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Orality in Joyce: Food, Famine, Feasts and Public Houses

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Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire

Some common themes within the history of food and literature include starvation, famine, gluttony, feasting, commensality, hospitality, religion, gender, and class, and indeed food also functions as a complex signifier of national, racial, and cultural identity. Despite the growing international scholarship of food in literature (Bevan 1988; Schofield 1989; Ellmann 1993; Applebaum 2006; Piatti-Farnell 2011; Gilbert and Porter 2015; Boyce and Fitzpatrick 2017; Piatti-Farnell and Lee Brien 2018), until recently, Ireland appeared “as only the smallest of dots on the map of high gastronomy” (Goldstein 2014, xi). Most international collections discuss the canonical Irish writings of James Joyce and of Jonathan Swift, and more recent collections include Seamus Heaney’s poetry (Gilbert and Porter 2015). Much of Joyce’s work is oral in as much that it is more talked about than read, but this article broadens the understanding of orality from the oral tradition to also includes what does or does not enter the mouth.

O’Kane Mara (2009, 94) suggests starvation, both willing and unwilling, is a recurring theme in Irish history, citing Ellman’s (1993, 12) discussion of the Medieval Irish legal procedure of “fasting to distraint”, where a creditor or victim of injustice could fast against a debtor or the person who had injured him. This tradition of self-imposed starvation or hunger strike – famously resulting in the death of Irish playwright, author and politician Terence McSwiney in 1920, and reportedly influencing Mahatma Gandhi in India – was used again by prisoners in Northern Ireland in the 1980s. Unwilling starvation due to famine has been recurrent in Ireland as in many other countries over the centuries, and is referenced in literature from Edmund Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* (1590) to Joseph O’Connor’s *Star of the Sea* (2003) (Boyce and Fitzpatrick 2017, 106, 140). However, this connection of Ireland with famine has, to date, presented an obstacle to the exploration of Irish food and foodways (Goldstein 2014, xii). There has been steady growth in scholarship on Irish food history in recent years (Mac Con Iomaire 2011; 2013; 2015; 2018; Flavin 2014; Mac Con Iomaire and Maher 2014; Shanahan 2014; Richman Kenneally 2015; Cashman 2016; FitzPatrick and Kelly 2016),

providing a more nuanced approach to the dominant narrative which all too often “begins and ends with potatoes and famine” (Goldstein 2014, xii).

The Irish Famine (*An Gorta Mór*) of the 1840s was the greatest social catastrophe of nineteenth century Europe and left a lasting scar on the Irish people. It should be noted that there were previous famines in Ireland such as *Bliain an Áir* - The year of the Slaughter (1740-1741) - where a higher proportion, albeit a smaller number, of the overall population died. Kiberd (1995, 180) points out that after the Great Famine, Ireland “had almost ceased to exist in the old Gaelic way: what was left – the remaining voices confirmed this – was a terrifying open space, in places and in person.” Ó hAllmhuráin (1999) confirms that the Great Famine was the death knell of the strong oral tradition of storytelling, songs and music that had been so vibrant particularly in the Irish speaking districts in their *clachán* based communities along the western Atlantic seaboard. Ó hAllmhuráin (1999, 44) concludes that the haemorrhage of emigration utterly changed the topography of music making in post-famine Ireland “the unquiet ghost of the Great Famine continued to haunt the communal psyche of rural Ireland, as well as the musical cultures of its people at home and abroad”. From a literary perspective, Eagleton (2003) asserts that the famine has inspired surprisingly little imaginative writing.

Extant literature includes a powerful novel by Liam O'Flaherty *The Famine* (1937), Walter Macken's *The Silent People* (1962), and a starkly moving drama by the contemporary playwright Tom Murphy, namely *Famine* (1968). More recent works include Eugene McCabe *Tales from the Poor House* (2000) and Joseph O'Connor *Star of the Sea* (2003). Eagleton (2003) argues that in both Yeats and Joyce it is “no more than a dim resonance”, describing this silence “as though African-Americans were to maintain an embarrassed silence about the slave trade”. Cusack and Goss (2006), however, seek to dispel what they term the “longstanding myth that Irish authors and Irish culture have, for the most part, deliberately avoided engagements with the Famine”. Their edited collection of essays, *Hungry Words*, traces the famine's influence on the works of mainstream authors from throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century, seeking to demonstrate that, far from being ignored, the legacy of the Great Famine has been felt, explored, and transformed by each generation of Irish authors since the 1840s.

Although some believe Yeats and Joyce to be mute on famine, others read Stephen Dedalus's rejection of solid food in *Ulysses* (1922) as building on an Irish historical and cultural tradition of food refusal "as a form of political speech and suggests a way to rebuild fractured identity" (O'Kane Mara 2009, 94). Eagleton (1997) concedes that the starved words, gaunt bodies and sterile landscapes of Samuel Beckett's dramas may well carry with them a race memory of the Irish famine, and that it is possible to read Beckett's meticulously pared-down prose as a satirical smack at the blather and blarney of stage-Irish speech. Beckett, he argues, "hoards his meagre clutch of words like a tight-fisted peasant, ringing pedantic changes on the same few signs or stage properties like someone eking out a scanty diet". Eagleton points out that there is, perhaps, a Protestant suspicion of superfluity here, in contrast to the extravagant expenditure of James Joyce, the linguistic opulence of John Millington Synge or the verbal gluttony of Brendan Behan. Language in Irish culture, however, was associated less with food than with drink. As drink flowed in, so words poured out, each fuelling the other in a self-sustaining process. The public house and the oral tradition of storytelling and conversation are well covered in Joyce's work as will be discussed below. Oliver St John Gogarty was such an unstoppable conversationalist that he found that food interfered with talk. George Moore on the other hand was quite the gourmand and his gastronomic reputation was immortalised in Susan Mitchell's poem 'George Moore Eats a Grey Mullet' (O'Mara and O'Reilly 1991, 17). Despite the Irish reputation for drunkenness and association with Guinness particularly, Eagleton (1997) points out that "apart from the notoriously bibulous trinity of Behan, Flann O'Brien and Patrick Kavanagh, remarkably few Irish writers have been alcoholics - far fewer than American authors, for whom alcohol seems as much of a prerequisite as a typewriter".

"Good puzzle would be cross Dublin without passing a pub" (Joyce 1992, p. 69). So ponders Leopold Bloom as he passes Larry O'Rourke's pub on his early morning wanders to buy a mutton kidney. We have only just met the protagonist of James Joyce's *Ulysses* and he has not yet eaten breakfast, but his bourgeois advertising agent's brain is already deciphering another puzzle: where do self-made publicans get the money to build such lucrative businesses? During the course of Bloom's travels in and around Dublin city more than 50 pubs are name-checked (O'Brien 2014, p. 213). Carrigy (2018) notes that several of these pubs feature as settings for prominent scenes in *Ulysses* involving Bloom and a host of local characters, most of whom drink considerably more than our anti-hero. Unlike Joyce himself, Bloom boasts a relatively modest appetite for alcohol, but both share a certain respect for the business acumen of Dublin publicans. Bloom knows that there is no use canvassing that "cute

old codger” Larry O’Rourke for an ad. “Still,” he admits, “he knows his own business best” (Joyce 1992, 69). In a letter to his brother Stanislaus written in 1912, two years before embarking on *Ulysses*, Joyce suggests that most publicans would welcome some free advertising. The letter relays an argument with Maunsel & Co. who were considering publishing Joyce’s collection of short stories, *Dubliners*, but were nervous of being sued for libel by publicans whose businesses had been mentioned by name (Ellmann 1983, 331). Carrigy (2018) discusses the strong link between the public house and Irish literature drawing examples from the works of James Joyce, John Millington Synge, John B. Keane, John McGahern, Tom Murphy and Roddy Doyle. She highlights how various theories of “commensal politics” (Dietler 2006), “cultural capital” (Bourdieu 1986) and the “third place” (Oldenberg 1998) can be applied to analyse these texts. For example, in Joyce’s short story “Counterparts” from *Dubliners*, the levelling and bonding club effect of a round of drinks within the third place of the pub is visible, as is the social capital that the young English acrobat, Weathers, uses in promising to introduce the group to some “nice girls” to make up for his lack of financial capital and his inability to stand a round. However, when the main protagonist Farrington feels snubbed by the attractive English theatre woman he is introduced to, his rage later manifests in the beating he gives his son. Carrigy notes that “Dietler’s distinctions of age, race and gender are all evoked as contested markers of identity, difference and relative status in Joyce’s representation of the evening’s chain of events” (2018, 10).

Unlike the theme of famine, there is no ambiguity concerning feasting in Joyce’s work, which is replete with food references, from the sumptuous feast in his short story “The Dead” from *Dubliners* (1914), featuring two dozen deliciously described victuals including “floury potatoes” and the word “hospitality” repeated five times during Gabriel’s speech, to *Ulysses*, where breakfast bookends Bloom’s waking and his falling asleep. As Small (2014, 35) notes, “meals chart the progress of time and Leopold Bloom unfolds through the foods that he eats”. Tucker (1984) also reaffirms how Joyce pays close attention to food and digestion, particularly in Bloom’s gustatory progress through the novel. A broad assortment of foods appear in *Ulysses* from the inner organs of beasts and fowl, rabbit pie, gorgonzola and lap of mutton with chutney, to the infamous kiss where Molly puts warm and chewed seedcake into Bloom’s mouth, which he eats with joy. Even *Finnegans Wake* (1939) is rich in culinary quips, from “gourmandising and gourmetearing”, to a reference to Mrs Beeton “with them

Murphy's puffs she dursted with gnockmeggs and bramborry cake for dour dorty dumpling obayre Mattom Beeton" (O'Mara and O'Reilly 1991, 103).

Conclusions

Orality encapsulates Joyce's work, part of the enduring intrigue of *Ulysses*, and perhaps one of the best-known elements in a book that "may be more talked about than read" (Mullin 2016). Orality refers also to what does or does not enter the mouth, although the seedcake exchange in *Ulysses* is wide open to psychoanalysis. There is even a food link within Nora Barnacle's surname. When Joyce's father initially heard Nora's name, he joked: "Barnacle? She'll never leave him." He was right. From that date on, Nora and Joyce stuck together. The themes of famine, fasting and feasting within Joyce and Irish literature in general have been discussed with some commentator's assertion that Stephen Dedalus's rejection of solid food in *Ulysses* (1922) as building on an Irish historical and cultural tradition of food refusal highlighted. The dominance of drink over food in Irish culture and the role of the pub in both Irish society and literature is marked, with the power play evident within key elements common to the Irish pub, notably the rounds system of buying drinks as a ritual of reciprocity and pub talk as a ritualised forum for negotiating social status (Bourdieu 1886; Dietler 2006; Carrigy 2018). Irish pubs and literature have become synonymous. Irish pubs named after literary figures or their creations abound. There are numerous James Joyce pubs to be found in cities around the world (Paris, Madrid, Athens, Baltimore etc.) and indeed a bespoke James Joyce literary pub crawl is operated in Dublin through the various establishments mentioned or frequented by Joyce (Publin.ie). A final oral element to Joyce, closely linked with the pubs and with hospitality, is the oral tradition of songs, which although still evident in Irish society, was dramatically affected following the Great Famine (Ó hAllmhuráin 1999). The pattern of the evening in the short story "The Dead" for *Dubliners* is still very evident within Irish life, with drinks followed by a meal and conversation, followed by drinks and a singing session. The melancholy tone of "The Lass of Aughrim" reminds Greta Conroy of her dead lover Michael Furey and leads to her husband Gabriel's revelation that he was neither her first

nor her greatest love. As G.K. Chesterton famously noted “The great Gaels of Ireland are the men that God made mad, For all their wars are merry, and all their songs are sad.”

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