Famine – A Crisis of History and Rhetoric

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For Mum and Dad

ABSTRACT

This work examines how famine memory is used in conceptualizing various modes of subjecthood. It traces both the changing and repetitive registers that the Western notion of famine has taken as ways to narrate the poor and the notion of humanitarianism. Using late nineteenth-century Bengal as an example, I will show how morality, land economics and liberal science has served as vehicles for generating a normalized, axiomatic notion of what it means to be charitable and for constituting different historical Others in the process. The significance of this is to raise broader questions of how famine memory might inflect our response to suffering.

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To repeat: literature is not verifiable. The only way a reading establishes itself – without guarantees – is by sharing the steps of reading. That is the experience of the impossible; ethical discontinuity shaken up in simulacrum. Unless you take a step with me, there will be no interdisciplinarity, only the tedium of turf battles.

Gayatri Spivak, 2002

Preoccupation

Although this thesis is about famine and how to read its history, it is ultimately preoccupied with ethics. This caveat is something that stands apart from the disparate inventory of histories of Britain and India that make up the bulk of this project. With the exception of philosophers, ethics is something no reading or figuring can contain satisfactorily without the risk of over-obscuring or over-abstracting. Nonetheless, I suspect that the empirical narrative, as some researchers call it, need not be the opposite of theoretical exegesis.

By pre-occupation, I mean that one of the wider aims of my work attempts to bridge the question of ethics and the empirical with regards to historiography, and in a way that is not bound to the sprawling terms of proper disciplinary inquiry of moral philosophy. The rigorous exegesis of the body of philosophical work on ethics spanning the Greeks to modern questions of morality such as those conducted by John Stuart Mill and Immanuel Kant is a different (and valuable) project altogether. My *pre*-occupation with ethics finds emphasis in the prior, consisting of an examination of an ethicity that is before the proper conceptualization of what is epistemically known as ethics. In my work, ethics is taken first and foremost as a question about what it means to relate to a stranger, without a prior commitment to established Truths. Primarily I want to emphasize the particular ethics of French philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995), whose examination of what is good or bad has, more often than not, been accused of being arbitrary and effective only in gesture. However, his work is relevant for

historiography precisely because it is situated at the crux of the dilemma between reading and writing history: how can historiography explain ethics if historiographical critique commits to no-Truth of any event? How can historiography commit to a recommendation of what is good, if the notion of Good is always already the product of Truth?

Levinas has often worked without the assumption of hypothesis or of a status of things at first, as giving rise to domains by which to discuss the meaning of what is Other. The context of his philosophy on the notion of ethics exists only between the Self and Other and he is rarely explicit about who the Self or Other is. This omission is probably intentional and is a refusal to give his terms over fully to conceptual definitions. For him, the Other simply refers to "radical heterogeneity" (1979: 36), an essential difference between humans that cannot be surmised into a conceptual totality without sacrificing this difference. For Levinas (1979), alterity stems from a difference between Self and Other that is irreducible to any existing category the Self may use to think of the Other, such as race, religion, gender, etc. Levinas' refusal to explicitly make his terms – for example, subject, object, reality, truth – continuous to the traditions in which they are often understood, causes his work to seem, to many of his critics, bracketed from material realities; his denial represents, in a sense, his general philosophical doubt towards the fundamental conditions of being, including the shared convention of linear and sequenced time – the 'conceptual totality' of History. His work can often be construed as a wholly distinct discipline or critique. However, these are also reasons why his work endears itself precisely to mine, whose focus is discontinuity, disjuncture and tension.

Anyone familiar with South Asian history will know that, since the 1980s, many scholars have busied themselves with the category of 'colonial'. This category presupposes a notion of the Other that is registered in colonial history. Depending on where you stand in this history, Other denotes alterity by cultural, status, economic or political difference. For India, the dominant historicism has been the one produced in the colonial encounter and has since established certain configurations for

apprehending alterity. This was observed by Ranajit Guha (1987) who also specified this historicism as a mode of reading alterity that is supported by colonial power. This colonial Other is not 'radically heterogeneous' since its otherness can easily be decoded by the categories instilled by imperial rule. In retaliation, some impassioned historiographical critiques produced against the category of 'colonial' have taken on a historical mode that follows Marxist terms of social and economic production, since colonial power circumscribed its subjects using precisely these terms. Many of those who sought to explain an autonomous agency for the South Asian person found motivation in the Marxist depiction of evil as social and economic determination by bourgeois/capitalist ideology. The passionate scholarship of Indian historians in the last few decades was prominently of Marxist persuasion (Chakrabarty, 2000: xi). The resonance of this Marxist concern with realities recorded in India's history, found particular force in highlighting the exploitation of groups of people via labour, sexuality, culture and land.

However, those who write against such evil also write from within an inheritance of morality and social justice preached by nineteenth century Western humanitarianism. This is, of course, part of the larger European intellectual traditions also succeeded to India's cultural and historical intelligentsia (mainly Bengali scholars) – a troubling inheritance whose disruptiveness continues to echo in the historiography of Indian thinkers like Dipesh Chakrabarty, Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha. My starting point in all of this was indeed colonial India and its conflicts with imperial powers, but through my entanglement with the writings of Bengali scholars, my work also found its way to the normative dimensions of the debate, particularly in India's famine narratives. I noticed a dialogic space between Levinas and South Asian scholarship with regard to the notion of alterity. Both begin with a prior objection to the fundamental assumptions of Otherness given by dominant historicism. This was particularly salient for India's famine history. The narratives of India's famine archive show that the triumph of specific historic will over alterity was not a mere characteristic necessary for organizing the chaos of the crisis. In a real sense, it was constitutive. Shortly after the famine in 1866,

Sir William Wilson Hunter published *The Annals of Rural Bengal*. In this book he explains that the records of rural life such as "the tenure of the cultivators, their earnings and their style of living, their clothing..." were paramount to the successful management of the region and those records laid "a groundwork for an accurate and a yet unwritten history" for the Government (Hunter, 1868: 9-10). The example of *Annals* outlines what Guha (1988) noticed as a conspicuous interest "in the historical aspects of the land...an interest which provided most of their [the administration] authors with their livelihood" (1987: 8). Hunter followed his work in *Annals* several years later with *Famine Aspects of Bengal Districts* (1873), with a more direct focus on famine adopting a commonplace format, which Guha (1988) describes as "the form of comprehensive surveys with the narrative extended over long periods of time and large parts of the subcontinent" (1988: 8-9). *Famine Aspects* is the result of interviews Hunter conducted with district officers over the region and largely followed the survey format Guha describes.

The Commission report to famine in Bengal and Orissa in 1866 attempts to represent the characteristics of the people of Orissa as the kind of categorization through which famine occurrence in the region could be explained. "Most of them are very Hindu in religion and have much caste prejudice..." (Commission Report to Famine in Bengal and Orissa, 1867: 9). The famine poor, in large rural regions, their livelihood, society and culture classified and used to explain why they seem 'prone' to famine. The need for imperial order encountered the urgency of crisis degrees, and the resultant Bengal famine became a well demarcated and measured object as well as a fixed scene of administration; the event was akin to Levinas' (1979) description of war as "the ontological event [that]...is a casting into movement of beings hitherto anchored in their identity, a mobilization of absolutes, by an objective order from which there is no escape" (Levinas, 1979: 21).

The lesson from Levinas showed me that Bengal's famine narratives might also bring the objection to such a mobilization to critical clarity or to *crisis,* so to speak. After all, famines were often the events that brought the administration into an ethical brink. The East India Company were accused of being immoral and the charge was of "rapine,

oppression, injustice and even murder" of causing the Bengal famine of 1770 with "their unbounded avarice" (*Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser,* August 14, 1772: 1). Before 1860, each famine threatened to convert the Company as arbiter of India's history of economic development to the arch-villain in India's history. After the switch to Crown rule, the Company sank into the pages of histories written under Royal commission. Either way, historical totalities are preserved. Nonetheless, famines are confluences of decisive moments of which both failure and success of ethics become more lucid.

Thus grew my interest in Levinas' work, which demanded an attention to the proper questions of how some Western notions of what is good were universal; how and in what sense do those judgments of good and charitable show particular views of the poor – always distant and studied – which did not always prove universally valid in the instances of their founders' practice? Of course my interest is in specific famines and places that cannot offer universalizable responses to suffering. Bengal in the late nineteenth century is one such specific place but it does mean that my examination excludes the rest of India. The specificity in the details does not, I hope, totally kill the optimism that my own response is to the general. What I do also hope to offer in my exploration is akin to what Chakrabarty calls "theoretical and factual registers" (2000: 6) of Western thought. I will elaborate on the conditions of now-evident histories of what is good or bad. This is something I try to do in the first part of my thesis in which, I will argue, these registers have thus been central to humanitarian thought and cotemporaneous to the inception of the modern term Humanity; and in the second part of my thesis, I will show that those registers play out in Bengal. Although they are meant to enable the project of humanitarianism to understand what it means when someone else suffers and what our responsibility is to that someone, I will explain how these thought registers have also gifted its adopters, at specific times and places, the propensity and justifications to be cruel and inhuman.

Records about famines in British-Indian Bengal are ripe with this ethical contradiction. Reading about the famines in late nineteenth century in Bengal, one

cannot help but feel that the experience of members of the administration was not unanimous, and response to the famine poor must have been fraught with moments of failure that might cause serious reconsiderations of the fundamental moral justifications of policy and governance. Even when judged against the administration's own pronouncements, some of the outcomes that led to what was understood to be Charity or Humanity then, proved disturbingly incongruent. The vast archive of documents of what was done during and after a famine showed humanitarian declarations from the British Government whose goals could in no way be considered accomplished when examined alongside documents of their implementation. The paradox of the humane or the charitable is often found in the various pasts of famine. These pasts reveal disjuncture and tension in the confident rhetoric of charity, and which are often overlooked in favor of maintaining commonly agreed-upon meanings of Human or Suffering.

This thesis is not pre-occupied with the category of the colonial *per se,* but rather in the category of the Other; I am concerned with the problems of prevailing historical mode of reading the colonial category, but my work is ultimately motivated by the aim to show, specifically, the problems of prevailing modes of reading alterity. So instead of asking what alterity is as an object, I will be asking how alterity is constituted in famine history. The already established Other of famine history is a specific category of the colonial: it is the one who is often victimized, eulogized and dramatized as imperatives for moral action. I see this notion of Other as axiomatic rather than effective, and historically habituated rather than naturally occurring. And Levinas' notion of Other, or of alterity, is a radical questioning of the certainty with which victims, sufferers and the dead are given over as captive partakers of Morality, Justice, Freedom. For many such 'victims' of famines past and present, such as Ireland, China, Russia, Africa, they are not. Alterity, as posited by Levinas (1979), describes a relation between Self and Other that originates in "the *inequality* of terms, transcendent to one another, where alterity does not determine the other in a formal sense" (1979: 251; original emphasis).

This 'formal sense' of alterity is, for India, partly given by the discourse of famine in nineteenth century Bengal, where colonial power founded, consolidated and made sense of India's impoverished groups. The balancing of equations – in check books and in rationale – with regard to Bengal's famine poor on the pages of her history's meta-narratives belie imbalances or inequalities that cannot be rationalized by structural beliefs and ideology. For example, the Famine Codes' success and reputation in India was in many ways the result of measured legality rather than effective moral calculation. Spates of famines in the late nineteenth century in the Northern and Eastern territories were followed with a debate in the 1870s on whether to have something analogous to the Poor Laws in India. According to an article on 23 October 1873, the *Indian Daily News* reported that one of the arguments against this was that the Laws would be abused in India, as they had been in Britain. The Government did not want the same legal loopholes for India's famished poor as they did for their own poor. For the British government, the failure of the legal system at home guaranteed its failure in India. This calculation led to the implementation of administrative codes rather than colony-wide laws.

I do not mean to say there should have been a Poor Law equivalent in India, but that the rationalization that went on behind the Government's eventual decision shows one of many instances in which the notion of the Other in famine history is a psuedo alterity, a mathematical result, or a failure of the ethical relation. In the Levinasian sense, the inequality between self and Other is radical and fundamental; the Other does not participate in "reciprocal relations" and in fact, Levinas (1979) finds that the assumption of reciprocity actually destroys the integrity of the Other, reduces the Other to what he calls, the "same" (1979: 170). The same refers to the subjective gesture that allows for the coincidence of terms with alterity and fundamentally based on shared concepts. The insistence of the same, for Levinas, denotes a certain ontological violence, where ontology refers to the "comprehension of being" (1979: 119). The violence is when the comprehension, the formal sense of knowledge takes over the relationship with the Other. The reduction of alterity into understandable and efficient terms is

precisely something that the scientific and moral registers of Western humanitarian thought succeed in doing, both formally in humanist-speak, and in other turgid, politically correct, expression. The subtle facts of a famine crisis such as the quotidian ones of district officials, what occurs at the points of encounter between aid and relief seekers, the particular cultural and social gaps that make sufferers' behavior seem senseless or harmful to the aid-giver – these views are at a distance from the 'factual registers' of Western humanitarianism.[1]

My concern with the prior is an interest in searching out possibilities of alterity in what is normally considered properly dead, past: closed cases of famine. For this purpose, I will show that a specific historiography, already explored to some extent by scholars of the Irish Famine in the 1840s, is especially useful for tackling the conundrum of reading Bengal's famine history with a somewhat a-historical ethic. In Chapter I, I describe what this methodology is and how it is pre-occupied with an ethic that might be argued as Levinasian in its conception of alterity. Famine historiography can, in the sense of being aware of history's interveners, engage with the dialogic link between Levinas and the debates of Indian historiography. Historiographical work in recent years on the Irish Famine in the 1840s has already begun some of this work. These attempts not only show how the modern conceptions of historicizing the poor instigate a view of the Other as opposition rather than alterity, but also suggest 'unhistorical' ways of engaging famine memory.

Next, it is impossible to look at registers of thought in the late nineteenth century without a concomitant engagement with Britain's Christianity. In many ways, the first humanitarian laws – the Poor Laws – were based on Christian moral principles. Christianity followed a morality that postulated a notion of natural virtue that justified a classificatory view of the poor. This view pervaded the discourse on famine, not just for Britain and Ireland but in India as well. In Chapter II, I will describe the movement of this view and how supporting religious doctrinal registers provided a definite mode of

[1] Notably, some of these gaps within the practice and theories of international humanitarian industry and policy with regards to famines in many places in Africa, such as Sudan, Darfur, Ethiopia have been widely and meticulously researched and written about by Alex De Waal (1989, 1991, & 1997).

engaging with alterity through Christianity's foundation myth of original sin and final judgment. I will explain how the Christian eschatology places famine in a logic that relies on an ontological take on the crisis as a final conclusion in the Apocalypse. This implies an Apocalyptic reading based on a fixed determination of 'us', 'them' and 'God', which is also another example of trying to establish what Levinas debunks as 'reciprocal relations' for ethical imperative.

Chapter III deals with India's Famine Codes as an example of the scientific register of humanitarianism. I will show how famine is rationalized as a way of coping with its irrational evils. Although Chapter II already examines how some of this irrational evil enters the logic of Christian morality, the scientific register is used specifically for rendering famine as phenomena, as William W Hunter (1868 & 1873) has done. This appearance of famine as phenomena allowed humanitarianism to first take hold of the scene, spaces and names of famine so that it had its own language, one that is still in use today.

Chapter IV-VI, tracks the movement of both such registers of British-India, specifically demonstrated through two cases of famine in the period roughly from 1865 to 1875 in Bengal. Chapter IV explores the idea of famine guilt through the way it narrates the Other as outside morality and law; in Chapter V-VI, I will show how the non-human agents (land, rice & malaria parasite) produce various modes of subjecthood; and, finally, Chapter VII will conclude by rounding up the material on Bengal and (re)open the question of the ethical with the original, broader aim of this work: to argue that the will of modern humanitarianism must acknowledge the ontological effacement of the Other. Furthermore, the response should not attempt to restore the 'lost' Other since this would mean re-invoking the ontological privilege the world has already often used and abused in the name of good. Instead, the ethical response of charity to the call of the Other need not only acknowledge the historical tensions I have demonstrated in my chapters, but also recognize that these tensions mark the limit of remembering tragedy. There is, as Levinas (1979) argues, "no purely interior history" (1979: 227) and Bengal's famine history shows the fallibility of even the

most final seeming triumphs of historical will and that its failures are, in fact, necessary for envisaging the dialogic space with the Other as an open, and true possibility.

I. UNHISTORICAL FAMINE HISTORIOGRAPHY

Irish Hunger and the Indian subaltern

Famine history has been widely explored in work from the 1990s onwards, although it is a curious fact that historiographical endeavors are dedicated almost exclusively to the Irish Famine of 1846. It can even be argued that the very notion of famine history as an object of scholarly study was born around the 150th anniversary of the Irish famine in the 1980s. One of the reasons could be that the Irish Famine was a focal point for many nationalists who sought to define and explain Irish culture and identity, and in American history too through the migrations the Famine provoked. It was clear the archive has no lack of nationalist writings on the famine after 1846 but these were never really organized as 'famine history' until attempts to 'remember' the crisis as a landmark of Irish history. Concurrently at each interval of remembrance, historians also began to respond to the famine discourse, adding to and propelling the momentum to tell and retell the event.

Famine histories described the famine as one that began with "massive and repeated failures of the potato crop in Ireland from 1845 on" and resulted in widespread suffering, most severely, among the rural poor (Ó Gráda, 1999: 13). A crisis of terrible scale – some report an alleged 25 per cent of the population dead (Kinealy, 1995) while others say there was a death in every eighth Irish person (Gray, 1995) – became an over-determined conjuncture for defining nation and identity. The fixation on explaining the famine and its impact on Ireland is understandable but, to some scholars, the post-famine glut of the event's (re-)telling in 'facts', 'truths' and now Irish History was not to remain undisturbed. Terry Eagleton (1995) explains:

> Ireland experienced in the Famine all the blind, primeval force of the pre-modern, of a history as apparently remorseless as Nature itself, a history not *naturalized* but natural, a matter of blight and typhus and men and women crawling into the churchyard so as to die on sacred soil... in a largely pre-industrial society, the land is the prime determinant of human life, and in the

> sense that in the Famine history appears with all the brute, aleatory power of a seismic upheaval, thus writing large the course of much Irish history (Eagleton, 1995: 11).

Nation, thus writ large by the famine crisis has the tendency to provide *natural* explanations of famine; following a kind of domino progression, the crisis becomes both cause and effect in a chain of historical events leading up to the determination of a collective self-image for Ireland. More specifically, some famine re-tellings use the event to establish a certain Irish 'nature' among the poorer agrarian population by blame or anti-British positions. This sort of framing has always been tempting. From as far back as the 14th century, William Chester Jordan (1996) points out that many historians view, for instance, the 1315-1322 famine in northern Europe as an explanation of the revolt against the English. His is but one of many accounts that follow the injunction to seek resolution and justice by assigning blame.

However, soon after nationalist viewpoints were debunked as biased, the ensuing historiographical debate became reduced to the opposition between 'true' histories and false ones, while the practice of writing famine history became divided among revisionists (those who aim for the most truthful version of famine history) and non-revisionists (those who reject the idea of a True Famine History). Discarding simple dichotomies, many scholars called for the Irish famine event's re-examination, questioning domestic and imperial politics and their complicity with Irish collective memory. Certainly, they might be labeled non-revisionists but their approach to famine history could not simply be surmised as the opposite of revisionist claims. Their interest in the Irish Famine also has something to do with the postcolonial turn in cultural studies in the 1980s. Following the lines of critique provided by poststructuralists and Marxist thinkers, colonial history, especially that of British rule, was reinterpreted so as to allow room for the self-determining subject. This meant that structural ways of understanding histories of colonial rule according to certain temporal and narrative conventions – for example, simple causalities – were rejected and replaced with viewpoints emphasizing the complex network of connections an event such as the Irish Famine would have with culture, morality and social codes.

Some Irish famine historiography returns to certain narrative contexts and re-extracts the discursive registers for serious critical inspection. Morash (1995), for example, systematically identifies the rhetorical themes of famine writing in *Writing the Irish Famine.* He argues that there are themes made historically available by Victorian imaginations and that famine is schematized in ways that must be accrued to religious and cultural ideologies. Elsewhere, in *The Historiography of the Irish Famine,* Graham Davis (1997) provides a direct attack on the propagandistic nature of famine writing after 1846. Nonetheless, Morash et al are careful not to prescribe their views as antidotal for nationalist narratives – this was the revisionist view that they found equally problematic.

Distinct conceptions of truth and the subjective viewpoint lie at the basis of the Irish famine historiographical debates. Where truth-history (revisionist) privileges the attempt by the historian to coincide the real event with representation, the anti-revisionists emphasize the inextricability of the historical object as always already an extension of other histories, i.e. those part of but not from, 'true' History. But adding to this, Irish famine historiography also emphasizes the tensions between contesting narratives and desires as a way of also legitimizing rather than rejecting these gaps between truth and subjectivity; this legitimacy would mean these gaps, in their very transitory and fluctuating nature, might provide active modes for personhood. In other words, their historiographical approach – neither revisionist nor non-revisionist – to famine history is concerned with allowing the notion of subjecthood to involve an active rather than passive individual, whose plural agency is acknowledged and narrated through sustained engagement with not just marginal historical viewpoints, but the *difference* between them and established famine history.

Few would argue against the fact that India's long and extensive record of famines is unsurpassed. Key proponents of the 1980s postcolonial perspectives of history derived mainly from Indian historiographical work via the project of the Subaltern Studies group. Yet those historiographical perspectives have been used to engage with the Irish famine history rather than India's famine history. Why has there

been little historiographical work on famines in India? The debates brought up by Irish famine historiography are not without value to India's famine history since Ireland and India not only shared colonial masters, but the oeuvre of Western-European values and principles is also a common inheritance. Obvious predecessors to modern governance in Britain such as David Hume and Adam Smith laid foundations for classical, liberal, empiricist and moral philosophical principles. Their heirs produced a body of extensive literature in and around the Victorian reign, from Jeremy Bentham, James Mill and Stuart Mill to the Bronte sisters, Kipling and Dickens; these inheritances belong as well to the liberally schooled 'managers' of famines in India and Ireland in the nineteenth century. Likewise, South Asian historians inherit Western conceptual tools of analysis and, as Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) points out, "bear the burden of European thought and history" (2000: 4).

Certainly, the shared ground between Irish famine historiography and Indian historiography cannot be denied. Work from Terry Eagleton (1995), Christine Kinealy (1995), Christopher Morash (1995), Graham Davis (1997), Margaret Kelleher (1997) and Stuart McLean (2004) transgresses the disciplinary boundaries of conservative historicism; they reject the existence of an objective historical truth of the Irish Famine. Or more accurately, they are concerned with alternative explanations of famine apart from those entrenched in public consciousness via nationalist histories without ever privileging their own as 'truer than thou'. In fact, Kelleher and McLean have acknowledged some debt to Indian historiographical work in the Subaltern Studies group counting works of Chakrabarty (2000) and Partha Chatterjee (1993) as influences as they, in turn, credit Western Marxism.

Intertwined in philosophical echoes and historical conjunctures, recent historiographical work on the Irish Famine has a goal of de-totalizing famine teleology. It aims to subvert any claims of a transcendental narrative, Famine History. When the remembrance of famine accounts for excluded modes of subjecthood, narration and viewpoints, the bandied axioms of human rights, identity politics and the ideas of development and freedom for the sake of famine become troublesome. Indeed every

time a famine occurs, - these days more frequently 'exposed' than before – the international rhetoric produces a humanitarian performance of writing, reporting and re-telling that takes for granted the assumptions of Famine History, and which ignores all the implications of contexts and chronology. The very notion of 'famine history' still (re-)written and (re-)told today surely suggests that those famine sufferers, their rights, identities and status were and have always been the result of conflict and tension with dominant ideologies and desires. Yet on each (televisual) remembering of famine, every sufferer not from First Worlds and democratic nation states is treated as if he/she is a citizen of 'First World' concepts and axioms such as Humanity, Rights, and Freedom. I will elaborate on the relationship between the axiomatic and the ethical via Ricoeur in the later part of this chapter, but I first will examine some historiographical questions.

Notably, one of the first principles of early Subaltern Studies work was to reject historiography aimed at telling Indians to 're-claim' the past for themselves. Indian nationalists such as Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (1838-1894) attempted to assert India's national status and autonomy by purporting to revise and restore India's history from imperial subordination and interpretations. In 1880, he wrote in *Bangadarshan,* "Bengal must have her own history. Otherwise there is no hope for Bengal. Who is to write it?" (Chattopadhyay cited in Guha, 1988: 1). One of the founders of Subaltern Studies, Ranajit Guha, rejects such revisionist takes on India's history and considers any "knowledge of the Indian past [that] is converted into a category of Indian nationalist thought" (Guha, 1988: 2) to be a fallacy. For the Subaltern Studies Group, the kind of historiography championed by some of India's freedom fighters had an inherent flaw: "[B]y designating itself as 'Indian', that alternative [nationalist historiography] announced its organizing principle as one of distantiation from what was paradigmatically un-India, because British and colonialist" (Guha, 1988: 3). This principle relies on falsely opposed categories of British and Indian, or colonialist and 'native', and in these oppositions the Indian subject remains a subordinated alterity.

Guha (1988) was by no means dismissing all nationalists as inadvertent participants of colonial hegemony. Chattopadhyay was a Bengali novelist and also a

prominent polemic figure of colonial India's intellectual groups. Tanika Sarkar (2001) argues that, as a well-known political commentator, Chattopadhyay negotiated Hindu culture and Western liberalism, and often defended Hindu religious and social thought against attacks of views that Hinduism was primitive and restrictive. Chattopadhyay certainly brought important tensions to the foreground and did not forget his own position as an English-educated, rent collector (Sarka, 2001).

Without the thought of Chattopadhyay, there might be no Subaltern Studies. And perhaps the point Guha (1988) is really making in his work, *An Indian Historiography of India: a Nineteenth-Century Agenda and its Implications*, is the importance of confronting the *aporia* that troubled Chattopadhyay's work head-on, as a way of highlighting the exclusions of nationalist claims. In a telling beginning, Guha (1988) announces, at the start of his lectures on Indian historiography, Chattopadhyay's nationalist call as a "voice, an educated, middle-class Bengali voice" (Guha, 1988: 1). In confronting Chattopadhyay's aporia, Guha probably confronts his own, his position – also educated in Western philosophical tenets from Marx to Hegel, and as an expatriate South Asian historian in the 21st century – in the encounter with Bengali history. For Guha, 'Indian' historiography ran the risk that hit home for any historian's attempt at reading Indian history: the interpretations of what 'Indian' meant was (troublingly) premised on its opposition to British imperiality. This implicates both the historian him/herself and the will to champion the poor. Guha both acknowledges and rejects his own participation in the category of Indian largely reliant on narrating 'anti-Britain' and therefore also rejects being dependent on the very image of British Imperiality that Bengal has been urged to reject. As such, nationalist claims decrying imperiality, Guha (1988) explains, were largely "an exercise in dominance and not an act of charity" (1988: 3).

The call to re-examine histories has the tendency to direct its critique according to the calculation of damage, both tangible and intangible. For Ireland, the famine provided a strong directive and much scholarship often construed the event as "a moment of cultural loss" (McLean, 2004: 160). It is easy to see how historiographical

critique can therefore take on the 'charitable' connotations, to 'give back' history, so to speak, especially to those who suffered it. There is a preference for romanticizing pasts behind such gestures, work that more recent Irish famine historiography finds difficult to ignore. Commemorative acts abound in Ireland since the terrible event, but they benefit from unchallenged biases of subjecthood that allow certain representations of Irish people and world-views to dominate the crisis's narratives. The tragedy is duly acknowledged, but the nostalgic pasts of famine undermine the very terms of any commemorative function with their classificatory approach. McLean (2004) tells us that, out of the total population, it was eminently the Irish rural poor who were "conscripted as the assigned bearers of timeless national essence" (2004: 20). Indeed, part of the problem with the commemorative aspect of modern historicism is its penchant for 'conserving' particular visions as timeless and eternal. And this fault may also apply itself to anti-histories as well. Guha's claim that certain histories reveal the will to dominate ideology has to do with a concern with Marxist revolutionary promises – which many South-Asian historians deemed too Eurocentric. The Subaltern Studies Group believe in the mobilization of the proletariat for social change and action, this proletariat is a figure that needed adjustment for the downtrodden classes and groups in non-Western cultures. Thus it is in the category of the 'subaltern', that Guha and his group assign the power of agency to marginalized modes of subjecthood, including minority groups of gender, race, religion, class.

In this respect, famine historiography such as Kelleher's *The Feminization of Famine: Expressions of the Inexpressible?* are inclined particularly to Subaltern Studies due to its examination of the female figure in famine history. Kelleher (1997) considers the literary representations of females in famine history and shows that they are gendered in the maternal, the victim, and/or the supernatural bringer of death. Such figuring, she argues, is the work of biases, often patriarchal ones, in widely accepted histories of the Irish Famine. The notion of famine, however, involves rather disparate traumas that are incommensurable with any direct identification with one or another (marginal) figure and as such, famine is always already excessive to a single form. The

revolutionary impulse is not easily transmuted in famine narratives into a focus on a particular kind of insurgent prose. McLean (2004) argues against what he calls "the too-easy transposition of such a notion [trauma] onto a reified 'national psyche'" (2004: 155). Such self-definitions risk obscuring the often-contradictory relationships inherent within networks of government, social groups and other institutions that generate famine as an object of history. Although the effort to instigate revolutionary impulses among the disenfranchised for social reform cannot be dismissed, the famine event engenders arguably subtler politics than the traditional Marxist hypothesis of worker alienation and social repression. It is precisely because the tragedy and the sheer nightmare of mass starvation tend to puncture all attempts at remembrance and self-definition in the form of humanism that it is difficult to see the problems of attempting to signify trauma.

Bengal

In contrast, the past does not signify trauma as readily as the present. Official records of famine in late nineteenth century Bengal show that, if the region suffered any trauma, it was dispersed, fragmented and contradictory rather than a coherent, collective force. Unlike Ireland, there is no famine that can be singled out for having the greatest effect on Indian culture. Instead, often they were judged against the careers of the East India Company and later, the British government.

Famines were considered to be evidence of failure and the administration's embarrassment led to a surge of documentation. Undeniably, in British-ruled Bengal, administrative responsibility during famine provoked controversies. These were made dramatic by finger-pointing and the moral deluge in the press since the famines of the late 1700s. When I say Bengal, I am referring to the Bengal Presidency and being the largest one of three during British rule, its disasters were often in the public spotlight and under the keen scrutiny of the Parliament in Westminster. Its city, Calcutta, formed a focal administrative point from which officials mapped famines and their policies.

Mass mortality, most notably the Bengal famine of 1770 where an estimated third of the population was wiped out, provoked heated criticism against the government. These were printed and published in newspapers circulated in England, Scotland and Ireland.

The archive is packed with documents explaining, recording and telling the famines in Bengal, including both the major disaster, in 1866, and the minor crisis in 1874. Famine, for Bengal, is a plural term. It signifies prolonged starvation throughout the Presidency in areas such as Nagpore, Orissa, Cuttack, areas West of the Ganges delta, to regions closer to the capital city Calcutta, such as Burdwan, Patna, Hooghly, Midnapore, and Nuddea[2]. On famine alone, there is so much material generated by the British administration that it is hard to even find a single continuous story of each famine without encountering an almost impenetrable volume of departmental writing. One gets the sense that the documents represent a desperate attempt to manage the trauma caused by famine, on all fronts of the administration, economic, cultural, social and political. The problem overwhelmed them. At first, many of the documents about breaking down the causes and effects of the event, inscribing the codes, procedures and policy for coping with famine, were probably not written primarily for constructing a hegemonic, all-encompassing and total narrative of famine in British-India. These documents are scattered all over: in rent records, medical records, survey reports, district reports, government letters, transcripts of meetings, official minutes on education, crop yields, yearly weather tables, statistics – the list is endless. The haphazard locations and content of these texts stand in stark contrast to the attempts to name, classify, order and categorize under headings, sub-headings using numbers, tables etc.

Both chaotic and ordered, Bengal's famine archive does not elicit the same kind of single 'brute' and 'primeval' force that primes a disaster for becoming a poster-child for nation building as Eagleton noticed for Ireland. There is a sense that as the basis for an over-arching Indian famine history, the complexity and mess of archival material is

[2] All Indian place names in this thesis will be spelled according to archive material.

unwieldy for such a purpose, and thus requires far more imagination than empirical effort on the part of those whose job it is to compile and narrate a famine meta-narrative. And this has often been the case with British-Indian historians such as James Mill (1773-1836) who could claim a definitive history of India without ever having set foot in the country.

One of the aims of my thesis is to focus on specific encounters in the archive, as a way of avoiding the kind of negative constitution that Guha (1983) previously warned against, that "relationship of alterity" in which "colonialism is a condition" (Guha, 1988: 3). Contrary to this, my work acknowledges alterity in which the *relation* itself is the condition, without first assuming this relation to be an adversarial one. Guha's refusal to over-draw the line between Indian and British, or Indian and colonial, arguably relives the urgent admonition by Levinas (1979) against the "plurality of being... integrated into a totality" (1979: 80). Levinasian ethics helps us see that a negative description of the Bengali famine poor will only reinscribe them back into the categorical forms. That assumption would mean subscribing to a prior modification of the relation with alterity. The emphasis on the ethical relation is partly a task of producing a discourse in which "the same and the other can not enter into a cognition that would encompass them" (Levinas, 1979: 80). The aim is for my analysis to be near the frictions and tensions prior to stable interpretations of the famine event.

The bulk of the empirical narratives my thesis invokes revolve around the famines of 1866 and 1874 in Bengal. Heading into the archive and looking at official correspondence, newspaper articles, public records, official diaries, I go over the major trajectories of famine narratives in those periods, mapping down the categories and language by which the famines are accustomed. Then I go on to look for tensive spaces. This has to do with the margins of the archive in which plurality, singularity, negotiate with totalization/essentialism/-ontology, and I will attempt to bring these negotiations to the foreground.

Levinas and Poststructuralism

In his essay "Violence and Metaphysics", Derrida (1978) recommends the Levinasian conception for the notion of desire that does not "designate a movement of negation and assimilation, the negation of alterity first necessary in order to become 'self-consciousness' 'certain of itself'" (1978: 114-115). There is a striking resonance of this in Guha's rejection of Indian nationalists' claims of "what was paradigmatically un-India, because British and colonialist" (Guha, 1988: 3). The importance of this shared ground between Levinas and Subaltern Studies not only offers a way of explaining the ethicity of historical texts but also opens the work of historiography to 'unhistorical' readings. Levinas shares at least one intellectual thread with the Subaltern Studies group. They both reject self-evident transcendence; the subaltern figures against transcendental ideology while Levinas' term of Other figures against transcendental Being. Guha (2002) later explains his own rejection of transcendence because it is "a claim to superior morality in favor of World-history, in which World-history refers to the view of history that is based on [Hegelian] logically abstracted Truths rather than concrete events." (Guha, 2002: 4). Indeed, ethical battles are provoked by events. The philosophy of Levinas cannot be dissociated from his experiences during World War II; save for his wife and daughter, all his family was killed. He was born into a deeply religious Jewish context and, in the early 1920s, came under the influence of the philosophy of Husserl and Heidegger. His own philosophy is concerned with the notion of ethics and existence. He seeks to reconcile Western thought with the concepts of rupture and diremption; by pitting an autonomous moral subject against a notion of alterity that is irrevocably beyond the subject's cognition, Levinas (1979) denies the righteous supremacy of objectivity – a key foundation of independent notions of Truth or History – and calls into question the fundamental constitutive elements of human relationships. His anti-universalist stance ultimately speaks from a position in which transcendental and universal moral authority failed. Famine in Bengal is not nearly similar to World War Two but does, in many respects, represent through specific moments where the totalizing code of institutions has failed as well.

As I have explained before, prior-ness lies at the heart of Levinas' ethics. His work in *Totality and Infinity,* as the title suggests, is situated right at the encounter between historical totality and unhistorical infinitude. Infinity is a notion that diminishes the significance of sequences and linearity, and is his trope for explaining what lies beyond the grasp of the historian, while totality refers to subjective scope or cognitive apprehension of the historian, implying a single and closed view of history (Levinas, 1979). For Levinas, an ethical historian must always account for the radical and insuperable gap between these two perspectives. In other words, the Other's alterity or its essence is involved in a reading between the historian and the text but is never completely determined by the text or the historian as such. For ultimately what is at stake here is the question in the historian's *response*, in writing, that rebukes any attempt for a narrative-ly 'correct' reading of the archival material. The proper question is always historiographical in nature – and in the earlier work of Derrida in *Of Grammatology,* this was explained as a historiography of writing. This approach recognizes that what famine history has produced is not only written in language but also, as Derrida (1978) elsewhere suggests, that writing about the nature of this language (rhetoric) is simultaneously also a reading: "what one sets out to say is already a response" (1978: 12). In order for the question to manifest, it requires a response that invokes the other. However, because this response cannot return alterity to established, formal structures of meaning, it must take on an informal, or perhaps *ludic* approach.

In a way, the discursive chaos that ensues in the encounter with famine already lends itself to unstructured approaches, or to be precise, poststructuralist perspectives. Arguably, poststructuralist reading of history has already been attempted in recent Irish famine historiography. The focus of this body of work was on what is produced at the fringes or outside of the traditional historical discourse of the Irish Famine. My interpretation of the term "poststructuralist" follows from Derrida's (1976) examination of meaning in *Of Grammatology* in which he explains how textual meaning is produced in between other texts and that meaning itself is always already circumscribed by representation. In fact, the use of the term text rather than document draws attention

away from the form as a closed vessel of meaning, and towards seeing a piece of writing as always already implicated by other writings in unforeseeable ways. For him, "attention to the signifier has the paradoxical effect of reducing it" (Derrida, 1976: 208). In other words, in taking on the famine archive as bearing signifying texts of meaning, poststructuralist Irish historiography looks out for textual excess, and the assumption is that established famine narratives necessarily abbreviate meaning. The Derridian view involves emphasizing the tensions between narratives and these tensive spaces are precisely where the Indian subaltern might deploy her/himself. To be sure, this approach may be construed as anti-historicism or a-historical since it implies famine narratives do not follow the events or that the poststructuralist view of history can do no more than merely stating that famine occurred. Eagleton (2008) himself has declared Derrida's work to be "grossly unhistorical, politically evasive and in practice oblivious to language as 'discourse'" leading to a "cult of ambiguity" (2008: 128,130). Yet in *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*, Eagleton (1995) interprets the famine through a decidedly unhistorical gesture and employs conceptual tools that might be taken for being Derridian.

Eagleton (1995) begins by suggesting that protagonist Heathcliff in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* is actually inspired by a refugee from the Irish Famine, Bronte's brother, Patrick Branwell. Following Branwell's movements from Haworth to Liverpool in August of 1845, Eagleton (1995) notes this year was the "very eve of the Great Famine, and the city was soon to be thronged with its starving victims" (1995:3). Branwell's visit to Liverpool was shortly followed by, as Eagleton (1995) claims, sister Bronte's writing of her famous novel in which the protagonist Heathcliff appears like a "beast, savage, lunatic and demon" (1995: 3). Drawing parallels between Branwell and Heathcliff, Eagleton (1995) opens the question of how the English saw the Irish and vice versa. The dates of the novel and the famine cannot verify this and Eagleton (1995) admits as much. He explains,

> [I]t is tempting to speculate that Branwell ran into some of them [impoverished Irish immigrants] and relayed the tale to his sister. There would be something

> symbolically apt in Branwell...presenting Emily with the disruptive element of her work, and there is a strong kinship between the brother and the novel's Byronic villain (Eagleton, 1995: 3).

Eagleton (1995) has deliberately set aside the fuzzy fit of historical continuity between Bronte and the famine to simulate a historical conjuncture between literature and the Irish Famine. In fact, his tactic echoes his own derisive comments about the French philosopher,

> Derrida's own typical habit of reading is to seize on some apparently peripheral fragment in the work – a foot note, a recurrent minor term or image, a casual allusion – and work it tenaciously through to the point where it threatens to dismantle the oppositions which govern the text as a whole (Eagleton, 1983: 133).

It soon becomes clear in *Heathcliff* that Eagleton (1995), in undoing the usual expectations of the novel, its characters, actually attempts to re-cast the Anglo-Irish antagonism in a historicism interpreted via literature produced by Bronte and her peers. His critique shares an operative logic with Derrida's method, deconstruction, in showing how "oppositions can be partly undermined... [or] can be shown to partly undermine each other in the process of textual meaning" (Eagleton, 1983: 132). By tracing a 'peripheral fragment' in the doubtful heritage of Bronte's family, Eagleton's deconstructive gesture challenges the belief that the [Bronte's] literary text can wholly encompass itself within itself; and when the exclusions of the literary humanist view are acknowledged, it can destabilize the security of oppositions, such as the Anglo-Irish relation.

Eagleton's (1995) take on the Irish famine may have inadvertently demonstrated the value of some of Derrida's approach for bringing out the missing nuances in the departmental reportage of Bengal's archive. Consequently, his disapproval of 'unhistorical' methodology may have helped to show that to involve critique with historical context or empirical narratives does not necessarily mean that the methodology has to reflect the structural bias of 'historical' considerations. This has

significant implications for Bengal's immense archive because it unburdens analysis from the well-established antinomy between historical and unhistorical for doing 'justice' to the archive.

Crucially, the value of poststructuralist critique for dealing with hegemonic narratives in the famine archive shifts away from empowering the marginalized *as a category* – whether the poor, the 'native', the female. Recent Irish famine historiography in, *The Event and Its Terrors: Ireland, Famine, and Modernity* by McLean (2004), unpacks the category of 'Irish poor' as articulated by the British government but does not attempt to 're-claim' a History of Irish Poor. Both McLean (2004) and Eagleton (1995) avoid re-inscribing the category as the British did and attempt to show instead the process of mutual and "simultaneous inclusion and exclusion" (McLean, 2004: 66). Their claim is that any single signified in a famine narrative is always already in excess of itself.

This detour into Eagleton's work is by no means to suggest Heathcliff is the Irish harbinger of the Indian subaltern. It has to do with aligning the loss of historical will with the aim of a non-negating Levinasian desire. Texts like *Heathcliff* and *The Event and Its Terrors* that deal with problems between those writers and interpreters of famine, ultimately tackle the problem of ethics. Their attack on the "seamless evolutionary continuum" (Eagleton, 1995: 4) of Britain's historical will is also to say that there is in fact, a loss of historical will. As Levinas describes, the "truth of the will", human will, is significant without having to be heroic (1979: 240). It is not "epiphenomenona", not the center of all cognition (Levinas, 1979: 240). They ask questions about what lies in the margins of famine history. A concern with the marginalized is a concern with the Other in famine writing. Recalling Levinas and Guha, the notion of the Other is also a notion of another past or another time, whether this Other be Indian or Irish, his/her alterity is involved in the margins of writing but never fully within writing's grasp. More importantly, alterity denotes a relation rather than a proper characteristic of the Other. As such, the use of the term Other is not meant to denote a suppressed subject of historical discourse *per se*, but rather the relations from this subject, whether to one or

many different positions of the discourse, dominant or otherwise. The poststructuralist notion of textual excess allows us to pursue this alterity, or to establish an ethical relation with the Other: I cannot fully grasp your alterity in narration – and Eagleton shows this for both literary and historical texts – but I can still maintain the encounter, the relation of essential difference.

Likewise, McLean's *The Event* is really about safeguarding the tensive encounters between Irish present(s) and past(s) and to do so implies never conceding historical will to any particular subjectivity in the event or its texts. Why? So as to invalidate any group's claim of history as belonging to them. And this injunction is an ethical issue since it is always concerned with what the Self in the text marginalizes or excludes – famine alterity. The notion of the Other in famine past has to do with difference produced by the very texts that make up famine past; and this difference also exceeds established famine history. McLean phrases the question of seeking out this difference, or as Eagleton (1995) puts it, following the 'peripheral fragment' of Irish history, as "the cultivation of alternative knowledges and historiographical idioms that might be directly informed by these subaltern visions" (2004: 159). He shows an example of this in one of his chapters, "Hungry Ghosts and Hungry Women", by demonstrating how gendered imagery of the famished body in Ireland "engages both the historical fate of the women described in famine narratives and objectified in nationalist iconography and a more elusive set of linkages between prehistory and the feminine..." (McLean, 2004: 161). At the same time, this difference relies on also cultivating a prior opening, or possibility for 'subaltern visions' to emerge from. Never the subalterns themselves, only their 'ghosts' so to speak, or the becoming-of, the conjunctural spaces for Other subjectivity to begin asserting him/herself.

Recalling the Subaltern Studies group's aim towards a historiography that views the minor (wo)man as a self-determining agent, famine historiography of Bengal in the latter part of this thesis follows on from the alliance between this view and Levinas' notion of desire. If major narratives of famine in Bengal supplant the Indian subaltern, alterity in famine history does not necessarily refer to those displaced or silenced.

Furthermore, it is precisely because Levinas' desire does not allow for a simple inversion or reversal of self-presence and alterity, that unhistorical gestures by the historiographer could be meaningful. My historiography of famine in Bengal aims to re-instate tension rather than reverse dominance and, to do so, my analyses follow contesting desires in famine history in which desire is treated as a positive-becoming: "desire – irreducible to the distance the synthetic activity of understanding establishes between diverse terms" (Levinas, 1979: 39). Therefore the relations explored in historiography in my following chapters do not form a total Bengal Famine History or an Indian Famine History as such; the minor (wo)man will not necessarily reverse roles with the major [British] (wo)man. Instead, investigating the Indian subaltern is, as Spivak (1988) once said, "a positivistic project – a project which assumes that, if properly prosecuted, it will lead to firm ground, to some *thing* that can be disclosed" (1988: 10). To the radical and excessive difference between the singular moment and historical totality, Levinas offers the historiographer an invitation to consider archive material as traces of present rather than 'pasts' of present, the former being part of, but not of History. These traces are disclosed but not necessarily self-evident, "the manifestation of the invisible can not mean the passage of the invisible to the status of the visible; it does not lead back to evidence" (Levinas, 1979: 243). The trace, might be explained as the mark of an opportunity for alterity to be made intelligible; as Guha (2002) prefers, "the writing of history... to have a subject matter as comprehensive as the human condition itself, the world would open up with all of its pasts ready to serve for its narratives" (Guha, 2002: 22).

Trace

In 1874, the district of Burdwan, Bengal, suffered an outbreak of malarial fever. Malaria is caused by parasites of the genus Plasmodium. The Anopheles mosquito carries these parasites, and when they bite a human, he or she will present, in the early stages, flu-like symptoms, and in the late stages, coma or death. Because of the carrier's

close affiliation with sources of water and the parasites' long incubation periods (six months to three years), a human population can easily become widely infected without detection. Once infection matures, the damage is relentless. A district Collector wrote in the "Report of the Burdwan Fever" (1875) that, "the eye is at once caught by anaemic, clammy faces of the sufferers from chronic fever; by the maimed and scarred limbs and colourless faces of the lepers; by the swollen legs of those suffering from elephantiasis" (Samanta, 2002: 63).

The *zamindars* (those who collect land revenue) and *ryots* (cultivators, or those who work the land) throughout Bengal use water extensively for cultivating rice. The development of canals, drainages and embankments is important for those who make their livelihood from the rice crops. The same is true of roads and railways since they link up these water networks, which are also used for fisheries. Official reports of malaria in each district often describe the causes as the damming of canals and drainages by zamindars and ryots for "retaining monsoon water on their comparatively elevated rice fields" (Samanta, 2002: 45).

At the same time, roads and embankments sometimes block drainage from villages causing the accumulation of dirty water. Records show that the Sanitation Commission was unwilling to intervene into the infrastructure, preferring instead to count on self-corrective action, or a refusal to encourage "laziness" from the villagers, diseased or not. Consequently, these documents behave as if they form a discursive effort to disperse British culpability for malaria in Burdwan. But such a position entails *verifying zamindars* and *ryots* as objects of moral burden.

Shifting the moral burden of the problem onto *zamindars* and *ryots* via the intimidation of technical knowledge of medical and district authorities belies the fact that one of the first functions of the administration's knowledge of land infrastructure and rural agriculture was for the collection of revenue. Further to this, the accusation of malaria being caused by common habits of village districts has no basis except to inspire what Guha (1988) observes as "some of the most obnoxious governmental procedures

such as the scrutiny of zamindari accounts and cadastral surveys and measurements" (1988: 34).

Yet these surveys and measurements are always a step removed from the event. The claims against the Bengalis' rice-scapes unravel as soon as one examines the official discourse surrounding famine. The archive is rife with documents, both before and after the Burdwan Fever, that claim that rice is the salvation to Bengal's famine curse. How is it possible for the government to simultaneously champion financial investment in agriculture and be against the improvement of water-damming roads and canals of rice fields? An overarching narrative of humanitarian will or Victorian charity stands in for this incongruence and shapes the moral basis for the historicism of famine and disease in Bengal. However, this narrative clearly overlooks the fact that these histories, whether of famine or of malaria, are contagious and often carry symptoms of other crisis within their discourse.

When Sir William W. Hunter wrote the *Famine Aspects of Bengal Districts* (1873), he was in the middle of compiling the complete statistical survey of India. His administrative duties gave him many years in Bengal and he saw himself not only as an administrator but as a Bengali civilian as well. He saw his efforts as a charitable act, his belief in the emancipatory nature of history caused him to regard himself as "a historian of the silent millions" and that his business was to be "with the people" (Hussain, 1992: 32). This is an important point about British imperiality. Hunter, and many others before him, seemed to demonstrate a genuine belief in the benevolence of their acts and the munificence and good the Empire did for India. The inability to distinguish between charity and ideological dominance, led to an inexorable drive towards more and more laws and codes for dealing with famine without a concomitant distinction in those laws and codes between colonial institution and its after-effects. John Dickinson, Hon. Secretary of the Indian Reform Society outlined one of the strongest principles that led to the adoption of a definite policy of public works for famine:

> [T]he principle, as recently stated by one of the late highest authorities of India, and supported by some of the highest political authorities in England, is, that

> "since the natives cannot have any constitutional government, and are our inferiors in civilization, *it is our duty to think for them...* (Dickinson, 1861: 6; original emphasis).

Conceived with a sense of totality, the injunction of these 'authorities of India' that would later become her historians as well, follows from a certainty about Indians as being incapable of self-governance; and the injunction is accomplished on the premise that this is fact – a neutral and inevitable characteristic of India's population. To declare the policy of public works for famine as being the same as thinking for 'the natives', enacts a kind of violence on the Other that represents for Levinas (1979), the ethical failure of privileging ontology. Elsewhere in *Otherwise than Being,* Levinas (1981) describes ontology as understanding, or a knowledge coming from cognition. He explains ethical failure as seeing alterity as something to be thought of neutrally as if it may be completely deciphered into knowledge. Many moments in the archive reveal that official discourse carries this perspective over into these adminstrators' endeavors to later record and write famine from the basis of these public works. Hunter was not only the Director-General of the statistical survey, he was also the Editor-General of the Imperial Gazetter of India and, as Hussain (1992) puts it, Hunter "caused the collection of mass materials on Indian History" (1992: 22). In addition, the fervor and extent of Bengal's archive also reveals the shared pedagogical tenets of Haileybury College, Elphinestone College and the Oxbridge bodies, where many colonial statesmen before and after Hunter earned credentials as authorities on Indian famines. G. W. Forrest, who wrote *The Famine in India* (1897), was Professor of English and History at Elphinestone College, and presided over the Imperial Record Office in Calcutta, India. George Campbell, who headed the Famine Commission for Bengal and Orissa in 1867, also graduated from Haileybury College. Among their peers are many fellow statesmen schooled in the academic tradition of James Mill's (1826) *The History of British India.* Scottish historian Mill (1773-1826) gained high office in the department of the India House. Mill not only produced an extensive body of work on India, but also on economics, governance, and political theory, and was regarded as a prominent

interpreter of Greek thinkers for later successors in Indian administration. Together, they assemble a notion of the Indian subject that was in essence, absent from the force of historical trajectories.

To address the volumes of material within the confines of a thesis while trying to make some historiographical headway according to the poststructural/colonial ideas explored here, the following chapters will be both historical *and* grossly unhistorical. Borrowing the conjunctural approach of more 'historical' or archeological historiography on the Irish Famine, the following two chapters will address some of the ideological registers often used in famine writing to measure and define the crisis, and to delineate and assign responsibility.

Narrative and Rhetoric: Victorian Britain

Spivak's (2008) critique of axiomatic kindness offers a caution in an essay called "Responsibility". She says "we must recall that Development is the dominant global denomination of Responsibility: the story is that the rich nations collectively hear the call of the ethical and collect to help the poor nations by giving skill and money" (Spivak, 2008: 85). At the time, she was referring to the 1989 Conference of the Flood Action Plan (FAP) at the Paris Summit of Third World Aid. The goal of the plan was to sanction the building of river embankments under the specific aim of relieving Bangladeshi fisher-folk of yearly floods. The purpose of the conference on the other hand was, according to its organizers, to allow for consultation between the World Bank, businesses and government agencies to discuss the terms of funding and investing in the FAP. Without going into the details of Spivak's empirical narrative of this case, I am interested in her argument that there is a gaping disconnection between the rhetoric of Development that supports such a conference, and our responsibility to the subaltern. The disconnection she speaks of involves discursive habits already pathological in the rhetoric of British-India on Bengal famines: the global 'story' of Development was given a specific link to the universal notion of Humanity since "Victorian Britain" (Spivak, 2008:

85) and her encounter with India's 'natural hazards' such as floods, famine and disease. There is a 'story' impulse enacted in the humanitarian rhetoric, which reflects what Ricoeur (1990) suggests is the "ultimately narrative character of history" (1990: 91). To him, all history is narrative; Ricoeur's (1990) unwillingness to separate history and narrative aims to add to historiographical critique an even more direct sense of the connection between history and ethics, specifically between history and human action.

In Victorian Britain, the 'call of the ethical' took the shape of the story of Humanity, a story invoked as the final justification of all her 'anti-famine' investments in India. As declared by the *London Economist* in 1874 on "The Famine in India" [Bengal]: "As by the unintended effect of civilized Government we have given life to an immense number of human beings, we cannot, in *common humanity, according to our notions of humanity,* leave them perish" (*Economist,* 1874: 379; emphasis my own). The parallels between the major elements in this story and Spivak's Development one are stark and, to any historian familiar with the well-documented testimonies from India and her people during Imperial rule, these parallels would also seem sinister. Nonetheless, the narrative mode of the humanitarian and the habits that maintain them cannot be taken for granted.

Ricoeur (1990) shows us that our tendency to narrate is not an unproblematic consequence of history and the problem is one concerning ethics. He attempts to include, in concrete terms, the *active* investment on the part of the historian, which makes his work an especially useful analytical tool for deconstructing the kind of disconnection, or lack of responsibility that Spivak (2008) noticed. Both the World Bank and Victorian Britain have, in many instances, invoked history as a story of inevitability and progress and employed the negation of alterity to support this. Recalling that Levinas rejects the constitution of the Other via historical negation and therefore rejects as well the simple reversal of negation as re-constituting the Other, Ricoeur (1990) shares a similar view that can be read as an attack of (unethical) relational negation by distinguishing it as a narrative habit rather than narrative eventuality.

Although Levinas (1979) declares that one can only express alterity in language which might suggest the assumption of Self subjectivity as original basis of this linguistic expression, he also states, "[T]he presence of the Other...is not contemplated as in intelligible essence, but is heard in language" (Levinas, 1979: 297). Here Levinas (1979) clearly makes a distinction between intelligibility and expression, and in preventing the latter from fulfilling the former, he also does not allow expression to serve any kind of eventuality. The Self may signify the Other but is always deprived of complete intelligibility of the Other because the signification is always a mode of Self-expression rather than objective knowledge. It is in this vein that Ricoeur's view of narrative finds ethical affinity with Levinas. In the first volume of *Time and Narrative,* Ricoeur (1990) rebukes the convention of historical time. He argues that chronology and temporal sequence that a historian uses to make sense of and organize events remains subordinate to a narrative mode which is based on the historian's own understanding of his/her existence. He rejects the notion of an objective and transcendental time flow and suggests that the element of intervention is absolutely unavoidable and inseparable from what is conventionally understood as historical narratives. As such, history *is* narrative and always already involves an intervener.

To be sure, this narrative sense of things cannot be reduced to simply the output of the historian's consciousness. Ricoeurian narrative points to an emphasis on an understanding based on the relation between things, rather than objective knowledge implying the cognition of things. By binding the act of intervention to the act of writing history, Ricoeur (1990) is indirectly refuting the primacy of consciousness, that Ego, or I, whose tyranny Levinasian ethics tries to undo. Humanity, as Levinas (1981) insists, "to which proximity properly so called refers, must then not be first understood as consciousness, that is, as the identity of an ego endowed with knowledge or (what amounts to the same thing) with power" (1981: 83). He rejects the objective notion of Humanity from the basis of the proximate, or of the same as conceptually selfish since no one can judge proximity without first having already regarded something as proximate. Yet, the principle of "the same" held a strong ground in Victorian thought,

most prominently in the utilitarian and liberal explanations for classification of human beings, which saw such determinations of groups as natural and innocent of intention. Victorian teachers like James Mill stressed that "the business of Classification is merely a process of naming, and is all resolvable into association, the observation, though general, is full and satisfactory" (Mill, 1869: 269). Ricoeur's (1990) emphasis on the intervener opens the burden of responsibility to all texts and their compatriots since it never allows for any separation of the historian, such as Mill, from the effects of the text. Both Ricoeur and Levinas recognize the necessity of narration but reject any final, proper conception of it, especially the status that History gives it. For them, the status of History/Narrative is a fact of repetition and use, but may continue to narrate itself even after the context of its substance has gone. Spivak (2008) argues that the case of the FAP teaches us that notion of responsibility can be made into empty promises, or what she calls a "pure performatives" through "elaborate and visible structures of public consultation" (Spivak, 2008:85). With Ricoeur (1990), we may add a way of explaining the relationship between the performativity of stories such as Development as anti-Other and the stakeholders of such consultation.

From the way the modern humanitarian movement has taken shape, one can argue that global concerts and high profile events to raise funds for famine relief behave precisely like the public consultations Spivak (2008) describes. Not only are these events well publicized, they also often adopt an inclusive rhetoric in the promotion of their cause. Although presented as "global" causes, such consultations are rarely able to demonstrate any consultative stakes from non-Western parties apart from those via victimhood. As Peter Walker, director of the Feinstein International Famine Center wrote, "Humanitarianism is cast in the mould of the West. It may hold that its values are universal, but funding, staffing and methods are predominantly Western" (Walker, 2005: 333). These 'public consultations', in their production of axioms of charity and compassion, set aside their complicity with specific parties to declare a 'global' humanity and to prescribe a global responsibility to take action for the destitution of millions and against the atrocities of human rights violation. In one of the most famous

televised 'public consultations', Bob Geldof's 1985 LiveAid concert for famine relief in Ethiopia, over 1 billion viewers from over 100 countries bear witness to the promises made to famine sufferers. In *Global Humanitarianism: NGOs and the Crafting of Community,* Robert DeChaine (2005) describes a process that probably occurs at a public consultation:

> [T]heir various audiences, together enjoined as an imagined global humanitarian community, are intimately engaged in the drama as well... a major source of the actors' labor is symbolic, consisting in the successful rallying of formative energies in and around clusters of key related terms, words, phrases, in order to dramatize and publicize the exigency of the crisis at hand (DeChaine, 2005: 3).

Victorian Britain demonstrates there are pre-Global histories and structures that enjoy relative success in deploying charitably motivated stories – the dramaturgy of the Human Crisis – as justification of actual responsibility. However, more disturbing is the fact that the polarizing tendency of global humanitarianism is a fruit that has not fallen far from the tree. In the latest offering co-founded by Bono, the One Campaign representative, Jamie Drummond, says:

> Many Africans I've met don't want aid. What they want is security, jobs, trade, investment, as well as accountable, responsive government and poverty-reducing, sustainable, economic growth. But a key underpinning of all these is a certain amount of healthy human and physical infrastructure: roads that are passable, water that is clean... in the right circumstances, effective aid can help deliver these basic underpinnings of what can evolve into socially just, sustainable, poverty-alleviating economic growth (Drummond, *Guardian,* 2008: 1).

The view that those who need help do not know what they really need is a familiar echo of the Victorian mantra for understanding the conditions of the poor, except the Victorians treated the poor based on what was regarded as morally just instead of 'socially just'. The Victorians, not unlike the global humanitarian stance above, maintain a story of the poor primarily as pre-health, pre-human, and pre-developed. At the same time, like the Victorians, in their story of Development and Responsibility, global

humanitarianism also preaches parables of self-sufficiency, or self-help (through economic growth). These axioms summarize all-encompassing knowledge of the poor, which privilege these textbook objectives and goals over the everyday practice of charity (e.g. such as care, which is based on the particular encounter rather than mass anonymous funds). The view of poor people as being deprived but incomprehensible to themselves was one of the fundamental tenets of the eighteenth century Poor Laws. Furthermore, the conversion of Victorian classifications of the poor into legal categories shows a very real translatability and movement of the Poor Man's Story and the Rhetoric of Self-Help. However, what is translated in the movement is often only a gesture of writing and policy frequently ends up enacting more restrictive limits on the quotidian lives of the poor than the seemingly benign classificatory terms for describing the condition of poverty. Such policy becomes, as Spivak (2008) noticed for the FAP: pure performance. Ricoeur (1990) argues that this has to do with mistaking narrative for being innocent and without an intervener. In addition, one gets the sense that Ricoeur also tries to restore morality from prescriptive dominance when he denies the notion of an autonomous history. For him, actions "imply goals, the anticipation of which is not confused with some foreseen or predicted result, but which commit the one on whom the action depends" (1990: 55). The departure from the foreseen and predictable is crucial because it means Ricoeur's moment of action encompasses an element of unknowability. This theoretical stance offers a strong link to Levinasian ethics. An action's concrete link to intent does not necessarily imply its fulfillment, but Ricoeur does not lose interest in the action because of this non-guarantee. He seeks out a way for reading texts in accordance with precisely this indetermination of the text's action and arrives at a conceptual tool not unfamiliar to Derrida and Levinas. Ricoeur (1991) elaborates in *From Text to Action,* "an action leaves a 'trace', it makes its 'mark' when it contributes to the emergence of such patterns, which become the *documents* of human action" (1991: 153). Ricoeur's trace, like Derrida's, is steeped in a movement: the coming-into, or the emerging-of. In a famine historiography for Bengal, this plays out in both reading famine narratives and denouncing them. And it is the tensions

rather than the outcome of such reading, that will host the beginning of a response to the Other.

Failed Historiography

The aim of this work is not to discard or reject Western notions of humanity or charity. We cannot disinherit values and heritage of thought quite as easily as the World Bank can disinherit responsibility. In fact, my next chapter begins by acknowledging, first, morality as a crucial register for propelling action in the first place. In *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind,* James Mill (1869) offers an explanation of Victorian belief as premised on foreseen closures and outcomes. He says:

> [T]he state of belief or disbelief is manifested when we are pursuing an Intermediate End. In masticating something sweet, the fruition of the sweetness sustains the energy of the will; there is no case for the believing function so all, any more than there is for Desire, Deliberation, or Resolution (Mill, 1869: 394).

The condition of belief based on known quantities is very much the premise of Christian morality. Of course, the 'known quantity' is not literally countable, but refers to God, whose known-ness lies in her immutability and eternity. Within this structure of belief, the Victorians judged what was good or bad more or less by what they judged to be moral or immoral. Mill (1869) describes some commonplace views, "Good is implied in the term virtue, evil in the term vice; good is implied in the term wealth, evil in the term poverty" (1869: 148). The poor figured in Mill's British-India history as largely an immutable and bad archetype and this was something Mill expressed as a point of objective and rational inquiry – something he never failed to underscore in his writing on British India. *History of British India,* in over five volumes, was a work Mill considered to be benignly objective and yielded philosophical as well as historical value. However, when it came to recommendations of governance, Mill's immutable archetype of the Indian poor became even more vast and homogenous whilst their place in the Empire also became very specific: the Hindu was viewed not only as a figure of the immoral

poor, but also as a profitable investment. For India, Mill's peers and successors reserved an unwavering singularity of thought. (un)Fortunately for Britain's own poor, Mill once declared that the principle to follow for investigating what actions to take for the colonies is that: "the only point of colonial policy, which it is here necessary to consider, is that of trade with the colonies. And the question is, whether any peculiar advantage may be derived from it" (Mill, 1826: 208).

From a historiographical standpoint, it is not hard to see how Mill and other historians of India might have foreclosed certain conclusions of famines if and when they did include them in their histories. Famine reportage by the colonial administration was vast and prevented easy 'calculation' of the known quantities and 'peculiar advantages' sought by those who tried to manage the crisis. Whether they judged the Hindu morality or their economy and government, writers searched for resolution and for cause and effect. The need to also economically justify their anti-famine work caused a lot of confusion among the officials since all anti-famine choices involved an indeterminate cost, both monetary and otherwise. One of the broader strokes in my work will be to leave such calculations to the side and focus on (re)building unfinished stories and a renewed examination of the artifacts of famine memory. Another would be to show how, and in what sense, certain Millsian archetypes of famine poor are immutable and evil, even though these beliefs actually share a specific domain with the market principles of British-Indian colonial policy. My own engagement is also not unaware that famine historiography that fights the unethical, or the immoral historicizing, carries the unethical at the same time. A self-declared project of famine historiography already impinges on its material via the classifications of famine history and the poor and must use these conceptions whilst attacking them at the same time. What would be the objective of this famine historiography then? My work is also complicit in the ontological violence that Levinas (1979) describes. Therefore, there is at least a kind of ontological thinking that my work will accept and that is failure; if failed historiography denotes non-historiography.

I will try to produce a reading of famine that is unhistorical and therefore outside the proper realms of what famine historiography should be. I try to place facts and figures about Bengal both in context and outside of their usual context, first as a way of demarcating the concrete energies in the archive that produce tension, and then to keep these tensions open and unfinished. In *Totality and Infinity,* Levinas (1979) states, "Desire is absolute if the desiring being is mortal and the Desired invisible. Invisibility does not denote an absence of relation; it implies relations with what is not given, of which there is no idea" (1979: 34). The desire of my historiographical reading is, so to speak, non-historiography.

II. DIVINED FAMINES AND THE DIVINITY OF ETHICS

Levinas' (1999) notion of alterity is understood as an 'Otherness' that cannot be properly determined. At the same time, his alterity is not possible without first acknowledging the subjective view: the "I" must assert itself as Self before it can proceed to say who the Other is. Subjective self assertion remains incommensurable with an objective determination of alterity since a self-determined Other is simply an alter-self rather than a radical and unsubsumable Other. Therefore, the subjective view effaces alterity in the instant of its asserting of its subjectivity. We may liken this subjective view to the interpretative view of the famine historian and his method of giving an ethical dimension to famine historiography's critique. The radical break, or discontinuity, between alterity and the reflective self assures a space for a faith in the sense of the divine. This allows us to conceptualize ethical failure in terms of the tendency in famine history to close the gap of the divine, to pull a cover over it so that alterity in famine narratives reflects the narcissism of their writers. Famine historiography addresses this failure in its forms of metaphoric disguise in famine narratives that install final figures or allegory. Western-Christian religious discourse that echoes through the British archive on Bengal is one such domain, that is dominated by a focus on having the last word, supplanting the radical tension in divinity through the finalized figure of alterity – God, Jesus, Truth, its simulacrum, so to speak.

Simile and the Famine Apocalypse

There is a sense that famine is like an apocalypse. As a simple simile, the argument follows that the horrors of mass starvation, both in extent and intensity, can only be equaled by the trope of absolute Biblical obliteration. Examples of this in modern times are numerous and among them the most famous in recent memory is perhaps the one taken from the witnessing of the 1984 famine in Ethiopia:

> Dawn, and as the sun breaks through the piercing chill of night on the plain outside Korem it lights up a biblical famine, now, in the Twentieth Century. This place, say workers here, is the closest thing to hell on earth (Goyder & Goyder, 1988: 93).

BBC Journalist Michael Buerk's infamous comments paint an example of apocalyptic imagery in the Ethiopian famine. In this scene of apocalypse, Buerk conjures up the naked force of death and destruction suffered by the inhabitants of Korem, a town in northern Ethiopia and refugee camp to nearly 30,000 individuals. In this famed famine, Ethiopia experienced unprecedented powers of media representation of national disaster, which tested the parameters of public imagination in the BBC's visual and detailed broadcasts of the scenes in Korem. Surmised in Buerk's remarks, the harrowing scenes of those refugee camps will in time become the modicum of famine imagery; the visual partner of an apt simile, in which a comparison to the Bible captured the imagination of the Christian world and became the rhetoric that mobilized international humanitarian intervention. However, that symbolic power of this simile is surely not merely a case of effective comparison. The role of simile, according to Ricoeur (1978), underlines the explicit borrowing between "the thing to be named [famine] and the foreign entity from which the name is borrowed [apocalypse]" (1978: 24). The crux of its function lies in the revelation of the mutual relationship of two things, rather than the simile dictating a stable aesthetic. Yet, since this moment in Ethiopian history, the imagination of famine has become inextricable from a specific apocalyptic imagery, suggesting that the rhetorical borrowing has been sustained – it is no longer a simple simile. I argue that the resemblance, or closeness to 'hell on earth' has, in a process corresponding to what Ricoeur (1978) calls the "excess of formalism", replaced a discursive habit with ontology (1978: 30); the famine *is* the Apocalypse. The visual rhetoric of Ethiopia's famine has collapsed into a category of knowledge given by the Korem famine scenes. Like Eagleton's (1995) treatment of the Irish Famine's excessive significance, the habitual or customary representations of the event suggest a tendency to seal the gap between the signifier and the actuality of the event, concomitantly erasing the plural alter-narratives. As such, Eagleton's reminder is also that every proper

definition or naming of the event also guarantees its non-significance. It is in the difference between simile's comparative function and the ontological categorization where one may endanger the conjoining of rhetoric and content, and where the signification of the Famine Apocalypse is both threatened and constituted.

The apocalypse invoked by Buerk must thus be understood in terms of its signification within pre-existing *doxa*, a Greek phrase meaning popular opinion. Like Ricoeur (1978), who recalls the philosophical opposition between opinion (*doxa*) and knowledge, the historico-hermeneutic examination of the Famine Apocalypse might raise the question of what and where the discursive conditions are, for the rhetorical simile to become an epistemic aesthetic. This includes the concern with the collapse of the forms into signifiers of famine truths, or how the famine is realized as the apocalypse within a religious context. In a way, Buerk inaugurated a *significant* moment – Ethiopia 1984 – and news media, which were hitherto already in the habit of reporting disasters as straightforward, seized upon the generous helpings of heart-rending narratives provided by the uproar in England after Buerk's report. The tragedy became a popular topic and humanitarianism stood in the news agenda limelight. Yet, as BBC historian Jean Seaton (2005) has noted, the extensive news coverage of the famine in 1984 did not come free of charge. The journalist's mandate to be selective meant that the famine reportage was not politically innocent; its news span cannot be divorced for instance, from post-war controversies of the Falkland Islands conflict (Seaton, 2005).[3] In the midst of the news racket, Ethiopia was selected as a sign of famine, a *language* to know and speak of famine. Today, we call this language humanitarianism. The tendency to see famine as a hyperbole of divine judgment – the apocalypse – reflects moral inheritances of this language, which is no doubt also a type of aesthetic. These inheritances arise out of another history: the Judeo-Christian religion. Like its heirs – Bengal and Ethiopia - this historical source is no less conflictual and plural. It is in view of this that I explore, in this chapter, the intersections of Christianity and famine.

[3] See Seaton's (2005) incisive *Carnage and the media: the making and breaking of news about violence* for further elaboration of complicities between news institutions and governments that affect how suffering and humanitarian crises are narrated.

Gnosis and Knowledge

It is straightforward to claim that Christian allegory represents a resonant structure of belief that organizes difference in the memory of famine. Taking this historiographically, what is the normative dimension of this view? Or in other words, how to explain alterity in famine memory after taking into account the historian's vantage point as complicit in the designation of self? In this case, what is the Other in Ethiopia 1984 if the failed historiography is conceptualized as the auto-repetition of the allegorical structure in famine writing? In *Fallible Man,* Ricoeur's (1986) offers a kind of reflection that might be used to explicate the ethical difficulty that exists between Christianity and famine memory. He posits a break between what he distinguishes as "sensibility and understanding". Ricoeur (1986: 18) likens this distinction to the difference between embodied meaning and transcendental meaning. Ideally, Christianity poses a language – such as "biblical" or "hell on earth" – to indicate the meaning of famine based on the aim of giving understanding to a more transcendental reflection (on God or existence beyond the bodily). So while religion might provide a metaphor for denominating famine out of a desire to understand it, the significance of the apocalypse belongs to a function of metaphor that exceeds its form. This excess is a notion Ricoeur (1967) calls, gnosis.

The notion of gnosis – sense rather than understanding – highlights the break between knowledge and faith (in knowledge). In the epistemic aethestic of the Famine Apocalypse, this break is bridged in a gesture of excess faith or transcendental faith: divinity; the autonomy of all other events becomes subservient to the Divined Famine. Buerk's remarks place the Ethiopian famine within a global consciousness. What his footage and report go on to produce is the Ethiopian Famine Apocalypse, a symbol rather than a mere image. Elevated out of anonymity, the Apocalypse repeats itself over and over. In 2008, *Times* Journalist Rosemary Righter re-invokes the imagery for judging our modern sins:

> What the world saw back then they are seeing again: heart-rending photographs of wide-eyed famished Ethiopian children... Famines in this day and age are man-made, if not by the sins of commission perpetrated by the thuggish Mengistu regime (and by North Korea's) then by culpable omission coupled with lousy policies" (Righter, *TimesOnline,* 20 August 2008: 1).

Righter refers to former Ethiopian dictator, Mengistu Haile Mariam's counter-insurgency tactics that were widely blamed by the international community for the famine. In her remarks, the motif of the apocalypse – those children housed in the refugee camp of Korem captured on camera – remains a powerful mnemonic for delivering the force of Righter's moral standpoint. The difficulty in such an appeal is the distraction from the political conditions of what was really a complex emergency. The power of Buerk's imagery to take over understanding is evidenced by the work of former journalists David Keen and Jean Seaton. They attempt to unpack the readymade assumptions of Ethiopia and famine. Keen (2008) uses the phrase "complex emergency" to urge a more nuanced understanding of the functions of violence alongside famine in Africa – for instance, how food aid can be used as a political weapon – if we are to respond effectively to the crisis. He argues that customary ways of articulating humanitarian disaster often obscure the fact that the response needed to meet these crises often exceeds any single mandate from international government organizations.[4]

Among journalists and humanitarian organizations, there is a tired acceptance since the 1984-86 crisis in Ethiopia, that Africa's starvation problems are "recurrent cycles of famine" (Harsch, 2003: 3). There is a sense, since the world "saw" what Righter described, that subsequent famines are *re*-appearances of Buerk's moment. Every famine after that moment becomes Ethiopia 1984. They are recurring 'Ethiopia 1984s' in that Buerk's images continue to bury famines past and future. No one denies that before or after Ethiopia 1984 there were real material events, but their materiality has

[4] Keen (2008) pits the phrase complex emergency against common phrases circulated in news discourses such as 'civil war' which he explains "can prejudice our understanding of the complex fault-lines of conflict and the complex manipulation of violence for a wide variety of purposes, whereas the label 'complex emergency' draws attention to complexity and embodies a useful degree of vagueness about the *nature* of a violent conflict" (2008: 2).

been buried by the symbolism of the Moment of Ethiopia 1984. The significance of the moment becomes terroristic, in the sense that it takes over all subsequent imaginations of famines so that they are all images of Ethiopia; just as all violence after 9/11 henceforth are referred to as acts of "terror".[5] The Event continues to shadow and haunt us, not as the actual famine but as a trace that represents, as Ricoeur (1984) explains, "the past, not in the sense that the past would appear itself in the mind (*Vorstellung*) but in the sense that the trace takes place of (*Vertretung*) the past, absent from historical discourse" (1984: 2). More importantly, the Ethiopian crisis may also reverberate through current historical imaginings of famine in Bengal. The trace from Ethiopia is terroristic – it is total – because it captures even those famines before itself, such as those in nineteenth-century Bengal, so that our imagination of them is informed by the shared Christian lineage; thus the moment of Ethiopia fulfills the gesture of Ricoeur's trace, as taking over Bengal's famines from India's historical discourse. Such a trace is also the familiar image of a naked African child with a distended abdomen – the radical combination of both terrifying shock appeal and undeniable familiarity attests to its extensive topology and tropology. It may repeat itself not as a mere copy, but as a type, acquiring the status of *genus* so that the image becomes an anonymous unit; as a classificatory item it behaves like a trace, it is part of, but not of that Korem refugee child photographed by BBC all those years ago.

For Ethiopia, the trace of the 1984 moment works by *re*-placing (*Vertretung*) all her subsequent famines under the symbolism of the Buerk sign – the tele-visual apocalypse, 1984 as an event or moment *takes place of* 1984 as one of many past *and future* occurrences of famine. The work of 1984 shows how the Ricoeurian trace seizes both temporality and place from 1984 to install an empty symbol of famine.

However, the moment of 1984 is important for making the realities of other crises intelligible. Ricoeur (1984) recognizes that this function is held against actual empirical explanation. It is impossible to dismiss the metaphoric expression of famine since it is an event whose realities are so complex. Ricoeur's work is helpful here

[5] Jeremy Fernando (2008) offers an elaboration of this point with regard to re-play of the 9/11 event in his book, *Reflections on (T)error.*

because he calls for this aporetic tension to be recognized in the historian's reflection, including my following ones about the Bengal famines. We need not deny the trace – the Ethiopia 1984 moment – per se but rather recognize the price of its intelligibility. This is the reason for Ricoeur's distinction between gnosis and knowledge.

The empty sign is capable of repetitive inscription(s), becoming a trace of many other traces. News coverage on Ethiopia's crises uses 1984 like an Event insignia by way of marking down and drawing attention to the Event-ness rather than the Event itself. The reference to that moment is instantly recognizable: "Ethiopia's last major famine between 1984 and 1985 claimed a million lives which prompted Sir Bob Geldof to organize Live Aid" (Gammell, *The Daily Telegraph*, 6 Jun 2008: 1). The trace is thus also signatory name; it names itself over and over, in repetition and in writing. These utterances, invoke the Buerk tele-visual image, as concept in the mind, which is no longer quite the same as what happened in 1984 or where it happened, and break from history to *appear* historical without *being* so. These utterances give every "food crisis" thereon after its ontological signification. It is an aesthetic *par excellance* where merely aestheticizing or by drawing the metaphoric link is equivalent to signifying its coming-into-existence. The Other is already dead in this framework, doomed by over-determination via the Biblical Apocalypse. The responsibility to the Other becomes rather, an axiomatic imprint of responsibility. Alex De Waal (1997) points out:

> [T]he Ethiopian famine of 1983-85, preserved in popular memory as a natural disaster of biblical proportions most fiercely struck those parts of the country that harbored irredentist movements. In a stunning, but telling, rejoinder to international pity for the purportedly hapless Ethiopian government, the Ethiopian foreign minister told U.S. charge d'affaires that "food is a major element in our strategy against the secessionists" (De Waal, 1997: 117).

In 2002, Ethiopia's Prime Minister Meles Zenawi even told BBC News that "[H]e feared that people in developed countries might be lulled into thinking that the drought was a manageable problem because there were no pictures on TV screens of skeletal figures as there were in the 1980s" (*BBC News,* 11 November, 2002: 1). He warned the BBC that Ethiopia, in 2002, was facing "a famine worse than that of 1984" and that the

immediate crisis was "like living through a recurring nightmare" (*BBC,* 19 November, 2002: 1). Indeed Mr Meles may be right in pointing out the figurative power of the trace, the motifs, as it were of the Apocalypse: millions dead, skeletons, the recurring "nightmare".

Ghosts and Specters

In using this spectrality of the trace to re-interpret the dead of the Irish Potato Famine, McLean (2004) quotes from Derrida's *Specters of Marx,* explaining the usefulness of spectrality for questioning "the assembled binarisms on which the authority and self-identity of the present are founded" (1994: 39). These binarisms refer to the conceptual distinctions between representation and reality, fiction and fact that govern *a priori* the organization and institutional gestures of remembering famine. The distinctions pre-empt the terms of pasts' expression and, though the resultant narratives are not necessarily invalid, they risk being taken for granted. Borrowing Derrida's notion of specter, McLean (2004) recasts archived descriptions of ghosts of the Irish poor who died from hunger by emphasizing the resonance of their 'ghostly' representations, whether allegorical or alleged, in places other than its designated archival habitations. The lesson here might be liken to a sharpened distinction between ghosts and specters: the former refers to the Marxist formulation based on the fundamental gap between materiality and alien abstraction, in which ghosts allude to fictitious capital whose fictitiousness can only become apparent in a revolutionary crisis; the latter – specters – focuses instead on the underlying lament or mourning in Marx's formulation. The debt of mourning (of communism) is owed not only to the historical context of former revolutionary impulses but also to the present for which mourning serves as therapy of dead pasts. Because of this there is no stable focal point in a reflection using the notion of specters, the only constant is spectrality: the movements or the haunting. Derrida (1994) explains this revenant movement:

> The present is what passes, the present comes to pass, it lingers In this transitory passage, in the coming-and-going, between what goes and what comes, in the middle of what leaves and what arrives, at the articulation between what absents itself and what presents itself (Derrida, 1994: 5).

The transitory tension described here between the past and the present is precisely the kind of historical reflection Ricoeur (1978) recommends. The points of traditional temporal sequence, past present and future, are positions heavily invested in historical motion, in its discursive movements, including that of the historian. From this viewpoint, one may unpack the insistence on the Ethiopia moment or the conviction in the apocalypse as a teleology that reduces the sacred and the social into the political via the repetition of disembodied pasts. In fact, these discursive efforts reflect an attempt to stitch a coherent story out of what are actually fractured and conflicted histories. Spectrality invokes an accounting of the present, that is to say the contradictions and complexities within each famine event, and regardless of whether before or after the Ethiopia 1984 moment; the moment certainly haunts but remains subject to the incongruities that the movement of famines (other events) are bound to generate.

Ethiopia's apocalypse is not the only intelligible reflection. For Ireland's 1848 famine, Morash (1995) notes that Secretary of Treasury, Charles Trevelyan's allusion that the Potato Famine is an act of Providence is a symptom of "a narrative of history shaped by the prophetic books of the Bible [which] formed a part of the discursive world of Famine Ireland which was every bit as 'true' as the narrative of progress" (Morash, 1995: 84-85). Morash shows how the Judeo-Christian inheritances of the Victorians laid down some of the fundamental moral registers by which the Irish Potato Famine was to be considered. His work on the religious themes can be used to problematize the framework adopted by official histories. Morash's work is an example of the expression of a desire to reverse the reduction of history by the politics of representation centered on closure. His critique suggests a conception of the Irish famine in ethical terms by showing the moral weaknesses of Irish famine history. More importantly, his work also illustrates the impossibility of ordering and separating sense and understanding.

Allegory, Myth and Christianity

Part of the reason why religious allegory is so compatible with the discourse of famine is because of its allegiance to narrative continuity. Specifically we can detect through its typology, how Christian eschatology maps a meta-narrative that links up all its myths under a finite history. The narration of closure implicates a chain of logic that pre-dates the end. Following this apocalyptic logic, narrating famine reiterates and maintains the assumption that there can be an objective ordering of the disaster and more specifically, that it can be concluded. Such a narrative depends on the existence of a transcendental vantage point and of a supervening objective source of authority: God. The combination of supernatural divinity and sequenced temporality allows Christian allegory to constitute an everlasting promise of a better future. Nowhere is this more explicit than in Biblical eschatology. The Book of Matthew describes:

> Jesus answered: "Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Christ' and will deceive many. You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of birth pains (Matt. 24: 4-8).

This example is from the New International Version (NIV) of the Bible. Here the Biblical interpretation of famine describes a moment in which clarity of judgment will arrive. Famine is a theological code; it is the harbinger of moral determination. Dichotomies play out in instructive tones: truth versus falsity, fact versus fiction, and chaos versus clarity; famine is not only the marker of the next stage to come, but also a better stage, a truer and clearer stage than before. The famine apocalypse is founded on the belief of a future end. The allegory's polemic orientates famine as a sign of judgment and history's end where the individual experience of this event is subsumed under an objective ordering of the world.

Historian Bernard McGinn said "during the medieval centuries, the Bible ...was rather a universal language to be used – a way of seeing and interpreting the world that

gave meaning to every level of culture" (McGinn, 1983). When famine is invoked as the apocalypse, its surety is a reflection of doctrine rather than of belief. Bernard McGinn (1975) states: "it is true that when the times were bad – when physical or moral catastrophes seemed about to overwhelm Christianity – there were many who did not hesitate to speak of the approaching end of history" (1975: 254). The hand of medieval clergymen reflected a tendency to express famine as apocalypse.

John Aberth (2000) provides some insight into apocalyptic imaginations in his book *From the Brink of the Apocalypse: Confronting Famine, War, Plague and Death in the Later Middle Ages*. Aberth examines various medieval texts and describes how the four major apocalyptic themes operate significantly in the interpretations and social implications within the church, the government and the peasantry during the period 1315 – 1322 in the British Isles and Northern Europe. His book is a vivid description of such rhetoric. Aberth (2000) writes:

> In the medieval view of millennial history, Antichrist was the leader of all that was unchristian, who would reign for a brief time before the final victory of God's forces and the Last Judgment at the end of the world. Typically associated with the seven-headed beast of the Apocalypse, the Antichrist was a terrifying figure but, ironically, a source of comfort as well to medieval Christians because his appearance meant that their tribulations were about to end (Aberth, 2000: 3).

Aberth details these sorts of 'fire and brimstone' echoes in prose and poetry written during these crisis events. Historians have noted greater use of the Biblical apocalypse as didactic commentary on current events from the 12th century onwards (McGinn, 1975; Smith, 1986). One literary source historians often draw from is William Langland's 14th century poem, *Piers Plowman.* It is one of the first pieces of social commentary in British history. There is a line in the poem that "dreams that the doleful state of society, including the Church, will be replaced by a better one after the final reckoning" (Aberth, 2000: 5-6). Langland's symbolic ("Waster" versus "Hunger"), Aberth describes, implied that famine was an effect of "those who refuse to work" (Aberth, 2000: 23). The good, symbolized by Piers, sees hunger as a way to combat the evils of idleness (Emerson,

1981). This trope – the tendency to moralize famine – is something that will recur in colonial Bengal and which I will visit in later chapters. In another poem written in 1327 called, *On the Evil Times of Edward II*, it was described:

> *And tho that qvalm was astint of beste that bar horn,*
> *Tho sente God on eorthe another derthe of corn,*
> *That spradde over al Engelond bothe north and south,*
> *And made seli pore men afingred in here mouth fvl sore;*
> *And yit vnnethe any man dredeth God the more* (Dean, 1996: 390)

There are at least two characteristics of the apocalyptic famine in medieval times: a) apocalyptic eschatology and b) primordial sin. Original sin is given by the Christian doctrine as the founding catastrophe of all humanity. Without eschatology, sin merely exists in a historical null space and serves to justify the existence of a categorical moral standard. When a famine occurs, the event is narrated as the exacerbation of the original human catastrophe of sin, turning it into eschatology. As an apocalypse, famine may be understood as original sin within a temporal sequence. The argument follows that the extent of humanity's moral depravity has grown to a point where the moment is ripe for judgment. The notion of sin organizes otherwise chaotic experiences of mass starvation into a set of causal relations while eschatology further lends this network of relations an overarching structure. In this way, the famine apocalypse is firmly embedded in the matrix of Apocalypse mystic-melodrama, guilt or fear of judgment, which perversely calls upon both a *placid acceptance*, or contentment of the famine crisis and *an active disavowal* of the famine sufferer. Taken as a whole, the contrasting structure of acceptance and disavowal means that the famine apocalypse is suspended in ultimatums. In 1615, recounting the miseries of war, plague and famine, Sir George More Knight gives the verses:

> *Man may collect th'abundance of his vice*
> *And the deare loue his God to him did beare,*
> *In thinking on th'inestimable price,*
> *Was paide his sinne pollutered soule to cleare*
> *To gaine him an immortall paradice*

And to Redeeme his foes to pay so deare.
For it out sinnes had not been more than much
The ransome of them sure had not been such (Taylor, 1615: B2)

Famine is described here as the irrevocable act of a divine force (and so one cannot or must not fight the will of God), the relationship is one between the human self and the world and is also emphasized as an *active* one (there are avenues for "redemption" such as praying or repentance or confession, etc). So the paradox here combines the totality of doctrine (famine as part of God's grand action plan) with a highly subjectivised ethics, that *one* must and *can do* something – repent, confess, erase sin, be vigilant of other sinners whose sin caused the famine – to overcome the crisis. In other words, the doctrine traverses at least two modes of famine memory: the eschatological, which invokes divine time as sovereign over the famine event; and the subjective experience of famine suffering, which invokes the naming of famine-causing sins.

The traditional Christian apocalypse is delivered by the Judeo-Christian triple drama structure (crisis-judgment-vindication). Within this structure, famine's given significance in such religious rhetoric is hinged on an end, which is always arriving. A. R. Myers (1971) notes that poems like *On the Evil Times of Edward II*, reflect the tendencies of late medieval literature where "there runs a strain of melancholy, a preoccupation with death, a sense of coming disaster" (1971: 10). Famine's significance is one of incomplete-ness and is expressed as a metonym of "birth pains" which is rendered as a total symbolic – the Apocalypse - , a sum-total sign of that which is about-to-happen; an eschatological role is imposed on famine, one that is shared with other disasters including wars of "nation against nation" and plague. The faith of the Christian doctrine is carried forward by the struggle with this Final Judgment or the myth of final redemption. As such, famine forms the crisis as indicator of oncoming judgment where all good Christians will reach divine fulfillment in eternal life.

The temporal sequence shows a tactic that fuses the material catastrophe with the myth of original sin into the logic that sins are famine-causing. In a set of Treaties written in 1631, by preacher William Gouge, to his parish in Black friars, London, he says

that famine is caused by the sin of ingratitude and prodigality, or the refusal to "subject our selves to that yoke and government under which God will have us to be" (Gouge, 1631: 140-141). Among many other sins, the idea of prodigality or unfaithfulness is severe because of the religious politics going on in Europe at that time. In 1696 West Kirk, Scotland, David Williamson warned his listeners against "atheism, irreligious superstition, profane swearing, Sabbath-breaking, undutifulness in our respective stations and relations" (1720: 13) which are said to be sins that Man sows and reaps in the form of famine. Williamson's sermon further exclaims:

> Now, my Friends, God is shaking his Rod over our Heads: He hath been shaking the Sword in France, and our Friends there have found the Dint of it. And who knows, when it may come to our Doors? We have found him shaking the Rod of Famine over our Heads. What! Shall we defy God? No, God will not be mocked, what a Man sows, that shall he reap (Williamson, 1720: 41).

The social schisms of the Reformation brought the role of this crisis-judgment-vindication structure into the foreground. Functioning as an important foundation myth for the church, narrating famine as a manifestation of sin was compatible with deposing the legitimacy of parliament or monarchy whenever they enacted policies that threatened religious doctrine.

Contemporary historians have no trouble piecing the story of medieval famines together. They tell us serious famines raged through Europe from as early as 12th century. As much as 10% of Britain's population perished in the Great Famine of 1315-1317. These analyses provided descriptive data relating mainly to economic, geographical, social and demographical factors. These were attempts to present a vivid picture of famine, which often were recorded hand-in-hand with pestilence and war, and without exception writers have noted extremely high mortality, crop failures and epidemics (Lucas, 1930; Kershaw, 1973; Outhwaite, 1991; Aberth, 2000). Historians who write the majority of such treatments usually offer scientific or economic analyses or conjectures about the causes and effects of famine. Generally they attempt to explain and account for the rates of mortality via analyses of economic, geographical and

political climates of a particular period. Compared to this body of work, those written about the tropological figuring of famine within religious rhetoric in those periods seem scarce even though the texts which provided the interface between these past famines and modern historians are already rich in elaborate allegory. My own writing hopes to intervene with much-needed attention to the latter.

Death of Divinity

Apocalypse did not always signify an end-of-the-world event. The meaning of apocalypse can also refer to the aspect of revelation (revealing details of the past or future) rather than the part about catastrophe (McGinn, 1975). Strictly speaking, McGinn's definition is still married to the theological structure of Christian eschatology since the sense of revelation he suggests here is still obsessed with disclosure as a transcendental function. Derrida (1993) describes the Greek etymology of the word apocalypse as "disclosure, uncovering, unveiling" (1993: 119). This conception finds affinity in the notion of spectrality in the sense that both are hinged on keeping the possibility of afterlife but one which is unknowable. A true disclosure or revelation does not recognize the end *per se* but rather the possibility of ending one world in order that another may emerge. In other words, Derrida (1993) recommends interpreting the apocalypse as an event without the religious or theological revelation. A disclosure without disclosure.

Derrida's (1993) counter-apocalypse move has to do with applying the revelatory logic to epistemological consequences. An end-focused apocalypse, Derrida cautions, requires a demonstration of a higher force of knowledge that oversees the apocalypse but at the same time, remains outside of it. Williamson's sermon claims about the infliction of famine by God over West Europe follows an ethic in which the higher force overseeing the apocalypse, "God is shaking the Rod of Famine over our heads" does not share the same time-space as this worldly crisis. The force of God, the Sword or the Rod,

strikes from outside the site of the apocalypse. This punishing divinity inhabits instead a time-space beyond and distinct from that of the apocalypse.

The determination of the End is different from that of a specific end. The fearsome tone of sermons like Williamson's insist on an all-encompassing, total End, which restricts the relation of a famine's realities to a final point that allows no subjective or objective negotiation. The End is a dead object. As such, Derrida's (1993) objection to the apocalyptic is to the death that occurs even before the finality is fulfilled. This death, he explains, refers to assigning all the predicates – the famine, humankind or what Williamson calls "Man" – of the apocalypse a Certainty which will render the "predicted certainty" moot; in other words; a death before the famine death, wherein death represents the death of any other possible outcome. It is the only possibility, which is also the demonstration of Christian morality. This announces a death even before "Man" is dealt the Rod of Famine. Derrida says:

> [T]he subject of eschatological discourse can have an interest in forgoing its own interest, can forgo everything in order to place yet its death on your shoulders and make you inherit in advance its corpse, that is, its soul, the subject hoping thus to arrive at its ends through the end, to seduce you on the spot by promising you to guard your guard in his absence (1993: 149).

Sermons such as Williamson's are a demonstration of the Christian apocalyptic discourse abandoning its own interest in God, through fixating famine with divine intervention; the meaning of the Christian apocalypse does not allow "Man" any chance of escape. It would not provide, Derrida (1978) tells us, that interest in the divine involving the "opening the space of transcendence and of liberating metaphysics", in which the latter refers to the radicalization of the reduced world as given by Christian eschatology (1978: 102).

Thus the Famine Apocalypse involves the belief in a universal, all-encompassing force in whose hands the finality of all things will reside. In Judeo-Christian religious allegory, eschatological famine is involved in what scholars call the "science of last things" (Smith, 1986: 21). Apocalyptic finitude is ethically significant because disclosure

of the end (therefore including also the constitution of the veiled beginning) provides a sense of history in both Christian and Judaic teachings.

This relates to the question of what to do, or how to respond to the famine Other when confronted, so to speak. Framing the problem of ethics in the matter of choice – the decision – Levinas, in particular, incorporates a theme from Jewish apocalypticism. McGinn (1984) describes the genre as such:

> An important theme of Jewish apocalypticism was the call for ethical choice between good and evil, or perhaps better, the call for the elect to persevere in their choice of the good, no matter what the cost in terms of disfavour, ostracism, persecution or death (McGinn 1984: 11).

It is well known that Levinas is influenced by Judaic teachings, specifically in using the ethical difficulties of attempts toward religious spirituality for reflecting on the goodness of human experience and action. He finds this conversation by combining the strands of eschatology in Judeo-Christian traditions with the substitution of God, for alterity, or for the Other. He radicalizes the idea of choosing "no matter what the cost" by posing it to religious dogma itself, including of course Judaism. Derrida's counter apocalypse is, in many ways, influenced by Levinas' re-examination of messianic eschatology. Derrida's (1978) emphasis shifts from the reading of apocalypse away from theo-ontology; his reading of apocalyptic disclosure involves, "designating opening itself, the opening of opening, that which can be enclosed within no category or totality, everything within experience which cannot be described by traditional concepts..." (Derrida, 1978: 103). The implication of overlaying this strategy onto the Hindu majority projected by the Bengal famine archive is not to reverse the imperial domination on famine narratives, but to restore the tensions between habits of thought and those outside of it as an ethical gesture. When taken on board for the Bengal archive, the Derridian apocalyptic reading would be a proposal to resist analyses that see Hindu religion simply as dislocated human experience from its original Western Christian terms such as, morality, virtue, finality, and transcendence. Often in the Bengal archive, the traditional concepts of colonialism denounce the life-worlds offered by the Hindus as cruel and

primitive, but at the same time, part of this rejection stems from the imperial persistence to see Hinduism as religion. For colonialists, the notion of religion is itself a notion steeped in Western Christianity. Ethics, for Levinas, must provide the question that challenges this Christian habit; the ethical choice must be made even if it goes against these terms, as "disfavour, ostracism, persecution or death" are given by Judaism itself or by any other religion-ism, as Derrida (2002) might say, dictating the condition of such a choice in the first place. Such a choice must endure the death of religion and all its concepts.

The Apocalyptic Famine, in casting down a framework of time and revelatory logic according to Christianity, announces the death of divinity by precisely the subjection of famine to the overarching narrative. There is no call for ethical choice as long as the Apocalypse is viewed *only* as a divined history. It is a tyranny of religious historical will, in which the memory of famine fails because the organization or structuring of it, into eschatology, behaves as the core of its utterance.

The Apocalypse and the Call to Ethics

One might argue that the modern call to ethical choice no longer relies on such archaic, medieval denominations of good and evil, or that such a crude sort of Apocalypse simulacrum is irrelevant now to the practices of response. This is true only if we assume that current humanitarian practices – or modern society for that matter – are based entirely on secularized thought. Further to that, if we must then also assume that the role of Christianity in society has been devolved to reason and its technologies. This is, in fact, a myth. The network of relationships between reason, religion and human agency evolves, rather than disappears completely. More importantly, thinking that modern society has "progressed" or successfully separated its politics from beliefs in divinity is greatly mistaken about the ways in which our moralities constitute our politics and vice versa.

With this in mind, my interest in the Apocalyptic abstractions of famine takes into account the very justificatory structures of the image in writing the famine as being an event at the end of time and history, and writing its subject as sinner or effect of divine judgment. As the example of famine in Ethiopia in the 1980s has shown, the resonance of how we view the time and place of the famine subject – as apocalyptic – is not simply something we "progress" from. Chakrabarty (2007) argues that the "capacity to notice and document suffering from the position of a generalized and necessarily disembodied observer is what marks the beginnings of the modern self" (2007: 119). He offers a remarkable examination of nineteenth-century Bengali social commentary to show how the call to ethical choice cannot avoid re-narrating its colonial, European Enlightenment inheritances. While at the same time, the Bengali call to ethical choice, - Chakrabarty uses the issue of domestic cruelty to Bengali widows as an example – manages to demonstrate an alterity not necessarily congruent to the one addressed by modernity's call. And if another alterity, aside from the kind prophesized by our modern looks at the past, might be found, how might this alterity be written so that "we" or "I" are still interested in *responding* to famine suffering?

As Chakrabarty reminds us, the tools to question the abstraction of suffering are built into the beliefs and structures of knowledge that support such an abstraction in the first place. Locating the tools is a matter of gaining a strategic approach from what the past has already given us. In interpreting Irish writer Clarence Mangan's famine poems, Morash (1995) says "that apocalyptic moment, so necessary to the nationalist unwriting of history, carries the potential to unwrite all narratives, including that of nationalism itself" (1995: 119). What about the narrative of subjectivity in the famine apocalypse? The mode of subjectivity, as I have explored, in the apocalyptic famine occurs in face of a resurrection of Jesus, which is also the future end of Christian history. What does the figurative gesture, in writing the history of famine according to the Christian apocalypse, unwrite at the same time?

Morash is referring to the ways nationalist writings of the Irish Famine used the apocalyptic moment to further political interests; invoking nineteenth century literary

narratives – Mangan's poems – instead of preferred histories of famine, Morash show that Irish famine memory has a history of social stratification and literary traditions that does not fit perfectly into the rhetorical structure of the apocalypse. His exercise is related to the nature of rhetoric: it provides a backdrop that takes into account both *spatial* and *temporal* specificity. There is no reason to assume, then, that rhetoric reflects stable definitions of cultural and social practices; in other words, the negotiation of cultural and social modes and practices that write the Famine Apocalypse, do so ambivalently. More importantly, we might ask what does this ambivalence mean for responding to the famine sufferer? Since such a responsibility has implications for how we constitute and define a famine sufferer in the first place, this is necessarily a question about the mode of subject formation: how might we write the mode of the Other in famine memory? Might we question the ethicity of the apocalypse moment, in its simultaneity of writing and unwriting famine, what spectral subjects emerge in which their mode of existence, as victims of the Final Judgment? What kind of ghostly "misfits" does the Famine Apocalypse invoke?

Nightmares and Sir Bartle Frere

To begin with, the motif of the famine apocalypse, as it continues to be written into modernity, does not easily ally itself with the complex relationship between the production of particular histories and the public who consume these histories. Divinity is caught between motif's quest for historical legitimacy – and the fiction of Famine-Judgment-Vindication – and famine reality's tendency to fray into specific cultural and social memories. In 1877, Vicar Daniel Moore gave a sermon for the Indian Famine Fund in which he says:

> [T]he gaunt figure of the Famine in the Apocalypse, hovering above their desolate and blighted fields... every second man, woman, or child you meet with is a living, ghastly, moving skeleton; whilst those in whom the signs of emaciation and waste do not show themselves, are either bloated with dropsy, or sinking under those Eastern maladies which famine always brings in its train.

> Few would blame them, we are sure, if, on their responsibility, they would determine to do more (Moore, 1877: 4).

The resilience of the apocalypse, the trace is familiar. Like the tele-visual power of Buerk's image, this (non tele)-visual Famine Apocalypse carries vestiges of a *future* nightmare and it is a confluence of various paradigms: the living and the dead, the present and the invisible, abundance and decay. However, Moore's apocalyptic imagery is somewhere in between these binaries. This sermon refers to "Easterners'" with the imaginations both absent and present: skeletal, ghostly, deadweight. The visceral nature of this motif replaces the disconcertion arising out of placing colonial realities in the quotidian of those – a *re*-presenting trace – who Moore addresses in this sermon. London of 1877 must contend with this nightmare image of her colonial subjects.

The state of these colonies and their populations creeps into public consciousness, and into the mindscapes of the Queen and her government. The apocalypse, graphic and exposed, echoes the plight of England's own poor. The frenzy over this nightmare underscores an attempt to maintain a clear distinction both between Empire and colony realities and that between "us" and the poor. Poverty, as Fishman (2007) points out, "lost its anonymous face" in the post-Reformation period, it became "more public and urban [and] threatened public order which forced the governments to encourage private efforts" (2007: 119). The threat of this distinction, already exacerbated by the increasing visibility of the Empire's own poor, grows ever more apparent within the apocalyptic imagery of the colonial "famine subjects".

When Sir Bartle Frere delivered a lecture entitled *Bengal Famine* in 1873 before London's Society of Arts, he illustrated how the ghostly apparitions of England's colonies might give the apocalypse striking corporeality:

> [M]en are death-stricken by famine long before they die. The effects of insufficient food long continued may shorten life after a period of some years, or it may be of months or days. But invariably there is a point which is often reached long before death actually ensues, when not even the tenderest care and most scientific nursing can restore a sufficiency of vital energy to enable the

> sufferer to regain even apparent temporary health and strength (Frere, 1874: 3-4).

Implicitly, the British Empire can no longer call the bluff of the famine precisely because the apocalypse no longer dwells solely in the visions of their Bibles, or crude predictions of sin and judgment: the Famine Apocalypse has the potential to *become the real Apocalypse*, wherein lies its true function – to unveil – threatens established paradigms of knowledge. Civil servants such as Sir Bartle Frere, who have themselves dealt with other crisis moments, like the Sepoy Mutiny in 1857, while writing the imperial narrative, also juggle the incongruence between their own position(s) as caretakers of the colonies and as servants of the Queen. When imperial rule confronts famine, the incongruity reveals itself, as Frere (1874) announces in his lecture that, "so complete was the separation between governors and governed that not even the best informed of the governing classes could tell with any approach to certainty whether the population of the province were 40 or 50 or 60 millions..." (1874: 10).

Moore's sermon addresses the famine in southern India, including Madras, Mysore, Hyderabad and Bombay. This famine is often nicknamed the Great Famine of 1876-78. Typically, private charity appeals through sermons such as his avoiding the vulgar enumeration of precisely how much money famine relief actually costs and how far the government's efforts fall short. The Famine Apocalypse motif is deployed for invoking the virtues of giving and aid, not for pricing the virtue, since charity is believed to be valuable in and of itself. Imperial management of colonies is not separate from the influence of religion, although this is no convenient combination of material and moral goals. The material and the moral cannot be viewed as separate spheres and should instead be looked upon as orders of knowledge translating and transforming each other. At the time of Moore and Frere, there are some "thirty-three missionary agencies employed in impressing on the natives of India the truths of Christianity" (Frere: 1874: 49). As for the Indian Famine Fund, it is a government effort to encourage private charity and in fact, dissuade anyone from taking government relief for granted. It is not so much that private charity had suffered because of the "rise of secularism" and

sermons are thus required to remind people of charity's inherent virtue. Rather, the Indian Famine Fund is an initiative carved out after the colonial administration realized the immense cost of relief. Religious famine rhetoric, by allowing the Apocalypse to be confused with something like a discursive emoting originating from the terrible suffering of the Other, appears like an independent charitable impulse rather than an initiative from the colonial administration. No doubt Victorian England was a pious society, but the doctrinal registers of Christianity were increasingly pragmatic. This was reflected in the administration.

Frere's is a practical approach. Like himself, his audience members would have held civil service appointments in India. Graduating from Haileybury College in 1834, President of the Royal Geographical Society, and appointed member of the Indian Council in 1867, Frere's career typifies the imperial administration: varied interests in science and nature centered around an imperial view of governance. Members of the Indian Civil Service (ICS) start as collectors of revenue in Indian districts before they assume higher positions of office. Given the frequency of famines in India, it is fair to assume ICS servants had previously encountered famine through administrative assignment. The nature of these encounters would explain the tendency of public addresses such as Frere's wherein the apocalyptic imagery is attached to the question of utility and efficacy since these are the types of qualities administration values as "good" for both the moral and economic advancement of Empire. The futility of reviving "death-stricken" living ghosts does not only appeal to the good Christian in the English gentleman, but also to their business sensibilities; preventing death is much cheaper than the actual cost of death in the loss of lives and thus, valuable workers.

Moore and Frere provide texts that show at least two types of "call to ethical choice" that reflect both the inheritances of earlier medieval Christianity and the approach of modern Reason. In one instance, we have a famine subject who completely disappears under the sign of the Apocalypse and whose subjecthood hinges on the general abstraction of his/her sin into the group of famine-causing sins or certain inherent predicates of "Eastern maladies". These find expression in the stable

paradigms of good and evil, living and dead, or healthy and diseased. In the other instance, we have a famine subject who, though the apocalypse is invoked, is provided a measured assessment by which to quantify it.

The drama of the apocalypse is wielded in both understandings of what constitutes being good and charitable. Its aesthetic, so often referenced, allows us to see the gap that must separate the reality of famine sufferers and the conditions of its entrance into rhetoric. The persistence of this gap lends the aesthetic its repetitive quality, now so familiar to us who have "seen" the famine of Ethiopia in 1984. The steps echoed in Bengal are recognizable: when Frere (1874) proposed that the land survey in Deccan be replicated in Bengal's famine as a preventive measure, he persuades with the description of horrific scenes of past famines in Deccan. Frere describes his own nightmare from scenes he witnessed when he started out his career as a district collector in the 1830s:

> One of my first experiences in Indian district life was an inquiry into cases where an attempt had been made to wring arrears from the half-starved survivors by actual torture; and famine waifs, in the shape of unclaimed scraps of property which had belonged to unknown fugitives from famine, who had died in their aimless flight from starvation, and children who had been sold by their parents to buy food... were to be found at most stations, in the public offices, or in mission house... (Frere, 1874: 55)

Using testimony from another official's (Lord Valentia's) witnessing, Frere returns to Deccan in 1804:

> Every halting-place up to Poona had its vision of horror, in the living skeletons too weak even to accept charity, in the bodies – sometimes one hundred in one spot – left a prey to dogs and vultures, and in tales of murder and deadly fights for food, and of children sold and deserted (Frere, 1874: 56).

Against these horrors, Frere champions the implementation of land survey so as to regulate and inform the policies of the British government. The idea is that, if the British government are properly aware of the land conditions, this will "enable them to fix, for each class of land, an assessment, which shall not exceed what the past history of the

village shows it has been able to pay in average years" (Frere, 1874: 63). Therefore the rates of revenue imposed on villagers would therefore be reasonable to their means, to the productivity of their land, implying as well that revenue policy would also react appropriately when crops fail.

Officials like Frere, as evidenced by their own nightmares, know that the issue of the land surveys belies a debate far more complex than getting land information to the government. Since Lord Cornwallis implemented the Permanent Settlement in 1793 – the policy designed to guarantee land tenures and a permanent rate of taxation to be collected by the British government – the dynamic between *zamindars, ryots,* and officials changed dramatically. As did the practice of land lineage and inheritance within the family unit, including those concerning the role of women. However, Frere does not formulate his lecture to assign agency to these various non-official figures in the debate on famine response (although this is not the same as denying them). The deep structural impact of British policies on Indian life, not yet fully comprehended by Frere's generation of officials and those before him, do not provide, as the apocalypse does, straightforward rhetorical devices for administrative debate. The recourse is instead to mix the apocalyptic aesthetic, familiar in their lives and Bibles, with the colder overtones of administrative speak.

Subjectivity and Disjuncture

Both McLean (2004) and Chakrabarty (2007) have shown that nineteenth century rhetoric in Ireland and India, modernity's writing of pasts and suffering, is made possible by the same gaze that judges medieval views to be archaic and distant. The utterances of Frere and Moore taken together, represents what Chakrabarty (2007) also calls "a disjuncture of the present with itself" (2007: 109) – what I liken to a nightmare. They refer to the famine as apocalypse in two calls to choice within the mode of colonial writing but do not, in each reference, allow for any space, or moment, which a *real* choice might inhabit. Response to famine (by either Christian morality or reasoned

economy) is decided *a priori* to their appeal, wherein the choice to choose to *deny* the very premise of the choice – the conditions of religious doctrine or economics – is not given. As such, the possibility of considering the inflections of these two types of spheres of knowledge is also unavailable. Together Frere and Moore show how their gestures inflect each other and are inflected by pasts and presents not always in the way they intended. Interpreters of famine memory writing about the horrific scenes in history, while acknowledging a spectrum of factors and circumstances, do not always make a point of this disjuncture. I want to bring this disjuncture into the field of ethics; that is to say, into the moment of response, and of decision. That is why I had begun with the famine in Ethiopia in the first place. The moment of Ethiopia is momentous in its regard with formulating the modern and global humanitarian ethic, but equally it can bring the ethic into crisis by drawing in other nightmares, like Frere and Moore, into disjuncture with Buerk's nightmare.

As a historian familiar with the apocalyptic rendering of medieval famine, John Aberth (2000) acknowledges the factors of weather, war, agrarian failure or flooding should be equally considered in interpreting famine medieval famine. This view is not untypical of the famine historian's search for cause and effect. Although not often recognized as such, applying the logic of causality belongs to the realm of the decision, but naming the "final" effect erases the decision altogether. Aberth is also cognizant of the conclusions too easily made in apocalyptic readings of famine: that people's beliefs were ignorant or "medieval", in the sense of how the word is now used colloquially as a hyperbolic, informal description of things crude and primitive. In other words, the medieval Famine Apocalypse might be argued as being, against the more "modern" apocalypses such as the 1866 Bengal famine or the 1984 Ethiopian famine, un-modern. He says:

> [There] is more to the making of medieval famines than the arbitrary whims of the weather... at the same time, medieval man was not helpless before the onslaught of hunger... formulaic and regular appeals heavenward to the Almighty for deliverance seem to have given victims some confidence that their sufferings at some point would end (Aberth, 2000: 55).

One might read this as installing in famine history what Chakrabarty (2007) calls "the modern subject endowed with interiority" (2007: 134). The "medieval man", as Aberth calls him, becomes a psychoanalyzed famine subject, in which his internalized belief logic rewards with "confidence" akin to the western humanitarian concept of "hope". The hungering subject of the famine nightmare gains traffic with modern historical discourse via the route of "rationalizing", as Chakrabarty would say, appeals to the divine, such as prayer. Without this, the public who read Aberth's history cannot satisfy their expectations of *why* people would practice something so obviously futile and so "formulaic" to the tremendous famine.

"Hope" is a familiar tirade in appeals for famine aid. Nonetheless, a distinction should be made between a formulaic interiority – the stable famine subject and stable outside – and interiority that is radically other, not reliant on a stable sense of outside. Aberth obviously recognizes the carelessness of reading the apocalyptic as "formulaic and regular". His evaluation of the Famine Apocalypse by awarding hope as the "value-free" psychoanalytical component of famine subjectivity typifies modern practice of historical discourse. By positing a psychoanalyzed interiority for the famine subject, divinity gains a reasonable function under a certain paradigm that dictates the way we see famine subjectivity. The need to seek out an "excuse" for divinity – thereby condemning it to death – as practiced by the famine Other arises out of the view that these very practices intrinsically are not "good" responses to famine.

For the colonial administrator, this condemnation reflects a profound lack of interest in the interiority of the famine subject when the subjectivity does not fit the formula of the conditions assigned for *legitimizing* the exterior response. Frere (1874) provides an example of this where he describes the need to educate the inhabitants, adding to the tasks of those Deccan land survey officers:

> The village schools were very few and bad; and for the most part but two persons, or at most two families in the village, could read or keep accounts. One was a Brahman – the village priest, astrologer, government accountant, and notary public... The Marwarry – for he generally came from Marwar – usually

> appeared in the village with nothing but a rather greasy suit of clothes, of which a huge red turban was always a part, and his writing materials... as he got old and rich, he returned to his native country to build a temple to the God of riches and accounts, whom he assiduously worshipped, in fact, as in metaphor, by once in every year heaping together his account-books, writing-materials, and balance in hand, with lights before the Idol, to be worshipped by him and his household. With these exceptions, few of what we should call the upper classes, and almost none of the cultivators or lower orders, could read or write, and education for the villagers was consequently as much needed for the protection of the tax-payer as for any purposes (Frere, 1874: 65-66).

He names here the types of local individuals who can, in fact, read and write – the criteria of being educated – but their associations with the divine prevents Frere taking any interest in them. The very conditions of those categories that make them comprehensible subjects to the colonial regime – caste, for instance – is somewhat marred by the divine as evidenced, in this instance, by Frere's need to qualify the (accounting) ability of the Brahman by listing his role as "the village priest" and "astrologer". Frere's reading of the Marwarry does not awarded this subject with the "hope of education" as defense against famine since this subject seems to squander his ability to read and write by taking the divine *literally* and putting his accounting books in front of the religious idol. Divinity, Frere tells us, should stay "as in metaphor". He is obviously expecting to surprise his audience, who share his expectations that the divine resides in the metaphoric, by implying that the Marwarry might actually place his land accounts and writing materials before "the Idol" for worship – an obviously ridiculous step towards preventing famine. Therefore the already available levels of educated-ness in the village cannot be relied on to help with the land survey in preventing and managing famine. On the other hand, the ridicule is phrased benignly in the religious context: when in a Christian sermon, Moore redeems the "Easterners" by saying "Few would blame them, we are sure, if, on their responsibility, they would determine to do more" (1877: 4). Altogether, Britain's call to response for famine in India is a strange mix of pity and despise not dissimilar to the Dickensian view of the poor, only more distant and alien than English or Irish poor on Britain's streets. The pity of these "Easterners" comes with an even more disconnection than those represented by Bronte's Heathcliff;

the Indian famine poor are also exotic and unfathomable. As Moore (1877) further implores in his sermon,

> We cannot look upon one in our nature's image, however degraded by race, or debased by superstition, or repulsive in features, however vice and cruelty may have marked him for their own, and mindless ignorance may be stamped upon his brow, without remembering that he is of the same flesh and blood with the holy and spotless Son of God... (Moore, 1877: 10).

The Empire's own publics, Christians who have not necessarily come into the imperial position by choice (conquest and exploitation) but only as a matter of being born into a citizenship, and who have even less individual investment in the "Eastern maladies", are left to consume a famine figure that remains a vague, abstract and mystical ghost in Biblical landscapes. In this position, a sense of charity, with an odd mix of forgiveness – since bad things like famine only happen to those who sin – and tender magnanimity is invoked.

Can We Help Them Help Themselves?

The details of these nightmares are worth some attention because they help reveal how the often-used Apocalypse aesthetic for famine might reflect, crucially, another crisis: the marginalization of the interiority that must be radically other. As a strategy of religious doctrine, the notion of the divine is well suited to nurture the difference between the good and the evil. Its technique of installing an overarching time-story and foretold ending, while promoting a sense of individual virtue through famine-causing sins, allows us to forget, quite easily, the disjunctures that constitute the aesthetic in the first place. As a strategy of modern reason, the notion of the divine reinforces a vision of an enlightened and reasonable h(e)aven in which virtue and economy co-exist for taxpayers and parishioners alike. The rampant failures of famine response, constituted as it were, by similar failures in the past, and by which colonial administrators saw the famine sufferer, is a discontinuity still unexplored in many cases of famine.

When Frere demands his audience see the monetary and real cost of famine, his appeals to the apocalyptic are not so very different from the medieval notion of how The End is Nigh. And when he subtly expresses his incredulity at the famine Other's – such as the Marwarry – seemingly literal engagement of the divine, does he not also posit that the crude or the "medieval" somehow remains in the separate realm of the metaphor, the realm of the simulacrum? We can argue that the modern insistence on having a dignitary symbol of what is good and charitable, what is virtuous or what is giving, is akin to the theological fulfillment of the Second Coming, the *manifestation* of Jesus Christ, the Christian *parousia* which Levinas (1981) derides as "an avatar of nature or a moment of the concept" (1981: 18). For him *parousia* is necessarily an obsession with one's own image, to see it over and over. He explains:

> It is not a question of assuring the ontological dignity of man, as though essence sufficed for dignity, but of contesting the philosophical privilege of being, of inquiring after what is beyond or on its hither side. To reduce men to self-consciousness and self-consciousness to the concept, that is, to history, to deduce from the concept and from history the subjectivity and the "I" in order to find meaning for the very singularity of "that one" in function of the concept, by neglecting, as contingent, what may be left irreducible after this reduction, what residue there may be after this deduction, is, under the pretext of not caring about the inefficacity of "good intentions" and [pg break] "fine souls" and preferring "the effort of concepts" to the facilities of psychological naturalism, humanist rhetoric and existential pathetics, to forget what is better than being, that is, the Good. (Levinas, 1981: 18-19).

Writing about the famine subject, then, is not about the "ontological dignity" of the sufferer. Equally, it should not be about the ontological dignity of the caller of ethical choice. Remembering that Derrida (1993) argues that apocalyptic discourse "can have an interest in forgoing its interest" (1993: 149), we can see the danger of reducing the famine subject, as often uttered in the archive, when we call upon the Apocalypse to invoke a response to another's suffering. After casting our victims of divine judgment, we may forget to examine, as Levinas points out, how the conceptuality of suffering and the sufferer remains subject to the conceptualization of ourselves – whether well-meaning or not. At this juncture, the apocalypse becomes *apocalyptic* in the sense of

disclosure: if we assume that the different practices of divining the famine sufferer not only through the formats of memory – through sermons, lectures, the Bible – but also through time *as* place, creates in Bengal for instance, a scene of famine sufferers so real that it seems to be *our* nightmare as well, a Levinasian reflection of our ethic ensues. What, indeed, might be left of our purported Good and our Hope when it no longer holds up against its own inefficacity, against the unspeakable deaths of famine?

In *Glimpses of Famine and Flood in East Bengal,* Sister Nivedita – an Irish nationalist originally named Margaret Noble, who dedicated her live to serving Indians (Chakrabarty, 2007) – makes a revelation of the famine nightmare: in loving our own charity and humanity, we invoke a nightmare that is not ours alone, but in seeing this nightmare, we also see as our own. In the last months of 1906, Nivedita describes her witnessing of poverty in terms she knew her own Europe would (still) recognize:

> On the lowest, stand the beggars. For every Indian community has its quota of these. There is here no poor rate, and the hopelessly indigent and helplessly feeble must needs be supported by the informal charity of the village. Lonely old women they are for the most part, sunned and wrinkled under all weathers, and they stand at the steamer-ghats, or in the bazaars, staff and begging-bowl in hand, not the least picturesque of all the picturesque elements that go to make up the Indian crowd... Indeed the Bengali word for Famine, *durbhikkha,* the 'hard begging,' gives us a wonderful picture of the disaster from their point of view (Nivedita, 1906: 45).

Quoting Tagore, Chakrabarty (2007) describes a mode of "loving Indians" through the work of Nivedita whereby "she was able to 'pierce the veil' of that which was objectively real" (2007: 150). Nivedita traveled as a Hindu missionary educated in the modern ways of social work. Her view of India's poverty is located at the intersection of the colonizers who go to India to work on the poverty and the colonized subject whose speech must abstract the scenes of suffering into a collective. Her unique position of being inheritor of Anglo-Irish history, Western education and Hindu faith allows her to construct a view that is strictly in-between and that might bring any stable humanitarian view of the India's famine poor into discomposure. On the one hand, her description of the picturesque Indian crowd reflects what Matthew Edney (1997) calls the "imperial

picturesque" (1997: 61). In *Mapping an Empire: The Geographical Construction of British India, 1765-1843,* he describes this view as originating from the eighteenth century European landscape view in which the dominance of visual knowledge was complemented by "more refined, subtle" aesthetic (Edney, 1997: 57). The picturesque reflected an "educated taste" that subscribed to the hegemony of an artistic reality. This allows the purported civilizing project of imperiality to be displayed in a light touch as opposed to being portrayed as a vulgar imperial force.

On the other hand, Nivedita's use of the picturesque is more than an aesthetic. Her picturesque is apocalyptic in the sense that it offers a revelatory possibility of what is not included in the imperial picturesque of the much-euphemized "Indian crowd"; or revelatory in the sense of unveiling what the imperial picturesque is blind to. The English, as Eagleton (1995) points out, tend to "think of paintings first and farms second – just as Jane Austen tends to look at a piece of land and see its price and proprietor but nobody actually working there" (1995: 4). Thus, Nivedita makes an obvious reference to the poor in England while structuring her view as if describing the three components of the picturesque aesthetic of European paintings – the foreground, the middle ground and the background –; these are terms she knows are familiar to the English readers of her accounts. Nivedita concludes this scene in saying of the flooded famine land: "On the next level that it reaches, are the homes of the peasants, the farm-labourers. And last of the village-group, but central, and first probably to have seen afar off the rising of the waters, are the larger farmers and small squires or *zemindars*" (1906: 48). In this glimpse of famine in East Bengal, a deliberate conjunctural gesture, Nivedita conflates the European picturesque aesthetic to the picture of famine nightmares. The ugly moralizing of the deprived by the poor rate in England is famously, an attempt to discipline and class the poor into well-segregated groups. Beggars in picturesque England would have only figured in dim and dirty foregrounds to enliven the grander horizons of the Empire's skies. Thus, if the picturesque served such a purpose in British thought, Nivedita plucks it out of the romantic or the sublime landscapes and casts it instead, upon the Bengali scene of *durbhikkha,* of hard begging, where she makes the

famished crowd the horizon and foreground; in her picturesque, the hard begging women are the ones who enliven the famine's horizon. The merciless flow of famine and flood, seems to take over the effects of the absent poor rate, showing, as if a mirror to the English (dis)taste of the poor, how the classifications of other poors, from these hard beggars onwards, stand no chance against the ebb of the majestic, exotic waters of Bengal. Nivedita's view reveals, piercing the veil of the imperial picturesque and the everyday realities of famine in Bengal, a scene of terrifying ambivalence, of the picturesque nightmare.

Nivedita shows precisely a doubling of the "humanist rhetoric", that it is more ambivalent than its gallant claims. Her odd phrasing of the Bengali word for famine, "a wonderful picture of the disaster from their point of view", both acknowledges the modern anthropologizing of suffering and does not, as Levinas (1981) says, leave it to the "effort of the concept" of "hard begging". Frere's translation of caste agency keeps the famine subject firmly in the modern. In contrast, Nivedita's famine subject is assembled from not only her own concepts of subjectivity; in phrasing the picturesque as nightmare, she shows the blindness of the aesthetic: a blindness where the seer only sees himself. She offers instead another kind of blindness, which is the a sense of what remains good but utterly out of reach and out of sight – the picture *from their point of view* – from the imminently "real" in her description. Colonial writers of famine have noticed the odd disjuncture evoked by the picturesque not only because the notion is at odds with the colonial nightmare but also because it is a *point of view* in which what is *revealed* is not the same as what is *seen*. A. Loveday (1914) wrote in *The History & Economics of Indian Famines* that

> In the curious mixture of picturesque, almost rococo, exaggeration and matter-of-fact simplicity, which characterizes the writings of Indian historians, the reality of the calamity is displayed in a more telling, if more gruesome, manner (Loveday, 1914: 18).

The disconnect in what is revealed in the picturesque and the reality of famine, like Nivedita's account, offers an inversion of the apocalyptic scene so familiar to colonial

administrators. Loveday (1914) admits the curiousness of such a view – of "Indian historians" – and his words suggest a break between the picturesque and the colonial view that can only be sensed but not really bridged. Perhaps only individuals like Nivedita, a somewhat inverted Indian diaspora, in which the Western view looks out through the Indian picturesque, we can see that there is a radical discontinuity in the continuity that her account or her glimpses of famine tries to bridge. It is in this way that we might read an example of a response in which the interiority of the famine subject – those "hard beggars" – remains radically other.

III. CODES AND MACHINES

Scholars have regarded Husserl's phenomenology as the founding force of continental thought and also that of Levinas. *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, first published in 1930, was Levinas' university dissertation and which opens his lifelong work on ethics. In this book, Levinas (1973) examines the Husserlian proposition that human interpretation of world phenomena is not only the product of cognition, but also of intention. As such, the interpretation that makes world events meaningful, is not only systematic (ontology), it also intentional. This chapter takes advantage of the reflection that Levinas (1973) opens up to examine the body of discourse that 'discovers' famine as a modern, scientific phenomena. For Levinas (1973), ethics is only possible when human cognition is also reflexive, that is to say, phenomena is linked to a prior reflection or awareness. This crucial link enables the ethical relation or relationship with alterity. Famine is an object of geography, biology, medicine, sociology, economics and many other disciplinary sciences; together they produce famine codes and theories. These codes are used as humanitarian documents – for famine response, management, prevention – but they also make use of famine memory in ways that cannot be clarified by scientific exegesis alone.

Yet in the last twenty years or so, we have been proclaiming Humanity in the name of past famines. It has also become a bit of a cliché, especially among ex-media practitioners (and particularly ex-journalists), to say that this Humanity is disingenuous. This is probably because these individuals are privy to the secret production of the Famine Apocalypse. While journalists like Michael Buerk or David Keen[6] go on to pursue dialogues with the long-term factors of famine in various areas of the world, the anti-rhetoric of "famine crimes[7]" or the "benefits of famine[8]" is accusatory. Underlying these

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[6] Before becoming Professor of Complex Emergencies at the London School of Economics, David Keen's work is a culmination of his previous experiences as a conflict journalist and consultant to non-governmental agencies. In recent years, he has written occasionally for the *Comment is Free* column in the *Guardian* newspaper.

[7] A phrase borrowed from *Famine Crimes,* by Alex de Waal, 1997.

[8] A phrase borrowed from *The Benefits of Famine,* by David Keen, 1997

complaints is, I argue, a difficult lamentation against the "world constructed by science, [in which] the substance of things is reduced to a convergence of causal chains" (Levinas, 1973: 9). Levinas' complaint has to do with how knowledge claims priority over goodness. As we count deaths, donations, despots, rainfall and grain prices, I argue that our imagination of famine no longer extends beyond what is objectively given, or as Nivedita suggests previously, it no longer pierces the veil of reality. The nightmare reality of famine, bodies and picturesque landscapes that characterizes the Apocalypse, through historical amnesia, produces a concern for response. In *Whose Hunger? Concepts of Famine and Practices of Aid,* Jenny Edkins (2000) acknowledges that response is a "call to ethico-political action that goes beyond the technical, depoliticized practices of aid" (2000:103). By asserting the technico-scientific practice as response to famine, humanitarianism not only forgets that its science refers back to its own history, but also that it is "conditioned by the empirical nature of man" (Levinas, 1973: 9); and this amnesia will continue as long as the phenomenal famine is left unquestioned.

Famine Theory / Code

In 2004, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) reported an adoption of a series of "famine scales" to measure precisely the intensity and magnitude of famines (USAID, 2004: 4-5). Developed from an influential paper by Stephen Devereux and Paul Howe (2004), these scales provided detailed description and measurements (see Figure 1) of famine and the conditions leading up to it. According to the USAID, their main (and dubious) assertion was that *a more specific, nuance and complex* code can be utilized as a helpful operational definition of famine in that it would encourage *consensus* so as to avoid "stakeholders contest[ing] the declaration of a famine to evade responsibilities to affected populations" (USAID, 2004: 4)[9].

[9] The full report entitled "Synthesis Report on the Famine Forum" is the outcome of a Famine Forum organized by the Office of Food for Peace (FFP) and the Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) on March 24-25, 2004 in Washington, D.C.

Table 2 Intensity scale[15]

Levels	*Phrase designation*	*'Lives': malnutrition and mortality indicators*	*'Livelihoods': food-security descriptors*[16]
0	Food-security conditions	CMR < 0.2/10,000/day and Wasting < 2.3%	Social system is cohesive: prices are stable: negligible adoption of coping strategies.
1	Food-insecurity conditions	CMR >= 0.2 but < .5/10,000/day and/or Wasting >=2.3 but < 10%	Social system remains cohesive: price instability. and seasonal shortage of key items: reversible 'adaptive strategies' are employed.
2	Food crisis conditions	CMR >=.5 but < 1/10,000/day and/or Wasting >=10 but < 20% and/or prevalence of Oedema	Social system significantly stressed but remains largely cohesive: dramatic rise in price of food and other basic items: adaptive mechanisms start to fail: increase in irreversible coping strategies.
3	Famine conditions	CMR >=1 but < 5/10,000/day and/or Wasting >=20% but < 40% and/or prevalence of Oedema	Clear signs of social breakdown appear: markets begin to close or collapse: coping strategies are exhausted and survival strategies are adopted: affected population identify food as the dominant problem in the onset of the crisis.
4	Severe famine conditions	CMR >5= but < 15/10,000/day and/or Wasting >= 40% and/or prevalence of Oedema	Widespread social breakdown: markets are closed or inaccessible to affected population: survival strategies are widespread: affected population identify food as the dominant problem in the onset of this crisis.
5	Extreme famine conditions	CMR >=15/10,000/day	Complete social breakdown: widespread mortality: affected population identify food as the dominant problem in the onset of the crisis.

CMR: crude mortality rate.
Wasting proportion of child population (six months to five years old) who are below 80 per cent of the median weight-for-height or below −2 Z-score weight-for-height (cf. NCHS, 1977).

Table 3 Magnitude scale

Category	*Phrase designation*	*Mortality range*
A	Minor famine	0–999
B	Moderate famine	1,000–9,999
C	Major famine	10,000–99,999
D	Great famine	100,000–999,999
E	Catastrophic famine	1,000,000 and over

(Figure 1: Paul Howe & Stephen Devereux (2004), "Famine Intensity and Magnitude Scales," *Disasters*, 2004, 28(4): 362,365)

The term "responsibility" denotes the USAID's agenda for the code: to mitigate any denial of famine by setting out to define the crisis that would have its terms objectively, neutrally and systematically interpreted. The paper does not dwell on the delicate details of said "evasiveness" even though "stakeholders" are prone to dance around

declaring a state of famine. The paper also lauds the effectiveness of the nineteenth century Indian famine codes in managing the crisis and famine relief.

It is a mark of humanitarian consciousness that it will not find responsibility or ethical response from local governments unless it is to write this out in a sequence or timeline such as the "Levels 1-5" above. What is noteworthy about the tendency to define, label and code famines is, first, how organizations like USAID identify responsibility as a conceptual burden which can be either 'well-defined' and specific, or crudely designated; in both cases, it is governance rather than the "affected populations", that is the target of coding. Second, the responsibility or humanitarian impulse that is being invoked by such codes is in no way specific or complex, because its forms – statistics, tables, scales and charts – can be understood via a direct, sequential and linear logic. The convergence of these logics in the form of 'range' and 'category' are efficient and reductive, rather then complex and nuanced. Third, when USAID or Howe and Devereux are justifying the need for disaster codes and scales from the effectiveness of the Indian Famine Codes, the said Codes are informed by an exercise of theoretical science that was, in many ways, the outcome of failure rather than success. India's Famine Codes are a set of documents that formed the basic doctrines of famine relief in India since 1880 for about ninety years (Brennan, 1984). The inception of these Codes was largely provoked by the famines from 1860s because of increased scrutiny from the Crown and was organized according to India's provinces (See Appendix 1: Index of the *Punjab Famine Code*). It was failure that propelled and sustained the production and editions of the Indian Famine Codes and indeed, those Codes provide no precise reckoning as to what constituted a successful famine response even if this was everywhere stated as an explicit goal.

Devereux and Howe (2004) assume that the codes are a stable, internally coherent contingent of famine policy during colonial rule. This was not the case. The colonial famine codes are the result not only of bureaucratic politics, but also of conflict within the imperial view of the Indian famine subject. Certainly, Devereux and Howe (2004) invoke a sense of how this view is situated in famine policy, revealing a crucial

point about historicizing famine: it is the state that discovers famine. Famine becomes, nothing more or less than what the English-speaking body politic calls the Humanitarian Disaster.

The Indian famine codes provide, for many NGOs and policymakers, an (over)substantial template from which to map famine policy. Devereux and Howe's (2004) is one example of how the process of coding famine might easily truncate the ways in which its historical knowledge is constituted while passing off as "complex" and "specific". Coders of famine suffer from a post-India euphoria. It is true that many framers of humanitarian codes or principles selectively pick out instances of the Indian famine codes when they have had been demonstrated to 'work', in the sense of having a systematic guide of action, needed to organize usually chaotic and large areas of crisis. Certainly, economists like Amartya Sen have shown how particular aspects of British famine policy in India issue important lessons that may be retained for policy today.[10] However, as Sharma (2001) pointed out, the provincial Famine Codes of nineteenth century Bengal helped inaugurate famine as a modern object, echoing Edkins' (2001) warning that "discussions of famine tend not so much to examine an already existing object of study as to produce that object in a particular way and alongside particular relations of power" (2001: 18).

The extent and effect of humanitarian rationalization is evidenced by the drive towards what Devereux (1993) calls "a taxonomy of famine theories" (1993: 30). He asserts that there is in fact such a thing or discipline as famine theory and loosely groups the expositions from eighteenth century Thomas Malthus's population theory to DeWaal's study of 1984-85 famine in Darfur, all under this heading. In fact, Devereux (1993) promises that "effective policy depends on good theory" and therefore, a proper and theoretical understanding and definition of this thing called famine theory (1993: 5) is needed for the world to successfully prevent famine. In Devereux's (1993) "search for the causes of famine", he calls for a taxonomy of famine theories because, he argues, famine theory requires organization. He demonstrates the urgency of this requirement

[10] This is much elaborated in, Sen, Amartya. (1981). *Poverty and Famines: an Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation.* Oxford: Clarendon.

by citing a televised BBC debate in 1990, attended by authoritative figures including those from the London School of Economics, the World Bank, the Transnational Institute and One World Action, for discussing what the definition of famine is (Devereux, 1993).

To make claims for the practical impact of the codes is to also claim that they perform a rational function where they do not. More importantly, the ethic of codes assumes that famine is a general phenomenon that unfolds in certain patterns and that to decipher these patterns is to benefit victims of famine. No doubt, codes do not say all famines are the same but they do go to lengths, as USAID demonstrates, to include as much variance as possible under a single priority. Ultimately, whatever plurality might be found within such codes serve the purpose of "consensus" (USAID, 2004: 4), to bring famine under a general umbrella of agreement of what defines the event. This reflects the philosophy of the great British empiricists such as John Locke and David Hume (1711-1776), who are part of a branch of philosophy that extend ideals into the general. Levinas (1973) describes such thinking in a postulate, "if anything general exists, it must be in some way individual, since it must be part of nature" (1973: 14). Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), whose ideas greatly influenced the governance of British-India, considered the "arrangement of objects of any science... a natural one" (Bentham, 1823b: 217; original emphasis). This opinion originates from the view that sees consciousness as natural; that is to say, it is immutable and also the origin of all meaning. However, the "levels" and "intensity" of famine echoes what Levinas (1973) calls, "ideal objects" whose "ideality" is reduced to the "content of psychological life" (1973:14). The "scale" of famine enacts the empirical privilege of consciousness as the arbiter of meaning by setting the limits of measuring famine in cognate categories. As such, the definition of famine is rather like an "ideal object" and in a debate like the BBC panel, it is the ideality of defining that is performed rather than the definition itself. As Sharma (2001) points out, "the sharp disjunction of a famine situation from 'normal' times is quite often the view of the state, whereas for the 'victims' of famine, it is an aggravation of familiar adverse circumstances" (2001: 4).

Without a different conception of consciousness, Levinas (1973) argues, "naturalistic ontology" will continue to dominate the ways we understand events. Levinas (1973) argues for viewing consciousness as always referencing prior, unscientific realities and perceptions. And indeed, the idea of famine aid and response as practice has a history of its own, not least issuing from the narrative of industrialization and development of India. A methodical review, like the one given by Devereux and Howe (2004), overlooks this history of the Famine Codes making them seem neutral, that the very idea of "code" is a result that "naturally occurs" once we have rationalized the crisis.

If Devereux (1993) and all the participating BBC debaters of famine definitions are right, then scales, theories or codes, whatever the name, all tend towards establishing famine as the exercise of theoretical sciences. This is in turn tied to the exercise of the government as humanitarian policy. The involvement of governance and science deeply permeates the documents of India's famine codes. These Codes are extensive texts demarcating, to the last detail, every state of famine that might possibly be described and recorded. In other words, they represent a familiar, if not terrifying, echo of what the British government recorded over a century ago.

Might code be taken as irrational then? What happens when we take the code as irrational practice? In terms of a call to a good act or behavior, the humanitarian rationale searches to ground the relationship between "I" and "them". The image of squalor in Calcutta for instance might be used in establishing an impoverished India and the focus of "our" humanitarian effort. A famine code is drawn up to name and give meaning to the image and to define the scope of humanitarian work – providing fresh water, building homes and handing out food rations – that needs to be done in Calcutta. Nonetheless, as Bengali postcolonial thinker, Ashis Nandy (1983) points out there is a "basic contradiction within the modern scientific rational world view which, while trying to remain rational within its confines, has consistently refused to be rational vis-à-vis other traditions after acquiring world dominance" (1983: 3). For a code to stand it is necessarily to exclude and in the case of famine, the exclusion often pertains not simply

to the "voice" of the poor, but also to the radically different worldviews and ethic of Calcutta's poor – fundamental Otherness. The rational world refuses Indian traditions as primitive or violent, and often as ignorance adding to the inconvenience of famine relief or government intervention. The refusal also represents what Levinas (1973) describes as a tendency in the empirical science of Locke and Hume "to realize what is intimated in the subjective phenomena" (1973: 15). The rationality of the Famine Codes characterizes the site where the phenomenological exclusion of the Other takes place, the "rejection of everything that is immediate, concrete and irreducible in direct perception" (Levinas, 1973: 16).

In other words, the question of taking code as irrational is also a question about its coders. The inscription of famines into something like a concrete handbook of to-dos, such as Devereux's (1993) Theories of Famine, must involve a degree of the irrational. The humanitarian intention is an irrational design, even though it is often portrayed as impervious to error.

Thus by irrational, it refers to a reflection that echoes Levinas' (1986) assertion that ethics is prior to ontology, to take heed the contradiction pointed out by Nandy (1983) of British rule and examine the function of these Famine Codes based on the (un)ethical intention. One is forever translating and transforming what the global benevolent shows us as famine without ever catching up or coinciding with our relation to the people in India. The irrational code refers to the view that famine codes fail instead of starting from the promise that they are effective. The very value of having a code to tell us what to do in a famine is not in its efficiency. It is, rather, the impossibility of such a code reducing the crisis to what is seen or heard to "myself", or of coinciding with "my" charity and goodness. Beginning from the irrational, or the failed code, we must then take up the contingent first – that we always and necessarily fail them – to re-exercise "I" and the Humanitarian Disaster called Famine. The necessary failure finds echo in Levinas' (1986) point here:

> Of course we inhabit an ontological world of technological mastery and political self-preservation. Indeed, without these political and technological structures of

> organization we would not be able to feed mankind. [But] we must use the ontological for the sake of the other; to ensure the survival of the other we must resort to the technico-political systems of means and ends (Levinas & Kearney, 1986: 28).

What Levinas (1986) means regarding using "the ontological for the sake of the other" does not merely refer to writing a history of the Technically Defined Disaster, or even famine history per se; Levinas' call for the "sake of the other" exceeds mere codic intent and its alleged humanitarian aim of responding to or preventing famine. For Levinas (1973), "the term intention must be taken in a larger sense than the one it has in expressions such as 'good intention' or 'having the intention of doing this or that'...[intentionality] cannot be taken as a property of consciousness" (Levinas, 1973: 40). To ensure the survival of alterity, the intention of famine codes cannot be predicated on consciousness – as it is with technological and scientific categories.

Unscientific Famine

Levinas (1973) proposes a notion he calls intuition in Husserl's phenomenology. Intuition sees intentionality as substance of existence rather than the substance of cognition. Human intention is not treated as if a thought category, like motive; it is not a notion exclusive to consciousness, and therefore, it is also not unconsciousness, a property of the unconscious. The codification of famine described by USAID gives the crisis over to precisely the "technological mastery" of humanitarian consciousness, which finds its basis of humanity in thought, rather than in the human. Intention is, for Levinas (1973), the thing that is the very ingredient of existence in the first place, and which "makes up the very subjectivity of subjects" (1973: 41). Human experience is not completely an outcome of cognition, it is also always an experience towards something external to cognition. Intuition is the relation that extends from this intention, it is the "relation between subjects and objects... the genuinely primary phenomenon in which we can find what are called 'subject' and 'object'" (1973: 41). If we treat technology as

having an irrationality or Levinasian intuition, then we can see that disaster science does not "master" famine.

While the Indian famine codes represent one of the first ways of the discipline and organization of famine, they also reflect a culture of inscription for writing famines in the public realm. This becomes clear from reading the reportage and letters of officials in the second half of the nineteenth century. The surge in official writing in part shows that famines were processed from having non-history status to history status. Despite this, nothing could prepare the administration – its staffing and resources – for the chaos of famine. The crises met the administration like lucid nightmares, forcing them to confront the tension between inclusion and exclusion in colonial ideation of India's poor. The conditions of underprivileged or those in extreme poverty are inscribed into a body of knowledge that both reveal and mystify famines.

When James Mill (1826) wrote the *History of British India*, he apologized at first, that his work did not provide extensive geographical details of India. Although this may have something to do with the fact that Mill never visited India, a more revealing explanation would be that his apology addresses his peers in the administration who were accustomed to the mapping of India. As a hegemonic history textbook of India for the British, his remark points to the shared patterns of interpreting famine. In the Report of the Commissioners for the famine in Bengal and Orissa in 1866, there is a substantial description of what was known as "famine tract":

> Near Balasore (the head quarters of the most northern of the Orissa districts) the line of hills may be said to turn inland to the north, while the coast line runs thence nearly east. Within the hills the cultivation being at best scanty, jungle abundant, and means of irrigation easy, the hardy population suffered less than in the plains. But, between the proper hilly country and Bengal, lies a sort of intermediate tract, that already alluded to as the laterite portion of Western Bengal. This may be described as a partially raised and undulating country abounding in beds of laterite. The laterite soil is not unfertile, but it is dry, and the water easily runs off the undulating surface. The rains, too, of the west being more scanty than those of the east, the cultivation is precarious, and the whole of this tract suffered very severely in the famine. It comprises the greater part of the Orissa tributary mehals of Mohurbhunj and Nilgherry...about half of the great district of Midnapore; a considerable portion of Bancoorah, or West

> Burdwan; and the Raneegunge country; most of the district of Maunbhoom, and part of that of Singbhoom in the Chota Nagpore division (Report of the Commissioners, 1867: 7).

The physical characteristics of the land are precisely noted. However, very little information is actually revealed. The description shows an aesthetic, rather painterly in its strokes of "line of hills", "undulating country", and abundant jungle, not unlike the picturesque previously invoked by Nivedita. Like a painting, the description frames famine as a sort of "ground-zero" scene of Bengal via a point-of-view given from a safe distance. The aesthetic offers certainty rather than facts about cultivation and the "hardy population". The report is certain about the connection between these characteristics and the quantity of cultivation, with the exception of "jungle" population, as corresponding to the severity of famine in various parts of Bengal. The certainty gives the "famine tract" as phenomena of meteorological interest – rainfall and vegetation, is noted alongside the topography. What is also interesting about this description is the way in which the details pass ever so smoothly from details about land to weather, to agriculture and to the severity of famine, and through several districts. The map of the "famine tract" takes its own inference of causality for granted.

Most, if not all, of the official investigations of famine begin with such 'mapping' of Bengal. There was, in fact, a consensus, among those who explain and write India's famine history; the focus on cultivation in the above mapping might suggest that official concern during a famine corresponds to crop yield figures. Contrary to this, crop yield figures themselves do not justify intervention for the administration. Reports often reveal that grain prices are held as the indicators of a region's deprivation. As long as district reports of grain prices remained at "ordinary price at season" (Report of the Commissioners, 1867: 38), the Board of Revenue in Bengal did not consider famine to have occurred. Even the famine commission observes that the Board of Revenue "seem[s] to have placed an almost superstitious reliance on them [prices] as a panacea for all evils..." (Report of the Commissioners, 1867: 37). The incongruity is stark. There is

clearly a disparity between the way the government measures famine and the way they retrospectively historicize and explain it.

George Campbell's Commission report is one of the damning accounts of the administration's deliberate negligence in the 1860s. At the time of its said famine, the British government had not yet formulated the Famine Codes but commission reportage forms an important foundation of their inception. Famine Commissions appear to act as a self-regulatory and self-surveillance role for the British government to gather knowledge for crafting the Codes. At the same time, they serve to provide consensus where none can be found: a consensus of the 'actual' unfolding of the events during the famine years so that the administration can move on from the scandal of each famine. Campbell's report, like many other famine commission reports, is a compilation of interviews with those believed to be at the scene of famine: districts officers, division or sub-division commissioners, district doctors, police staff and rent collectors. From commission investigations sprung a body of maps, related correspondence from each department, narratives about famine relief measures from smaller committees in each region, and statistical data of grain prices. All these measures provided by the commissions developed a consensus about the aspects of famine that was considered relevant for understanding the crisis and how to prevent it. The resultant Famine Codes show the "consensus" of famine markers to be resilient for the next few decades. The 1895 Bengal Famine Code considers the "liability of a tract to famine" based on the following "principal points":

> (a) the previous history of the tract as having been visited by famines or not; (b) the density and economic condition of the population; (c) nature of the soil and general capability of the tract to maintain its population; (d) how far cultivation depends on rainfall, and whether normal rainfall is regular or otherwise; (e) how far the tract is irrigated by rivers, canals, wells (Bengal Famine Code, 1895: 3).

These measures of famine liability echo the Campbell-led Commission's mapping of so-named, famine tracts. There is no actual science behind the stating of "normal" versus "regular" rainfall, or of the "nature of the soil" and its "general capability". There is,

however, a very real absence of who lives, works, and raises families and communities on that famine tract.

Professor of Geography, Brian Murton (1984) notes that the British-India records and sources of famine narrate "cycles of famine" that really "reflect the history of this type of record, rather than the actual history of the occurrences of famine" (1984:78). He examines the spatial patterns of famine before and after the British drew up the Famine Codes to show his readers where the research lacuna for famine policy-making lies. Murton questions the verifiability of the famine document in terms of the conditions of what makes the document a historical – or authenticated – record in the first place. By comparing the significance of each historical document in relation to the spaces of famine, his unconventional use of spatiality on temporality animates a famine landscape within the famine archive that is issued by the method of inquiry. According to Currey & Hugo (1984), the value of the geographer's perspective for famine should depend on it bridging the gap between response and "the perspective of the victims" (1984: 3). However, Murton is careful not to romanticize the victim's perspective and instead offers a warning that the variations between definitions of famine conditions can be great depending on the kind of document or record being examined.

Naming Famine

According to the Bihar and Orissa Famine Code of 1930, the declaration of famine:

> [D]oes not imply the assumption by Government of any new responsibility for combating distress. It is a recognition that the distress, for the alleviation of which Government have already adopted the measures described in the previous chapters, has assumed proportions which require a widening of ameliorative measures, a more amply provision of funds and consequently more detailed and more frequent reports on the situation (Government of Bihar and Orissa, 1930: 18).

The "previous chapters" refer to a set of guidelines called "Expectation of Distress and Period of Small Scale Relief". Broadly, the code distinguishes between pre-famine and

famine stage as "expectation of distress" and "in times of distress". In each stage, every official is given specific instructions as to his jurisdiction, administrative powers and responsibilities. Taking the District Officer as an example, in the stage of expectation he is to visit areas of "scarcity" and "form an estimate of the degree of distress which is likely to occur in each"(1930:5). Additionally, he should "consider in some detail what village works will be suitable...what means of employment will be available, e.g. on district board works, railway works, etc" (1930:5). If in times of distress, the District Officer must carry out, along with all officers on famine duty within his district, "all matters relating to the employment and wages of labourers, the opening or closing of works, the fixation and variation of tasks" (1930:21). We can see the code roughly divides response into two main objects: preventive and remedial (Government of Bihar and Orissa, 1930).

However, the line between the preventive and the remedial is indeterminate since the delineation of when a famine starts or ends is unclear. More significantly, the Famine Codes have been revised many times over in all three Presidencies to reflect the legislative, geographical, religious and ethnological organization of British territories. The impulse to define famine only showed up in official records after Colonel Baird Smith's report on famine in the North-Western Provinces in 1861, and was further agitated by Campbell's report in 1867. And even after the Codes were formally incepted in 1880, the administration continued to dispute the definition of famine. Yet colonial historians – members of the administration who write famine as historical record – manage to point to records of famine in India from as far back as 1345. The British-Indian history of famine is both a myth of elaborate development that naturalizes famine history and mystifies famine; as Chakrabarty (1994) puts it, "their own representations of 'progress' were explicitly riddled with self-doubt" (1994: 87) and the nightmare of famine made this doubt all the worse.

Smith's report, published in the newspapers, revealed a famine that brought the colonial administration into crisis. When the Crown took over from what was popularly deemed, the incompetence of the East India Company, what the British needed, and

indeed struggled with, was a narrative by which the functions of colonial rule might continue to be justified in the face of its worst nightmares. The definition of famine in such a narrative should, ideally, cohere the past and future to reflect the economic and technological imperatives of the colonial present – the antidote to nightmare is to wake up (to safe realities). The result of this, is a famine wedged in a kind of Emancipatory History wherein the colonized emerge from the Dark Ages of pre-official famines. Commenting on Colonel Baird Smith's report, Professor of History, G. W. Forrest says:

> It is worthy of the man [Colonel Baird Smith] whose genius, courage, and labour did such good service in Delhi in the days of peril and danger. Deeply and fearlessly he searches out the origin of evil; and as fearlessly lays it open. Plainly and without disguise the errors of the past are laid bare, and he shows how calamity can be mitigated in the future (Forrest, 1897: 6-7).

Indeed, once "laid bare", the next imperative is to discover a scientific cure for famine. In this endeavor, the administration found itself going back to the "origin of evil" to recast the shape of such evil, which in fact, could not easily be confined in a single inscription.

For one, the monetary expense of combating the evils of famine required inexpensive definitions of famine; this is easier written than practiced. Also, the villagers were not active participants in defining famine; in fact, the perspectives of the locals are considered directly at odds with a workable concept of famine. The Board of Revenue is often at pains to lay down a consensual definition of famine since it was grounds for zemindars to ask for remissions (exemptions from rent payments). Quite literally, the administration desired a concept of famine that enhanced rather than disrupted the working of the revenue system. There is a near-obsession in the archive with the word even before a definite famine policy was laid out:

> In some of the earliest papers the word was freely used; but the failure having been early called in official documents "scarcity" and not famine, it seems as if, as the scarcity and want became more intense, the official use of the term "famine" was gradually pushed back into narrower and narrower limits. The Board of Revenue, in their Administration Report of 20th August 1866, under the

> heading "the scarcity" seem to maintain that there was no "famine" in Orissa till the very last days of May (Report of the Commissioners, 1867: 25).

Not unlike Howe and Devereux's paper, the British officials distinguished levels of "intensity" of famine by using the seemingly milder term of scarcity. It is significant that the zemindars' requests for remissions figure centrally in the sections of the report on the Board of Revenue. The official attachment to having demonstrable definitions of famine might have something to do with something William Alston (1964) pointed out – again in the Lockean, empiricist view:

> A word gets a meaning by becoming associated with a certain idea in such a way that the occurrence of the idea in the mind will set off (or tend to set off) the utterance of the word, and hearing the word will tend to bring about the appearance of the idea in the mind of the hearer (Alston, 1964: 63-64).

According to Levinas (1973), the Lockean view of the world "places subject and object in the same world, which it calls nature [consciousness], and studies their relation as a relation of causality" (1973: 15). It does seem that officials place famine within a kind of administrative consciousness so that the crisis becomes a question of knowing what the 'standard' or 'definition' of famine is. Whenever the name 'famine' is uttered, it acts as the evidence for activating definition even though there is no longer any objective way of explaining why or how the evidence follows from the definition, i.e. no way of explaining the cause of causality. The result, Levinas (1973) adds, is "Truth [that] is only this feeling of evidence" and all observations from this Truth will "have a descriptive value, but they cannot be used to derive any assertion concerning the existence of values" (1973: 15,18). The kind of "feeling" described here does appeal to the efficacy of bureaucratic flow; In an essay entitled "Remaking Custom: The Discourse and Practice of Colonial Codification", Neeladri Bhattacharya (1996) argues that "Benthamite utilitarian positivists" (1996: 22) such as James Mill believed that "Individuals were bound not by ties of community but by a commitment to clear, determinate, unambiguous public rules, systemized into a single universal code enacted by a proper legislative authority" (1996: 23-24).

In the nineteenth century, individuals concerned with the governance of India combined Lockean empiricism with the idea of state legitimacy and authority in Rousseau's social contract theory, and developed an unwavering belief in the power of codification. For the famine administration, this played out in a perverse ethic. The very name of famine inaugurated a set of codes that resonated badly with the officials who struggled to juggle their responsibilities to imperial revenue and the population's welfare. The utterance of the word famine seemed to "set off", in the mind of the Board of Revenue remissions or drops in revenue to such an extent that, eventually, the Board declared a categorical refusal of all appeals for remissions from the zemindari even before these requests were acknowledged. "[B]oth the Commissioner or the Board of Revenue refuse to even allow collectors to make official enquiries to corroborate the appeal of remission... to stop all such enquiries in whatever form and with whatever object"(Report of the Commissioners, 1867: 36).

Quite clearly, the empirical criterion inverts itself so that the word and its implications become prior to any demonstration of famine. The definition of famine is held so firmly by the Board of Revenue that the word rather than the actual crisis becomes the overruling contingent. Incredulous as it may sound, this perverted empiricism proves to be persistent in following records. It is, as Murton noted, a phenomenon of inscription rather than a phenomenon of famine; what we have instead in the archives of the Codes is simulacra. Everywhere we see simulacra and everywhere we see that the repetition of parousia, in which the ontology of famine has prior claims over the Other.

In 1873, William W. Hunter grappled with the definition of famine when he was commissioned to produce land statistics in India. He worked out that:

> Different ideas are entertained as to the point at which scarcity amounts to famine, but for political and financial purposes, this point may be taken to be that at which Government relief operations become necessary, that is to say, when in order to save people from starvation, the State has to find work and food (or wages) for the able-bodied, and to give food in charity to those who are incapable of labour (Hunter, 1873: xi).

Going by Hunter's definition, the predicates of an official famine are actions related to compulsion, to necessity, to no other possibility. This reasoning parallels the privileging of official perception; Government must first perceive their sponsorship as necessary before it can be considered necessary. It must first be rationalized by official humanitarian consciousness.

Famine is trapped in consciousness, and thus becomes an "unerasable trace", which Derrida (1978) argues, "is not a trace, it is a full presence, an immobile and uncorruptible substance, a son of God, a sign of parousia and not a seed, that is, a mortal germ" (1978: 289). In calculating the verifiable conditions of famine, the administration also calculates the point at which decision is dead – the point when "relief operations become necessary... to save people from starvation" – there is no choice but. Hunter's definition is operationally meaningless since famine is only famine after it is too late. His definition, like many other official definitions in the archive, hinges on the absolute determinacy of utter starvation. [This hinge is double because the emphasis on perceptible starvation also reflects a concomitant Western idealization of the idea of Nutrition – Absolute Health – and I will be exploring this regime in greater detail in Chapter V via the career of rice in Bengal.] Officials were keen to eliminate the decision to intervene altogether, and applied this motivation to every facet of famine policy.

One of the major scandals in India's archive was the Bengal and Orissa famine in 1866 when the Government famously refused to import rice into the famine regions until the very last minute or when they could not deny the presence of famine any longer. In Orissa:

> On 31 January, [the] works were at a standstill for want of rice, and asked urgently for leave to import. The Board, however, peremptorily refused permission. "The Government decline to import rice into Puri [Pooree]. If the market favours importers, rice will find its way into Pooree without Government interference, which can only do harm (Report of the Indian Famine Commission, 1885: 46).

To be sure, this does not contradict the overall humanistic push in the codes' governing rhetoric. The relief architecture 'set off' by the Famine Codes – the Public Works – cultivates another body of inscriptions that translate the call to response, the so-called humanistic motivations in which one code, that of the Madras Famine of 1883 declares as the "first principle... to save life, and to this end all other considerations must be subordinated" (Madras Government, 1883: 1). This humanistic rhetoric circulates on the general level but transforms itself at specific official-local interfaces. The Indian Government maintains a coherent overall rhetoric regarding free market principles and factual "mapping" of the famine crisis while at the level of translating these codes into practice, the ethical decision is relegated to phenomenal criterion. But as evidenced by the preemptive deaths of the decision, such phenomena do not actually arise out of empirical observation but rather, out of the effort of pre-conceived concepts. What we have, as a result of this, is the unscientific famine.

Pure Sign of Fraternity

If not science, then what is the basis of the humanitarian call to respond to famines? Human Fraternity is often the axiom that articulates itself as the foundation of humanitarianism. In his article about the ideological contradictions embedded in the humanitarian Code of Conduct, Peter Walker acknowledges the struggle of founding a document that purports to both articulate the singularity of humanity as plea for response and to authenticate collective responsibility. A singularity, he says, was the basis of drafting a Code of Conduct: "humanitarian NGOs could and should ... be stimulated into coherent action" (Walker, 2004: 325). However, in his examination of ethics in language, Levinas (1981) reminds us that the status of what is said does not guarantee its performance, especially that of its responsibility to alterity. The humanitarian notion of fraternity has been awarded a status as concept more than as a signifier of actual, meaningful friendships.

To borrow again from Derrida (1997), he asks in his later, more politically outright work, such as in the *Politics of Friendship*:

> [W]hat would the definition of 'humanitarian' be in its unheard-of forms with respect to what Kant calls – let us recall – 'the friend of man', a concept Kant intends to keep separate from that of the 'philanthropist'? In what respect does the humanitarian participate in this process of fraternizing humanization that we are questioning here? (Derrida, 1997: 272).

In the gesture of rationalizing scenes of hunger, the famine code thus, has a particular logic. In the (hyper-real) event of a humanitarian crisis such as famine there is a burden of information in the public domain, the creation of code, this system of sign-signals, is publicly instituted[11] for signification (famine). This is manifest in the production of the statistical quantifications and classifications of creating codes at various levels of the phenomenon – "military intervention/neutral aid", and "normalcy/distress/crisis". These terms repeat themselves and in repetition, spawn a plethora of tropes, figures and symbols that circulate in ways that mean their authority to authenticate and activate responsibility in any crisis is ritualistic than truly empirical.

A useful theory to borrow is Derrida's examination of language since, as we have seen, the intelligibility found in the logic of language systems lends itself to the impetus to establish inventories of codes/names. Derrida (1978) posits that a pure sign is one that signifies but signifies nothing – it bears no transition to a signified; a pure language is then one that carries no meaning. I argue that the oft demonstrated futility of naming, measuring and classifying in being a response to the Other shows that these scales or codes may be understood as "pure" language and when, upon inscription, they collect on the facades of official reports, traverse "a surface whose essential characteristic is to be infinitely transmissible" (Derrida, 1978: 13).

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[11] Some would argue (as Foucault has done in *History of Sexuality*) that everything is directly or indirectly (and more powerfully) instituted, disputing and negating Habermasian distinction of public or private spheres. It is interesting to consider this question with regard to humanitarian ethics during a famine: is there any validity to the distinction with regard to ethics of such a crisis, seeing that famine, however handled, is morally public, which produces its effects irrespective of private or public forms (such as charity) of ethics?

Right after the famed artificial famine in Bengal during the early 1940s, the report of the India Famine Commission stated: "[T]he Commission holds that scientific knowledge and technology make it possible so as to develop the resources of India as to "remove any future threat of famine and decisively raise standards of living and nutrition" and goes on to continue to stress the dangerous impact of "population increase" (Madras Government, 1946: 172). Displaying an almost comical attempt to preserve the unifying document (as well as awareness of the absence of signification within it), and to justify the invocation of Malthusian ghosts[12] (even though these ghosts are thought to have been long exorcised by previous attacks against colonial administration during the 1876 Madras famine), the Commission says very carefully:

> This is not an academic treatise but a relatively quick assessment of a complicated situation, prepared by busy men as a guide to administrative action and government policy. Careful reading of the complete report indicates that many compromises must have been necessary to reconcile divergent views, and that the Commission may have hesitated to pursue the full implications of its analysis to the ultimate pessimistic conclusions. None the less, this is a courageous report, although phrased in the detached and moderate language of a government document (Madras Government, 1946: 171).

This remark certainly indicates an awareness of the poverty of the institution's own "detached and moderate" language, which "busy men" feel, fail to express complexity of the famine and the "courage" of summarizing such a complexity. The emptiness of such government documents' signification, as pointed out by its very creators, illustrates their performance as Derridian pure sign. If the concrete aim of managing famine today is to respond to another's suffering, it is also to organize response(s) of famine's differentiated realities, whatever the form. Then the antagonism of this division between the specific and the general means that in order to assert itself, the signifying

[12] Even today, the discussion on the international political economy of food continues to be interrupted by the Malthusian ghosts. In an article in the *Financial Times* dated 26 February 2008, Mark Thirlwell's piece entitled "Food and the spectre of Malthus" illustrates the persistence of framing a viewpoint that the supply of food and food aid (by the World Food Programme) is mainly linked to price gains and agricultural output without necessarily incorporating the political difficulties (a dangerous position already emphasized by the work of Alex De Waal and David Keen) into such a financial analysis.

function of an official document such as the Commission report, often makes approximations. When this repeats itself to the degree that the document is no longer the third party between famine and our knowledge structures, but behaves instead as the contingent, what is left is the cancelling out of the event altogether. Leaving a neutered space (present absence), a null identity, or an empty signification of the Commission report and within it, of famine. It is not that it signifies nothing, rather it signifies by non-signification.

Expurgated and rendered scientifically useful, whether by governments or corporatist groups, the Indian Famine Codes, may be employed paradoxically as both ethical alibi and jury, which award them certain status as "historical documents". And while we are dealing with these documents as being part of a larger discourse, they are akin to what Michel Foucault (1976) famously refers to as, "authorized vocabulary" (1976: 17). As jury and alibi, codes are effects of each other and produce effects – they produce knowledge by marking down positive denotations of boundaries and limits while leaving open the question of why any person should act in accordance with codes.

The possibility of constituting code as a specific object of famine science designates not only the role and primacy of official or authorized observation but also the subordination of famine response to deductions (from the code) and calculations (in the code's field of reportage). The Indian Famine Codes provide a discursive place in which the officials can demonstrate their (lack of) knowledge of the famine crisis. Since the Famine Commission laid down a definite famine policy, famine response is subsequently organized as a hierarchy of levels:

> In every village there was an official called a "patwari", and under the Famine Code he was desired in ordinary times to periodically report upon the condition of the crops belonging to his village... these reports finally got to the commissioner, the highest executive official nearest to the Lieutenant-Governor of the province...the work of notion, record, and observation was complete from beginning to end...this remarkable code was a monument of patient and prescient administrative work, principled by the highest motives, and based on the latest and most effective executive position (Liverpool Mercury, Lord Hamilton, 1896: 5).

This is Lord G. Hamilton's detailed assurance, on 18th November 1896 to the readers of the Liverpool Mercury newspaper that the famine conditions in India's Northwest provinces were not cause for worry or alarm; or at least the Famine Code, being an administrative jewel, gave little justification for any doubt in the public's minds of the administration's capabilities[13]. The problem is, however, that all these levels indicated by Lord Hamilton's claim are not homologous. Despite this, the Code carries on behaving like a "monument", producing and enabling the multiplication of "authorized vocabulary" to speak of famine and affect how this speech is carried out.

It is this juxtaposition of authority and knowledge that has been seized upon by theorist Michel Foucault, who was interested in the Victorian period of the nineteenth century, for whom the reign and powers of this Empress of India constitutes fertile grounds for arguing repressed desires. Rather than joining in the fight for undoing repression, Foucault (1976) was more interested in the inner contradictions of what seemed like a straightforward vocabularizing and censorship of certain objects in Victorian history.

The repressive hypothesis is problematic for Foucault. His archeological method begins by considering "objects" as constituted articulations and in doing so, Foucault re-imbues these objects with the energies of those who speak them. From this perspective, it may be argued that the famine scales or "remarkable" Famine Code (as referred to by Lord Hamilton) are in part effects of what Foucault (1976) calls institutional incitement: "an institutional incitement to speak about it, and to do so more and more... and to cause it to speak through explicit articulation and endlessly accumulated detail" (Foucault, 1976: 18). For the British administrators who dealt with the famines in colonial India, this "institutional incitement to speak about it" occurred more or less around the time India was brought under the scrutiny of the Crown (in 1858), presumably also when the famines faced increasing public exposure and criticism in England. This institutional incitement, or scrutinized circulation and exposure, works together with the "perceived and desired unity" to multiply effects, including a revival of

[13] In the two decades of 1878 – 1901, 8 million Indians were recorded as having perished in famines throughout the territories including the North-west provinces.

what Derrida (1994) often calls the referent, or resuscitation of old spectres. Some might say indeed they were never really dead – old "authorized vocabularies" become fused as pure signs, no longer reliant on the sum of its parts (objectivity, authority, etc), they form a new, immortalized, empty (pure) sign.

Automata

In a book called *Automata: The Golden Age 1848-1914*, collector and restorer of automata, Christian Bailly, gives a history of these specially crafted toys – automata – and the fascination with them in late nineteenth century Paris and London. An automaton is "a machine which has the form of an organized being and contains within itself a mechanism capable of creating movement and stimulating life" (Bailly, 1987: 13). "Why did the android fascinate the eighteenth century?" Bailly (1987) declared, it was "[because its creators] saw in it a symbol of triumph of human reason over ignorance" (1987: 14). This statement explains the later Victorian rationale that the body and the soul are ontologically separate. The former can be understood via the regime of physiological and biological sciences while the latter is a philosophical or religious examination. The life-like machine, or the automaton, is the outcome of this ethic; the view that bodies-without-soul are like a mechanical analogue, that they move, are in some ways primitive, and exist at the interface between the living and the non-living. In many ways, the colonial organization of famine relief showed that they treated relief-seekers as bodies-without-soul, as automata. The administration regarded the salvation of these famished bodies to be found in labour; without souls, they needed the virtue of labour to become valued, like those prized automata of Bailly's Golden Age, those "jewels of mechanical invention, requiring long and patient labour on the part of their creators" (Bailly, 1987: 14).

The Codes envisioned famine as a landscape of bodies that were not starved of food, but of work. The Times of India declared in a newspaper article "Let it be remembered that famine in India results more from the want of work than any absolute

want of food"(20 Dec, *Times of India*, 1866: 5). Over ten years after Hunter, the Bombay Famine Code of 1885 provides an example of this enduring attitude across the Presidencies:

> When in consequence of the failure of the harvest over a large area the price of food is raised and the usual employment of labour or wages is diminished in such a degree that the poorer classes will perish from starvation unless Government intervenes with measures of relief, a famine is said to exist (Bombay Government, 1885: 1).

The view of the famine subject as bodies that need labour has been entrenched since first half of the nineteenth century. The view was so ingrained that the Government officially classified famished children above the age of eight as "able-bodied labourers" (Sharma, 2001: 144). The only people who are exempted from this consideration are those deemed phenomenally dis-abled, namely: "idiots[without sense], lunatics[without minds], cripples[without movement], blind persons[without sight], the aged[without youth] and the sick[without health]" (Bengal Famine Code, 1895: 19). These categories of outliers who are entitled to gratuitous relief demonstrated what the Victorians considered to be the cornerstones of the soul – of having consciousness, movement, energy and health. Bodies without labour are like bodies without souls, and this view echoes the description of automata by philosopher, Rene Descartes (1596-1650) in his book, *Treatise of Man*. For this famous modern philosopher, the soul is only an agent of thought or cognition. The soul is not necessary for animating the body or causing physiological functions; the body may conduct its movements and energies independently of the soul (Descartes, 1972). In other words, unlike a spirit, the soul does not have a unique relationship with the body; it is merely the contained for the container. Descartes (1972) discusses the body in ontological terms – a mechanical scheme – provided by physiology and likened to a machine having such functions as,

> [t]he digestion of food;... the nourishment and growth of the members; respiration; waking and sleeping; the reception by the external sense organs of

> light, sounds, smells, tastes, heat, and all other such qualities; the imprinting of the ideas of these qualities in the organ of common sense and imagination...(Descartes, 1972: 113).

According to Sharma (2001), the "able-bodied" category "necessarily perceived a person not as a member of a household, caste, or community but as a mere labourer capable of work whose condition could be compared to that of a regular labourer in the labour market" (Sharma, 2001:141). The Bengal Famine Code's list of dis-abled bodies describes the conditions that make a "regular" labourer irregular, it demonstrates missing functions of those echoed in Descartes's (1972) *Treatise of Man*. Physiology and economics share a goal of rationalizing the body as a machine of pragmatic functions, or without perceptible scientific conclusions. This rationale parallels the recommendations of the New Poor Law of 1834. This was concerned with able-bodies as paupers, individuals who were "abstracted from his or her personal background" (Sharma, 2001: 141).

Before 1913, Bihar and Orissa were part of the same local Government – that of the Bengal Presidency – and all three Presidencies (Bengal, Madras and Bombay) in British-India had similar administrative traditions of famine relief measures (Singh, 1993). Even though these Presidencies mostly operated independently of each other, the ethic of famine relief came from a rather unifying theory of the poor. Sharma (2001) argues that the colonial management of famine relief "reflect[s] the Poor Law climate prevailing in England in the 1830s" including its "categories of classification and its language" for describing the poor (2000: 140). According to an article in 1841, The Derby Mercury reported that:

> Lord John Russell, contended that the New Poor Law was founded on the principle of the statute of Elizabeth, which goes at once to relieve the old and inform, but requires from the able-bodied a test to distinguish whether they were willing to perform labour. The Duke of Wellington had acted on this principle in allotting relief during a famine in India (The Derby Mercury, 10 Feb, 1841: 1).

In the codification of famines in India, this "willingness to perform labour" is sometimes established via distance tests – individuals must prove that they really need relief by making the travel to work camps. In effect, this justified any awkward locations of the camps (Brennan, 1984).

The insistence on viewing Indians as labourers proved very compatible with the colonial desire to map India. Through the use again, of the relation of causality, officials are allowed to justify the need for labour not only as that missing-virtue, but also as the economically reasonable solution to the causes of famine. The official belief about the main causes of famine foregrounded natural disasters – droughts or floods. As I have already pointed out, the credibility of such conclusions is provided by the apparent objectivity of meteorological and geographical observations. As such, what follows from such "scientific" problematization of famine is the official belief in technology and commerce as the only solutions – the able-bodied machines. President of the Indian Famine Commission, Lieutenant-General Richard Strachey delivered a lecture Physical Causes of Indian Famines to the Royal Institution of Great Britain on 18th May 1877, in which he claimed that the only way to deal with famines is to extend irrigation works and railways. The underlying ethic of this, he says, is that "True humanity assuredly demands of all Englishmen their co-operation in what will really conduce to the mitigation of the calamities caused by Indian droughts. But it is certain that there is only one possible mode of escape, namely through labour" (Famine Inquiry Commission, 1881: 7; original emphasis). The famine poor, these automata, would be the ones to bring the technological solution to famines, to fruition.

Richard Strachey's belief in meteorology, geography and finance carried its impact into the formulation of the Indian Famine Codes. Famine relief implied putting able-bodies to work and the organization of relief reflect homogenized groups of occupations. Every automaton was given a purpose or function: something the machine would make. "The 190 millions who compose the population of the British provinces... may be classified roughly as follows according to their occupations: - Agricultural, Traders, Labourers, Professional and Service" (Indian Famine Commission, 1880: 6).

Despite this, the Codes often show no indication that they recognized any differentiation between these occupations and their crafts. Under these specific occupational labels, the terms remain generic. In fact, the classification was carried out for the sake of it since only the economic value of the output mattered while the moral-religious value was a barred possibility. The Bengal Famine Code states that "relief workers" are "encouraged to distribute themselves into small gangs" and "in determining the task to be set, a careful estimate should be made of the quantity of work which can be turned out by the gang as a whole by a fair day's labour" (Government of Bengal, 1895: 25). Furthermore, the fuel requirement of these machines will also be determined accordingly; on the famished body, the mechanical ontology maps out everything from sex to nutrition. According to the Bengal Famine Code of 1892, "the full ration prescribed under this Code as sufficient to maintain able-bodied labourers in health and strength is – for a man: 8 oz. of rice, for a woman, 4 oz. and for children, ½ or ¼ rations according to age and requirements" (1892: 25).

The unwieldy application of the Poor Law's framework to India's famine poor is complicated by the British's weak grasp of the colony's vast and varied cultures and languages. The effect of which, I argue, debunks any simple moralized notion of the poor and instead translates them into dysfunctional mechanized bodies of work - automata. The lack of a Christian soul corresponded to a lack of virtue too. For the Poor Laws' poor in England and Ireland, the question of managing poverty was linked to the Christian discourse of morality. Many Victorians saw the poor as idlers, lazy and immoral. McLean (2004) points out the Irish famine poor were regarded by the British, as immoral individuals who breed without the ability to provide for their children. Christian morality constituted objects of poverty. In India, it is slightly different. While the Poor Laws' poor were poor because they were immoral, for India this morality is something applied after the fact of poverty. Indians did not have Christian souls, and the colonial administration certainly showed no wish to suggest the Indian soul had anything like inherent virtue. The Indian poor served only a purpose of utility and if any of them were given opportunities and educated to become the colonial government's

informants, they remained, according to Macaulay (1835), "Indian in blood but Western/European in tastes, manners, etc" (Macaulay, 1835: cited in Culler, 1985: 33).

The automata represent Indian bodies lacking a Western soul. They are starved not of food, but of the virtue of labour. The image of famished India is first established as a priority of knowledge; for the Government in India, the condition of India's poverty was never in question, or was never a matter for debate as it was for Elizabethan England in the discourse of the earlier Poor Laws. Categories of the Indian poor "were applied to famine without addressing the broader issue of poverty" (Sharma, 2001: 141). It was only when the cheerfully transplanted codifications proved problematic, that the discourse of morality is retrospectively added to the logic of the famine poor. The automata of India's famine poor did not demonstrate a complete "triumph of human reason over ignorance" (Bailly, 2003: 14) but rather, showed the presence of the imperceptible, the unscientific and the incomputable.

In *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes (1993) likens the question of what was outside what he "very clearly and distinctly perceive[d]" to the question of whether God exists (1993: 24). He recognizes that there are things that cognition cannot fully comprehend or apprehend, such as "volitions or emotions, [or] judgements [sic]" and that the origin of human understanding is not totally attributable to cognition (Descartes, 1996:26). Being a modern man and believer of sciences like mathematics and physics, Descartes, in asking if God exists, is also searching for a way to explain the normative dimension of human experience. He says, "I have often judged in the past that they are pushing me in the wrong direction when it was a question of choosing the good, and I do not see why I should place any greater confidence in them than in other matters" (Descartes, 1996:27). This is precisely the doubt that Levinas' (1973) philosophy transforms and that is useful for building the ethical problem of phenomena; the Cartesian doubt of cognition not only provides Levinas with autonomous intentionality – I doubt I am good, therefore I can be better –, but also a certain blindness needed for the Self to relate to alterity. Descartes (1996) concedes that there are in fact ideas or thoughts that are self-evident not because they are Good and True,

but because there is "some blind impulse that has made me believe up till now that there exist things distinct from myself which transmit to me ideas or images of themselves through sense organs or in some other way" (Descartes, 1996: 27). For Descartes, this blindness is a negative thing but for Levinas, it is neither positive nor negative, only necessary.

There is no way, of course, of telling if the colonial administration exercised any Cartesian doubt, but they certainly had adverse feelings for what they did not know or "see". Some have argued that the preference for sticking to such categories of labour and non-labour arose because famine relief is expensive and the British feared that if they taxed people to pay for relief, it would undermine the deal initially struck between them and the landowners; designing a famine policy of work would help stem the outflow of revenue needed to pay for relief. Thus, the administration tried to subsume unknowable futures and famine response under known quantities, under what Levinas (1973) names as the "Cartesian cogito" (1973: 26). Like this cogito, the policy was imperfect or more accurately, had no way of ascertaining famine policy as good and true. The whole project of India was already expensive for England. Costs also accrued from the military, education and the building of infrastructure, if and when these investments were made. In practice, the gains accrued from putting "able bodies" to work makes hardly a dent in reducing expenditure in India or stemming the outflow of revenue. Furthermore, disagreements among the Indian Civil servants as to how much of the planned infrastructure was actually built were rife. Levinas (1973) problematizes Cartesian doubt [and Judeo-Christian morality] by arguing that Descartes' reflection of God proposes a process of negation from the Self. The Codes represent the British government's attempts to apprehend famine by formally negating it through mechanical labour. However, the negation, in many ways, failed and not least of all because the rationalization process was empty and acted only on the surface of documents rather than via the famine poor.

Levinas (1973) both uses and departs from Cartesian doubt. He replaces the conceptualization of God with the unknowability of the Other (Levinas, 1973). He

invalidates formulations of the imperceptible that are based on known bodies and final, determined outcomes. Intuition, as Levinas (1973) postulates, allows us to see that our over-reliance on the famine phenomena dehumanizes the scene of hunger, so that the Apocalypse, so that the self, the Christian self is able make the gesture of rationalization required to join knee-jerk humanitarian sentiments with technologizing famished bodies. On the famished body, the incomprehensible and inexpressible incongruity of famine intersects with rational famine science in the most basic manner: the ontology of hunger takes prior claim over the interiority of the other.

The colonial government elaborates in many documents, their criteria of able-bodies by which the ontology of the famished is derived:

> The Ooryahs [people of Orissa] are, we should say, physically somewhat larger-boned and not so slight looking as the average Bengalee though they would be at a disadvantage compared with other Indian races. Their features are, on the whole, good, and both features and language indicate that they are to a great degree Aryan in race. ...we do not see reason to believe that they are in their own way less industrious; they have a certain intelligence of their own...we shall have occasion to notice, however, as one of the causes which increased the severity of the famine, the absence among the Ooryahs of any energetic trading class such as we have both in Northern and Southern India (Commission report to famine in Bengal and Orissa, 1867: 9).

The strong, Aryan-like bodies of Orissa are seen as if robust machines, they have the right physical qualities that promise prosperity and well being. However, it is up to a certain civilizing wisdom to turn these raw qualities into a productive force. The bodies alone do not constitute the human worker until intervened by civilization. The kind of prosperity envisioned by the British Government belongs to the liberalism of Adam Smith (1835) who wrote about the productive power of labor in bringing about the wealth of a nation. When a Commission is called to archive the famine in Bengal and Orissa from 1865-67, its writers must address the burden of inscribing official famine without compromising the English's knowledge of work and the body. For this, the writers resort to the Smithian claim in the natural human predisposition to trade; a predisposition believed to be absent among the Ooryahs. Smith (1835) wrote in his An

Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations, of "a certain propensity in human nature...the propensity to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another" (1835: 9). The writers of this Commission Report (1867) view the lack of such a propensity to have the terrible effect of increasing the severity of famine among the Ooryahs. The tireless machines, the bodies of productive labour are degraded by the lack of a vital Human food: the impulse to trade. This is a fundamental point. When the impulse to trade is viewed as a natural human impulse, it follows that the healthy human is a bartering human too. Broken and unhealthy, hungry subjects are declared as a consequence of a lack of such natural impulse, rendering the famished body unnatural and non-human – a machine. In this mode, the coded body, the dis-abled body, the famished body has no interiority. Famished bodies among the Ooryahs acquire, in effect, a non-human status. This, in fact, agrees with the general thrust of the Famine Codes that the famine subject is a mode of existence requiring only technological intervention – the building of public works to provide jobs like the digging of ditches, coolie work, etc. The subject, as pronounced by the Humanity that compels the Government to code Indian famines, is also the automaton.

The Mechanical Writing of Famine

The automata designate work in which no work is actually produced. They are pure signs of work in the famine poor are classified as able-bodies of labour. They become machines. They become their coding – labour – but where the codes do not contain the Being of these able-bodies. When Richard Strachey claimed labour is the only mode of escape from the evils of famine, he effectively paved the way for famine sufferers to be labour, to be famished bodies, rather than beings in which many modes – healthy, nourished, thinking and singular – under which their Being is possible.

The disgrace of the East India Company and various unsavoury depictions of famine in India in the press led the administration to create a structure of famine response. But it would have to be divorced from imperial politics since the economic

aims of the East India Company, although scandalized by famine, it had to remain entirely congruous to the logic of imperiality. After Baird Smith's report on famine in the Northwestern Provinces, the administration embarked on an extensive organization of famine information. Having never collated such figures before, the colonial machinery proved to be vastly inadequate – staff neither had sufficient resources or time to carry out the project. Richard Strachey's Famine Commission led an inquiry whose questions are to later reflect the general framework of Famine Codes – documents that would bear out over the next 50 years of colonial rule and beyond.

A major feature of this framework is the emphasis on agricultural statistics. According to a report by the Secretary to the Famine Commission, the project of building this body of information was propelled by Richard's brother, Sir John Strachey, who pressed the Government to set up:

> A specific branch of the administration, whose prime duty it should be to suggest measures for the development of agricultural industry in India; and one part of this duty was to consist of the collection of statistics which might throw light on questions of agriculture, and to watch the progress of commercial legislation and the fluctuations of trade... (Elliot, 35-36)

For famine in India, this idea adapts itself into enquiries designed around gathering information regarding the agricultural cultivation of food, to establish as it were, regional susceptibility to famine. According to one example, the Bengal Famine Code (1895), this would fall under the duties of officers and local government during "ordinary times" and the report of such investigation was organized like this:

(1) the amount and distribution of rainfall;
(2) the character of the weather;
(3) the progress of agricultural operations;
(4) the condition of the standing crops;
(5) the outturn of the crops at time of harvest [to be estimated in annas (16 annas denoting an average crop, 20 annas a bumper crop];
(6) the condition of the grain-stocks;
(7) the retail shop prices of common rice (mota chaul) and other principal food-grains (quantity obtainable for a rupee)

(Bengal Famine Code, 1895: 1)

On paper, these are framed into sets of questions then posed at local revenue officials. Afterwards, the information was to be collated into a specific archive of agriculture. Famine, thus, falls under the subset as an archive of agriculture pertaining to the production of food-grains. When John Strachey's proposal was heard and distributed among the various local governments, it was made quite clear that officials neither had the resources nor the means to obtain reliable answers to all of these questions.

What was recorded as evidence represented an orchestrated effort to unite a body of land and food information that simply could not be surmised in a single corpus. The local officials found the questions problematic because they did not take into account that Indians worked the land according to different sets of practices in each region. The notion of food, for instance, was significant to the people in ways other than mere sustenance. Even if crops and food grains could be identified separately, they did not necessarily follow procedures that allow for clean measures of qualities or quantities. Furthermore, existing revenue rates were haphazard and arbitrary and this had a profound effect on how the people interfaced with officials. However, these issues were not seriously considered since the people were largely regarded as mechanical vessels of labour.

Reports were nevertheless submitted and upon these documents as evidence, a definite famine policy was crafted. In this way, the famine codes represent the sedimentation of the various rounds of inquiries put forth prior to 1880. Addressing the question "What is the average amount of chief food-grains produced per acre?" the revenue official from Nizam, Moulvie Mahdi Ali, took pains to emphasize how his answers to the Famine Commission's enquiry have "not withstanding all the care taken, was unsatisfactory, and there appeared numerous and irreconcilable variations between the estimated and the actual returns of produce" (Mahdi Ali, 1879: 23) He goes on to explain: "[W]hen [cultivators] are questioned on the subject, [they] avoid giving any reliable information, on the supposition that any increase, real or supposed, in the

outturn would lead to a corresponding enhancement in the revenue dues" (Mahdi Ali, 1879: 23).

Mahdi Ali's disagreement with his own report is evident and further to that, his qualifications suggest an implicit differentiation arising out of these bodies of cultivators. Mahdi Ali probably dares not point out the obvious explicitly: the administration had the tendency to create an unambiguous class identity called "cultivators" where, in fact, no such homogeneity existed. Bose (1993) pointed out before that social categories such as ryots, zemindars arose out of a variety of factors of caste, tenure, occupations, community in which no single one takes clear priority over the rest. However, the practice of making famine policy for the administrators followed a legislative process – which the British have applied to many other facets of their colonies – that demanded such coding for the priorities of trade and profit. The enquiries were meted out in such a way that they did not recognize any frame other than that of their own for defining these bodies.

Famine codification amounted to a mechanical view of a scene of bodies as famished and silent. While clearly the peasant labour does in fact speak and can in fact have a stake in the way they enter famine narratives, the enquiry acted against this, proceeding from entirely opposite assumptions of the people. The famine commission's precursory enquiries were a process through which the colonial government appropriated famished bodies in specific schemes. Although these schemes have no real internal coherence, the documents produced famine realities according to the categories that they ordered. The enquiries, the process of translating the relationship cultivators or peasants had with a Western idea of agriculture, interpreted these people's relationship with food and provided a way for narrating a landscape of automatons in which colonial machinery and its laboring machines intersect in failure. What began as a project to monitor the so-called susceptibility to famines resulted, in fact, in codes filled with ambiguities and inner contradictions.

IV. FAMINE: A GUILT TRIP

In the *Genealogy of Morals*, Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844-1900) says that the origin of moral guilt can be traced to the notion of monetary debt. He argues that pain or hurt is narrated in terms of a debt to be collected from the injurer, as if it were money owed. One may then calculate a corresponding punishment upon which the notion of guilt is founded and directed towards. According to Nietzsche (1887/1967), moral guilt – the Christian kind especially – produces a debt-centered relationship between morals and punishment that necessarily predetermines good and evil in fixed measure. The famine codes of British-India perform a similarly calculative function via the Benthamite utilitarian principle where, "utility is meant that property in any object...[that] tends to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure...or to prevent the happening of...pain, evil, or unhappiness to any party whose interest is considered" (Bentham, 1823a: 3). The Codes were aimed as a guide to enhance the greatest happiness for all – revenue – by decreasing and preventing the "pain" that is famine, according to the Benthamite ethic of "directing men's actions to the production of the greatest possible quantity of happiness" (1823b: 234). As one such directive, the Codes thus demonstrate a belief that response to famine, to alterity, can be based on a mathematical exercise. The outcome of this calculation is the figure of guilt, the "injurer" as Nietzsche phrases it, from which to extract accountability equal to the financial loss of the administration. However the problem, as Bentham (1823a) himself concedes in *An Introduction to The Principles of Morals and Legislation*, is that the principle itself cannot be proven, "for that which is used to prove everything else, cannot itself be proved...to give such proof is impossible as it is needless" (1823a: 6). Therefore the notion of guilt in the utilitarian moral calculus is premised on an *ideal* and even though Benthamite principles are geared towards practice, what it produces is ultimately depends on a transcendental concept. I have already shown how the sign of guilt under the Apocalyptic Famine effaces alterity by rendering the famine subject passive in a final teleology. In the Bengal Famines of 1866 and 1874, guilt is signified by

blame figures. Not only do these figures reveal their reference to an ideal moral, they also ascribe to an *ideal history*; a history that, like the closed drama of the Apocalypse, narrates final wrongs and final rights, which in turn locks its founding principle within itself.

Archiving the Guilty

Lord William Hay asks, "Who was to blame?"(House of Commons Debate 2 August 1867 vol 189 cc770-818: 793; henceforth HC Deb). In that Commons sitting in the summer of 1867, Hay was referring to the Bengal and Orissa famine of 1866-67, the catastrophe described by Mr Henry Seymour when "750,000 of Her Majesty's subjects in India perished from famine" (HC Deb 770). Although precise mortality is debatable, the immense death toll was undisputed. The famine spread through many regions in Bengal, the most severely affected were rural populations including but not exclusively, Manbhoom, Burdwan, Bankura, Midnapore and 24-Pargannahs in the west, Jessore, Nuddea in the east, and towards the south Balasore, Cuttack, Pooree those regions that make up the Orissa spread of the famine. The famine's beginnings are marked by crop failures reported from the end of 1865 and lasted about two years. In the "end", in 1868, millions of people were reported to have died from starvation and/or disease. The sheer scope of the event forced an explanation from the colonial administration. William W Hunter (1868) pointed out as much when he posed the same question as Hay in *The Annals of Rural Bengal,* that leaving blame to the weather is not enough: "an Englishman, reading that tragical [sic] story at the present day, cannot rest content with this" (1868: 35).

In 1867, Parliament convened to discuss the Bengal famine because the famine had become a distinct scandal of governance. Exacerbated by the public furor roused by horrific eyewitness news reports in both Britain and Bengal, various pundits added to the outrage by expounding their opinions about who should be blamed for the famine whose warnings first came up in the fall of 1865. From a year before the debate, a

newspaper was quoted as saying "that the shocking famine in Orissa must be considered as a slur upon our administration, and upon those who are responsible for it, both on the spot and in London... the responsibility is a serious one, and it is our own" (*The Pall Mall Gazette,* June 25, 1866: 2). Regarding those "on the spot", the newspapers refer to those officials who hold administrative positions in the Bengal Presidency; they target particularly the Lieutenant-Governor, Sir Cecil Beadon, accusing him guilty of not importing rice where it was needed and ignoring early warnings of famine. Newspapers paint a convincing picture of a guilty Beadon. Calcutta-based, English language newspaper, *Bengal Hurkaru*, said that "[Sir Cecil Beadon] denied the proportions of the Famine, even when the Chamber of Commerce represented the matter to him" (*Bengal Hurkaru,* Oct 6, 1866: 2). Accusations of his willful neglect of starving people proved to be an enduring smear on Beadon's place and reputation in history as evidenced by his entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2009). It earmarked his career as being one marked with "misfortunes and failures" (ODNB, 2009: 1).

The Parliament session in 1867 was held to address the attacks of culpability against not just Sir Cecil Beadon, but also his boss, Governor-General Sir John Lawrence. Newspapers fanned the scandal fires by revealing specific details of official correspondence around the time leading up to the famine. A Commons member, Mr Smollet, highlighted this in the session:

> In autumn last year the newspapers in this country informed us that a telegram dated Simla had reached the Office of the India Department from Sir John Lawrence, stating that affairs in Orissa were very distressing, and...that an independent subscription should be got up in the city of London through the instrumentality of the Lord Mayor. The public papers gave the substance of the reply... to the effect that he [Mayor] would not countenance the application of alms... that Sir John Lawrence [was] in possession of £47,000,000 a year of revenue, and that the resources of the country ought to be devoted to the saving of life and the relief of destitution (HC Deb 787).

English language newspapers in India then took up the smear volley, published the Mayor's reply and, when reports of deaths poured in, suggested that Lawrence sat

indifferent on that reply, refusing to tap into revenue resources to pay for famine relief (HC Deb 788). Eager to narrate specific figures of blame in which any implication of guilt might be deposited and the price of it fixed, the Houses of Parliament appear to distance themselves – as Britain's main body politic – from any direct involvement in the matter. Famine dead is used to incite what Nietzsche calls the "consciousness of guilt" (1967: 62) and to pursue its equivalence in punishment, as Smollet declares, "700,000 persons had died through neglect, and [this is] a great crime, which demanded *condign* punishment" (HC Deb 785; emphasis my own). Subsequently, it was Beadon who was indicted by Parliament and the commission inquiry, absolving, of course, the City of London. The sin is calculated from not just the 700,000 persons who died under colonial jurisdiction, but also from the fact that they had died *despite* having monetary resource of £47,000,000 to save lives. News stories repeatedly bring up the £62,500 leftover from the North-west Famine Fund and the various cash advances made by the Government for famine relief. The general accusation was that, despite all this money, famine mortality remained very high and thus showed evidence of blatant administrative negligence, especially on the part of Beadon. Blame was devolved to this one man while his colleagues defended Viceroy Lawrence; George Campbell himself claimed that "I do not think that he [Lawrence] was to blame... his only mistake was in believing Beadon" (Campbell cited in Smith, 1885: 362). Furthermore, the juridical proceedings made it quite clear that it was *specifically* the India Departmental arm of the British government that was guilty of gross mismanagement that caused an unconscionable number of famine deaths. Everywhere famine reportage made a distinction between the bad egg of the government – the India Government – and the benevolent whole.

This demarcation of the good from the bad shows an attempt to insulate the British government from the problems in the colonies, even though British activity in India was never independent of policies in London. Victorian Britain thought poverty was costly and immoral, in and outside of England. The Poor Laws had already demonstrated the Parliament's dislike of gratuitous aid because they considered such gestures indulgent of the already-demoralized poor. It was not surprising that the Lord

Mayor refused, as Smollet puts it, "the application of alms" (HC Deb 787) when Lawrence asked the City of London for it. The narration of guilt and culpability has greater basis for reflecting the chain of command from Westminster to Bengal than for clarifying accountability after the crisis. Policy on trade and the use of public funds, whether for famine or otherwise, could never actually have gone ahead on the sole motivations of Beadon and the Board of Revenue for India. However, when a problem became a cause for public ridicule, the buck often stopped short of implicating the entire body politic. For example, in the Bengal famine of 1770, the East India Company was likewise chastised for its exploitative behavior. Back then, the press were equally scathing in their judgment:

> The newspapers tell us, that some time ago there was an artificial famine in Bengal, which was contrived and carried into execution by the unparalleled hard-heartedness of a set of beings, who to the shame, to the scandal of this island, are called Englishmen...(*General Evening Post,* April 18, 1772: 3).

The Bengal famine of 1770 invited tremendous criticism for the Company. Parliament in London then imposed the East India Company Act 1773 to establish regulatory measures over the Company's activities in India. After ensuing debates and legal revisions, its powers were finally given over to the Crown in 1858 under the Government of India Act. The entrance of India's famines into the English public realm magnified the political dimensions of the crisis, although it also revealed the Anglo-Indian problems that plagued famines in the nineteenth century to be not so different from those in the eighteenth century. According to Sanjay Sharma (2001), information gathered by the Company from as early as 1769 on the famines of Bengal, Madras and Bombay already raised questions of "monopoly, profiteering, grain supply, and remission" (2001: 35). The Company's earlier, already heightened sensitivity to these issues may be demonstrated in their representative's letter to a newspaper in 1775: a "Mr Becher" was very keen to stress that "during the time of famine in Bengal, or at any other time whatever, he never was concerned in, or benefited himself directly or

indirectly, by any monopoly of grain, provisions, or any other articles of trade" (*Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser,* April 13, 1775: 2).

Evidently, the problems caused by the Company's domineering presence in agricultural transactions in India were no secret. In fact, before the Crown took over, it was partly the disproportionate extraction of revenue from the land in India that provoked the English parliament into debate about Britain's role in India. According to Sara Suleri (1992), Edmund Burke had drafted the Fox's East India Bill in 1783 to recommend regulation of the Company's activities in India because the Company seemed to be operating increasingly as a governing device rather than an economic one. Drunk, he says, with the "intoxicating draught of authority and dominion", the Company Englishmen in India have "torn the cloth from the loom, or wrested the scanty portion of rice and salt from the peasant of Bengal" (Burke, 1784: 32). Burke's attempts to regulate the Company were eventually defeated but famine became a crucial point of articulation between opposed terms of good and bad, justice and injustice.

The Price of Everything

The politics of famine response, showing games of figures and statistics in which one wins by having the most substantial word on injustice, might have indeed accomplished Nietzsche's genealogy of guilt as originating from the idea of monetary debt. In the fervent calculation of blame, one may spot an underlying modern ethic that, as Bentham has shown, was couched in ideals; namely, the Truth of Science, the incontrovertibility of Experience and the determination of Cause and Effect. This type of ethic, Levinas (1999) describes, is akin to a search for the sacred,

> [I]n the dimensions of the humanity of man. Drunk with being *in himself* and *for himself* in the presence – or the modernity – that he unveils by his cognitive thought and more indubitably planted in his *cogito* than his feet on the ground, man is capable of sobering up, and of dis-interestedness and extreme vigilance *vis-à-vis* his absolutely other fellow men (Levinas, 1999: 5).

If, for Nietzsche, guilt represented the unacknowledged "contractual relationship between the *creditor* and the *debtor*" (1967: 63), exemplified in the search and calculation for persons to blame when damage is done, Levinas (1999) has drawn attention to guilt's significance as an ethic of modern Western discourse, characterizing the absolute insistence on knowledge – or human cognition – as an end in itself, and as the explanation of objective or 'sober' Justice for the treatment of others. The allocation of blame in the aforementioned famine discourse follows the trail of the material concept of monetary funds or revenue, and justice is found in colonial modernity's accounting operation by which the 'cost' of famine in Bengal is encompassed. The operation performs something akin to what Levinas (1999) calls totalization, in which thought tries to contain "understanding in an absolute Whole" (1999: 45). Perhaps Burke had indeed foreshadowed a certain drunkenness of his successors whose endeavor to increase pleasure and happiness for the greatest number somehow became that of the greatest power; after the handover to the Crown, the imperialist's self-image in the late nineteenth century had become sanctioned both as government *and* businessman. Thus, "drunk with being in himself and for himself", the colonial government, like Bentham, finds it "needless" (1823a: 6) to prove their final determination of guilt, where the only proof required could be found in the mathematical total of what Bengal was worth: its revenue. Colonial rationality represents the cognitive thought of the classic utilitarian, who tried to prescribe Justice after the scandal of famine through assembling evidences against a chosen figure of blame.

As leaders in the Presidency and in the Board of Revenue, Lawrence and Beadon were responsible for the profitability of British activity in Bengal. They had to ensure that revenues from trade and agriculture in Bengal justified their positions as administrators of the territory. For this goal, their unwavering support for Millsian principles of laissez-faire market economy meant that they did absolutely everything to avoid government intervention into the market, such as ordering the importation of rice. Defending his decision not to import rice into famine regions, Beadon wrote a

minute in which his remarks showed a strong collective belief amongst colonial administrators for interpreting a direct relationship between free grain trade and the extent of famine.

> In a paper by Mr J. Strachey on the famine in the North-Western Provinces, which was specially brought to my notice about this time, any attempt by the Government to import grain on its own account in time of scarcity is deprecated as almost certain to be mischievous, and a passage is quoted from Mr Mill's writings to the effect that direct measures at the cost of the State, to procure food from a distance, are expedient only when, from peculiar reasons, the thing is not likely to be done by private speculators. There was then, and for some months afterwards, no reason to suppose that any such peculiar reasons existed, or that private speculators would fail to supply the market (Beadon, 1867: 8).

Remembering that John Strachey was also the one who actively pushed for a dedicated agricultural unit in the administration to gather, analyze and store all kinds of information about the land, weather and crops, claims against "direct measures" of the State during a time of "scarcity" were extremely tenuous. To say officials had obtained accurate information about the state of the population and land in each province from its agricultural commissions may be true if knowledge were defined merely by administrative classifications. Otherwise, how can Beadon insist on the antagonisms between "the market" and "mischievous" importation in the face of the mass obliteration of alterity, those famine poor? Surely, there could be no conflict of interest if officials had any inkling of what the Other's destitute conditions were in those real terms that agricultural policy speaks of? To be sure, the policy was not exclusively applied to colonial territories only, but also to trade and agriculture in Britain as well. 1866 was the year that the Bengal and Orissa famine peaked which corresponds to the completion of Britain's first agricultural statistics. Significantly, the author responsible for those statistics, agricultural writer and politician, James Caird (1816-1892), indicated that free trade and investment are essential tenets to uphold during a famine. His pamphlet, *High Farming under Liberal Covenants, the Best Substitute for Protection,* endorsed free trade. Caird, who was once a Scottish farmer, believed in a principle of

self-reliance and the importance of high investment in the land in order to reap high outputs (Caird, 1849). Caird's professional opinion was that farmers would be safe from scarcity as long as they made proper and substantial investments in their methods and practices. Caird ultimately supported a liberal policy of land management and considered it a preventative antidote to famine. In 1849, in the aftermath of the Irish Famine, Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel commissioned Caird to study Ireland's agriculture conditions. His report "made considerable impression and encouraged interest in Irish land reform, resulting in substantial new investment there of English capital" (ODNB, 2009:1). On the back of his work's reputation for confirming the prudence of liberal policies, Caird was also sent to India under commission to investigate the causes of the Madras famine of 1877[14].

Alongside colleagues like John Strachey, Caird's work demonstrates an insistence on seeing famine as an economic problem and on the popular belief, after the Irish Famine, that, given the right infrastructure and with the well-functioning distribution channels in place, the hand of market forces would resolve the imbalances in the economy in which famine is a symptom. When staggering figures of famine mortality poured into the press, as with the 1770 Bengal famine, public and official rhetoric phrased the search for blame via the presumption that famine can be attributed to financial imprudence and malfunctioning market flows. Rather than challenge the sanctity of Adam Smithian market liberalism or admit that colonialism runs on a dangerously unfair economic system, the narration of culpability demonstrates an ethic that prefers to subsume alterity, rather than engage with it. As Guha (1997) reminds us, the British government recognized this alterity as being "utterly different from Britain... in religion, manners, civilization, language – indeed, in every qualitative detail" (1997: 79). The government was supposed to overcome famine through investment and reform, but this strategy effaces all the aforementioned markers of otherness, since most of them were considered hindrances to market efficacy. Market liberality failed to have any remedial effect on famine precisely because Benthamite ideals indicate the

[14] Elsewhere it is also known as the Great Famine.

imperialist's "dis-interestedness and extreme vigilance *vis-à-vis* his absolutely other fellow men" (Levinas, 1999: 5). The fervent recommendation of agriculture, as a measure against famine, fell short because it was more interested in the ideal – the Greatest Happiness Principle – rather than the Other.

Guha (1997) describes a "contradiction between Utilitarian principle and "Anglo-Indian" performance" (1997: 80). Millsian or Benthamite principles did not work out seamlessly in India because "the authority of the state [was] structured as an autocracy that did not recognize any citizenship" (Guha, 1997: 20). Although it is true that an Indian was not considered a citizen, or what Bentham (1823b) calls a "natural-born subject of such or such a country" (1823b: 67), famine documents reveal the colonial administration did not have as much internal coherence as the term, autocracy, might suggest. Beadon's minute reveals himself and other administrators as individuals searching for collective agreement to sediment what seemed like rather shaky views of the general mandates of the British government during a famine crisis. Beadon (1866) concedes in a note in his minute that "[John Lawrence] consulted me personally as to the proposal to import rice into Bengal and Orissa... his Excellency was strongly inclined to act upon the proposal, but yielded to my opinion and that of others that it was not expedient or necessary" (1867: 10).

The documents of consultation between the officials concerned not only shows they doubted the district reports of starvation but also there was a very strong prior fidelity to liberal-utilitarian principles overriding investigations into the situation in India. At stake was not so much the debt to starving Indians but the debt to a conventionalized mode of thinking. The autocratic model alone would not explain such thinking, since political will appears to be neither singular nor cohesive. Instead it may be more accurate to say that ideals had in fact taken over politics, so that governance became a matter of *performing* those ideals, rather than actually putting them to practice. This is perhaps a more accurate way of explaining the earlier contradiction between utilitarianism and the Anglo-Indian performance pointed out by Guha; it was not autocratic because Lawrence's hesitations show that the highest power in British-

India was neither real nor unlimited. What transpired was a performance of politics rather than politics, demonstrating reductive interpretations of the utilitarian notion of justice which might be surmised by Nietzsche (1967) as a "sense of exchange, contract, guilt, right, obligation, settlement... along with the custom of comparing, measuring, and calculating power against power" (1967: 70). It was the calculation of power rather than power itself that mattered. According to Nietzsche (1967), this names a false egalitarianism in which "Everything has its price; *all* things can be paid off' – the earliest and naïvest [sic] moral canon of *justice,* the beginning of all 'good-naturedness', all 'fairness', all 'good will', all 'objectivity' on earth" (1967: 70; original emphasis). Those guilty of famine crime, if such persons can be pointed out with certainty, are subject to the logic that these crimes have a price, and can be paid off.

The interest in establishing the existence of an objective beyond, or an absolute external force, is the reason why Levinas (1999) based his ethical philosophy against against the religious question of the sacred, of God. Indeed, as I have mentioned in Chapter II, the members of the government of British-India were of a pious society who equated imperial good with the ideal of universal good; it would not necessarily contradict their Christian or utilitarian sensibilities to pronounce moral judgments based on (psuedo) rational calculation. Although Mill (1874) debunks Christianity, he maintains "religion may be morally useful without being intellectually sustainable" (1874:74). To some extent, the collective narration of guilt figures such as Beadon demonstrates that Christian judgment may still serve a purpose. It allowed the administration to minimize the scandal of famine by rationalizing cause-effect, even where actual cause could not be pointed out with any precision. How this may occur unproblematically, even though no one can produce a concrete explanation for a transcendental God, might be explained by Ricoeur's (1967) exposition of guilt as part of Christianity's wider scheme of symbolizing evil. In *The Symbolism of Evil,* he argues that "it is not... a personalistic relation between God and man that raises the counterpole of an accused subjectivity; it is the ethics of a city of men that constitutes the focus of a reasonable indictment" (Ricoeur, 1967: 110). It may be argued that the career and reputation of Beadon fell

largely due to the amassing of opinion amongst government officials rather than to the outcome of any real debate of the Bengal famine. It was, in many ways, a decision based on predetermined faith rather than faith itself.

Ricoeur (1967) highlights the fundamental tension within the broad system of Judeo-Christian thought between the moral subject and its object. A subjective notion of good and evil can only be pronounced absolute by external, objective representation such as that of a government, the so-called "ethics of a city of men". However, it is impossible to apprehend the moral object, such as the 'reasonable indictment' of famine guilt, except via the subjective experience, namely, through the actions of figures like Beadon. Ricoeur (1967) thus offers the reflection that this external Evil does not necessarily negate primordial good, "evil is not symmetrical with the good" (Ricoeur, 1967: 156). Indeed, individual accounts by administrators attempt to diffuse the framework of opposed terms in official rhetoric about famine – the declaration of their evils, and therefore their guilt, does not correspond to an uncontaminated good of the rest of the government body. Keeping this in mind, what is left behind is "the disfiguring of an innocence" (Ricoeur, 1967: 156), the individual documents of the accused show the asymmetries between their experiences and rhetoric of guilt mounted against them, demonstrating ambiguity within colonial Reason. Sir William Herschel, who served in the Bengal Civil Service from 1853-78, retaliated against the accusations of the press and of the incriminating Famine Commission Report of 1867. Against the alleged malice of the accused, Herschel, who was working as a collector in Midnapore in 1866 insists that,

> [N]either I nor the officers generally, showed, or felt, any carelessness, callousness, or heartlessness...our efforts and measures were largely ineffectual...Then arose the cry of the Press, always ready in India to lay every calamity to the charge of the Government...what it [the Commission Report] did was, avowedly, to presume the officers of Government *guilty* until they were proved *innocent* (Herschel, 1867: 3; original emphasis).

The famine commission of Bengal and Orissa was drafted by a team led by Sir George Campbell and, when the report was released, British officials such as Herschel were

seized by panic: what should have been understood as a problem caused purely by Nature or God became a public embarrassment. Sir George Campbell's report is a judicial account of the conduct of particular officials, not least of all Beadon, Lawrence and T. E. Ravenshaw. As an implicated subordinate, Herschel, writing in a private paper, disowned the Commission Report as evidence of their guilt in the famine. Herschel wrote in his report about the less-discussed impracticalities of importing and distributing rice to famine areas:

> Has any one considered *how* we should, in such a Province as Cuttack even in the dry season, have conveyed 40,000 tons of rice over the country so as to distribute it even to every tenth village? For it is to be borne in mind that, in addition to the mere physical difficulties of transport (themselves hopelessly insuperable) the instruments at the disposal of Government are after all only men – according to popular belief, rather specially fallible men – certainly, men entirely inexperienced in such work; and that, in any such operations, an immense amount of human stupidity, and carelessness, and general bungling is absolutely certain to occur (Herschel, 1867: 9).

Herschel argues strongly throughout his paper that the Board of Revenue has been made a scapegoat for famine relief failures that should in fact be accrued to the negligence of the higher authorities. His claim against the Commission Report is that evidence was misinterpreted and that it gave Revenue officers no chance at cross-examination (Herschel, 1867). Regardless of who has the best facts of the matter, the struggle between the accused and the accusers highlights an important tension between the event and its interpretation. The latter cannot speak totally for the event without showing a radical want of knowledge. It would be impossible to undertake, quite literally, a count of every different perspective on the event without reducing the face-to-face experience that someone like Herschel might have had. To attempt to reconcile the absolutely irreconcilable, Levinas argues, is to conjure up false totalities. The face-to-face encounter illustrates what Levinas means by the singularity of the event or an "absolute experience" (1979: 71) whose absoluteness is brought about by its appeal to alterity rather than an Ideal. It highlights the unfixable nature of the Other, a crucial difference from sacred notions. Although Herschel's claims about the

difficulties of transporting rice seems obvious and minute compared to the vast drama of famine, it is precisely the minuteness of such articulations that might speak more prominently and significantly than the spurious claim to Famine Guilt.

Nietzsche (1967) rejects God as the pretence of false egalitarianism of rationalized (slave) morality among Christians exactly for the fact that there is *too much* consensus about the Truths of guilt and sin that we no longer pay attention to the autonomy of human will – Levinas' notion of absolute experience would be contingent upon such an autonomy. Where Nietzsche (1967) focuses on the inequality between the debtor and the creditor, Levinas (1999) emphasizes the radically irreconcilable relations between 'us' and the event. For Levinas, the radically unknowable event is ultimately death, but surely famine, the incoherent nightmare that administrative wisdom evidently found so often insurmountable, also proves to be that singular event containing the most ambiguous encounters between humankind, God and laws.

Peasantry and the Permanent Settlement

The famine discourse not only displayed adversarial relations between officials but also seemed to extend these relations to the Indian population. The Bengal famine of 1770 helps shed some light on this. As I have mentioned, before the Crown took over, it was the Company who bore the brunt of famine guilt. The crisis was considered a consequence of a lack of coherent policy in Bengal on the part of the Company, who held the grant of *Diwani* (since 1765). The Company suffered a loss in its credibility as a competent and entrepreneurial force and, according to colonial historian Loveday (1914), "had been seriously frightened by the final effects of the 1770 disaster" (1914: 34). Hunter (1868) wrote about the "corruption and heartlessness" of the Company's actions during that famine (1868: 38). Newspapers in London reflected a keen effort to emphasize the incompetence of the Company, and thus also to justify reducing the Company's role in revenue policy in Bengal. The *Whitehall Evening Post* said in 1783 of the Bengal famine:

> Notwithstanding these calamitous events in India, the direction of East-India affairs is fought for and pursued with as much avidity as ever...thus is the India Company in confusion from its center to the extreme parts, as if no Direction had taken place for years past (*Whitehall Evening Post,* April 10, 1783: 1).

The famine triggered off some political gestures against the Company by devolving power to agricultural policies. One of these policies emerged in the fuller form of the Permanent Settlement of 1793. It is in the rhetoric of the Permanent Settlement that roughly two kinds of peasantry are discerned: the *ryots* and the *zemindars.* In the discussions in those years leading up to the settlement, then revenue advisor, Sir John Shore (Governor-General of India 1793-98), refers to *ryot* as occupants of the land who were also "cultivators of the soil" while the *zemindar* is construed according to the ideals of the English landlord or "proprietors of the soil" (Shore, 1789: 50). However, in practice the *zemindars* were only really given the rights to land returns cultivated by *ryots* working and living on the land, rather than holding actual rights to the land. The rate of tax (or *jumma*) exerted by the Government as public revenue from these land returns, is therefore central to the peasantry's and the administration's incomes.

Although Shore was against it, Lord Cornwallis (1738-1905), the incumbent Governor-General of India, was dedicated to the creation of a Permanent Settlement. In *A Rule of Property for Bengal: An Essay on the Idea of Permanent Settlement*, Guha (1981) describes that Cornwallis regarded the famine to be "the most conclusive evidence of the worthlessness of existing economic policies and the best reason that could be there for seeking an alternative in terms of a more stable and comprehensive land settlement" (1981: 12). In 1790, Cornwallis declared, "the whole of the Company's provinces are in a general state of poverty and depression" (cited in Government of India, Revenue and Agricultural Department 1884: 80). He also wrote in his minute for the settlement that fixing *jumma,*

> [in a country] subject to drought and inundation... affords strong inducement to the landholder to exert himself to repair as speedily as possible the damages which his lands may have sustained from these calamities; for it is to be

> expected that when the public demand upon his lands is limited to a specific sum, he will employ every means in his power to render them capable of again paying that sum, and as large a surplus as possible, for his own use (Cornwallis cited in Government of India, Revenue and Agricultural Department, 1884: 71).

The argument for setting a permanent rate held that correlating *jumma* to yearly yields means the landholder will not bother improving his land to avoid being classified under a higher rate; a fixed rate might induce the otherwise lazy and mischievous landholder to improving his yield. Cornwallis associated Bengalis with greed and deception. He was deeply suspicious of them, and preferred the safe option of guaranteed and homogenized land revenue. The Settlement was propelled as a departure from the agrarian policy of the Company in Bengal in which the 1770 famine proved to be wholly destructive (Guha, 1981). Cornwallis demonstrates above that his focus was really on the landholder and that he considered the Bengali landholders to be mercenary, or as primarily motivated by material gain. To him, the legislation would help the country recover quickly after [the inevitable] famines. Evidently, he assumed these *zemindars* had the same motivations as one would expect from the model of European landlords, except in a cruder and uneducated form. Guha (1981) points out that Cornwallis "wanted to reform the old Bengali *zaminders*... to convert him, by education and the gift of property, into an improving landlord after the contemporary English model" (1981: 171). Further to this, Cornwallis' remarks shows an adversarial Anglo-Indian ethic; decisions of well-being made by the self is based the view of the Other as Opponent that would continue to persist in the following decades on matters in Bengal.

Bentham (1823a) invokes the notion of private ethics to oppose the interests of the individual against the concern of many or of the community. The notion of legislation, he asserts, is the "art of government" and also, "one branch of the science of jurisprudence" (Bentham, 1823: 236, 255). A common critique raised against Bentham is his tendency to privilege the interest of the many over the interest of the individual, but he at least shares one point of coincidence with Levinas. To be fair, his notion of private ethics does in fact acknowledge the autonomy of the subject, which he lets down by casting it in opposition to the collective. In a similar failing, the Permanent Settlement

was calculated based on assuming that the interests of "the landholder" is opposed to that of the public and of the British. Under such a framework, the colonial self perceives the Other's autonomy as a threat rather than a priority. Not only for correcting the 'confusion' of the Company and distancing the government with regard to famine culpability, the Permanent Settlement of Bengal also represented a shiny new instrument with which to organize Bengal's land and people while further cementing future revenue. To do this, the government's choice was clear: they opted to collapse private ethics into legislation, alterity into totality. If only a little, the notion of private ethics that Bentham so briefly gave life to does, in fact, animate the tension between the autonomous subjects, but falls short in explaining what the tension is.

The piece of legislation, sometimes called the Cornwallis Code, was incorporated in 1793 and remained in force for the next 160 years (Guha, 1981). As such, it was to become the legal backdrop of subsequent famines in Bengal. According to Articles II to III of the Settlement:

> II. The Marquis Cornwallis, knight of the most noble order of the garter, governor general in council, now notifies to all zemindars, independent talookdars, and other actual proprietors of land, in the provinces of Bengal, Bahar and Orissa, that he has been empowered by the honourable court of directors for the affairs of the East India Company, to declare the *jumma*, which has been or may be assessed upon their lands under the regulations above-mentioned, fixed forever.
> III. The governor general in council accordingly declares to the zemindars, independent talookdars and other proprietors of land, with or on behalf of whom a settlement has been concluded under the regulations above-mentioned, that at the expiration of the term of the settlement, no alteration will be made in the assessment which they have respectively engaged to pay, but that they and their heirs and lawful successors will be allowed to hold their estates at such assessment for ever (Guha, 1981: 11).

It is clear that the settlement affords *zemindars* rights while largely ignoring the possessory rights of the *ryots.* Cornwallis ignored the latter. He was uninterested in the occupants of the land. The type of legal language in the Settlement is exclusionary in that, by stating explicit terms of a fixed rate of rent or tax 'for ever', it automatically leaves out any *other* kind of relationship that the Bengalis might have had with the land

apart from those deciphered according to British landowning traditions. The Settlement produces a dynamic between *zemindar* and *ryot* not unlike that of the English landlord and his tenant, installing a concept of private property not easily translated by the Bengalis. In the manner of critiquing social injustices, it is not hard to see how a historian might adopt Marxist arguments for making a claim on behalf of the tenants but, as Guha (1997) already pointed out, "the contradiction between indigenous capital and metropolitan capital does not need an alternative theory of state for its representation in historical discourse" (1997: 97). There are other histories that tell us the Permanent Settlement did very little by way of enforcing clarity and homogeneity of terms between the peasantry and the administration. In one written by Sugata Bose (1993), he tells us that some of the Bengal *zemindars* were old territorial heads called rajas, some of them were "great landholding families... and behaved like feudatory chiefs, some were families "who held offices for collecting land-revenue over a number of generations", and some were revenue-farmers since the grant of *Diwani* to the Company in 1765" (Bose, 1993:70). Even as a pure legality, Bengal *zemindari* operated in varied ways, for which the terms of the settlement did not account.

Nineteenth century famines in Bengal threw the Permanent Settlement into crisis by accentuating the lack and disparity in legality so that it extended into social and *moral* discrepancies. Soon writers of famine seemed to extend the rhetoric of guilt via the terms of disparities implied by the Permanent Settlement. For *ryots,* famine was a verdict on the cruelty and meanness of *zemindars,* suggesting that they abused their Settlement privilege as managers of *jumma.* A strong, adversarial tone is reflected among those English-educated, *ryots* and *zemindars*, which seemed to mirror the tone of debates in Parliament. The narration of guilt took for granted a transcendental, immune third party; for Beadon, this party was Parliament while, for the *ryot* or *zemindar,* it was the British in general to whom the blaming discourse seemed to offer immunity. The structure of guilt and blame exhibited by *ryots* and *zemindars* bears some similarities with that of Christianity. The narrative battle for demarcating right and wrong, good and evil, takes place by setting aside an infallible transcendental

adjudicator; in Christianity this adjudicator is God while in colonial India it is the British government. Writing as an "Indian *ryot*", Abhay Charan Das expresses respect and sympathies for the British and blames, instead, *zemindars* for famine:

> [Famine] This is a subject, the searching enquiry of which shows the utmost depravity of human nature, and proves incontestably the unexampled and most senseless cupidity of the zemindars by their appropriating to their own private use lakhs of rupees, which the Government remitted through them in 1866 to the starving millions of Orissa. They also pocketed the advances they had received to them. There is no atrocity in this world, which may not be perpetrated by them (Das, 1881: 539).

Charan Das uses the example in 1866 to comment on the famine in 1874. He suggests that the *zemindars* showed an utter lack of charity and moral duty to the *ryots* and that the British were also victims of the selfishness of their appointed *zemindars.* Not content with airing his views, Charan Das also demonstrates support from the English press regarding his views. He quotes an article dated 31 January, 1874 in the *Indian Observer* as saying:

> A word of warning to the zemindars. According to the Calcutta correspondent of the leading journal, the native landed proprietors, with a few notable exceptions – three in all – are holding back and neglecting their obvious duty to their tenants in particular, and to their poor countrymen in general. The zemindars of Bhaugulpur are especially gibbeted and held up to scorn and disgust as refusing to do anything for their tenantry (Charan Das, 1881: 542).

Zemindars are thus narrated as a figure of famine guilt but under slightly different terms than those of British officials in the 1866 Bengal and Orissa famine. Accusations of selfishness and moral depravity suggested a lack of private charity that the British were eager to encourage among the Indians during famine. These instances repeat the Ricoeurian problems of allowing ethical reflection to be dominated by the clash of good and evil, and the tendency to reduce alterity to a symbol of evil. Less forthcoming in Charan Das's book is any mention of the monetary difficulties and dilemmas influencing the government's assessment of a moral responsibility to India's famines. Furthermore

acknowledging any collusion or cooperation between the Bengalis and the government would have compromised the Infallibility of the British – a crucial counter-myth to colonial exploitation.

Attempts to have *zemindars* shoulder the responsibility of charitable agency was also reinforced by the imaging of *ryots* as lower classes situated at the center of famine suffering. The press is rampant with such impressions. Although aimed at goading the colonial government into action, the press also produced a hierarchy of subjecthood. While this mode of relation – *zemindars* as culprits or potential 'savers' and *ryots* as central 'victims' of famine – can be useful for emphasizing the necessity of government intervention, it hints at a certain class-consciousness in which *ryots* rather than *zemindars* are associated with 'workers'; except that this is a Marxist analogy of the worst kind: the workers are thought of as victims, not social agents. In reporting on the spread of famine in the specific districts of Behar, Tirhoot and Monghyr, *Friend of India* news correspondent stresses that:

> [R]yots in these parts are very badly off, numbers dying daily of want of food and matters getting worse. The very worst rice sells at 8 seers the rupee, which puts a full meal quite out of the power of the lower orders. In all my experience I never witnessed anything so distressing as the sight of the poor starved wretches you meet on the roads, and lying on the highways unable to proceed further. They just lie down to die. Government must be cognizant of the wretched state these poor people are in, yet they give no help. If matters are left as they are, one half of our working population in this part of the district will die from starvation (*Friend of India,* 24 May, 1866: 605).

In this imagery, ryots are "lower orders" and described as "poor starved wretches" who apparently have no will whatsoever, such that they simply drop dead; it is clear that the article stresses on the sheer and utter desperation, and the complete helplessness caused by poverty and hunger, to make its appeal for official intervention. The problem with this "helpless" *ryot* is that the narrative of the famine is built from this figure of the *ryot;* and this figure, useful as it may be for eliciting powerful affective reactions, when repeated and privileged as the figure *par excellence,* equally aids and abets the currency of the *wretched category* of the Indian *ryot* as a predicate for the 'rightness' of

Government action. Ricoeur (1986) responds to the tyranny of the Good and the Infallible by making a distinction between evil and fallibility. Indeed, Bentham did not trust private ethics for calculating good because he considered the individual man's opinion to be more susceptible to error than a city of men's. Ricoeur tries to dissolve this distrust by introducing the concept of fallibility. For him, existence has a fallible nature, that is to say, man is fallible because "the possibility of moral evil is inherent in man's constitution" (Ricoeur, 1986: 133). If Bentham had accepted such a claim, he might have been able to move beyond naturalizing utility and happiness because Good would then no longer be confined by the demands for proof *and* the belief in original Truth. Certainly, Bentham's intellectual successors and their Bengali informants refused their own fallibility by deflecting to their chosen symbols of evil.

As a rhetorical strategy for invoking concern and charity, it is hard to say how effective the helpless figure of the Indian *ryot* proved to be; but, when the government did finally intervene in the famine, the caricatured horrors of starvation in the *ryot* did not necessarily disappear. Consequently, the re-play of this wretched figure reveal him or her to be a rhetorical tool that is also easily appropriated into political economy. Although the British government drafted political scapegoats among those officials in the Bengal administration, they were still left with the problem of responding to famine while divesting themselves of the cost of famine relief as much as they could. Although organized famine relief by the administration was generally considered the best chance against deaths, in practice, the forms of relief often proved to be neither complete success nor failure. The poor and starving wretch that was the *ryot* proved to be useful for officials when intervention did occur, but with mixed results. The alterity of the *ryotwari* did, in some instances, revealed their will, its Levinasian refusal to be continuous to the traditional definitions and expectations given by the British.

Location was a major issue when the government planned and built their famine relief centres, since the ideal was to have well-distributed nodes of supplies; in theory, the cost of famine relief could be minimized or at least kept under control if these well selected relief points proved efficient. However, according to a *Bengal Hurkaru* article

on 19 October, 1866, when mortality kept rising, officials relied on the wretched figure of the *ryot* to explain that these starving people refused to go to the centres and would rather wait to die at home than travel to the relief. The Deputy Commissioner of Manbhoom "knew that numbers [of *ryots*] *had tried* to reach the depot had been stopped by hill streams, and had died on their banks", but preferred to devise the *ryot* as having some kind of sheer, impenetrable wretchedness (*Bengal Hurkaru,* 19 October, 1866: 3). The *ryot* was regarded too wretched, not only for his poverty and inferior class, but also for his primitive lack of reason or intellect to the point, that he would choose death over the virtue and salvation of work. The same Commissioner's letter had been published in the newspaper in the previous day and illustrates that the Englishman's absolutely rigid belief in the goodness of work and that this belief, in the face of famine, was met by the stubborn counterpart in the wretched Indian *ryot*:

> I asked a thin, sickly looking man, who thought I believe capable of doing some work, was clearly from his attenuated appearance a starving person, whether he would work on the road as he could get no more food if he did not. His answer was no, that he did not understand road work; he would take service as a *pyada,* nothing else (*Bengal Hurkaru,* 18 October, 1866: 2).

Drawing from what are clearly Victorian sensibilities about the poor, the *ryot's* plight and indeed his final death are construed as effects of his/her poor nature. All that seemed wretched and downright ridiculous to the Deputy Commissioner about this subject would have been considered an intrinsic temperament of poverty; the "starving person" is here construed as lacking in modern understanding – he said he 'did not understand road work'. By essentializing the poor through an ontological deduction aided by moral reasoning, the process recalls what Levinas (1979) earlier describes as the "mobilization of absolutes" (1979: 21). By casting the poor into "an objective order from which there is no escape" (Levinas, 1979: 21), the administration could marry the ethical call of the image of the impoverished *ryot* with any failure of their (non)response to produce the 'good' self-image. This image is a kind of "egoism" akin to what Levinas calls "an ontological event, an effective rending... the rending of a totality" (1979: 175).

Debates around government action and response to famine in Bengal and Orissa often use *ryots* as the central victim, as if narrating the discovery of this wretched category of *ryots* as famine phenomena. This kind of rhetoric reflects, as we recall, the ontologically violent coding via cognition, as pointed out by Levinas (1973) and detailed in the previous chapter. The adversarial terms of this quarrel over heroes, victims and villains with little basis in the villagers' lived realities, indeed advocate "dimensions of humanity", as pointed out by Levinas (1999), as being "indubitably planted in *cogito*" rather than "on the ground" (1999: 5). For many newspapers, the *ryot* cuts a familiar figure to the colonial mind, providing a recognizable counterpart of the English pauper in its appeals to the Government to grant rent remissions to the landholders. Joteendro Mohun Tagore from the British Indian Association wrote a letter published in the *Bengal Hurkaru* arguing that, if pressed to pay up given famine conditions, *ryots* will "reduce themselves to the lowest depths of pauperism" (*Bengal Hurkaru,* 13 October, 1866: 2). The figure of the pauper is no doubt familiar to British administrators and English readers and reflects rhetoric redolent of the English Poor Law. The wretched *ryot* is a strong discursive accompaniment to the demarcation of *zemindars* as the guilty ones to blame for famine.

So far, the famine archive shows an undeniable tension between the goal of profitability and the goal of exercising a state's responsibility to its people. The conflict of these two goals is perhaps the reason for the collective ambivalence of famine response, in which each party is either moral but unprofitable or profitable but immoral and, altogether, wholly ineffective. When famine calls in the moral debt of Crown to her subjects, the legal backdrop accorded to this rhetorical game of *zemindars* versus *ryots* by the Permanent Settlement of 1793 reveals its failures in establishing a Bengali version of the English notion of private property and the stable peasant subject. Any attempts to implant moral integrities to a benevolent self through guilt assignment crumple in the face of the so-called Other evils. Beholden of the tensions pulling these *zemindari* or *ryotwari* categories apart, the figure of famine guilt guides us through the ambivalence of the modern humanitarian ethic.

Death and 'Special Famine Crimes'

I have shown how guilt featured widely as particular amplifications of famine as the outcome of immoral and imprudent behavior in government documents and English-newspapers sources; in division police reports, however, it was often the other way around. If policing is seen as serving the function of maintaining the boundaries of moral and lawful totalities, famine likely disrupted these limits and was instead interpreted as causing the failure of morals, as an event in which the usual social codes do not apply. No doubt deprivation often drove starving people to thefts and robberies, but crimes took a heinous turn during a famine and often challenged the usual provisions of the police and juridical departments. According to Levinas (1999), "death is the most unknown of unknowns. It is even otherwise unknown than all unknown" (1999: 153). Talking philosophically about the notion, he suggests that because "we speak of it without ever being sure that that is what we are talking about", death thus has the capacity of being a proper question to the order of human experience (Levinas, 1999: 154). Significantly, Levinas' ideas here might have played out in the way that the surge of deaths that wrecked havoc in the juridical pronouncement of guilt, such as this case in the District of Cuttack in 1866, did:

> The deceased, a young girl 16 years old, thin and emaciated from want of food, was on the 9th March picking up some grains of *dhan* [rice] in the field of Bunshoo Mohapatter and Bhallo Beg. They seized and beat her and burnt her on the chest with a torch; from the effects of this treatment she is said to have died in the course of the following night. The case is undoubtedly a suspicious one, but there was nothing to show that deceased died from the effects of the beating rather than from starvation or disease... the two prisoners were discharged by the Deputy Magistrate (Ravenshaw, 1867: 12).

Cases like these were recorded in the *Annual Police Report of the Cuttack Division for the Year 1866,* which also included Bengal districts Pooree and Balasore. If the cases of death were not directly related to the theft of food, the police considered them as

murders or, as with the case above, "culpable homicide" (Ravenshaw, 1867:12). Such cases articulate the difficulty of law enforcement when that evidences of crime intermingle with those of famine and may have accomplished what Levinas (1987) says about death, that it has a way "of announcing itself in suffering... [death] is an experience of the passivity of the subject" (1987:70). When villagers were so starved and near death, it seems the police found it harder to indict an act as murder or homicide. The famished conditions of the villagers introduces dissonance in the attempt to construct them as a criminal subject. The guilt of the criminal becomes ambiguous when the usual site of evidence – the body – degenerates to the point so near death that the "crime" is no longer attached to an active subject, where "death announces an event which the subject is not master, an event in relation to which the subject is no longer a subject" (Levinas, 1987:70). Indeed, with only barely-bodied criminals, most of such cases fall apart when they reach trial. The police reports showed less than the usual conviction in criminal prosecutions of the poor.

In practice, the police and juridical system found it difficult to cope with the effects of famine; although many of the cases were simple and straightforward in the facts, complications when the desperate intentions of the villagers were taken into account. The Commissioner of Cuttack, T. E. Ravenshaw (1867) states,

> [A] very large number of the cases of culpable homicide were due to the influence of famine in demoralizing the people. Under the pressure of starvation, they stole whenever they could find an opportunity. Those who had anything to lose naturally took the law into their own hands, and treated every starving thief, or suspected thief, with great cruelty... the Police have not generally dealt with the cases in a satisfactory manner, though allowances must be made for the great call upon them by the increase of crime; and by the fact that the sympathy of the villagers was always with the owners of property (Ravenshaw, 1867:41).

In contrast to the earlier rhetoric of blame games, famine is seen as the source of wrongs rather than their outcome. The crisis brought about a sort of uninhibited human horror and, as Ravenshaw points out above, may suggest how the people behave when hunger takes away their morality. At the same time, the parties involved in such famine-

induced crimes are framed by the terms of the Permanent Settlement. "Owners of property" have a ready advantage from the legal-objective formation of their land and food as "property" so that robbery or theft gains the status of an objective criminal notion whilst the "homicide" part of crime, lose potency in the diminished and starved bodies of its victims. The nearness of famished bodies to death, unlike valuing a piece of land or property, defy measurement. As Ricoeur (1967) points out, it is in the "action of definition and measurement by the human tribunal" that the modern Christian state measures penalty and, in doing so, also measured guilt (1967: 111). For British-India, the tribunal that grew around the terms of colonial policies largely followed the rhetorical rituals of English law but perhaps did not foresee the scenes in which famine sufferers took "the law into their own hands". Ravenshaw's description of crime "due to the influence of famine" shows the dismantling of colonial definitions of culpability in the encounter between English judicature and alterity that appears to be missing the distinguishing marks of the human civilization.

When the annual police reports reached those higher officials prone to throwing moral accusations at each other, the nuancity given by the intangible, incomputable forces of particular case narratives were quickly replaced by the inclination towards the idea that famine enhanced the criminal instinct in the poor. All those who held superior positions to the district level office were said to have "shut their eyes to the facts – while the jails were filling with natives whose one crime was their attempt to assuage the pangs of hunger in the way that lay nearest to them" (Smith, 1885: 357). No doubt the bias in Smith's account contrasts these rogue officials against the innocence of Viceroy John Lawrence, but it does indicate a general desire among those in higher government to deflect any claims that might have incriminated them. Aside from blaming each other for the famine in Bengal, official discourse suggested that the crisis brought out criminal behavior such as, theft, murder, etc, acts to which Bengalis were already predisposed. The belief in this predisposition was often accompanied by statistical evidence, according to annual police reports, which declare that the three

years when recorded crime in Bengal was higher than usual were: 1866, 1875 and 1897, around the periods of famine (Mukherjee, 1995).

James Mill regards Indians as generally criminal and anarchic, while fellow historian, Charles Grant (1746-1823), interpreted entire Hindu castes as having criminal natures. Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee (2003) argues:

> One of Grant's lasting contribution to subsequent English narratives about India was the formula of the 'naturally criminal castes' in India: 'There are castes of robbers and thieves, who consider themselves acting in their proper profession, and train their children to it... murder is very common... multitudes of individuals employ themselves in despoiling their neighbours' (cited in Mukherjee, 2003:32).

As such, if the British regarded their own poor as social deviants of a virtuous norm, the poor in India are regarded *as the norm* (Mukherjee, 2003). Grant was an evangelical Christian, and the Chairman of the Company. He played a considerable part in the founding of Haileybury College – incubator to many colonial administrators to follow – and wrote *Observations on the State of Society among Asiatic Subjects of Great Britain, Particularly with Respect to Morals; and on the Means of Improving it* in 1792 to qualify his moralistic views on India. Like James Mill, Grant saw a use for Christianity in India, where he regarded many customs as primitive and savage – characteristics later Victorians would associate with Nature. Grant's emphasis on establishing the primitive traits of Indian society as *evidence* awarded by Nature, in which the Christian influence of Britain would morally and socially advance India, is an approach whose inductive logic perhaps anticipates John Stuart Mill's (1874) critique of pre-Victorian Christianity. Mill (1874) preferred to discard the unempirical and superstitious element of Christian thought – a shift towards the modern progress of science that those pious Victorians embraced. This is most explicitly explained in his attack on revelatory Christian miracles. Revelation, Mill (1874) argues, according to "books and traditions... [even] original eyewitnesses" (1874: 219), is refutable. Replacing the notion of supernatural with phenomenon, he proposed instead a formulation of revelation based on human senses, where "divine interference with nature could be proved if we had the same sort of

evidence for it which we have for human interferences" (1874: 228). The Victorian government appears to have advanced this view for justifying the moral good of colonial intervention in India. Often interpreting India's cultural and religious traditions as if "an observation of Nature" for evidence to justify "rule of his [God's] government" via colonialism as the "means of second causes" (Mill, 1874: 233). The figure of the criminal Hindu serves as one of many exemplifications of the supposed antithesis of the enlightened civilization modernity and science might bring.

Whenever reports of crime popped up in the local areas, there was a quick tendency to jump to the conclusion of Indians' predilection for crime. In colonial discourse, this tendency is constitutive; it is not so much that poverty brought out criminality but rather that *being poor and being guilty are the same thing*. Reporting on the death of 5-year old child whose throat was slit by his father near a temple in Bihar, *The Leeds Mercury* concluded in an article called "Crime in India", that "the Hindoo, drugged with superstition or opium, broods over his personal wrong, whether poverty or want of children, or under an ever-growing sense of guilt desires to sacrifice the fruit of his body for the sin of his soul." (*The Leeds Mercury*, 15 July, 1867: 4). The news article paints a wretched scene, describing how the poor father scribbles out his confession for the police, although it is unclear as to why the man tried to kill his child. The fact that crime occurred during the famine period seems to have been ignored. The article prefers to apply the stereotype of the impoverished, superstitious Hindoo, guilty of his own circumstances and further condemning the whole of India as suffering from religious "idolatry frenzy" (*The Leeds Mercury*, 15 July, 1867: 4).

It is especially where there is no death mentioned that the police reports show a firmer, more confident hand in describing the crimes. Grain theft is the oft-described crime in police reports during Bengal's famine years. Likened to a 'trend', it is also referred to in the reports as famine crime. In *Crime and Public Disorder in Colonial Bengal, 1861-1912,* Mukherjee (1995) tells us that in April 1866:

> The District Magistrate of Midnapore [a district in West Bengal] drew attention to a new trend of thefts from granaries becoming more frequent and one or two

> having burnt down;... Looting of foodgrains was rampant in the Jangal Mahal segment of Midnapore, the seven police stations of this segment accounting for almost 75% of the dacoity and robbery cases reported in the entire district between November 1865 and April 1866 (Mukherjee, 1995: 53).

The proliferation of reported cases of grain thefts during famines in India looks incriminating. In another Bengal district, 24-Pergunnahs, the police report notes the rise in what the Government classifies as 'offences against property':

> [T]wenty-nine cases were all grain dacoities, which occurred almost wholly in the southern part of the District during the famine... there were about 857 persons supposed to be concerned in these cases, of whom 243 arrested; of these 176 were committed and 59 discharged; of those committed all were convicted and sentenced to one year and nine, six, three, and two months' imprisonment each, and seven were pending at the close of the year and one escaped (Chapman, 1867: 17).

In 1877, the Inspector-General of Police described dacoity as "the special famine crime" and considered statistics of dacoity to reflect the severity of famine (Yang, 1985:68). In *Crime and Criminality in British India,* Yang (1985) explains dacoity is "technically defined as robbery by five or more persons". In practice, the label is applied to grain looting, gang raids or feud-related crimes committed by groups that were considered to be of low social ranking. Here, famine strengthened the 'natural' conclusions of crime and the poor. In Jessore, the magistrate's comments were that "clearly then the inference may be drawn that the criminal population pressed by scarcity were obliged to take to thieving more extensively during the famine months" (Chapman, 1867: 38).

Nevertheless, the police reports of those famine years in Bengal reveal that the officers largely did not or could not impute the penalties of these famine crimes. For one, there were so many collective acts of grain thefts that arrests became so common that they seemed almost moot. In turn, the juridical system rarely developed these arrests into convictions since it was quite ridiculous to convict all of these arrested grain thieves, many of whom readily admitted to their acts or did not bother to conceal their crime. Furthermore, many of these famine dacoits often died even before their cases could be brought to trial. In the District of Cuttack in 1866,

> [o]ut of 1,1139 persons under trial [for grain robberies], only 88 convictions were obtained, to 762 acquittals, of which 80 only were released by the Police; 240 prisoners were pending trial at the close of the year, and 48 deaths occurred in jail; many of the prisoners having received in a weak and debilitated state, fell victims to cholera and dysentery (Ravenshaw, 1867: 21).

The results are a rather hazy incongruence between the supervening English jurisprudence and the realities of its practice. No doubt, the police reports reflect the format of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) of 1860 to the tee; the crimes are ordered according the categories stipulated in the Code usually, as I have shown, in the format of 'crimes against' followed by religion, property, public health or safety, etc. It is obvious that penalty was ordered by the negation of established schemes of civilization. However, at trial, when the moment arrives for sentencing guilt, the categorizations fall loose or become absurd; odd case narratives are left scantly recorded and in the margins alongside year-on-year police performance statistics. A case in Cuttack, classified under "Offences relating to Religion" vividly attests to the absurdity of invoking systemic definitions and measurements, where guilt cannot really be formally enacted:

> A man in whom the Medical Officer could detect no symptom of insanity, was convicted of mutilating corpses in the public burning ground and stealing portions of them. The evidence showed the he was in the habit of cooking and eating human flesh, dressing himself in shrouds and using skulls as vessels for necessary purposes. He was convicted by the Assistant Magistrate of an offence under Section 297, and sentenced to one year's rigorous imprisonment. In spite of medical evidence, the Magistrate is of the opinion that he is really not of sound mind, and should be treated as an insane... the accused was released on the ground of unsoundness of mind (Ravenshaw, 1867: 36).

The man was convicted according to Section 297 of the IPC, that penalizes who "with the intention, commits any trespass in... any place set apart for the performance of funeral rites... or offers any indignity to any human corpse" (IPC, 1863: 219-220). However, it appears the conviction fell apart since the man's acts went beyond any indignity or intent the government could detect. Both the extremity of the case and the

context of the famine, which Ravenshaw himself had duly noted, makes absurd the original framing principle of the "offences relating to religion": "no man should be suffered to insult the religion of another" (IPC, 1863: 217). The case narrative is entirely disproportionate to the provisions of the Penal Code.

Nineteenth century Britain was not unaccustomed to reports of necro-cannibalism during famines. McLean (2004) has shown us how the "consumption of unusual or inappropriate foods is a recurrent motif" in accounts of the Irish Famine of the 1840s (2004: 135). He notes specifically how the plight of the starving Irish depicted as "eating wayside plants and other raw foods" might be associated with the figure of "the Wild Man of the Woods of medieval European tradition" (McLean, 2004: 73). This was not dissimilar to some descriptions of famished Bengalis. In November of 1866, Lord Napier told *The Times* that,

> Some of the *Ooryah* cottages I have myself visited, where destitution and starvation might be seen in every pathetic and terrible form... multitudes of persons gathering a precarious and unwholesome sustenance from half edible roots, berries, and leaves... pastoral *ryots* who would under no pressure kill their cows, drink the blood of their living goats, and reserve the animals for successive depletions (*The Times,* 9 Nov, 1866: 9).

Hunter (1868) noted in *Annals of Rural Bengal* certain "aborigines... some of whom ate horse-flesh; others human flesh; others again, fed on the uncooked carcass..." (Hunter, 1868:115). Just as the scavenging Irish famine persons evoke the Wild Man of the Woods, the elusive corpse-eating, famished Indian criminal finds affinity with the figure of Hunter's historical "aborigine", in which "hunger comes to appear as a condition of exile from the social world" (McLean, 2004: 73).

In another murder case in Nuddea, an area not far west of Jessore, the 1866 report describes:

> Deceased, a person of weak intellect, went to the accused's house to ask for food and shelter. On being told to go away, he abused the accused, who in return struck him with a bamboo club thereby causing his death... the prisoner was sentenced to imprisonment for four years (Chapman, 1867: 56).

This case is notable for the punishment met out: four years imprisonment, same as the punishment dealt out to dacoits arrested in the same famine period. The penalty for causing the death of a famine sufferer gave the same result as those 'offences against property'. The incongruity appears ever more stark when one considers how, everywhere, the official line at that time recommends private charity: when this charity is not only refused but met with murder, somehow the colonial coding calculates punishment equal to that of grain theft. The result signifies the irrationality of colonial schemes of Reason. Summarized but incomputable into charts and tables, the case narratives exemplify categorical absurdities; they are amputated specificities of those intersections between the nightmares of the famine and imperial codifications. Despite extolling condign punishment for crime, the practice of jurisprudence with regard to 'famine crimes' appears to calculate a quantity of guilt both definite and irrational.

When crime cannot be explained by reason, just as the above case of necro-cannibalism, the judgment turns to Nature. The idea of special famine crimes came to be seen as a kind of malignant inflammation of poverty's pathology: like insanity or, to borrow Ravenshaw's phrase, an "unsoundness of mind", famine crimes represent the hyperbolic manifestation of the natural and normal criminality of the poor. The characteristic criminality, which conforms to the Victorian discourse of criminal 'classes', produces a sweeping, inflated notion of the Indian criminal *genus* in which a Bengali magistrate is able to declare in a report for the year 1867:

> I can speak from experience, both of the *Domes* and the *Bedeyas*, that their predatory habits, which are inculcated from childhood, are not to be eradicated either by persuasion or incarceration... [they are] persons possessed with an incurable propensity for thieving (Chapman, 1867: 42).

Special famine crimes thus represent the exacerbation of propensities that Indians possess *anyway*, a claim made more convincing by the 'empirical' evidence or facts from crime statistics during famine periods.

The notion of famine crimes cannot be divorced from the legal architecture of which the Permanent Settlement is a crucial part. It provided the language to draw up direct claims of guilt about famine; the land laws installed by the British irrevocably transformed rural relations in India (Yang, 1985). By assigning land (revenue, not ownership) rights to the heterogenous and unstable and culturally-specific group of *zemindars* and cultivating an accompanying ethic of private charity amongst them, the law then, in effect, *outlawed* any other kind of response or relationships between people living off the land. The revenue system tied the cores of the poor's livelihoods to an economy not only of debt (based on the market and grain prices), but also of the liberal Englishman's moral economy.

"Who is to Blame?"

In Nietzsche's polemic, he likens Christian morality to "slave morality", which he argues "from the outset says No to what is "outside," what is "different," and what is "not itself": and *this* No is its creative deed" (1967: 36; original emphasis). A similar gesture of negation and refusal surely characterizes the colonial discourse on famine guilt in its deflections to moral transgression and natural criminality. The administrative chain of command said no to Beadon and similarly identified rogue members of government; the Famine Commission, discovers difference in instances of misadministration, such as negligence or the willful refusal to import grain, in order to re-assert and sustain the logic of modern imperiality. At the same time, this logic operates a series of symbols of evils – guilt, debt, and punishment – according to the doctrinal framework of modernized Christianity as given by the teachings of liberal empiricists such as John Stuart Mill; the mastery over these symbols of evil is demonstrated in formal measurement and exchange. It is important to emphasize, the fact that utilitarianism and Christianity could co-exist as registers of thought for Victorian British-India demonstrates how their effects go beyond merely ideological functions of Millsian political economy or Lockean empiricism even though these provide the formal domains

of imperial world-views. In the first place, reasoned utility and religion is a false antinomy. Although posited as a critique of Christianity, the liberal empirical stance of Mill (1974) never really brings Christianity's doctrinal concepts – revelation, God, divinity – into crisis. He replaces one dogma with another; morality with modern science; it is ultimately dogmatism that governs human existence. After all, Ricoeur (1967) also reminds us that a symbolic knowledge of Christian evils gains us access not only to its commonplace tropes, but also to the fundamental and mythic mode of existence, in the other words, the ethics of the religion.

This is where Levinas (1999) may take up the critical baton. His argument goes beyond the false antinomy of evidence and religion by taking issue with the modern man's obsession with cognition and sense as determinants of action and of what is good. The colonial encounter with famine provides a domain in which this reflection plays out. Ethical failure may be identified by how coloniality casts its alterity.

For one, the casting of alterity is really the casting of the self. One cannot urge or champion the cause of the alter-narratives, alter-memories or in other words, singularities with which interiorities practice and play in between or outside inscriptions, without first returning to what Levinas often reminds us of, the first pronoun: I. For him, "I" denotes "the monist hypostasis of the present" (Levinas, 1987:54), the first indication of substance, or knowledge beginning from the present. The colonial judicature process for investigating who or what to blame for famine echoes such hypostasis. This is the function of a famine commission: to authenticate the event's narratives via tabulating and calculating the costs, funds, revenue, land returns, prices, etc. Second, the ego of the "I" that says no to alterity already misses its target; the alterity is really the same as the "I". By blaming certain individuals, the colonial government does not denounce alterity; the Other is noticeably missing from the denouncement, which is already false. In effect, administrators have invariably divested themselves of their own singularity; the pronoun I is not a resounding one, it is not in fact governed by the self but rather by the ontology or convention of what self dictates: which is that the importation of grain *without* prior evidence or justification is not

allowed. John Lawrence submitted to such an institutional mandate, and so did the other political scapegoat, Cecil Beadon.

On February of 1866, Cecil Beadon was sent to inspect the provinces with reports of famine. In the week that he was there, Beadon states that he "neither saw nor heard anything about the famine in the course of this tour" (HC Deb 02 August 1867: 777). After his tour, Beadon even made a speech to announce that if he gave the order to import rice, it would interfere with the prices of grain and he "should be little better than a dacoit or thief" (HC Deb 02 August 1867: 777). This sums up the capture of ethics by lawfulness, by the contractual relationship between Beadon and his paymasters. No one can explain how Beadon managed not to (or refused to) see the starvation and the destitution at what was to become one of the most severe famines in India's history. Instead, what the administration appears to have in its vision, the famine phenomenon, it reads according to code, a set document, which is again a contract, or an agreement dictating the terms between the British government and the Indian peasantry. Beadon's inexplicable blindness reflects a preoccupation the imperial order had with sense-making, and with grounding the order of the famine nightmare in the modern order of human existence. Yet, at the same time, the ego of colonialism fails when it confronts death of famine proportions. The "I" appears to have encountered the absurdity that troubled the police departments of Bengal in those famine years, where dealings with the Indian criminal category defied their own codifications.

V. RICE FAMINE

The tale of Beadon's scandalous career narrates a famine in which rice plays a pivotal role. In sociological and economic descriptions, rice is often invoked as the central artifact for explaining India's famines, particularly those occurring under British rule. Often the notion of Bengali rice also figured interchangeably with 'Bengal's food' or often also India's food. Since the eighteenth century, Burke (1784) already described the Indian territory as "that vast extent of country [in which] there is not a man who eats a mouthful of rice but by permission of the East India Company" (1784: 12). Such strong associations were translated by historical discourse into another shorthand: famines in Bengal are rice famines. The persistence of taking rice for Bengal's currency during famines carried on well into the twentieth century. In the famous famine of the 1940s, the tragedy was embroiled in a political tug-of-war with Britain's war efforts in Europe at the time. Among historians, the famine is generally regarded as the man-made consequence of Britain's preference for allocating resources to war rather than to rice. Srimanjari (2009) describes "lapses in food administration during the way and the delay in implementing famine relief measures" (2009: 177). Understandably, the focus on the fact that famine can be man-made tries to assign culpability to the British government and their "criminal negligence" (Srimanjari, 2009: 177). Nevertheless, Levinas reminds us that the ethics cannot originate from man as a cognitive precept, which converts alterity into a homologous category borne out of self-evident oppositions rather than radical heterogeneity. Histories of Bengal's rice tragedies risk repeating the constitutive antinomian feature of Man vs. Nature that the colonial government used to justify withholding help. Although researchers such as De Waal (1997) put forth valuable arguments about the abuse of food relief for strategic negotiations[15], there is a need to pay closer attention to the role of rice as a non-human agent shaping the Other's

[15] According to De Waal (1997), food was used as a "weapon of coercion" in Africa in the 1980s by opposing players of the civil war, and "all food supply channels were either blocked or closely controlled by soldiers, including: government granaries (the sole conduit for relief supplies); commercial food transport, gifts of food to relatives; and food sales from shops. When relief was distributed, recipients were not allowed to take any rations away, but had to eat their meals under army supervision" (1997: 59).

humanity, as well as a political weapon. In the latter scenario, rice exists in an objective connection between the "I" [giver of food] and alterity [needy of food], famine is an ontological event between self and other. While this provides a basis of rationality for arranging relief, the privilege of the ontology can reduce the famine other to being *only* a hungry subject. The former scenario sees rice as inextricable from both the notions of subjectivity *and* from materiality; in other words, I propose a view of rice framed by the Levinasian idea that materiality and subjectivity are not, like a vessel and its contents, separate. Rice is not simply the captive artifact of famine to be appropriated by humans but rather, as having genuine agency for shaping a relationship with alterity. This view of rice does not oppose materiality to culture but is conceived as an irreducible and incalculable part of humanity.

What is implied by conceptualizing rice as the food that feeds the famished? Nineteenth century literature on food and feeding suggests that Britons had specific views on rice. Firstly, it is classified by the regime of nutrition. Rice is construed as a principality, a *staple*; it is considered a type of all-nutrient food, which Sir Henry Thompson (1873) regards in his book, *Food and Feeding,* as belonging to "a large part of China, the East Indies, part of Africa and America, and also the West Indies" (1873: 22). Secondly, rice represents the *de facto* nourishment of distant cultures; so much so that the term 'rice-eaters' was coined to denote large populations – a colonial-anthropological assessment. The marriage between the most *basic* view of food in the nutrition regime – food for survival – and the objectification of the Other, gives a rationalized view of the relation between rice and the famine poor in India; it is based on the ontological separation of material [food] and subject [famine poor]. The Indian Council of Agricultural Research concluded before, "the rice diet in India, as also in many other countries, is associated with dense population and low economic status of a large section of the people" (Ghose, Ghatge & Subrahmanyan, 1960: 404). The Council articulates the starving subjects' hunger in terms of lack of nutrition or, as malnutrition, implying that the poor may improve their lot *only* by gaining access to the nutriment regime of knowledge – a reasoned, utilitarian view made possible by the separation of

material and subject. The liberal-economic interpretation of famine sees the crisis as a techno-agricultural problem, and poor 'rice-eaters' are portrayed as subjects who have not mastered their material: "the low level of nutrition among rice eaters is no doubt, due, to some extent, to ignorance" which would have to be "corrected by proper education in the field of nutrition" (Ghose, Ghatge & Subrahmanyan, 1960: 404). In the narratives of the 1866 Bengal famine under the Viceroyalty of John Lawrence, rice is recorded as "the staple crop... the people are poverty stricken, ignorant, indolent, and improvident" (Smith, 1885: 356).

Seen as 'ignorant' and 'improperly educated', India's 'rice-eaters' are a category that corresponds to the familiar Victorian distinction of 'deserving' from 'undeserving' poor and the construction of poverty as the outcome of personal habits (lazy) and generic characteristics (ignorance). More significantly, by making explicit the act [eating] and the material [rice], the notion of rice-eaters also upholds what Derrida often describes as the logocentric distinction between cognition and materiality. The term 'logocentric' refers to privileging of essential meaning of entities and they are captured or frozen by specific forms or matter of things. Thus, logocentric views would distinguish between Reason as representing the realm and origin of thought while materiality as referring to the immutability of "the ultimate referent" or the sensible substance of things (Derrida, 1981: 65). This distinction resonates through Victorian articulations of the poor, in which their material conditions represent the fixed embodiment of the poor's inferior morals and intelligence, only to be redeemed by their willingness to work for food. Thus construed, "deserving" poor was a category that elevated the reasoned ideality of Christian virtue over the material realities of poverty.

Ricoeur (1986) deals more specifically with the logocentricism of Christianity. The doctrinal focus on God represents what he calls, "transcendental reflection" and which "starts from the *thing*"(1986: 47). "It is a reflection on the conditions of possibility of the objectivity of the thing", which, for Ricoeur, is a serious limitation since "the universe of things is still only the abstract framework of our life-world" (1986: 47). The critique of a belief in a transcendental entity shows Ricoeur's attempt to explore ethics through Christian existentialism. What he finds troubling about Christianity is its exhaustive claim to meaning even though its theological origin – God – is a figurative or abstract idea; his challenge to this aspect of the religion forges a strong, dialogic connection between the Christian notion of God and Derrida's "ultimate referent". But where Derrida focuses his energies on the territory of language, Ricoeur (1992) puts his

argument most explicitly to history. Ricoeur's argument is particularly salient to the modern Christian reign of Queen Victoria's empire since expansion into non-Christian worlds such as India meant that the explanation of humanity could no longer be exclusive to religion or secular governance, but needed to be a combination of both. Even though secular, the scientific discovery of *things,* such as the determination of alien material, should not come into conflict with Christian piety or the universalism upon which imperiality was founded. This is the modern Christianity that Ricoeur (1992) describes in *History and Truth*, "the Christian meaning of history is therefore the hope that secular history is also part of that meaning... that in the end there is only *one* history, that all history is ultimately sacred" (1992: 93). It might be argued that the denotation of poor, Indian rice eaters repeat a similar determination, where Indians are only historically intelligible by, quite plainly, the thing they eat – rice, which is also their materiality; and it is this ontological classification (and reduction) that works alongside the moral justifications for the designs of Western, Christian humanitarian intervention (or expansion). Both Ricoeur and Derrida highlight what Levinas considers unethical; in *Time and The Other,* he explains that this stubborn separation of subjectivity and materiality, between colonizer and colonized, is a fixation on hypostatizing alterity that gives, for instance, India's rice eaters, "the appearance of a 'something that is'" in which the Other "would remain fundamentally anonymous" (Levinas, 1987: 51-52).

In *Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages the Present,* Mennell (1985) describes how such a hypostatizing logic might deploy itself in the time-honored view that, in a state of hardship, Europe's poorest subjects can survive on coarse (but all-nutritious) foods while delicate stomachs of the higher classes cannot. Obviously, the bodies of the rich and the poor are ordered as different categories that correlate with distinct types of food. An ontological link is established between the subject and material that appears both neutral and complete, producing, as it were, "social" foods. By the time of the twentieth-century, the ontology of food had evolved into the status of the objective, a fully-fledged sociological discipline for teaching the unique nutritional requirements for the lower orders of British society. In

The Science and Culture of Nutrition 1840-1940, Kamminga & Cunningham (1995) observe that "scientists, physicians, policy makers and charitable organizations in Britain advocated educating the poor about scientifically responsible diets" (1995: 12). The growth in the culture of nutrition parallels the myth of development from tradition to modernity made evident by the growing importance of having a historical perspective in agricultural research (particularly salient in the colonial setting, such as the Indian Council's). Values associated with historical truth and the emphasis on the origin of meaning are modifications of logocentricism that aid the establishment of the regime of nutrition and public health. Such histories provide the founding registers for the view that rice is the food of the Other, the poor and the Indian.

Fixing the Other's subjectivity in an ultimate materiality is not exclusive to India's rice eaters. It was prevalent throughout nineteenth-century England and Europe for potatoes to be associated with the poor (Kamminga, 1995). Ireland's 1847 famine provided a symbolic culmination of this belief. These associations are vividly represented in Vincent Van Gogh's 1885 painting *The Potato Eaters,* showing a family of five coarse and ugly-looking peasants seated around a small table eating potatoes under a dim oil lamp. 'Coarse' food like potatoes are ever-ready symbols to express the distinctions between the Irish and the English, or the poor "English peasant", as Thompson (1873: 25) calls it, and the superior social groups. According to a similar logic, in the nineteenth century, when the English, Portuguese and Dutch were busy expanding their trade empires around the world, rice became regarded as food of the Orients, Indians, Africans and people of the West Indies and most prominently, its role in impoverished agrarian Asian countries.

Market rationality sees food as sustenance or, quite literally, the very material subsistence of a population. Figured as Bengal's staple crop, rice assembles a neutral relationship between Bengalis based around, as Thompson (1873) shows, Britain's sociological observations of food and feeding. These are centered on food as a human practice – for fulfilling *lack*. For this framework, famine represents the extreme lack of food. Although it is hard to deny the necessity of food in the face of mass starvation, the

regime of nutrition, beliefs in single-crop dependency, and social food show that the strength of reason and scientific power can outgrow itself, and assimilate everything past and alien. Ravindra Khare (1976) argues that Western, modern understanding of food and diet is based on values that exclude socio-cultural ways of food, such as those derived from Hinduism. Although the whole of the Bengal Presidency was not all Hindu, Khare does offer a critique that is culturally pertinent to a large proportion of Bengalis. The exclusion of marginal logics of food from utilitarian ways of interpreting a famine removes the cultural and social tensions for the sake of administrative efficacy; and, in doing so, allows such efficacy to pass off, under the pretension of knowledge, as good conscience. Like Khare, Levinas (1987) prompts us to question "the [Heideggerian] habit of considering the world as an ensemble of tools" or the clichéd antinomy of the phrases "we live to eat" versus "we eat to live" (1987: 63). Both phrases are troubling to Levinas (1987) because "human life... does not go beyond the objects that fulfill it... the uttermost finality of eating is contained in food" (1987: 63). Khare's argument is that the material culture of Hinduism does not meet Western instrumentalism unproblematically precisely because Hindu materiality and culture lends itself to other interpretations. In Bengal, the practice of designing famine relief solely around the administration of rice owed much of its failures to the utilitarian expectation that providing rice to the starving population alone was the only necessary response for the crisis. This is some evidence of a persistence historicism described by Ricoeur (1992) as the decision to see in history "the *accumulation of acquirements*" and to "consider only the anonymous proliferation of tools" (1992: 82; original emphasis). To be sure, the Permanent Settlement provided such a scene for Cornwallis' successors since it mapped a land-revenue-centered domain for the rural folk of Bengal's history; so that land improvements and crop yield were, for Bengalis, factors that overshadowed all other considerations. Relief measures were designed around the final goal of accumulating stocks of rice for distribution, with political accountability stopping dead in the tracks from that point. Khare (1976) points out that a gap of thought between the British officials and India's famine poor impinges colonial organization of relief. For India, he argues, this gap has serious implications on

the thought and action for distribution, consumption and production of food, as we "discover that India now faces a 'food problem'" (Khare, 1976: 143).

For 'Third World' or developing countries, rice has acquired a kind of self-evident role as the antidote of world hunger; its strength as a symbol may be argued to have even transcended the physical food, rice itself. This is the dangerous finality in food that Levinas (1987) warns of, in which food becomes the *last* accomplishment of the event. For example in the case of *FreeRice* (a website[16] run by the United Nations World Food Program (UN WFP)), rice is depicted as the operative symbol of world hunger. Through multiple-choice quizzes, people can "help end world hunger by providing rice to hungry people for free" (FreeRice.com, 2009: 1). For every correct quiz answer, *FreeRice* (2009) shows a web animation of rice grains falling into the existing 'pot' of apparently 66 billion grains already donated. According to the site, world hunger is understood as the lack of food (rice) and it is up to 'First World' countries (having computer and internet access is presumed to be a marker of such a world) to bring rice to the hungry poor.

"Rupees Are Of No Use Without Rice"

Famine as a story of India's 'food problem' is not unfamiliar to nineteenth-century Bengal, but does it, as Khare (1976) warns, escape the trap of reasoned ontological advantage that would consist of writing a Western history of world hunger? To usurp imperial powers and assign culpability, there is a temptation to use the history of Bengal's rice famines as materialist text, that is to say, to propose a reading according to nationalist Indian historiography's aim of overturning dominant discourse. Enticing as it may seem, to narrate a history of material abuse and injustice via the malicious control of rice risks, as Guha (1988) reminded us earlier, repeats the fallacious opposition

[16] *FreeRice.com* operates like an online quiz on various basic subjects. For each correct answer clicked, 10 grains of rice is donated through the UN WFP to 'help end hunger'. This 'Free Education & Free Rice' idea is that participants may learn something new while generating charitable donations. Among the 'educational' subjects are Famous Paintings, English Grammar and Vocabulary, Geography and World Capitals, and Language Learning for French, German, Italian and Spanish. Another similar American site is www.thehungersite.com.

between British and Indian, an opposition not unfamiliar to Marxist, dialectic arguments against imperial exploitation. Like Guha, Derrida (1981) cautions that material dialecticism can just as easily take on "mechanistic, non-dialectical form... remaining prisoner of the oppositional couples of dominant discourse" (1981: 72). To ask if the British did actively exacerbate starvation by restricting the importation of rice is valuable up until the limit beyond which the question must be exchanged for asking how to proceed from the aggression of such a polemic. In this respect, we may interpret the Levinasian derision toward constituting a true and unchangeable materiality as an attempt to transcend a materialist attack on the failure of food administration; he poses the ethical question to the materialist. How does re-framing the notion of material interrogate the presuppositions of the "oppositional couples of dominant discourse" and thus also challenge their status as the pre-requisite considerations of our relationship with alterity?

It was, according to Kamminga & Cunningham (1995), in "the colonial setting that the modern concept of malnutrition was constructed out of scientific research, economic imperatives and political agendas" (1995: 12). The observation of a food problem usually begins with natural causation, which designates nature as the realm of the materiality of food. One of Bengal's earliest chroniclers and surveyors, William W Hunter (1868) wrote, "famine in India is caused by natural scarcity" (1868: 5). Hunter saw a pattern of famine according to the health of the rice crops in Bengal; his record of the 1770 Bengal Famine remembers a recovery at the end of that year where "the great rice crop of the year, was gathered in. Abundance returned to Bengal as suddenly as famine had swooped down upon it" (Hunter, 1868: 30). The accounts of administrators and civil servants like Hunter, who surveyed and wrote about Bengal and her land, portray Nature as a singular and sudden obliterating force. In *History of Bengal, Bihar & Orissa under British Rule,* historian O'Malley (1925) states that the 1866 famine was caused by the failure of the winter rice crop due to drought in 1865. An essay about famine from the Calcutta periodical *Friend of India* referred to the "Cyclone of 1864" for admonishing the importance of a detailed weather warning system for coping with

famine (*Friend of India,* 7 Nov 1867: 1320). In a "Special Narrative of the Govt. of Bengal", a District Superintendent describes how "bazaars and *golahs* [granaries] with their supplies of rice [have] been swept away [by the cyclone]...the inhabitants have lost nearly all the means to procure food from elsewhere" (Government of Bengal, 1865: 11). Newspapers report on Beadon's scandalous famine describe Orissa as "the scene of the present disaster... a wild tract of country" (*Friend of India,* 18 Oct, 1866: 1228).

Drought or cyclone, such histories depict the rice-scapes of Bengal as exotic places of severe weather. Arising out of their unruly agrarian materiality, the otherness of "rice-eaters" becomes understood as a kind of victimhood caused by climactic inevitability and agricultural dysfunction. If, according to Levinas (1987), "the condition of time lies in the relationship between humans or in history" (1987: 79); colonial classifications of rice harvest periods in India might act as telling metaphors for how British imperiality modified Indian alterity in order to accomplish the famine event. The British distinguished three seasons of rice in India which they corresponded to seasonal and calendared terms understood in Europe: "Bengal has three harvests each year: a scanty pulse crop in spring; a more important rice crop in autumn; and the great rice crop, the harvest crop of the year, in December" (Hunter, 1868: 20). In Bengal, the winter crop harvest spanning the season June-July to November-December is traditionally considered the most important of the year as it provides the bulk of rice in the region (Ghose, Ghatge & Subrahmanyan, 1960). Historians believe it was the damage to the December crop in Orissa in 1865 that started the famine. These narratives summon the insurmountable material power of crop failure to represent a defenseless government and market:

> The stocks of rice in the country were very low, for there had been an active export trade and the cultivators had not kept a reserve sufficient to counterbalance a short harvest. No one, whether official or non-official, had any conception of the extent to which stocks had been depleted till it was found that the markets were empty and the country almost destitute of food (O'Malley, 1925: 444).

Government action is clearly demarcated here from the actual *natural* cause of the famine. Such histories are written in the wake of many governments scandalized by famine, both in India and Ireland, over the years of Britain's imperial rule. Commentators like O'Malley seem to proceed from the common inference in Ireland that, "the negligence of Westminster politicians is blamed for transmuting a presumed fact of nature into a social catastrophe" (cited in McLean, 2004: 71). Such conditions for culpability suggest not only that the Bengal crisis itself is ultimately regarded a consequence of nature, but also that the failed rice crops represent the failure of the social to master its (natural) material. We may recall here that, in Chapter II, the naturalist philosophy of Locke and Hume, of whom many nineteenth century British government officials were intellectual disciples. The view that allows historians to surmise the combination of administrative negligence, their "complete failure to anticipate the distress" and willful nature as the "real fault" (Loveday, 1914: 50), corresponds to the traditional empirical distinction between the individual cognition or experience, and its general counterpart in nature. For Bengal just as for Ireland, O'Malley (1925) invokes a famine nightmare revealed by the single food's disobedient refusal to yield to human agricultural mastery:

> The Orissa famine has many points of resemblance with the Irish famine of 1846-47. In both cases the country was mainly agricultural and the vast majority of the inhabitants depended for their subsistence on one crop – the potato in Ireland and winter rice in Orissa – the failure of which overwhelmed both peoples with famine (O'Malley, 1925: 448).

Rice represents the stable trope of Nature, its portrayal as the failed materiality of the Other pre-sets the stage for the conception of response and intervention. The rice crop pits unruly weather against benevolent hopes of agricultural progress and this dramatic opposition was supported by opinions and statistics about the 1866 famine. In the same parliamentary meeting that debated Beadon's blame, Seymour declared, "the people were not in want of money but of rice" (HC Deb 02 August 1867 vol 189: 780). Report from another meeting held in October 1866 stressed that "Rupees are of no use without

rice, and rice itself is of no use without the means of moving it from places in which it rots to places in which human beings are slowly perishing from want of it" (*The Times,* 1 Oct 1866: 6). The race – intervention versus nature – against the decomposition of rice made monetary resources appear futile without speedy transportation. Quite literally, the existence of Bengal famine poor hinged on their consumption of rice; their alterity is wholly reduced and contained in the proverbial phrase, "eat to live". Systemic failure of food administration is only made worse by the natural decomposition (of rice); Nature provides the neutral enmity of colonial trade, allowing a market-focused reasoning of famine response, which calls for a more efficient economy of rice.

Despite his arguments against the privilege of ontology, Levinas does not necessarily ask to subvert it completely. In fact, he admits in *Alterity* that he does not know "whether... it [ontology] should be grounded or undermined" (Levinas, 1999: 168). For a re-reading of Bengal's famine history, it is probably the former, since, frequently, the fashionable reiteration of ontological links between rice and indicators of famine severity often had basis in little more than abstracted conceptual associations, i.e. they were not something that could be considered ontological in the first place. The orders and hierarchies invoked in the debates surrounding the famine appear dubious and inconsistent. One such link was the relationship between grain supply, its market prices and the rates of mortality. In letters commentators wrote to the *Times* newspaper, the relationship between the famine deaths and the supply of rice was stressed. A military civilian wrote "none will deny that if even the most scant dole of grain, say for a million persons, could have been distributed to the country the enormous death-toll would have been greatly diminished" (*The Times,* 23 August 1867: 4). Historian Loveday (1914) recalls that, in 1866, "every maund [mound] of rice landed from June to October saved a life, whether it was sold, given away, or stolen" (1914: 50). The stronger the assertion of grain as the correlative indicator of mortality was, the more discourse was produced about the distribution, buying, selling and supply of rice. Over time, the price of rice became the official indicator of famine severity. However, this indicator was not only arbitrary, but also economically unsound, since it rarely referred to a broader market

context, and was applied both universally and ahistorically. When Hunter (1868) compared the famines of 1770 and 1866, nearly a century apart, he declared, "in these similarly situated parts the actual pressure, as indicated by the price of rice, was precisely the same in both famines, the maximum being fourpence and the average over twopence a pound" (1868: 53). His *only* (vague) qualification about the price of rice in these two famines was that "silver was dearer then than now" (Hunter, 1868: 53)! Even if it was evident to the British government that the grain market *failed,* the discourse reveals an absurd persistence not to admit it, while allowing these "economic" registers to continue to provide the crucial points of articulation for famine. In fact, the insistence to correlate rice with mortality was seen as a confirmation of how beneficial and important English influence was for Bengal. Hunter (1868) regards famines as symptomatic of development not catching up with Nature. He said of a famine in 1837 in Bengal that "the breakwaters which modern civilization raises up between natural scarcity and its actual pressure had not yet been constructed and the ancient monotonous story of starvation was repeated" (Hunter, 1868: 51). As Hunter's work has shown, a corresponding economy of death and historical narration that distinguishes the "ancient monotonous" from the "modern", adds to the legitimacy of such hyperbolic claims of death-repelling rice. All of this further builds up to the presumption that famine is quantifiable – just as I have shown in the previous chapter, that the question of who to bear the moral guilt of the crisis can be determined via the calculation of monetary debt. Rice, tangible and countable, while portrayed as a life-saving matter for Victorian Britain's famished others, also represents the denial of the radical alterity of death and substitutes its unknowability with an attempt to, quite literally, embody the event by the phenomenon-centered counting of bodies.

The Government considered relief expenditure to be an unproductive endeavor; essentially it was a loss-making investment since money goes neither to railways, irrigation nor roads, any infrastructure that might contribute to revenue productivity. The Famine Commission was under pressure to address this necessary but unjustifiable cost in its recommendations and investigations into how best to proceed with relief

policy. Attempts to correlate mortality with rice in turn justified the allocations of relief provisions and was one way of pegging cost to economic justifications, allowing officials to defend or rationalize how much (or how little) relief was given.

In practice, revenue, most prized by the administrators, was directly grounded in land produce and the number of "able-bodied" labourers – famine automata – required to generate it for them. In 1866, Lord Napier wrote a minute describing the state measures of famine relief in Orissa:

> The ryots have been detached from the other classes, and are dealt with, in some degree, apart. For their benefit, the Government has sanctioned (1) the refund of surplus collections; (2) remissions of assessment; (3) a distribution of seed grain; (4) a distribution of uncooked grain in the villages for food; (5) the improvement of certain small irrigation works; (6) employment on extraordinary public works.
>
> The rural labourers and other miscellaneous paupers are supported (1) by distributions of cooked food; (2) by employment on public works. Relief houses have been established by the collector or by the zemindars, at 14 stations in the district. Of these, I had occasion to visit ten. They generally consist of an open space of ground enclosed by a slight fence. In this a cookhouse is erected, and sometimes a large open shed, to shelter the people from rain. The recipients are seated in rows upon the ground, divided according to their castes, ages, and sex. The food, consisting of cooked rice and raggy [small coarse grain from Mysore], is carried round in large pots, and is received in earthen dishes and on leaves. It is, for the most part, consumed on the spot (*The Times,* 9 Nov 1866: 9).

Quite clearly, the organization of relief centers dotted around the region appears to be imbibed with the goal of maintaining a functioning workforce. The distribution of "cooked food" resonates like the terse provision of fuel for these machines. The methodological detachment of Orissa's relief system is revealed by the cookhouse's ordered layout of food recipients, adding to caste and demographical classifications the distinct tint of nutritional logic and discipline. Taking heed of the Codes' classifications of able-bodies of labour, Napier shows that this idea may extend to the regulation of rice, through the supervision of feeding relief seekers – its consumption by famine automata – for reviving their status as the state's production units.

Foucault has written about the state's ability to create "docile bodies" out of routine, surveillance and formal organization, not unlike the cookhouse. For Foucault, other bodies can be made docile through regulation and through the emphasis on the propagation and preservation of life; elsewhere in *History of Sexuality I,* he calls this biopower and describes its utilization by modern, rational societies in Victorian England (Foucault, 1970). To the extent that colonial food administration upheld a mechanistic view of its famished automata, the notion of biopower might explain why the cookhouse is designed for the surveillance of eating. Although resented for being an unprofitable expenditure, food relief houses animated the Government's claims toward saving life, therefore they also helped to sanction the demand for order and classification; like the Victorians who, as Foucault (1970) argues, in believing the state's emphasis on the protection of life, internalized and accepted sexuality as the (private) notion of ordering their bodies and habits. Famine relief was poised as having the goal of saving life, under which all actions are subservient. Relief-seekers enter into this contract at the cookhouse, allowing *any* imposition on their bodies and actions to be justified by the government's claim to saving their lives. The task of managing hunger and the threat of (mechanical) death, when re-cast within famine relief as protection, allowed officials such as Napier to consider the rationalization of Indian social categories such, "castes, ages, and sex" for the receipt of cooked rice, as benevolent or "for their benefit". To Napier, it was considered proof that "remedial measures adopted by the Government are adapted to the character and wants of the suffering population" (*The Times,* 9 Nov 1866: 9) The religious and social dimensions of Indian practice were considered only insofar as hindered the smooth transactions of rice; in effect, these considerations rendered alterity – Indian caste – as a negative conception.

David Arnold (1993) attributes the principles regarding food in famine policy to those of Indian prisons, arguing dietary investigations in prisons led to a state focus on discipline and labour in organizing famine relief:

> [P]rison policy between the 1860s and the 1920s ... [served] experiments in disciplinary dietetics... [and] provided a standard by which food or money doles

> were given to those who sought state relief during the frequent famines of the late nineteenth century, providing evidence of how much – more often, how little – food was required to sustain life and labor (Arnold, 1993: 112).

Indeed, rupees are of no *use* without rice, ultimately colonial policy is concerned with the *utility* of the body: how much rice is required for the body to remain *useful* for labour and therefore as a proper object to govern? In such food administration, everything transpires as if one already knows what rice is, or means. In fact, however, it could be demonstrated that this material and its subjective counterpart, rice eaters, cannot be wholly imprisoned in a rational scheme of nutrition.

"Food of the Bengalees"

The 'discovery' of malnutrition in colonial India, as Arnold (1988) puts it, was part of government efforts to discipline prisoners and deter what was believed to be entrenched criminality. This is particularly true in the creation of the famine relief centers. The state regarded relief-seekers in much the same ways they regarded criminals, except with added agrarian traits. The "discovery" of malnutrition among famine sufferers parallels Christianity's attempt at, as Ricoeur (1986) puts it, establishing the "*pathetique* of misery", developing through various types of symbols, such as in the criminal or the famished figure, the "situation of the miserable soul" (1986: 7). As I have previously mentioned, the Victorians conveyed poverty as a pathological situation; Bengali relief seekers, the central miserable figure of the Rice Famine, represent a similarly impoverished state of morality. To the pragmatic Christian, their famished bodies resemble the most corruptible bodies. The effort of Bengali materiality is to be found in their agriculture of rice. This perception found articulation in colonial descriptions of Bengali rice and diet, especially in the years leading up to first famine policies and codes in 1880. Often using romantic and idyllic ways to describe the so-called simplicity of agrarian lives, colonial narratives of India's rural conditions converged towards agricultural justification since it was the favored panacea of the

disrepute of British rule caused by previous famine scandals, such as those of 1866, 1874 and 1877. Recalling his own agricultural reconnaissance mission to India, Caird wrote in *India: The Land and the People,* as he was walking through the rice fields in a village of Burdwan, "[t]hey have all good stocks of rice; some of them have four years' stores by them, stored in round stacks of unhusked rice. They spend so little; 7lbs of rice to a family of five will feed them handsomely... nor do they desire to improve their mode of living" (Caird, 1883: 106). As Caird moves on into Eastern Bengal, he describes "a very rich country, chiefly in rice" (ibid).

This account sees Bengali materiality in their rice stocks and sources, which reflects the Benthamite preference for seeing materiality in the end results of human action. According to Bentham (1823a), materiality "is a relative term: applied to the consequences of an act, it bore relation to pain and pleasure: applied to the circumstances, it bears relation to the consequences" (1823a: 129). The situation of pain or pleasure among Bengalis can be traced to their handling of rice, as the consequence of their crude and unremarkable "mode of living". Caird invokes a marker of the pathology of Bengalis' primitiveness - their lack of "desire to improve" – as a way of finalizing their well-being in the supply of food.

It is significant that Caird (1883) chooses to include some detail into the Burdwan family's rice stores and the rice-scapes of Bengal because the scene around Burdwan in former years 1866 and 1874 were elsewhere painted quite differently. According to Samanta (2002), Burdwan was inundated by paupers who, in 1866, left neighboring towns such as Raniganj, to search for food. It was recorded that "Ranijanj was full of women and children, who followed rice carts, picking up grains which fell" (Samanta, 2002: 62). One cannot help but sense that both Caird's description of blissful austerity and the report of Burdwan's misery strike a strange balance within otherness: the pathological condition of the Indian Rice Eater – chiefly, embodied in the materiality of their food – just as easily manifests in virtuous happiness and in misery. This is both the strength and weakness of pathologizing Bengal alterity via a food; it reflects the ability of the ontological link between material and subject to offer inclusive and convincing

hypotheses of the Good and the Bad, but where the subject remains stubbornly locked into the pre-availability of choices. Nonetheless, subjective certainty has no choice; pre-availability cancels out choice by fixing choice to a predetermined set of options. Therefore, the outcome of Caird's reconnaissance already has the known outcome of affirming policy. Famine Codes were already in place by the time of Caird's recollection, and, as an authority in English agriculture himself, he was no doubt in a position to confirm rather than dispute policy. Notably, Caird shared some of Robert Peel's position on famine relief including the promotion of agricultural reform in favor of the growing market economy (Gray, 2006).

Beyond an assessment of landlocked misery, agricultural reform did not adequately translate all the cultural and social links that Indians have with rice, not least of all the Indian farmer's religious and work ethic. For example, the Hindu system of organizing food does not have the same intellectual precursors of the notion of agriculture – such as a body of scientific literature – from which to "systematically set forth the art and science of food production, whether related to fields or waterways" (Khare, 1976: 152). Accounts about relief-seekers who are classified or understood as malnourished others seeking rice handouts point to gaps in the intersections of the regimes of (mal)nutrition and colonial politics not explicitly defined in Proper History alone.

It is significant that in his *Treatise of Man,* Descartes never got to follow his exegesis of the mechanized body with one of the soul, although he did acknowledge, elsewhere in *Meditations,* that the power of what lies beyond the body's senses is important for explaining the human decision. If Descartes had pursued the limitations of his *cogito,* he might have written a critique more explicitly directed at the cognition-centered decisions that produced Proper History. Similarly, undoing the ontology between materiality of rice and the Bengal famine poor highlights the attempt to loosen the history of Bengal's Rice Famines by making room for approaches to materiality not explained by rational cognition alone. Ricoeur (1986) recognizes that the strength and authority of pathology has no real power without myth, the progression in which "

pathos reaches mythos" (1986: 7) – the kind of imagination with fluid roots of conception and understanding. Descartes (1972) shows an inkling of this view in his question about whether God exists and thus Descartes suggests our explanation of humanity is held back by cognitive habits.

So what exactly is 'Bengalee rice'? How might it reflect or differ from pathological interpretations of alterity? A *Times* correspondent, writing an article called *Food of the Bengalees*, quotes from Baboo Pratopachandra Ghosha's book:

> The staple food of the natives of Bengal is rice boiled, and in that form termed *bhat*. It is taken usually twice before bed time, sometimes three times or oftener, and especially by children and labouring people; but as it is not always convenient and economical for the poor people to procure hot rice as often as they require it, they cook rice once in the day, which suffices both for present consumption and subsequent use. ...In some districts, instead of boiling, they bury the paddy for some days in a pot underground, and when sufficiently moist they husk it...Rice from sun-dried paddy is considered purer than rice from boiled paddy, and it is given in offerings to the gods and for the consumption of Hindoo widows and devout Brahmans. ...Paddy is also boiled and beaten flat by husking, and then it becomes churra, and is either consumed by parching or steeping in mustard oil or clarified butter, or eaten raw with confected khoi and curd. It serves for extempore meals in the absence of cooked rice, and is also served to guests at the feasts of the poor and the humble classes, or to those who may have caste objections to take cooked rice (*Times,* 6 Oct 1874: 8).

In this account of 'Bengalee' food, the treatment of rice is significant. A simple statement of rice as 'staple food' in the beginning of the paragraph evolves into many subdivisions according to the way rice is consumed or cooked. The treatment of rice not only affects who consumes it, but also when and why it is consumed. The western idea of cooking simply refers to applying heat to food, but here the distinction is clearly made between heat from the sun (sun-dried paddy) and heat from boiling rice in a pot. With regards to Hindus Bengalis, Khare (1976) suggests rather that Hindus are more likely to refer to cooking as meaning "to prepare for eating" and ultimately follows a principle that "*conjoin[s] the cultural properties of the food with the cultural properties of its eater*" (1976: 12; original emphasis). Surely this strongly suggests that the relationship between Hindus and rice eschews the usual Western distinction between

material and subject, which Levinas (1987) urges us to discard in favor of the ethical over the ontological. Rice does not denote "Bengalee food" anymore than the term rice eaters denote Hindu famine poor. It is the objective nature of such denotation that offends alterity. Using the idea of 'staple food' to describe Bengali rice or food and consequently to frame famine relief operations, means very little to the religious and cultural schemes of Hindu relief-seekers. To be sure, *The Times* article here is presented as an anthropological view, or a terse description characteristic of presentations of Indian society and culture during colonial times.

Khare (1976) attempts to tackle this in his book on the Hindu food system. He offers, at the beginning of his book, an explanation of what cooking means in relation to the Hindu way of life, or the relationships between the Hindu self and others:

> In terms of Hindu rituals and rank structures, these categories of food and cooking are also hierachized – both horizontally differentiated and vertically generalized... Horizontal subhierarchies may develop, however, when, for example, *prasad* (food for deity) is differentiated on the basis of whether it has been offered to the deity or eaten by somebody, or is "polluted" by some external agent... [this] is based on the pure/impure basis - ritually pure being always higher than the one ritually impure. But the higher it is it also often exclusive, rather than inclusive (Khare, 1976: 6, 9).

According to Khare (1976), food and cooking in Hindu sacrifices and rituals reveal that the food system follows a cultural scheme that involves interfolding the physical with the spiritual and the dead with the alive. This is where the pure/impure distinction runs counterintuitive to the Western, rationalized interpretation of purity and cleanliness. While the dead and inanimate are usually kept separate from the living in the Western regime of nutrition, the system described here eschews such segregations, and employs a rather more diffused than defined mode of differentiation. Under Khare's description, purity is not simply the absence of external human contamination, but also an extension towards the spiritual – food for deity. Food may thus be symbolic but for different reasons than the Western notion of symbol. Elsewhere, in *Normative Culture and*

Kinship: Essays on Hindu Categories, Processes and Perspectives, Khare (1983) tell us that one must also consider how Hindu symbols are,

> [i]ntuited, "realized", "experienced" and strategically weighted... Indian epistemology...may let appropriate symbols be a way to ultimate reality and in the cases they may become that reality. Symbols transcend towards the Whole as well as make the individual *existenz* possible (Khare, 1983: 17; original emphasis).

Under this framework, rice would need to be considered not only for what it is, but also how it is realized. Khare (1983) hints at a tension between Hindu interiority and transcendence of "the Whole"; his description of the movement of symbols between these two aspects at least suggests that this tension, rather than the stable identification of meanings, characterize Hindu life-worlds. In other words, Hindu alterity cannot be substantiated by the utilitarian identification of purpose and consequence without discarding these tensions. And, because the criteria of Indian epistemology include both the abstract and the spiritual, the notion of the Western object will not fully explain Hindu significance. For the Hindu, the movement of food is also the movement of meaningful cultural and religious exchanges; "food as a physical substance is kept consistently subservient to the thought (abstract) aspect" (Khare, 1976: 119). Under the design of a sensory based cognitive habit, Western ideas of phenomenon, such as those of Descartes or Husserl, consider the meaning of food in precisely the reverse: the physical substance, its sensibility is its primary source of meaning. To be sure, the Hindu category of abstract thought thus translated by Khare is not the same as the kind of Cartesian *cogito* that frames the calculation of famine codes, since Hindu thought is *not* epiphenomenona; the inclusion of spirituality in the Hindu notion of the abstract disqualifies food from being the freely circulated material of colonial market liberalism.

The explanatory function of such a scheme, as highlighted by Khare (1976), demonstrates an interiorized connection between the Hindu subject and his/her food that challenges the ontological interpretations in famine relief practice, at least with

regard to Hindus in Bengal, that are responsible for perpetuating the story of India's food problem. He explains that Western interveners who claim that rural Indians often stubbornly refusing to cooperate with modern agricultural practice do not understand, for example, what food means for Hindus "in their own terms and for their own significance" (Khare, 1976: 144).

Cooked food and the "Sweepings from a Rice Golah"

Sir Charles Trevelyan (1807-1886), who notoriously denied the responsibility of the British government for the Irish famine in 1846, was also one of those politicians in Westminster whose recommendations for famine relief excluded any religious or cultural significance of rice. His proposals left out the traditions of relief seekers, and replaced their alterity with a conviction in the criminalized and unmotivated rural Indian subject. In a letter to *The Times* in November 1873, he doggedly insisted that only cooked food be handed out during famine relief because,

> The "cooked food test" was found particularly efficacious in preventing abuse and the enforcement of it in some parts of the country cost a severe struggle. Undressed meat might be converted into cash by those who did not require it as food, and even the most destitute often disposed of it for tea, tobacco, or spirits; but "stirabout," which becomes sour by keeping, has no value in the market, and persons were, therefore, not likely to apply for it who did not want it for their own consumption (Trevelyan, 1873: 6).

With the experience of the Irish Famine behind him, Trevelyan appears to be no stranger to famine relief. As a disciple of Smith and Bentham, Trevelyan, historian Robin Haines (2004) describes, was every bit a man of modern values – "competition, efficiency, progress, and improvement", believing "nothing corrupted the mind so much as dependency" (Haines, 2004: 546). Not surprisingly, Trevelyan showed that he favored cooked food relief because it gave the government greater control over what food was handed out and to whom, thereby giving greater insurance for efficient and effective execution. In the 1840s, he recommended the "stirabout [a mixture of ground maize,

wheat and oatmeal,]" for Ireland relief system and considered it "wholesome and sufficiently palatable" for the Irish poor (Haines, 2004: 182). Such claim had little basis in truth, but, because nineteenth century nutritional science could neither prove nor disprove it, the recipe for "stirabout" was distributed to relief committees. In fact, it might be argued that Trevelyan's conclusions of "stirabout" were arbitrary rather than scientific; and while his "empirically"-based approach made his policies popular amongst his colleagues, Trevelyan's instructions show more of his bias for the hallmark values of British Enlightenment than any regard for the poor. Detested for claiming that the Potato famine helped curb an unchecked Irish population – who, according to McLean (2004), he oft believed to be a bunch of idle drunks, immoral and agrarian savages – Charles Trevelyan campaigned particularly for food relief in India to supplement public works because of his previous experience in Ireland (Bender, 2007 & McLean, 2004). Speaking a month later at a Society for the Arts conference in December 1873, Trevelyan told his audience about the abuse in the public works for Ireland in 1846, which led him to believe that public works in India must be supplemented with the distribution of cooked food or what he considered direct relief (Bender, 2007). In 1879, *The Times* ran a fourteen-page article written by Trevelyan that was "produced to show administrators of Bengal famine how relief had been organized in Ireland" (Haines, 2004: 407). If Trevelyan did not trust relief seekers in Ireland, he certainly showed less faith in starving Indians, suggesting that they might similarly abuse uncooked food relief by exchanging them for products like tobacco and spirits. These products lie outside the limits of the state's well-demarcated charity, relief being construed strictly according to the (un)scientific definitions of food, nourishment, sustenance or nutrition.

Like Cornwallis' reasoning for prompting a Permanent Settlement, the presumption that the poor were a mercenary lot featured centrally in Trevelyan's insistence on handing out cooked food for India's famine poor. Trevelyan thought he would greatly diminish the exchange or monetary value of food by cooking it. He also had a rather utilitarian view of the kind of cooked food suitable for relief and went

ahead with whatever he considered acceptable in flavor and texture (Haines, 2004). In Ireland, the "stirabout" did not go down, as Trevelyan said, without "severe struggle" (1873: 6). The Irish poor, particularly in Limerick, considered it degrading and rioted against receiving cooked soups. It was, McLean (2004) tells us, this show of organized dissent that disturbed the government's assumption that the rural populace were passive "potato eaters" and had rather 'base' diets of coarse staples. A similar unrest in the form of riots and strikes broke out in Bengal in the 1840s when a common messing system was introduced in prisons to prevent prisoners from buying and preparing their own food (Arnold, 1993).

Although the outbreaks in Ireland and Bengal against cooked food handouts might have challenged the rhetoric of cooked food relief in these decades, they did little to dent the increasingly scientific interpretations of food. The rise of a certain nutrition-consciousness kept a steady pace in the nineteenth century so that responses to food relief protests proposed to types of cooked food based on their nutritional value. Alexis Benoit Soyer, a French chef who became very famous in Victorian London, highlighted the problems of *how* food was cooked for these relief handouts. Referring to the soup given during the Irish Famine, he argues in his book *Charitable Cookery or the Poor Man's Regenerator* (1848):

> [I]nstead of producing a wholesome and nutritious aliment, [the soup] has often the contrary effect, particularly to a stomach in a state of starvation... I have found that the rice, split peas, barley, and any substance of that nature, were generally under-done, and often the whole contents tasted as if burned, and that for want of proper vessels and practical knowledge of cooking (Soyer, 1848: 11)

Soyer's remarks appeal to 'proper' cooking and nutrition. They show how the rhetoric of nutrition gained, rather than lost ground, despite the dubious claims of "wholesomeness" by Trevelyan. Administrators looked for nutritional defects in the food but did not see the troubling ethics underlying the relief system: an outlook of poor relief based the ontological definition of food as objective material for living. Ignoring all the affective or cultural connections people have with food, the relief

system was designed according to practical mandates, which had failed, in many instances, to fulfill even the most basic requirements dictated by such mandates. The debate on food, as Soyer shows, might be taken hold of by the rhetoric of nutrition, and still excludes the voices of those most affected by it. The blatant refusal of otherness and the absurdity of nutritional claims in the government's practice of cooked food relief echoes what Levinas (1987) calls, "the pure and simple identity of hypostasis" where "the subject is bogged down in itself... there is a 'relationship with everything that is necessary for being'" (1987:63). Necessity and pragmatism gave rise to the idea of using cooked food, and to its nutritional status, or determination as food for the poor while the fate of the subject, poor and famished relief-seekers, was riveted to the objective classification of his/her material. Subsistence, nourishment and 'proper' methods and instruments adhere to a rational view of cooking in Victorian England associated with the rise of notions of individualization, taste and culinary creation in the nineteenth century (Mennell, 1985). According to Mennell (1985), the Victorians followed a hierarchy based on a central-peripheral framework: the rational (and hungry) actor – such as the rice eater – will, first and foremost, begin eating from the most 'basic' unit of food – the staple. The objective was, as Soyer (1848) pointed out, "not to create an appetite but to satisfy" (1848:18). Coveney (2000) says there was a growing recognition among medical doctors such as Dr Edward Smith, appointed to the Poor Law Board in 1865, that the poor had nutritional needs. Smith's work on diet among prisoners and labourers in English workhouses led him to recommend a scientific view of feeding the poor based on prioritizing the basic, most nutritious options for the needs of the poor (Coveney, 2000). Nevertheless, the expectations of this view exceeded the often-bureaucratic practice of food relief.

In 1866, starving Indians in Jubbulpore (or what is later named Jabalpur) were given spoiled rice as relief. The conditions in the district – which is located in the western part of the Central Provinces – in October were reported in the *Bengal Hurkaru* newspaper through a series of stories about precisely what the rice handouts were like. One of them questioned the Deputy Commissioner of Jubbulpore who, instead of

destroying the spoiled rice, claimed that having to eat spoiled rice was better than no nourishment at all:

> We are not of course in possession of that official's notions of what may strictly be regarded as "food" and it is just possible therefore that putrescent rice may be considered by him to be a very wholesome and nutritious article of diet. The poor starving wretches in Jubbulpore eat of this dreadful stuff and die by hundreds. They complain that as there is literally nothing else to be got they are compelled to partake of even this, and the consequence is that they are seized with pains in the bowels and diarrhoea almost immediately after they have swallowed it – some die, some linger, to succumb finally to want and starvation (Bengal Hurkaru, 6 October, 1866: 1).

The marriage between the ethos of liberal economy and Western ideas of nutrition produces a farcical attempt by officials to indulge in the belief that providing the Bengalees 'food' – the staple of rice – in whatever form, might somehow be defensible and even argued as a decent feed or a scrap of nourishment. Elsewhere, from Pooree, a town near the coastline of Orissa, the *Bengal Hurkaru* describes "a worm-eaten cake, looking as if it were composed of dust, chalk and the sweepings of a rice *golah* [granary]... it looks like rice, coarse at the beginning, rained into a pulp, then sun-dried and sun-baked, then re-washed out, re-sun-dried and re-sun-baked" (Bengal Hurkaru, 6 October, 1866:2). If this cake seems like a desperate grasp at food, it finds haunting parallels in earlier accounts coming out of Pooree in May of the same year. Arthur Miller, from missionary agency, Messrs Sykes and Co. in Balasore, reports:

> I was horror-struck by the number of living skeletons, in the shape of men, women, and children, seen prowling about in search of food, and actually turning up with their hands the gravel and dust in front of shops [indeed, the sweepings of rice *golahs*!] in the hope of finding grains of rice or anything in the shape of food...Nothing eatable, however filthy and offensive, is rejected (Miller, cited in FOI, 1866: 617).

The predicament of relief-seekers across the Orissa from Jubbulpore to Pooree appears aggravated, from mere hunger or lack, to putrefaction and spread of disease until death. It is as if the staple rice, or so-called 'food of the Bengalees' provides the charting of the

course of Nature's cyclical force, where famine gains viscerality and presence while the materiality of its so-named staple fades back into the realm where it came from. The spoiled and putrid rice finds itself "converted into cholera, visible and solidified for the convenience of administration" (Bengal Hurkaru, 6 October, 1866: 2). So, on the one hand, rice is the designated staple of able-bodied Bengalees, reflecting the (colonial) fruits of agriculture and the richness of cultural and social meaning; on the other hand, rice grows putrid and dirty, and, during famine, displays a willful materiality that tests the limits of the colonially and nutritiously defined 'Food of the Bengalees'.

Ultramateriality

If the spiritual and cultural role of rice in Bengal rebukes the ontological separation of materiality and subjectivity, what mode of existence might rice or "Bengalee food" designate? Furthermore, if the Hindu system of food confirms the fallacies of Western thinking of rice, at least for the Hindu population in Bengal, does it imply that the material view of rice should be wholly discarded? Khare's work suggests that, to the Hindu, food is much more than a physical substance and its cultural, social and spiritual significance defies Western classifications of Bengali food and its "eaters" by de-emphasizing isolated conceptions of materiality. Rejecting rice-centered views of famines does not necessarily imply rice is immaterial or plays an unimportant role in alleviating starvation and prolonged poverty. Quite the opposite, it lends the opportunity to interpret rice via Levinas' concept of "ultramateriality" or "paroxysm of materiality" which,

> [D]oes not designate a simple absence of the human in the piles of rocks and sands of a lunar landscape, nor the materiality that outdoes itself, gaping under its rent forms, in ruins and wounds; it designates the exhibitionist nudity of an exorbitant presence coming as though from farther than the frankness of face, already profaning and wholly profaned, as if it had forced the interdiction of a secret. *The essentially hidden throws itself toward the light, without becoming signification*" (1979: 256; original emphasis).

I have discussed, in Chapter I, how Irish famine historiography pursues alterity in the archive from the assumption that any single signified in a famine narrative is always already in excess of itself. This notion of excess may be extended to Levinas' concept of ultramateriality. Levinas insinuates ultramateriality as both erotic and feminine, and is probably connected with Levinas' non-negating desire that is "irreducible to the distance the synthetic activity of understanding establishes between diverse terms" (Levinas, 1979: 39). Ultramateriality is compulsive excess; a desire that is an erotic metaphor for the relationship with alterity as a contact with the Other, which phenomenon or ontology fails to fully explain. For Levinas, ultramateriality denotes a face-to-face closeness of touch that is like a "dream running along the surface of being" (Levinas, 1979: 175). "Exhibitionist nudity" and "exorbitant presence" are like profane caresses against the sacredness of cognition-centered human experience; it is this defiance to phenomenon and to attempts at ordering the relationship with alterity that makes the significance of "Bengalee rice" more ultramaterial than material.

Moreover, Nandy (1983) suggests that colonial ideology used masculinity for gaining political power and control, that there was a "homology between sexual and political dominance which Western colonialism invariably used – in Asia, Africa and Latin America..." (1983: 4). The British government commanded their response to Mother Nature's famines with heavy-handed force, they opposed and tried to tame Her; perhaps this is why Irish famine historiography, like that of Margaret Kelleher and McLean, at times sought out the feminine figure as an expression for alterity and otherness. Likewise, one might consider the spiritual abstraction of rice in Hindu culture and food as a representation of the ultramateriality of the Bengali Other; an erotic and feminine reading of food to replace Modern Europe's habit of delegitimizing femininity (Nandy, 1983: 16) in which an ethical relation with the Other was not the veneration of a static materiality.

In the eyes of the British government, local gods and rituals have neither functionary nor explanatory purpose for organization and creation of food relief. To overcome what they considered to be nonsensical superstitions, the government sought

to dominate rice relief through the figure of the masculine Brahman. It was assumed that, as long as a Brahman is installed as cook, relief-seekers would have no objection to his cooked rice. Caste was read as vertical hierarchy corresponding to masculine dominance, in which the Brahman may provide the one-size-fits-all solution to having a common cooked food distribution system. When Bartle Frere (1874) gave his lecture to London's Society of Arts, he admonished:

> Remember that, as a general rule, no ordinary Hindoo or Indian Mohammedan may eat food cooked by one, or which has been touched by one, of an inferior caste... so strong are these prejudices that the greater part of the Indian population, till absolutely beside themselves with the frenzy of hunger, will refuse to eat forbidden food, though it might be of a kind that is considered the most tempting and nutritious by a neighbour of inferior caste (Frere, 1874: 14-15).

Frere's assessment of "these prejudices" showed that he failed to consider the complex network of religious meanings of food. To Frere, the notion of "touch" is sensory and neutral; he sees irrational repugnance to touch as being ordered by caste constraints, as if the idea of contact and the idea of caste are two separable categories of Indian life. Furthermore, the colonial arrangement of food relief according to categorical dominance might reflect the Victorian ideals of masculinity. To draw from Nandy (1983) again, in Victorian society, "the lower classes were expected to act out manliness by demonstrating their sexual prowess [while] the upper classes were expected to affirm their masculinity through sexual distance, abstinence and self-control" (1983: 10). Of course Indians have their own notions of gender and sexual difference but Nandy (1983) argues that colonialists tried to assemble Indian notions of male and female essence with these Victorian sexual tendencies to produce a notion of undifferentiated masculinity. The British (mis)interpretation of Indian culture and caste rules conveyed the expectation that Indians might also be governed by a similar strategy of masculinity.

The installation of a male Brahman cook in relief houses for the famine poor might be taken as an illustrative instance of Nandy's point and reveals the simplistic vertical interpretation of caste by officials like Frere. In *India,* Strachey (1888) tells us

that, "the veneration for Brahmans runs through the whole social as well as religious life of a Hindu peasant, and takes practical form of either offerings or food... He must reverence and feed the Brahmans, he must abide by caste rules and restrictions..." (1888: 209). However, Khare (1976) tells us, "[Hindu] foods... produce veritable arrangements for meaningful exchanges. They (like women) must be given away in a culturally appropriate way, because the "giving away" *karma* paves the condition for becoming a receiver to these very objects" (1976: 125). Taking caste into account during food administration might be necessary, but officials like Strachey and Frere would have assumed that organizing food handouts according to these Hindu categories was alone sufficient. Using objective, phenomenological interpretations of caste, they paid no attention to the gesture or the act, as Khare says, of "giving away", which was more significant than merely fulfilling the process of feeding. "Food for the Hindu", Khare (1976) tells us, "represent essentially two interrelated dimensions – as a nutriment for remaining alive and as a cultural principle of cosmological creation" (1976: 119). Feminine ultramateriality thus may provide a more appropriate starting point for interpreting the alterity implied by "Bengalee food"; a relation with otherness cannot, Levinas argues, be advocated by the certainty of the final material, those "rocks and sands of a lunar landscape" (1979: 256). This is not the same as saying ultramateriality can explain what the "cultural principle of cosmological creation" actually is, which is why it is only good enough as a starting point. Ultramateriality enables focus to shift from the understanding of food and feeding to an intuition, between giving and receiving. Khare's emphasis on the "giving away" is a call towards the implicit, the unsaid; like Levinas' critique of Husserl in my earlier chapter, it denotes an intentionality that "cannot be taken as a property of consciousness" (Levinas, 1973: 40) since it is not *just* a "nutriment for remaining alive". It was not that "rice-eaters" willfully refused rice when it was offered, or stupidly preferred death over accepting charity; Bengalis who refused, as Frere anguishes, "forbidden food" were really refusing the context, the relation, the dominance implied by relief.

Those who did not understand this did not understand why having a Brahman cook did nothing to mitigate cultural and social sensitivities in food administration. For example, the Commissioner of Chutia Nagpur (southwest frontier of Bengal), Dalton (1872), points out that Bengali Hindus held a national antagonism to the practices of the Santals – a well-known tribe. Using a Brahman cook for food relief could not assuage the animosity between the two parties. He commented, during the famine of 1866, "the Santals kept aloof, and died rather than eat from hands so hateful to them" and furthermore, the people themselves have forgotten the reason for the animosity (1872:214). So while ICS officials such as Dalton battled budget with reputations, they fervently painted the impression that they were battling rural mindsets and un-modern stubbornness – suggesting those Bengali farmers and tribal folk rejected rice handouts as though for a simple matter of choice.

Practical difficulties such as these, in which the British found themselves, sparked off debates regarding the extent to which caste, religion or culture should be incorporated in the operations of relief centers. Adding insult to injury, especially after Beadon's debacle in 1866, the image of ICS officials faced a public bashing when the very categories - caste, Hindu - they had thrust upon the chaos of the relief operations as well-reasoned answers turned into challenging questions for colonial ideology. The pornographic nightmare of starvation at relief stations supplied a resonance that inverted the official calculations about "Bengalee food".

The failure to codify food effectively for relief depicts their own failure of mastery over material, and troubled the validity and usefulness of these codes and also disrupted the category of "Bengalee". In the rising exchanges in public rhetoric and media representations coming into and out of Bengal those decades from the 1860s, the agrarian image sought after by original state policy was often battered by that of colonial violence and scandal. Not unlike what happened in Ireland, Darren C. Zook (2000) notes that unfading famine mortality and nationalist voices from India fueled the impression that welfare and relief were badly managed by the British government, and yet all the while affirming the chronic ignorance of India's poor. Agrarian policy imputed

Bengal's 'food' problems with economic failure and its 'rice-eaters' with insurmountable awkwardness and impracticalities; as Bengali 'food', rice was constituted as an object of responsibility and a deflection from its "all-too-mystical" cultural and social connections with the people, allowing the administration to draw clear lines of nutritional and scientific differentiation in the history of famine.

VI. *PHARMAKON*: FEVER OR HUNGER?

Elaborate and scientific demarcations of malnourishment and starvation from "scarcity" and able-bodied automata tend to skirt over disease-related deaths as if they are simply a part of the sum total of famine demography. Unsurprisingly, in the particularly disgraceful famine of 1866, the excess of deaths and nightmare scenes allowed medical correspondence in Bengal to quickly collate and subordinate all varieties and reports of disease under the horrific appellation of famine mortality. However, where there are purported totalities that appear pristine and healthy, their limits are also most vulnerable. One such totality was the 1874 Bengal famine: famed for little to no mortality, the 'aversion' of the crisis was, on record, an accomplishment of government response. A narrow miss. The success story. As ever with the British Empire, this triumph was not without cost. In order to accomplish such a victory over famine, colonialists had to collect and mute indefinite Others. Constructing an unblemished famine required the government to bury any unknown meanings that might disturb the health of The Narrowly-Missed Famine. Such a task, as demonstrated by Foucault, had already been achieved for other types of afflictions, such as madness and leprosy, that modern reason found unsettling. Derrida examines Foucault's archaeology of the exile of madness in European history – *History of Madness* (1961/2006) –, in which insanity is portrayed like "the calcinated root of meaning" (1978: 41). Foucault (2006) argues that the modern experience of madness as a disease, an object of science, would not have been possible without the deliberate moments of human decision to circumvent, to place a limit on the ontological development of madness so that its meaning is never allowed to be fully formed. The government of India performed a similar gesture of circumvention for a disease they called Fever. The process of its calcination, however, did not occur in isolation; it happened within the history of the 1874 famine and was displaced elsewhere to be cultivated under controlled conditions, into something named Malaria.

The archive reveals that the success story of famine in Bengal in 1874 could not have been achieved without muting certain histories, specifically the defusing of disease from famine. In this chapter, I will draw attention to remnant imprints of disease in 1874, not as a mere byproduct of famine, but as an emerging discipline and history within another. The famine-fever tension marks moments of decision as Foucault did in the history of madness. The sterilization of Famine from disease was, like madness, "a subsequent silence, a discourse arrested by *command...*" (Derrida, 1978: 45). For situating famine and disease in historical form, this command may be likened to what Derrida also expresses as a "protectionism imposed by reason that insists upon being sheltered" (1978: 45). Through his critique of Foucault, Derrida highlights the iterative function of language with a claim that it romanticizes objects of reason and therefore violates those entities that are not encompassed in such objectification. Under this exclusive reasoning, objects continue, he argues, as "soliloquys" (Derrida, 1978: 45), and no longer address each other in dialogue. In his later work, *Otherwise than Being,* Levinas (1981) examines the ethical implications of such enunciative acts. He distinguishes between the "said" and the "saying", where the former "would idealize the identity of entities" while the latter would "constitute the identity, and recuperate the irreversible" (Levinas, 1981: 37). Levinas' response to the foundational formulation given by language and to the structures – such as History – that arise out of these roots, is to call attention to a prior process; the notion of saying represents the moment in which there is still negotiation, where it is still possible to affirm *and* retract the said (Levinas, 1981: 44).

After the nightmare of Bengal in 1866, the year 1874 was indeed a protection, a sheath against being blamed again, and a cure for recuperating from previous shame. The historical constitution of the famine of 1874 seemed to coincide, for the government of Bengal, with Derrida's notion of the *pharmakon* – the Platonian notion of drug or remedy. Remembered as a famine of low body-count and a victorious case of

famine relief[17], 1874 was the 'would-have-been' famine, the exemplary event which demonstrated the efficacy of government remedies. In *Famines in India: A Study in Some Aspects of the Economic History of India with Special Reference to Food Problems, 1860-1990*, the loss of life in 1874 was said to be "so mild in its incidence" and the relief policy as having a "happy result" (Bhatia, 1991: 82).

Answering the question of how this *said* narrative of the narrowly-missed famine of 1874 took place requires precisely an examination of the saying, a search for moments of its command-*ing*; I argue, these are given by the feverish dramaturgy circulating around the same time in Bengal, suggesting that the "happy result" of the 1874 famine might not have always been an autonomous kind of result. As Levinas (1981) reminds us in Chapter III, the status of what is said does not guarantee its performance or its responsibility to alterity. The suggestion that famine relief is an accomplishment of humanitarian effort requires some examination of the said effort, in other words, its *work* in the archive. The narrowly missed famine cannot be situated in historical form without silencing other dialogues in the archive.

Fever developed its own soliloquy. For the years 1874-75, records tell of a "Burdwan Fever", corresponding to a district (now called Barddhaman) northwest of Calcutta. Among historians, the Fever "proliferated rapidly and widely in the 1860s and 1870s, often in the districts in Bengal" (Klein, 2001: 159) and has been regarded as the "Bengali Black Death" (Arnold, 1999: 136). Elsewhere, this episode is famously described as the "Epidemic" which turned areas of Bengal into "hot-beds of disease, misery and death" where "the skulls of human beings now strewn the fields at every few yards' distance" (Gopal, 1876: 1). Contemporary historians say the Fever spread to Midnapore district, causing "a decline in population by 1 per cent between 1872 and 1881" while India's Census records the total deaths from the fever as "quarter of a million" (Samanta, 2005:123). At the end of 1872, London journal, *The Graphic,* had already declared that "whole villages were depopulated, and in the town [Burdwan] itself

[17] For elaboration of this please see Jill Bender (2007) "The Imperial Politics of Famine: The 1873-74 Bengal Famine and Irish Parliamentary Nationalism" or B M Bhatia (1991) *Famines in India,* Delhi: Konark Publishers.

almost every human being was more or less affected by fever" (*The Graphic,* 26 October, 1872: 385). This vague fever was also called "intermittent fever" or "enteric fever", as an indication of typhoid, cholera, dysentery or malaria. The Burdwan Fever is often referred to in medical histories specifically as an epidemic of malaria[18] as part of a sequence of fever epidemics recorded in Bengal since 1820s. It is hard to imagine how the above horrific scene described by much-cited Gopal (1876) – surgeon and Inspecting Medical Officer of Dispensaries in Burdwan – elided officials such as Sir Richard Temple, Lord Northbrook (Viceroy of India, 1872-1876) and George Campbell who were overseeing famine relief works throughout Bengal in 1874. If it did not escape their notice, there is very little in the discourse that may suggest how the Burdwan Fever intermingled with the success story of the 1874 famine, or that it intermingled with official famine record at all. There is, in fact, a startling disconnection between the written Bengali universes of famine and malaria. What is left behind is an oddly quarantined famine story in which Bengal appears overrun with hunger or fever, but never both.

The severance of hunger from fever eschews any ambivalence that might exist between problem and solution, disease and drug; it represents the attempt to expel negotiation between the two but not always with success. The result of which is that the Bengal Presidency's historical records behave schizophrenically. Even though the alleged effects of those events on the population must surely deny any simple distinctions between famine and disease, the archive narratives depict scenes of fever and hunger as separate events, neatly demarcated like administrative departments. In remembering one event, the other becomes an absent thing, although both bear traces of each other. It is in this character that evoking Derrida's (1981) notion of Plato's *pharmakon* might come in useful. According to him, this *pharmakon* is a medicine that "acts as both remedy and poison, [and] already introduces itself into the body of discourse with all its ambivalence" (Derrida, 1981:70). In presenting the famine relief as the "happy" and

[18] For example, in the Corpus Research Institute, eds., Chittabrata Palit & Achintya Kumar Dutta (2005). *History of medicine in India*. Delhi: Kalpaz.

effective antidote for hunger, official record might also reveal moments where the remedial function was inverted into poison.

To some extent, my work has so far dealt with what McLean (2004) calls "extravagances", a notion of excess which shares at least the element of indeterminacy with Derrida's *pharmakon*. This idea of excess helps to emphasize that *pharmakon* does not denote an opposition or a dichotomy of remedy *or* poison. *Pharmakon's* interchangeability rather points to or proposes that there is an element of unintelligibility in both cause and effect. It is, as McLean (2004) points out, the dead that command official memories of famine, conjuring up, as he names it, a "theater of death" (2004: 95). Borrowing from Antonin Artaud's famous essay, "The Theater of Cruelty", McLean (2004) animates in the Irish famine the kind of elusiveness of meaning that fascinates Artaud. He employs a historiographical gesture that restores the unpredictable movement of death from its capture by famine history. The excesses and stories in the burial records for instance, the "surfeit of mortality triumphing over any attempt at the orderly disposal of bodies", McLean (2004: 102) argues, may be likened to the performative excesses of drama that cannot be (and should not be) encompassed in a single theatrical show. Like Artaud, who tries to go beyond the confines of the theatre by emphasizing the process of representation [stage] rather than the representation itself [show], McLean proposes an image of the famine deaths beyond the preset limits of Irish History by showing how the signs of death run amok in the archive and enact,

> [A] parallel between the modernist theatrical avant-garde and depictions of such "real-world" issues as hunger, death, and disease draws attention not only to the constitutive role of imagination and desire in shaping supposedly documentary accounts, but also to the ubiquity of performance, across genres and contexts, as embodying a range of possibilities for action and transformation... (McLean, 2004: 96).

For Bengal, such powers of performance and excess might have been displaced from the famine of 1874 and emerged elsewhere as energies for articulating and documenting the account of fever.

Thus far it is precisely in the extravagances of scandal and (mal)nourishment that a certain affect (guilt) or material (rice) might remain irreducibly ambiguous under the measurement of modern and scientific moralities. This in turn defies the calculation of economic interest in the ethical response since judgment, or choice, insisting, as it were, on stalling our ethical imperative to give it a chance for new meaning. Poised to cancel out the possibility of ethics and of alterity, is the perversity of enlightened knowledge, the ontological derailment of "I", deceived into believing in the infallibility of sense, like the bias of Cartesian *cogito* surmised by Foucault as the perception that, "I, when I think, cannot be considered insane" (Foucault, 2006: 45). For the colonial government, this insanity manifested in the confluence of famine and fever and it was not something with which British officials could cope. To them, it was the impossibility of facing a battle of two-fronts when they can barely cope with one that seemed mad.

The double-writing of Bengal through the repetitions of fever and hunger presents another kind of excess that emphasizes, I argue, a desperate lack of a cure. Looking closely at the episodes of the Burdwan Fever, this chapter traces the liminal points of its writing where distinctions between hunger and fever fade and also where neither is really whole, solid, or present. Famine may be said to have traversed India's malarial countryside and emerged victorious in the rhetoric of that year. However, it is precisely within that cure which seems so effective that a non-famine space, such as 1874, might be created for another poisonous history to emerge.

It is in those years, in the declared segregations of what is hunger and what is fever as an unquestioned symptom of record and writing, that we may find the dissolution of the framework of problem and solution. In fact the rhetoric of the 'successful' famine in nineteenth century Bengal was created in a space around the opposition of problem and solution that had a basis in moralizing medical and scientific discourses. The very foundations that sought to distinguish and classify hunger and fever also allowed the conditions for the blend of the agents of these epistemes – doctors, government officials and their Bengali counterparts. This coincides with a kind of contagion (person to person) not dissimilar to Derrida's (2005) exploration in his work

Dissemination. He explores the notion of contagion as a plural and inherently conflicted process; for him, "the epistemic order of *logos*" of the pharmacy carries within itself the "complicity of contrary values" (2005: 124-125). Derrida (2005) argues that the usually separate readings of the medicinal and the poisonous are in essence the same because no claims for curative power can be possible without first presenting the claims of poison. In other words, the "othering" of a malarial crisis by famine relief discourse provides a domain for the Artaudian recapture of both dramas – a return to the *saying*, in which the futility of discriminating cures and poisons may play out.

The Memories of Burdwan, The Historiography of Fever Poison

The Burdwan Fever is a misnomer because it refers to so many things. The disease's vector and parasite had not yet been discovered in the 1870s and the so-named Burdwan Fever rarely refers directly to what some historians call, the "desperate fever spot" (Klein, 2001: 152) of Burdwan. It invokes instead a dramatic spectacle of disease that spread not only all over the deltaic regions of Bengal, but also all over medical discourse with mysterious miasmic characteristics. It names neither fever nor place, and is, rather, an enduring depiction of a broad and universal epidemic across time and spaces. In 1863, Dr J. Elliot describes a fever in the Burdwan and Nuddea Divisions in which "the rich and the poor of all ages and castes have suffered alike" (1863: 7) and in which areas "have been decimated by a disease which has numbered its victims by thousands, and which has left three-fourths of those who have escaped from immediate death to linger on for a few months" (1863: 8). The extent and impact of Fever in India was historically significant enough to be later appropriated by epidemiologists and historians for one disease – malaria – that spread "uninterrupted in N. W. Frontiers, Delhi, Rajputana, U.P. Terrai area, C. P. Bombay, Goa, Hyderabad, Madras, South Bihar, Orissa, Bengal, Assam, Andaman and Nicobar Islands" (Palit, 2005: 50). The archive shows that the Burdwan Fever excites in historians' minds a sprawling landscape of

death, providing a vast image repository of the rural, 'marshy' India, exciting yet surely already familiar and repeated in famine histories.

Echoing, perhaps, the sense of familiarity of the diseased nightmare, we may recall James Routledge's description from the famine of 1873-74 of "skin and bone" and "frightful diseases" whereby the repeated imagery draws attention to the (re)circulation of official record for authenticating unique causes and effects. It is from this body of language that the official and medical correspondence scribbles the diseased everyday of Bengali rural life and its cures. How does one restore the (healthy) physical realities of the Bengali people's mis-named, re-named afflictions? Restoration is not the cure; in fever or famine, it is precisely such an inspiration to write histories that have the function of "repair", of en-gendering nightmares that Derrida (1981) sought to explain in what he calls the "rite of the *pharmakos*: evil and death, repetition and exclusion" (1981: 134).

In his critique of Plato's systematic Reason, Derrida aims to subvert the rigidness of Platonian knowledge and representation through transforming dead inscription into Socratic speech. By this, he means to challenge any stable presumptions of meaning in writing. Instead, he hopes to furnish a domain of difference and play so that writing may always remain open to interpretation and intervention. For him, the immediacy and irreducibility of the (re-presenter) narrator may return an element of undecidibility back into knowledge, rendering it as the inherently dual and contrary *pharmakon*. The rite of the *pharmakos* therefore gives emphasis back to the translative gaps – "phantasms" (Derrida, 1981: 134) – within Reason. Derrida (1981) calls for the "major, decisive opposition", to pit two moments against each other, to reveal each other, to "[repeat] a repetition" so as to demonstrate the fissures, non-coinciding moments of memory (1981: 135). Therefore, the *pharmakon* is to offer a gesture for showing what was absent and excluded before hunger and fever split into their respective historical trajectories. The Burdwan Fever, for all that it names and does not name, provides exemplary moment for examining this split because it intersects with a unique context: the famine of 1874 served the specific purpose of being the remedy or cure. The

paralleling decades between famine and fever, the 1860s and the 1870s, with their overlapping but discursively separate realities belie a tensile space in which specificities and localities both collided and repelled each other. This encounter is the Socratic ingredient – that *pharmakon* – of Burdwan Fever, for which accounts cannot be contained in neat geographies and where the character of fever is not easily named (and cured).

In 1871, Dr Payne described a vague fever caused by "marsh poisons" of the area in which he also stated,

> [A] crowded or dirty village here, and poverty and foul drinking water there, may and doubtless do, by predisposing the human system to a taint that may threaten it, and impairing its resistance, determine in some degree the local features of the disease when it comes (*Calcutta Gazette,* 30 Dec 1871 cited in *Hindoo Patriot,* 1873: 2-3).

Dr Payne and his peers regarded the Burdwan Fever somewhat as the epidemical manifestation of poor drainage systems in rural areas of Bengal. Whereas in Dr Joseph Fayrer's (1882) lectures, *The Climate and Fevers of India,* delivered at the Royal College of Physicians, he associates fever with a "hot and damp" version of Bengal, prevalent he argues in low-lying, marshy, or water-logged ground" (1882: 39). Fayrer identifies fever-prone areas as the "Sunderbunds" of Bengal, where "alluvial mud is covered with dense jungle" (1882:42). Both Fayrer and Payne have rather imprecise descriptions of the 'climatic' environment of fever and are even more hesitant to make conclusive definitions of it being specifically malarial fever. The underlying claim is that water is the "prime causal agent", and in India, this pertains especially to *"stagnant"* water near the surface of the land. This allows medical correspondence to loosely interpret and group most sources of water in villages or deltaic Bengal as being "charged with fever poison" (Fayrer, 1882: 39). The significance and persistence of this vision of malarial Bengal is testified by later studies of malaria which attempt to define a "Bengal Proper", which refers to the delta of "numerous channels of Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers" (Samanta, 2002: 7).

Though vivid, this malarial Bengal seems all at once rural, poor, jungle-covered, swampy, poisonous and hot, the Fever has long since left its namesake, Burdwan, even before the apparent historical dating of the epidemic. Indeed, the idea of 'fever poison' did not retain itself in damp climates and deltaic landscapes; with narrative potency, it also manifested as an ideological tool. Burdwan or 'malignant' fever's miasmic characteristics find echoes in the later cries against colonial development policies in British-India that these were poisonous for India as they interfered, so to speak, with the ecology of agriculture and rural conditions. Writings of this sort in economic-social historians like Klein (2001) make links claiming that roads, railways and embankments built by the colonial government altered "water flows, salinity and temperature" and encouraged "the proliferation of *Anopheles philippinensis, Anopheles sundaicus, Anopheles maculates, Anopheles stephensi* and *Anopheles culcifacies"* malaria parasites (2001: 159). Concerned with the exploitation of the poorer classes, these represent later revisionist views brought about by the discoveries of bacteria towards the end of the century regarding the idea of living agents and causes of disease. The belief in miasmic or environmental causes of fever became outmoded and regarded as excuses for justifying exploitative or commercial endeavors. Klein (2001) highlights the proliferation of early twentieth century studies that defer to the links between malnutrition and malaria infections as a way of attacking government development schemes in Bengal.

The platform for revisionist views reflects, in western medical discourse, a new regime that some classic historians regard as the "Bacteriological Era (1875-1950)" (Rosen, 1958: 294). This established a thrust of medical history and correspondence based on formulating epidemiological knowledge of the disease for judging the conditions of the poor. The 1870s were, as respected medical historian George Rosen (1958) claims in *A History of Public Health*, a "period characterized by solid advances in technique and consequently in knowledge" (1958: 310). In this era of "historic demonstration" (Rosen, 1958: 288) from individuals around Western Europe, the point of articulation for policy reformists revolved around curbing the spread of bacteria through frenetic sanitation measures. Commenting on the discovery of the causative

agents of leprosy, malaria, diphtheria, etc, by Robert Koch and other major bacteriologists, Rosen (1958) says, "for the first time, the microbial origin of a disease had been incontrovertibly demonstrated and its natural history elucidated" (1958: 312). Although it would be many more years before concrete explanatory links between bacteria and diseases formed, this gave the sanitation movement in Europe scientific and diagnostic credence.

However, in both the revisionist and miasmic interpretations, the antagonism between the realities of the poor and medical knowledge is morally upheld in assumptions of the poor's ignorance, vice and the evils of their traditional habits. In fact, the association of 'miasmic' fever interpretations with those earlier and oft considered outdated medical correspondence aligns itself with the inexorable story of Medical Progress. Portrayed as primitive interpretations, readings of miasma provide the 'mistakes of our past' as it were, performing the role of a negative conception for confirming positivistic science. *The Friend of India* (FOI) published the The Bengal Sanitary Commission's First Report in 1865, which suggested that it is "far more probable that the disease has its origin in certain specific poison propagated from man to man, than that it is produced by any sanitary conditions, however unfavourable" (cited in *FOI,* 28 December, 1865: 1518). The report devotes its discussion to cholera and venereal diseases (although it is not clear which 'fever' the title refers to), and making conjectures based on statistics from Bengal's army and jail. I do not mean to suggest that it was a missed opportunity on the idea of bacteria, rather I want to illustrate the arbitrariness of both miasmic and fever reportage and highlight the modes of difference – for example, normal subjects against criminals or the sexually immoral – on which the colonial notion of 'poison' is based. Against the backdrop of these manufactured oppositions, the superiority of modern medicine remains unchallenged along with the myth of unmitigated biomedical advancement. Fever poison became fever *as* poison, evoking a different but equally powerful drama-turgy of the battleground of (godly) cleanliness against (evil) poverty. And here we may recall a similar logic was enacted when the Famine Apocalypse became famine as sin, turning

the poor – alterity – over as sinners and the event as divine inevitability. Miasmic poison, like the atmosphere of the ubiquitous Original Sin, was compatible for initiating the story of moral advancement and social progress.

For Bengal's Burdwan Fever, this 'era' was a unique conjuncture. The efficacy of government intervention has always been a sore point in colonial rhetoric because of the reputation of previous famine mortalities and relief systems. When the years of 1873-1875 came around, and the Bengal famine was deemed narrowly escaped, the British were allowed a chance for the writing of famine history that should have been the remedy of the colonial self-image. However, this remedy mobilized, for the constitution of the 1874 famine history, the reference to an object (low famine mortality – i.e. death) that *both* denied and gave rise to another object, fever. It appears that the collision between the very criteria of this alleged creeping era of bacteriology (intervention and response) in London's medical world and the suppression of diseased death in writing the famine of 1874 by those ICS individuals produced a surplus of official response. For the colonial government, the excess of 'our' memory against others manifested in a deluge of political documents; because the Burdwan Fever coincides with the nascent but steadily growing notion of public health, the alleged case of a successfully intervened famine became instead a transitive, vacated famine space in which conflicted testimonies from the archive emerge. There appeared to be so much fashionable intervention for one 'Indian' object or the other, but never for both at the same time. The miasma of fever poison held sway because it served as a rhetorical strategy against the failures of response. Whether miasmic or parasitic, the spread of the Burdwan Fever becomes troubling when it is considered as a repetition of narratives derived from schizophrenic ontological markers in a conflicted conjuncture. It is ultimately, as Ricoeur (2004) names it, a "surplus of meaning" (2004: 307) amidst medical phenomenon and memory that allows the historian, Fayrer or Rosen, to be 'witnesses' of fever. The excess requires the intervention of order and classification that draw together two highly complex realities – disease and poverty – into schemes by which to organize the poor. And, like the Famine Codes, public works and cookhouses,

the intervener never fully comes to grips with alterity, whether diseased or starved. Colonial classifications arise from a speaker whose language already betrays him/herself.

Fayrer's own witnessing occurred just at the (official) sealing off of the famine narrative. In October of 1873, Lieutenant-Governor George Campbell wrote letters to the Government of Bengal from the district of Hazaribagh (West Bengal) to alert them of the situation of rising grain prices and crop failures. Publicly, the word famine was not uttered in the news until a week later; letters from civilians started to trickle into *The Indian Daily News* insisting that the "rice crop in every part from Burdwan" will not produce enough and asked for the Government to "interfere...if it is desirous of preventing the same misery that we saw during the last famine" (*The Indian Daily News,* 29 October, 1873: 2). Again, the knee-jerk reaction was to avoid interfering with trade despite unfavorable conditions. This time, however, because the government was still recovering from the scandal of Orissa's famine in 1866 (added to the fact that Campbell was also former Chief of the Orissa Famine Commission), the letters took care to show that Campbell's warning was not taken lightly (India, 1874: 4-5). By 29 October, *The Indian Daily News* (IDN) reported special trips taken by Lord Northbrook to convene with Campbell, stating that both of them evidently "do not intend to have a repetition of the *fiasco* of 1866" (IDN, 29 October, 1873: 2; original emphasis). Official correspondence from within the Indian government show public works initiatives called for famine relief immediately after Campbell's letters. Reports of works in various Bengal districts were diligently given, although they reflect, as with previous episodes of famine, a preference for employment rather than charity, and for the discerning allocation of funds. In Burdwan,

> [works] has already been put in hand, partly in hope of obtaining an immediate supply of water and partly in order to give employment. In this same part of the country there has been much complaint of want of good tanks for drinking water, of petty drainage channels, and such like improvements. There can be no doubt that petty works of this kind are at least as useful as large works... But on the other hand, it would be impossible for Government to undertake and

> superintend such works of local improvement on private property (India, 1874: 5-6).

The official correspondence that followed shows that this was quite quickly ignored and left out of the rest of Bengal's famine narratives. The letters, later collated as *Correspondence relating to the Famine in Bengal 1873,* marshals all of the administrative resources to invoke a decidedly *managed* famine, enumerating districts, progress, statistics, expenditure, wages, deaths and costs, through letters from commissioners in affected Bengal districts. As such, "complaints" about water and drainage are quite easily swept under the sea of detail, a myriad of symptoms were brought under one label: famine. This sort of documentation supposes a discursive containment in history, meant to provide later generations of administrators timeless lessons and codes for appropriate action – guidebooks for the future. The complaint of a lack of clean water channels appears ignored for rest of the duration of the "successfully managed famine", these colonialists later perceive the repercussions of its ignorance as a separate problem that demands its own set of solutions.

Apprehending this brief remark of Burdwan's famine conditions is like finding one has wandered off the epidemic pathway and into a parallel Burdwan for which officials are able only to acknowledge one or the other: hunger or fever. One is forcibly reminded that these depictions are selective in their re-presentation, and that the absences marked by the gaps of the letters' intermittent dates and various official hands somehow tell a different story. At the end of the set of letters, we find correspondence telling of a brief meeting held at the Royal College of Physicians to discuss "obtaining a complete and scientific record of the diseases and deaths caused by famine in India" (India, 1874: 390). Among those who attended were Dr Joseph Fayrer himself, who was then the Surgeon Major in Bengal's Army, Dr F T Mouat, Inspector General of Prisons in Bengal, and Dr J M Cuningham, Sanitary Commissioner with Government of India. The meeting was aimed at setting the agenda for:

> The nature of fevers prevalent in the populations suffering from the famine, careful records being made of their symptoms (including temperature) from their

> commencement to their termination, in their varieties as well as in typical cases, of their rate of mortality, of their *post-mortem* appearances, of facts bearing on their contagious or non-contagious character, and of all circumstances tending to show how far any fevers are in their origin due to the famine; whether the ordinary fevers of the locality have been merely increased in prevalence, or any new fevers have appeared... whether any increase or modification of type of cholera, dysentery, diarrhoea, or other epidemic diseases, can be traced to the famine (India, 1874: 391).

Replete with echoes of official worry from the scandal of the 1866 famine, the urgent call for inscribing fever into symptoms, delineating beginnings and ends of fevers and writing up the "*post-mortem* appearances", i.e. the forms of the dead into 'facts' so that they become items of medical knowledge. Like Foucault's madness, the protocol was to "move directly from social experience to scientific knowledge, progressing from group consciousness to positive science, the former being the raw form of the latter, something like the primitive elements of its vocabulary" (Foucault, 2006: 79). With the Sanitary Commission brought into the picture, ripples become apparent on the calm surface of 1874's famine and its past. Just before the 1866 famine 'officially' began to wreck unquestioned havoc over Bengal, the *Friend of India* published an article "The Recent Epidemic Fever in Bengal" admonishing how the "Hindoo Press has for some time, and almost unanimously been drawing attention to the want of drainage as the great cause of the disease. The *Patriot* had a few weeks ago a series of very closely written articles on the subject..." (FOI, 1864: 751). This archived meeting confirms how the designated realm of one object (famine) can also inaugurate the realm of another (fever), permanently leaving traces, or blemishes on the supposed 'intact' famine. How have the events that unfolded in official correspondence given rise to a fever context both indissociable and separate from famine history? There can be no denying the nagging suspicion that the "complaint" above might have a history delineated *elsewhere* if it were not lodged in the arc of the famine story.

"Famine Deaths"

According to Derrida (1978), one of the confusions of the Cartesian cogito is the inability to align itself with indemonstrable notions; in Chapter III, I have already shown how Descartes examines this with respect to the existence of God, and arrive at the conclusion that there is a blind impulse inherent in Man that betrays human cognition. As I have also mentioned, the other radical unknown is death, which the colonial administration attempted (and failed) to enumerate alongside the calculation of guilt and criminality – these were deaths which officials established as being directly caused by famine. Crucially, after the downfall of Beadon and the scandal that besieged the Company, officials understood how death could easily betray their command. To defeat famine, they had to defeat death. As with Descartes, who felt dissonance from being unable to ascertain God from the standpoint of cognition, officials in Bengal were uncomfortable with not being able to "see" death. According to the main narrative of the 1874 famine, Sir Richard Temple was one man who did. He went down in history as the person who saw death coming and prevented it; Temple stopped the grain shortage and bad harvest (scarcity) from 'becoming' famine. On record, his success was marked by his timely importation of grain and more crucially, the low figures of mortality. The figures were pivotal in proving that the relief operation was a success and that government response, this time, might repair reputations from the 1866 famine. Loveday (1914) notes that, "the report of the Orissa Famine Commission had sunk deep into the mind of the Government, and bore fruit in absolute determination, and almost hysterical anxiety, to avoid mortality" (1914: 53). Yet the archive shows that the betrayal of death may take on other contexts. Only a few years before Temple's deathless success, a Sanitary Commissioner, D B Smith, reported that malaria in a district not so far from Calcutta, called Hooghly, was causing "sure depopulation, on an alarming scale" (1869: 1). According to the Commission's report for Bengal in October 1873, Civil Surgeon of Howrah (on the west bank of Hooghly River), Dr Jackson, said fever was "present with special force and fatality" (Coates, 1875: v).

Despite the "special force and fatality", these recent observations came from medical authorities yet were not mentioned at all in the official correspondence of the

1874 famine. Because they are further away from Calcutta, any signs of disease from Hazaribagh and other rural regions might be taken as rather nebulous and lie outside the immediate jurisdiction of Temple's famine relief, but Burdwan and Hooghly districts lie near the Hooghly River, a major tributary in the Ganges Delta. Moreover, these areas were officially recognized as major districts in the Bengal Presidency. The impression of 'low mortality' is clearly a description disseminated by selective delineation of famine and the geographical exclusion of fever. Nevertheless, the fever was already creeping into discourse with its damp and watery insignias, providing a stubbornly cotemporaneous disturbance of official writing. Temple's circumvention of death may have been limited. His team of famine administrators seems to have adopted a Cartesian assumption that, Derrida (1978) tells us, "[implies] that thinking and saying what is clear and distinct are the same thing. One can say what one thinks and that one thinks without betraying one or the other" (1978: 71). Famine officials wanted to deny famine mortality, they also articulated this denial with steadfast resolve. Even though the Bengali poor died of causes that were at times indiscernible, officials still clung to the flimsy demarcations that diseased victims should be left outside the concerns of famine relief. Put another way, death *pronounced* by other reason than starvation were considered deaths that cannot be held against Temple's system of relief. Reports of famine mortality were treated as "alleged" until otherwise proven so as not to cause alarm for the Departments of Revenue, Agriculture and Commerce: the story of a successful famine relief should not be in threat. Mr Bayley, Commissioner of Patna, wrote to the Government of Bengal in March 1874, explaining the deaths reported. He declared,

> Mr Worsley reported five persons as having died of fever brought on by want of food. The case was inquired into by Mr Llewhellin, Assistant Manager, Court of Wards, and though these persona has not died directly of starvation as at first reported, it seemed certain that their deaths were attributable to insufficient food (India, 1874: 304).

Like doctors alarmed at spreading infection, the correspondences make a show of distinguishing between deaths from starvation or from hunger. The official phrase was "famine deaths" (India, 1874: 219); this was the administrative command over death, the words that would order their dead subjects. Radical alterity would thus have a name by which to command it. The "veracity of the subject", as Levinas (1981) would say, "is absorbed in the said" (1981: 134). When six cases of death were reported in Tirhoot and Monghyr, Sir Richard Temple wrote that he did "not reckon these cases as 'famine deaths'" (India, 1874: 319). Famine dead are no longer colonial subjects, they become objects under such a label, indeed revealing a correlation between "the saying and the said" that Levinas (1981) describes as one which "delineate[s] the subject-object structure" (1981: 46). In a letter to these sections on 10 April 1874, a Deputy Commissioner reported "several cases of deaths have been reported, but these, I am happy to say, after full inquiry, have been found to be deaths from disease" (India, 1874: 351). Even where fever or any other disease could not be properly attributed to the case, officials had designed a cause of "privation", adding further that "two of the deaths must... have been due to privation, such as occurs in a poor country where food is dear, without there being what is properly called a famine" (India, 1874: 319). The intelligibility of death given by the said, these words and proper names, effaces the famine dead and encloses them in object structures that would later become histories.

Derrida (1978) suggests that the privilege of Reason is, in the end, premised on madness itself since, like insanity, it is also often determined rather than proven. His critique therefore argues that Foucault is, after all, working with a false opposition in the history of reason and of madness, and that both notions are not only proximate but also complicit. Perhaps, it does seem mad for official correspondence to persist in announcing "happy" results; the reasoning for such felicity seems absurd in the face of such surplus of death all over Bengal. Herbert Charles Fanshawe (1874) kept a diary, *What I saw of the '74 famine in Bengal,* that offers just such a disconcerting proximity, in the face to face, to death and disease. Fanshawe reported to Bhagulpore (a neighbouring district roughly 25miles east of Monghyr) for famine duty in March 1874

and there he stayed for about five months overseeing relief works and traveling between the various divisions. During this time, his diary manuscripts took stock of the quotidian in relief centers in the villages, providing a loose eyewitness account interspersed with personal ruminations and references to various aspects of the administration's relief ideologies. The result, if his descriptions are to be believed, is a mixed contribution to the subsequent success story and Temple's reputation. His offering reveals rather maddening instances of death in an event intended to be a monument of administrative success in famine response. Take, for instance, the following account:

> Day by day the death list increased: day by day on searching the huts someone was found absent from the meal- too weak to come, and then death shortly followed. On one black day no less then five patients died. Some came in and died quietly after eating a single meal: others lived on a few days and then died: many were carried off by dysentery...altogether in the Relief Centres and hospital we lost 52 persons. After the people were removed to the poor-house, the relief center was occupied by the Executive Engineer, and I spent many pleasant evenings in it...once I remember I startled them all by a grim joke on ghosts, remarking that I had seen over thirty people die in the very room in which we were then sitting in (Fanshawe, 1874: 30).

The juxtaposition of food, fever and death permeates Fanshawe's descriptions of his duties, his narrative often blurring the boundaries of death by starvation or disease. His claim of deaths by dysentery is problematic since medical officials like Fayrer (1882) demonstrate in their own accounts that they could not tell, conclusively, unrelated fevers apart (typhoid, dysentery, cholera) until a few decades later. Fever is one of many symptoms of dysentery as well as other diseases that Fanshawe and some of his peers regarded as endemic to the Indian population. His account functions less like objective diagnosis than like a trace of dispersed official memories. Perhaps this could fill the dated gaps in official correspondence but to reconstruct linearity or 'complete' chronology would be to miss the point. While he does not provide statistically substantial enough figures to contradict Temple's relatively 'happy' famine, his account indicates that the impact of mortality was not solely on administrative record and

measures of famine. Fanshawe's startling 'grim joke on ghosts' hint that death brought about a sense of discomposure that could only manifest obliquely, with brief utterance of uncomfortable humor; and that this manifestation only referenced the invisible, and absent presences. In April 1874, Fanshawe wrote that he regarded famine as a silent and secret "unseen enemy", and none so clear as being dead or alive could simply encompass the "persons dreadfully emaciated... too weak to drag their limbs along, kept turning up in the most unexpected manner" (1874: 45). Fanshawe's account paints a very different picture from the earlier letters' attempts to medically 'see' and itemize mortality as behavioral and bodily determinations. Instead of solid inscriptions of bodies and data, Fanshawe (1874) wrote of adults like "miserable skeletons" with "tottering steps", "projecting bones, and the sunken eye which tell of starvation" and children or infants like "young monkeys" (1874: 29-31, 51). The languages that render the sufferers bestial are striking too. Sanitary commissioner D B Smith (1869) described fever sufferers in Hooghly like "poor, miserable squalid creatures... shoulder-blades starting out from the body" and where "infants are seen like famished objects...their ribs starting outwards... they hang upon the breasts of mothers who creep about" (1869: 4). The visual echoes are arresting, if not for the worded details, then for what the official gaze 'sees' or 'remembers' as horrific, which appears to be a rather messy, chaotic vision where one does not find certainty in the cause of death but in death's pornographic excesses. Like previous eyewitness accounts, such as Sister Nivedita's, there is the sense of the revelatory in Fanshawe's diary, the apocalyptic tone as it were, that might bring the administration to grips with the Cartesian blind impulse of colonial reasoning, for unveiling the crumbling boundaries that separate life and death, human and nonhuman.

Hence, Derrida may, after all, be right about the madness in Reason. Just as madness might not be the silent counterpart of modern orders and truths, famine or fever deaths were probably not distinguishable phenomena. Fanshawe shows that the administration could not completely cast away failure, their responsibility to alterity, in what was/could be said, in the words of "famine deaths" or "privation". Instead, it is the

troubling scenes of Fanshawe's witnessing, his own facing, that seem to give a glimpse of radical difference, of the Other; his diary reveals, not in the unsaid, but in the saying, the "movement going from said to unsaid" that "meaning shows itself, eclipses and shows itself" (Levinas, 1981: 181). Derrida (1978) pinpoints the ethical problem of Foucault's work and shows a shared ground with Levinas: the question of ethics in any historiographer's work in *not* accomplished via the searching for the silencing and the unsaid, but in restoring a tension between self and other, and even within the self. No doubt the scramble to disentangle famine from disease in descriptions of mortality demonstrate an ethos of humanitarian reasoning that prefers to be 'ontologized' and that this ontology is a verbal utterance, having a loud and assertive taxonomy. Nevertheless, it is not invulnerable to alterity, as is Descartes' *cogito* to doubt.

'Endemic' Fever and Rice Bunds

In her seminal essay "Illness as Metaphor", Susan Sontag (1978) argues that nineteenth century literature romanticizes tuberculosis – regarded then as a type of fever – imbues it with elaborate mythology so that dying sufferers become associated with passion, sensuality and insanity. Sontag (1978) suggests, TB operated "in the service of a romantic view of the world" (1978: 70) originating from its associations with writerly and sensitive sufferers who also perpetuated the idea that TB was involuntary, poor and could be blamed on "insalubrious surroundings" (1978: 40). Poverty, disease and death are arguably joined in "fantasies" (Sontag, 1978: 40) in literary universes from Keats to Bronte; I contend, however, that the premise of such a myth structure gives TB sufferers an interiority that was not awarded other kinds of fever sufferers in the nineteenth century and this is because of a different dynamic of other-ing takes place for the kind of poor and filthy surroundings invoked by diseases like malaria, typhoid or cholera. From Sontag (1978), we may locate an inverted metaphor in fever for which the British, especially the Victorians, used to homogenize the colonies' poor and their material conditions, extending their deprivation into an ideological one. Since those fevered

poor, like those in today's 'Third World', had no (linguistic) access to notions of writerly sensitivities, their impoverished realities took on rather less romantic connotations, which, as McLean (2004) notes, are rather like the Irish famine poor: breeding, filthy and diseased bodies. This might help to explain why fever, in Bengal, is reserved for the population as an endemic affliction, a natural trait of an indiscriminate group; without a romantic viewpoint, the metaphorical framework evolves into a dangerous ontological diagnostic. In other words, what ostensibly distinguished and set apart the Bengali sick and poor as Other were their conditions - diseased and dirty. They invoke predisposing homogenous environments and growing discourse on public health and epidemiology whilst retaining a moral ordering of humans not dissimilar to Victorian ones of TB.

The 'malarious' Burdwan Fever was thought of as an already existing characteristic of Bengali people. In *The Causes, Symptoms and Treatments of Burdwan Fever,* Gopal (1876) shows he was able to pass off his views of Bengal as medical fact:

> In process of time every bit of that land has been brought under rice cultivation, so that the rice-fields present an uninterrupted view for miles around in the harvest season. It is the peculiar nature of the crop that the field should remain at least one foot under water before a good harvest can be expected. This water is prevented from flowing out by *als* or bunds that bound the field of every individual peasant. ..[affecting] the hygrometric state of the atmosphere and cause subsoil dampness. ...we observe Bengal enjoying the unenviable notoriety of being the hot-bed of fever, which is ever endemic...(Gopal, 1876: 10).

Gopal's (1876) treatise on the Burdwan Fever starts off with careful elaboration of all his geographical, agricultural and climatic assessments of Bengal as the fever's "probable source[s] of origin" (1876: 1). His book first establishes the endemic qualities of the Burdwan Fever and then describes the fever as an epidemic. Gopal (1876) remains imprecise and vague on the question of how the fever converts from being endemic to epidemic but his account, replete with geographical statistics, climate figures, physical facts, has enough scientific structure to allow it to appear as if explaining a continuous and progressive process. The beginning repeats the familiar tendency one might also find in 'causes and treatment' of earlier events in Bengal such as famine narratives that

often begin in a similar thread. The endemic notion of fever poison suggests something about the *natural* and inevitable conditions in Bengal that made it a "hot-bed of fever" (Gopal, 1876: 10). Like Gopal, who was a member of the Glasgow Medico-Chirurgical Society, many such utterances are spoken from positions of authority or use pseudo-scientific language, adopting a particular gaze at Bengal: terse and distant. This gaze, like 'uninterrupted views' of rice fields, accords Bengal a sweeping sense of homogeneity, continuous across her geography and peoples. According to some press descriptions in the 1860s, "if you traverse the vast plains of Bengal at the season when the rivers have all run dry... there is nothing to arrest the eye but patches of tall bamboos with tanglewood" and this kind of vegetation allegedly "hides a village of low unventilated huts, which would be poisonous" (FOI, 7 July, 1864: 751). Bengal's landscape is willfully untamed and vast, thus in terms of health and well-being is faulted by inherent characteristics: a supposedly lethal combination of tropical heat and choked passages describes the stagnant "water left from the rain season" where villagers wash and drink (FOI, 7 July, 1864: 751).

These examples show how fever is able to stand for a sweeping range of 'endemic' traits of Bengal and all that is in it. By his account, Gopal (1876) points to another feature of this landscape that supports an endemic view: the rural villages' supposed *total* cultivation of rice, whose agricultural requirements allegedly caused a "hygrometric state" and "subsoil dampness" across all of Bengal. Echoing at once the commonplace view that Bengalis live on uninterrupted "rice-plains" that plug up pools of stagnant water, and the enduring perception that people who live in the region are all "rice eaters", such remarks inadvertently lead us into contradictory spaces of which historical traces coalesce and collide. In the *Report on the Epidemic Remittent and Intermittent Fever occurring in parts of Burdwan and Nuddea Divisions,* Dr J. Elliot (1863) declares:

> [A]s sources of malaria are, I believe, endemic in most of them [villages]... whether on *bheels* [wetland], *khals* [canals], or on the banks of stagnant or running Rivers...those that have suffered the greatest ravages have been situated on the banks of stagnant Rivers filled with vegetation and weeds of

> every description... Most Villages are surrounded by a sheet of water during the rains, with extensive rice cultivation all round them...after it is cut the soil, which is covered with both animal and vegetable remains, dries, cracks, and miasmatic emanations probably rise through the fissures (Elliot, 1863: 9-10).

It appears that rice might be treated both as part of the fever problem and as mentioned in the previous chapter about the 1866 famine, part of the famine solution; as ultramaterial *pharmakon*, "food of the Bengalees" has the capacity to seduce both good and evil, remedy and poison. When the authorities encountered what they believed to be a malarial epidemic, and were confounded as to what its precise causes were, they were able to seize upon the watery environments of rice-eating Bengal and propose the histories of rice *cultivation* and the epidemic as inseparable and continuous. In December of 1873, however, the famine in Bengal brought the issue of grain back into the limelight: on the one hand, the fallout of Beadon's actions taught officials the political dangers of mishandling the famine problem and, on the other hand, they could not contradict, at least publicly, their scientific revelations of stagnant water in rice fields. Furthermore, despite George Campbell's urging to prohibit the exportation of grain, Lord Northbrook refused because he considered this a step too far for famine response and was supported by the likes of Charles Trevelyan and Bartle Frere who, as we may recall, gave a lecture in the same year on the nightmare scenes of famine.

Officials reconciled the horrific (re)-telling of the famine, the sensitivities of grain trade and malaria diagnosis in Bengal via a rhetorical trajectory following Frere's prior address to the London Society of Arts[19] that the Bengali people's religious and caste beliefs absolutely prevented them, even on the brink of starvation, from eating certain "forbidden food" (Frere, 1874: 15). Although food prices were high, allegations of the people's dogged 'stubbornness' could absolve the government's reluctance to interfere with trade and provide, at the same time, an easy explanation for the rising incidences of disease. Dr J. F. Beatson (1875) declared in the *Report on the Charitable Dispensaries of Bengal for the year 1874,* "many of the people were too proud to work until they were positively compelled by impending starvation to do so...the people were more

[19] See Chapter V: Rice Famine

prone to contract and succumb to illness then they otherwise would have been" (1875: 19). Goaded by this commonly held belief in the alleged imperviousness of the Indian population's beliefs to reason, the East India Association declared in a Conference on Bengal Famines that:

> [O]n the 15th August [1873] this very territory which is now threatened with famine, was almost inundated with water; and a gentleman lately from Bengal, declared that having at about that date gone through the country, he never before saw a country so completely inundated with water. The fact was that the people of Bengal had not learnt the use of water when it came... the great food of the people was rice, and there was always an enormous difficulty in getting them to accept any other food" (*Times of India,* 14 January, 1874: 3).

In this case, famine appears to be studied in terms of rice cultivation. Adding to the 'stubborn' impulse of the population's unwillingness to eat anything else, they are portrayed here as inept cultivators who do not know how to manage water flows in these areas. Villages were said to be left with vast bodies of stagnant water that later come to serve as the precursory background against which to paint Bengal's feverish climate.

In many ways, the career of 'Bengalee' rice is intertwined with both the Burdwan Fever and the 'successful' 1874 famine. With the added encounter with disease, the modes of categorizing, naming and writing fever and famine fracture, divert and disperse. As I have shown, through writings in official documents, eye-witnesses' accounts and news reportage, one can see the prolific reproduction of rice as the panacea of Bengal 'food' problems and where 'rice-eaters'' ignorance was also the cause of fever 'hot-beds'; each crisis conjuncture – 1866 and then 1874 – through the decades of late nineteenth century Bengal demonstrated transforming signification arising out of the double process of historical writing. In order to realize the entelechy of the Burdwan Fever as the story of how original poison became epidemic, their 'Rice Famine' must be forgotten and replaced with a Famine of Self-Sufficiency. In this non-hungry or 'ignorant' space, the conflicted status of rice demonstrates the double effects of the *pharmakon*, as both poison and remedy; it ritually re-enacts the duplicity of our

written histories to be both, as Derrida (1981) pointed out, mythic and truthful. Through the purported 'endemic' origins of the Burdwan Fever, the proof of such a story of origin might drag out another's ambiguities. Both histories manage to testify for mutual gaps in memory, creating a transitive space between history and memory, for which the heterogeneous predicates of Sontag's fevered metaphors might be revealed.

Gopal (1876) himself was not able to say with certainty whether the rice bunds cause enough obstruction to be the main causation of the Burdwan Fever and neither were later writers of the infamous fever, such as Joseph Fayrer, any wiser of what precisely was the Burdwan Fever even after enumerating all the myriad of symptoms and signs of various propositions of cholera, typhoid or malaria. In a definite rhetoric space, – official medical and humanitarian correspondence – what circulated was a determined concept for rather vague and imprecise relationships and processes. Yet contemporary writers remain quite keen to adopt determinate views of the fever, invoking and continuing its wide-ranging discursive coherence, especially in epidemiological histories. In *History of Medicine in India,* Palit (2005) refers to the Burdwan Fever as the endemic *Kala-azar* where he claims that,

> India is the oldest *kala-azar* endemic area in the world. Devastating epidemics once swept through most of Bengal, Bihar, and Assam during British rule... the disease described by the French in 1872 in the district of Burdwan, which prevailed from 1862 to 1872 by the name of Burdwan fever, was in all probability *kala-azar* [Black Fever or visceral *leishmaniasis*] (Palit, 2005: 51).

As Kumar Dutta (2009) points out, nineteenth-century health officials like Leonard Rogers, Dr Wilkies and Dr Elliot only suggested the possibility that the Burdwan Fever might be identified as the *kala-azar* but observed symptoms not exclusive of other kinds of fever. Nonetheless, the combination of overlapping symptoms and the lack of 'original' medical writing on the *kala-azar*, however, meant it was quite easy to say that both the *kala-azar* and the Burdwan fever at least co-existed in that damp, rice-cultivating dirty area of Bengal – this alone was enough to allow medical correspondence to augur the 'fever epidemic' from the 'endemic' without ever really

explaining precisely how one became the other, let alone explain the alleged connection between rice cultivation and fever. Dr French, who was on the Sanitary Commission sent to investigate the fever epidemic (after the worst of it) failed to find any continuity from 'outbreaks' of former years and admitted that "it will appear that I am placed in the difficult position of having to write a report on a fever which I have possibly never seen at all, and which I have certainly never seen in the form which attracted attention to it" (Coates, 1875: vii). Harish Naraindas (1996) brilliantly elaborated this crucial rupture in the discourse, which he argues represents the creation of "the pathological atlas, the basis of which is a physical and moral meteorology" (1996: 29). The officials were preoccupied with the physical and spatial causes of fever – for example, the waterlogged and unsanitary villages around rice fields – that the disease symptoms and causes begin to engender the environment itself (ibid).

It is worth noting, medically speaking, that the use of the notion of epidemic did not contradict claims of the endemic qualities of malarious Bengal (Naraindas, 1996). In fact, in the conjuncture provided by the famine in 1874, Naraindas' assessment extended quite easily to the inscription of 'Bengali malarious traits'. Both land and people were pathologically and 'naturally' a bed of disease whilst also a threat to other non-pathological or non-naturally malarious areas. What medical officials such as, Civil Surgeon Dr John G. French, Dr Jackson and Dr Wilkie reporting on the Burdwan Fever disputed was not the malarious nature of the disease but whether the character of the fever was contagious. Endemic viewpoints of Bengal and its people thrived just as well as that of its corresponding Victorian partner, tuberculosis. Though it is not hard to see how British views of the Bengali fevers are far from the imaginations of Keats and Bronte. According to Anthony Wohl's (1983) study of disease in Victorian times, there were virulent epidemics back in England in those decades from 1830s to 1870s that put pressure on the state to improve the circumstances of its people, especially the deprived classes. The government had to contend with tuberculosis which historians say account for "one-third of all deaths from disease in the Victorian period" (Wohl, 1983: 130). It was one of the Victorians' own 'fevers', with other members like cholera, small

pox and typhoid, the fever category reflected everything that was considered a "filth" disease, since fever, "drew attention to filth and to poverty" (Wohl, 1983: 125). It should come as no surprise that, like the diseases, fever became a dirty word. Sontag (1978) claims that successful metaphors are able to accommodate contradictory meanings (1978: 26) and the name of Fever in Bengal certainly reflected this. Fever articulated not only the 'miasmic' presence of filth and poison as emanating from the Indian environment, it invoked as well a sense of abundance – in the feverish pitch of the masses of sick and hungry. The endemic qualities of the Burdwan Fever not only referred to the miasma from rice plains, stilted up rivers, damp soil and jungle vegetation, it also conjured up imagery of the poor. Apparently, 'fever poison' may originate from both sources at the same time. Recalling that the Victorians accorded charity only to the 'deserving poor' against lazy and criminal poor, poverty was said to be a kind of disease or infection, which endangered blameless Christian poor. It was this particular quality that transformed what medical officials regarded as non-contagious fever into a problem of epidemic proportions. Government-dispatched medical commissions led to itemize fevers through the examination of villagers returned with reports replete with elaborate lists of symptoms (*mortem* or post-*mortem* appearances), but also with the *habitual* poison of the people. According the *Friend of India,* a medical commission found that,

> People were contented with their mode of life. The simple Hindoo, to whom a bowl of rice is sufficient food and a little pungent vegetable is a sufficient luxury, can endure a hot sun...but he does not like unnecessary locomotion. He does not like to keep up watercourses, or to carry away his refuse to distant deposits. He claims the privilege to be idle and to die of pestilence...not to be disturbed by sanitary commissions or tyrannical regulations of any kind (*FOI,* 7 July, 1864: 751)

We see here this 'simple Hindoo' is the contagion whose idleness and contentment prevents her from maintaining the boundaries between clean and filth, food and waste, a sanitary life and the poisons of nature. For Gopal (1876), for "as long as the Hindu remains a Hindu with his peculiar filthy habits, always acting in opposition to all sanitary

laws", the improving the health of the fever-afflicted population must "remain a mere phantom" (1876: 116). With 'endemic' characteristics adding constantly to their numbers as rational medical fact, the consequence of 'epidemic' proportions might seem very convincing indeed.

Apocalypse Redux

Burdwan fever's leap from categories of miasmic poison to the malarial endemicity of Bengal and her people, and finally, to the category of epidemic has a linearity that resembles an apocalyptic eschatology, in which a non-immediate and dispersed network of processes is compressed into a persuasive entelechy of cause-and-effect. A fatal causality existing as 'from the people' or 'from the climate' becomes associated not only with the body counts from fever (and/)or from starvation, but also with cultural and social *habits* 'infected' by such fever poison. This allows an event like the Burdwan Fever to take on, as I have demonstrated, a myriad of diseases, places and peoples; through usage and repetition in medical and scientific discourses, and by demarcating origin for means of comparison and analysis, the Fever acquires ontological force and conceptual rigor. Like the miasmic poisons, a similar source is noted in the Hindoo's aversion to 'locomotion' as one of many cardinal sins of the Unclean from which judgments from medical and scientific regimes may spring and on which apocalyptic 'prophesies' of sweeping epidemics may play out. It is precisely this (poetic) leap from the singular event to the representative, the speech (the event) of fever as it were that gave an entire epidemiological stratum of discourse.

This leap is seized upon by Ricoeur (1978) as the central problem of the careers of rhetorical categories. In *The Rule of Metaphor,* Ricoeur (1978) reminds us that "analogy functions at the level of names and predicates" but the predicative function weakens through repetition and "accident" (1978: 274). For him, analogy works through a process in which the meaning of the singular/the event moves "from inherence to proportion and from proportion to proportionality", suggesting that what begins initially

as logical inference acquires, through repeated equivocation, new meanings and differences between them. Gopal (1876), in fact, recognizes the metaphorical nature of fever poison but his medical inference mirrors the process that Ricoeur (1978) describes. For example, Gopal (1876) appears convinced of the truth of the notion of malaria poison, he says "our position [is] strong enough by analogy, when judging from effect to cause we presume it to be some heterogeneous element present in certain conditions of air, the exposure to which generally gives rise to perverted state of health" (1876: 64). He shows an extension of the name of malaria to other categories not unlike the formulation explicated by Ricoeur (1978). Quoting Aristotle, Ricoeur states "'Healthy,' Aristotle notes, is said analogously of the cause of health, of a sign of health and of the healthy subject" (Ricoeur, 1978: 271). The 'perversion' of health, as indicated by Gopal, allows a rhetoric of preservation and protection of health to develop against the 'conditions of air' to 'exposure' to the 'perverted state'. But the relationship of fevered subjects according to this perversion with the 'heterogeneous element' is not specific. 'Poison' is ill-defined but powerful when repeated; the notion returns proportionality to the 'inherent' fever climate, in the sense of behaving like a new concept where proportion is already a given, and where independent and ready taxonomies for which notions like unsanitary, and cure/treatment might spring forth.

Ricoeur (1978) calls this play of writing "conceptual labour", but his interest in it stems from the problem created by the "opacity of primary attribution" (Ricoeur, 1978: 266). For history, this has to do with the singularity of events like fever or famine, which we can only 'know' through contemporary retrieval from the archive that cannot avoid taking metaphorical form. With this opacity in view, we see the same problem play out for Gopal's treatise on the Burdwan Fever: even at its naming, and after elaborating on the conditions of Bengal's people and geography, he had "not been able to detect the active principle of malaria" (1876: 64). Gopal's point of view is also an (failed) act of retrieval but more importantly, his work on the Burdwan Fever is positioned as medical history or a fulfilled medical account of the fever. This was also precisely Sontag's contention of the Victorian frames of speaking tuberculosis and cancer. Her response to

the stigmas and affectations underscores the conceptual labour by which the Victorian literary epistemes understood those diseases and also notes the lack of "generic commonality" (Ricoeur, 1978: 269) among the many meanings insinuated about people with illness and the conditions of illness. The origin of analogy – whatever artifact or moment –, for Ricoeur, remains so utterly singular and radically distinct that it is impossible maintain any claims of primordial essence. Ultimately, this opacity forms the basis of Ricoeur's critique of metaphor as an *ethico-philosophical* question since it concerns the elusiveness of being as an ontological determination. It is precisely via this process that the Burdwan Fever became synonymous with malaria and 'malarious' places and people.

Ricoeur's hermeneutical examination of metaphor recognizes the need for interrogating the notion of metaphor itself before its use, whether for designating alterity or being, can be challenged. Levinas (1981) agrees on the necessity of both these tasks, except he reverses the process: he employs an interrogation of being to challenge the integrity of metaphor. He argues,

> [I]f being's essence is spelled out, scanned, resounds, or temporalizes in the verb to be and there by becomes discourse and apophansis, this is not by analogy with actions and processes, which verbs would first designate...the effort to reduce verbs to the function of signs naively presupposes the division of entities into substances and events, into statics and dynamics...but the connection between the said and being is not simply reducible to designation (Levinas, 1981: 39).

Unlike Gopal, who shows a firm belief in the strength of analogy [of malaria poison], Levinas (1981) here expresses serious doubt in attempts to correlate being with words. He dismisses such correlation or attempt to write a resemblance of being as apophansis, categorical statements of Truth, which should be held in suspect. In fact, Levinas maintains a radical distinction between "the meaning of perception, hunger, sensation" and "the psyche that animates perception, hunger and sensation" (1981: 70). The animation, Levinas (1981) tells us, is not a metaphor because it would suggest this psyche to be intelligible to the outsider. The relationship with alterity, Levinas therefore

insists, must carry both meaning and unintelligibility, like "two Cartesian orders, the body and the soul, which have no common space there they can touch...[yet] they are in accord" (ibid).

The intersection of famine and fever was, for the colonial administration, a kind of Ricoeurian 'accident', producing a byproduct that was perverse to the Victorian sensibilities and Christian principles of those who ruled Bengal. At the same time, they highlight the failures of "the said", of colonial presumptions to intelligently order and classify alterity – the revealing of such a failure is accomplished in the apocalypse. In January 1874, despite its alleged 'successful' reputation, like a disquieting nightmare, scenes familiar but from elsewhere, from not so long ago, were invoked through news discourse of the famine of 1874. Sufferers like "skeletons and dead bodies, in all the stages of putrefaction, lay along the road between Cawnpore and Ferozepore" and the "....men, women and children, were creeping about, wailing, actually scratching the very dung of camels, and horses in search of undigested grain or two" (*Times of India,* 14 January, 1874: 3). The account culminated by invoking a particular section of *The Famine* by nineteenth century American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow for which the intimate mix of famine and fever provided resonative force:

> Fell, and could not rise for weakness
> Perished there from death and hunger;
> Oh the famine and the fever!
> Oh the wasting of the famine!
> Oh the blasting of the fever!
> Oh the wailing of the children!
> Oh the anguish of the women!
>
> All the earth was sick and famished;
> Hungry was the air around them;
> Hungry was the sky above them;
> And the hungry stars in heaven,
> Like the eyes of wolves, glared at them! (*Times of India,* 14 January, 1874: 3)

Through the invocation of heaven and earth, women, children, Longfellow's poem suggests a terrifying ubiquity of suffering that gives the ordinary nightmare an

apocalyptic quality. The sense of ubiquity gives this scene its resonance for analogizing what appeared, or was *revealed*, to be a familiar scene of pasts (supposedly) long dead. In the wake of the 1866 Orissa famine and cholera in the 1860s, news reportage in the 1870s of dead bodies and skeletons both desperate and prostrate carry familiar echoes of the apocalyptic nightmare, the work of those who return from the graves of previous famines and fevers, the futility of distinctions of hunger and fever. Epidemical ubiquity, the miasmic ideology of colonial administrators seemed to have turned on them; the atmosphere so 'proportionally' equated with India used to catalogue and medically define 'malarious' people and moments everywhere appeared to have become *truly everywhere* – poison seeping from the putrescent lands into every instance of writing. The utterances themselves performing the very poison they describe so that famine histories become contaminated and medical taxonomies of fever sullied by the spectacle of *other figures*: women, children, the sick and the famished.

The coincidence of the Burdwan Fever and Richard Temple's 1874 'successful' aversion of famine created a lot of pressure on the government to quell the burgeoning fever mortality figures that could potentially cause much embarrassment in its incongruity with the publicized 'success' of the 1874 famine. Rather than contradict any claims of the 'near-zero' mortality of the 1874 famine by acknowledging any relevance of fever deaths reportage, officials wrote a 'miasmic' and 'endemic' India in no less scientific terms. These gestures are among many that paved the way for a distinct medical mapping of a chronically fevered Bengal, whilst avoiding complications related to famine. According to Mark Harrison (1994), Fayrer, who was also a member of the Indian Medical Service (IMS), later rejected the discovery of organism transmission of fever in the 1880s. In *Public Health in British India: Anglo-Indian Preventative Medicine, 1859-1914*, Harrison (1994) tells us that prior to the discovery of *the plasmodium* parasite, "European medical men were virtually unanimous in their opinion on the causation of malaria"; they were adamant about maintaining the theory of miasma which had allowed them to join up their observations of disease with their scientific conclusions of geography and climate – these observations would later gain ground as

the disciplines of public heath and tropical hygiene. In the aftermath of intermingling crises, came the sedimentation of meaning for concepts like epidemic, the Indian tropics, famine and fever, whose discursive repetition often bypass the variegated opinions prompted by practice, context and the quotidian.

The creation of 'miasma' or the 'Indian tropics' reinforced the long-existing biases expressed and felt about the 'Bengalee rice-eater'. What changed was simply that another ornate, or "ornamental" as Ricoeur (1978: 47) would say, language for speaking about the Other had emerged. For this ornamenting function, a coherent medicine was needed not just for the 'health' of Britain's employees in India, but also for 'curing' the tainted famine narrative. For this, they turned to quinine – the now well-known malarial drug – and produced a glorified career for it in a rhetoric that allowed them to cement the 'fever ' as malaria and as epidemic – a continuous and definite entity.

Quinine, Translation and Miracles

The appearance of the now-famous antimalarial drug, quinine, was something of a miracle. It is commonly known as the alkaloid made from the bark of the cinchona tree originally discovered by Catholic missionaries in Peru (Rocco, 2003). When administered to a patient, it acts as a febrifuge (fever-reducing) and as an antiperiodic, counteracting any recurring tendency of the disease's symptoms (Gopal, 1876). Widely accepted by nineteenth century British medical authorities like John Eliot Howard (1872) as the fever drug *par excellence,* he declared that "[t]here is no medicine in the world to rival quinine and its efficacy and in the extent of its consumption, and there is no probability that any artificially formed produce will ever take its place" (1872: 12). In this regard, the discovery of quinine was also the discovery of Nature's miracle fever drug. More recently, award-winning journalist Fiammetta Rocco (2003) refers to quinine's travels from South America to British India as the "story of the riddle of quinine, the miraculous fever-tree which transformed medicine – and history" (2003: xix). Commentators on the

history of medicine and epidemiology accord the drug a major stake in the story of our battles against fevers. What made quinine seem miraculous, especially in the nineteenth century, was its prophylactic powers – the view that it was not only a cure, but also a preventative drug.

These are the broad strokes of a well-established story of medical advancement, the battle and final conquest of malaria. The success of this narrative, like Temple's narrowly missed famine, is hinged on mastery over a notion; for Temple, it was death, whilst, for Quinine, it was the notion of drug. Plucked from faraway lands from a tree marked by otherness – from the tropics, in wet, humid rainforests, indigenous to South America – colonial intervention refined the cinchona alkaloid and made it a drug, turned it into an item of value and utility. This history has all the hallmarks of the common myths of modern progress of science and the triumph over Nature. The writing of the History of Quinine, according to individuals like Rocco or Eliot, implies a translation of the notion of drug as remedy or cure. A literal reading of *pharmakon,* Derrida tells us, the translation by drug or cure follows "the transparent rationality of science, technique, and therapeutic causality" (1981: 99). Crudely put, the history of Quinine can be said to fulfill this Platonic reading of *pharmakon.* Nevertheless, it is not medicinal effect that is under scrutiny, but, rather, the *notion* of effect, of cure, of its basic assumption that Truth can be unearthed and used without question.

The assumption poses what Derrida calls, "the Platonic problem of writing" (ibid). In *Dissemination,* Derrida's (1981) lengthily unpicks Plato's *Phaedrus,* a dialogue that relates the discussion had between *Phaedrus* and Socrates about a written speech. Their debate centers around the comparisons between the virtues of word and speech, reason and myth. As a kind of metaphor, Plato inserted the notion of pharmacy by way of emphasizing the importance of truth or purity in writing or that the forgetful practice of speech might be safeguarded by truthful writing. Derrida (1981) takes up this notion and argues that writing does not have an unambiguous nature and thus as a drug, it does not necessarily have purely 'curative' (truthful) effects. Using this logic, it may be argued that the histories of the Burdwan Fever and the 1874 famine, though written

and remembered as unadulterated, or as pure narratives of one or the other, the conjuncture of these events have also produced a play of oppositions that cannot simply be subsumed into existing epidemiological, miracle entelechies from Tropical Medicine or from the Famine of No Mortality. Using a Derridian intervention, another reading of quinine might be proposed, one that challenges the miracle of the historical text and the ethical problem of announcing therapeutic causality.

Quinine was neither cheap nor simple to manufacture. Closer inspection of the various enunciative gestures to declare a Fever cure, show a miraculous be-coming of quinine rather than the actual miracle of quinine. The records show a *pharmakonic* quinine traversing the archive; earlier on the career of quinine did not actually look promising for gaining status as a miracle drug and in fact, opposed the possibility of it becoming a 'preventative cure'; for all the mysterious properties of quinine and its elusive chemistry, this 'miracle' had its own built-in 'poison'. Firstly, the sheer scale of drugs required for a fever epidemic became a costly endeavor in itself, not to mention extracting alkaloids from plantations in South America. Secondly, cinchona was from a *different* kind of tropics compared to India, with characteristics not necessarily explained or aligned with the poisonous miasmic universal mapping of Other 'tropics' as accorded to Bengal. When the British medical world embarked on the project to cultivate the cinchona plant on Indian soil, they followed a horticultural system that was not dissimilar to the classificatory framework of Tropical Medicine as outlined by Harish Naraindas (1996) – they pit the plant 'against' the hot, damp climate of India. In his seminal paper "Poisons, Putrescence and the Weather: A Genealogy of the advent of Tropical Medicine", Naraindas (1996) argues that the discourse on climate "was a general 19th century European preoccupation" and that the figuring of 'tropics' as illness-causing "was part of a ubiquitous pathologisation of space" (1996: 3). Ultimately, as Naraindas (1996) points out, the steps taken by the Government in nineteenth century Bengal to produce a solution to fever epidemic revolve around "the figure of attrition" in which the Imperial Self is pitted against the scourge of tropical environments and bodies (1996: 29). Reports of deaths in the military forces in India, for

instance, created a space for a medicine to emerge, for battling the harmful effects of the climate on the European self. Tropical Medicine is an "extended trope on what happens to the Self in this Other world" (Naraindas, 1996: 29). Officials needed something for 'tropical afflictions' *in 'tropical bodies'*. The figure of attrition could not hold any weight because without a positive medicine, it would not be attrition, there would be no tension or friction to wear down the body, simply a drive towards nothing, towards death.

Although the cinchona was not yet strictly-speaking a viable medicine, it provided a workable trope for extending the benevolent Self. This is demonstrated by the nineteenth-century currency of the medico-horticultural field dedicated to the 'miracle' plant and drug: a discipline named 'quinology' emerged in which 'quinologists' might work. The terms quinology and quinologist first appeared in English usage in John Howard Eliot's book, *The Quinology of East Indian Plantations, 1869-76.* Eliot himself was later recognized as one of the founding quinologists in the field, having credit for his work related to the cultivation of cinchona and the medicinal value of quinine. In the war of attrition against the fever epidemic, the quinologist is the soldier. In order to portray this, quinologists did not reveal to the public that cinchona was not only proving a horticultural challenge in India, but was also rather plural in its chemical composition. The tree did not only yield one alkaloid, it also gave many other variants that did not necessarily have the same febrifugal effects that these quinologists desired in an antimalarial drug. In practice, it was actually impossible for quinine to become the proverbial antimalarial as it is commonly referred to today. So why did quinine gain momentum in the 1870s as the miracle fever drug?

It should come as no surprise that the first Famine Codes arrived for India from around the same two decades that (1860s-80s) the 'tropical fever remedy', quinine, was also properly pronounced under the Tropical Medicine episteme. If the Famine Codes dictated what officials should do when mass starvation 'strikes', which provided not only administrative but also moral alibis for the colonial government, then the founding or discovery of quinine the 'miracle' antimalarial was the Platonic "*pharmacia*" (Derrida,

1981: 65), the paradigmatic answer to mass disease – the epidemic. The 'journey' from discovery to the proverbial miracle drug was neither spontaneous nor natural. The drug was inscribed within designated confines – it was a kind of play "that is supervised and contained within the safeguards of ethics and politics" (Derrida, 1981: 155). Tropical Medicine's question of 'what happens to the Self in this Other world?' further extended into 'what *good* is the Self *for* this Other world?'

It was Temple's 'successfully' avoided famine that provided the conjuncture and the imperative in which quinine was established as the antimalarial drug *du jour.* We recall that the contamination of fever mortalities with famine (non)mortalities in 1874 led Temple's team of famine officials to also call a meeting of medical authorities including leaders of the military, prisons and the sanitary commission of Bengal. What began as a preoccupation with itemizing and collating fever symptoms also provided an extensive resource in which the itemizing of medicine might take place – a drug's efficacy being systematically tested against each and every failed body part and 'abnormal' bodily functions. In their efforts to stamp out any allegations that there were in fact widespread deaths throughout the 'famine' regions and that 'fever' deaths could not actually be isolated from deaths by starvation, the administration stumbled on an immense resource. The rural poor provided an extensive reserve of symptom cases for which to carry out later conclusions about the febrifugal and prophylactic powers of quinine. Against the medical world's mapping of diseased bodies and their causes, the British Government was allowed to build a persuasive case, in medical-scientific terms no less, for quinine as successful ameliorative and counteractive action, allowing doctors to narrate a miracle drug.

The novelty of these practices in the 1870s was the way in which the poor in rural Bengal participated in the 'trials of quinine'; the crucial benefit of this came from their performance as figures of attrition in the Battle Against the Fever Epidemic, rather than being living testimonies of the actual 'miracle' effects of quinine. The science of quinine was more concerned with its production rather than its curative powers. The fact that quinine had some value in the treatment of fevers was clear to the

administration but the alkaloid proved very expensive to extract. The question that dogged officials was how to mass-produce it cheaply. Needless to say, this was a major concern for the colonial government. In 1865, the Secretary of State for India,

> [E]xpressed an opinion that it was very important with reference to the commercial interests of chinchona cultivation in India, that *authoritative medical decisions should be pronounced* on the relative value of Chinchona alkaloids, other than quinine (Arnott, 1866: 1; emphasis my own)

The document here explicitly acknowledges the necessity of *pronouncement,* that the remedial quality of fever drugs, quinine or otherwise, was at least performative as well as febrifugal. The government needed a rhetorical gesture from medical authorities before introducing substitutes for the expensive quinine into the cultivation and production of fever medicine. Publicly, the name of quinine made no such distinctions between the alkaloids since the economics of its production were simply subsumed into the humanitarian axiom of making affordable drugs for the 'good' of the Indian population. By 1880, *The Pall Mall Gazette* was able to announce that "every fall in price means extending use in India in the cure and prevention of fever and disease, and therefore the cure and prevention of want and suffering among the poorest class of native population" (*The Pall Mall Gazette,* 18 September, 1880: 3). By the end of the nineteenth century, quinine was conferred the status of fever remedy after 'acclimatizating' the cinchona, 'safely tested' within the tropical boundaries of India might then become the paradigmatic answer to the troubling moral uncertainties of administrative involvement in widespread, uncontrolled fevers among the poor and starving 'masses'.

This war of attrition shows a process of translation undertaken by the self *for* the Other, in which quinine is the word that takes center-stage. As Derrida (1981) tells us, under the supervision of the self, the *pharmakon* is a linguistic remedy in which the "word inscribes itself as the citation of another sense of the same word...[it] cites, re-cites, and makes legible that which *in the same word* signifies" (1981: 100; original emphasis). Conveniently relayed to the public as a drug from the cinchona tree in the

1870s, quinine underwent precisely such a *pharmakonic* translation. Records show that earlier medical correspondence circulated at least several different alkaloids yielded from the plant. Before quinine was formally 'named', officials referred to its source, the plant, rather than the drug. Earlier in 1866, the government's Chinchona Commission obtained at least three other "chinchona alkaloids", namely "chinchonidine, "quindine", and "chinchonine" for the "cure of tropical fevers" (Arnott, 1866: 1). Different methods of cultivation or agriculture produced different substances and harvest amounts. These variables, added to the fact that the government did not have a stable formula for producing quinine, implied that it remained very expensive to supply large amounts of quinine to afflicted populations. In an early report of cinchona plantations in Darjeeling, Howard (1872) notes that the yield of quinine from those plantations declined from 1868 to 1871 whilst that of chinchonidine increased. He further forewarned that

> [T]his difficulty must be looked steadily in the face, and I would suggest that it may be obviated either by a change being wrought in the opinion of the medical world as to the value of chinchonidine as a medicine, or by the plant being encouraged to produce quinine instead of chinchonidine (Howard, 1872: 8).

Consequently, reports show that they favored the earlier option. Howard (1872) himself probably knew that the opinion of the medical world was more than enough to change the value of these other alkaloids as fever medicine and was far easier (and cheaper) than the time-consuming tedium of further modifying cinchona's cultivation so that it yielded more of the quinine alkaloid. Medical commissions were set up to determine the efficacy and viability of these other alkaloids for the treatment or prevention of fever. Their results differed on many details: dosages, methods of administering the alkaloid and frequency of intake all produced mixed reports on whether they were good substitutes. Although some results were promising, there was neither consensus nor surety amongst members of cinchona or medical commissions; the much-needed 'pronouncements' of the value other alkaloids, despite urging from the Government, was not as readily available as was hoped. The cost of quinine and its unyielding agriculture had, in fact, made it impossible for quinine to be rendered a 'miracle' drug,

even if it did have favorable effects against 'tropical maladies'. Nonetheless by 1874, the difficulty of yielding quinine had created a rhetoric space in medicine around the figure of purity. The absence of consensus in the medical world did not stem the increasing currency that quinine came in a 'pure' form, which if not better, at least had unquestionable efficacy, however unclear what exactly this 'pure' form of quinine actually was. More significantly, while 'pure' quinine stood for the view that medicine or drug were unadulterated, i.e. purely good (or purely bad), its scarcity meant it had little political or symbolic capital. It was of little use since it could neither be produced nor sold widely in both India and Britain. In this way, Howard (1872) might have indeed foretold an important direction of medical discourse. It was not until 1875-6 (in the aftermath of the double-nightmare of famine and fever) that clinical trials were undertaken by the Indian Medical Department in Indian districts among the rural poor and the Indian members of British troops that the career of quinine's 'miracle' grew.
In contrast, the lack of 'miracle' in quinine's career in the late 1860s to early 1870s was given testament by a noticeable absence of the drug in reports of dispensaries around Bengal. As late as 1873, the report from the Charitable Dispensaries of Bengal made no mention of quinine although there was extensive mention of fever. Although it was referred to specifically as cholera, the report indicated a debate amongst doctors on whether it was a more serious and different disease. In contrast, in the 'nearly-famine' year of 1874, the report began to confirm the disease as malaria – the now infamous Burdwan 'epidemic' – and acknowledge a widespread need of quinine (Beatson, 1875). The cost of providing quinine to 21 dispensaries at the time of the report's writing did not go unnoticed. Added to this was the unwelcome attention drawn by the high death rates of dispensaries in Burdwan, Midnapore, Patna, and other districts. The report insists that the "scarcity of 1874 did not raise the general death-rate of dispensaries" (Beatson, 1875: 8). Keen again to keep famine and fever separate, the dispensaries' report could not, however, ignore the high costs incurred from supplying quinine – especially since it reported to have treated nearly 400,000 cases of fever in 1874

(Beatson, 1875). The scramble to avoid mounting mortality figures brought 'cinchona' commissions, quinologists and doctors face-to-face with Howard's (1872) forewarning.

The project of acclimatizing the cinchona plant to Indian soil was yielding other alkaloids and with no cheaper a means of acquiring quinine; a shift was needed for the figure of attrition to focus on bodily symptoms. By 'announcing' the itemized symptoms of the 'Fever epidemic' as the primary indicators of an alkaloid's value, officials began a shrill medical campaign to test cinchona alkaloids, quinine or not, against those symptomatic among the rural poor. According to the dispensaries report of 1874, "experiments are now being made throughout the Presidency regarding the therapeutical value of the cinchona febrifuge manufactured at Rungbee, near Darjeeling" (Beatson, 1875: 14).

In the following months, Dr Beatson distributed this so-named cinchona febrifuge throughout the Bengal presidency for testing. Changing the name to cinchona febrifuge re-defines 'cinchona' drugs according to whichever symptoms – in this case, fever – they counteract. This is crucial for the drug's 'performance' and it has to do with the performativity of medical pronouncements – an important aspect, as the Bombay and Madras cinchona commissions pointed out earlier in 1866, of ascertaining 'medicinal' value. Needless to say, the results were as mixed as those obtained in 1860s. However, they remain of interest to administrative practice because these trials have to do with setting up an empirical and scientific tone, a language with which to compose the rhetoric of the 'new' quinine – the cinchona febrifuge. Through a medical logic based on the (dis-abled) body as map of disease, 'Bengalee bodies' provided a chance for clinical trials to arbitrate the disease and produce a translation of therapeutic causality – something which medico-horticultural science – 'quinology' – was not able to "prove" or perform. And, in 1876, he published the dispensaries report claiming to "have received afford proof that results have been obtained which are encouraging as to the virtues of the drug as an antiperiodic" (Beatson, 1876: 13). However, Beatson (1876) made it explicitly clear that he was still uncomfortable with recommending the drug's usage in "civil and military hospitals" in Bengal. His reticence about this virtuous

drug might be accrued to some of the ambiguous statements reported by district doctors who participated in the trial of the cinchona febrifuge. A Burdwan doctor wrote:

> From the results obtained during a six months' trial, I believe that the Darjeeling quinine is most efficacious in the treatment of intermittent fever, and that it may safely be substituted for the ordinary sulphate of quinine in Government dispensaries, jails and police hospitals. But in all malarious districts a certain amount of ordinary quinine should also be allowed to each institution for such cases as resist entirely the power of the Darjeeling quinine (*Collection of Papers,* 1878: 35)

According to the same papers, after the trials the cinchona febrifuge was administered to civil, military native hospitals throughout India, replacing up to 75% of the supply of what was formerly pure quinine.

As I have shown, when histories are proposed as *pharmakon,* this implies a gesture of reading that departs from genealogies and structural oppositions. Derrida's notion has been used thus far to illustrate how the historical language does not shelter one discourse [famine] from another [fever]. More importantly, the *pharmakon* makes room for unintelligibility in writing by pointing out how writing "turns us toward[s] the inanimate and toward[s] nonknowledge" (Derrida, 1981: 108). Derrida's caution to Foucault is that (re)writing a history of a silenced disease risks isolating the affliction, and subjecting it to the same structural forces that constitute its silencing. Without questioning the very notion-ing of madness itself, Foucault jeopardizes his historiographical critique by never addressing the kind of (mad) ethics that enable concepts and objects in the first place.

The Burdwan Fever designates a kind of madness in writing, which the colonial government never anticipated. At the same time during their fervent documenting and naming, Bengal's government forgot, rather than remembered famine and fever; they forgot alterity, the relationship with the Other that cannot be encapsulated in writing. A man who relies on writing, "who brags about knowledge and powers it assures him", Derrida (1981) argues, is pretending to "[sell] the signs and insignia of science: not memory itself, only monuments, inventories, archives, citations, copies, accounts, tales,

lists, notes, duplicates, chronicles, genealogies, references. Not memory but memorials" (1981: 109).

VII. AFTER APORIA

Conscience and Callousness

Those suspicious of Truth and History, Baudrillard (1994) tells us, are usually accused of spreading despair or nihilism. Often, he adds with some caricature, there is

> [a]n insidious objection [that] is proclaimed in the name of the Third World: How can you take away abundance when some people are starving to death? ...[or] the class struggle from all the peoples that never got to enjoy their Bourgeois revolution? If you don't like reality, please do not make everyone else disgusted with it! (Baudrillard, 1994: 1).

To suggest skepticism and introduce ambiguity to famine history is also to confront such an objection from all kinds of historians and their attempts at doing precisely the opposite: 'repairing' gaps or loopholes in historical realities. As the presenter of BBC Radio 4's series, *The Things We Forgot to Remember* (henceforth *The Things*), former Conservative MP Michael Portillo seems to have taken on such repair work for Bengal. On 7 January 2008, in a broadcast entitled "The Bengal Famine", Portillo gathers a formidable team of commentators, including Christopher Bayly, Gideon Polya, Amartya Sen, and Sanjoy Bhattacharya, with testimonies from an eyewitness and a relief worker, for putting together a revelatory radio documentary that "challenges our collective amnesia and asks historians from both India and Britain whether it [the Bengal Famine of 1943] could have been avoided" (BBC Radio 4, 2008: 1). The series is a collaboration between the BBC and the Open University (OU), and has enjoyed three successful runs on Radio 4 dedicated to various other historical events, such as The Battle of Trafalgar, Battle of Britain and Jack the Ripper. Portillo singles out the Bengal Famine in the 1940s as "a catastrophe that in Britain at least is not so much misremembered as completely forgotten... both the Indians and the British have good reason to forget for it makes uncomfortable listening even today" (ibid). Polya alludes to the gross injustice of such forgetfulness when he tells Portillo that he "discovered" this little known famine "from seeing the film *Distant Thunder* (1973) by the great Bengali filmmaker Satyajit Ray"

(ibid)[20]. Describing his shock, he adds, "I was quite appalled...I've never heard of this. And I went to my history books in my big personal library. It was not there. I immediately went to a local, very large academic library and... it was there in the arcane academic literature" (ibid). With the piercing pitch of un-silenced secrets, the "reality" of the Bengal famine, the broadcast goes on, is a grating *exposé* of neglect and bad judgment on the part of the British government, exacerbated by World War Two and the ensuing collapse of rice exports from Burma to Bengal. According to Bhattacharya, a medical historian at London's Wellcome Institute,

> [T]he Bengal Famine started in Bengal. But, as panic responses from the state tried to bring the famine under control in Bengal, localized famines were created in provinces. So that six to seven million figure includes the deaths that happened in the provinces of Bihar, Orissa and Assam (BBC Radio 4, 2008: 1).

The astronomical death toll represents, we are told, "the largest single loss of life in the British Empire in World War Two" (BBC/OU, 2007: 1). Portillo explains, "the high demands of the war caused inflation in the price of rice and the uncertainty brought about by Japan's military successes encouraged hoarding," while Sen underscores an added "general sense of callousness" (BBC Radio 4, 2008: 1) from the British government. Winston Churchill and the War Cabinet, Sen tells us, lacked sympathy for the Indian people and Churchill even "permitted himself to make the remark that the Indian population brought it [famine] onto itself [sic] by breeding like rabbits... that Indian people were the beastliest in the world, next to the Germans" (ibid). It seems quite clear, to these group of experts at least, that if historiography is not on the same side as this famine reality, it must then be in cahoots with the callousness and unjust amnesia that plagues the rest of British society. Furthermore, the premise of Polya's

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[20] According to the New York Times synopsis: "Satyajit Ray's drama about the Bengal famine of 1942-1943 stars Ray collaborator Soumitra Chatterjee as Gangacharan, a Brahmin who sets up a school in a remote Bengali village. As World War II drains India's resources, the price of rice begins to rise, and soon the villagers can no longer afford to eat. Merchants horde their grain and the impoverish villagers riot in protest..." (*New York Times,* 1973: 1). Favorably reviewed, Ray's film is also part of NYT Critics' list of "Best 1000 Moves Ever Made" (ibid). Suffice to say, there is not much deviation between Polya's account and the film's account, thus making his stance – 35 years after the film's release in New York – about the famine being stuck in the grips of arcane academic literature, seem rather dubious.

shock and subsequent reaction might also suggest that there is a Bengali famine trapped in shackles of academic and arcane work that should be released into public consciousness and, to do this, requires an effort of historical discovery.

Polya expresses the same indignation and heartfelt offense elsewhere in his article on Media with Conscience News (MWC News), "Media Lying over Churchill's Crimes", in which he labels the famine the "Bengali Holocaust", and a crime of Churchill's that has been "deleted from history by extraordinary Anglo-American and Zionist Holocaust Denial" (Polya, *MWC News*, 18 November 2008: 1). He called it "deliberate, sustained, remorseless starving to death of 6-7million Indians... an atrocity larger in magnitude than the World War II Jewish Holocaust" (ibid). Adding to his ire, Polya (2008) says, "the extraordinary thing is that... even a highly educated, anti-racist, anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist in 1966 was apparently utterly UNAWARE of the immensity of Winston Churchill's crimes" (ibid; original capitalization). In the radio broadcast, he explains his personal connection to World War Two, "my father was a Jewish refugee to Australia in 1939. I of course knew about the Jewish Holocaust" (BBC Radio 4, 2008: 1). His controversial remarks on Churchill did not go unnoticed. The London Churchill Centre and Museum at the Cabinet War Rooms issued a statement of retaliation with, "The Facts", stating that Churchill "*did* attempt to alleviate the famine" and that "his impulses in situations of human suffering were the opposite of hateful" (*Churchill Centre,* 2008: 1). Gideon Polya's accusations are, the Churchill Centre argues, a "myopic determination to find feet of clay in a man who was human and made mistakes, like everyone else..." (*Churchill Centre,* 2008: 1).

Comparing the famine to the Jewish genocide is a telling gesture, like that of the Apocalyptic Famine, the Holocaust can be terroristic; it is a symbol that, as Polya shows, provides the ethical framework for famine history by taking over all subsequent death events in a locked relationship or exchange. The invocation of World War Two seems to recapitulate Levinas' claim that the sign of war is a demonstration of how ontology might anchor otherness to a pre-existing order. The historian that instigates a moral charge against the forgetting of famine history, against callousness, coincides with the

presentation of the idea of human totality, since the charge can only stand on the presumption of a complete and closed historical existence. Alterity, for Polya, is based on the formulation of negation, of being an "anti-imperialist, anti-colonialist and anti-racist" academic, where the identification of Bengali famine sufferers is entirely dependent on the opposition between deniers and revisionist historians. "History" would be "the privileged plane where Being disengaged from the particularism of points of view is manifested" (Levinas, 1979: 52). As I have mentioned in my introduction, there is no doubt that the kind of ethical failure discussed in Levinas' work is always already inextricable from his own experiences in World War Two. Nevertheless, he has always been careful not to explicitly mention the Holocaust because, he argues, "there is no need to refer to an event in which the non-site, becoming a site, would have exceptionally entered into the spaces of history" (Levinas, 1981: 184). At the end of *Totality and Infinity,* Levinas' refusal to utter the presence of the Holocaust in his writings (save for in his autobiographical essay, "Signature") has also made his work philosophically viable for seeing ethical problems in the claims to repair the history of Bengal's famines. *The Things* certainly communicates a strong sense that one can "do justice" to Bengal, this unfortunate "non-site", by underscoring "collective amnesia", for seeing why the famine was forgotten, thereby converting it into a proper historical site. According to the producer, Philip Sellars, *The Things* is a "revisionist series" aimed at "trying to see through the spin of history" (BBC/OU, 2007: 1).

The writing of this thesis has involved stumbling over precisely such battles with the violence of referring to famine, especially when that reference tries to be normative. The struggle might be loosely adapted from Derrida's comments about the history of madness, "[*t*]*otal* disengagement from the *totality* of the historical language responsible for the exile of madness... would be possible in only two ways. *Either* do not mention a certain silence... *or* follow the madman down the road of his exile" (Derrida, 1978: 42; original emphasis).

It is obvious that neither applies to research. The debates raised by Portillo or Polya are not only emotionally compelling, but also a disquieting reminder that the

project of famine historiography often seems to be in perpetual debt to human suffering, no matter how hard research tries to be critical. This is, however, not the same discomfort as the one Portillo points out; the "reality" of a Bengal famine is not uncomfortable to hear because of clichés like "the truth hurts" or "reality bites". Nor is it because assessing famine histories concedes a moral sting at the missing or neglected personal conscience provoked by the collective sin of forgetting such an important tragedy. The difficulty of encountering conflicted famine histories of Bengal is already somewhat illustrated by the aforementioned quarrels and issues raised by these interveners for the example in the 1940s: the attempt to weed out falsifications, mistakes and omissions of history cannot escape joining the very structures that put them there in the first place. This is the foremost and fundamental aporia of historiography that has both inspired and burdened my thesis from its earliest pages, and it represents an unpayable debt to the Other. None of the claims proposed by Portillo and his team, about the Bengal famine or Churchill can be totally confirmed or discredited without first appealing to already existing "arcane academic literature" and the amnesiac histories – to which access are already guaranteed for individuals such as a Professor at Cambridge University (Bayly), a Bengali-born Nobel prize-winning economist (Sen), and an "Australian scientist" (Polya) (ibid). However mysterious or secretive these histories of famine realities are, accessing them implies a previous privilege that is all too easy to ignore in favor of revealing horrific details and discovering terrible injustices. Even if one concedes that there is a better version of history, that is to say, the position that argues for elucidating a better truth of the Bengal famine, it is still premised on the false belief that all Bengalis want is another history. Part of the success or credit of a project like *The Things* goes beyond what is actually said about the details of the Bengal famine; the series is given weight simply because it is presented as *historical,* and also because it is aired on a medium that enjoys the reputation of being the radio station for Britain's intelligentsia. Thus, it is no ordinary history that *The Things* supposes Bengalis to want, but a proper and intelligible History.

If Polya had personal experience in the Gulf War, he might have derided Baudrillard as a criminal denier as well.[21] The revisionists' abuse of the terms – Bengal, famine and history – for building polemic targets is not so very different from the politically opportunistic painting of an archaic and indecipherable pre-history for India by colonialists. One cannot help but get the sense that the gathering and repetitive deluge of pseudo-historiographical critique might be a sign that we have already reached, what Derrida (1993) calls, "the limits of truth" (1993: 1). Otherwise, Baudrillard (1994) or for that matter, Nietzsche, would not have needed to adopt callous-sounding renouncements of reality, or, for the latter, (the Christian) God. The accounts presented by Portillo strike a familiar chord amongst the narrative tensions I have already invoked in all of my chapters – the conjuring of blame figures, rice or food disputes, criminality, apocalyptic imagery, an obsession with famine mortality, Indian pathology, etc – but this does not mean we are doomed to repeat Bengal's famine histories unless we renounce the reality of famine itself.

Limits of Truth

At the beginning of this thesis, I say that Levinasian ethics highlight the insoluble clash, the essential aporia that exists between reading and writing history. Let me repeat the questions such aporia would command: how can historiography explain ethics if historiographical critique commits to no-Truth of any event? How can historiography commit to a recommendation of what is good, if the notion of Good is always already the product of Truth? The sense of truth's limit suggested by Derrida is a paradoxical one, a contradiction that has not gone unnoticed by Guha for India's pasts and which, he argues, Indian historiography has elided with nationalism and anti-colonialism. The efforts exemplified by Portillo and Polya against "covered-up" or sanitized history repeats the battle for "justice" between "Indians for India" and "Indians for Empire" that Guha (1997) has described as being "locked in an indecisive

[21] This is a reference to Baudrillard's commentary in his 1995 book entitled *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place.* Indiana: Indiana University Press.

battle" (1997: 3). The former wants to reclaim history for India from dominant histories written by colonialists, while the latter wants to assimilate Indian history into British History. Although he does not explicitly say it, Guha hints that the indecision not only maintains such battles but also leaves them free to re-perform and repeat the old modes of interpreting India's historical events that have prevailed throughout the last two hundred years. Without decision, limits of truth are left as they are, paradoxes remain unexplained and events are caught in a paralyzing search for theoretical and practical purity.

There is, Guha (1997) argues, an important discrepancy within colonialism and that is the gap between the realization of the philosophical tenets of European thought that have acted as registers for governance, and the performance or practice of the British government in India. The influence of ideas from James Mill, John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham on officials such as George Campbell, Cecil Beadon, William Hunter, Richard Temple and John Strachey, and the colonial encounter with the Buerkian terrors of famine have produced a Bengal famine archive that shows precisely the kind of discrepancy Guha notices. Although the colonial administration often interpreted famine according to Enlightenment values, such as utility, fair exchange, debt, Christian morality, economic prudence and scientific pragmatism, these perspectives neither prevented nor ameliorated the scale of death and destitution. Such failure, though each time proclaimed by the government a lesson-learnt, manifests in the archive as schizophrenic discourse, both orderly and internally conflicted. Burdened by the overarching and irreconcilable demands of maintaining imperial profitability and the responsibility of saving lives, famines in the archive appear not as distorted events, but as aborted and dispersed discursive objects. An instance of this emerged in the moralizing discourse of famine that attempted to create Indian counterparts for age-old Christian sins and biblical finalities that aimed to reinforce the mythic virtue of self-sufficiency and passive subjecthood. But, while the official descriptions of famine poor were written in moral overtones, the face-to-face confrontations with famine took on nightmarish proportions that appear to have troubled the vigilance of even the most

wakeful Christian officer. The pornographic exposure of famine – "seeing" too much – might also show the obverse for what it is, for disclosing the blindness of imperial sight. At the same that religious registers were at work, the government also laid down and operated an extensive taxonomy for codifying every single aspect related to famine – from its name, recipes for cooked meal handouts to the soil fertility and monthly rainfall – providing an accompanying operative framework for presenting famine as a modern, scientific phenomenon. However, by desperately clinging onto what can be "seen" or already known, officials tarnished their own attempts at uniting information about Bengal's land, people, climate, tradition, and conventions into a single corpus of Famine Codes. These Codes, rather than being the reliable handbook of administrative protocol in the event of a famine, implicate the vast and dizzying confusion of the Codes' own preparatory documents and reports. Reports at district and village level from division leaders, members of the police or revenue collectors reveal inconsistencies more profound than methodological tweaking can handle; straightening dates and aligning statements is not sufficient for coping with the incongruence between seeing famine as "epiphenomena" (Levinas, 1979: 240) and the particular moments of confronting the crisis. In other words, the very history of the notion of colonial coding itself reveals an inherent flaw in not only the administrative machinery, but also in the phenomenonalization of famine as well.

Derrida (1993) uses an example, the history of death, to explain what he means by limits of truth:

> This word ("limit") not only designates the external limits that the historian gives himself for methodological purposes (death in the West from the Middle Ages to the present, for example), but also certain nonthematized closures, edges whose concept is never formulated in these works. First, there is semantic or onto-phenomenological type of limit: the historian knows, thinks he knows, or grants to himself the unquestioned knowledge of what death is, of what being-dead means; consequently, he grants to himself all the criteriology that will allow him to identify, recognize, select, or delimit the objects of his inquiry or the thematic field of his anthropologico-historical knowledge. ...This assumption takes the form of an "it is self-explanatory": everybody knows what one is talking about when one names death (Derrida, 1993: 25).

Derrida's deconstruction of aporia is undertaken- in terms of death and suggests a radically non-appropriable relation between the Self and the Other. For him, aporia does not refer to a disciplinary limit; aporia escapes the conceptual and notional demarcations available in history for the historian. Derrida rethinks the centrality of history by shifting the accent of the historical endeavour from the structural boundaries of the event to the pre-knowing of the historian as an act already prior to his/her interventions, whether reading or writing. The Codes represent an instance of the "onto-phenomenological type of limit" while the eschatological moralization of famine shows the interiorization of this limit within the unquestioned Christian doctrine. The assured-ness of the "self-explanatory" is, for Levinas, the conscience that should really be examined, the intention that makes an event meaningful. He recommends this most explicitly in his critique of Husserlian phenomenology, insisting that an ethical relation with alterity is not possible if the cognition that creates and knows phenomena is not reflexive.

After invoking the Codes and the Apocalyptic Famine, I have tried to show how the combination of uncritical science and doctrinal morality in nineteenth century British-India produced a hybrid kind of non-reflexive dogmatism – where hybrid refers to the marriage of two totalities, two whole egos – for creating figures of guilt. The polemical rendering of guilt manifests as political scapegoats while elsewhere it is transmuted into the wretched criminality of the Famine Dacoit. The iconography of the Irresponsible Administrator, the evil Zemindar and the Ryot victim also show a process of self mimesis – in trying to articulate the networks of culture and society in Bengal via the legal terms of English landlords and property-based relationships, the British government cheat themselves of the chance to make their technologies and infrastructure into potent policies. Instead, they produced the failed Anglo-Indian performance, a failure that was already anticipated by the pre-existing economic registers of Western thought, and which also highlights yet another limit of imperial truth. Retaliative histories of famine that focus on material abuse for overturning the dominance of economic production also reveal another limit: privileged signifiers of rice

and physical health risk, asserted as the final materiality of famine, trap famine subjectivity in anthropological-historical objects – "rice eaters" and "stirabouts". This was not always successful because the largely Hindu famine poor did not access the notions of food and health in the ways predicted by the British government. An alternative starting point for material history is available in Levinas' notion of ultramateriality, in which the notion of material does not exist only in the false antinomy of Man versus Nature. This begins with rejecting the view that the famine subject has a neutral relationship with his/her material. Ravindra Khare (1979) shows how, for the Hindu majority of Bengal, food has significance beyond mere sustenance; the Hindu system of food is focused on movement and exchange and implicates both the spiritual and interior aspects of Hindu life-worlds. Finally, the sweeping brush strokes of painting a Fever Epidemic invoke themes of endemicity, hygiene, nutrition and miasma that produced an imagination of Bengal the exotic and dangerous backdrop. Bengal was narrated as though part of what Naraindas (1996) calls the "discourse on the tropics" (1996: 3) that provided the terms of Otherness, a tendency to diagnose pathology and disease as an assault against health by alterity.

Hence, I have tried to show the limits of all the truths within these examples, these themes, modes and formulas that provided the rules of engagement with the famine Other. The recourse to Levinas is important for emphasizing the need not for undermining these famine histories; it is not simply a matter of transgressing truths since that will only ensure the recurrence of the limit, of our nightmares. The failures of the British government's efforts in Bengal's famines represent not only a failure of policy, but also a failure of apprehending the Other. This kind of failure involves an examination of the self-evident, of intention that is before thinking and cognition. The weight of ethics must shift from the notion of centrality, to the notion of tension, to make room for the unknowable and the unknown.

After Aporia

The familiarity of Polya's recommendation at the end of The Things broadcast is terrifying to hear. He urges,

> This isn't simply an argument about rubbing out history. Scientists can help society through what is called rational risk management. It successively involves A, getting the accurate data. B, doing a scientific analysis. And then C, recognising this, taking action, changing the system, whether it's a national system or a global system, to avoid a repetition (BBC Radio 4, 2008: 1).

I began this thesis as an attempt to examine those very registers of modern Western thought, a task that Chakrabarty has previously invoked and inspired in Irish famine historiographies as well. It should be clear by now, as evidenced by the broadcast of Polya's remarks, that the modern registers of Reason and Rational thought, so prevalent in the Enlightenment, still have currency for humanitarian advocacy via histories. After declaring the abominable failures of collective memory and revealing the crimes of twentieth century British India, those "self-explanatory" assumptions of "scientific analysis" and "rational risk management" bear frightening resemblances to the utilitarian criteria of colonial codification and governance for nineteenth century Bengal. Bentham's principles of morality and legislation similarly influenced administrators into concocting empirically-based justifications for their designs of food administration, public works and calculations for gratuitous relief. Bentham's own work is occupied with the artful placement of limits he thought necessary for successful governance and civilized society. As I have mentioned, the utilitarian principle is a calculus designed as a cautious protection against the "risks" of man's "private ethics" or individual pleasure; he saw personal interest as the enemy of collective happiness and the opposite of temperance and virtuous labour. Benthamite limits manifested themselves on the Indian body and on laws regarding India's land (the Permanent Settlement) through the intervention of his intellectual heirs such as John Stuart Mill and James Mill, both, like Portillo, actively participated in (imperial) politics. Polya echoes Bentham in showing a preference for guiding human decision by cause and effect and in demonstrating a view that Bengal's famines might be "managed". What might not be as easy to discern as the

"ABCs" of famine is the fact that axioms of Truth, History, Reason declared in the name of World Hunger continue to have unquestioned resilience for mobilizing charity and humanity in ways that ignore alterity.

If Levinas tries to denote the Good in alterity, it is also worth emphasizing that he does not mean to indicate that the Self is evil. Levinas does not advocate private pleasure as the opposite of collective happiness. His formulation of the social never closes the tension between self and alterity for the sake of greater good. Levinas offers a counterpart to Bentham's ideas about private ethics, with what he calls the "egoism of happiness". Unlike Bentham, happiness, for Levinas (1979), "in its relation with the "other" of nutriments, suffices to itself; it [happiness] even suffices to itself because of this relation with the other: it consists in satisfying its needs and not in suppressing them" (1979: 118). Such egoism of happiness is Levinas' way of recommending the preservation of difference, of the element of unknowability in our humanitarian calls-to-arms. This would consist in a positive, rather than negative, view of self, of existence. The failures and ambiguities in Bengal's famine histories indeed show there is very little credence to the oppositions in the archive that might justify an attempt to try to reverse them for the sake of social justice and freeing up truths. In the end, Levinasian ethics is not only a call to the Other, to alterity, but also a call to self-affirmation; not in the sense of centering one's own existence – that would be to imply an objective view of existence. Happiness, for Levinas, is not a thought-out instinct and this absence of cognition, or the prominence of the prior, the "pre" intention makes a relation with the Other possible, and maintains such a relation as a possibility. The relevance of this philosophy for our response to famine is most explicitly indicated in Levinas' *Totality and Infinity*. Happiness, "is for itself as in the expression "each for himself"; for itself as the "famished stomach that has no ears," capable of killing for a crust of bread, is for itself; for itself as the surfeited one who does not understand the starving and approaches him as an alien species, as the philanthropist approaches the destitute" (ibid).

So what comes after aporia? Perhaps the confrontation with another aporia. Beyond the confines of this thesis, a more aggressive theorization of the link between Levinas and subaltern studies/postcolonial studies is needed to fully explain the complicity between French existential theory and subalternity. The intellectual politics of such complicity has not gone unnoticed and has already been picked up by Eagleton's derision for the "cult of ambiguity". Certainly, among those academics that champion the cause for the world's marginalized groups, there is also an undeniable preference for the post-structuralist movements, particularly from France. The commonalities and differences between the histories of subaltern theorists and that of Levinas needs to be explored at greater length in order for it to gain a chance at de-mystifying "arcane academic literature" and granting it recognizable "utility" for serious consideration in humanitarian practice for the poor and the hungry.

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