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Paul Lynch's *Grace* and the "Postmemory" of the Famine

Abstract: This paper starts as a discussion of Paul Lynch's novel *Grace* as a Famine novel and on the ways in which the Famine is represented historically, but also emotionally. It questions the limits of language and fiction in representing history, trauma and affects and discusses the specificity of *Grace*, comparing it with Liam O'Flaherty's *Famine* and Joseph O'Connor's *Star of the Sea*. *Grace*, it is argued, manages to evade the nationalist versus revisionist debate and constitutes, at an aesthetic level, the same type of middle-ground as the one achieved by the "post-revisionist" historians, situated half-way between the mythologising of the first interpreters of the Famine and the revisionists' controversial attempts at writing "value-free" narratives of the tragedy. Drawing on Eric L. Berlatksy's model of an anti-realist narrative mode and its application in Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, and on Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory applied to the Shoah, the essay posits that Lynch's novel offers the reader a renewed mode of understanding the reality of the past, and in particular, of horrifying historical events that resist representation – in this case, the Great Famine.

Keywords: Paul Lynch, *Grace*, literary representations of the Great Famine, Joseph O'Connor, *Star of the Sea*, Liam O'Flaherty, *Famine*, historical fiction, postmemory.

Résumé: Cet article analyse le roman de Paul Lynch *Grace* comme s'inscrivant dans la tradition des récits fictionnels de la Famine, qui ont cherché à représenter l'événement d'un point de vue historique mais également affectif. L'écriture de Lynch nous pousse à nous interroger sur les limites de la représentation d'un événement historique traumatique par le langage et la fiction. À cet égard l'article cherche à différencier l'écriture de Lynch de celle de Liam O'Flaherty dans *Famine* d'une part et celle de Joseph O'Connor dans *Star of the Sea* d'autre part, et à établir que Lynch se situe à mi-chemin entre le réalisme de l'un et le postmodernisme de l'autre, adoptant la même position médiane que celle des historiens dits « post-révisionnistes » de la Famine. S'inspirant de la notion d'« anti-réalisme » développée par Eric L. Berlatksy à propos de *Maus* d'Art Spiegelman, et du concept de « post-mémoire » utilisé par Marianne Hirsch à propos de la Shoah, cet essai suggère que le roman de Lynch offre un mode renouvelé de compréhension de la réalité du passé et en particulier de l'horreur de la Famine, qui défie les pouvoirs de la représentation.

Mots clés : Paul Lynch, *Grace*, représentations littéraires de la Grande Famine, Joseph O'Connor, *Star of the Sea*, Liam O'Flaherty, *Famine*, roman historique, post-mémoire.

Among the numerous Famine novels registered by critics, two examples can be put forward which illustrate diverging views on the role of fiction in witnessing and recording the past: one is Liam O'Flaherty's 1937 *Famine*, a typical realist historical novel; the other is Joseph O'Connor's 2003 *Star of the Sea*, which resorts to the kind

of metafictional historiographic devices described by Linda Hutcheon in her book on the poetics of postmodernism¹. O’Flaherty’s novel is cluttered with historical explanation, an aspect which, as Margaret Kelleher observes, is not unique in this respect; the problem of integrating historical explanation within the Famine story, she says, is one that besets most novelists who take on the subject². Critic Patrick O’Farrell has also underlined this flaw, explaining that, as it is “beyond the natural capacities or range of his choice of characters to make sense to the reader of what is happening”, O’Flaherty is forced to “insert unattributed lumps of school-text history” into his narrative³.

Whereas O’Flaherty’s alleged realism was actually underpinned by a desire to convey his personal views on the Famine and the way it had been grievously mishandled by the various authorities involved – the British government, the local authorities, the shop-keepers, the Catholic clergy – Joseph O’Connor’s mode of narration in *Star of the Sea* results in a questioning, on a revisionist mode, of traditional interpretations of the Famine, especially as far as the class of landlords was concerned. As a result, the contrast between the aesthetic modes of the two novels tends to overlap with the historiographic debate about the origins and the nature of the Famine and the official responses to it. O’Flaherty’s style of historical realism matches the nationalist historians’ tendency to rely on emotion and pathos, in order to emphasise the criminal nature of the British government’s response, whereas O’Connor invites the reader to reflect on the constructed nature of historical discourse and therefore on the reality of these accusations.

I would like to pit those two examples against Paul Lynch’s 2017 *Grace*⁴, which in my opinion manages to evade the nationalist versus revisionist debate and constitutes, at an aesthetic level, the same type of middle-ground as the one achieved by the “post-revisionist” historians, situated half-way between the mythologising of the first interpreters of the Famine and the revisionists’ controversial attempts at writing “value-free” narratives of the tragedy.

In contrast with both O’Flaherty’s *Famine*, characterised by its realism and its wish to provide the reader with an alleged truthful depiction of the reality of the event, and *Star of the Sea* which illustrates the belief that, according to such historians as Hayden White, the past can only be accessed through always already encoded narratives⁵, *Grace* offers the reader a renewed mode of understanding the reality of the past, thanks to what Eric L. Berlatsky calls an “anti-narrative”

1. Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism. History, Theory, Fiction*, London – New York, Routledge, 1988.

2. Margaret Kelleher, *The Feminization of Famine: Expressions of the Inexpressible?*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1997, p. 137.

3. Patrick O’Farrell, “Whose Reality? The Irish Famine in History and Literature”, *Historical Studies*, vol. 20, no. 78, 1982-1983, p. 6, 7, 8.

4. Paul Lynch, *Grace*, London, One World, 2017 (page numbers between brackets refer to this edition).

5. “This means that what distinguishes ‘historical’ from ‘fictional’ stories is first and foremost their contents, rather than their form” (Hayden White, “The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory”, *History and Theory*, vol. 23, no. 1, 1984, p. 2).

mode. Berlatsky defines it as a mode of writing which acknowledges "the capacity of real events to exceed the discourse engendered to contain and explain them", insofar as "what is real is precisely that which cannot be rendered satisfactorily in discourse, or at least in narrative". According to this definition, language is unable to give access to reality; however, Berlatsky argues that some novels "suggest alternative modes in which history can be 'made present'"⁶. Berlatsky has noticed in 21st-century historians what he calls "a return to ethics", according to which the historian, like the postmodern writer of metafiction, rejects objectivity, and is on the contrary aware of the "underlying ideology and assumptions of his/her own discourse", but is also driven by "a passion for the unreachable 'others' of the past", and is urged to speak "for the nameless 'others'"⁷. It is this passion to reach out for the "others" of the past, in this case the victims of the Irish Famine, and to speak for these nameless others, that in my opinion manifests itself in Lynch's *Grace*.

Among the texts that he uses to demonstrate his belief in the possibility of representing and accessing the past despite postmodernist distrust of language and signifying codes, Berlatsky offers a close reading of Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, in which he sees an example of "historical representation as a means not merely of presenting epistemological truth but also as a medium for conveying the affect of past experience"⁸. What's more, *Maus* is a Shoah narrative⁹, "the foundational test case of an event that is impossible to represent" as Berlatsky puts it, in the same way as the 19th-century Famine, described by Terry Eagleton as "the Irish Auschwitz", is generally considered to be "a repressed or unspeakable memory in the Irish psyche"¹⁰. As Scott Brewster and Virginia Crossman recount, direct witnesses to the catastrophe found it difficult to find the proper language to convey what they saw, "wrestl[ing] against the inadequacy of language"¹¹. Facts and figures are equally insufficient for the contemporary reader, so that, as Luke Dodd puts it, as quoted by Brewster and Crossman:

An understanding of how famine is experienced is fundamental to an understanding of its causes and effects, but this past experience cannot be meaningfully retrieved by historical discourse alone. It requires a methodology which combines the tangible and the intangible¹².

6. Eric L. Berlatsky, *The Real, the True, and the Told. Postmodern Historical Narrative and the Ethics of Representation*, Columbus, Ohio State University, 2011, p. 24.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

9. Claude Lanzmann insists that the term "holocaust" commonly used in the USA is a misnomer insofar as its religious connotation implicitly gives a meaning to the genocide of the Jews by presenting it as a sacrifice. I prefer to use the term coined by Lanzmann for his film, *Shoah*, which is now commonly also used in Europe and in Israel.

10. Scott Brewster, Virginia Crossman, "Re-Writing the Famine: Witnessing in Crisis", in *Ireland in Proximity. History, Gender, Space*, Scott Brewster, Virginia Crossman, Fiona Becket, David Alderson (eds.), London – New York, Routledge, 1999, p. 43.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

12. Luke Dodd, "Famine Echoes", *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 95, no. 1, 1996, p. 101; quoted in Scott Brewster, Virginia Crossman, "Re-Writing the Famine...", p. 53.

Like the Shoah then, the Famine is “that which must be remembered and represented [...], just as it is archetypically that which cannot be represented or recovered”¹³, an assumption which seems to comfort the postmodern view of the past as being irretrievable. However, in response to that pessimistic reporting of the “withdrawal of the real”, Berlatsky draws on Frank Ankersmit’s idea of the “sublime historical experience”, which insists on the crucial importance of personal experience in the historian’s task of recovering the past. According to Berlatsky, *Maus* is a book which “bears the imprint of subjective and emotional Holocaust experience”¹⁴.

This emphasis on experience, emotion and sensation in establishing contact with an otherwise irretrievable past seems to me what Lynch’s *Grace* also seeks to achieve. While displaying his awareness of the “inadequacy of language”, the writer nevertheless attempts to give access to the reality of the Famine through affect and emotional investment – even though of course, contrary to Art Spiegelman in *Maus* who transcribed his own father’s memories, Lynch acquired his knowledge of the Famine through text books and documents. Like Joseph O’Connor’s postmodernist rendering of the Famine in *Star of the Sea*, *Grace* flaunts its own textuality and constructed nature through the choice of a highly sophisticated, self-conscious language, and a marked distance with the devices of realism; yet it still seeks to give access to a certain truth about the Famine, particularly in the way it recreates the victims’ embodied experience, using words and images meant to stir emotion and empathy in the reader’s imagination. It is in that regard that Lynch’s novel exemplifies Eric L. Berlatsky’s idea of a return to ethics in 21st-century historical fiction, as opposed to the scepticism of 20th-century postmodernism¹⁵.

The de-contextualisation issuing from the lack of realistic details, together with the numerous references to the supernatural, which endows the novel with a certain neo-gothic mode, remove it from the generic confines of the “Famine narrative”. What is more, the novel also tells a larger story of survival, echoing the apocalypticism proper to late 20th-century narratives, but also 21st-century attempts to imagine what Peter Boxall calls “precarious forms of embodied being in the world”¹⁶.

In *Grace* Lynch offers none of the comforts of traditional realist narration, as is perceptible right from its opening page where the reader experiences a powerful effect of de-familiarisation when he / she must wrestle with a fragmented, a-grammatical syntax, in which personal pronouns are often used before or without their referents, stirring confusion as to which character does what. This creative language, a mix of Irishisms, orality and sheer dislocation of grammatical language, is used throughout the novel, drawing attention to the artificiality of the device, a far cry from realism’s

13. Eric L. Berlatsky, *The Real, the True, and the Told...*, p. 151.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 150.

15. *Ibid.*

16. Peter Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction: A Critical Introduction*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 13.

claim to the transparency of the medium. Anomalous usage of ordinary language prevails, adverbs becoming verbs as in "she would like to be able to go back to where she has been suddened out of" (p. 175); sentences are reduced into improbable compounds: "she is shout-trying, shout-trying" (p. 168), "the everything-falling of dusk" (p. 219); syntax is dismantled as in: "the where of it she does not know" (p. 165), or as in the striking: "Or perhaps he is just thinking himself forward step by step, his teeth set, his eyes staring into the far-off as if to unthink himself into will" (p. 267).

This systematic dislocation of language, which is meant to reflect Grace's gradual psychic and physical decline, is stretched to an extreme when the character's inner monologue dissolves into mere stammering and silence as the young woman's consciousness approaches extinction in the last segments of the book. Lynch's poetic language owes nothing to any authentic oral tradition or to the traditional usage of Hiberno-English as a marker of authenticity, so frequent in Irish literature – from Edgeworth to O'Casey to O'Flaherty and even Roddy Doyle. Its aim is on the contrary to create an effect of estrangement and surprise. This strange language – or language made strange – defers meaning, resists immediate understanding, and makes the connection between the sign and its referent unstable and uncertain – a way of suggesting the limits of language in describing the extremes of suffering caused by the Famine.

The de-familiarisation effected by language is further emphasised by the absence of the time and space markers generally used in realist fiction, particularly fiction based on real historical events. A comparison with some aspects of O'Flaherty's *Famine* brings to light the antirealist, anti-narrative streak in Lynch's re-writing of the Famine novel, beyond the similarities. O'Flaherty situates the action of his novel in a remote place called Black Valley – a name strikingly close to Lynch's Black Mountain – starting at the same period as *Grace*, that is to say Autumn 1845; the incipit contains similar allusions to the harmful rainy weather. Like *Grace*, *Famine* lingers on the first two years of the Famine, when the blight struck for the second time but the worst of the disaster was still to come. O'Flaherty's characters live in the same type of derelict cabin as Grace and her mother. There is talk as well among them of the stench coming from the rotting potatoes. Many of the characters suffer the same fate as those encountered by Grace: they experience hunger, disease, and death. But all along the novel, O'Flaherty traditionally alternates narrative comments, dialogue and description, attempting through this device to cover all aspects of the Famine – social, political, religious – including nuances regarding the role played by the various political forces at play, such as the O'Connellites, the Young Irelanders, the Mitchelites, highlighting the dichotomy in Irish history between the tradition of constitutional action and that of revolutionary force. Characters are used to embody types, which range from the poorest cottiers to the middleman, the devoted doctor, the parish priest, the landlord, the government representative, and the corrupt shop-keeper who wants to take advantage of the people's misery. Some of the scenes are meant to epitomise some of the most salient aspects of the management of the Famine by the government – a meeting of the relief committee, an eviction, the visit of the sick and the dying by the local doctor – while the narrator

summarises the background to the crisis. He also introduces long digressions to convey his opinion on the events and the conduct of the British government. In accordance with the rules of classic historical fiction, individuals are seen to become inextricably enmeshed in a web of events which they cannot control, and the plot takes them in a downward spiral towards decay and disintegration.

One essential aspect that differentiates *Grace* from other realistic accounts of the Famine, such as O'Flaherty's, is the use of a single internal focaliser, in the person of 14-year old Grace, whose interior monologue is recreated all along the novel, interspersed with the words she hears being uttered by the people she comes across. This choice entails the absence of any guidance on the part of a narrator who would supply background information and comments on the characters' actions and behaviours: the reader is made to experience the same overwhelming feeling of disorientation as the one suffered by the young girl. After she is torn away from her native home by her own mother in the middle of the night, and cast out into the unknown, bewildering world that was Ireland at the onset of the Famine, emphasis is laid upon that single character's disorientation, and her reliance on her physical perceptions only – eyesight, hearing, touch – stressing her profound lack of understanding of what is happening to her, except through her bodily sensations. As a result, Lynch does away with the markers of referentiality proper to realist fiction. The story does follow a chronology, but one which depends solely upon the character's perception of the passing of the seasons and is organised according to the only type of calendar the young girl is aware of, the one transmitted by popular customs and beliefs. Beginning with the Samhain, and this "flood October", with its "rains like something biblical" (p. 9), Grace's ordeal for the most part derives from the alterations of the weather as the year unfolds, inflicting on her the pains of cold, rain and snow, her hopes of surviving being rekindled by the return of spring: "Guesses it must be April, for the rains have come to pull colour from the earth that will bring forage to live on" (p. 142), or of summer: "everywhere she sees the betiming of summer – a con man's trick, she thinks" (p. 180).

Space time remains also for the most part undefined in Grace's mind, except for the only place that she is familiar with, her native Donegal homestead. After she is driven out of this original birthplace like a cursed wanderer, her eyes discover a vast tract of unknown places, where she is cast away adrift without any sense of direction: "She has walked deeper into the world, spent nameless days on these nameless roads that twist and turn with no ending" (p. 106). She can only pick up the few pieces of information available to her as she enters new localities: "Donegal town, a road sign announces" (p. 53). "Welcome to Clones, County Monaghan" (p. 110), or when she is advised to find work "out past Cavan town near Felt" (p. 145). Her journey is delineated by a few scattered landmarks which also suggest the unending nature of her wanderings: "The dreaming world is shaking free its shadows when they reach Athlone town" (p. 197), "The Slieve Bloom Mountains rising before them" (p. 209), "They pass through Nenagh town" (p. 246), "They have lucked themselves a lift towards Limerick" (p. 249). Contrary to many other Famine stories, the novel contains little information as to the exact context of the

tragedy. The potato blight itself is only alluded to a number of times, for example through the stench it releases: "What a strange year it's been, she thinks, the rain and the storms that upturned summer into winter and the heat of September and then that bilgewater stench that came from the fields" (p. 9); in the young girl's private language, the failure of the crops becomes "the wintering"; the repetition of the blight in the second year of the Famine is marked by her disappointment on realising that "the lumper stalks have become slippery with rot, the crops become scrawny old legs withering to their last moment" (p. 232). The situation of cottiers who soon became unable to pay their rents and faced eviction is fleetingly called forth at the onset of the novel when Grace remarks to her brother that "they have nothing for him", "him" meaning Boggs, a middleman who as we are made to understand, has granted Grace's mother his protection in exchange for sexual services and has fathered two of Sarah's children. He is part of the reason why Sarah wants to send Grace away, when she realises he has started to covet her. Apart from these few elements included in the plot, Lynch provides no overview of the political situation of the country on the onset of the Famine, in the way that O'Flaherty's novel *Famine* does. *Grace* contains only a few scattered allusions to the role of government, and to the relief measures that were taken. The British government is referred to as "the Crown" by the few characters Grace encounters who hold an opinion on the events, but it is mostly the difference between rich and poor that they resent, as is the case for her travelling companion John Bart: "the have-it-alls and well-to-doers who don't give a fuck what is happening to the ordinary people" (p. 189). The one episode which comes closest to a traditional, history-based evocation of Famine times is when Grace, dressed up as a boy, is encouraged to take part to the public works and experiences the harshness of the labour on a "road to nowhere" under the supervision of the guards. At one point of her journey she also overhears rumours of a rebellion: "The town diamond is strewn with loose straw and masonry and almost as many official men and soldiers from the barracks. The people are beginning to stir up, Colly says. Some kind of gathering or protest has turned violent" (p. 121). But evidence of the pervasiveness and depth of the tragedy is mostly provided by Grace's being struck by the ghostly appearance of the people she comes across during her wanderings, whom she views as "raggedy little shapes" (p. 47), "their rag clothing upon them as if it were the wind that dressed them" (p. 80), "how they look like they are losing both their inwardness and outwardness" (p. 107), "a man made only of bones as if he had borrowed his body from what hides in the earth" (p. 279). As opposed to O'Flaherty's *Famine* which alternates dialogue, narrative summary and narrative comment in order to deliver precise information about the context of the Famine, Lynch's *Grace* therefore only fitfully alludes to historical events and makes no allusion at all to historical characters, in accordance to some extent with Eric L. Berlatsky's definition of the "anti-narrative" mode.

O'Flaherty incorporated into his novel his knowledge of Famine folklore and relied heavily on his reading of the Reverend John O'Rourke's *The History of the Great Irish Famine of 1847 with Notices of Earlier Irish Famines*, published in 1875,

and which itself included accounts of what witnesses had reported. By fictionalising what he had learned from books in the writing of *Famine*, O'Flaherty unwittingly demonstrated the interchangeability of history and fiction as narratives. In *Star of the Sea*, Joseph O'Connor problematised this reliance of historical fiction on previously published books by using various devices, such as embedded narratives and pastiche. *Star of the Sea* reads indeed like a narrative within a narrative, a bestselling book supposedly entitled *An American Abroad*, composed by one of the characters on board the ship sailing to America. The American journalist Grantley Dixon is urged by his publisher to write a sensationalist account of the events in Ireland – an allusion to the role of the press at the time, a famous example of which being *The Illustrated London News* who sent artist James Mahoney over to Ireland, to draw vivid pictures of the Famine victims, providing succeeding generations with some of the most precious primary source documentation of the Famine. Dixon's embedded narrative is itself interspersed with fragments of other texts and documents, such as the ship *Star of the Sea*'s captain's logbook, newspaper articles, police reports, medical reports, private correspondence, etc. O'Connor also incorporated extracts from contemporary history books, such as Mary Daly's *The Famine in Ireland* published in 1986 or Helen Litton's *The Irish Famine. An Illustrated History* published in 1994. *Star of the Sea* also establishes clear intertextual links with famous novels published at the time of the Famine, so that the characters remind us of stories by either Dickens or Oscar Wilde, or from one of those “penny dreadfuls” that had grown so popular in Victorian England. This accumulation of allusions to verbal accounts tends to make the reality of the events recede behind the numerous layers of textuality that signify it. *Star of the Sea* thus seems to illustrate Dominick LaCapra's argument according to which “[t]he past arrives in the form of texts and textualised remainders – memories, reports, published writings, archives, monuments, and so forth”¹⁷. By mixing parodies of Victorian texts and documents and quotations from contemporary analyses of the Famine, O'Connor denies the possibility of creating a representation of the Famine that would not be already textualised, encoded and interpreted, a typically postmodernist position which eventually led, according to Fredric Jameson, to “a weakening of historicity”¹⁸ and in Carlo Ginzburg's view, opened the way to the dangers of historical revisionism¹⁹. But it is a threat that *Grace* artfully eludes. For, confronted with the reality of violence and catastrophic events at the turn of the 20th century, such as terrorism, wars, ecological disasters, etc., 21st-century writers like Paul Lynch have to face the persistence of history as a hard fact of life, and the way, as will be developed further, the past continues to haunt the present, and consequently “attempt to rethink the relationship between history and narrative,

17. Dominick LaCapra, *History and Criticism*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1985, p. 128.

18. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1991, p. 6.

19. Carlo Ginzburg, *Threads and Traces: True, False, Fictive*, Anne C. Tedeschi, John Tedeschi (trans.), Oakland, University of California Press, 2012.

and to gain a new understanding of the way that historical material asserts itself in the contemporary imagination", as Peter Boxall puts it²⁰.

O'Flaherty, writing *Famine* the same year as Ireland gave itself a Constitution, had a clear political agenda, which was to instil in his readers' minds the creed in the nation's necessary struggle for independence, to remind them of the cruelty of landlordism and colonialism and to condemn social injustice. O'Connor for his part was writing in the context of the revisionist / nationalist debate which opposed diverging interpretations of the Famine, raising suspicion as to the truth of any historical account since it could be retold and reshaped any number of times according to what political bias underpinned it. Writing at a different period, Lynch's novel presents a different strategy, which consists in both avoiding the pretence of representing the past as it really happened, claimed by the realist historical fiction, and to overcome the postulate that it is impossible to give access to the reality of the past. Lynch is also writing at a time when, as noted before, a certain "post-revisionist" consensus has been reached on interpretations of the Famine, and certain facts can no longer be contested.

Consequently, what matters now is no longer to persuade the reader of interpreting the Famine as evidence of colonial oppression, or to warn him of the deceptive nature of history, which is only story, but to find a new language to establish contact with the reality of past events. It is also crucial to re-establish an embodied link with the victims of the natural, social, political and cultural disaster that was the Famine at a time when other disasters are lurking, or are already taking place. That is why, while not denying that the reality of the past reaches us mostly through discourses and representations, this new language aims nevertheless at forcing the reader to forget what he already knows about the Famine through books and discourses, so as to look upon the event with fresh horror.

Writing about what she calls "postmemory", Marianne Hirsch wonders: "How, in our present, do we regard and recall what Susan Sontag has so powerfully described as the 'pain of others?' What do we owe the victims?", questions which, as she argues, "[t]he multiplication of genocides and collective catastrophes at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, and their cumulative effects, have made [...] ever more urgent" to confront, bringing together memories of the past and understanding of the present²¹. Postmemory is an attempt to respond to an ethical imperative, which is to bear witness to the past despite the acknowledged limits of historical or narrative representation. In this regard, Lynch aims to recreate what Marianne Hirsch calls "an affective link to the past, a sense precisely of an embodied 'living connection'". According to Hirsch, "Postmemorial work [...] strives to *reactivate* and *reembody* more distant social / national and archival / cultural memorial structures by reinvesting

20. Peter Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction...*, p. 41.

21. Marianne Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory", *Poetics Today*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2008, p. 104, on line: <https://read.dukeupress.edu/poetics-today/article-pdf/29/1/103/458907/PT029-01-05HirschFpp.pdf>.

them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression”²². Following this imperative, Lynch incorporates fragments of discourses and representations to enable the reader to recognise facts which have now become common knowledge of the Famine, but strives to reactivate that “embodied living connection” with the Famine victims by making what has become too familiar feel strange and horrifying again, first by insisting on the fate of one individual facing the ordeal, then through the recourse to gothicism and its aesthetics of terror.

For besides the use of a defamiliarising language, as pointed out before, the creation of a gothic atmosphere in the novel corresponds to the image that underpins the novel, namely that of the haunting of the living by the dead. It starts of course with the blending of two voices in the ongoing flow of thoughts and impressions that makes up the narrative, Grace having literally incorporated the voice of her dead brother Colly, who drowns at an early stage of the story. The device suggests that all the descendants of the dead are the bearers of their extinguished voices – thus establishing the “familial form of mediation” referred to by Hirsch; it is also an embedded image of the role of the writer who must speak up for all the Famine victims who disappeared and were reduced to silence, the same silence that many commentators and historians of the Famine and its literature have deplored: “Nobody will have heard of me”, Grace thinks (p. 101); “all memory eventually falls into a great forgetting that will include herself and everyone at Blackmountain and everyone on earth” (p. 193). But language falters as its horror cannot be fully fathomed or apprehended except in the shape of nightmarish, unspeakable images: hence the multiple allusions to dreams and nightmares which recur through the narrative, expressing Grace’s horrific experience of utter disorientation: “she is haunted again by that dream image of Boggs-as-wolf” (p. 48), “dreaming is a tricky business because all dreams are timeless” (p. 105), “she dreams her old self” (p. 106), “rising from the dream through half dream” (p. 119), “within the dream she is an ageless child trying to speak to Sarah” (p. 144), “and anyhow who can tell this dreaming from real, there is no such thing as real anymore” (p. 280), etc. Besides emphasising this fearful blurring of the frontier between dream and reality, Lynch endows the narrative with a supernatural dimension by including Grace’s childish, popular superstitious beliefs in her flow of thoughts. The girl alludes to Samhain – the festival when the dead return to visit the living – but also to the pooka, to “the she-wolf that stole the baby boy from the woman” (p. 87), to Ossian and Bran (p. 101). Grace is also visited by the vision of the woman her travelling companions killed in an attack: “She is talking to the dead woman from the coach” (p. 226), or by the ghost of her dead mother at the very end of the novel when she is expecting a child.

The experience of the substitution of a rational, familiar reality by chaos, meaninglessness and death brought about by the Famine is also rendered through

22. Marianne Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory”, p. 111.

the figure of inversion that runs through the narrative. It starts with her mother's decision to dress Grace as a boy so as to give her a greater chance to fend for herself when she sends her wandering on the roads. Her incorporation of her brother's voice also changes her into a "he-she" creature so that Grace herself seems to transcend the laws of nature. For it is mostly nature which seems to have inverted its course in the devastated universe that Grace walks through, as is suggested by the pervading device of personification that Lynch deploys throughout the narrative, the non-human elements being granted an agency that the humans have been deprived of: "the rain comes yoked to a hooded sun, unfastens and falls like a cloak" (p. 21), "there is some power here contained in the earth that rise up and has an effect on the brain, makes you sleepy, the trees whispering their madness to you and it is not you who will eat the trees but the trees that will feed on the dust of your bones" (p. 278). Nature is no longer regarded as the benevolent purveyor of food and life in the service of mankind, but as a cold, indifferent, or even hostile agent, so that Grace can only witness "the silence of nature" (p. 132). Conversely, the people Grace encounters along her wandering journey are deprived of their humanity: they are turned into "raggedy little shapes", into "fright-shapes in the dark" (p. 268), or return to a state of sheer bestiality, sucking rocks, eating from roots and trees, hankering after the purely animal sensation of warmth and comfort, and finally burying the dead in raw earth.

In this world made upside-down, where reality becomes incomprehensible, inseparable from dream, especially to the eyes of a 14-year-old girl, bodily experience takes precedence over thought: the choice of internal focalisation emphasises Grace's physical perceptions and sensations all along the story, as she struggles to survive and wanders on an aimless journey through the country. Whereas one of the most traditional tools of realist fiction is to use a character's point of view to naturalise a description as he/she discovers a new space or a new environment, Lynch's narrative of Grace's travels through a hostile landscape mostly concentrates on her physical, inner experience of hunger, cold and darkness, taking them to the extreme limit where language falters and fails to evoke what she undergoes: hence the black pages inserted in the middle of the book and the muteness Grace is struck with. The materiality of the black pages is a visual equivalent of the writer's acknowledgment of the impossibility to represent extremes of suffering through language, despite the artist's efforts to render what Erich Auerbach called "creatural realism". The author of *Mimesis* defined this notion in relationship to Christian iconography, which according to him was dedicated to representing the sufferings of Christ and of the martyrs in the crudest fashion and with a high power of sensorial and mystical suggestion²³. Through his concentration on Grace's physical torments, which reduce her to a suffering body, Lynch also comes close to evoking what Eric Santner, in a study of Rilke, Walter Benjamin

23. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: la représentation de la réalité dans la littérature occidentale* [1946], Cornélius Heim (trans.), Paris, Gallimard, 1968.

and W. G. Sebald, calls the “creaturely life”²⁴. In an article on the “creaturely” in Carol Reid’s film *The Third Man*, John Charles Hill defines Santner’s concept of creaturely life as the way

[...] each individual person is a particular creature, in that sense, of the unique history they are born into, and that history, especially in the twentieth century, is likely to be a history of mass violence and disruption [...] The creaturely therefore rescues the individual from the anonymity of the mass [...]. However, it then installs that individual in the lonely torment, the living death, of those who find themselves caught up in that mass, constituted from the wreckage of history, among Rilke’s street people, or, as Santner footnotes, among Primo Levi’s concentration camp “*Musselmanner*”: those prisoners in extremis, unable to work, or even speak, awaiting only selection for the gas chamber, and from whom we turn away in fear, seeing ourselves reflected in their degradation²⁵.

The challenge in *Grace* is indeed to concentrate on the sufferings of one, lonely individual, chosen among a mass of victims. The initial scene in which Grace is turned out of doors by her own mother is in this regard a powerful image of the utter misfortune of being born in “a history of mass violence and disruption”. Grace’s loneliness as she is caught up in the catastrophe of the Famine is likewise compounded by her loss of speech as a consequence of her traumatic struggle for survival surrounded by the many dead. Writing on Shoah narratives, Claire Kahane argues that “[l]iterary representation of the Holocaust attempts a textual mimesis of trauma through tropes that most potently capture, and elicit in the reader [...] primal affects contiguous with the traumatic event”²⁶, while Marianne Hirsch comments that “Postmemory is not identical to memory: it is ‘post,’ but at the same time, it approximates memory in its affective force”²⁷. In *Grace* Lynch attempted to provide his story with that affective force through the poetic, lyrical language he used. Hirsch insists on the significance of “post” in “postmemory”:

Postmemory shares the layering of these other “posts” and their belatedness, aligning itself with the practice of citation and mediation that characterize them, marking a particular end-of-century / turn-of-century moment of looking backward rather than ahead and of defining the present in relation to a troubled past rather than initiating new paradigms²⁸.

24. Eric L. Santner, *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2006.

25. John Charles Hill, “The Creaturely Life of Carol Reed’s Cities: Eric Santner and Walter Benjamin”, *Film-Philosophy*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2018, p. 117.

26. Claire Kahane, “Dark Mirrors: A Feminist Reflection on Holocaust Narrative and the Maternal Metaphor”, in *Feminist Consequences: Theory for New Century*, Elisabeth Bronfen, Misha Kavka (eds.), New York, Columbia University Press, 2001, p. 163.

27. Marianne Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory”, p. 109.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 106.

We may indeed reflect on the timeliness and belatedness of Lynch's Famine narrative, insofar as it harks back to previous Famine narratives and to the store of public knowledge about the event built up by its numerous visual or literary representations disseminated by text-books but also commemorative monuments. Memories of the Famine have now become widely familiar to public imagination, after numerous commemorations have produced a wide store of popular images of the Famine victims. James Mahoney's pictures and engravings for instance, reproduced in a large number of scholarly books and websites dedicated to the history of the Famine, have greatly contributed to nurture our imagination of the past event, up to nowadays. As Emily Mark-Fitzgerald puts it in her introduction to *Commemorating the Irish Famine: Memory and the Monument*²⁹, a "remarkable outpouring of public commemoration and sentiment [...] swept across Ireland and the nations of the diaspora during the Famine's 150th anniversary [which] reversed the trope of Famine 'silence'". Consequently, Famine narratives today can safely rely on a shared knowledge with the reader and dwell on other aspects than a mere reporting of historical facts.

Grace is a very rich novel encouraging other readings than just another piece of Famine narrative fiction. Indeed, if *Grace* may be looked upon as an example of "postmemory", namely an attempt to define the present in relation to the past, it also resonates with very contemporary issues. In particular we should not overlook the central role Lynch attributes to the natural elements, through close attention to details of the landscape and the weather and the device of personification; so that *Grace*, instead of a historical novel, could also be interpreted as an apocalyptic scenario staging the general collapse of natural resources in a universe much closer to our own. Grace's predicament, as she wanders alone through a devastated landscape, amid wreckage of former forms of life, can be aligned with that of other protagonists of post-apocalyptic dystopias such as Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam Trilogy* (2013) or Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006). The same imagination of an environmental disaster prevails in these novels, the difference being that Lynch turned to 19th-century Irish history to find a model for such an apocalyptic vision, whereas Atwood and McCarthy found inspiration in the present to imagine an undefined future.

Alternatively, Lynch's use of Gothicism could also illustrate the genre of what Emily Horton calls "postmillennial Gothic", in which "the centrality of ghosts and haunting reflects a topical preoccupation with discourses of trauma, violence and socio-economic abjection specific to twenty-first-century life"³⁰, another way *Grace* could be read as much as a reflection on the present times as on the past. There are indeed multiple ways of identifying with what Grace endures: first and

29. Emily Mark-Fitzgerald, *Commemorating the Famine: Memory and the Monument*, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2013, p. 1.

30. Emily Horton, "A Voice without a Name: Gothic Homelessness in Ali Smith's *Hotel World* and Trezza Azzopardi's *Remember Me*", in *Twenty-First Century Fiction: What Happens Now?*, Siân Adiseshiah, Rupert Hildyard (eds.), London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. 133.

foremost, she may be viewed as a victim of a defining event in Irish history; but also as a victim of an ecocatastrophe which may involve any human being in the future; and also as the embodiment of what some unfortunate children in some parts of the world, born in the wrong place at the wrong time, still have to suffer nowadays, engulfed in a disaster that they cannot comprehend. That is why Lynch's novel definitely exemplifies the return to ethics that many critics have identified as a major trend in 21st-century fiction.

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