BODIES THAT FESTER IN THE HOLDS OF THE "COFFIN SHIPS": POSTCOLONIAL NEO-VICTORIANISM, VULNERABILITY AND RESISTANCE IN JOSEPH O'CONNOR'S *STAR OF THE SEA* (2003)

CUERPOS QUE SE PUDREN EN LAS BODEGAS DE LOS "BARCOS ATAÚD": NEO-VICTORIANISMO POSTCOLONIAL, VULNERABILIDAD Y RESISTENCIA EN *STAR OF THE SEA* (2003), DE JOSEPH O'CONNOR

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Abstract

The presence of Empire in the Victorian period and its aftermath has become a new trope in neo-Victorian studies, introducing a postcolonial approach to the re-writing of the Victorian past. This, combined with the metaphor of the sea as a symbol of British colonial and postcolonial maritime power, makes of Joseph O'Connor's novel *Star of the Sea* a story of love, vulnerability and identity. Set in the winter of 1847, it tells the story of the voyage of a group of Irish refugees travelling to New York trying to escape from the Famine. The colonial history of Ireland and its long tradition of English dominance becomes the setting of the characters' fight for survival. Parallels with today's refugees can be established after Ireland's transformation into an immigration country. Following Judith Butler's and Sarah Bracke's notions of vulnerability and resistance together with ideas about 'the other' in postcolonial neo-Victorianism, this article aims to analyse the role of Empire in the construction of an Irish identity associated with poverty and disease, together with its re-emergence and reconstruction through healing in a contemporary globalised scenario. For this purpose, I resort to Edward Said's and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's ideas about imperialism and new imperialism along with Elizabeth Ho's concept of 'the Neo-Victorian-at-sea' and some critics' approaches to postcolonial Gothic. My main contention throughout the text will be that vulnerability in resistance can foster healing.

Keywords: postcolonialism, neo-Victorianism, *Star of the Sea*, vulnerability, resistance.

Resumen

La presencia del Imperio en el período victoriano y sus consecuencias se han convertido en un nuevo tropo en los estudios neo-victorianos, incorporando un enfoque postcolonial a la reescritura del pasado. Esto, junto con la metáfora del mar como símbolo del poder marítimo británico colonial y postcolonial, han hecho de la novela de Joseph O'Connor *Star of the Sea* una historia de amor, vulnerabilidad, identidad y pertenencia. Situada en el invierno de 1847, cuenta la historia del viaje de un grupo de refugiados irlandeses que viajan a Nueva York tratando de escapar de la hambruna. La historia de Irlanda como país colonizado con una larga tradición de dominio inglés se convierte en el escenario de la lucha por la supervivencia. De esta manera se pueden establecer paralelismos con los refugiados de hoy día tras la transformación de Irlanda en un país de inmigración. Siguiendo las ideas de Judith Butler y Sarah Bracke sobre vulnerabilidad y resistencia, además de las ideas sobre la otredad del postcolonialismo neo-victoriano, este artículo tiene como objeto analizar el rol del imperio en la construcción de la identidad irlandesa asociada con la pobreza y la enfermedad, así como su resurgimiento y reconstrucción a través de la sanación en un escenario contemporáneo globalizado. Con este fin, recurro a las ideas de Edward Said y de Michael Hardt y Antonio Negri sobre imperialismo y nuevo imperialismo, así como al enfoque del gótico postcolonial y al concepto de Elizabeth Ho sobre 'lo neo-victoriano en el mar'. Mi principal argumento a lo largo del texto será que la vulnerabilidad dentro de la resistencia puede promover la sanación.

Palabras clave: postcolonialismo, neo-victorianismo, *Star of the Sea*, vulnerabilidad, resistencia.

1. Introduction

Joseph O'Connor's *Star of the Sea* (2003) is a neo-Victorian fiction that recreates one of the darkest periods in the history of Ireland: the Famine. It is set in 1847 on board a coffin ship, the Star of the Sea, which was one of the many vessels that crossed the Atlantic carrying thousands of Irish people trying to escape from poverty and devastation to start a new life in America. These people were also fleeing from English oppression and colonisation at a time when many Irish tenants were descendants of English landlords and the British colonial government proved

incapable of managing the Irish situation. The trauma and vulnerability of the Irish population represented in the text reflect contemporary issues that affect our globalised world. In particular, the nightmare of great numbers of vulnerable populations who become refugees in developed countries and live precarious lives under inhuman conditions echoes that of the Irish at the time of the Great Famine. Significantly, Ireland has transformed itself from a migrating to an immigration country and it has recently become a place of dehumanisation and discrimination for newcomers.

Star of the Sea tells the story of a twenty-six-day voyage to New York during which different voices can be heard. One of the main voices is that of the Captain, Josias Tuke Lockwood, who narrates many episodes that take place during the journey and on arrival at the ship's destination; another main voice is that of G. Grantley Dixon, a journalist who writes an account of the journey many years after he lived through those sad events on the vessel. Together with these two men travel several characters whose lives are closely interconnected: Lord Merridith and his family, the servant Mary Duane, and the impostor Pius Mulvey. All of them are escaping their vulnerable pasts, showing resistance and seeking healing after a life of suffering and trauma in Ireland. Although all these characters represent different angles of the same tragedy, I will focus on Mary Duane as a representation of the fallen woman and the Irish other, that is, as a victim of poverty and precarity.

Following the neo-Victorian trend of giving voice to those neglected by history, this article has a two-fold aim: firstly, to re-consider the story of the Irish Famine as a shameful episode of the Irish past where precarity and vulnerability were part of the Irish landscape; and secondly, to add a postcolonial perspective to the history of Irish colonisation and mass migration in the nineteenth century through the recent field of postcolonial neo-Victorianism. In this context, the notion of the neo-Victorian-at-sea coined by Elizabeth Ho as well as the theoretical stance of maritime studies become relevant. This approach has important implications for a British colonial past immersed in a sea culture. Similarly, a postcolonial approach which focuses on ideas of imperialism and new imperialism as put forward by Edward Said, and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, is apposite for the analysis of an Irish identity associated with poverty, disease and trauma. This identity finds an echo in our contemporary globalised cultures. Finally, Judith Butler's and Sarah Bracke's notions of vulnerability and resistance will help us to understand the consequences of the Irish Famine and the Atlantic crossing and to establish connections with contemporary situations of precarity. The importance of healing —including national healing— is particularly relevant.

2. Neo-Victorian Sea Narratives and Narratives of Silence

Neo-Victorianism has recently been thoroughly discussed, and even defined, as an aesthetic movement, an academic trend and new genre which is mainly concerned with the revision, re-reading and re-writing of the Victorian past as a period which reflects many of the concerns of the present. Similarly, neo-Victorian fiction tries to fill the interstices of the past giving voice to minorities that were not heard or represented in Victorian mainstream culture. Consequently, the plots of many neo-Victorian novels are populated with situations that convey the unresolved traumas of the period, like those of colonialism and Empire, and with characters that were considered outside the norm, such as outlaws or fallen women (Voights-Virchow 2009: 111).

As early as 2008, after almost two decades of neo-Victorian productions, Marie-Luise Kohlke defined 'neo-Victorian' "as term, as genre, as 'new' discipline, as cultural happening, as socio-political critique, as reinvigorated historical consciousness, as memory work, as critical interface between past and present" (2008: 1). Some years later, in 2014, she described neo-Victorianism in a wider sense as historical fiction related to the nineteenth century and encompassing diverse geographical settings so that it can be understood as a 'liminal zone'. The fact that the UK was a huge Empire during the Victorian period, and the relevance of colonial violence and empire building for the configuration of our modern states, make issues of postcolonialism and new imperialism key elements in neo-Victorian narratives of Empire. These issues, together with ideas of national identity and of reparation for crimes committed against indigenous people, are all crucial topics of concern in neo-Victorian postcolonialism (Kohlke 2014: 28-29). Postcolonial neo-Victorianism tries then to give voice to the subaltern and to the victims of colonial and racial violence and discrimination.

In this sense, Dana Shiller's notion about the redemptive past in the neo-Victorian novel is very convenient for my analysis. She contends that neo-Victorianism is involved in a historical commitment to redeem the traumatic past. She also argues that neo-Victorian fiction offers a significant revisionist approach questioning the accuracy of existing historical knowledge and giving protagonism to certain events that had not been resolved or had been omitted by history. She considers both history and fiction to be human constructs, and neo-Victorian novelists are aware of this in their own relation to the truth about the past (Shiller 1997: 538-541). All these arguments are very useful in my approach to the Irish Famine and the Irish national identity through the analysis of *Star of the Sea*.

Sea narratives can be interpreted as cultural responses to the sea; they convey the different modes in which people interact with the sea and represent trans-national contexts. The sea becomes an imaginative space beyond land while the ship becomes a socially constructed space, as is the case in O'Connor's novel (Mathieson 2016: 2-4). The association with the unknown and the mysterious makes of the sea a feared space linked with the notion of 'the other'. It is in this context that the Irish coffin ships represent places where national history and cultural memory can be reinscribed, and imperial history and histories of colonialism can be re-enacted. Thus, oceanic cultures are "drawn together across nationalities by their shared sea experiences more than by their national contexts" in keeping with aspects of contemporary globalisation (Mathieson 2016: 13).

The history of Britain in the Victorian period is also the history of Empire. Nineteenth-century imperialism can be identified with a set of beliefs that the British were superior to other races —including other Europeans— and the most civilised and progressive power in the world. Although this idea pervaded mid-to late-Victorian and Edwardian discourses, it was also an important preoccupation for early Victorians. Colonial affairs as well as migration were part of the everyday life of the metropolis, affecting both domestic issues and various reform initiatives. Besides advocating territorial expansion, this imperialism was also concerned with the 'civilising mission' to bring light to other parts of the world, including Ireland (Bratlinger 1988: 4, 14). However, there are other representations of Empire different from those traditionally given in English literature and culture, as Gayatri C. Spivak argues (1997: 146), and O'Connor's *Star of the Sea* is one example.

Ho's idea of the ocean as a political space that reflects national ideologies is pertinent here. As she argues, "[t]he neo-Victorian-at-sea serves as a reminder that the British Empire was above all an 'empire of the seas', forcing us to re-think the usual structures of centre and periphery that mark most postcolonial fiction" (2014: 166). She goes on to state that this concept is "an attempt to move beyond conventional neo-Victorianism's bounded territorial spaces and status as national literatures and argue instead for a global memory of 'the Victorian' that is attuned to the conditions and experience of transnationality" (2014: 166). It is from this perspective that I would like to analyse the Irish exodus in the 1840s as a postcolonial project that not only encompasses the history and cultural memory of colonial atrocities, but also calls for healing and restitution in the present. It is evident that contemporary globalisation has become possible thanks to massive flows of people, that is, bodies in transit, a phenomenon which is partly the result of nineteenth-century and current imperialism. The latter caters for the needs of "global consumption, trade and labour" today (Ho 2014: 168). We can attach the label of postcolonial not only to texts that are produced in Europe and North

America, but also to those produced in ex-colonies. This opens up the possibility of contesting political implications in literature examined through the lense of postcolonial theory (Punter 2000: 5, 8).

Additionally, neo-Victorian fictions of Empire also provide us with the means to discuss English and Irish identities and anxieties in the aftermath of de-colonisation, which in turn will lead us to re-consider postcolonial politics. It thus becomes necessary to map neo-colonial and neo-imperial ways of dealing with contemporary cultures and identities. In this respect, neo-Victorian postcolonial fiction provides the means to develop "discourses and strategies of representation" (Ho 2012: 5-9).

Joseph O'Connor is a reputed Irish writer who began his career writing for newspapers and magazines. He then started writing short stories and novels; he is also the author of some plays and film scripts. In an interview with José Manuel Estévez Saá, he explains his purpose when writing *Star of the Sea*: he wanted to present a collection of characters of which the Famine could almost be considered as one. It was not so much a question of historiography as of breaking the silence about such a traumatic episode in the history of Ireland, while simultaneously questioning cold statistics and political propaganda. He believes in the possibilities of remembering through fiction and involving the reader in the process of storytelling (in Estévez Saá 2005: 163). Given these ideas together with its time setting, the novel can be analysed as part of the neo-Victorian project of re-writing the past and giving voice to those Victorian discourses which were silenced, as well as finding connections with our contemporary societies. Eckart Voights-Virchow argues that "contemporary readers encounter in the neo-Victorian novels not only the Victorians, but also their own culture" (2009: 108). For this critic, "the aim of cultural hermeneutics is to arrive at an understanding as a result of historical processes by analysing historical narratives, both fictional and non-fictional" (2009: 108). Unresolved traumas of subcultural transgressions in our current culture can be said to have their origin in Victorian subcultures, as *Star of the Sea* shows (Voights-Virchow 2009: 111-112).

The Great Famine (1845-49) resulting from the potato crop failure is one of the most traumatic episodes in the history of Ireland. According to the online *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, the potato blight was caused by the water mold *Phytophthora infestans*, which destroys potato leaves and roots. It arrived accidentally in Ireland from North America, causing the failure of the potato crops which were the main means of subsistence for the rural Irish population of the time. As a result of the spread of the disease, about one million people died from starvation or typhus and other famine-related diseases. The result was that the population of Ireland decreased from almost 8.4 million in 1844 to 6.6 million in

1851. Also, mass emigration to North America, Canada or Australia ensued with about two million people leaving the country, while at the same time birth-rates declined drastically, further diminishing the population (Mokyr 2004).

Younger generations of historians have tried to write a revisionist history of the Famine, especially since the 1980s, and more particularly on account of the commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the event. This new perspective on this ecological and civic disaster attempts to contest the anti-imperial nationalistic Irish discourse following independence from British rule (Baucom 2000: 127). O'Connor himself stated his position regarding the historical treatment of the conflict when the novel was published: the idea that English colonisers were responsible for the disasters of the Famine was disseminated to support the political propaganda of the IRA and its militant republicanism, indulging in the repudiation of the English (in Estévez Saá 2005: 164). All these facts reflect the wish of contemporary Ireland to learn more about the Famine and have access to historical and literary accounts, which is symptomatic of cultural trauma. In this context, O'Connor wrote *Star of the Sea* as a way to provide an alternative discourse to those traumatic ones surrounding the Irish Famine, as he considers the novel to be the appropriate means to provide a historical account with a different perspective on the topic. In his view, narratives of trauma can also be the means whereby some kind of healing can be achieved. He makes use of various historical sources and fictional elements so that the boundaries between story and history become blurred. The novel is written as the one-hundredth edition of a journalistic chronicle, which clearly points to the need to re-think and re-write the event, very much in line with the neo-Victorian agenda previously explained. Furthermore, the polyphony of voices in the novel does not allow for a single authoritative account. The Famine is a kind of ghost that can scarcely be put into words (O'Malley 2015: 135-138).

The novel makes it clear that one of its main purposes is to unearth the suppressed dark side of the history of the Irish Famine:

> And yet, could there be silence? What did silence mean? Could you allow yourself to say nothing at all to such things? To remain silent, in fact, was to say something powerful: that it never happened: that these people did not matter. They were not rich. They were not cultivated. They spoke no lines of elegant dialogue; many, in fact, did not speak at all. They died very quietly. They died in the dark. (O'Connor 2003: 130)

The novel articulates a discourse of Irish precarity which relates the Famine with groups of people who did not apparently deserve to be regarded as human in the eyes of the English colonial authorities, as they were poor and ignorant. O'Connor tries to convey the idea that these people's lives had no value and that one cannot

remain silent in the face of such atrocities. Although the Famine had already been verbalised by many historians, he wants to bring another perspective on the subject in *Star of the Sea* where the voices of the victims can be heard. As Punter claims, "personal and historical traumas, can never be recounted in linear narrative fashion, they can never be considered to be 'over', consigned to an untroubled or untroubling past" (2000: 67).

3. Irish Precarity, Trauma and Postcolonial Gothic

In her reflections on precarity, Judith Butler meditates on contemporary violence and on global events that make her wonder: "Who counts as human, Whose lives count as lives? And, finally, What *makes for a grievable life*?" (2004: 20, emphasis in original). This scenario can be taken back to the Irish past when many people were not considered human or worthy of public mourning after death, being under English colonial rule. Butler also defines bodies as associated with mortality, vulnerability and agency; she affirms that we live in communities and we are all interdependent. And yet, there are certain groups who are more vulnerable to violence than others, such as the bodies of the poor, the sexually 'deviant' and the racialised 'other'. These are all bodies vulnerable to political and social conditions and, as such, victims of different forms of violence (Butler 2004: 26-29). Butler's discourse of the dehumanisation of certain individuals and groups is a complex one, and the thousands of Irish deaths at the time of the Famine offer just one historical example of such discourse. In her view, subaltern groups do not deserve to be regarded as human, nor in consequence does their loss deserve any grief. When the journalist Dixon talks about the situation of Clifden at the time of the Famine, the population of Ireland was devastated by poverty and disease:

> The town was a dreadful sight, I could never forget it; with a multitude half dead and weeping as they walked through the streets. Worse again to see those for whom weeping was too much effort, and they sitting down on the icy ground to bow their heads and die, the best portion of life already gone out from them. (O'Connor 2003: 39)

Because of the deadly plague, many landowners lost their land and their tenants lost their ways of earning a living, many becoming the victims of eviction. Many Irish labourers were hit by poverty and ended up on the streets. Most of them put the blame on the landlords, the majority of whom were descendants of the English who had colonised the island in the past. One of these landowners was Lord Merridith, who travelled with his family on board the Star of the Sea. Unable to manage the situation, he had lost his land and estate to debt after his father's death. However, he claims that not all landlords are bad, as "many of them subsidise their tenants to emigrate" (O'Connor 2003: 13).

The relations between the Irish and the English had always been difficult. The former were treated by the latter as subalterns, but O'Connor wants to give a more complete vision and interpretation of the disaster. This concerns the shared Irish experience of having to come to terms with the hegemonic Anglophone culture, and the disjunction and disorienting experience of negotiating identities that the knowledge of migration inevitably brought about (O'Malley 2015: 151). This is something common to many other cultures which have been victims of the atrocities of colonisation and exploitation: "'Treat a man like a savage and he'll behave as one' […] 'anyone acquainted with Ireland should know that fact. Or Calcutta or Africa or anywhere else'" (O'Connor 2003: 13). With these words, O'Connor draws a parallel between Ireland and other British colonies. In particular, he tackles Britain's failure to deal with the precarious situation of its Irish colonial subjects (Corporaal and Cusack 2011: 347), as well as other postcolonial scenarios where migrant subjects were not considered as human. However, O'Connor wishes to challenge the nationalist interpretation of the dreadful event, thus making not only the English government but also the Irish establishment responsible for the deaths of up to two million people by not preventing exports of food from Ireland and relying only on workhouses to alleviate mass precarity (Fegan 2011: 326).

The answer to the question "Why is there a Famine in Ireland" as posed by the novel can be found in an article written by Dixon and published in *The New York Tribune* on 10 November 1847:

> Most of the British establishment abjures responsibility, while millions of those they rule in Ireland are left to the cruellest destruction in a long, cruel history; all the while many of the better-off Irish with whom the victims share nationality (if not much else) quietly look the other way. (O'Connor 2003: 19)

This article reflects the sad reality that both parties, the English colonisers and the Irish landowners, did nothing to remedy the situation of thousands of people who died of starvation or emigrated to the colonies in a desperate attempt to find a job to support their families. This attitude toward the dispossessed and migrant subjects is not uncommon in the aftermath of colonisation today. For the Irish survivors of the Famine and their descendants, the lack of funerals, the burials in mass graves of their relatives who died of starvation and the confinement of their family members in workhouses and soup kitchens constituted a shameful episode. The Irish also failed to help the abandoned victims, which was even more shocking (Fegan 2011: 324).

The lack of trustworthy accounts of Irish history is underlined in the narrative by the inclusion of one of the most popular forms of oral history: ballads. Ballads became the Irish means to say things that could not be uttered under a colonial

regime (Fegan 2011: 331). Pius Mulvey, one of the main characters in the story who assumes different identities, becomes a balladeer. Here is an example of one of the ballads he sings:

> *And if ever we take up the musket or sword,*
> *It won't be for England, we swear the Lord.*
> *For the freedom of Erin, we'll rise up our blade,*
> *And cut off your head in the morning.*
> (O'Connor 2003: 103, emphasis in original)

Ballads are not reliable historical sources, and they merge Irish forms with English lyrics. According to O'Malley, there is no literary tradition about nineteenth-century Ireland regarding its divided political, religious and cultural colonial context (2015: 146), which makes it necessary to revise and re-write the Irish stories of the Great Famine. In O'Connor's words: "What has happened in Ireland is that we've had history as ballad, with good guys, bad guys, heroes and villains. History has been turned into narrative, that is, into a kind of fiction" (in Estévez Saá 2005: 166).

Star of the Sea is the story of a huge number of Irish migrants travelling from Liverpool to New York escaping the Famine. The vessel was one of the many so-called coffin ships that crossed the Atlantic. It left for New York on November 8, 1847, the first year of the Famine. Coffin ships can be defined as 'heterotopias' in the Foucauldian sense, that is, as "countersites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted" (Foucault 1986: 24). In other words, during a sea journey, people from different communities and cultures mix together, creating a new social space where all those cultures can be enacted outside their own realities. This allows for the inversion, contestation and representation of real cultural sites during the voyage, and for new identities to be created as a result of the experience. For Foucault, ships are the communities that can best represent heterotopias as vessels for the imagination. In this sense, coffin ships might be seen as semiotic systems within which images of the Famine and the Irish diaspora are incorporated; they are imagined Irish communities in which identity is negotiated halfway between the homeland and the new world. Coffin ships are also repositories of memory as encapsulated in the narratives of migration and death of many of the poor passengers, who were already infected with disease and had to face a journey of six or seven weeks below deck. Consequently, many Irish men and women, about thirty per cent of passengers on board these ships, lost their lives travelling to America and were buried in the Atlantic Ocean (Corporaal and Cusack 2011: 344). The Captain of Star of the Sea, Lockwood, keeps a register of the voyage's everyday happenings, together with the names and

causes of death of all the passengers who die on board, and whose bodies are dumped in the ocean. Most deaths happened among steerage passengers suffering from typhus, dysentry, scurvy or famine dropsy, and of course, hunger.

The passengers and the crew were classified in different groups and followed certain routines. In the Captain's words:

> We have thirty-seven crew, 4021/2 ordinary steerage passengers (a child being reckoned in the usual way as one half of one adult passenger) and fifteen in the First-Class quarters or superior staterooms. Among the latter: Earl David Merredith of Kingscourt and his wife the Countess, their children and an Irish maidservant. Mr. G.G. Dixon of the *New York Tribune*: a noted columnist and man of letters. Surgeon Wm. Mangan, M.D. of the Theatre of Anatomy, Peter Street, Dublin, accompanied by his sister, Mrs. Derrington, relict; His Imperial Highness, the potentate Maharajah Ranjitsinji, a princely personage of India; Reverend Henry Deeds, D.D., a Methodist Minister from Lyme Regis in England (upgraded); and various others. (O'Connor 2003: 3)

Although different ethnicities are together on the vessel, they never actually mix; separate communities that constitute a particular social group create their own sense of Irishness according to their values and principles distinct from external 'others'. A new Irish identity is built through its performance on the Atlantic crossing (Corporaal and Cusack 2011: 352-353). In this context, emigration can be identified with the destruction of previous social relations that occurred because of the travelling experience and the horrors of the Famine, together with a sense of dislocation that also characterises our contemporary global societies (Fegan 2011: 323). The priest is representative of the Irish Catholic identity, whereas the Indian prince stands as an example of the importance of Empire in a colonial setting; the Earl and his family represent Irish traditional society, whereas Mary Duane, the woman servant, represents the precarity of the Irish poor. Thus, the ocean and the ship become a political space where issues of Irish nationalism are discussed.

Elements of neo-Victorian and postcolonial Gothic can be discerned throughout the novel. The Gothic was a literary form that became especially popular at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth. This genre celebrated "the irrational, the outlawed and the socially and culturally dispossessed" (Smith and Hughes 2003: 1). Thus, the Gothic and the postcolonial have in common their interest in contesting ideas about rationality promoted by the Enlightment which conceptualised the distinction between the human and the non-human. This conceptualisation was behind the racial hierarchies and the exclusion of 'otherness' that colonialism established. Gothic non-human figures like monsters or ghosts are created to defy the humanist discourse and serve to convey postcolonial ideas. Therefore, colonial binaries such as black/white,

savage/civilised or Orient/Occident that reflect the notion of other/self are challenged in postcolonial Gothic. In this way, fundamental aspects of the dominant culture are discussed, confirmed or interrogated in postcolonial Gothic fiction, questioning particular social, political or historical situations (Smith and Hughes 2003: 1-3). For neo-Victorianism, the Gothic represents notions of postmodern anxiety, excess, instability, hybridity and decline, which lead to the idea of 'otherness' (Kohlke and Gutleben 2012: 1).

Anxiety can be expressed in the dislocation between home and abroad, but it cannot be better represented than in the discomfort and dislocation that death brings. Death was the fate of many Irish who left their country seeking a better future and trying to leave devastation behind. This is the reason why

> [t]he collective memory of the Famine repeatedly approaches and draws back from images of corpses buried in canvas sacks rather than in coffins, of bodies left to rot in collapsing cabins, of bodies tumbled together in lime pits, of bodies left to rot along the roads, and, as the gathering figure for all those accounts of dead matter out of place, of bodies that either fester in the holds of the "coffin ships" that carried the Famine emigrants to the Americas or tumble from the decks of these vessels to the unplaceable deeps of the Atlantic Ocean. (Baucom 2000: 132)

As this fragment shows, the bodies of dead Irish migrants do not seem to deserve proper burial, nor public mourning. Gothic otherness can take many shapes, and neo-Victorianism is "*by nature quintessentially Gothic*: resurrecting the ghost(s) of the past, searching out its dark secrets and shameful mysteries, insisting obssessively on the lurid details of Victorian life, reliving the period's nightmares and traumas" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2012: 4, emphasis in original). The presence of the Gothic is abundant in the text, and the dead become protagonists in the account. Death itself is monstrous as illustrated by the following Gothic scene:

> The badly decayed remains of a youth and a girl were lying in the drainway; side by side, still enfolded in each other's embrace. Surgeon Mangan was called to pronounce death. The lad was about seventeen yrs; the girl perhaps fifteen. The girl had been several months with child. […] We took them out and gave them a Christian rite as best we could, but they had nothing at all by which we might even discover their names. […] Reverend Henry Deedes also assisted me and said a simple prayer. "That these children of God; of Ireland and England; each of whom was child of a mother, and each of whom was beloved of the other, may find their safe home in the arms of the Saviour". (O'Connor 2003: 278)

These two passengers, who happened to be stowaways, remind us of the fact that death makes us all equal, no matter our nationalities. Furthermore, this scene might be a reminder of the many people from underdeveloped countries who nowadays lose their lives in their attempt to reach the developed world. The representation of otherness in the current images of migrants trying to reach

Western European countries is shocking, and an example of contemporary dehumanization. According to Tabish Khair, "the Other is seen as a self waiting to be assimilated […] the Other is cast as the purely negative image of the European self" (2009: 4). Identity becomes essential in this equation, and the Gothic returns to haunt both England and the very notion of 'civilisation'. The aforementioned scene thus illustrates the monstrosity of the civilising mission and the brutality suffered by the Irish other as it evokes similarly devastating images in today's media.

The novel displays the Irish cultural trauma and shame of a humiliating past that always returns to provoke anxiety about the unburied dead of the Famine. The Famine is identified with the Ghost in the novel, a character that makes its appearance on board the ship so that "the stink had an almost corporeal presence; it felt like something you could grasp in gluey fistfuls. Rotten food, rotten flesh, rotten fruit of rotting vowels, you smelt it on your clothes, your hair, your hands; on the glass you drank from and the bread you ate" (O'Connor 2003: xv). O'Connor tries to bury the Famine dead and offer some apology and restitution to the survivors of forced migration and their descendants, thus turning this disaster into "a polymorphous spectral presence that resisted enclosure" (O'Malley 2015: 133).

4. Global Neo-Victorianism, Resistance and Healing

O'Connor's attempt to retrieve the Irish traumatic past is an example of the neo-Victorian duty to bear witness to suffering and the anxiety that this traumatic past generates. Healing can be achieved through trauma narratives that strive to reenact and express what the victims could not possibly articulate. Moreover, working through nineteenth-century traumas such as the Irish Famine can also help us to deal with our current wounds and pave the way for justice and reparation. Trauma and violence are omnipresent in today's mass media, which undoubtedly calls for political action, and the current traumatised subject of modernity in turn re-discovers itself in manifold nineteenth-century others like criminals, perverts, prostitutes, colonial subjects, etc. (Kohlke and Gutleben 2010: 2-9).

Parallels between American slavery and the Atlantic crossing can be drawn in the novel, as there is a clear association between African slaves and Irish migrants, both victims, although in different ways, of the British slave-trading colonial past (Corporaal and Cusack 2011: 347). Both black Africans and Catholic Irish were the victims of colonial oppression, as is clearly stated in the confrontation between the American journalist Dixon and the Anglo-Irish landlord Merridith:

> "My grandfather was an opponent of slavery all his life. *Do you hear me*?"
> "*Did he rid himself of the lands which slavery purchased from his ancestors*? Give back his inheritance to the children of those who made it? Live as a pauper to ease his conscience or the coffee-house pretensions of his mewling grandson? Who is so deeply ashamed of what pays for his vittels that he *aches* to find greater atrocities in the accounts of others".
> "*Merridith*— "
> "*My* father fought in the wars that ended slavery throughout the empire. Risked his life. Wounded twice. Proudest thing he ever did. Didn't ponce on about it, just bloody did it. My mother saved thousands from starvation and death. While your servants were calling you 'Little White Massa'". (O'Connor 2003: 134, emphasis in the original)

Merridith defended himself and his ancestors as an advocate of the end of slavery in his confrontation with Dixon, in contrast with Dixon's position and that of his family towards colonialism. The Irish were victims of English colonial oppression before leaving their country for a new life in America, and subsequently they were also victims of violence when they settled in North America; negative stereotypes about them limited their success in their new country (Corporaal and Cusack 2011: 349). At the end of the nineteenth century three million Irish immigrants were living in North America, thirty-nine per cent of whom had been born in Ireland. Nowadays, forty million Americans have Irish ancestors from the time of the Famine (Estévez Saa 2005: 165). This explains why global issues have become so important for the postcolonial neo-Victorian project, which aims to give voice to the subaltern and the other; also, to heal the trauma of colonial atrocities committed in the Victorian past.

Neo-Victorianism has recently moved from the boundaries of the UK to the colonial geographies of Empire. Neo-Victorian imaginations of Empire have thus acquired a distinct global character in keeping with contemporary new forms of imperialism. Traditionally, history has been made up of a series of historical narratives with a mostly national perspective. Through a global history of the present, neo-Victorian modes of commemoration can be discerned, but this change to the global entails the risk of imposing collective memory over cultural specificity (Llewellyn and Heilmann 2013: 29-30). In this sense, postcolonial neo-Victorianism can be identified as part of a global project to re-write the history of the British colonial past. As Cora Kaplan affirms, we are currently involved in a debate about "historical memory and the direction of the political future in which we, as readers and citizens, do have a voice and a role to play" (2007: 162). We must move beyond Western and Anglophone stances to encompass a plurality of attitudes, contexts and mindsets; global exchanges include the dissemination of cultural products, and neo-Victorian literature is accessed by a global audience via digital media and the Internet. Therefore, neo-Victorianism can rely on a variety of historical and geographical perspectives to

analyse Victorian legacies like those of Empire (Primorac and Pietrzak-Franger 2015: 4-9), in such a way that the study of the past can throw some light on the present. As Said argues:

> Appeals to the past are among the commonest strategies in interpretations of the present. What animates such appeals is not only disagreement about what happened in the past and what the past was, but uncertainty about whether the past really is past, over and concluded, or whether it continues, albeit in different forms perhaps. This problem animates all sorts of discussions —about influence, about blame and judgement, about present actualities and future priorities. (1994: 1)

This is clearly the message put forward by *Star of the Sea*: we must learn from past errors to build a better future. However, new forms of imperialism are taking the upper hand. This is the reason why Hardt and Negri talk about globalisation in terms of a new empire:

> War, suffering, misery, and exploitation increasingly characterise our globalising world. There are so many reasons to seek refuge in a realm "outside", some place separate from the discipline and control of today's emerging Empire or even some transcendent or transcendental principles and values that can guide our lives and ground our political action. One primary effect of globalisation, however, is the creation of a common world, a world that, for better or worse, we all share, a world that has no "outside". (2009: vii)

The same horrors that characterised Empire and colonialism in the past can be found in our current cultures and a new form of Empire is determining our globalised societies. The ship is a microcosm that represents a common globalised world. Many of the characters in the novel are victims of suffering, misery and exploitation. In particular, Mary Duane of Connemara, the Merridiths' maidservant, symbolises extreme vulnerability while simultaneously showing resistance to adversity. She was Merridith's first love and, after his desertion, she got pregnant by her second lover, Pius Mulvey. She was once again abandoned and became a fallen woman, but eventually married her seducer's brother, Nicholas Mulvey, who took care of the child. Both her husband and her little daughter died of starvation, and there was no other way for her to survive than becoming a prostitute in Dublin. Then, she decided to leave Ireland for America to start a new life and leave poverty behind:

> Three hundred miles north-west of the point where he was standing, a woman was passing a milestone for Chapelizod. She was hungry, this idle tramp. […] Her feet were bleeding badly and her legs were very weak. Not so long beforehand, she had given birth in a field; but the ratepayer would not be burdened by having to keep the child alive. […] On the sea must be a ship that could take her to Liverpool. Glasgow or Liverpool. It did not really matter. All that mattered now was to stay on her mangled feet. […] Her name would not be mentioned in the House that sunny evening; nor in *The Times* for the following day. (O'Connor 2003: 256)

Mary's precarious life is valueless for both English and Irish people in positions of power. Nonetheless, as Butler claims, "there is plural and performative bodily resistance at work that shows how bodies are being enacted on by social and economic policies that are decimating livelihoods" (2016: 15). Moreover, "these bodies, in showing this precarity, are also resisting those very powers; they enact a form of resistance that presupposes vulnerability of a specific kind, and opposes precarity" (2016: 15). This is the case of Mary, whose endurance and agency enable her survival. Sarah Bracke's definition of resistance "characterised as the ability of something or someone to return to its original shape after it has been pulled, stretched, pressed, or bent" (2016: 54) becomes essential to my analysis. Resistance leads to resilience, and subjects who are victims of trauma and violence often want to preserve their subjectivities and identities through "denial of vulnerability" and "a disidentification with dependence", that is, choosing and advocating agency (Bracke 2016: 59).

Verbalising her trauma allows Mary to work it through, as when she talks about her tragedy in front of Captain Lockwood and his men so that her seducer can be prosecuted:

> *everything said by the people about p..s M..... is true. i denounce him as a land robber, a seducer and a blackguard. he is after harryin his own brother and my only child into a grave and i would like something done on him by you and yeer men.* (O'Connor 2003: 275, emphasis in original)

In this quote, the reader can hear Mary's voice —the voice of a poor Irish woman— in her attempt to denounce the violence and suffering inflicted on her and her child by a particular man, Pius Mulvey. She accuses him of crimes connected with seduction and robbery and wants him to be condemned for his actions. O'Connor tries to convey her sense of dislocation by using italics to express her anger and anxiety. However, telling her story can also be curative.

Narratives of healing become essential to cure cultural trauma like that resulting from the Irish history of suffering. A narrative can be a source of consolation, as when Mary talks about the death of her child and many other children, also victims of the situation in Ireland:

> she wept that night on the *Star of the Sea*, as perhaps only the mother of a murdered child can weep. Nobody ever drew Alice-Mary Duane, whose ruined father snuffed out her agonised life. Her mother wept as she uttered her name. 'Like a prayer', as many of the witnesses said.
>
> And as the name was uttered, some began to pray; and others began to weep in sympathy. And others again who had lost children of their own began to utter their children's names. As though the act of saying their names —the act of saying they ever had names— was to speak the only prayer that can ever begin to matter in a world that turns its eyes from the hungry and the dying. (O'Connor 2003: 374)

As this quotation shows, children are particularly vulnerable since they are often victims of poverty. The novel makes a plea for empathy, social justice and political action to protect victims of famine of all periods and in all parts of the world. As is well known, it is the world economy, and not food scarcity, that is responsible for hunger and poverty. According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), almost one billion people suffer from chronic hunger, almost two billion are under- or over-nourished, and nearly five million children die every year due to poor nutrition (Elver 2015). Like the victims of the Irish Famine, many people today are hungry, which leads them to become migrants desperately searching for a better life for themselves and their families. In his novel, O'Connor subtly connects the period of the Irish Famine with the current situation of Ireland as a destination country for refugees escaping poverty, war and violence.

The passengers on the Star of the Sea were treated as refugees upon their arrival in New York. Steerage and first-class passengers alike were denied entry and, to make matters worse, had to remain isolated in quarantine. Disease and hunger were widespread, and their condition became extreme:

> Significant number (about twenty-five several infants among them) in most urgent need of hospitalisation. […] Everyone I saw showing symptoms of gross malnutrition and badly underweight, some dangerously so. […] Very poor supply of clean blankets. No safe, clean place to store or cook whatever food they have taken on themselves. No safe, clean place for personal cleanliness and necessary matters. No privacy whatsoever, a matter of obvious distress particularly to the women. Steerage cabin very dark and devoid of clean air. (O'Connor 2003: 342-343)

As can be seen, the conditions on the ship were inhuman for the passengers on board: disease, hunger and dirt were all around. As a result, some steerage passengers were prompted to rebellion, and the Captain had to adopt more strict rules to govern the ship. Groups of Irish people already living in New York approached the vessel to see if some of the relatives they were expecting were on board and called out their names. Some desperate passengers, mainly women and children, tried to leave the ship on the lifeboats, and others jumped overboard, losing their lives in the cold water. A total of ninety-five deaths were counted at the end of the journey. Situations like this have become quite familiar to contemporary readers. Unaccompanied minors from places such as Afghanistan, Eritrea, Iraq, Syria, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Libya, Morocco, Georgia, Iran and Sudan come to Ireland "seeking protection from conflict, persecution or serious harm, or to reunite with family" (Pollak 2018).

Ireland has become a destination country for many migrants nowadays, mainly due to the prosperity that the Celtic Tiger period brought to the country and to Ireland's belonging to the European Union. The experience of famine, dislocation,

and anxiety that shapes the lives of all these migrants and refugees should prompt Irish postcolonial society to give them shelter and hospitality. This could be a way to commemorate and remember the former Irish tragedy in a globalised world (O'Malley 2015: 151-152). However, this is not always the case because, as Fegan contends, the story of the Irish Famine repeats itself and has "been transferred to more vulnerable internal and external others" in contemporary "multicultural" Ireland (2011: 340) as Irish people do not always give shelter to migrants. In this sense, O'Connor invites his readers to become aware of the fallacy of portraying the Western world as progressive and morally superior to the rest. He affirms that writing a novel is not only at the service of art and beauty but should also be an attempt to change the world (in Estévez Saá 2005: 173, 175). This idea is in keeping with one of the aims of neo-Victorian fiction to echo the reflection of contemporary traumas in the Victorian past because, as O'Connor states:

> Many years have passed but some things have not changed. We still tell each other that we are lucky to be alive, when our being alive has almost nothing to do with luck, but with geography, pigmentation and international exchange rates. Perhaps this new century will see a dispensation, or perhaps we will continue to allow the starvation of the luckless, and continue to call it an accident, not a working-out logic. (2003: 386)

As we can see, things have not changed much since colonial times. However, many Irish finally settled in North America and left a life of hardship, suffering and precarity behind. They endured and contributed to the building of a nation which has paradoxically become an imperial power. Nonetheless, as O'Connor affirms, there are still many victims of hunger and dispossession who need the empathy and support of the 'civilised' world to survive.

5. Conclusion

After having analysed different aspects of the fictionalised history of the Irish Famine as embodied by the characters travelling on board the coffin ship Star of the Sea, we can conclude that this neo-Victorian novel deals with past and current issues associated with identity, migration, vulnerability and precarity of the colonial and postcolonial other. The narrative also upholds agency and endurance as the best means to work through trauma and survive. Coffin ships are presented as repositories of memory, as transformative spaces where the Irish identity and, by extension, the migrant identity of transported people become transnational and testify to the need to retrieve cultural memory and rewrite history. The ethics of justice allow us to connect the related traumas of the Irish past with many present-day conflicts. Colonial and postcolonial ideas about the

sea allow contemporary sea narratives in a global world to establish a dialogue between the past and the present. Ho's notion of 'the neo-victorian-at-sea' becomes essential for the analysis of the novel in that it creates a global memory of the Victorian Empire associated with sea travel and its implications of transnationality and globalisation. The British Empire becomes the epitome of disease and disorder, and this image can be extrapolated to contemporary forms of imperialism as put forward by Hardt and Negri's concept of New Imperialism. Postcolonial theory becomes an approach to historical memory that denounces long-silenced imperial atrocities, and this neo-Victorian endeavour strives to fill in the gaps of an incomplete archive.

The dead are conspicuously present throughout the novel, which gives it a Gothic touch. We can argue that their spectral presence, like that of the Famine, turns the transnational present into another version of the cruel Victorian past. Although millions of Irish people died, both in their country at the time of the potato disease and during their journey to the new world, many of them testify to a history of survival and resistance, despite their former precarious and vulnerable condition. This was the case of Mary Duane: just as she managed to work through her trauma by articulating it into a trauma narrative, O'Connor writes his fiction to make readers learn from the errors of the past and thus pave the way for a better future.

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