

## **A Discourse of Need: The Drive in the Contemporary Situation of Famine**

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Famine in its most general sense is understood as an objective lack of nutrients in a given population. Preventing and eliminating famine in the world has thus far proven impossible in spite of advancements in farming and food distribution technologies. While many thinkers struggle to develop new and better ways to address the problem of a lack of food for bodies, in this essay I hope to suggest a way of thinking about bodies that addresses famine through the excess of desire. Psychoanalysis provides the coordinates for such a reevaluation of the body through its development of the drive: a concept that identifies traces of aggression and pleasure in the discourse of famine. Mobilizing an understanding of hunger as informed by a logic of desire rather than necessity, I hope to demonstrate that famine is a discursive product that develops out of the human subject's access to the signifier. Language – and the signifier in particular – has been elided in famine discourse in deference to an emphasis on the body that privileges its objectivity and does not recognize its dependence on language. The psychoanalytic concept of the drive corrects the faulty understanding of the body as an *a priori* objective entity by describing it instead as a sequence of impulses delivered through the medium of the signifier. Any understanding of famine must incorporate the body's desiring, linguistic ground.

In the development of this argument I will first dedicate a section to the identification of similarities between two contemporary forms of famine discourse: famine eschatology and the commemoration of the Great Famine in Ireland. In the final section, I will address how these similarities can only be properly situated through an understanding of the drive. Recognizing the

value of these similarities in their psychoanalytic context opens up the possibility of a future for famine studies in which scientific quantification will no longer obscure the pathways of pleasure that are truly at stake in the global relation to food shortage. If this analysis does not produce the formula through which famine can be effectively treated or erased, it will at least redefine the problem of famine in such a way that pleasure, enjoyment, and excess take their appropriate place at the heart of the issue.

Contemporary famine discourse depends on the logic of necessity. It makes intuitive sense to draw on this logic to understand food shortage: the body needs certain nutrients to survive and without them it dies. Once this necessity is invoked, it is a short jump to relations of mathematical equivalence. What the body needs is represented in the form of a measurable quantity of calories. Critical investigation into the interrelation of necessity and quantification knits other countable quantities into its discourse. In the last ten years, Cormac Ó Gráda, Pat McGregor, Julian Cribb, and Simone D'Alessandro among others, have produced contributions to famine studies that depend on these countable quantities. Ó Gráda, for instance, defines famine through necessity as “a widespread lack of food leading directly to excess mortality.”<sup>1</sup> He goes on to provide a mathematic function  $p(s)$  – the probability of a food shortage – to distinguish between “natural” and “unnatural” famine causes. As Ó Gráda explains, “the former would include the effect of serial autocorrelation in the weather ... and that of low yield ratios and poor storage capacities. The latter would include war” (7). He ends his article by claiming that the act of naming an event a famine strikes a balance between deaths incurred and the money raised by NGOs. “On the one hand,” he writes, “the very declaration of a ‘famine’ may prevent it from becoming a major mortality crisis. On the other, overuse of the term by relief agencies and others may lead to cynicism and donor fatigue” (32).

It is clear that objective, countable quantities emerge from the logic of necessity inherent in this understanding of famine in order to produce an analysis entirely dependent on mathematical equivalence. The inscription of the signifier “famine” is, at the conclusion of Ó Gráda’s article, a matter of appropriately valuing deaths (quantity x) against aid dollars (quantity y). Hidden behind these impassive variables are concepts that gesture toward excesses, and these excesses resist being formalized in relationships of equivalence. The problem that emerges from this incompatibility between quantifiable and subjective forces is the need for a unified field theory of famine to address appropriately the confluence of necessity and desire. Ó Gráda admits this incompatibility where he notes the difference between “natural” famine causes (weather, insufficient storage) and causes that arise from desiring subjects (war). However, his formula only addresses the causes he labels “natural,” causes I would alternatively refer to as “objective.” No arithmetical formula will ever completely formalize the overlap between the objective body and the desiring subject present in the development of famines. For this reason, either one or the other always receives short shrift in famine studies that put such formulas into operation.

Quantitative models of famine discourse introduce terms of subjective excess only to forget them in favor of mathematical exegesis. Phrases such as “donor fatigue” and “unnatural causes” gesture towards a subjective relation to famine elided in recent scholarship. Psychoanalysis identifies in this omission a pleasure related to the definition and acquisition of knowledge. Jacques Lacan locates in the historical production of the subject of science a tendency towards algebraization. He writes, “the opposition between exact sciences and conjectural sciences is no longer sustainable once conjecture is subject to exact calculation (using probability) and exactness is merely grounded in a formalism separating axioms and compounding laws from symbols.”<sup>2</sup> Lacan stresses the reign of countable quantities, and how

their use obscures the fact that “there is no such thing as a science of man because science’s man does not exist, only its subject does” (730). In other words, the object that science claims to access through countable quantities (the body, the “man”) is actually nothing more than a product of the logics of discourse and language (the “I” function: the subject).

When one engages in “compounding laws from symbols,” one simply grasps at *objet a*, the object of jouissance that is missing from the symbolic order. Producing “laws” such as the  $p(s)$  function is a means of accessing pleasure derived from an intersubjective relationship structured by the promise of access to knowledge. Lacan refers to this situation as the discourse of the university, in which truth is taken as a valuable possible possession, and the position of mastery aligns with a “new tyranny of knowledge.”<sup>3</sup> Claims to objective analysis, shrouded in the veneer of empirical objectivity, produce relationships of subjugation capable of pleasing the speaking subject. In other words, talking about the famine through the rhetoric of mathematics produces enjoyment for the critic at the expense of a balanced analysis of the situation of famine. Understanding the quantitative elements of food shortage will never, in and of itself, prevent a famine. Psychoanalysis alerts us that here we need a concerted effort to analyze the subject and the linguistic structures from which its enjoyment derives.

Yet an impasse emerges in the path of linguistic analysis as well, for it is clear that there *are* bodies and that these bodies require sustenance. The question arises: Is it possible to produce a discourse of the body that will neither disguise itself in the abstraction of mathematical analysis nor abandon its embodiment for a purely linguistic criticism? From this impasse, the psychoanalytic concept of the drive develops. Its genesis in the body is clear from its inception, where Freud imagines a “living vesicle” that develops a psychical mechanism as a means of insulating itself from the shock of external stimuli.<sup>4</sup> It becomes especially sensitive to internal

stimuli, the most potent of which are “the so-called instincts, the representatives of all forces arising within the body and transmitted to the psychic apparatus” (41). The drive does not deliver the body itself, but rather *representatives* of its impulses. Capable only of producing signifiers of bodily experience for consciousness, the drive “cannot be represented otherwise than by an idea.”<sup>5</sup> Therefore, psychoanalysis does not aim at a true analysis of the body. Rather, it concerns itself with the forms of instinctual representation. Formal approaches to the drive reveal aggressive, hostile, and destructive impulses at the basis of instinctual representations. As Lacan suggests, “[o]bject *a* is not peaceful” (733), meaning that its absence from the field of signifiers (and knowledge) is jarring and violent. The lack constituted by object *a* should not itself be taken for the lack of food that causes a famine. Yet it is precisely the object *a* that causes all other lacks to take on meaning. Therefore, the reason that famine has not been extinguished from the world is precisely because there is the other lack beyond the lack of food – this little, absent object: the *a*.

### **Impossible Equilibrium**

Famine has been a commanding presence in global politics over the last decade. The degree to which famine is dramatized as a source of apocalyptic destruction is evident from the books, articles, and G8 press releases that address it.<sup>6</sup> This coming calamity is expressed through the logic of equivalence: that is, through the differential comparison between the food we require and the food we are able to produce. John Vidal summarizes this argument, explaining that the world “for the sixth time in eleven years will consume more food than it produces.”<sup>7</sup> This claim for an imbalance of supply and demand in a biological sense quickly becomes supply and demand in the economic sense – “the price of key staples may double,” in Vidal’s words –

causing those who have limited monetary resources to starve. Those with excess capital will be fine, as they will be able to absorb the added cost of food by reducing nonessential purchases motivated by desire. Only those with limited funds will be forced into situations of need. Likewise, D'Allesandro argues that an asymmetry in wage fluctuation due to natural conditions “can reduce the ability to keep adequate food stocks thereby increasing peasants’ vulnerability to famine.”<sup>8</sup> D'Allesandro proceeds from a mathematical model that attempts to balance the food a population requires against the “maximization of profits” (628). Therefore, when she claims that “a sequence of bad seasons may lead ... to food scarcity and starvation,” and “a sequence of good seasons can imply an increase of the population level above the long run equilibrium which is not sustainable” (631), any equilibrium she describes is *a priori* derived from the foundational excess of the desire for profit. In both Vidal and D'Allesandro, a model of equivalence is established through the obfuscation of surplus. As we saw above, reducing the issue of famine to countable quantities always requires that desire be elided.

When desire is written into famine analyses that depend on equivalence, it is as an excrescence that prevents the achievement of a balance between production and need. Paul R. Ehrlich connects reproductive rights to population control through a tenuous ethical relationship to desire. Ehrlich explains that the best way to limit the population of hungry people is to “give full rights to women and to make modern contraception and backup abortion accessible to sexually active people.”<sup>9</sup> After admitting that these measures might not limit global population in a meaningful way, he concludes they will at least “deliver significant social and economic benefits by making huge reserves of brain power available to solve our problems.” The issues of safe access to contraception in the third world and the relation of famine to overpopulation need to be carefully distinguished, for Ehrlich confuses them in his proposed solution. Ehrlich’s

rationale suggests that humanity's ability to think deeply about its problems is dependent on it being allowed to pursue its inborn desire to avoid conception. Yet this assumes that those in the third world do not wish to procreate. Ehrlich relies on his own desire for famine-threatened populations to acquiesce to the imperative of improved access to contraception, regardless of social and cultural forces that may oppose it. Cribb follows Ehrlich in arguing that only reducing world population will avoid famine. He claims that based on declining birth rates among people under forty, young women are "voluntarily and perhaps instinctively reducing their fertility."<sup>10</sup> Again, the desire to reproduce is completely elided; Cribb never considers that economic and social factors could just as easily prevent young women from reproducing. In short, both Ehrlich and Cribb depend on the projection of *their own desire* to limit the number of global poor; we have already seen that it is the poor alone who truly face starvation. Arguments that begin by attempting to balance two given, mathematical quantities easily end up as a contest of desires. In the discourse of necessity, the drive finds an outlet through which it can pursue the pleasure of mastery through the subjective determination of others' sexual practices. Famine, figured as a concept heavily rooted in necessity, opens up onto this field of potential enjoyment.

Transitioning from equivalence to moral imperatives against reproductive practice is historically rooted in famine discourse. This pattern of thought was developed in the late eighteenth century, when thinking of humans as countable quantities became acceptable in political thought.<sup>11</sup> In 1798, T.R. Malthus's made an argument similar to those forwarded by Ehrlich and Cribb. For Malthus, it is the moral duty of the poor to restrain themselves from "marriage" and "irregular gratifications" in order to stem overpopulation.<sup>12</sup> He is appalled to note that in spite of the intelligence the poor are capable of demonstrating in remaining celibate, "there are few states in which there is not a constant effort in the population to increase beyond

the means of subsistence” (50). Malthus, Ehrlich, and Cribb are equally confounded by the possibility of the poor desiring to copulate and reproduce.

Malthus’s position is all the more remarkable as he transitions from the imperative of sexual restraint to the objective imbalance in food. Diverging from contemporary critics in his willingness to blame those who engage in reproductive sex for their desire, Malthus does not suggest that given the option the poor would cease this activity. However, like contemporary critics who use mathematics to project a field in which moral castigation is regarded as objective truth, Malthus stakes his claim on an ethical high ground through an *a priori* logic of equivalence derived from the structure of necessity.

We will suppose the means of subsistence in any country just equal to the easy support of its inhabitants. The constant effort towards population ... increases the number of people before the means of subsistence are increased. The food, therefore, which before supported eleven millions, must now be divided among eleven millions and a half. The poor consequently ... [are] reduced to severe distress. (11)

Willful blindness to the violence of this economic model permits Malthus to enjoy certain aggressive impulses free from any sense of personal responsibility. By supposing the means of subsistence to be naturally equal to the biological demands of any population (thereby insisting upon the logic of necessity), Malthus makes it impossible for any famine to be anything but the representation of the vice of a population that has indulged when it should have made better use of, to borrow Ehrlich’s phrase, its huge reserves of brain power. Mathematical rationalism is allowed to fortify the enjoyment of the destructive impulses of the drive, a desire that colonizes the objectivity of scientific discourse.

While it is true that recent critics tend to dismiss Malthus, their insistence obscures the degree to which contemporary famine discourse relies on the premise of necessity and the omnipotence of equivalence. McGregor explains how Malthus’s assumptions have been proven

false, as “famines have occurred without a significant fall in the local supplies of food.”<sup>13</sup> What Malthus failed to consider, according to McGregor, is capitalism. As he explains, famine does not occur when there is an imbalance in the equilibrium between population and food supply, but instead when “the loss [of food] results in a wage rate below that which can support subsistence. To survive, those who supply labour must supplement earnings from their endowments; those with insufficient assets starve” (625). Famine is produced in the gap between capital needed to survive and available wages, not nutrients needed and available food. According to this model, the reproduction of the poor is foolish because it incurs unnecessary costs. The mathematization of desire for surplus capital becomes the imperative for contraception.

Ó Gráda is therefore right to claim that “eliminating famine should be ‘easy,’” and “[t]he eradication of ... Malthus’s ultimate check” would be a worthy representation of mankind’s progress (3). If famine were simply the reparation of a negative balance, either between population and food supply or between available and required capital, then restoring the equilibrium would be well within humanity’s grasp. The cost of eliminating world hunger is estimated at thirty billion dollars, a figure that demonstrates that there is always something more than quantification at play in mathematical analysis.<sup>14</sup> Forces located in the gap that constitutes our relation to our own and other bodies stand in the way of the completion of this arithmetical operation. Our attempts to fix the bodies of others masquerade as our attempt to balance the ledger. The gap between our psyche and our bodies assures that any relationship of equilibrium will produce a surplus quantity; in short, equivalence is antithetical to the basic qualities of the human subject. Objective quantities such as the cost of commodities fluctuate interminably due to the value assigned through purely symbolic means, a value produced by desiring subjects.

Libidinal cathexis does not admit of a period of rest; its work is constant, and as a result any equilibrium is short-lived and spectral.

### **The Famine between Two Deaths**

Contemporary forms of commemoration attached to the Great Famine in Ireland attest to the persistence of famine's libidinal investment. While most locate the Great Hunger between 1845 and 1852, these endpoints are deceiving, for the Famine is still alive. I intend this statement neither as a reflection on the fact that the Famine left cultural and historical resonances that are still felt today,<sup>15</sup> nor as an endorsement of the scientific theory of a permanent genetic mark on the Irish race.<sup>16</sup> What I mean is that the Famine, as a discourse, is undead. This does not make light of the real suffering experienced by victims of hunger in the nineteenth century, but rather marks a distinction between that suffering and the discursive product "The Great Famine." Distinguishing between these two iterations of the Famine suggests that while the food shortage ended sometime in the 1850s, something definitive persisted beyond that point. The Great Famine's first death – the restoration of a sustainable form of life in peasant Ireland – only presaged the coming second death that would resolve its ongoing libidinal investments.<sup>17</sup>

Approaching the experience of the potato famine today is only possible through these libidinal investments. Any objective form of the Hunger is therefore never experienced except as the product of a larger concept - "The Great Famine." Accepting this linguistic interpenetration of concept with event allows one to address the Famine's contemporary manifestations. These expressions of the Famine include traditional modes of signifying trauma, such as the annual international famine commemoration day<sup>18</sup> and the advertisement produced by restaurant chain Denny's in 2010.<sup>19</sup> Although the two examples differ greatly in media expression and reception,

they both produced a group identification that distinguished between acceptable and unacceptable Irish experiences.

Yet the Famine also contains modes of signification that do not correspond to traditional forms of remembrance.

The persistence of these atypical symbolic gestures suggests that the Famine is undead. The Famine's atypicality is expressed in its openness to capitalist market practices; often there is no transformation from commemoration into



*Fig. 1: Famine celebrators in Kiltrush, dressed in period costumes.*

commodity fetishism, for both operate at the same time.<sup>20</sup> For example, a former famine workhouse in Carrick-on-Shannon became a tourist destination, offering the curious an opportunity to “live like a Famine victim.”<sup>21</sup> The usual forms of mediation between historical object and consumer are foregone; the museum veneer of informative displays and blocks of aestheticized text is absent. The public is sold direct contact with history itself. Plasticity between commemoration and capitalism is further evident in the replica Famine ship, the *Jeanie Johnston*. As the ship's website explains, it is “available for PRIVATE HIRE and can be used for special events, product launches and other corporate meetings as required.”<sup>22</sup> Capitalist synergy of this kind would be unthinkable in the case of the *Amistad*, a replica nineteenth-century slave ship. Something about the Famine in particular delivers it to Irish and non-Irish audiences free

from the fetters of historical guilt. The smiles on the faces of those who dress up in period garb at famine commemorations make this clear (Fig. 1).<sup>23</sup> These examples support the claim that a famine can never be limited to its objective elements alone and must be pursued by incorporating an accounting of desire. In other words, what opens the Great Hunger to commodification is the pleasure derived from Famine memorial activities.

Pleasure obviously motivates commemoration in the recent genetic reproduction of the potato strain devastated during the Famine. This potato, nicknamed “the lumper,” was distributed by Marks and Spencer for Saint Patrick’s Day in 2013. Peter Tinkler, a representative of M&S, explained that “despite the unfortunate history,” the lumper was sure to “be a hit with customers.”<sup>24</sup> This assertion defies reports claiming that the potato was not amenable to contemporary tastes. A potato blog claims the lumper had “a texture that tended towards the waxy end of the scale,” but that the taste was secondary because “the mere fact of [its] availability is a story that has piqued people’s curiosity no end.”<sup>25</sup> This has become a commonplace in lumper reporting. Indeed, the *Irish Times* quotes restaurant owner Peter Gallagher describing it as “a little bit of Irish history on a plate.”<sup>26</sup> Another restaurateur, Cathal Armstrong, expressed more eloquently the relationship between the potato’s past and present: “I think it’s both exciting and a little frightening .... But I would still love to get my hands on some and see how they taste. I guess it would be similar to bumping into the ghost of a long-lost relative in a dark alley.” One need only replace the word “but” with the words “and so” to discover what is at stake in the production and marketing of the lumper. Tinkler grasps the relationship between the cause of desire and historical tragedy backwards: people want the potato *because* it is responsible for the Famine. Tinkler’s assertion should therefore be reversed:

Marks and Spencer understood that despite the lumper's unfortunate flavor, its history would make it a hit with customers.

When asked why he would bother recreating the famine potato, farmer Michael McKillip demonstrated that he understood the lumper's true appeal: "because of its history," he responded. Likewise, Dermot Carey, a potato expert, summed up its appeal as "pure nostalgia."<sup>27</sup> The relationship between history and nostalgia is in this case complementary. Nostalgia, as a motivating force, prohibits the history of the Great Famine from ossifying into a dead object of impassive observation. History, for those who engage in famine commemoration, is always already nostalgic: the longing for a past that is lost or ungraspable from the position of the present. As long as the Famine goes on, dead but still living, history is now.

Forms of contemporary Famine commemoration therefore share a foundational commonality with contemporary famine criticism: the attempt to address famine through objective means. In both cases, experiences that are tactile and rooted in present bodily experience dominate the field of possibility. One turns the process of famine itself into countable quantities (calories, dollars, dead bodies, etc.) in the same way that remembering Famine is turned into a sequence of objects corresponding to authentic sensory experiences (period clothes, famine workhouses, etc.). The similarity springs from famine's partaking in a logic of necessity linked to the experience of the body; famine is a lack of objects (food) that threatens the persistence of another object (the body). As the first objective totality we experience, the body serves as an *ur-object*: all objects are based on this model.<sup>28</sup> Its status as the one object that we can take for granted in a field populated with multiple objects establishes a discursive model in which quantification takes hold as the most intuitive exegetical method. That is, neither purely objective nor purely subjective means of critique will ever accurately address the concept of

famine. What we deal with when we deal with need is a new, broadened, impossible objectivity. This objectivity draws into question the solidity of our given objects by puncturing them with desire, while also granting a rooted objectivity to our abstract notions of desire. Psychoanalysis refers to this new objectivity through the relationship of the body to its double, the object *a*.

The body is not composed of the objective extended substance as the good Cartesian assumes. As Lacan notes, “the substance of the body” can be “defined only as that which enjoys itself.”<sup>29</sup> Psychoanalysis therefore breaks apart the false binary of extended and thinking substance through the introduction of a third, enjoying substance. This substance is, according to Lacan, produced when the body enjoys itself by “‘corporizing’ the body in a signifying way” (23). This is the work of the drive, delivering corporeal impulses to the psyche through representational means. *Trieb* introduces a split into both extended and thinking substance, isolating them from themselves as thought thinks the body and the body presents itself as thought. This broken binary enters psychoanalysis first in the work of Freud through another ruptured binary: hunger and love.

### **Famine and the Drive**

Schiller’s poem “Die Weltweisen” is often summarized through an approximation of its finale: “Hunger and love are what move the world.” Freud identifies this approximation as the motivation behind his elaboration of the drive concept. Noting that there is no unique force in the psyche responsible for aggression, he instead points to the complicated relationship between sexual and ego instincts. “I took as my starting-point a saying of the poet-philosopher, Schiller, that hunger and love are what moves the world,” Freud writes. “Hunger could be taken to represent the instincts which aim at preserving the individual; while love strives after objects,

and its chief function ... is the preservation of the species.<sup>30</sup> Any distinction between love and hunger is drawn into question first by the fact that love and not hunger strives after objects, and even more consequentially when Freud finds that “the ego itself is cathected with libido” (71). This libido-invested ego turns a simple opposition into something much more complicated.

Due to this complication, love and hunger reappear constantly and serve as a “basic dualism” that “contribute[s] significantly to Freud’s elaboration of ... key concepts.”<sup>31</sup> Yet as mentioned above, this basic dualism is never as basic as it seems. Freud says as much in 1920, explaining that while he “kept at first to the popular division of instincts typified in the phrase ‘hunger and love,’” he had to broaden his understanding of the terms to accommodate the breadth of sexuality now “extended so as to cover many things which could not be classed under the reproductive function” (61). Six years later Freud determines that love and hunger are not naturally or definitively separable, arguing that “we give these bodily needs, in so far as they represent an instigation to mental activity, the name of *Trieb*.”<sup>32</sup> This indistinction between the two is present as early as 1900, when Freud remarks that “love and hunger ... meet at a woman’s breast.”<sup>33</sup> The year prior, he describes “hunger and love” as “the two most powerful motive forces” of life without further differentiating between the two.<sup>34</sup>

Love and hunger are crucial to understanding psychoanalysis; their relationship directly informs the concept of the drive. Yet what precisely is this relationship? Freud often presents the relation of hunger to love in contradictory terms, as he does in this passage:

The popular view distinguishes between hunger and love as being the representatives of the instincts which aim respectively at the preservation of the individual and at the reproduction of the species. We accept this very evident distinction, so that in psychoanalysis too we make a distinction between the self-preservative or ego-instincts ... and the sexual instincts ... The force by which the sexual instinct is represented in the mind we call “libido” – sexual desire – and we regard it as something analogous to hunger, the will to power, and so on.<sup>35</sup>

There are three main claims. First, the common distinction borrowed from Schiller's poem holds that there is a distinction between hunger and love that signifies the split between the foundational human goals of self-preservation and reproduction. Second, psychoanalysis recognizes the validity of the common distinction between love and hunger, using it to inform a definition of the instinct (*Trieb*). Third, there is a "force" called libido that enables the instincts to become legible to the mind, and this force is comparable to hunger or the will to power. The third claim in this schema can only contradict the first two. If love and hunger are *a priori* distinguishable, how can it be that they are only able to appear to the mind through the force of sexual desire – a sexual desire that is comparable to hunger? Wouldn't the foundational distinction between love and hunger disappear when both are invested with libido? Surprisingly, the distinction is maintained *because* of the sexual force that drives both hunger and love. The relationship established between the two cannot be thought through, as it is in much of the criticism, with a binary of distinct modes of desire. Rather, the two should be imagined as the overlapping circles in a Venn diagram; the middle, shared section of the diagram is libido. In this sense, the above passage is not strictly contradictory: It describes a relation of difference that is not dependent on complete exclusion. What Freud argues instead is twofold: One must maintain the distinction between love and hunger while simultaneously recognizing their shared content.

The dangerous proximity of biological necessity and sexual enjoyment is evident in Freud's earliest writing. The similarity between hunger and love made his attempt to produce a quantitative, scientific account of the psyche an impossible task. While thinking through the co-presence of exogenous and endogenous stimuli effecting the tension present in the organism, Freud determines (surprisingly) that the latter pose the most trouble. He imagines a process of absorption and release of exogenous stimulus that operates on the same premise of mathematical

equivalence that characterizes famine studies. In other words, Freud conceives of the psyche as Malthus conceives of population, that is always already in perfect quantitative balance with its environment.

Yet, unlike Malthus, Freud refuses to take any mathematical equivalence for granted, and in the emergence of an internal need, the subject and desire fall out of equilibrium. He explains that endogenous stimuli

have their origin in the cells of the body and give rise to the major needs: hunger, respiration, sexuality. From these the organism cannot withdraw as it does from external stimuli; it cannot employ their  $Q$  for flight from the stimulus. They only cease subject to particular conditions, which must be realized in the external world. (Cf., for instance, the need for nourishment.) In order to accomplish such an action (which deserves to be named "specific"), an effort is required which is independent of endogenous  $Q_{\eta}$  and in general greater, since the individual is being subjected to conditions which may be described as *the exigencies of life*.<sup>36</sup>

An excess quantity of tension is *a priori* in play at the level of need. Hunger and sexuality, presented in tandem, are never reducible to their biological functions because, even at that level, a surplus is necessitated in order to fulfill their demands. Three years later when a patient presents Freud an insistent memory consisting in the image of a species of flower and the flavor of bread, the quantitative model of the psyche has been completely abandoned. When Freud argues that these sensations (flowers, bread) took on their importance during a period in which the patient struggled to feed himself, he suggests that those bodily matters we take as the most objective (hunger, need) are influenced by the processes of cathexis and linguistic expression: hunger is converted into an image. Contemporary criticism distinguishes between the psychical processes we subject to psychoanalytic interpretation (sexuality, violence, art) and those left to objective science (nutrition, locomotion, respiration). Yet, as Lacan insists, this segmentation and quantification neglect the foundational gesture of psychoanalysis, namely its insistence that the bodily manifestation of symptoms is best treated through representation. Something exceeds

quantification in the representation of need, a surplus that disrupts the gesture toward mathematical interpretation with the unavoidable stain of desire.

Desire is therefore not a byproduct of need, capable of being dismissed or forgotten in order to produce useful models of equivalence. Rather, desire is the readable, material product of the drive, and the only access we have to any true account of the body. Need is therefore never present in our analysis except as a fantasy of objective control through which aggressive urges can be discharged. In truth, only the impulses of the drive, delivered in signifiers of desire, can account for our corporeal being. Famine persists between two deaths as an apocalyptic threat and a commemorative discourse because it satisfies a desire at the level of the relationship to our biological organism by conjuring the mirage that hunger, viewed as a product of pure need, will allow us a transcendent access to our bodies. Yet, as Lacan says, “no object of ... need, can satisfy the drive.”<sup>37</sup> Famine critics would do well to heed this warning, for objective analysis of the famine takes the body in an impossible fantasmatic form: as an object fixed in time and space by mathematical figurations of its economies of energy. Just as the object of food is in truth the sensation of taste, the calculation of objective disequilibrium is the satisfaction of the drive. Only by taking this articulation seriously can discourse properly approach the problem of famine.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Cormac Ó Gráda, “Making Famine History,” *Journal of Economic Literature* 45.1 (2007): 5-38, p. 5. Further references are incorporated into the text.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Lacan, “Science and Truth,” *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2006), p. 733. Further references are incorporated into the text.

<sup>3</sup> Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: Norton, 2007), p. 37.

<sup>4</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (SE)*, vol. 18, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1953-74), p. 31. Further references are incorporated into the text.

<sup>5</sup> Freud, “The Unconscious” (1915), *SE* vol. 14, p. 177.

<sup>6</sup> See for example Melanie Allen, “G8 Leaders’ Statement on Global Food Security,” *International Food Policy Research Institute*, 10 Jul 2008.

<http://www.ifpri.org/blog/g8-leaders-statement-global-food-security>

The statement is separated into six numbered points, wherein the G8 leaders express dismay at the fact that food scarcity has not successfully been addressed and still poses a real threat to global food security: “Progress in hunger reduction since the mid-1990s has been disappointing, and poverty remains severe and persistent in many parts of the developing world. The current food crisis will push even more people into poverty and hunger.”

<sup>7</sup> John Vidal, “UN warns of looming worldwide food crisis in 2013,” *The Observer*, 8 August 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Simone D’Allesandro, “Modernization, weather variability, and vulnerability to famine,” *Oxford Economic Papers* 63 (2011): 625-647, p. 630. Further references are incorporated into the text.

<sup>9</sup> Paul R Ehrlich. “Famine threatens the very survival of human civilization,” *The Daily Star*, 14 May 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Julian Cribb, *The Coming Famine* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010), p. 160.

<sup>11</sup> This discourse begins largely in treatises related to the slave trade, where human beings (as property) become subject to objective mathematical analysis for the first time. Remarks in the House of Commons in 1790 on the slave trade in the West Indies included the suggestion that “it is certainly in the planter’s best interest to keep up the slaves by breeding, if possible,” as well as simple mathematical formulas for how best to breed slaves for work (“15 or 20 years must elapse before those born would be fit for field work. In that period, the working negroes must, in the course of things, be diminished near ½”). *Abridgment of the minutes of the evidence, taken before a committee of the whole House, to whom it was referred to consider of the slave-trade, 1790* (London: Government Printing Office, 1790), p. 50.

<sup>12</sup> T.R. Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (London: J. Johnson, 1798), p. 49. Further references are incorporated into the text.

<sup>13</sup> Pat McGregor, “Famine: A simple general equilibrium model,” *Oxford Economic Papers* 50 (1998): 623-643, p. 623. Further references are incorporated into the text.

<sup>14</sup> “The Cost to End World Hunger,” *The Borgen Project*, 23 June 2008.  
<http://www.borgenproject.org/cost-to-end-world-hunger>

<sup>15</sup> Goya Dmytryshchak, “Ireland’s Great Famine Fed our Rich History,” *Maribyrnong and Hobson’s Bay Weekly*, 20 Nov 2013. Note the strangely upbeat pun in the use of the word “fed” in the article’s title.  
<http://www.maribyrnong.starweekly.com.au/story/1792911/ireland-s-great-famine-fed-our-rich-history/opinion>

<sup>16</sup> Molly Muldoon, “Irish Famine triggered mental illness in future generations of Irish, says historian,” *Irish Central*, 14 Nov 2013. Historian Oonagh Walsh argues that “epigenetic change” due to the famine caused the generally high levels of mental health issues in Ireland today.  
<https://irishhungercomm.wordpress.com/2014/01/20/irish-famine-triggered-mental-illness-in-future-generations-of-irish-says-historian>

<sup>17</sup> Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book VII*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: Norton, 1992), p. 248. Lacan describes death as “the point at which the very cycles of the transformations of nature are annihilated.” It is from this limit that Lacan claims “false metaphors of being (*l’étant*) can be distinguished from the position of Being (*l’Être*) itself.” In the context of the famine, this would amount to the ability to separate the actual material events from the discursive production of the category of the Great Famine.

<sup>18</sup> Held so far in New York, Liverpool, Boston, and Sydney, as well as in Canada, the event plays with notions of racial continuity in order to produce an ahistorical abstract identity for the Irish.

<sup>19</sup> A television commercial explained an all-you-can-eat fries and pancakes promotion supposedly intended to honor the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Great Famine – with a voiceover that said, in part, that the deals were offered in spite of the fact that they hadn’t “ever heard of a pancake shortage before.” The ad produced significant outcry, enough that Denny’s pulled it and apologized for the error.

<sup>20</sup> See Russell Jacoby, *Social Amnesia: A Critique of Contemporary Psychology* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1997), p. 5. Jacoby argues that commodity culture, especially in relation to capitalist strategies such as planned obsolescence, contributes mightily to mass cultural forgetting. He refers to this concept as “social amnesia,” which he describes as “society’s repression of remembrance, ... a psychic commodity of the commodity society.” It is therefore surprising that Irish Famine remembrance often goes hand in hand with efforts at commodification; the product is a kind of endless repetition of remembering attached to the commodity culture of forgetting.

- <sup>21</sup> Kate Hickey, “Irish town offers opportunity to live like a Famine victim for a weekend,” *Irish Central*, 1 Mar 2013.
- <sup>22</sup> “Jeanie Johnston – Events and Private Hire,” *Jeanie Johnston Tall Ship & Famine Museum*, n.d.  
<http://www.jeaniejohnston.ie>
- <sup>23</sup> Molly Muldoon, “Annual Irish Famine Commemoration held in Co. Clare – VIDEO,” *Irish Central*, 9 May 2013.
- <sup>24</sup> Richard Ford, “M&S goes back to the past with Lumper potato for St Patrick’s Day,” *The Grocer*, 14 Mar 2013.  
<http://m.thegrocer.co.uk/fmcg/fresh/fruit-and-veg/ms-goes-back-to-the-past-with-lumper-potato-for-st-patricks-day/237550.article>
- <sup>25</sup> “Spud Sunday: Return of the Lumper,” *The Daily Spud*, 11 Mar 2013.  
<http://www.thedailyspud.com/2013/03/11/lumper-potatoes>
- <sup>26</sup> Conor Pope, “Famine Lumpers on the Menu and in Shops,” *Irish Times*, 7 Mar 2013.  
<http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1P2-34360907.html>
- <sup>27</sup> Catherine Zuckerman, “Meet the Lumper: Ireland’s New Old Potato,” *National Geographic*, 15 Mar 2013.  
<http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2013/03/130315-irish-famine-potato-lumper-food-science-culture-ireland>
- <sup>28</sup> Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function,” *Écrits*, pp. 75-81. “For the total form of his body, by which the subject anticipates the maturation of his power in a mirage, is given to him only as a gestalt, that is, in an exteriority in which, to be sure, *this form is more constitutive than constituted*, but in which, above all, it appears to him as the contour of his stature that freezes it and in a symmetry that reverses it, in opposition to the movements with which the subject feels he animates it” (76, my emphasis).
- <sup>29</sup> Lacan, *Encore: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: Norton, 1998), p. 23. Further references are incorporated into the text.
- <sup>30</sup> Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (1929), *SE* vol. 21, pp. 75-6. Further references are incorporated into the text.
- <sup>31</sup> Graham Frankland, *Freud’s Literary Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 40.
- <sup>32</sup> Freud, “The Question of Lay Analysis” (1926), *SE* vol. 20, p. 241.
- <sup>33</sup> Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), *SE* vol. 20, p. 212.

<sup>34</sup> Freud, “Screen Memories” (1899), *SE* vol. 3, p. 314.

<sup>35</sup> Freud, “A Difficulty in the Path of Analysis” (1917), *SE* vol. 17, p. 139.

<sup>36</sup> Freud, “Project for a Scientific Psychology” (1896), *SE* vol. 1, pp. 296-7. Further references are incorporated into the text.

<sup>37</sup> Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: Norton, 1978), p. 167.