

*Famine Roads and Big House Ghosts: History and Form in John Banville's 'The Infinities'*¹

Estradas da Fome e Fantasmas da Casa Grande: História e Forma em The Infinities, de John Banville

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Abstract: *This article considers John Banville's engagement with memories of the Irish Famine and the conventions of the Irish Gothic and Big House novel in his 2009 novel The Infinities by comparing his approach to these topics to that of Emily Lawless in her considerably earlier 1897 collection Traits and Confidences. I argue that Banville's engagement with the history of the Irish Famine and the conventions of the Irish Gothic and Big House novel are not incidental to the novel's exploration of the problem of identity and the idea of the self but, rather, are fundamental to its thematic investments. Furthermore, I suggest that the novel's experimental form fits into Irish literary tradition as Banville's novel develops questions of identity, form, and content central to Lawless's text.*

Keywords: *Gothic; Famine; Big House; Banville; Lawless.*

Resumo: *Este artigo considera o envolvimento de John Banville com as memórias da fome irlandesa e as convenções do romance gótico irlandês e sobre a Casa Grande em The Infinities, publicado em 2009, comparando sua abordagem desses tópicos à de Emily Lawless em sua coleção anterior Traits and Confidences de 1897. Argumento que o envolvimento de Banville com a história da fome irlandesa e as convenções do romance gótico irlandês e sobre a Casa Grande não são acidentais à exploração do romance sobre a problemática da identidade e da ideia de si, mas são fundamentais para sua delimitação temática. Além disso, sugiro que a forma experimental do romance se encaixa na tradição literária irlandesa, pois o romance de Banville desenvolve questões de identidade, forma e conteúdo, as quais são centrais ao texto de Lawless.*

Palavras-chave: *Gótico; Fome; Casa Grande; John Banville; Emily Lawless.*

To leave one's background without guilt is an indication of shallowness of character, I suspect.
(Banville "The Art of Fiction").

People used to say I'm a postmodernist in days when postmodernism was still fashionable. It no longer is.
(Banville "The Millions Interview").

Postmodernism and Place: Critical Discussions of John Banville

I preface this article with two quotes, both taken from interviews conducted near the publication of *The Infinities* in 2009, because they address my central concerns with the novel: despite being an experimental adaptation of Heinrich Von Kleist's treatment of the Amphitryon myth with seemingly no investment in its Irish setting, *The Infinities* remains a profound reflection on John Banville's "background" as an Irish author. Banville's relationship to this background as it relates to his reputation as a postmodern author is, perhaps, the most frequently occurring topic in studies of his work. For example, early Banville critics like Rüdiger Imhof (1989) tended to dismiss his Irishness and positioned him as an exclusively postmodern author. Arguments like Imhof's depend on a deracinated, internationalist definition of postmodernism that insists that any art marked by true formal experimentation must also turn away from regionally or nationally defined subject matter (6-8). Over time, the relationship between Irish subject matter and postmodern aesthetic concerns in Banville's work has been refined, particularly by Derek Hand (2002) and John Kenny (2009), who have both centered the importance of Irish history and culture to Banville's artistic project. Hand argues that Ireland's postcolonial status makes "the notion of transition" between identity formations, ideologies, and social structures key to understanding Irish culture. Thus, the prototypically postmodern investments in the instability of language, identity, or capital-T-truth that Imhof locates in Banville's work are not a turn from Irish themes but, rather, a deep-dive into the fundamental philosophical problems of Irish culture (10). Kenny, on the other hand, stresses the contradictions of Banville's own ambivalent relationship to Irish literary culture, noting that even as Banville has frequently and unequivocally refused to engage with Irish subject matter in a manner that could be construed as nationalist, the conditions of Irish nationality are significant backdrops in works like *Eclipse* (2000), and *The Sea* (2005) (40-41).

By rooting the postmodern in the material conditions of modernity in Ireland, Hand offers a more useful way to think about Banville's writing. At the same time, Kenny's awareness that Irish themes are not limited to the problems of bourgeoisie nationalism makes it possible to see how Ireland is never merely a backdrop in Banville's works. These notions are fundamental to Hand's interpretation of *Birchwood* (1973), the most overtly Irish of Banville's novels. *Birchwood* is a re-imagining of the traditional Irish Big House novel that takes place in a kind of nightmare version of Irish history with major historical events like the Irish Famine and the War of Independence happening simultaneously. According to Hand, this disjointed and confusing structure effectively breaks the Big House novel as a form and dramatizes the central problem of the novel as "one of representation and the inability to find an adequate form that will contain and fix Ireland's history" (38).

As Hand's reading of *Birchwood* makes clear, Banville's engagement with Irish generic conventions and history can easily work alongside any broader postmodern projects. In this essay I take a similar approach to what is—seemingly—one of Banville's most historically unmoored novels, his playfully postmodern novel *The Infinities*. In particular, I argue that Banville's engagement with the history of the Irish Famine and the conventions of the Irish Gothic and Big House novel are not incidental to the novel's exploration of the problem of identity and the idea of the self but, rather, are fundamental to its thematic investments. In order to clearly place Banville's engagement with the historical themes of the Famine and the formal and thematic qualities of the Irish Gothic within a canon of Irish writing,² I will demonstrate how an essay and short story written by Emily Lawless outline many of the broad themes that inform my reading of *The Infinities*. My rationale for this pairing is both thematic

and political; as I will prove, Lawless's approach to representing Irish history bears many striking similarities to Banville's. At the same time, this comparison is a unique opportunity to center an often-overlooked woman writer in the Irish literary tradition while also exposing Banville's active role in continuing that tradition.

The Famine, the Gothic, and the Big House

In her 1898 collection *Traits and Confidences*, Lawless devotes an essay and short story to the problem of the Famine in Irish history. In "Famine Roads and Memories" and "After the Famine," Lawless shows herself to be remarkably cognizant of many of the representational problems literary critics and historians would associate with the Famine throughout the twentieth century. The most notable of these representational problems is that of constructing monuments and historical accounts that capture both the factual and emotional aspects of the Famine experience. Lawless centers these issues at the beginning of "Famine Roads:" "It has sometime seemed to me as if every great event, especially if it be of the more tragic order, ought to have some distinctive cairn or monument of its own." In response to this concern, Lawless nominates a deserted village in Connemara—and particularly the Famine Road that runs through it—as an ideal monument (142).

According to Lawless, the words Famine Road "mean only too much" (151). It is in these roads, which Lawless describes as "the most absolutely futile and abortive" of the public works projects instated by the British government in Ireland to create work and cash flow in rural Ireland during the Famine, that Lawless locates the ideal monument to the historical catastrophe of the Famine.³ She argues that they are appropriate symbols for the Famine experience because of the absolute futility of building roads between always isolated but now rapidly dying communities: "Imagine how urgently some way of connecting them with one another and with the outside world must have been wished for . . . *until made*. Then the need for such means of communication ceased suddenly, and has never returned" (154).

The connection Lawless forms, or acknowledges, between the seeming senselessness of the Famine Roads project, the roads' existence as monumental, metaphorical "scars" on Ireland, and loss of the Famine highlights many of the concerns historians and literary critics bring to discussions of the Famine, particularly as it is consistently couched in the terms of societal trauma.⁴ Examples of these concerns abound; Luke Gibbons (2014) argues in *Limits of the Visible: Representing the Great Hunger* that the lack of photographs from the Irish Famine is not because of technological limitations, but because of the inability of the medium to represent the effects of the Famine in their full extremity without sensationalizing the subject (12-14). Perhaps most representative, however, is Chris Morash's provocatively titled article "Famine/Holocaust: Fragmented Bodies." In this article, Morash (1997) argues that "the Famine and the Holocaust have . . . a history together" (136). While Morash is quick to qualify this claim, arguing against simplistic comparisons of these two tragedies that ignore the significant differences in their causes, qualities, and effects, he insists that the painful nature of both events brings about an emphasis on fragmentation when they are represented in art (147-48).

Lawless's discussion is marked by many ruptures that acknowledge the representational limitations acknowledged by Gibbons and Morash. Words seem to fail her as she instructs her reader to "Take the mere official reports; the report, for instance, of one county inspector in this very district, and you will find him speaking of a hundred and fifty bodies picked up by himself and his assistants along a single stretch of road. Multiply this fiftyfold, and ask

yourself what it means” (155). Instead of counting bodies, she turns to the Famine roads themselves as an ideal monument to the Famine, not because they accurately portray the suffering of the Famine victim, but because of their very failure to represent anything beyond their own futility.

Lawless’s essay also foreshadows the debates surrounding interpreting the Famine as a historical event. The Famine is a famously contested historiographic subject. This issue came to the forefront of Irish Studies with the 150-year anniversary of the Famine in the mid-1990s, which led the Irish government to turn its attention—and its research funding—to documenting and commemorating the Famine. The resulting boom in Famine scholarship generated many questions: Had earlier historians ignored the Famine as a topic? Had revisionist historians downplayed Britain’s culpability in the crisis? Had nationalists irresponsibly generated resentment by arguing that the Famine was an intentional act of genocide?⁵

Even in 1898, Lawless is clearly troubled by similar questions: “How far the Government—misfortunate abstraction!—did or did not realize the extent of the disaster is a point which may be disputed till the crack of doom . . . That the blame must be shared amongst other impersonal potentates—Circumstance, Environment, Fate, and so forth—is true. Still, when we have admitted this, what then?” (158). Lawless raises these questions to stress the challenges she is facing in both her essay and short story; she must represent both the bodily destitution of the Famine and its broader cultural and political implications. These challenges seem to determine the very form of her story “After the Famine,” which she introduces at the end of her essay as having “the double defect of not belonging to the actual time [of the Famine], and of being laid within the limits of a class upon which the effect of the Famine was indirect rather than direct.” (159).

In “After the Famine,” Lawless adopts many of the generic conventions of both the Irish Gothic and the Big House novel to address these Famine themes. This turn to the Gothic is particularly appropriate considering Robert Smart’s claim that the Gothic’s emphasis on haunting memories, decay, and death make it uniquely suited to representing the Famine (8). Furthermore, the Irish Gothic and the Big House novel are united by a preoccupation with the unstable identity formations created by the complicated class relations between the Catholic population and the Anglo-Irish, and a fascination with historicizing these relations. In Lawless’s story these overlapping concerns are overtly connected through the Famine, which is made the historical cause for the decay of the d’Arcy estate in the West of Ireland, destroying the family of landlords and leaving the sole surviving daughter, Eleanor d’Arcy, so overwhelmed by grief she marries Henry O’Hara, the son of their former tenant.

Many critics, most notably Jarlath Killeen (2014), have suggested that the Irish Gothic is rooted in an “Irish Anglican Imagination” (34).⁶ Killeen argues that this imagination stems from two aspects of the Anglo-Irish experience in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: a crisis of identity created by their liminal position between an Irish and English identity, and an “enclave mentality” by the looming threat of the Catholic masses (38-39).⁷ This Irish Anglican Imagination fits into broader trends in historical studies of the foundations of Gothic literature where the Gothic is often seen as a Protestant Enlightenment attack on the supernatural specters of a vaguely pagan and deeply sensual Catholicism.⁸ Killeen notes the ways in which Ireland becomes a “collective of atemporality, a place of the primitive” where the besieged Anglo-Irish are driven to the Gothic because its “Horror offers to those who remain within the borders of the enclave moral purity and safety from annihilation” (10; 41).

While they minimize religious concerns, Irish Big House novels tend to focus on this culture clash, consistently staging the decay of an Anglo-Irish estate as an allegory for the cultural failures of the Anglo-Irish and the growing power of the Catholic Irish (Kreilkamp 6-7).⁹

The Ireland of “After the Famine” is very much a “place of the primitive;” the story’s narrator describes Galway as peopled by “moving skeletons” and “pitiable-looking ghosts of humanity,” while the entrance to the d’Arcy estate is marked by a “sinister-looking old castle” (167; 169). More notably, in the aftermath of the Famine the d’Arcy estate is being pulled apart by both the Anglo and the Irish parts of the Anglo-Irish identity. The narrator is visiting the estate on behalf of an English firm looking to take advantage of the Encumbered Estates’ Act to purchase huge tracts of land at “excessively low prices” (165).¹⁰ While staying at the d’Arcy house to oversee the sale, he becomes infatuated with Eleanor d’Arcy and briefly imagines himself as competing with Henry O’Hara, a “red-headed squireen” with a thick brogue, who ultimately marries Eleanor and takes her to America after the sale of the estate (186). The story belabors the class conflict in this love triangle through the d’Arcy butler who complains that O’Hara was a member of an “inferior family” and that the “notion of one of them aspiring to lift his eyes to a d’Arcy was almost too audacious to have come within his idea of what was possible” (207-08). Thus, the Famine, which continues to haunt the Irish landscape, is established as the triggering event which upsets the entire social structure of the d’Arcy estate, leaving its only surviving family member caught between two kinds of class annihilation, one which forces her to join her own former tenant as a Famine refugee and another that leaves her marrying into the very class that helped to perpetuate the Famine conditions in the first place.

Furthermore, “After the Famine” returns to the representational problem of the Famine by offering up a character whose function within the narrative is quite like that of the Famine Roads of the essay: Eleanor d’Arcy. d’Arcy is frequently described as a kind of vessel for the aspects of the Famine experience that cannot be contained in the narrative itself. Throughout the story the narrator is fascinated by her haunted gaze, which gives the impression that “so much that was heartrending and confusing had passed before her eyes that they could never become natural again” (181). This is in keeping with broader patterns in the Gothic, which tends to be built off the excessive nature of its own subject matter that exceeds repressive and representational bounds. Furthermore, it plays on representational tropes many academics have associated with the Famine. Eleanor’s gaze invokes what Luke Gibbons, borrowing a phrase from Niamh O’Sullivan, refers to as “the unflinching eye,” a phenomenon in Famine art where the victim of the Famine is portrayed looking out at the viewer, seemingly calling for aid and sympathy, while also making Eleanor into a prototypical example of what Margaret Kelleher (1997) calls the feminization of Famine where the female body is made to contain a history “too awful to relate” (15; 6-7).

Read together, Lawless’s essay and short story outline a broad set of cultural and historical concerns for Irish authors, while also suggesting the ways those concerns inform formal choices. As she makes clear in her essay, addressing the nuances of the Famine experience demands a turn to certain generic shapes like those of the Gothic and the Big House novel. By directly connecting her essay and short story, she essentially turns the pair into an experiment on the relationship between form and content. A similar investment in the relationship between form and content recurs across Banville’s writings. Indeed, it is Banville’s self-professed desire to “mak[e] reality comprehensible” through art (Banville qtd in Imhof 18). As my reading of Lawless’s essay and short story make clear, Banville’s concern with

representing reality can grow just as naturally from the relationship between Irish history and literature as any more cosmopolitan philosophical problems. Comparing *The Infinities* to Lawless's writing brings the distinctly Irish dimensions of the Banville's novel to the forefront in ways that both reinforce and complicate its obvious exploration of problems of identity and representation.

Irish Cultural History and Identity in *The Infinities*

The Infinities was inspired by Heinrich Von Kleist's *Amphitryon* (1899), but, as Neil Murphy observes, it "doesn't simply reinterpret and transplant the same story; it enlarges the metaphorical possibilities offered by Kleist's dramatic model" (151). Hedwig Schwall (2010) makes a similar point, noting that the novel expands on the problems of identity central to the Amphitryon myth where Jupiter and Mercury take on the identities of Amphitryon and his servant Sosie to enable Jupiter to seduce Amphitryon's wife Alcmene (90). While this narrative still sits at the heart of *The Infinities*—Zeus forces Hermes to facilitate a tryst with the character Helen—the cast of characters is greatly expanded and, most significantly, the first person narration frequently shifts seamlessly between characters to recreate the problem of identity confusion at the level of form. The new narrative, which takes place in a single day, concerns the gathering of the Godley family to attend at the deathbed of the family patriarch, a renowned mathematician named Adam Godley. Throughout the day, Hermes, Zeus, and Pan, who appears in the form of Benny Grace, interfere with the family's doings, eavesdropping on their reactions to Adam's seemingly impending death and often directly intervening in the events of the day, most notably when Grace brings about Adam's miraculous recovery at the end of the novel. Schwall suggests that this narrative casts Banville's concern about the boundaries of identity in the mold of fantastic literature, paying particular attention to how Arden—the Godley estate in central Ireland—and its environs constitute an "Irish fantastic" space (93). While Schwall privileges a capacious notion of the fantastic in literature that includes motifs from High Fantasy and Romance as well as the Gothic broadly conceived, *The Infinities* consistently draws on particularly Irish aspects of the Gothic tradition.

Much like Lawless, Banville turns to the Famine roads as a symbol of representational excess. The Famine makes its most overt appearance in *The Infinities* as Adam Godley's son, who is also named Adam, returns from picking up his sister's not-quite-boyfriend Roddy Wagstaff from the train station. As they drive back to the house, they take the "Hunger Road," which makes Adam feel "uneasy" due to its "desperate purposelessness." The narrator, at this point Hermes, informs the reader that "everything seems to face away [from the road], looking stolidly elsewhere", describing the landscape as "uncanny" and haunted by birds that look like "pure-white ghosts" (100-01). The section of the novel describing the road allows a distinctly Gothic voice to intrude into the text, cutting into the harmless musings and wordplay that begin the section of the book about Adam's drive to the train station when he "feels like Adam on the first day in the garden" (89).

Even as the Famine Road demands a shift in the novel's tone, it also leads Adam to directly address some of the novel's central concerns with the nature of identity. As Adam diverts himself from the Famine Road, he contemplates the surrounding landscape, asking himself "where exactly it is that the river ends and the estuary begins?" (101). As he considers the implications of this question he briefly concludes "all that separates them really, and it is not a real separation at all, is his having put the question in the first place" (102). The Famine Road becomes one of the many triggers in the novel that inspire such introspection for its

characters; however, when thought of alongside Lawless's musings, it is clear that Adam's questions are not fundamentally removed from the problem of the road itself. In its "desperate purposelessness" the Famine Road is a reminder of the collapse of clear identity in the excess of widespread death and disease, a collapse mirrored in the problem of the river and estuary.

The Famine Road also does much to locate the Arden estate in a historically-centered—if fantastically rendered—Irish landscape. For Schwall, much of the novel's fantastic landscape is endowed with a life-giving quality suitable for a novel about a man who will survive a serious stroke. For example, she points to the holy well on the grounds of the estate as a site of fertility, connecting it to Helen's pregnancy, which is announced at the end of the text (93). However, when considered within the Irish Gothic tradition's tendency to collapse Irish Catholicism and paganism as primitive holdovers, the well takes on an additional, darker resonance. Indeed, Banville emphasizes this resonance when he describes the view of the Godley estate from the woods surrounding the well: "the place looks crazier than ever . . . [like] a church in some backward, primitive place where religion has decayed into a cult and the priests have had to allow the churchgoers to worship the old gods alongside the new one" (252). When looked at from the well, even the enclave of the Big House itself is revealed to be compromised by its pagan surroundings. This reinforces the novel's larger preoccupations with the delineation of identity, as the well becomes one of the many locations where the boundaries between identity formations like Catholicism, paganism, or even the supposedly rational values associated with Arden as both a Big House and home to the master mathematician Adam Sr. become unclear. This connection is strengthened by the well's connection to Adam Sr.'s theories about the nature of time; it is at the well that Adam explains his theories to his daughter Petra, using the surrounding woods as an example of the "temporal discrepancies" that "hindered [the world] into existence" (117). This idea could be seen as the Irish Gothic recast in the language of science fiction, as the fantastic space of the Godley estate is created by a temporal confusion that blurs past, present, and future.

Unsurprisingly, Arden house itself is marked by similar temporal discrepancies. The most notable example of this is when Petra has a vision of the house's former owner. While walking the halls of the house she sees "a man, heavy-set, scowling . . . in old-fashioned clothes and high boots, standing here and not wanting to do something, to accede to some request or command, but knowing he will have to, will be forced to" (121). Petra is sure that this man is a Blount, one of the original owners of the Arden estate. In this memory, the past once again erupts into the present of the novel. Notably, it also emphasizes the house's particular significance in the Irish context. While the past Petra glimpses remains vague, the man's failure to avoid this request suggests the decline of the estate, a decline that is clearly completed by the time in which the novel takes place as the only remaining Blount now works as a housekeeper for the Godley family. Thus, the class conflict central to Big House narratives like Lawless's "After the Famine" is turned into something of a backdrop for the events of *The Infinities*. However, this backdrop is not merely set-dressing; it is, in fact, one of many Irish cultural traditions that haunt the structure of the narrative, primarily as they are represented through Petra, who is constantly linked with the excesses of an almost forgotten past.

In many ways, Petra is an updated version of Eleanor d'Arcy from Lawless's story. Much like d'Arcy, Petra exists in the novel as something of a vessel for the past violence associated with the Arden estate. She is consistently associated with pain, death, hunger, and sickness. For example, she is introduced as "tiny and thin with a heart-shaped face and

haunted eyes,” with pajamas “hanging limp on her meagre frame (10). Furthermore, she is particularly interested in disease, and is in the process of creating an “almanac of ailments” listing “all the illnesses known to afflict mankind” (98). Notably, she is immediately connected to one of the novel’s many spectral interlopers—a boy Adam Godley Jr. spots from a passing train at the beginning of the novel. Adam is deeply troubled by the boy’s “pinched face and enormous eyes” and his “hungry scrutiny” (7). As Adam reflects on the boy’s gaze, he directly addresses some of the novel’s central concerns with the problem of identity, asking “How can he be a self and other others since the others too are selves, to themselves?” and concludes “The child on the train was a sort of horizon to him and he a sort of horizon to the child” (8-9). Just as Adam Jr. shifts his attention away from the boy, he encounters Petra in the hall and “yet again he sees in his mind the child’s face at the train window” (9). Notably like d’Arcy, Petra and the boy are distinguished by their starved and haunting glance, a glance which troubles Adam by seemingly calling out to and even challenging his selfhood.

Much like d’Arcy, Petra is frequently associated with a history “too awful to relate.” Beyond her vague awareness of the conflicts surrounding the unnamed Blount forebear discussed earlier, she is frequently associated with haunting and the returned dead; Adam Jr. remembers her as a “mummified” baby wrapped in a blanket. Additionally, his grandmother tells him, “you’ll think your arse is haunted” at Petra’s birth after describing the newborn Petra as “one [who] has been here before” (14; 9). Her haunted and starved body recreates another trend that Kelleher associates with the feminized depiction of Famine by revealing a breakdown in domesticity as the maternal form is shown as devoid of life and fertility (6-7). The way that Adam connects Petra’s starved frame to the boy’s hungry glance clearly invokes this fear and suggests that the remnants of the Famine are not exclusively located on the Famine Road leading to the Arden estate. Indeed, in their hungry, beseeching eyes, the boy and Petra bring the unflinching eye of Famine art into the very heart of the estate.

Furthermore, by blurring the lines between life and death and the human animal, Petra represents what David Lloyd (2008) has described as the “Indigent sublime” of Famine memory. According to Lloyd, the Famine challenges ideas of subjectivity and selfhood by threatening to annihilate the self. Much like Morash, Lloyd identifies a unique trauma in the idea of the Famine where human life was brought to the threshold of death (50-51). This connection is most evident in the novel when Petra’s brother remembers her sleepwalking “with her eyes rolled up into her head and her mouse-claws lifted in front of her chest”, an image immediately reminiscent of that quintessential example of the living dead, the zombie. This image also blurs the lines between the human and animal in Petra’s “mouse-claws” (11). By recasting this bodily breakdown in aesthetic terms, Lloyd’s concept makes it easy to see how the problem of the Famine is, in many ways, the problem of *The Infinities*. The conflict of identity at a point of liminal extremity dominates Banville’s novel, from the seemingly subconscious Gothic subtext, to old Adam’s state between life and death, to the very narrative voice of the text, which slips back and forth between Hermes and old Adam, often with no indication as to who is currently the narrator. All of this seems to deny the plausibility of clearly demarcated identities, favoring, rather, the infinite (or infinities) found in the sublime extreme of Famine memory.

By acting as a kind of representational center for *The Infinities*’s most notable engagements with Irish cultural memory, Petra takes on a multiplicitious identity unique in this novel invested in the problem of identity. She is not merely blurred with another character in the ways that Old Adam, Hermes, and Zeus are merged in the novel’s narration. Rather, in

much the same way that Eleanor d'Arcy contains all the aspects of the Famine experience and the fall of the Big House that Lawless's story cannot represent, Petra is forced to contain and express the whole problem of the Irishness of the Arden estate. In fact, one could even argue that Petra enacts this representation on her own body at the end of the novel when she cuts herself in a part of a personal ritual which has left "[t]he underside of her arm cicatriced all along its length" (278). In her act of self-harm, Petra maps the Famine Road that leads to Arden house on her body, turning herself into a vessel for the history that simmers just below the surface of the text.

By casting Petra and the estate as receptacles for the history of the Famine and the problems of Irish literary tradition, Banville creates a novel that is more than just an exploration of Famine memory, a Gothic tale, or a Big House novel. Rather, he engages with the philosophical and representational problems central to all three in his expansion of the Amphitryon myth, latching onto their implications for defining personal identity and its relationship to history. In doing so, he follows Lawless in showing an awareness of the ways that history can strain the bounds of literary convention, in much the same way that it can erode the boundaries of conventional notions of identity. Thus, much like Lawless's essay and short story, the novel is an experimental attempt at thoroughly integrating form and content, a postmodern concern cast in a particularly Irish register.

Notes

- 1 This paper came together with considerable input from my colleagues and mentors. I'd like to thank Claire Connolly and the attendees of the 2017 "Great Famine and Social Class" conference for initial feedback on the project, and Jeffrey Longacre and Sierra Senzaki for their comments on the article draft.
- 2 The very existence of an Irish Gothic is a contested matter. There has been considerable debate whether it is best understood as a genre, tradition, or mode. Throughout this essay I will be following Richard Haslam's argument that it is best thought of as a "gradually evolving yet often intermittent suite of themes, motifs, devices, forms, and styles, selected in specific periods, locations, and rhetorical situations, by a succession of different writers (2).
- 3 The British government regularly turned to such public works projects prior to the famine with some success. However, the sheer number of people made destitute by the famine in the years between 1845-1847 made such projects an impractical solution (Ó Gráda 66-67).
- 4 It is worth stressing here that I am pointedly avoiding the language of trauma studies as much as possible in this article. While I acknowledge that it provides a useful vocabulary for describing representations of the famine, I fear that it is irresponsible for a literary critic to speculate on any individual's psychological state in such terms, let alone the state of an entire country. I am more invested in how the Famine is thought of as a trauma and how artists put that cultural conception to work in their projects.
- 5 It would be impossible to detail these debates here. See James S. Donnelly Jr.'s "The Construction of the Memory of the Famine in Ireland and the Irish Diaspora, 1850-1900," Niall O Cioséin's "Was there 'silence' about the famine?," chapter one of Melissa Fegan's *Literature and the Irish Famine, 1845-1919*, and chapter one of Christine Kinealy's *The Great Irish Famine: Impact, Ideology, and Rebellion*.
- 6 Though he complicates this position in *Dissolute Characters: Irish Literary History through Balzac, Sheridan Le Fanu, Yeats, and Bowen*, W. J. McCormick makes a similar argument in his

contribution to *The Field Day Anthology*. More recently Christina Morin has echoed this interpretation of the Irish Gothic (1-3).

7 In many ways, this can be seen as an expansion on Julian Moynahan's argument that nearly all literature produced by the Anglo-Irish is a response to their insecure position as a "hyphenated culture" (6-10).

8 A prime example of this is Patrick O'Malley's argument in *Catholicism, Sexual Deviance, and Victorian Gothic Culture*. (2-4).

9 Examples of this abound. The foundational Big House novel, Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* (1800), establishes this template quite clearly, but even more experimental works like Banville's own *Birchwood* draw on these conventions consistently.

10 The Encumbered Estates Act of 1848 facilitated the fast and cheap sale of Irish estates rendered bankrupt by the famine (Moynihan 76).

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