

GOD AND THE GREAT FAILURE: POETRY FROM THE IRISH FAMINE.

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In the years from 1845 to 1849, the potato crop in Ireland was afflicted by recurrent disease, effectively obliterating the staple diet for much of the population. Historians disagree about the number of deaths and other details, but several million people died; many emigrated, often dying on the journey; Cecil Woodham-Smith's *The Great Hunger. Ireland 1845-9* is a good introduction to the situation. The crop failure itself was aggravated by homelessness; inability to pay rent gave a pretext for eviction of tenants. Governmental attitudes were affected by notions of Progress and the need to reform the Irish land system, by the belief that the Irish had been most irresponsible in their population growth, by a conviction that Providence intended such sufferings.

Homelessness and starvation led to epidemics; diseases affected others who came into contact with the more direct victims of famine. Meanwhile, good grain crops went to the landowners for export; in the freemarket spirit that prevailed, this was not prevented. Some Indian corn was imported to relieve starvation; it was very difficult to process and to digest, and the conditions under which people could earn money to buy it were very limited. Calling these events 'The Great Failure' is a reminder that more failed than the potato crop.

In this survey of poems written at the time, I use poems from Christopher Morash's anthology *The Hungry Voice: The Poetry of the Irish Famine*,¹ which gives poems from many sources. The surviving poetry could give a misleading picture of contemporary responses. It is mostly by observers, written in English and transmitted in print; those directly afflicted would be more likely to use Irish and oral transmission. *The Nation*, connected with the Young Ireland movement, is a major source, and its political perspectives are echoed in the selection.

Effective references to God or heaven appear in about 85 of the 116 poems in the anthology. This is not surprising, especially for Ireland in the middle of the nineteenth century; calamities raise basic questions for believers in a God who takes an interest in human events. Ways of articulating and answering these are affected by many factors. In a society following the main Christian denominations, the Bible is important, especially where there are traditions of seeing Biblical events as 'types' of

what may happen again and of interpreting the apocalyptic writings as foretelling events that may come to pass in one's own time.

Poems about the individuals afflicted by the Famine events tend to present the victims as powerless objects of events outside their control. Normally they are the suffering innocent, those who have lived by the simple pieties, and who assert them even in affliction. They see God as just and merciful, even if His ways are inscrutable, especially where His hand is acknowledged as a cause of crop failure and pestilence. Sometimes His mercy is displayed in bringing death. Mulchinock's 'A Lament' describes the miseries at length, comments that 'To us has high Heaven / Sent ills without number', but ends by denying our instinctive view of death, and anticipating a better afterlife:

Kind Death, whom in madness,
 We call 'Desolator,'
 Will place you in gladness
 Beside your Creator,
 Where only is Freedom.

The goodness of God is sometimes mentioned to stress the cruelty of men, as in 'God is kinder on the moor than man is in the town' from the anonymous 'A Lay of the Famine'; the kindness is in offering the girl who has been refused food the chance to struggle home to bury her parents before dying herself!

In several poems, the mercy of God contrasts with cruelty of landlords and their agents, who evict and destroy. This is particularly appalling because home is also presented as the place of the basic pieties, as in Frazer's 'Extermination' (p. 172) which takes its title from the term used for eviction and destruction of houses:

An all-embracing evil flings
 Despair around the outcast poor,
 Massing all dead and living things
 In one small picture when it brings
 The roof-tree to the floor.

The household altar of the hearth -
 The Sabbath rest each evening gave -
 The holiest holy things of earth -
 The mother's love - the father's mirth -
 The bridal bed - th'ancestral grave

Since the victims are good devout people, they and their observers are particularly horrified by loss of the normal practices, even of being driven by hunger to impious thoughts and acts. The anonymous 'The Song of the Famine' (p. 41) has a mother snatching the children's food from her dying son's mouth and being grateful there is one less competitor. Even cannibalism results, as in the anonymous 'Thanatos, 1849' (p. 165) and Frazer's more guarded 'The Three Angels' (p. 181):

Themselves and their kindred, thro' sheer despair
Some slew, in belief that *to slay was to spare!* -
A cannibal fierceness but ill-suppress'd
In many - made some - we must veil the rest!

As well as such acts, expressing doubt about religious beliefs and practices is something to dismay these sufferers: in Walsh's 'Drimin Donn Dilis' (p. 77) the farmer, now evicted and farewelling his old brown cow, is shocked that he was unable to pray:

I knelt down three times to utter a prayer,
But my heart It was seared, and the words were not there.

In Lady Dufferin's 'Lament of the Irish Emigrant' (p. 53), the man admires his wife for not losing hope, thus being stronger than him:

Yours was the good brave heart, Mary,
That still kept hoping on
When the trust in God had left my soul,
And my arm's young strength was gone.

While, for the victims, questions about God's justice and merciful care are likely to be symptoms of the crazed things people are driven to by hunger, the poets themselves may feel less guilty about asking hard questions. Mary Kelly's 'A Scene for Ireland' (p. 61) hints that rebellious 'Black thoughts' engendered by 'the Famine fiend' might be justified, but John O'Hagan, ('Famine & Exportation', p. 202), speaking on behalf of his country, warns:

Lord! thy guiding wisdom grant,
Fearful Counsellor is WANT;
Burning thoughts will rise within,
Keep us pure from stain of sin!

In Keegan's 'The Dying Mother's Lament' (p. 58), the distraught mother is apologetic:

Oh God If you be merciful, have mercy now, I pray,
Oh God, forgive my wicked words, - I know not what I say

But the authorial voice implies that the prayers of the simple faithful *are* in vain, and the poem's ending avoids the conventional consolation of declaring that the victim has a blessed afterlife; significantly, Keegan himself was not one of the professional and 'educated' class, and was buried in a pauper's grave after dying in the 1849 cholera epidemic:

Thus prayed the wanderer, but in vain! - in vain her mournful cry;
God did not hush that piercing wind, nor darken that dark sky;
But when that ghastly winter's dawn its sickly radiance shed,
The mother and her wretched babes lay stiffened, grim, and dead!

While the Famine can be an occasion for displays of virtue, as in Mary Varian's 'Proselytising' (p. 216), where a mother heroically starves rather than deny her religion, it frequently reveals the religious hypocrisy of others, especially those praying on cushioned kneelers in their comfortable homes, while oppressing their tenants and canting about Providence and divine rights. One consolation of religion is the prospect of ultimate vengeance, and God's mercy to the innocent is sometimes contrasted with the punitive justice awaiting those who cause and exploit their misery. In 'Rhymes for the Landlorded' (p. 189), Linton warns, 'What if God harry thee / Forth from His face?'

Among the poems that raise the larger questions about these events, several, especially from Nationalist sources, challenge notions that the Famine comes from God rather than men; and when attention moves to the unjust distribution of resources, divine sanctions for the present social order are also questioned. T.C.D.'s 'The Last Appeal' (p. 49), while invoking more conventional pieties in recalling that Mary, having been poor herself, will have special sympathy for the victims, also asks who suffers and who profits. The anonymous 'Be Free' (p. 162) announces:

The LORD himself declared it, in his just and loving plan,
That earth's abundance was bestow'd, not on some men, but MAN.

Frazer, in 'The Spring Flowers' (p. 179), is also clear that it's unreasonable for God to expect us to forgive or to refrain from seeking vengeance:

Oh! Command us not, Heaven,
For a future of bliss,
That the foes be forgiven
Who crushed us to this!
Though angels were beckoning,
How could we forgive?
A day of dark reckoning
Must come — if we live.

Ferguson, a Unionist who briefly sympathised with the Nationalist response, speaks in 'Dublin: A Poem' (p. 102) of those in England who presume to know God's ways:

Where God himself can't lay His heavy hand,
In wrath mysterious on our sinful land;
But every Cockney sprig assumes the airs
Of privy councillor in heaven's affairs;
And while he dreams himself a mighty thane,
The Titmouse of some Irish earl's domain,
And for the splendid bargain counts his pence,
Applauds the policy of Providence.

'The Famine Year' (p. 221), by Speranza (Jane Frances Elgee, later Lady Wilde), after more ambiguous views on God's part in things, concludes:

For the Angel of the Trumpet will know them as he passes.
A ghastly, spectral army, before the great God we'll stand,
And arraign ye as our murderers, the spoilers of our land.

The common view is that a just God would not permit undeserved suffering; afflictions must therefore be divine punishment for sins. The questions then arise 'Which sins? Whose sins?' Several poems following this train of thought refer to our past fratricidal strife, as in Speranza's 'A Supplication'(p. 228):

We have sinned — in vain each warning —
Brother lived his brother scolding,
Now in ashes see us mourning.

The refrain of 'Thanatos: 1849', 'God sent a curse upon the land because her sons were slaves,' represents several that blame meek submission to conquest. From such views come the call to unite, cease fratricidal strife,

and throw off the oppressive chains, as in Williams's 'Hand in hand' (p. 234).

With the authority of the Book of Revelation, famine and pestilence can be seen as a cleansing process sent by God, anticipating a great flowering. At times, indeed, the famine dead are almost incidental, their deaths seen as a purging of the weaker among us (a curious convergence with the attitudes of some of the English government). Some stress a divinely-supported struggle for political freedom, as the poems sweep past the actual victims in the excitement of anticipating mighty battles. (Martyrdom for a great cause is easier to contemplate when others are doing the dying, while the bloodshed which some of these poems contemplate is not really the term to describe those who die of Famine.) Speranza's somewhat obscure 'Foreshadowings' (p. 222) considers the terrible angelic horsemen bringing Wrath, Plague, and Famine, proceeds to consider heroic battles after asking:

But can we only weep, when above us thus lour
The death-bearing wings of the angels of power;
When around the arrows of pestilence flying —
Around, the pale heaps of the famine-struck lying —
No, brother of sorrow, when life's light is weakest,
Look up, it is nigh the redemption thou seekest.

Such references to the Apocalypse reinforce the view that Famine and Pestilence are part of a great divine plan from which better things will come. Frazer's 'The Three Angels' (p. 181) also merges such language with social/political comment. The ambiguous ending offers intimations of 'justice at last', but is vague as to when and where, or just who is going to be the avenger:

But a murmur went up with the dying moan
That the poor — the poor — had been victims alone!
That the angel of famine, to rich men a friend —
To the humble — a foe — was the darkest fiend! —
And the breathings of God, ere the famine-fiend passed,
Sent abroad his high promise of justice at last.

Aubrey De Vere, a landowner and convert to Catholicism, seems to have felt genuine sympathy for the victims, but this merges oddly with an impulse to proclaim the place of these events in God's plan; he anticipates a great missionary destiny for Ireland, as in 'The Desolation of the West' (p. 82).

And in my spirit grew and gathered

Knowledge that Ireland's worst was weathered,
Her last dread penance paid
Conviction that for earthly scath
In world-wide victories of her Faith
Atonement should be made.

His 'The Year of Sorrow: Ireland — 1849' (p. 92) ends with the starving people stretched in Christ-like posture while the snow falls in a transforming ritual:

On quaking moor, and mountain moss,
With eyes upstaring at the sky,
And arms extended like a cross,
The long-expectant sufferers lie.

Bend o'er them, white-robed Acolyte!
Put forth thine hand from cloud and mist,
And minister the last sad rite,
Where altar there is none, nor priest.

A survey like this inevitably simplifies, and the better the poet, the greater the loss. De Vere is an abler writer than I've implied here, and I'm especially conscious of a loss in mentioning Mangan so briefly. His 'A Vision: A.D. 1848' (p. 146) uses a dream convention, moving through a series of visions of recent Irish history that seem to be leading to the decisive battle; an apocalyptic event is almost promised, but at the end the dreamer wakes before learning the outcome of events he has witnessed, while hearing, nevertheless, vaguer sounds of violence and confusion; it's as though there's a tension between the urge to declare a meaning and the uncertainty about whether there is one at all:

And I heard, as I guessed,
The far-echoing sound
Of a trumpet, with tones,
And lightnings and thunders,
As you read of in John's
Revelation of Wonders.
What meant they? I trow not,
What next might befall?
And how ended ALL?
This too, friends, I know not —
For here were my cords
Of Sleep suddenly broken
The bell booming Three;
But there seemed in mine ears,
As I started up, woken,
A noise like fierce cheers,
Blent with clashing of swords,
And the roar of the sea!

Mangan often works by analogy, referring to other times and places, situations from which the appropriate comparison is left implicit: this can be a way of enlightening, but also of obscuring. 'Song of the Albanian (1826)' (p. 144) tells of a sad land where the struggle for political freedom also takes place in a famine context, with an oppressor forbidding the eating of the abundant crop. His haunting 'Siberia' (p. 143), set in a desolate landscape, considers the state of apathy on the borders between life and death; its wary observation that 'Therefore in those wastes / None curse the Czar' has implications for divine as well as human rulers.

Finally, two poems influenced by liturgical forms. Speranza's 'A Supplication' (p. 228) is framed by Biblical/liturgical phrases. Its epigraph, 'De profundis...' ('Out of the depths...') is from Psalm 130, while the refrain 'Kyrie Eleison' ('Lord, have mercy') is the Greek expression used in the Mass, originally attributed to the lepers cured by Christ. So the poem suggests participation in a ritual group prayer, as indicated in the recurring 'us'. Initially, the lips are too faint to utter prayer, but the poem moves from speaking on behalf of the famine-stricken to a voice that almost forgets them as it becomes a reminder of 'our' common sins of 'each brother scorning' and finally anticipates a 'holier zeal', one to be expressed, however, in the 'feeling' of Christian patriots rather than in actions.

Richard D'Alton Williams's 'Kyrie Eleison' (p. 236), uses the Latin refrain 'Parce nobis domine' (Spare us, O Lord), as if in a formal Litany. It repeats the common assumption that God sent the Blight as a punishment for great sins; but is the tone of this somewhat ironic, as if dutifully repeating the standard view, (the one repudiated by Job!) while implying something else? The poem suggests that those uttering the authorised Lord's Prayer get no answer:

The dying, ghastlier than the dead,
With blanched lips have vainly said,
'Give us this day our daily bread'

The poem also echoes the view of Lamentations 4:9 that it would be better to die in battle than by starvation; here, the stress is on the pointlessness of such deaths, a contrast to those poems which find potential glory in the prevalent misery:

Oh! had we fallen on the plain,
In rapid battle swiftly slain,
We had not perished thus in vain.

The statement that 'their God is wrath' is attributed to the foemen, but leaves open the matter of whether the foes are right. The 'mysterious God' is asked to change policy, to withdraw 'thine Angel'. The final submission to God's will also appears a grudging one in the context of the stanza's actual emphases:

But if the pestilential sun
Must see us wither, one by one,
That thou hast made — Thy will be done —
Parce nobis, Domine!

This poem, while using a structure and references that imply a more submissive manner, hints that if God does intervene in his human creation, His behaviour is at least questionable. Such a counterpoint of form and content produces one of the more complex and suggestive poems of this collection, which overall has shown a considerable range of responses to this calamity whose 150th anniversary we now mark.

REFERENCES

¹ Christopher Morash, *The Hungry Voice: The Poetry of the Irish Famine* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1989).