



The Aftermath of Famine: Food and Identity in *Ulysses*

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‘Eating is a fundamental activity. It is more or less the first thing we do, the primary source of pleasure and frustration, the arena of our earliest education and enculturation. Food is our centre, necessary for survival and inextricably connected with social function’.¹

Ulysses is James Joyce’s epic attempt to capture the essence of human experience. Food, as Sceats notes, is the centre of this experience: literally and figuratively the source of life, essential for survival and intrinsically linked to those who ingest it. As a novel intensely rooted in its context, suffused with the political, social, economic and cultural concerns of 1904 Dublin, *Ulysses* recognises the integral role food plays in society. Joyce’s mealtimes are intrinsic to his recreation of seemingly banal everyday routine, providing a valuable insight into the attitudes and identities of those who consume it. The language of food is not only essential to *Ulysses*, but to Ireland. Just half a century before the publication of this now infamous text, the Great Famine of 1846-1851 permanently reshaped the political and cultural landscape of Ireland. Originating from a blight on the potato, an Irish food staple and national symbol, the famine led to increased colonial opposition as nationalists argued the disaster was largely ignored by the British government, who continued to export Irish produce and enforce taxes. Consequently, the understanding of famine as a symbol for English oppression politicises mealtimes throughout *Ulysses*; the excess of food is an English luxury, and starvation a metaphor for the damaging repercussions of colonial behaviour. The way in which each character engages with food not only serves as a reflection of individual attitudes and identities, but uncovers Joyce’s consideration of numerous social and political concerns and the integral role history plays to *Ulysses*.

Ulysses opens ‘Stately, plump Buck Mulligan’,² immediately drawing a connection between wealth and food. ‘Stately’ carries connotations of the monarchy associated with Ireland’s coloniser, England. Mulligan’s ‘well-fed’ (6) voice attests to the notion that it is those of status and power that ingest an excess of food. Though Mulligan is not English, his defence of Englishman Haines allies him with the empire as Joyce subtly implicates a criticism of colonial politics into the breakfast scene of ‘Telemachus’. In his part, Mulligan is Ireland’s ‘gay betrayer’ (14) as he not only invites Haines into the tower, but also serves him breakfast. For Joyce, Mulligan represents all that is wrong with the collective Irish conscience, shaped by the reflection of English notions. Even his futile attempts to ‘play’ (16) his English counterpart stem from an internalisation of colonial politics. As he puts on a ‘cockney accent’ and mockingly sings about ‘the coronation’ (12) Mulligan performs a nationalism based on an inversion of English tactics of the assertion of one nation’s worth over another through ridicule and suppression. Andrew Gibson indicates that Joyce’s unique

¹ Sarah Sceats, *Food Consumption and the Body in Contemporary Women’s Fiction* (Cambridge: University Press, 2000), p. 1.

² James Joyce, *Ulysses: The 1922 Text*, ed. Jeri Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 1.

All further references to *Ulysses* will be to this edition of the text, cited by line number.

nationalist stance opposes these ideals, and instead works towards liberation from the colonial power through an ‘awakening’ of an Irish consciousness with ‘the emphasis on the refusal to serve, on the annihilation of the ruler within’.³

Haines, as a symbol of the ‘ruler’ to which Gibson refers, is an imposing and dominating presence in ‘Telemachus’. Rather than helping to prepare breakfast he ‘stood at the doorway’ (12) as the symbolic guard of the Martello tower, a disused English military defence, making the metaphor of England as the protector and ruler of Ireland doubly powerful. Loyal subject Mulligan calls him to breakfast, where Haines takes charge of pouring the tea, stating ‘I’m giving you two lumps each’ (12). Though neither the tower nor the foods belong to him, Haines asserts ownership over the meal, finishing by ordering his companions to ‘pay up and look pleasant’ (17). His rule and control of the food source mirrors England’s continued exportation of food from Ireland during the famine, of which Rev. John O’Rourke’s 1902 account is highly critical:

Let any one look at the tables of our exports of food during the famine years, and he will see how the case stood. The food was in the country, on the very ground where it was required — beside the starving peasant, but was taken away before his eyes.⁴

He suggests the disaster may have been averted, yet both the English and Irish Governments continued to export what little food the country produced; a wealthy few benefitted from the colonial policies that impoverished the masses. When the extent of the famine eventually came to light, England was, O’Rourke argues, ‘painfully unequal to the situation. They either could not or would not use all the appliances within their reach, to save the Irish people’.⁵ Haines is symbolic of the selfish and ambivalent attitude the English enacted during the famine years. He tells Stephen ‘we feel in England we have treated you rather unfairly, it seems history is to blame’ (20). He is dismissive of the oppression inflicted upon the Irish nation, blaming ‘history’ rather than the colonial government which caused it, yet throughout *Ulysses* ‘history is ideology enacted’.⁶ Directly after their conversation Stephen is evicted from his tower, as Haines and Mulligan take control of the key, reminiscent of the evictions landlords of farmers and tenants during the famine. It seems that the colonial politics which exacerbated the already devastating famine are not forgotten but perpetuated by figures that represent England in *Ulysses*.

If Haines is England in this scene then Ireland itself is embodied in the milk woman described as ‘Silk of the Kine’ (14). She is in a position of subservience within the tower, an ‘immortal servant’ (14) to Mulligan and Haines ‘her conqueror and her gay betrayer’ (14). Physically, she reflects the perishing effects the famine had on the body, as Stephen observes her ‘old shrunken paps’ (14). Margaret Kheller examines the connection of famine and the image of the empty breast, which Ulin argues ‘horrifies the observers with its implications’ as the source and nourishment of human life, the mother’s breast, runs dry.⁷ The politics of famine continue to colour this exchange as Stephen imagines her ‘crouching by a patient cow at daybreak in the lush field’ (14), using romanticised language reminiscent of revivalist literature to idealise the Irish countryside as the source of the milk. Though from Ireland the milk is ‘not hers’ (14) exported, like Irish produce during the famine, to a breakfast table

³ Andrew Gibson, *Joyce’s Revenge: History, Politics and Aesthetics in Ulysses* (Oxford: University Press, 2002), p. 5.

⁴ John O’Rourke, *The History of the Great Irish Famine of 1847 With Notices Of Earlier Irish Famines* (Dublin: Veritas, 1989), p. 89.

⁵ O’Rourke, p. 92.

⁶ James Fairhall, *James Joyce and the Question of History* (Cambridge: University Press, 1995), p. 40.

⁷ Margaret Kheller, *The Feminization of Famine, Expressions of the Inexpressible?* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1997), p. 23, quoted in Julieann Ulin, “‘Famished Ghosts’: Famine memory in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*”, *Joyce Studies Annual* (2011), p. 35.

controlled by the colonial power. Haines is ‘the loud voice that bids her be silent’ (14), yet the milk woman fails to recognise that he is speaking Irish. Mellissa Fegan writes ‘the famine acted as an accelerator for the death of the language’ as it hit those in the rural farming counties with the most dependency on the potato the hardest.⁸ The majority of the Irish-speaking population lived in these counties, meaning much of the language was lost with the deaths. As an embodiment of ‘Ireland’ the milk woman represents both cultural and physical decimation famine caused.

The loss of the Irish language to the milk woman is also symbolic of the lasting psychological effects of famine. Cormac O’Grada examines the horrors that the famine forced people to perpetuate: ‘tales of child murder, neglect, apathy, abandonment and even cannibalism’.⁹ The resulting shame and guilt of behaviour during the famine forced Ireland into silence. In *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*, Terry Eagleton explains ‘after the event there were villages which could speak Irish but didn’t’.¹⁰ It was considered ‘bad luck’ to be Irish, and the wish to escape the memory of the famine silenced the entire nation, even to the present day as there is a notable absence of famine literature by Irish writers. As the milk woman expresses, she is ‘ashamed I don’t know the language’ (14); she hints at a deep seated shame imbedded in her national consciousness, the same consciousness that Joyce wished to ‘awaken’.

Joyce’s efforts are epitomised in Stephen Dedalus, a character preoccupied with Irish nationhood as he sets out his manifesto in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* to ‘forge in the smithy of my soul...the uncreated conscience of my race’.¹¹ In Joyce’s detailed use of internal monologue, Stephen’s ‘conscience’ is comparatively deficient of food imagery and his consideration of famine is non-existent, causing Terry Eagleton to ask ‘Where is the famine in Joyce?’¹² However, it is no accident that he does not engage with food and famine in any direct way; as Johnson states, in *Ulysses* ‘Omissions are not accidents’.¹³ Stephen’s lack of engagement with food imagery reveals just as much as Bloom’s excessive contemplation of it. Lindsey Tucker identifies in Stephen’s ‘tendency to relegate digestive functions to a lower world that is both attractive and threatening’.¹⁴ In his pursuit as an artist Stephen asserts spiritual matters above the earthly, consequently avoiding the history and politics associated with them. Tucker argues that ‘to fail to become the artist is to become devoured’.¹⁵ The dichotomy of Stephen’s need to keep bodily instincts suppressed and the opposing need to bring them to full consciousness render him unable to engage with food; he is perpetually anxious about the possibility of being ‘devoured’ by powers beyond his means, by ‘country, church and mother’.¹⁶

Stephen therefore, like the milk woman, cannot fully confront the aftermath of famine throughout *Ulysses*. He is rendered silent by both his inability to address food and simultaneously his implication in the collective Irish conscience. He states that ‘history...is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake’ (34). The memory of famine haunts him in the imagery of death and corpses that surround him. The death of his mother becomes a particularly pertinent metaphor for the haunting presence of famine in *Ulysses*. In ‘Telemachus’ Stephen recalls a dream where he witnessed her ‘wasted body within her lose graveclothes’ (10), an appearance similar to that of a famine victim, wasting away. In Circe she reappears ‘emancipated’ (539), speaking from a ‘toothless mouth’ (540) to tell Stephen to

⁸ Melissa Fegan, *Literature and the Irish Famine 1845-1919* (Oxford: University Press, 2002), p. 31.

⁹ Cormac O’Grada, *Black ’47 and Beyond, The Great Irish Famine* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 210.

¹⁰ Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger* (London: Verso, 1995), p. 12.

¹¹ James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (London: Wordsworth, 1992), p. 196.

¹² Eagleton, p. 13.

¹³ Jeri Johnson, ‘Introduction’, in James Joyce, *Ulysses: The 1922 Text* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. xxviii.

¹⁴ Lindsey Tucker, *Stephen and Bloom at Life’s Feast* (Ohio State University Press: Columbus, 1984), p. 13.

¹⁵ Tucker, p. 12.

¹⁶ Tucker, p. 14.

‘Get Dilly to make you that boiled rice every night’ (540), imploring Stephen to eat, to confront the earthly pleasures from which his conscience hides, and consequently address the history which shaped it. The imagery of skeletons and ghosts is inextricably linked with the literature of famine. Christopher Morash describes ‘a haunting of language’, suggesting that ‘in the living skeletons and spectres who materialise again and again in the paces of Famine writing we see a discourse of famine taking shape with its own particular vocabulary’.¹⁷ Travel accounts and articles during the famine were littered with motifs of ‘living skeletons’ which described the horrors of Irish poverty. For Stephen, he is perpetually haunted by the same visions, yet unable to fully confront them for fear of being ‘devoured’ by that which he cannot control. Stephen himself asks ‘What is a ghost? One who has faded into impalpability through death’ (180). The famine is ‘impalpable’ to Stephen as, even though he is only one generation removed from the event, once passed the atrocities of famine have been hastily buried in the Irish conscience, relegated to a mere ‘ghost’. He is, as Terry Eagleton argues of many artists in post-famine Ireland, ‘traumatised to muteness’, haunted by the food history he refuses to embrace.¹⁸

If Stephen Dedalus is the character through which Joyce expresses the haunting nature of the Great Famine, Leopold Bloom is the character through which he directly confronts history in an attempt to extrapolate the experience of famine, and consequently reshape Irish nationhood and ‘awaken’ the conscience. Like Mulligan, Bloom is introduced through interactions with food: ‘Mr Leopold Bloom ate with relish the inner organs of beasts and fowls’ (53). Though he is a stoutly man this is not, as is the case with Mulligan, a metaphor for power and colonial rule but rather a sign of his embodiment of the multitude of identities foods stand for. Though he is Jewish, ‘kidneys were on his mind’ (53) and his inner monologue is littered with allusions to pork in his admiration of woman’s ‘moving hams’ (57) and legs as ‘sausages’ (69), presenting an ambivalent position to religion. Joyce explains that *Ulysses* is ‘the epic of two races, and at the same time the cycle of the human body’, revealing that it is the dichotomy of Stephen and Bloom, ethereal and corporeal, spiritually hungry and literally sated through which Joyce extrapolates the consciousness of human life.¹⁹ If, then, Stephen is intrinsically implicit in the conscience of the Irish race, Bloom stands apart from this as food and eating within his character is used to depict his position as ‘other’ in relation to Irish identity. This ‘otherness’ is not just to Irish conscious, but rooted in his polysemic identity expounded through his relationship with food. In being well-fed without an allegiance to the English, Jewish without abiding by Kosher laws, ridiculing vegetarians but rejecting carnivores in ‘Lestrygonians’, Joyce opens up a discursive space to create a character in which Irish history and politics may be confronted and redressed.

It is because of this lucid relationship with identity that Bloom is able to see that which Stephen hides from. In the case of famine history, the lasting effects of poverty and starvation on the nation. ‘Lestrygonians’ opens with ‘a sugarsticky girlshovelling scoopfuls of creams for a Christian brother’ the ‘Lozenge and confit manufacturer to His Majesty the King’ (144), referencing the two controlling presences in Ireland, the Catholic Church and the English monarchy, and their damaging influence on future generations ‘bad for their tummies’ (144). He observes a ‘brewery barge with export stout’, recognising the control England has over Irish food, just as earlier he states ‘roast beef for old England’ (94). Whereas the breakfast scene employed a subtle discourse of metaphor in its criticism of colonial oppression, the explicit effects of English rule are voiced in Bloom’s interior monologue.

¹⁷ Christopher Morash, ‘Spectres of the Famine’, *Irish Review* (Winter 1995): 74-79 (p. 75).

¹⁸ Eagleton, p. 118.

¹⁹ James Joyce, ‘Letter to Linati’, in *Selected Letters of James Joyce*, ed. Richard Ellman (New York: Viking, 1957), p. 271.

Bloom's confrontation of the effects of English oppression is the motives behind his 'despondency' within 'Lestrygonians'.²⁰ As he enters The Burton in search of food he is repulsed by ravenous diners sloppily consuming their lunch. The animalistic imagery of men tearing meat from the bone, 'every fellow for his own, tooth and nail' (162) directly parallels the shame-inducing mentality of the famine in which 'every man had to do for himself'.²¹ Bloom observes a man eat 'as if his life depended on it' (162), recognising in the men a desperate need to 'eat, eat, kill or be killed' (162) caused by a subconscious memory of starvation leftover from the Great Famine. Irish men, he observes, are 'famished ghosts' (163); their insatiable appetites stem from a need to compensate for the starvation they once suffered.

Bloom not only articulates the psychological effects of famine memory, but is also able to address images of starvation and poverty in Ireland, to confront the 'living skeletons' Stephen flees. He observes Dilly Dedalus: 'underfed she looks. Potatoes and marge. Marge and potatoes' (145). Bloom names 'potatoes', a staple food of the Irish diet and a symbolic emblem of Irish cultural identity — both of which were diminished during the famine. In her discussion of Bloom, Julieanne Ulin states Bloom 'desires to see himself as a participant in [famine] memory' and that he seeks assimilation into Irish identity through his preoccupation with foods associated with famine and Ireland.²² I would argue, however, that Bloom's position as a racial outsider allows him to view the flaws in history has caused. He distances himself from Irish identity as he states 'it's after *they* feel it, undermines the constitution' [*italics mine*] (145). In the same episode Bloom observes the 'hungry famished gull' (145) displaying pity for 'those poor birds' (146) and endeavours to feed them. Throughout *Ulysses* Bloom not only reveals his recognition of the historical implications of famine, but also works to redress them. He offers food and shelter to Stephen Dedalus, and works to prevent the Dignam family from eviction, offering restitution for the same forces which caused the hunger and homelessness criticised in 'Telemachus'.

Bloom's position as the 'modern epic hero' of *Ulysses* is then secured by his food behaviours and engagement with famine memory.²³ Declan Kiberd writes 'Joyce is intent upon his creation of a new species of man'.²⁴ Bloom's food behaviours prove he is Joyce's tool to unlock the Irish conscience and redress history. The most pertinent and recurring food motif which proves this is Bloom's potato. A traditional symbol of Irish nationhood and cause of the Great Famine, it is not, for Bloom, a symbol of bad luck but a 'talisman' (450). Unlike the Irish, Bloom carries a symbol of famine not as a haunting psychological memory, but a solid object, over which he has control. Bonnie Roos argues that his surrendering of the potato in the 'Circe' episode is a metaphor for the scene of Ireland and England's Union, in which Bloom's relations with Zoe represent an unconscious relinquishing of control to England.²⁵ However, his power over the potato lies in his manipulation of it, not as a symbol of starvation but as a gloried food source: 'killer of pestilence by absorption' (452). Bloom reshapes symbols of Irish identity in an 'awakening' of the soul. As he is hailed as Lord Mayor, he rallies against 'capitalistic lusts' (453) that profit as the 'poor man starves' (453), criticising the colonial English rulers which put politics and economic gain before the well-being of Irish people. Bloom's confrontation and subsequent manipulation of famine memory render him the saviour of Ireland, from both history and colonial oppression.

²⁰ Named as the 'sense' in the Linati schema, *Ulysses*, ed. Jeri Johnson, p. 737.

²¹ O'Grada, p. 211.

²² Ulin, p. 53.

²³ John Henry Raleigh, 'Bloom as Modern Epic Hero', *Critical Inquiry*, 3.3 (Spring, 1977), pp. 583-98.

²⁴ Declan Kiberd, *Ulysses and Us: The Art of Everyday Living* (London: Faber, 2009), p. 69.

²⁵ Bonnie Roos, 'The Joyce of Eating: Feast, Famine and the Humble Potato in *Ulysses*', in *Hungry Words: Images of Famine in the Irish Canon*, ed. George Cusack and Sarah Goss (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006), p. 342.

In a novel where food is a vehicle for expression; of identity, of politics and of history, Molly's final word 'Yes' assents to, among other things, the passing of seedcake from Bloom's mouth to Molly's. In a chapter Joyce describes as 'human, all too human' (732), food is recognised as the affirmative centre of experience.²⁶ Its centrality to life is reflected in the complex disruptions and repercussions of its absence. The Great Famine is subtly implicated throughout *Ulysses*; it haunts the text just as the memory of it haunts Ireland. Mealtimes become subtle metaphors for the damaging colonial politics, and food behaviours emblematic of the national identities of those who eat it. The abundance of food motifs within *Ulysses* provide a unique vantage point into Joyce's world, and in order to understand this dynamic, complex realm we must fully immerse ourselves within the food it produces and the characters who subsume it. We need to do as Bloom suggests in 'Lestrygonians': 'Know me, come eat with me' (167).

²⁶ James Joyce, 'Letter to Frank Budgen', in *Selected Letters of James Joyce*, ed. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Viking, 1957), p. 278.

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