witness the devastation of Animula, who, in order to better serve as a symbol of victimization, must be individuated and feminized. It is thus through O'Brien's pen that one reads the imagery of Famine and laments the losses of *Old Erin*.

However, calling "The Diamond Lens" and other O'Brien tales "Famine literature" must not only account for national contexts; one must also consider the ways in which gender operates within the genre. If "'famine' recalls the feminine and maternal, then the Irish Famine would have been even more at odds with America's masculine expansionist narrative," claims Jack Morgan (48). The idea of Animula as a feminine representation of the Famine contrasts with the way it was to be understood in antebellum America, if not also in post-Famine Ireland. Whereas "in written records of famine and catastrophe, the female figure undergoes a kind of physical inspection that is never applied to the male figure" (Morgan 55), in most of O'Brien's Gothic short stories, female suffering is relatively minimal while much attention is paid to the physical and psychological condition of men and boys. Although the female figure of Animula in "The Diamond Lens" links closely to the so-called "feminization of famine," O'Brien's other Gothic tales include mostly male characters whose gaze, like that of Linley in "The

Diamond Lens," is most similar to a witness of famine rather than to a sufferer herself. Once again, O'Brien's fiction can be linked to the broader literature of the Famine; however, he continues to hold a singular place within it as his work refuses simple categorization. In viewing hunger from a mostly male perspective, O'Brien continues to challenge conventional interpretations of the relationships among sympathy, gender, and victimization.

In "The Pot of Tulips," which appeared originally in *Harper's* in November 1855, O'Brien's experimentation with the Gothic form continues to emphasize his concerns about the possibility of sympathy in the face of suffering. Narrated from the perspective of a supposedly native New Yorker, Harry Escott, "The Pot of Tulips" principally concerns the life and death of Mr. Van Koeren, an immigrant from Holland. Escott's narrative takes readers back twenty-eight years to the summer he spent leasing the Van Koerens' old Dutch villa located in Central Park, Manhattan. Escott, who was interested in (and eventually marries) the Van Koerens' daughter, Alice, always desired to live in their house, and he notes that the couple themselves were very unhappy, especially due to Mr. Van Koeren's jealousy of his wife, Marie: "And Marie, weeping and silent, would sit on the edge of the bed listening to the cold, trenchant irony of her husband, who, pacing up and down the room, would now and then stop in his walk to gaze with his burning eyes upon the pallid face of his victim" (O'Brien 114). After describing Mr. Van Koeren's jealous habits and Mrs. Van Koeren's resulting poor health—which resembles in many ways that of a Famine victim—Escott notes "that one luckless night Mr. Van Koeren learned with fury that he had become a father two months before the allotted time" (115). However, Mr. Van Koeren does not respond violently to this revelation of

adultery; rather, he "changed his tactics and treated [Mrs. Van Koeren] with studied neglect" (115). This affair sets up an intriguing template through which to read "The Pot of Tulips." As recurs in several of O'Brien's other Gothic tales, the main characters operate in a pattern of obsession and neglect, each dependent upon the others' interest yet none apparently willing to actively assist in alleviating the suffering of others. Ironically, because Mr. Van Koeren is monomaniacally jealous of his wife, he decides to punish her infidelity by ignoring her and neglecting her son, Alain Van Koeren. Alain goes on to live "a life of meagre [*sic*] dissipation," and Mr. Van Koeren dies almost immediately after his illegitimate son's death (115). Thus begins a tale of intrigue and woe the likes of which O'Brien is expert in delivering and which offers further evidence of his use of the Gothic to "reinstate memory in the public sphere" (Gibbons). Moreover, even though "The Pot of Tulips" concerns the Irish mostly indirectly, its messages regarding the capacity for sympathy in the face of suffering follows from O'Brien's efforts elsewhere to emphasize the role of history in shaping the outcomes of contemporary living.

Continuing the tale, Escott recounts the mystery of Van Koeren's estate—which is found to be worthless—and the story begins to hint at an Irish underbelly previously unnoticed. Even though they expected a great windfall, Mrs. Van Koeren and her daughter Alice (Escott's future wife) are left as paupers. Escott's interest in the Van Koeren women, although self-involved, seems motivated primarily by his concern that they must work for a living. After declaring his love for Alice Van Koeren outright, Escott goes on to describe the oddities of the Van Koeren home, and he relates how he and his friend, Jaspar Joye, would go on to discover just how odd it was. Upon feeling a "continuous stream of cold air blowing upon [his] face," Escott identifies the tell-tale

signs of the paranormal and encounters the ghost of Mr. Van Koeren, who "held in both hands a curiously painted flower pot, out of which sprang a number of the most beautiful tulips in full blossom" (121; 122-123). Escott intends to get to the bottom of this mystery, questioning the meaning behind the pot of tulips. Here, Escott's position as narrator and O'Brien's as author are intertwined. Through Escott's narration, O'Brien explicitly addresses the symbolism of "The Pot of Tulips," which remains difficult to decipher yet is linked to the Irish.

Escott continues, "I declare solemnly, that, as the ghost made his exit, I not only saw the door open, but *I saw the corridor outside*, and *distinctly observed a large picture of William of Orange that hung just opposite to my room*. This to me was the most curious portion of the phenomenon I had witnessed" (123; *emphasis* in original). With this passage, "The Pot of Tulips" provides a specific connection to the Irish and a link to the Famine itself. William of Orange, known as "King Billy" to many, was victorious over the Catholic King James II at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690, which established and solidified English Protestant influence in Ireland for centuries thereafter. This victory is celebrated every July 12 by sectarian 'Orange' societies, primarily in Northern Ireland, where memories of Protestant/Catholic conflicts remain palpable. The appearance of William of Orange in "The Pot of Tulips" establishes an explicit historiographical context in which to read much of O'Brien's fiction. Other than his Dutch nationality and this 'curious' portrait, the character of Van Koeren has no apparent connection to King Billy; however, many readers of "The Pot of Tulips," especially Americans of Irish descent, would have realized the relevance of 'Orange' history in their lives. Whereas most established Americans of Irish or Scots-Irish origin were predominantly Protestant prior

to 1840, Irish immigrants during and after the Famine were mostly Catholic. Often, they were the direct targets of nativist Know-Nothing animus. As Mary Kelly writes of antebellum New York, "WASPish ill feeling escalated daily with the spectacle of what looked like a plague of emaciated foreigners descending into the lower recesses of the city" (*The Shamrock* 17). Placed in this context, "The Pot of Tulips" takes on additional weight as a story of assimilation and its concomitant difficulties for the Irish. J. J. Lee adds: "The injection of even sharper religious antipathies into public attitudes partly helps explain why Famine memories would become so divisive—why they would feature centrally in the Catholic sense of identity and scarcely at all in the Protestant" (17). Thus, the specter of King Billy recalls not only Irish history of the seventeenth century, but also the more immediate histories of the Famine and of the problems concerning Irish assimilation in the United States. Escott's encounter with the ghost of Mr. Van Koeren would not be as scary or meaningful without the addition of King Billy.

Reading "The Pot of Tulips" within this combative context, the story becomes an allegory for nativist/immigrant relations in post-Famine America. One notes O'Brien's use of language sympathetic to marginalized Americans, including Irish Catholic immigrants. After Harry Escott and Jasper Joye again encounter the apparition of Mr. Van Koeren, they witness another ghost, "the unfortunate wife of Van Koeren," Marie (O'Brien 126). Escott narrates: "Occasionally she would turn her eyes on me, as if to call my attention to her companion, and then, returning, gaze on him with a sad, womanly, half-eager smile, that to me was inexpressibly mournful" (127). Escott's identification with Marie Van Koeren mirrors the ways in which O'Brien sympathizes with his fellow Irish Americans, both Protestant and Catholic. If Mr. Van Koeren is linked to William of

Orange and the Protestant past, Marie Van Koeren—who is said to be from Belgium—represents the Catholic, ostensibly "inexpressible" present:

> There was something exceedingly touching in this strange sight—these two spirits, so near, yet so distant. The sinful husband torn with grief and weighed down with some terrible secret, and so blinded by the grossness of his being as to be unable to see the wife-angel who was watching over him; while she, forgetting all her wrongs, and attracted to earth by perhaps the same human sympathies, watched from a greater spiritual height, and with a tender interest, the struggles of her suffering spouse. (127)

In the end, the symbolism behind "The Pot of Tulips" is left unexplained. O'Brien, via Escott, regrettably takes the easy way out of explaining Van Koeren's haunting; we never hear Escott's theory "reconciling ghosts and natural phenomena" (129). However, justice is served and Alice attains her "envied position" as heiress of the Van Koeren fortune. Likewise, Escott makes out like a benevolent bandit, marrying into money. Thus, "The Pot of Tulips" becomes a tale of modernization and assimilation, since its characters, especially Harry and Alice, succeed by overcoming their pasts, capitalizing on the present, and focusing on the future. After all, it is in the pot that Van Koeren's fortune is found, and Escott notes that Mr. Van Koeren "became aware of his wife's innocence just before he died" (129). In the end, Marie's hard work and genuine innocence are rewarded and justified by her daughter's marriage to Escott; thus, she accustoms herself to her new circumstances, something many other immigrants to America had to do. Likewise, she maintains her ability to sympathize with others even though her husband is "so blinded" to his wife's goodness.

Although "The Pot of Tulips" cannot fully account for the complexity of the overall Irish immigrant experience, it offers a tale of assimilation applicable in part to the Famine Irish. The assimilation of Famine Irish immigrants into American culture was a process fraught with initial failures and only gradual successes. Stephen Brighton accounts for these problems of assimilation, borrowing terms familiar to readers of hunger imagery: "At the time of the Great Hunger, many Protestant politicians and media perpetuated the idea that the thousands of poor and unskilled Irish landing daily of U.S. shores were an invasion of the American way of life, a social plague, and a 'cultural tumor eating away at America's heart and soul'" (135). Although the eventual story of Irish-American assimilation would be told as one of triumph, many immigrants did not transition easily into an American lifestyle so different from their lives in predominantly rural, pre-modern Ireland. Their hunger was seen by many as a threat to the American way of life. O'Brien must have understood this sense of alienation, having himself lived in western Cork and Limerick, sites of some of the Famine's worst scenes of starvation and other Famine-related traumas. Among O'Brien's Gothic tales, "What Was It?"—first published in *Harper's* in March 1859—stands out for its oblique connections to Irish history and culture, particularly regarding the Famine. It also complicates the relatively simplistic assimilation story presented elsewhere in O'Brien's oeuvre, and it embodies the fullest extent of O'Brien's investment in hunger as a trope of Gothic literature and as a means of connecting directly to the experience of the Famine, which many others felt was otherwise best left behind them.

"What Was It?" includes another unreliable and picaresque narrator—also named Harry but not necessarily the same from "The Pot of Tulips"—who encounters a strange

creature while lodging in a "haunted house." Once again, the narrator shares traits in common with O'Brien himself: he has written supernatural fiction and claims to possess "considerable physical strength" (O'Brien 60). He also smokes opium and recognizes that his story may "meet with an unusual amount of incredulity and scorn" (55). Filled however with the "literary courage to face unbelief," O'Brien's narrator proceeds to describe being attacked by "Something" while sleeping, an encounter "so awful and inexplicable that [his] reason fairly reels at the bare memory of the occurrence" (55, 57). Harry's narration nonetheless continues unabated:

> Immersed in the most profound darkness, totally ignorant of the nature of the Thing by which I was so suddenly attacked, finding my grasp slipping every moment, by reason, it seemed to me, of the entire nakedness, neck, and chest, having every moment to protect my throat against a pair of sinewy, agile hands, which my utmost efforts could not confine,--these were a combination of circumstances to combat which required all the strength, skill, and courage that I possessed. … *I saw nothing*! (O'Brien 61)

O'Brien's invisible, violent creature in "What Was It?" offers perhaps the most apt allegory for the human experience of hunger that exists in the American canon. We do not hear much of the creature's struggles; rather, we experience the perspective of Harry's witnessing. Whereas "the terror of the witness of famine lies profoundly in what the spectacle of the skeletal, starving human reveals about the very minimum of humanity itself" (Lloyd, "The Indigent Sublime" 164), this scene of struggle between O'Brien's narrator and an invisible creature opens itself to readings that emphasize humanity's

potential even in the face of violence. One is initially stunned by the suddenness of this attack in "What Was It?" Although the story's title and its suspenseful narration repeatedly hint at an intimate encounter with a creature of some kind, the irony of its invisibility is most striking. Harry's emphatic claim of "*I saw nothing*!" only adds to the impact of this scene and its aftermath. The creature's power, while physically limited, is made greater by its invisibility. "But after all," says the "Mystery" critic of the "invisible ghost," "it is little more than a half-being." Even after the extensive analysis 'the creature' undergoes in "What Was It?" not only is its gender unknown (except that it had the weight of a fourteen-year-old boy), but the threat it appears to represent is itself uncertain. One is left to speculate about how seriously to read the symbolism of O'Brien's "thing." Charles Fanning suggests that this monster could be considered an Irish-American *Invisible Man*, invoking Ralph Ellison's more famous twentieth-century figure (88). However, a major difference, aside from race, is that this "Thing" does not speak. Even though it represents an actual and imminent threat to the narrator, the creature's invisibility and silence could be seen to diminish its power. Moreover, its inability to eat, even amidst its evident hunger, link it to a victim of Famine and further embroil O'Brien's narrator in a socially symbolic power dynamic that he cannot easily escape.

After the narrator of "What Was It?" subdues the creature that attacked him, he struggles to understand just what 'it' is, and he comments on the act of viewing such a 'thing': "There was something truly terrible in beholding, as it were, those secondhand indications of the terrible writhings and agonized struggles for liberty which themselves were invisible" (65). Consulting with his opium-smoking friend, the so-called "Doctor"

Hammond (along with another Doctor X—), the narrator decides to make a plaster cast of the "Enigma" and takes time to note its striking physiognomy, exclaiming: "It was shaped like a man,--distorted, uncouth, and horrible, but still like a man. It was small, not over four feet and some inches in height, and its limbs revealed a muscular development that was unparalleled. Its face surpassed in hideousness anything I have ever seen. … It looked as if it was capable of feeding on human flesh" (O'Brien 66). Not only is the creature incredibly strong, but it is also potentially cannibalistic. However, calling it a cannibal would assign it more than a modicum of humanity, which is all O'Brien's narrator seems to allow for at this point, describing it "like a man" but not yet admitting its humanity outright. Next, Harry focuses on food (or lack thereof) for dramatic effect: "The most singular part of the affair was that we were entirely ignorant of what the creature habitually fed on. … It was awful to stand by, day after day, and see the clothes toss, and hear the hard breathing, and know that it was starving" (67). When one reads this 'creature' as a Gothic representation of a Famine victim, "What Was It?" becomes a much more complicated and compelling narrative, combining fascination with fear, terror with sympathy. Seeing this representation as a "delegation of power" helps one to appreciate its personal, social, and even political relevance (Smart 63). Here, one witnesses the horrifying effects of hunger firsthand: hunger may lead eventually to death, but it elicits such terrible anger along the way, the likes of which is perhaps best expressed through the creature from "What Was It?"

Although O'Brien himself never suffered the visceral hardships of the Famine, his imagery of hunger in this story and elsewhere allows his readers to encounter such disturbing realities through the distance and safety of fiction. As David Lloyd contends:

> The Famine is made possible in large part by the sphere of representation: by the representation, determined by the need to negate a complex alternative culture, of the Irish as excess, as irrational and immoral, … as an abundance of wretchedness. Such representations shape the perception of the Irish as at, if not beyond, the very pale of what can be said to be human. ("Indigent Sublime" 161)

O'Brien participates in this representation of the Famine while living within "a complex alternative culture" of his own. His distance from the event itself allowed him some security from its "irrational and immoral" elements, yet he was simultaneously enmeshed in its "abundance of wretchedness." Rather than minimizing the horrors of the Famine, O'Brien forces his readers to consider the relationship between being hungry and struggling for freedom. In other words, the "Thing" in "What Was It?" should be read as a representation of the anger and ambivalence brought about by the experiences of the Famine in Ireland, which were repressed in the United States in part through the force of modernization. Whereas in Britain, "the monstered Irishman reflected an anti-modernist fantasy and embodied powerful fears of contamination and devolution" (Smart 63), similar fears would have been sparked in American readers, only on a more diversified scale. Like Melville, O'Brien was aware of the relationship between sympathy and fear. Melville's "strange feeling" again serves as an apt phrase to describe O'Brien's complex connections to his Irish past.

O'Brien's invisible creature, like many Irish Americans of the Famine generation, is incapable of expressing a grievance that remains to be more fully acknowledged. While its silence is a trope familiar to Famine scholars of all kinds, few have attended as closely

as necessary to the nature of this silence, or, more specifically, to "this ambiguous territory of the mouth," as David Lloyd terms it ("The Memory of Hunger" 212). The culminating scenes of "What Was It?" do not simply employ silence as a means of ending the creature's "terrible writhings and agonised struggles for liberty" (O'Brien 65). Instead, O'Brien offers his readers a closer view of his narrator's decision-making process after being faced with such a visceral, yet curiously sympathetic threat:

> Hammond and myself had racked our brains during the long night to discover some means by which we might realise the shape and general appearance of the Enigma. As well as we could make out by passing our hands over the creature's form, its outlines and lineaments were human. There was a mouth; a round, smooth head without hair; a nose, which, however, was little elevated above the cheeks; and its hands and feet felt like those of a boy. (O'Brien 65)

Not only is the creature's gender revealed here, but it is finally considered almost "human." Specifically, its mouth, as the site from which both its potential speech and unfortunate silence comes, embodies "the ambivalent representation of Irishness: the site at once of fluent speech and secretive silence, lament and laughter, intoxication and hunger, guile and guilelessness" (Lloyd, "The Memory of Hunger" 212). Such ambivalence is precisely what O'Brien has been signifying all along, and there is perhaps no better representation of the ambivalence surrounding the Irish experience of the Famine than through this Gothic creature in "What Was It?"

One is left, then, to ask the question: Is this creature itself meant to embody a victim of Famine, or is it, more likely, a symbol of the suffering that many who witnessed the Famine were forced to internalize? Returning again to the term melancholia, which

"is, precisely and above all, a form of grieving that compounds the pain of loss by inflicting further injury upon the self" (Moglen 153), one notices how the creature seems to participate in its own destruction. Its apparent refusal to eat differs in essence from the victims of the Famine (most of whom simply could not afford or find access to healthy foods), but one must note similarities in kind. For this creature to give in and accept handouts—not unlike those nationalist Irish who refrained from accepting evangelical charity and disdained those who "took the soup"—would align itself with the very regime of power it apparently seeks to attack. Whatever its grievance against the narrator, the creature ultimately turns its rage upon itself. If one continues to read this 'thing' as a victim of Famine, one cannot easily accommodate this unfortunate ending other than to view it as an expression of melancholy, a condition similarly experienced by many Irish as they sought to assimilate in the United States and elsewhere. Once again, however, David Lloyd further problematizes this reading: "But the question that must arise, however, is whether *melancholy* is in fact the term by which to apprehend the cultural formations that emerge in the wake of the Famine. Does not the invocation of this term … tend to reinscribe Irish cultural practices as somehow deficient, lacking, and pathological in relation to a normative modernity?" (Lloyd, "The Memory of Hunger" 215). The simplest answer to Lloyd's provocative question is "yes." The intervention here, however, is more complicated, as is O'Brien's symbolism of the Famine through the creature in "What Was It?" Ultimately, although one will never know precisely how O'Brien understood the Famine for himself, his Gothic short stories warn readers of the dangers of naturalizing and normalizing such an experience. Likewise, while the creature in "What Was It?" seems to undergo a form of suffering best termed *melancholia*,

O'Brien is careful enough to refrain from reinscribing Irish culture "as somehow deficient." Instead, he represents it as something rich enough to embody the very phenomena that both constitute and threaten to destroy our "normative modernity."

Although Harry's life appears to return to normal after his visit from the creature in "What Was It?" his encounter remains "the most singular that has ever come to my knowledge" (O'Brien 67), and one cannot help but remain wary of the remnants that this experience leaves behind. As with the trauma of the Famine, one can naturalize and normalize almost any event, but its after-effects are less certain or manageable. Dying of hunger, however one rationalizes it, is a process that cannot and should not be accommodated in the modern world. Yet hunger remains an irrepressible part of modern life, and our understanding of its insidious effects remains rather primitive. On their surface, the closing lines of O'Brien's "What Was It?" offer scant explanation of the story's symbolism; however, Harry's final lament can and should be read as a representation of what it means to witness hunger: "It was evident that the creature was dying for want of sustenance. While this terrible life-struggle was going on, I felt miserable. I could not sleep. Horrible as the creature was, it was pitiful to think of the pangs it was suffering" (67). Simply yet skillfully, O'Brien offers Harry's witnessing of hunger as a way to connect with those readers who would feel similarly ambivalent sympathy in the face of the Famine. Hunger elicits pain, not only it its immediate victims, but also in its viewers. It is this experience that O'Brien most admirably represents in "What Was It?" and in his other Gothic short stories selected here. Undoubtedly, further inquiry into the fiction of Fitz-James O'Brien will yield fantastic results as scholars (Irish Studies and Americanist alike) uncover other examples of literature dealing with the

Famine, the innovative representations of which remain insufficiently analyzed and underappreciated.

The impact of the Famine is certainly more widespread than previously realized; it is an event well-suited for transatlantic historians and for other scholars concerned with social justice. Likewise, its literary impact beyond the shores of Ireland is just beginning to be uncovered. The Famine transformed the Irish cultural imagination, and its impact on Irish-American fiction writing is no less transformative. As Marjorie Fallows writes, "What the Irish have demonstrated is that American life can encompass difference without insisting on eradicating it, and that an ethnic group can adopt an American identity without completely renouncing its historical sense of peoplehood" (qtd. in Lynch-Brennan 346). Studying representations of the Famine in the fantastic tales and poems of Fitz-James O'Brien allows readers to broaden their understandings of memory, identity, and assimilation. Not only do O'Brien's works serve as literature of the Famine, they help to redefine the Famine itself. O'Brien saw and felt Famine hunger; he sought to represent it not just as a catalyst for sympathy, but as a complex physical and psychological phenomenon that has much to do with being human. Although his background was one of relative privilege, O'Brien's ability to sympathize with those around him suffering from the Famine was nonetheless meaningful. While his style differed significantly from the likes of missionary Asenath Nicholson, O'Brien also encountered hunger head-on. His texts deserve to be read for what they were: unsophisticated yet serious poems and fascinating, fantastic Gothic fiction that opens up the dimensions of the short story to include concerns with social justice. O'Brien himself warrants special recognition for his attempts to imagine the Famine within his fiction:

"This was our poet—one who strode / These streets in *ante bellum* ages, / … A Dublin gownsman, London rake, / … 'Twas here he sowed each splendid crop / Of fecund wind—here did he reap / Fine whirlwinds. … / … He swayed the scepter, felt the lash, / Wrought starving nights—by sated days" (Watrous 431).

Chapter 4:
Entitled to Hunger:
Frederick Douglass and the Famine Irish

> I used also to carry bread with me, enough of which was always in the house, and to which I was always welcome; for I was much better off in this regard than many of the poor white children in our neighborhood.
> ~ *Narrative of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, 1845

> I had heard much of the misery and wretchedness of the Irish people, previous to leaving the United States, and was prepared to witness much on my arrival in Ireland. But I must confess, my experience has convinced me that the half has not been told.
> ~ Letter from Douglass to William Lloyd Garrison, 27 March 1846

> Every hour sees us elbowed out of some employment to make room for some newly-arrived emigrant from the Emerald Isle, whose hunger and color entitle him to special favor.
> ~ *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, 1881

The epigraphs above intimate a remarkable transformation in Frederick Douglass's view of the Famine Irish, along with the generations of American Irish who followed in their wake. On the cusp of the Famine, Douglass could profess sympathy for "the poor white children in our neighborhood," which almost certainly included many Irish immigrants (*Narrative*; ch. VII, 41). His use of the first-person, plural possessive pronoun appears genuine as Douglass demonstrates an affinity for the Irish in much of his early writing and oration. In 1846, during his famous visit to Ireland, Douglass could "confess" that not even "half" of the Irish story had "been told," implying that he could and would eventually help to tell it in full. However, Douglass's principal interests lie elsewhere amidst the *sturm und drang* of anti-slavery politics. He struggled throughout his career to maintain sympathy for Irish immigrants while attending to the more pressing

goals of abolition, emancipation, and enfranchisement for African Americans. In addition, Douglass's concerns about anti-black racism, especially as it was exercised among Irish Americans, pushed him away from sympathy for the Irish towards resentment of them. After the Famine, Douglass would label the Irish American as a job stealer, "whose hunger and color entitle him to special favor" above and beyond any deserved sympathy (*Life and Times* 367). While one can understand how *color* could privilege an Irish person in the nineteenth century, most important here is the idea that, in Douglass's view, both color *and* hunger *entitle* the Irish over African Americans for reasons that even he would have difficulty explaining. Put simply, Douglass's view of the American Irish—seeing them as both white *and* hungry—moves from admiration to anxiety and, ultimately, to anger.

Race is an obvious and undeniable advantage for Irish Americans throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but hunger requires much more consideration in order to see its benefits. In other words, if it was economically, politically, and culturally beneficial to be white in the nineteenth-century United States, how and why was it also rhetorically advantageous to be hungry? The reasons for the development of Douglass's position towards the Irish are explored in this chapter, which focuses on his encounter with the Famine and with related representations of hunger throughout his *oeuvre*, most specifically the three editions of his autobiography: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845); *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855); and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written By Himself* (1881). This chapter's guiding idea derives from Douglass's own assertions about how hunger, distinct from yet attached to race, can be represented as a form of entitlement. Douglass's turn away from initial

identification with the Famine Irish is due in part to his recognition of hunger as a powerful rhetorical tool for soliciting sympathy that, in Douglass's view, was held by the Irish almost exclusively. The Famine, among other historical and cultural circumstances, forced Douglass to revise his autobiography so that he could maintain the sympathy of his audience members, whom the specter of Irish hunger threatened to distract from his focus on anti-slavery and other forms of advocacy for African Americans. Ultimately, Irish hunger served to solidify for Douglass a clearer sense of who was (and who was not) considered to be worthy of sympathy in the nineteenth-century transatlantic sphere. While his concerns with racial and economic justice remain paramount, Douglass's anxiety about the social and rhetorical impact of Irish hunger is a critical component of his literary endeavors overall.

This Irish attachment to hunger, although limited by particular economic and cultural circumstances, has nonetheless appeared as a transhistorical phenomenon due to the Famine's seminal impact as both historical reality and rhetorical trope. Hunger as a sign of communal suffering became more associated with the Irish than with any other group in the antebellum era, and this association persisted throughout the nineteenth century and even into the twentieth. Douglass, beyond most of his contemporaries, was well aware of the political potential and rhetorical efficacy of hunger, and he recognizes hunger's association with the Irish throughout the revisions of his autobiography. Likewise, he realizes that hunger, however much it affected the lives of both enslaved and free black persons, was not often affiliated in the common reader's mind with African Americans. If anything, hunger was seen as peripheral to the slave experience. For Douglass's anti-slavery platform to be effective within the broader power relations at

play in the nineteenth century, slavery had to always trump hunger and other socioeconomic concerns. In his attempt to solicit sympathy for the abolitionist cause, Douglass comes to worry that the Irish association with hunger threatens to preclude attempts by African Americans to identify it as an element of their own enslavement and continued oppression. For African Americans, however hungry they were literally or figuratively, their rhetorical use of hunger as a means of soliciting sympathy had to contend with the Famine Irish and with subsequent generations of Irish Americans intent on achieving their own political and socioeconomic gains.

This chapter further suggests that the relationship between African Americans and Irish Americans throughout much of the nineteenth century hinged on hunger, in juxtaposition with race, as an archetype of suffering. This assertion stems in part from recent scholarship placing the Irish in what Nini Rodgers calls a "transatlantic jigsaw puzzle," which "reveals that black slavery had a dramatic impact both on the Irish who emigrated across the Atlantic and upon the economy at home [in Ireland]" ("Introduction" 2). Like the sympathetic attachments created by the transatlantic abolitionist movement, sympathy relating to hunger has the potential to cross boundaries of nation, class, and race. As horrifying and destructive as the Famine was, the Irish in America were able to capitalize on their hunger because it helped them to solicit sympathy from Americans of all races. As claims Ta-Nehisi Coates, "Racism is not merely a simplistic hatred. It is, more often, broad sympathy toward some and broader skepticism toward others." This definition of racism is most relevant to this chapter's goal of tracing the role of hunger in soliciting sympathy. Even as slavery remained the principal social problem of the antebellum era, African Americans had to contend with

skepticism about their prospects while the Famine Irish, comparably speaking, were recipients of "broad sympathy." This is not to say that the Irish were not also alienated from and victimized by the broader American public, nor that they themselves did not participate actively in the racist behavior that dominated the nineteenth century. Adding to the enlightening discourse concerning race in the nineteenth century, this investigation into antebellum interpretations of hunger shows how racism was not always obvious to see. In other words, the Famine was a politically useful yet problematic topic for those who sought to promote abolitionism among the American public. While relations between African Americans and Irish in the nineteenth century were hardly happy, the African American response to the Famine highlights the very constructions of race and ethnicity that often involve such tension. Hunger factors into this tension as both a sociological fact and a rhetorical device nearly as significant as race itself. Race alone does not explain the relationship between African Americans and Irish in the nineteenth century, nor do other complex modes of analysis such as class and nationality. This explanation of Irish hunger, then, offers insights into their complicated relationship with African Americans even beyond the antebellum era.

Of course, factors other than hunger alone affected the ability of the Famine Irish to make progress towards acceptance as Americans during the nineteenth century. For instance, the fact that most Irish, at least the men among them, had access to the vote increased the likelihood that they would be included in the broader American community much more easily than former slaves and free African Americans. An article from *The North Star* on May 5, 1848, reinforces this view of Irish suffrage and political usefulness:

> Irishmen! … We could not get on without them. … They have votes, and they plunge into the heated contest, get their heads broke and their coats torn to pieces to secure the election of some person who probably cares nothing more about them than to secure their votes. ("Irishmen")

Presumably, the "We" in this passage includes any American benefitting from the Irish, "who were laboring with zeal for their daily bread" ("Irishmen"). This anonymous writer's apparent praise of the Irish is delivered for an audience that most likely includes African American readers of abolitionist periodicals. One is left to ponder this writer's motive, however, as such encomium must be calculated for political effect. The editors' decision to include this portrait of Irishmen is intended in part to solicit sympathy for the editors' own abolitionist cause. The exclamation point after "Irishmen!" attracts a reader's attention, and one is then prompted to consider the political and socioeconomic value of the Irish in America. However ironic it was that their votes went unappreciated by those they elected, Irish access allowed others (including mostly Democratic supporters of slavery) to better their circumstances in a country that did not yet appreciate Irish contributions. While suffrage is an undeniably significant right that the Irish would eventually exercise to their own advantage, this article makes it clear that, at least in the 1840s, they were kept from accessing the fruits of their freedom as fully as other white male Americans.

In the considerable scholarship concerning African Americans and Irish in the nineteenth century, there remains a dearth of analyses regarding responses to the Famine from across the Atlantic, specifically in regard to depictions of hunger. Some of the most enlightening commentary on the Famine, however, comes from former slaves and free

black people in the United States. From famous figures like Frederick Douglass to lesser-known individuals, African Americans encountered Irishmen and Irishwomen both in Ireland and in America. The views put forward in African American newspapers both reflect and diverge from other American attitudes concerning the Famine. Former slaves and free African Americans (among other abolitionists) saw the Famine and the subsequent Irish Catholic immigration to North America as catalysts for their own calls for social change. Concern for Irish suffering was promoted through several African American newspapers, and this coverage suggests that the Irish were considered by many to be as much *American* as they were *other*, prompting some African American readers to reconsider their own social plight. African Americans could sympathize with Irish hunger but had to remain always cognizant of the need to solicit sympathy for their own worthy causes.

Language employed by African Americans and others in reference to the Irish and to their hunger tells much about how the phenomenon of the Famine was understood on a broader scale than analyses of race and class alone can provide. Among all Americans, expressions of sympathy for the plight of the Famine Irish were tempered by Nativism, anti-Catholicism, and ethnic prejudice. American slaveholders, eager to reinforce racist ideologies and societal controls, were likely to place the Irish in a "competitive one-ups-man-ship against African Americans" (Ferreira). The disadvantages of the Famine Irish were initially easier to see than their advantages, so they became both easy targets and apt archetypes for Americans of all races and classes. Irish laborers were especially susceptible to ridicule for the types of work they took on; some joked that other laborers

"turned Irishman" whenever they were forced to complete a demeaning task on construction sites (Campbell 53).

While the racial implications of such a phrase are open to debate, one should also consider the psychological effects that the idea of *turning Irish* had upon African Americans and the Irish themselves. To be Irish was to be dirty and desperate, but it was also frighteningly easy to *turn* towards Irishness if circumstances demanded. Some African Americans could thus psychologically benefit from placing the Irish below themselves in an imagined social hierarchy, yet as they viewed the Famine Irish, African Americans were confronted with the facts of their own material impoverishment. While some African Americans derided the idea of deigning to perform *Irish* labor, they also worried about the fact that many jobs which could have gone to African Americans were being taken by the Irish. In the 1830s, domestic service jobs in New York and other major American cities were dominated by African Americans; by the 1850s, after the Famine, most were Irish (Diamond 452). There was both a real and figurative fight being waged among free black people and immigrant Irish in the 1840s and 1850s, and hostilities would boil over—amidst other contributing circumstances—in the infamous Draft Riots during the Civil War in 1863. In the rhetorical realm, much sympathy relating to hunger was reserved for the Irish. Real political and economic power was at stake as the Irish gained a foothold in the United States while African Americans struggled to obtain and maintain freedoms continually denied them. Perhaps above other groups in the antebellum era, African Americans could view the Irish experience as a reason to sympathize, but such sympathy came along with the danger that the issue of hunger became almost exclusively "Irish," thus eliding African American suffering. One must be

careful, however, not to label the Irish as victims only. Undoubtedly, there were sufferers of disease and desperation among them, but there were also many who employed whatever agency they had to create lives for themselves in the United States (Anbinder 137). It must be said that no matter how hungry they were, the Irish always had access to whiteness.

While race remained the ultimate means of differentiation, the analogy of the Irish situation with that of African Americans was made often in antebellum America. As the Irish were associated with poverty, they were therefore considered by many Americans to be almost *black*. "Although the Irish were primarily white," contends Patricia Ferreira, "their skin color did not necessarily 'guarantee their admission' to the white race." Douglass therefore could not allow a *black* Ireland to overwhelm the cause of real black people in America. This point follows Richard Hardack, who writes, "A 'black Ireland' is then a significant threat to Douglass, not a potential political ally. … Slavery becomes a rhetorically contested site—one which Irish and African Americans both lay claim to—and he must ultimately propose that the Irish are responsible for their own fate" (118). Such an explicit focus on slavery, however, excludes the impact of hunger upon Irish and African American relations. Slavery was not the only "rhetorically contested site" in antebellum America, nor was a "black Ireland" itself the exclusive point of contention for Douglass and other African Americans. They also had to contend with a "hungry Ireland." The dilemma for Douglass was to avoid engaging in a comparison of social plights while emphasizing the differences between the condition of slaves and the relative freedom of others in the antebellum era. Likewise, Douglass had to account for increasingly violent provocations from the very same Irish for whom he had once felt

such sympathy. Ultimately, hunger becomes a source of contention in Douglass's texts as he realizes how the Irish access it, in juxtaposition with race, as a marker of their entitlement.

In order to emphasize the role of hunger in Douglass's writing more broadly, it is worth noting here an important instance in Douglass's oeuvre that captures the essence of his concern with hunger. In Douglass's novella *The Heroic Slave*, his hero Madison Washington explicitly notes, with considerable relief, how hunger was not an integral part of his experience of slavery. In Part II, Washington discusses his experiences attempting to escape. In the passage below, Washington points out the particularity of hunger among the other forms of suffering associated with his plight:

> Here were hunger, cold, thirst, disappointment, and chagrin, confronted only by the dim hope of liberty. I tremble to think of that dreadful hour. To face the deadly cannon's mouth in warm blood unterrified, is, I think, a small achievement, compared with a conflict like this with gaunt starvation. The gnawings of hunger conquers [*sic*] by degrees, till all that a man has he would give in exchange for a single crust of bread. Thank God, I was not quite reduced to this extremity.

Douglass depicts here the "extremity" of hunger in its most visceral form. In such moments, one can identify signs of Douglass's developing use of hunger imagery to achieve lasting literary effects. Faced with "the dim hope of liberty," Madison Washington claims to "tremble" at the thought of "gaunt starvation," not (as one might expect) at his likely return to slavery. He is grateful that the "gnawings of hunger" do not overwhelm him. Although Washington is able to forego starvation through the assistance

of his wife, who smuggles him food from her nearby owner's kitchen, he remains in precarious circumstances that threaten him at every turn. It is hunger, however, that prompts perhaps the most significant commentary about his hardships overall. One is left impressed by the singular nature of hunger in this description, and it remains necessary to explore the development of this hunger imagery through Douglass's similarly tense and provocative non-fiction. Implicit in this passage also is a sense of hunger as an occlusion of individualism. In Douglass's representation here, one cannot be both hungry and free. However, Douglass's encounter with the Famine Irish would change this supposition. As the revisions of his autobiography show, hunger is not something to be conquered; it is rather to be manipulated however necessary for the sufferer's own rhetorical ends.

What follows, then, is an account of Douglass's transformation from sympathy for Famine hunger to resentment over its rhetorical and racist manipulation. In the first section, entitled "Admiration Abroad, Hesitation at Home," attention centers around Douglass's fascinating relationship with the Irish both in Ireland, where he visited in the 1840s, and in the United States, where his sympathy for them gradually began to wane. Subsequent sections of this chapter are arranged partly chronologically, partly thematically. Although it focuses primarily on Douglass's 1845 *Narrative*, the first section also incorporates passages from *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) and *Life and Times* (1881) in order to emphasize moments in which Douglass's sympathy for the Irish shine through. Abbreviations such as *My Bondage* and *FDP* (*The Frederick Douglass Papers*) will be used as necessary as the chapter moves between and among selected texts from Douglass's oeuvre. In the next section, entitled "'The same beast'," attention turns more exclusively to *My Bondage* and *Life and Times* in order to emphasis

how the revisions of Douglass's *Narrative* display his growing fears about economic competition and anti-black racism, especially among Irish Americans. Finally, the concluding section accounts for the ways in which these fears were mingled with the rhetoric of hunger, a combination that threatened to derail Douglass's overall goals of advocacy for African American causes. Among the myriad challenges of Douglass's career as a writer and orator, Famine hunger proved a most notable paradox in that Douglass could neither fully embrace the Irish nor completely reject them. This chapter's intent, then, is to better understand how and why Famine Irish immigration to the United States, along with the sympathetic associations with hunger that lasted well beyond the Famine years, could have prompted Douglass to make changes to his own life story.

Admiration Abroad, Hesitation at Home: Douglass in Ireland and The Irish in Douglass

During his lecture tour in Ireland in 1845 and early 1846, Douglass spoke regularly of the inadequacy of language to depict the horrors of life as a slave, declaring: "I never more than at present lacked words to express my feelings" ("I Am Here"). Like the great Victorian-era orator that he was, Douglass worried not about the irony that his effusive claims of lacking language belied themselves; rather, he was concerned with the rhetorical effect that such claims had upon his audiences, especially those who were sympathetic to abolitionism. Just weeks after the initial Famine potato crop had been decimated, Douglass delivered a speech in Cork, stating: "The master can buy, sell, bequeath his slave as well as any other property, nay, he shall decide what the poor slave is to eat, what he is to drink, where and when he shall speak." The antecedent of the first

"he" in this passage is "the master," whereas in the following passage from a speech dated December 5, Douglass is careful to confine the pronoun "he" exclusively to "the slave":

> God had given the slave a conscience, and freedom of will, but the slaveholder took that from him, and said he should not be governed by conscience and his religious aspirations—he should not be able to say what he should eat, when he should eat, or how he should eat—when he should work, what he should work at, or how he should work—when he should speak, what he should speak, or how he should speak. All his rights were conveyed over to his master. (par. 14)

This rhetorically elaborate passage makes clear Douglass's central message about slavery. By expanding the tripartite structure of his speech, Douglass clarifies the fundamental rights that the institution of slavery denies: rights to food, work and speech. Such speeches emphasize the value of precise language at a time when the news of the Famine threatened to elevate Irish interests over abolitionists' concerns about slavery. Douglass became aware relatively early in his career of the value of hunger as a rhetorical tool. By highlighting "what," "when," and "how he should eat," this passage exemplifies how control over food was a central topic in discourse surrounding slavery. Douglass is not saying that slaves are hungry; rather, he emphasizes their lack of control over their food choices. He also serves to remind any Irish people listening that whatever freedoms they want for themselves should first include freedom of choice over the products they eat and how they eat them.

Hunger, although a useful means of coaxing sympathy from those disinterested in his cause, risked getting in the way of Douglass's anti-slavery agenda. Abolitionism was the principal goal of his antebellum writing and oratory, including in his speeches delivered abroad. "Ironically," Ferreira writes, "Douglass came to Ireland seeking asylum," offering him an "opportunity to witness firsthand the fact that oppression can be predicated by factors in addition to race." Douglass's witnessing of the Famine in Ireland—even though it is depicted in retrospect—ultimately instantiated for him that hunger, as an outcome of oppression, could be almost as powerful a source of such oppression as was racism in the United States. Even without seeing the worst of the potato blight during his time in Ireland, Douglass's sense of hunger as a rhetorical pathway towards sympathy—if not also potential liberation—was reinforced. In most of his speeches about his stay in Ireland, however, Douglass remained reluctant to make public the suffering he saw. "Although he went on to write about the 'character and condition of the people' which had 'thrilled [him] with pleasure,'" writes Ferreira, "[Douglass] refused to offer any perspectives on those aspects of Irish life which 'filled [him] with pain.'" While it is not true that Douglass offered *no* opinion on Irish suffering, this relative silence on the part of a prolific writer and orator speaks volumes about his decision-making process, which was fraught with ambivalence. After witnessing abject poverty in Ireland, Douglass would "confess," "I must be ashamed to lift up my voice against American slavery, but that I know the cause of humanity is one the world over" (qtd. in Rodgers 285). The native Irish with whom Douglass sympathized while in Ireland may have been hungry, but he did not wish to contribute to the notion that their hunger translated to an American context. He was interested in emphasizing those aspects

of Irish suffering—and only *those* aspects—that could be employed as effectual comparisons and contrasts to the plight of African American slaves.

Douglass was understandably tentative about aligning himself with the Irish experience of hunger. Early in his travels in Ireland, in a letter to William Lloyd Garrison, Douglass references "a number of things about which I should like to write" but digresses, saying, "of this I must deny myself,--at least under present circumstances" (*FDP* 3.1.47). The "circumstances" of the Irish Famine were not conducive to Douglass's goals of abolition. Even though he could claim of his visit to Ireland "a total absence of all manifestations of prejudice against me, on account of my color" (*FDP* 3.1.54), he would also note of the Irish: "I have met with much in the character and condition of the people to approve, and much to condemn—much that has thrilled me with pleasure—and very much that has filled me with pain" (*FDP* 3.1.73). While his interactions among the Irish were numerous and diverse, Douglass remains ambivalent throughout much of his career about where the Irish stand in his political imagination. On one hand, Douglass could wax poetic about the freedom that came along with his initial travels through Ireland, where "the chattel becomes a man" (*FDP* 3.1.74). On the other hand, he would regularly point to the Irish as illustrations of the failures of some white Americans to embrace his anti-slavery cause. In a speech entitled "Colonizationist Measures," delivered in New York on April 24, 1849, Douglass mentions the Irish specifically:

> There is one class, however, of transatlantic men who come to this country, to which I wish to call special attention. It is the Irish. Now I am far from finding fault with the Irish for coming to this country, for they have a right to come here or go anywhere else they please; but I met with

> an Irishman a few weeks ago ... He conversed with me on the subject of Slavery. He had scarcely shed the first feathers of 'ould Ireland,' and had the brogue still on his lip. (Laughter.) And that man, newly imported to this country, gravely told me that it was his deliberate opinion that the coloured people in this country could never rise here, and ought to go to Africa. … What I have to say to Ireland is,--send no more such children here. (*FDP* 1.2.164-165)

Douglass could regularly refer to the Irish both as exemplars of a race that had overcome hardship and as one that had denied members of his own race the advancement they deserved. While he admits that "they have a right to come here," Douglass is clear to stress the "but" of his argument, and he cannot resist eliciting laughter from his audience with some stereotypical "stage Irish" imagery. Thus begins Douglass's frustrated fixation on the Irish. In calling "special attention" to them, Douglass takes advantage of his audience's anti-Irish bias. His problem with the Irish lies less in any belief that he may share in their inferiority than in the sense of superiority exhibited by those "transatlantic men."

Often during his time in Ireland, Douglass took the advantage of opportunities to develop his oratory and leadership skills, drawing directly from the process of Irish Catholic Emancipation. Douglass was influenced intellectually and emotionally by these engagements with the Irish. In his *Narrative*, Douglass emphasizes the importance of Irish orator Richard Brinsley Sheridan's speeches, the reading of which "enabled [him] to utter [his] thoughts." Clearly, Sheridan, along with other Irishmen like Daniel O'Connell, played an influential role in Douglass's development as an intellectual and political

figure. This influence should not be underestimated; few readers of his *Narrative* could mistake the essential role played by Irish philosophers and social thinkers on Douglass's developing consciousness as a revolutionary leader and inspiring orator. One can read in Douglass's writings a deep sense of gratitude to particular Irish figures along with ambivalence about the Irish more generally. Juxtaposed to the inspiration of men like Sheridan and O'Connell is Douglass's suspicion of unnamed Irishmen he encounters as an enslaved boy in chapter VII of his *Narrative*:

> Seeing two Irishmen unloading a scow of stone, I went, unasked, and helped them. When we had finished, one of them came to me and asked me if I were a slave. I told him I was. … The good Irishman seemed to be deeply affected … He said it was a shame to hold me. They both advised me to run away to the north … I pretended not to be interested in what they said, and treated them as if I did not understand them; for I feared they might be treacherous … I nevertheless remembered their advice, and from that time I resolved to run away. (44)

One sees fundamental evidence here of the vexed relationship that often existed between Irish and African Americans in the antebellum era and beyond. However, this passage also clearly displays Douglass's sincere desires both to help these men and to get help from them. "[U]nasked," he assists them with their work and thereby gains access to credible knowledge about his potential escape. Douglass wants to engage with these men, not only to further his own interests in escaping slavery, but also to better understand his world, to gain access to knowledge that had eluded him up to this point in his life as a slave. The mixed feelings engendered by this scene exemplify many African and Irish

American relationships in the nineteenth century. This anecdote, from very early in Douglass's life and career as a writer and orator, is exemplary of African American attitudes towards the Irish on a grander scale. The ambivalence that develops between the two groups is perhaps no better expressed than it is in this passage. While Douglass notes elsewhere the need to remain wary of "treacherous" white people in his midst, this passage remains significant for its specific association with the Irish as a community of whites for whom Douglass has sympathy, yet about whom he shares suspicions. For his part, the young Douglass does not know whether to trust or doubt the Irishmen he meets. "The good Irishman" may have only "seemed to be deeply affected," but Douglass's diction indicates that some sympathy is shared between them. Although he feigns disinterest, Douglass is essentially consumed with whatever compassion the Irish have to offer. His pretense of misunderstanding seems half-hearted; after all, these Irish are providing him with motivation and advice to escape the confines of slavery. He learns from them to be cautious but also to take risks. Although he would go on to gather more enemies than allies among the Irish and Irish Americans he encountered throughout his life, Douglass experienced professional successes and advanced his antislavery agenda precisely because of (and sometimes in spite of) his interactions with the Irish.

In certain instances, however, Douglass also identifies, to an occasionally stunning degree, with the Irish as fellow sufferers, marked by race, within the transatlantic system of oppression. He could recognize that "all the Irish lacked was 'a black skin and wooly hair, to complete their likeness to the plantation Negro'" (qtd. in Ferreira). Such a comparison indicates Douglass's recognition of race as the essential difference between African Americans and Irish, yet "their likeness" seems to include

other identifying factors, such as socioeconomic class. In such passages, Douglass seems to believe that race is the only form of entitlement that the Irish hold over African Americans. This leaves a factor like hunger open for debate. However, Douglass could not ultimately employ hunger as a unifying form of suffering experienced alike by both African Americans and Irish. An explanation for this lack of unified suffering may be that hunger was not a particularly salient symptom of a slave's oppression. Many masters were known to feed slaves consistently and adequately enough to ensure the slaves' abilities to labor in the fields and plantation houses. In fact, masters had obvious incentive to keep slaves satiated: starving a slave would undermine the value of the master's property. Except as a rare and extreme form of punishment—similar to maiming or murdering—exposing slaves to hunger was anathema. There is no known account in the African American tradition that describes an event of mass starvation remotely comparable to the hunger of the Irish Famine. As early as 1850, Douglass seemed to concede, with few exceptions, that hunger belonged in the American imagination almost exclusively to the Irish. Hunger was a symptom of the Famine, yet it was not easily comparable to the oppression endured by African American slaves. This is not to say, however, that Douglass does not try to make useful and provocative comparisons to suit his own rhetorical needs and to combat the ever-growing influence of anti-black racism among the Irish in the United States.

Although Garrison's introduction to the *Narrative* points out that Douglass's "lot was not especially a hard one" (*xiv*), clearly Douglass himself is concerned with identifying hunger as one of the major forms of suffering that he experienced while living within the slave system. In chapter VI of his *Narrative*, Douglass notes how the "city

slave," in his estimation, "is much better fed and clothed, and enjoys privileges altogether unknown to the slave on the plantation." In addition to "the odium attaching to the reputation of being a cruel master," slaveowners "above all things" would avoid being accused of "not giving a slave enough to eat" (37). Douglass goes on, however, to provide an exception to this rule: the case of Henrietta and Mary, slaves owned by Mr. Thomas Hamilton (as opposed to William Hamilton) and his wife. Douglass narrates:

> Henrietta was about twenty-two years of age, Mary was about fourteen; and of all the mangled and emaciated creatures I ever looked upon, these two were the most so. His heart must be harder than stone, that could look upon these unmoved. … Added to the cruel lashings to which these slaves were subjected, they were kept nearly half-starved. They seldom knew what it was to eat a full meal. I have seen Mary contending with the pigs for the offal thrown into the street. So much was Mary kicked and cut to pieces, that she was oftener called "*pecked*" than by her name. (*Narrative*, ch. VI)

Clearly, Douglass is concerned early on in his autobiography about depictions of hunger. This description of the abuse of Henrietta and Mary is included almost verbatim in his *Narrative* and in *My Bondage*, with slight emendations in *Life and Times*: Henrietta's name is changed exclusively to "Henny," and only brief mention is made to "Mr. Hamilton's cook—Aunt Mary," whom Douglass calls "a generous and considerate friend" (*Life and Times*; ch. XIV, 138). Likewise, in his depiction of his time under the infamous Thomas Auld, Douglass is clear to identify hunger as one of the deprivations he shared with his fellow slaves, sister Eliza, aunt Priscilla, and Henny, who were "allowed less than a half of a bushel of corn-meal per week, and very little else, either in the shape

of meat or vegetables" (*Narrative*; ch. IX, 54). As one of these "poor creatures" who have been "nearly perishing with hunger" (54), Douglass aligns himself with the sympathy associated with starvation.

As he describes "the difficulties, real or imagined" of his own experiences escaping from slavery, Douglass also employs provocative language similar to that often used to describe the horrors of the Famine (*Narrative*, ch. X; 84). The escape scene described below is tinged by stylistically Gothic tropes, not unlike some of the provocative imagery employed in *The Heroic Slave* and elsewhere in Douglass's oeuvre (and as well in the short stories of Fitz-James O'Brien). Here, one notices especially Douglass's references to hunger, including "starvation," as well as the implication of cannibalism:

> Upon either side we saw grim death, assuming the most horrid shapes. Now it was starvation, causing us to eat our own flesh; -- now we were contending with the waves, and were drowned … and finally, after having nearly reached the desired spot, -- after swimming rivers, encountering wild beasts, sleeping in the woods, suffering hunger and nakedness, -- we were overtaken by our pursuers, and, in our resistance, we were shot dead upon the spot! (*Narrative*, ch. X)

Here lies an obvious yet important difference between the experiences of African Americans and Irish in the United States. However horrible the trauma of the Famine, the Irish immigrating into North American ports were escaping more awful conditions, not being pursued by them. The same could not be said for escaped slaves and others living in precarious circumstances almost anywhere in the United States, especially after the

passage of the Fugitive Slave Act. Ironically, having regular access to food could be seen as a reason to remain a slave or to return to slavery when faced with starvation. While hunger is included among the numerous forms of oppression and abuse encountered by African Americans, the Famine Irish are linked to it (and can escape from it) more successfully than can most slaves. For African American slaves, hunger was simply one of many forms of suffering—others include "scorpions" and "snakes"—but Douglass is careful in each version of his autobiography to include this description of his 1835 escape attempt. As the passage above demonstrates, hunger happened to slaves when they tried to run, but Douglass and other former slaves still cannot lay claim to hunger as a marker of suffering as successfully as could the Irish.

In apparent contrast to Douglass's declarations that hunger was not a highly significant part of his experience as a slave, some elements of his *Narrative* suggest that hunger was always on his mind as a particularly effective marker of narrative sympathy. "[F]rom that time" of his encounter with the Irishmen in Baltimore, Douglass's resolve to run away from (and to continue exploring) the intricacies of hunger never diminishes. Gavin Jones points out how Douglass's 1845 *Narrative* "reveals how the suffering of hunger was deeply rooted in slave consciousness. … For Douglass, hunger represents the ultimate cruelty of slavery because it emphasizes the slave's total subjection, his inability to control his own food supply" (*American Hungers* 133). Explicit in Jones's contention is the relationship of hunger to slavery, but Douglass's particular attachment of hunger to his encounters with the Irish shows that the issue is more complex than one of "total subjection." When he was "about twelve years old," as described in chapter VII of his

Narrative, Douglass became familiar with the sorts of poverty and physical want experienced by many Irish Americans in the antebellum era. As he writes:

> I used also to carry bread with me, enough of which was always in the house, and to which I was always welcome; for I was much better off in this regard than many of the poor white children in our neighborhood. This bread I used to bestow upon the hungry little urchins, who, in return, would give me that more valuable bread of knowledge. I am strongly tempted to give the names of two or three of those little boys, as a testimonial of the gratitude and affection I bear them; but prudence forbids;--not that it would injure me, but it might embarrass them; for it is almost an unpardonable offence to teach slaves to read in this Christian country. (*Narrative*, ch. VII)

Douglass is careful in the opening line of this passage to repeat the word "always" as a means of emphasizing his special status as a house slave. While regular access to bread may have been rare in the life of a slave, Douglass's implication is that his time working in the house was markedly better than the experiences of those working the fields. In earlier chapters of his *Narrative*, Douglass speaks with remarkable graciousness for "that kind providence" that "marked [his] life with so many favors" (ch. VI). Meanwhile, he also takes space to list the staple diet of slaves—"eight pounds of pork, or its equivalent in fish, and one bushel of corn meal" (ch. II)—working the plantations. More specifically, Douglass's experience of hunger while living in the house of Master Hugh was ostensibly minimal. Douglass makes clear early in his *Narrative* that among the many deprivations he suffered, hunger did not top the list: "I was seldom whipped by my

old master, and suffered little from any thing else than hunger and cold. I suffered much from hunger, but much more from cold" (29). Even when he was a slave, Douglass is able to see that he was "much better off" than his hungry white peers. Hunger existed for him, but it was not a primary form of suffering that would compare with the starvation associated with the Famine. It was, rather, a useful means of gaining sympathy from audiences similar to those who would be affected by stories of Irish hunger.

On a more utilitarian level, this serendipitous access to food allows Douglass to use others' hunger to his own advantage. The "urchins" whom Douglass "converted into teachers" take part in an educational and sympathetic transaction. While they benefit from their interaction with Douglass, the risks they take in teaching him potentially outweigh whatever alimentary rewards they receive. Not only do these "urchins" face embarrassment; they also could suffer significant punishment for their role in committing "an unpardonable offence" of helping a slave to read. Douglass's diction shows signs of care and consideration both for his "characters" and for his audience. He is sympathetic towards the hungry boys who helped him, but he cannot afford to engage in simplistic comparisons of his plight with theirs. Instead, he is humble and tentative in describing this early interaction with hunger, and even though he is "strongly tempted," he is deliberate in refusing to name "those little boys." Were he to do so, one would likely read Irish surnames among them. It is likewise worthwhile to note the similarities between Douglass's strong temptation to acknowledge the identity of these boys and the way in which he behaves with the Irishmen at the docks. In the one case, Douglass makes special note that he was "unasked" in helping the Irish dockworkers carry their load. In the other, Douglass makes clear that he could out the children who had helped him, thus

compromising their status in the slaveholding South. The game being played here depends as much on a negotiation of hunger as it does on Douglass's ingenuity. Douglass valued the "bread of knowledge" over the real thing. His experience of hunger, although undoubtedly difficult, does not concern him as much as the all-consuming trappings of slavery and the ever-present desire for education. Douglass's decision to include such descriptions of his interactions with the Irish and other unspecified poor shows their influence on his representations of his experiences as a slave, and thus on his image of himself.[9] Overall, there is room in Douglass's *Narrative* to view hunger as a symptom of oppression shared by African American slaves and Irish immigrants. This apparent moment of sympathy across racial lines is tempered in Douglass's post-Famine revisions to his *Narrative*, but there are indications of carry-over.

While there are several references to hunger in Douglass's 1845 *Narrative*, in *My Bondage* and *Life and Times*, the word "hunger" is used more explicitly in two separate chapter headings per each text. Both *Narrative* and *My Bondage* also include commentary about customs among Maryland slaveholders regarding the feeding of slaves. Douglass makes the same point in both texts that failure "to give a slave enough to eat, is regarded as the most aggravated development of meanness even among slaveholders." It is not that slaveholders sympathize with hungry slaves, only that the slaves' hunger would reflect poorly upon their owners in addition to causing production

[9] Douglass was not alone in seeking to promulgate an association with the Irish. While visiting the British Isles in 1845, Douglass developed a professional relationship with William and Mary Howitt, the Quaker activists and writers whose interests ranged from abolitionism to Catholic emancipation and general advocacy for the rights of labor. Their publication, the *Journal of Literature and Popular Progress*, "consistently devoted space to the condemnation of slavery as well as the Irish famine" (Ferreira). Thus, Douglass was linked personally and professionally to other advocates of the Irish.

to suffer. In *My Bondage*, Douglass is intent on emphasizing the extent to which hunger became a greater problem for him as he experiences more of slave life:

> Want of food was my chief trouble the first summer at my old master's. Oysters and clams would do very well, with an occasional supply of bread, but they soon failed in the absence of bread. I speak but the simple truth, when I say, I have often been so pinched with hunger, that I have fought with the dog -- "Old Nep" -- for the smallest crumbs that fell from the kitchen table, and have been glad when I won a single crumb in the combat … When very hungry, I would go into the back yard and play under Miss Lucretia's window. When pretty severely pinched by hunger, I had a habit of singing, which the good lady very soon came to understand as a petition for a piece of bread. When I sung under Miss Lucretia's window, I was very apt to get well paid for my music. (*My Bondage*)

Douglass's insistence upon his own hunger not only emphasizes "the simple truth" that hunger was a reality of slavery, but also represents hunger as something that could be overcome with ingenuity and sympathy. He even indirectly gets paid for being hungry. Undoubtedly, Douglass suffered much material and psychological deprivation during his time as a slave, but one is left to wonder why Douglass waits to include such an anecdote until the revised version of his autobiography. Why is this provocative part of his story left out of his original *Narrative*? And why does Douglass stress the dehumanizing aspects of his hunger? It is worth mentioning that the role of Miss Lucretia increases in each revision of Douglass's autobiography: the *Narrative* includes 7 references to her, while she is mentioned 27 and 39 times in each respective version thereafter. To fight

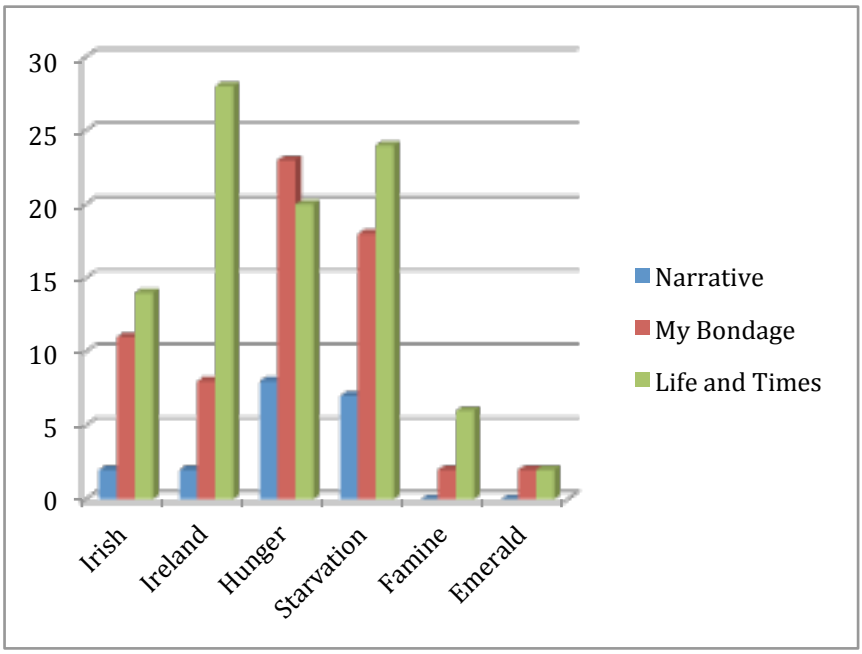
with a dog over scraps seems something right out of the horrifying depictions of Famine Irish found in periodicals of the late 1840s and early 1850s. Douglass speaks with passion regarding the Irish and their deprivations. Interestingly, however, Douglass moves quickly beyond the pseudo-gothic towards the sentimental. His "habit of singing" when hungry seduces the reader into sympathizing with his suffering while admiring him for his pluck. This scene portrays Douglass as an ingenious survivor, capable of handling hunger through his individual talent. It remains clear that, although hunger was not something that caused Douglass considerable hardship compared to the other deprivations of slavery, it was among his most useful means of soliciting sympathy from his readers, especially when it was associated with the lovable character of Miss Lucretia.

Later in *My Bondage*, Douglass narrates a scene of similar emotion, connecting again with the theme of Irish hunger. Noting the custom of slaves singing while working, Douglass says, "I have never heard any songs like those anywhere since I left slavery, except when in Ireland. There I heard the same *wailing notes*, and was much affected by them. It was during the famine of 1845-6" (ch. VI, 76; Douglass's *emphasis*). One is left captivated by Douglass's ambivalent fascination with the similarities among the experiences of Irish and African Americans. These similarities, which he thought initially were useful in his own efforts to solicit sympathy for abolition, become less so as Douglass needs to stress contrasts and emphasize the sufferings of slaves over those of the Famine Irish. However, it is clear in such lines that Douglass's keen ear allowed him to hear the complexity of the Irish experience in a way that other commentators may have missed. Douglass applied an aesthetic sensibility to his rhetoric that adds another layer to his complex engagement with the Irish. Although it is unclear exactly which "*wailing*

notes" so moved Douglass, the effect they had upon him were undeniably profound. Only the songs of slaves in the fields seemed to prompt such emotion in him. One may speculate that, within the pentatonic scale employed by both Irish and African American folk traditions, several songs share a similar range of musical notes and differences between major and minor chords (Lawson and Akinwole). Apart from whatever lyrics were sung, the emotions produced vocally would have been difficult to forget as Douglass travelled in the nineteenth century. There is no doubt that he not only *saw* the Famine Irish, but also *heard* them, meaning that he went out of his way to take note of the impact these songs had on his state of mind as he worked towards his rhetorical and social goals. Douglass's deepest sympathy for the hungry Irish came not through meeting directly with those who were starving; rather, through hearing these songs, Douglass could identify the suffering that he and his own people shared with the Famine Irish.

"The same beast": The Anxiety of Competition in *My Bondage* and *Life & Times*

Whereas much of his *Narrative* published in 1845 focuses on Douglass's domestic struggles to escape the bonds of slavery in the American South, the initial post-Famine text, 1855's *My Bondage and My Freedom*, underscores his transatlantic emphasis. The progression of Douglass's transatlantic perspective, prompted in part by Irish hunger, can also be seen quantitatively throughout the versions of his autobiography. The following chart offers a basic yet instructive view of Douglass's uses of terminology both directly and indirectly referring to the Irish:



These data tend towards a conclusion that the Irish Famine of 1845-1851, along with the subsequent mass migrations, factored heavily into Douglass's revisions of his *Narrative*. References to "Ireland" and the "Irish" more than quadruple from Douglass's 1845 *Narrative* to 1855's *My Bondage and My Freedom*. Likewise, uses of the word "hunger" almost triple from one text to the next, while references to "starvation" (including words like "starve," "half-starved," and "starving") increase in kind. Mention of "Famine" and "Emerald Isle" is made in the revised editions only. On the surface, such changes seem insignificant or easily explained given that the Famine was such a notable event between the 1845 publication of *Narrative* and the 1855 edition. Likewise, it is important to note that *My Bondage* was simply longer than the original *Narrative*, thus raising the likelihood of more references to the Irish based on length alone. However, it is likely that Douglass's uses of hunger imagery are produced in significant part by his experience with the Irish and his knowledge of the Famine. He had to encounter hunger

as a basic element of the Irish experience, and this experience shaped Douglass's hope of soliciting sympathy for the anti-slavery movement. Douglass had to make the revisions of his *Narrative* accommodate the Famine in part to make sure that the Irish would not be considered by the broader American public as the only group to suffer from hunger and thus to deserve exclusive sympathy for it. Unfortunately for Douglass and his fellow African Americans, hunger eventually becomes a marker of entitlement, not for them, but almost exclusively for the Irish.

More than in his 1845 *Narrative*, Douglass's stance in *My Bondage* and in the speeches produced while he was travelling abroad suggest a sophisticated awareness of audience. His knowledge of his "opponents" is more nuanced and understated. After paying due deference to the "sufferings of the Irish," Douglass does all he can to avoid the false analogy. Most interestingly, Douglass uses the rhetoric of silence, which was central to slave narratives and was likewise used to describe the Famine Irish. It is not they who are silent; instead, Douglass's "*silent dead*" are precisely those slaves that have yet to escape from bondage and achieve the freedom to speak for themselves. Such freedom was available to the Irish no matter how hungry and poor they were. Their material deprivations did not lead, as in the case of many African Americans, to a concomitant denial of civil rights.

In another letter to Garrison, dated March 27, 1846, Douglass's growing ambivalence about the Irish tends more towards indifference: "For a time I gave way to my feelings [about poverty in Ireland], but reason reminded me that such a course must only add another to the already long list of beggars, and I was often compelled to pass, as if I heeded not and felt not" (*FDP* 95). The use of the verb "compelled" above intimates

that Douglass's sense of control over the unfortunate condition of the Irish was lacking. There was, he knew, almost nothing he could do to remedy the deplorable reality of the Famine, even during its early stages in 1846. Douglass was thus tempted, as would be most Americans and others in his position, to turn away from such poverty once it became too much to bear. It is not that he cares nothing for the Irish hungry; rather, his use of the phrase "as if" shows that his true feelings had to be masked for the sake of his own abolitionist agenda, of which others like Garrison were so wont to remind him. In his "Farewell to the British People" from London, Douglass continues to use Irish tropes in support of his anti-slavery agenda. "To illustrate our principle of action [as abolitionists]," Douglass exclaims, "I might say that we adopt the motto of Pat, upon entering a Tipperary row. Said he, 'Wherever you see a head, hit it!' (Loud cheers and laughter)" (*FDP* v.3, 31). Thus, Douglass employs stereotypes of Irish aggression in order to engage his audiences. While an Irish "multitude can assemble upon all the green hills," Douglass and the American slaves he advocated for could not equally "proclaim their wants" (*FDP* 258-259). It did not make sense for slaves and anti-slavery supporters to use hunger as a means of soliciting sympathy. Whatever hunger they may have experienced or witnessed was irrelevant to most Americans, even to many of their fellow abolitionists.

African American leaders like Douglass were often forced to argue that the inhuman conditions of slaves and the ravages of racism were inherently harder than the unfortunate circumstances faced by women, immigrants, poor laborers, or other groups suffering from real or perceived hardship. Douglass does not simply equate the Irish case with the slave's; rather, he seeks to represent the slaves' suffering as inordinately more

painful and dehumanizing than any other form of suffering in the transatlantic world. However, in a lecture entitled "The Nature of Slavery," delivered on December 1, 1850, during the midst of the Famine and after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, Douglass offers a way of looking at this complicated relationship that indicates the shared experiences of African and Irish Americans while making clear where they differ:

> It is often said, by the opponents of the Anti-Slavery cause, that the condition of the people of Ireland is more deplorable than that of the American slaves. Far be it from me to underrate the sufferings of the Irish people. They have been long oppressed; and the same beast that prompts me to plead the cause of the American bondman, makes it impossible for me not to sympathize with the oppressed of all lands. (*My Bondage* 341)

Pausing here, one can appreciate the potential Douglass creates for generalized sympathy; he seems to struggle, however, to move much further in his exploration of the comparisons and contrasts between African American slaves and Famine Irish immigrants. This hesitation can be seen most directly in Douglass's telling diction about "the same beast that prompts" him to defend the cause of abolition. Following legendary influences like the Liberator Daniel O'Connell, Douglass works throughout his career to express sympathy for all those who are oppressed. He does not wish to underappreciate the seriousness of Irish suffering, but he knows he must do so in order to emphasize his own anti-slavery platform. The "beast" is always in Douglass, but he cannot seem to apply it towards the case of Irish hunger as ecumenically as he can in other cases.

Douglass is in the unenviable and paradoxical position of speaking for those who cannot speak for themselves (or simply are not permitted to do so). Because his pro-

slavery opponents seek to promote attention towards Irish suffering as a means to distract from calls for African American emancipation, Douglass understandably cannot allow his comparison between the two groups to be read as an equation of their suffering. He points out the need to cease seeing the Irish as passive victims "incapable of hard-dealing" (Akenson 175). In an even more intense tone, Douglass clarifies his claim:

> Yet I must say that there is no analogy between the two cases. The Irishman is poor, but he is *not* a slave. He may be in rags, but he is *not* a slave. … But how is it with the American slave! … ask the slave—*what* is his condition!—*what* his state of mind?—*what* he thinks of his enslavement! and you had as well address your inquiries to the *silent dead*. There comes no *voice* from the enslaved, we are left to gather his feelings by imagining what our's [*sic*] would be, were our goals in his soul's stead. ("The Nature of Slavery"; extracted in *My Bondage* 341; Douglass's *emphases*)

As eloquent and memorable as such lines are, they remain most provocative for how they juxtapose what to Douglass are two subjects meant to be kept distinct from one another: Irish Famine victims and African American slaves. While in some speeches Douglass vehemently denies an analogous relationship, his language otherwise employs metaphors that apply to both cases. For instance, Douglass's mention of silence here is especially significant given the critical notion of the Famine as an event that led to the silencing of its victims. Christopher Morash mentions this issue of silence most directly and memorably in his "Afterword" to the collection *Hungry Words: Images of Famine in the Irish Canon*, edited by George Cusack and Sarah Goss. Morash says, "It has long been

recognized that as an historical event in which matters such as causality, duration and agency look increasingly unresolvable, the Famine lacks a recognizable narrative shape" ("Afterword," 303). Thus, like the slave trade and other events of world history that belie beliefs in human and divine goodness, the Famine falls into a place of uneasy silence, from which simple explanations and rational understanding are precluded. It is echoed, however, in the rhetoric of silence that links African American and Irish causes.

Similar to writers like Asenath Nicholson and even Herman Melville, Douglass is speaking from a position that must counteract an elision of ordinariness. He cannot allow the oppression produced by the institution of slavery to become normalized in his audience's consciousness. Even though he may suggest similarities in the experiences of African Americans and Irish, he must maintain the "we" as an audience of African Americans, both enslaved and free, with whom his truest sympathies lie. Douglass's claim that the enslaved have no voice for themselves, however much he wishes to differentiate it, mirrors that of many Famine narratives in which the sights being described ostensibly defy narration itself. In Douglass's telling, the voices of the enslaved sound eerily like the voices of the hungry. Their silence is shared, but Douglass is precise in the passage above to distinguish the silence of American slaves from that of the Irish. He wants to make clear the difference between material deprivation and denial of civil rights, including the right to speak of one's experience. Douglass makes it his goal to prevent a paradox from winning the day: he must ensure that the silence of the Famine, which is nonetheless rhetorically effective, does not drown out the voices of the African American slaves and fellow free men and women about whom Douglass cared so

passionately. He must win the rhetorical battle not by being louder but by employing silence more effectively.

The slave system depended upon the threat of both physical violence and psychological alienation. In his seminal study *Slavery and Social Death*, Orlando Patterson offers a way of viewing the experience of African American slaves that more clearly distinguishes it from that of the Famine Irish. Through his concept of "social death," Patterson shows how slaves are silenced so much so that their very personhood is denied them. Patterson writes:

> The slave was natally alienated and condemned as a socially dead person, his existence having no legitimacy whatever. The slave's natal alienation and genealogical isolation made him or her the ideal human tool, an *instrumentum vocal*—perfectly flexible, unattached, and deracinated. (337)

Following Patterson, then, one must acknowledge the key difference between the silencing experienced by Irish Famine victims and that of slaves. African American leaders like Douglass were often forced to argue that the inhuman conditions of slaves and the ravages of racism were inherently harder than the unfortunate circumstances faced by women, immigrants, poor laborers, or some other group suffering from real or perceived hardship. "[U]ndoubtedly the most articulate former slave who ever lived" (Patterson 13), Douglass ironically uses silencing as a sign of slavery, prompting readers to reconsider its relationship to similar tropes used in descriptions of Famine suffering. The Famine Irish were not "socially dead" in Patterson's sense primarily because many could at least leave Ireland and seek new lives elsewhere. While Irish American

immigrants similarly experienced isolation and alienation, they were not entirely "unattached" nor were they "deracinated" as were African American slaves and even some free blacks. Therefore, Douglass does not simply equate the Irish case with the slave's; rather, he represents the suffering of slaves as inordinately more painful and dehumanizing than any other form of hardship in the transatlantic world.

Throughout most of *My Bondage*, the Irish remain "they," not "we," meaning that they are not considered among those whom Douglass identifies as Americans. For Douglass, the immigrant Irish do not overcome "the cruel lie" that African American adversity is linked with their prosperity (*My Bondage* 361). Another reason for his ambivalence has to do with Douglass's anti-Catholicism, which became more pronounced as his career progressed (Hardack 121). The Irish in Ireland are seen by Douglass as potential allies, but immigrant Irish Americans are distinct threats. In the face of Famine immigration and Irish poverty, Douglass had a dilemma between sympathy and self-interest. While he considers the Irish both capable and deserving of sympathy early in his career, Douglass struggles to understand their apparent incapacity for self-improvement. He was able to recognize that the Irish themselves had suffered, and the voices of Irishmen like Daniel O'Connell never were far from Douglass's ear. Thus, Douglass was truly ambivalent about the Irish, especially those he saw suffering from the Famine. On one side of the Atlantic, he could sympathize with the Irish as a "downtrodden race" hungry for freedom; however, in the United States, he struggled to distinguish the Famine Irish from the other free white people (and commonplace racists) around them. Although doing so was not his goal, it seems that his desire for solidarity with the Irish, which was not to be fulfilled, prompted the ambivalence towards the Irish

with which he struggled throughout his career as an orator and advocate for African Americans.

On their surface, Douglass's views of the Irish stem from clear socioeconomic rivalries between African Americans and Irish as two groups struggling to survive in nineteenth-century America. However, such conflicts are often overemphasized by both contemporary observers and latter-day critics (Anbinder 312). One must point to factors other than financial to explain the complicated relationship between African Americans and Irish. For one, Douglass admits that the Irish are "warm-hearted, generous, and sympathizing," and he clarifies that their "hate" for "the colored people" is a learned behavior, not a natural trait (*My Bondage* 361). This point opens up the possibility of unity between Irish and African Americans. Likewise, Douglass lays implicit blame upon those other Americans would seek to *teach* the Irish that African Americans "eat the bread which of right belongs" to the Irish themselves (361). The "cruel" party in the dispute is the broader American ideology of racism and class-based disenfranchisement. In Douglass's depiction, this lesson about social injustice is both instant and thorough. He does not yet blame the Irish—as he will come to do—for their role in believing this damaging ideology; however, he laments that they give in too easily to the damaging ideology of racism while retaining their privileges as not only white, but also hungry.

The American Irish, for Douglass, ultimately remain foreigners who learn to watch out for their own self-interests above all. In an extract from a speech deliver to the American Anti-Slavery Society (excerpted in *My Bondage* 361), Douglass cautions that "the Irish American will find out his mistake one day," further predicting and affirming, "He will find that in assuming our avocation he also has assumed our degradation. But

for the present we are sufferers" (361). Such claims upon the trait of suffering seem odd. For one, Douglass here acknowledges that the Irish have taken the jobs that would otherwise go to African Americans, and he scolds the Irish for opting to perform such labor. Instead of seeing here an opportunity for solidarity, Douglass instead considers this a "mistake" that will "one day" come back to haunt the Irish. He appears to revel in his portent that the Irish will take on the "degradation" of African Americans. In reinforcing his sympathy for fellow African Americans, Douglass seeks to limit the Irish claim on suffering. Differently from the sympathetic way in which he first spoke of the Irish in Ireland, Douglass begins to focus less on sympathy for them as the Famine ends and Irish prospects rise.

The various versions of Douglass's autobiography offer fascinating insights into this process of Irish-American assimilation after the Famine. In a speech to the American Anti-slavery Society in the spring of 1853 (also included in *My Bondage*), Douglass laments the position of black workers in competition with immigrants (here not yet specifically identified as Irish): "Every hour sees us elbowed out of some employment to make room perhaps for some newly-arrived emigrants, whose hunger and color are thought to give them a title to especial favor. … This fact proves that if we cannot rise to the whites, the whites can fall to us" (361). Here, Douglass shows how hunger is a rhetorical device for achieving sympathy. This passage suggests, on one hand, that the Irish (and other white immigrants) should be seen on the same level as African Americans; they can and do perform similar tasks as working Americans. On the other hand, one can detect bitterness in Douglass's recognition of racial entitlement. He clearly contemns the "fact" that the combination of hunger and color has been used by

"emigrants" as means of accessing economic power. In addition to race, hunger is depicted here as a form of "especial favor." Douglass seems worried that those who are publicly and undeniably hungry can now claim access to Americanness more easily than former slaves and even free black Americans like himself. As a marker of identity, hunger, in Douglass's articulation, is just as valuable as whatever whiteness the Irish may have achieved. Their process of assimilation is depicted by Douglass as a continual and inexorable climb that displaces black workers along the way. However, as this is still early in Douglass's transition from sympathy for the Irish towards contempt of them, his use of qualifiers like "perhaps" and "some" hints at his hesitation. Access to sympathy based in "hunger and color" are only "thought to give" immigrants like the Irish a leg up on black competition. In this initial representation, the Irish and other unnamed "emigrants" can employ hunger as a means of moving both/either up and/or down the social ladder. Douglass's use of first-person plural pronouns "we" and "us" presumes his identification with those African Americans put out of work by such maneuvering on the part of the unnamed "whites," whose plight as "emigrants" is made to seem less significant. However, his apparently intentional vagueness leaves open the possibility that the members of Douglass's audience can take on roles of social climbers by recognizing the role hunger plays in addition to race.

Douglass turns back again and again in *My Bondage* to this discourse of hunger, offering an explanation "for the few slaves who have, after making good their escape, turned back to slavery" (*My Bondage*, ch. XXII). Among the reasons why these slaves would choose slavery over albeit precarious freedom are, according to Douglass, "loneliness, apprehension, hunger, and anxiety." In this passage, hunger, a physical

sensation, is included among such otherwise psychological forms of suffering as loneliness and anxiety. It is as if Douglass considers hunger to go beyond the body, that its effects are somehow both personal and communal. He continues, "It is difficult for a freeman to enter into the feelings of such fugitives. He cannot see things in the same light with the slave, because he does not, and cannot, look from the same point from which the slave does." A fundamental problem for Douglass's goals of soliciting sympathy for his anti-slavery cause is that hunger is merely one trait of suffering among many for the slave. Hunger does not have social value required to elevate it to a level on par with the loss of freedom; however, Douglass suggests that hunger is one of the few forms of suffering that could drive an individual back into slavery, as horrifying an experience as it was. For a former slave to emphasize hunger as an element of suffering is to risk lessening the seriousness of slavery as the principal form of oppression. Initially, Douglass says that it is "difficult," yet not impossible, for a non-slave to understand the experience of a slave who would choose to return. This brief moment of potential sympathy, however, is then obliterated by Douglass's contention that non-slaves simply "cannot" view a decision to return to slavery in the same way as a slave. Therefore, the Irish experience of hunger does not serve for Douglass as an opportunity for sympathy with African Americans; if anything, hunger further separates them.

Conclusions: The Power of Hunger and The Hunger of Power

Throughout the revisions of his autobiography, Douglass's view of hunger is simultaneously progressive and reactionary. His ambivalence about the Irish simmers in the earlier versions of his autobiography (*Narrative* and *My Bondage*), only to boil over

into the anger of *Life and Times*. Although his career lasted well beyond the Famine years, it is clear that the massive Irish exodus and immigration of that era altered Douglass's views of sympathy and solidarity. Douglass goes beyond Herman Melville's notion of "strange feeling" in that Douglass's representations of hunger are not merely indications of ambivalence; rather, they show a real attempt to engage with the power of hunger both as an issue of social justice and as a literary tool for soliciting sympathy. Douglass is understandably frustrated by the Irish who failed to support his abolitionist and antiracist agenda, but he is also angry with himself for having lost the rhetorical potential of hunger to win over an audience to his cause. Douglass could not sell hunger because it had already been reified as an essential element of Irish American assimilation.

In chapter IX of *Life and Times*, the last version of his autobiography (published in 1881), Douglass makes an even more explicit association of Irish hunger with American identity: "The Irish who, at home, readily sympathize with the oppressed everywhere, are instantly taught when they step upon our soil to hate and despise the Negro. They are taught to believe that he eats the bread that belongs to them." While this passage maintains the Irish as the third-person "they," Douglass makes a provocative and almost certainly intentional shift from third-person singular "he" to first-person plural "us," thus indicating his allegiance to an African American audience. Word choices like "hate" and "despise" exemplify the virulent, invidious racism against African Americans which is "instantly taught" to the Irish upon immigrating. Such spontaneous instruction seems impractical, if not impossible, but it is based in part upon the pragmatic reality of hunger. Douglass's premise here is that Irish immigrants are instructed by the majority society to think that African Americans take food away from them. In doing so, he

applauds Irish solidarity with oppressed peoples around the world while condemning the racism incited among the Irish in the United States. The repetition of the verb "taught" deserves closer examination in this passage. The term implies an imparting of knowledge from American to Irish that assumes a racial hierarchy. While those specifically responsible for teaching this lesson to the Irish are never identified, it is clear that Douglass's concern lies in this pedagogical process that includes hunger as a key element of its rhetoric. He blames the Irish for being astute students of racism, but he reserves his harsher critique for their American instructors.

In addition to his provocative claims about how the Irish learn to become racists in America, Douglass constructs a tale of labor relations between Irish immigrants and African Americans that incorporates both race and hunger:

> Every hour sees us elbowed out of some employment to make room for some newly-arrived emigrant from the Emerald Isle, whose hunger and color entitle him to special favor. … If they cannot rise to the dignity of white men, they show that they can fall to the degradation of black men … while a ceaseless enmity in the Irish is excited against us. (*Life and Times*)

Especially noteworthy in this passage is the inclusion of the phrase "from the Emerald Isle," which specifies Ireland as the location of origin for "some newly-arrived emigrant." Douglass's view of the Irish recognizes their capacity for sympathy while lamenting their susceptibility to racist propaganda. The implicit teachers of the Irish are those white Americans who would seek to recruit the Irish to white supremacy. As a cause for "special favor," hunger adds to the discourse of race through its specific connotation of

entitlement. Within the racial hierarchy of nineteenth-century America, even hunger could be used to differentiate groups based on their qualifications for sympathy.

Aside from capitalizing on their race, the Irish simply laid claim to hunger more successfully than did other groups in the nineteenth century. Not only were the Famine Irish hungry and poor; they were also white; therefore, especially in comparison to African Americans during the antebellum era and beyond, the immigrant Irish were much more likely to overcome social injustices and to obtain American citizenship. As writers like Noel Ignatiev argue in controversial fashion, the process of Irish assimilation in the United States entailed, in part, an ability to claim access to whiteness that was initially denied them but from which African Americans and other nonwhites were always precluded. One can thus understand the resentment regarding the fact that European immigrant men, including the Irish, could exercise rights of citizenship that were denied to African Americans. Other critics, such as Timothy Meagher, offer a view of Irish-American assimilation that exposes this whiteness thesis to interrogation. "In other words," writes Meagher, "the Irish were not trying to become white—they were fighting to prevent the elevation of nonwhites to a new status that would render whiteness and its resources and privileges irrelevant" (223). This perspective is more in keeping with the notion that the rhetoric of hunger rivaled Irish claims to whiteness. Likewise, this view helps to explain Douglass's anger with the Irish who worked "to prevent the elevation of nonwhites." In addition to their racial and political advantages, Irish immigrants had rhetorical access to hunger as a source of ethnic identification and political sympathy. It is not that the Irish used their hunger deliberately to gain social standing; instead, in the broader ethos, hunger became so linked to their status as immigrants that it became part

of their Americanness. While they were being taught to "despise the negro," the Irish also learned to exploit the non-racialized advantages they had. Rather than signifying active agency on their part, hunger was passive proof of Irish fortitude. Hunger became a marker of identity that allowed the Irish to assimilate as Americans while retaining a distinctive immigrant character. Because hunger was not easily acknowledged among an American public that preferred to see itself as self-reliant and stoic, it became linked to the Irish in ways that permitted them sympathy and simultaneously prevented African Americans from accessing such sympathy as fully as they needed and deserved.

Ultimately, his witnessing of the Famine and its concomitant hunger showed Douglass who was a subject worthy of sympathy in the transatlantic world and who was not. In chapter XVII of *Life and Times*, entitled "The Last Flogging," Douglass writes, "A man without force is without the essential dignity of humanity. Human nature is so constituted, that it cannot *honor* a helpless man, though it can *pity* him, and even this it cannot do long if signs of power do not arise" (177). The revisions to Douglass's autobiography were made for myriad reasons, many having nothing to do with the Irish. However, it is clear that Douglass's ambivalence towards the Irish significantly shaped his representations of hunger. For the Irish in America, hunger did not equate to helplessness. In essence, hunger helped to establish the humanity of the Irish; it proved ultimately to be as much a marker of admiration as it was a signal for sympathy. For Douglass, hunger combined with color to solidify Irish privilege over African Americans in the nineteenth century. In his eyes, hunger served the Irish well, meaning that it allowed them political and cultural capital at crucial moments in their acculturation as Americans. Douglass's rationale for moving away from sympathy for the Irish is based in

concern over their access not only to sympathy, but also to power. The Irish perhaps could have made it on whiteness alone, but their association with hunger solidified for them broad sympathy that African Americans struggled to gain well into the twentieth century. In addition to racist violence, sympathetic hunger made it possible for the Irish to gain and maintain power, particularly over African Americans during the key years of Reconstruction. The revisions of Douglass's autobiography demonstrate how the relationship between African Americans and Irish in the nineteenth century was fraught with ambivalent emotions based specifically around the social problem and rhetorical manipulation of hunger.

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Curriculum Vitae
Brian P. Crowe

PROFILE

A talented and experienced teacher of writing and literature, with expertise in Nineteenth-Century American, African-American, and Irish Literatures and Cultures. Successful teaching demonstrated in four-year universities, community colleges, and high school. Other interests include Transatlantic Studies, Gothic Literature, Composition Process Pedagogy, Print Culture Scholarship and New Historicism.

EDUCATION

2006-2014 – Ph.D. in English Literature, Lehigh University, Bethlehem, PA

- Dissertation: "Irish Hunger / American Eyes: The Great Famine in Antebellum American Literature**"**
- Completed course work in 2009; Passed Comprehensive Exams, 2010; GPA: 3.87/4.0
- Major Field: 19th-century American Literature; Minor Fields: Modern Irish Literature; Critical Race Theory
- Taught ENGL1-Composition and Literature, Lehigh's required first-year writing course
- Taught and designed original syllabus for ENGL2, Lehigh's second-tier freshman course
- Completed courses in composition pedagogy and served as mentor to incoming fellows

2002-2004 - Master of Arts in English/Irish Literature and Culture, Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA

- Received "Pass with Distinction" in Comprehensive Exam; GPA: 3.75/4.0
- Developed composition pedagogy on semantics for First-Year Writing Seminar
- Attended Harvard University's Radcliffe Consortium course in feminist inquiry

1997-2001 - Bachelor of Arts (English), Villanova University, Villanova, PA

- Irish Studies concentration; English Honors Society; Cum Laude; GPA: 3.7/4.0
- Awarded Commuter Scholarship for all four years; Dean's List, 1998-2001
- Awarded position as Writing Tutor in Villanova's Writing Center, 1999-2000
- Studied at the National University of Ireland, Galway, 2000

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

2011-Present, English Teacher, Morristown-Beard School, Morristown, NJ

- Taught multiple sections in grades 10-12, including Humanities courses and electives
- Created student-centered, skills-based class assignments, activities, and assessments
- Co-coordinated programs for several sophomore-level Humanities Symposia
- Co-created and revised reading, writing, and grading rubrics for interdepartmental use
- Attended NJAIS "Creativity Conference" and helped facilitate speaker's visit to campus

2008-2010, Temporary Full-Time English Instructor, Delaware County Community College (Two Consecutive 1-year Appointments)

- Taught multiple sections of composition and literature-based courses
- Graded college placement tests and assigned students to appropriate writing courses
- Assisted with assessment of ENG050 as part of the Middle States Accreditation process
- Served as Volunteer Writing Tutor at DCCC's Exton Center, 2009

2005-2006, Adjunct English Faculty, Villanova University, Villanova, PA

- Taught courses in ENG 1050-The Literary Experience, a theme-based, writing-intensive literature course required for Arts & Science undergraduates
- Taught ENG 1010-Composition, designed for Commerce & Finance students
- Collaborated with full-time faculty in class observations and departmental meetings

2004-2006, Adjunct English Faculty, Montgomery County Community College

- Taught ENG 010 and ENG 011, basic writing courses required for program placement
- Incorporated technologies, including Blackboard and Smartboard, into pedagogy
- Tutored students in reading and writing at the Developmental Studies Lab

2004-2005, Adjunct English Faculty, Philadelphia University

- Taught three courses in H99-Fundamentals of College Writing, working within two separate motifs: 'Sports and Society' and 'Music and Society'
- Interacted with students in conferences and through extracurricular activities, including a field trip to the Philadelphia Art Museum
- Collaborated with faculty in essay grading and development of course criteria

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

- "Entitled to Hunger: Frederick Douglass and the Famine Irish," Conference on "Ireland, Anti-Slavery, Empire," University College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland, October 2013
- "The Famine Irish in the African-American Imagination," American Conference for Irish Studies (ACIS) Mid-Atlantic Region: "Re-Viewing Ireland: Irish Culture in Words, Music and Images," Drew University, Madison, NJ, October 2010
- "How to be Bohemian: American Bohemianism in Henry Clapp's *New-York Saturday Press*," Society for the Study of Multi-Ethnic Literature in the United States (MELUS): "Ethnic Transformation in the Self and the City," University of Scranton, PA, April 2010
- "Irish-American Gothic: Famine and the Fantastic Tales of Fitz-James O'Brien," ACIS Southern Region: "Ireland on the Move," U of Tennessee at Chattanooga, March 2009
- "Nunsense! Anti-Convent Literature and Irish America," ACIS National Meeting: "The Global Irish: Conflict, Coexistence, and Community," St. Ambrose University, Davenport, IA, April 2008
- "Translating Nuala: The Problem of Fidelity in Irish-English Poetry Translation," ACIS Southern Region: "Real Ireland," Emory University, Atlanta, GA, March 2004

PUBLICATION

- Published "Standing Still for the Night," a poetic translation of one of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's original Irish-language poems, in *Words Without Borders* Online Literature Journal, Spring 2004

OTHER ACTIVITIES and VOLUNTEER WORK

- Member of *Daltaí na Gaeilge* (dedicated to promoting the Irish language) since 2007
- Research Assistant to Lehigh University's Director of American Studies, including editing responsibilities for *The Vault at Pfaff's* online archive of art and literature by New York City's Nineteenth-Century Bohemians, 2010
- Volunteer "Big Brother" with Big Brothers Big Sisters, Southeastern Pennsylvania, 2009-2012
- Assistant Coach of Archbishop Ryan High School's Boys' Rugby Team, 2006-2007
- Assistant Coordinator for the Villanova University Summer Program in Ireland, June 2003-2006