
Representing the Irish in Russell Banks's *Cloudsplitter*. Swift's American Resonances?

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Abstract. Race is at the centre of Russell Banks's grand scale novel *Cloudsplitter* (1998) which traces John Brown's struggle to abolish slavery in the years before the American Civil War. While Brown's (and Banks's) sympathy with Negro slaves is prevalent, the treatment of other social and ethnic groups, such as Native Americans and the Irish immigrants offers insight into the racial and cultural complexity of the United States. The essay identifies the three instances in which members of the Irish immigrant community in the aftermath of the Great Famine that drove them across the Atlantic play a role in this work, including: an extremely young prostitute, a "sad lot" of miners dwelling in shanties, and a gang of "Irish laddies" in Boston who beat up the narrator. It is suggested that these beings could be reminiscent of Jonathan Swift's depiction of the Irish in *A Modest Proposal*, and the *Struldbrugs* and *Yahoos* in *Gulliver's Travels*, in their circumstances, characterization, and actions.

Key Words. *Cloudsplitter*, Russell Banks, Irish immigration, race, class, nineteenth century America, Jonathan Swift, *A Modest Proposal*, *Gulliver's Travels*.

Resumen. La magistral novela de Russell Banks *Cloudsplitter* (1998) pivota sobre el tema racial al trazar la lucha de John Brown por la abolición de la esclavitud en los años previos a la Guerra Civil norteamericana. Mientras que la simpatía de Brown (y de Banks) por los esclavos negros es incuestionable, el tratamiento de otros grupos sociales y étnicos deja entrever la complejidad racial y cultural de los Estados Unidos. El ensayo traza las tres instancias en las que aparecen miembros de la comunidad de inmigrantes irlandeses en las postrimerías de la Gran Hambruna que los empujó a cruzar el Atlántico. Estas instancias incluyen: una jovencísima prostituta, un "triste hatajo" de mineros que malviven en un poblado de chabolas, y una banda de "chavales irlandeses" en Boston que le proporcionan una somera paliza al narrador. En lo que atañe a sus circunstancias, caracterización y acciones, se sugiere la posibilidad de que estas figuras contengan resonancias de las descripciones que hiciera Jonathan Swift de los irlandeses en *Una modesta proposición*, y de los *Struldbrugs* y *Yahoos* en los *Viajes de Gulliver*.

Palabras clave. *Cloudsplitter* (*Rompenubes*), Russell Banks, inmigración irlandesa, raza, clase, América en el siglo XIX, Jonathan Swift, *Una modesta proposición*, *Los Viajes de Gulliver*.

Introducing *Cloudsplitter*, the novel

Race is at the centre of *Cloudsplitter*, Russell Banks's award winning grand scale novel¹ that tackles the issue of slavery in the troublesome years before the American Civil War. The life and strife of the abolitionist – hero or villain –

John Brown constitutes the *leitmotif* of this epic

1. PEN/Faulkner Award finalist, as well as Pulitzer Prize for Fiction Finalist, and *New York Times* Best Fiction Books.

narration, which spellbindingly reveals his religious and ethical motivations that eventually resulted in actual confrontation. As Anthony Hutchison states: “Aside from William Faulkner it is difficult to think of a white twentieth-century American writer who has negotiated the issue of race in as sustained, unflinching and intelligent a fashion as Russell Banks” (2007: 67). While the author is, indeed, fully sympathetic with the blacks as an oppressed and outcast community, and while his work pivots on them, the sometimes critical stance when dealing with other social and ethnic groups, such as American Indians and the Irish, offers insight into the racial and cultural complexity of the United States.

The historic figure of the radical abolitionist John Brown looms large throughout the 750 pages of this work, written in the mode of neo- or postmodernist realism.² In response to the challenge the reader is confronted with at the blurred line between fiction and reality, Banks insists: “It’s a novel, not a trial transcript; and Brown is a fictional character in the novel, not a real person. I wasn’t trying to write his biography” (Faggen 1998: 50-88). In the narrative voice of Brown’s third son Owen, the story presents the protagonist’s and his family’s life between the 1830s and the 1850s, focusing on his character and motivations. Monomaniacal, obsessed with the idea to eradicate slavery, driven by what nowadays would be considered religious fundamentalism, not unlike Melville’s captain Ahab, John Brown’s “all-consuming idea, of course, is the destruction of the ‘white whale’ of slavery” (Hutchison 2007: 68). Owen had been his father’s right hand in the Kansas Wars of the 1850s, and was also involved in the raid on Harpers Ferry (1859), in which several of his brothers were killed. The failure of this action resulted moreover in his father’s execution, thus marking the beginning of the legend around his figure.

It is around fifty years later, towards the end of the nineteenth century, that Banks’s metafictional narrative unfolds in form of a supposed memoir. The now elderly Owen is

2. Likewise this mode had been applied in some of his previous works (such as: *Trailerpark*, *Continental Drift*, *Affliction*, and *Rule of the Bone*), as pointed out in Collado 1998: 24

urged by Katherine Mayo, a researcher for the editor of *The Nation*, Oswald Garrison Villard,³ to reveal his recollections and thus to help shed further light on his father’s character. Though initially adamant in his refusal, Owen eventually warms up to the project, seizing the opportunity to contribute to correcting the image biased by a blend of myth and imagination that has been built up around his father. However, this will also entail a tortuous process of introspection for Owen, as he tries to come to moral terms with his past. Emotionally distant and spiritually bereft, by then he considers himself rather a ghost of himself. Like Thoreau in *Walden*, Owen seeks solace in retirement, in his case in a cottage in an isolated area of California. In this self-imposed spiritual exile, the survivor not only of the Harpers Ferry debacle but also of the massive imprint of his father’s overpowering personality, spends his days tending a flock of sheep and a couple of cows. His new pastime consists in gathering his memories in form of letters, which are presented in linear narrative, intertwined with professions of his awe at his father, whom he loves and admires,⁴ but also detests, for his “rightness,” thus mirroring in his person the public opinion of this dichotomic figure. In Owen’s words:

...during his lifetime, like all abolitionists, Father was a much despised man, and that not just slaveholders hated him, but Whigs as much as Democrats; that he was hated by white people generally; and then, after Kansas and Harpers Ferry and during the Civil War years and beyond, even to today, that he was reviled by Southerners and Copperheads and even by many who had long supported the abolitionist cause,

3. Oswald Garrison Villard (1872-1949) was a journalist who championed civil liberties, rights, and anti-imperialism, editor of the weekly periodical *The Nation*, and author of *John Brown 1800-1859: A Biography Fifty Years After* (1910), in which he portrays the abolitionist as an inspiring American hero. Garrison was the grandson of William Lloyd Garrison, who plays a (minor) role in Banks’s novel. Katherine Mayo, likewise, existed.

4. When referring to him as “Father”, the capital initial letter is consistently used, as if referring to God. The remoteness of this figure is enhanced by generally avoiding personal pronouns (such as “my” or “our”) in connection with the noun.

Republicans and the such. Nor, very probably, does it matter to you that he was also widely admired and even loved, loved passionately and almost universally by Negroes and by the more radical white abolitionists, and that he was celebrated and sung by all the most famous poets, writers, and philosophers here and abroad. What matters to you is that between those two extreme poles of opinion concerning John Brown, since December 12, 1859, every American man, woman and child has held an opinion of his own. So, yes, Miss Mayo, if greatness is merely great fame and is defined by an ability to arouse strong feelings of an entire people for many generations, then Father, like Caesar, like Napoleon and Lincoln, was indeed a great man (Banks 1999: I.4,102-103).

The real Owen Brown died in 1889, yet “for the purposes of storytelling”, Banks explains, “I let him live on till 1902, long enough to be interviewed by Miss Katherine Mayo and then to write the letters that make the novel” (Faggen 1998: 50-88).

Three passages featuring Irish immigrants in Russell Banks’ *Cloudsplitter*

In this mural epic about the struggle against slavery the author carefully weaves in three scenes which feature Irish immigrants or persons of immediate Irish descent, thus evidencing his connectedness with the wider context of the time, geographical area, and main topic of the narration. Yet while the novel seeks to convey sympathy towards the slaves throughout, the contrasting treatment of the Irish characters is striking. Hereafter it will be explored how Banks depicts Irish identity in *Cloudsplitter*. A closer look at the mode in which these characters and their circumstances are represented in the narration brings to mind narrative and pictorial representations of famine and dispossession associated to this national group around the time the story develops (in the mid nineteenth century), and in the century before.

More concretely, and from a literary point of view, it seems to reveal resemblances to Jonathan Swift’s depiction of the Irish in *A Modest Proposal* and the *Yahoos* in *Gulliver’s Travels*. At first it might strike forward to suggest this association, especially since there is neither external nor internal evidence of Banks making reference to Swift or to the philosophers and theorists that might have

influenced him, and by extension himself. Yet Swift must have been a figure of significance to such a widely read author as Banks, as were other eighteenth century characters whose imprint on him can be more clearly traced. Thus, when Banks entered the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in the 1960s, he cofounded a small literary publishing house and magazine named *Lillabulero*, doubtlessly in a reference to Uncle Toby’s whistling this air in Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* (1769-67). Furthermore, Banks’s short story, “Indisposed”, (featuring in his collection of tales *The New World*, 1978) is a fictional account of the eighteenth century painter William Hogarth’s infidelity from the viewpoint of his long-suffering wife, Jane. Moreover, when asked if he had models of the epistolary novel in mind when writing *Cloudsplitter*, Banks replies with an explicit reference to the eighteenth century, and satire:

Not specifically. We’ve inherited the biblical epistles, of course, and the great eighteenth-century English epistolary novels that are based – even if satirically – on the classical writers’ use of it. Then they get based on each other, so that by our time it has become more than a literary form – it’s practically a genre. You almost don’t need models, you need a structure. My narrator, his psychology and the occasion of his telling, gave me that structure, but the form drops whole from the genre, the tradition of the epistolary novel (Faggen 1998: 50-88).

In any event, when representing the Irish in this novel, Banks obviously referred to common Irish stereotypes as present in Jonathan Swift and other authors, such as Sydney Owenson or George Bernard Shaw, who, in turn, might have been harkening back to Swift.

The three fictional scenes in which Irish characters appear in *Cloudsplitter* are likely to be placed after 1848, and well before 1859 (the year of Harpers Ferry), deducing from other references in the text and some historic coincidences. This means precisely the years around and after the Great Famine, or the *Potato Famine*, which struck Ireland between 1845 and 1852 and drove hundreds of thousands over the Atlantic.⁵

5. There is a myriad of works published on the Irish Famine and its effects, especially on emigration. E.g. Kissane 1995: 153, commenting on trans- ./.

The burden brought with them across the sea, aggravated by hunger and the social marginalization they had already suffered at home, can be clearly perceived in those accounts. A second glance may incline the reader to hesitate over the dream of equality, not only with regard to race. Here one feels that the nation was divided not only racially between blacks and whites, but also socially between the poorer and the better-offs.

1. *The Young Irish Prostitute*

The first instance in which a person of Irish descent is depicted in *Cloudsplitter* is in book I, chapter 4. On an April evening before the family depart from Springfield for their new home in the Adirondacks, 24-year-old Owen goes for a last, solitary walk, “determined tonight not to leave this river town without learning at least something of what I would miss afterwards – for the remainder of my life, as it seemed.” On his stroll he sees several women, though averting their gaze, until along comes one who calls out, “Hullo, Red! Would y’ be needin’ company tonight?” Banks then goes on to recreate her through Owen’s eyes:

She was a girl, practically, I had glimpsed that much, and red-haired herself, perhaps fourteen or fifteen years old, with bright white powder all over her face and a broad slash of painted lips and smudge-blackened eyes. She wore erratic scraps of cloth elaborately draped across her shoulders, wrapped, sashed, and pinned so as to suggest an exotic gown, although it was more a child’s motley costume than a woman’s dress. I stopped and turned back to her, and she said, with a curl to her voice and a pronunciation that was noticeably Irish, “You’re a big feller, ain’t you now” (Banks 1999: I.4, 128-9).

Considering the moment, place, and socio-economic circumstances, would it come as a surprise to the reader that this strikingly young “wench”, turned into a prostitute, happens to be Irish? Her red hair and “noticeably Irish” accent are telling. Owen then describes the lonely, dark, and dangerous place “in the shadows

of a high stone wall,” and in more detail the girl, who is small and extremely thin (“the thickness of her wrist seemed not much greater than that of my thumb, and her waist was smaller than the circumference of my right arm”, Banks 1999: I.4, 129), with her powdered and painted face. Owen is struck by a sense of guilt: “And so here I was, where my father and brothers would never be, soliciting a prostitute” (Banks 1999: I.4, 130).

In “A Modest Proposal” Jonathan Swift satirizes the situation of the Irish by displaying not only their poverty but also suggesting their moral degradation as a consequence of the former. Though not explicitly stated by Swift, it can easily be inferred that turning into a prostitute is an equivalent fate for the females to that of the male infants, “who as they grow up either turn thieves for want of work, or leave their dear native country to fight for the Pretender in Spain, or sell themselves to the Barbadoes” (Swift 1729: #1). Extremely thin, sick and poor, this Irish prostitute moreover matches the image Swift had drawn of Irish females some 270 years before Banks,⁶ the mothers in the opening lines of his *Modest Proposal*:

It is a melancholy object to those who walk through this great town or travel in the country, when they see the streets, the roads, and cabin doors, crowded with beggars of the female sex, followed by three, four, or six children, all in rags and importuning every passenger for an alms. These mothers, instead of being able to work for their honest livelihood, are forced to employ all their time in strolling to beg sustenance for their helpless infants... (Swift 1729: #1).

The reader is not told if this nameless Irish girl in *Cloudsplitter* is, in spite of her youth, a mother herself, having to provide for a child (or possibly more than one), if she has to contribute to her parents’ and siblings’ sustenance, or if she merely – though not simply – has to survive herself. The reader contemplates her through Owen’s eyes as a girl who, hardly able to disguise her childishness,

·/· Atlantic emigration: “By 1847, as the starvation and its attendant diseases intensified, the sense of urgency took an aspect of hysteria. Between 1845 and 1851 the number amounted to 1.2 million; by 1855 another .9 million had departed, giving a total of 2.1 million for the period 1845-55”.

6. A *Modest Proposal* was published in 1729. The events of Banks’s narrative took place about 1848. The story is recounted by Owen, a participant, about 1899. *Cloudsplitter* was published in 1998.

“had costumed herself as a grown woman in order to keep from starving or freezing to death” (Banks 1999: I.4, 130).

For the few loose copper coins Owen can offer her, “enough for a single loaf of bread, no more” (Banks 1999: I.4, 131), he won’t get more than a quick masturbation (“Before I could fully register what was happening, it was over”, Banks 1999: I.4, 131), and a piece of advice: “Come back when you get your wages.” (Banks 1999: I.4, 132). Not happy with it, he presses the girl to grant him a look at her: “Look at me? What do you mean? My bubbies y’want to see?” “Yes, and the other.” “The other? Naw, you’re daft, mister. You’re making me scared” (Banks 1999: I.4, 132). Eventually the girl briefly displays “a bony pink chest with tiny breasts. The fragile body of a child” (Banks 1999: I.4, 133). Overawed, Owen suddenly feels as ashamed of himself as sorry for her, and, in a kind of Biblical gesture, he falls down on his knees in front of that *fallen* woman to beg her pardon, yet only triggers off the following reaction in her: “Well, you’re a crack-brained cull, mister,” the girl says, before he can hear “her footsteps clack against the stone as she made her escape” (Banks 1999: I.4, 133). For hours after that incident, Owen rambles ruminating:

...aimless, confused, frightened by the appalling knowledge I had obtained – not knowledge of women in general or of the particular poor, nameless Irish girl, but knowledge of myself. I knew myself now to be vile, a beast. On my own like this, away from Father and the rest of the family, cut loose from their moral and intellectual clarity, from the virtue generated, sustained and perfected among them, I was but a sack of contradictions and unpredictable impulses: I was a boy locked inside a man’s body, my childish innocence contaminated now, not merely by longing and self-abuse, but by sexual contact of the most disgusting sort. I had inflicted myself upon a poor, pathetic street urchin, a whore, yes, but a person who, compared to me, was honest, was virtuous – was innocent. (...) It should be she, not I, who could freely return to a warm household filled with a loving, upright family; she, not I, who was able to stand alongside her father and mother and brothers and sisters in church and public meetings to walk freely about the town in the daylight glow of respect from the citizenry, she, not I, who performed honest labor and received for it shelter, food, clothing; she, not I, whose

father, guide and protector was the good man John Brown (Banks 1999: I.4, 133-4).

It is noteworthy that this “pathetic street urchin, a whore” remains nameless, and that Owen considers her morally superior to himself: honest, virtuous and innocent. Thus she appears a victim of her circumstances, which, though not explicitly mentioned, imply having escaped, most probably with her family, from hunger and oppression in Ireland in the 1840s.

2. *The Irish Miners in the Shanties*

The second scene featuring persons of Irish descent, likewise in appalling conditions, is that of a group of miners. On their way north when helping a couple of fugitive slaves to escape to Canada, the group of the Underground Railroad⁷ led by John Brown stops at Mr. Wilkinson’s, the supervisor of a mine with mostly Irish workers, who is to become involved with their cause.

The dullness of the impressions they convey reminds one of the pictures in black and white taken by the Brazilian social documentary photojournalist Sebastião Salgado in the second half of the twentieth century, of the post-apocalyptic horror drama *The Walking Dead*, or the *Struldbrugs* in Book III of *Gulliver’s Travels*. The scenario is heavily gothic:

It was nearly dawn, and the moon had long since set behind us, when we finally exited from the woods south of Indian Pass and approached the mines and furnaces of Tawahus and the settlement that surrounded them. We were making our way down a long, rock-strewn slope that appeared to have been burned in recent years. Hovering over the marshes and stream below us, a pale haze reflected back the morning light, with the dark, pointed tips of tall pines poking through. The village was an encampment, made up mostly of shanties for the Irish miners which, in their sad disarray and impoverishment, reminded me of the shanties of Timbuctoo, and as we passed by, we could see the miners emerging from their cold, damp hovels

7. The “Underground Railroad” was a network of secret routes and safe lodgings used by the slaves to escape to the free states in the North and to Canada. They were escorted by abolitionists and aided by allies sympathetic to their cause.

– gaunt, grim, gray-faced men and boys rising to begin their long day’s work in the darkness of the earth (Banks 1999: II.7, 211-2).

Another typical feature in Swift’s critical writings appears here: the animalization of humans.⁸ E.g. a “hovel” is a shed, sometimes also used for livestock, and the miners disappearing “in the darkness of the earth” remind us of moles. So much for the men. And now to the women:

Behind them, standing at the door or hauling water or building an outdoor cookfire, were their brittle-looking women, downtrodden creatures in shabby sack frocks who looked too old to have given birth to the babies they carried on their bony hips. They barely looked up at us as we passed, so borne down by their labors were they (Banks 1999: II.7, 212).

This depiction of those Irish mothers may contain carefully encoded allusions to the opening lines of Swift’s *Modest Proposal*, mentioned above (when dealing with the young prostitute): “downtrodden”, “shabby”, “borne down”, incapable of reacting to a stranger, “carrying babies on their bony hips”. It is moreover reminiscent of the second paragraph in Swift’s essay *A Modest Proposal*: “this prodigious number of children in the arms, or on the backs, or at the heels of their mothers...” (Swift 1729: #2). Banks proceeds thus:

As we passed close to the open door of one of the shacks, Father touched the brim of his palm-leaf hat and nodded to a woman who stood there and seemed to be watching us, her round Irish face impassive, expressionless, all but dead to us. “Good morning, ma’am”, Father said in a soft voice. She made no response. Her eyes were pale green and glowed coldly in the dim light of the dawn but seemed to see nothing. She looked like a woman who had been cast off and left like trash by an invading army (Banks 1999: II.7, 212).

Together with the following, this passage moreover bears a noteworthy resemblance to those in which the immortal *Struldbrugs* in *Gulliver’s Travels* are described. These imaginary creatures were used by Swift to crush

8. Animalization is a typical, yet not exclusive, feature in Swift. E.g. George Orwell deployed it even more famously and pervasively.

the prevailing human dream of eternal life. Gulliver, the visitor, keen to learn more about the *Struldbrugs*, is informed by his host:

neither are they able, (...), to hold any conversation (farther than by a few general words) with their neighbours the mortals; and thus they lie under the disadvantage of living like foreigners in their own country.

I [Gulliver] afterwards saw five or six of different ages, the youngest not above two hundred years old, who were brought to me at several times by some of my friends; but although they were told, “that I was a great traveller, and had seen all the world,” they had not the least curiosity to ask me a question (Swift 2005: III, 10).

A population that is impassive, reluctant to communicate, and a traveller who does not arouse curiosity in the locals – these are further similarities with Banks’s Irish dwellers of the shanties, on one hand, and on the other with the visitor John Brown and his group, whom these dwellers hardly notice when passing by. Swift’s devastating judgment of the *Struldbrugs* is thus, in Gulliver’s words:

They were the most mortifying sight I ever beheld; and the women more horrible than the men. Besides the usual deformities in extreme old age, they acquired an additional ghastliness, in proportion to their number of years, which is not to be described (Swift 2005: III, 10).

As the group of the Underground Railroad make their way along the muddy track, the shanties of “the poor, sullen souls” are now being erased from their sight one by one, when they see ahead of them “situated on a pleasant rise of land, a proper house with a porch and an attached barn, the home of the supervisor of the mines, Mr. Jonas Wilkinson”. There is a sharp contrast between the abode of the Irish miners and the home of their American supervisor. Furthermore the difference between the way Wilkinson sees his Irish workers versus the way the Browns see the slaves they are helping is striking:

Mr. Wilkinson told us, “They run off to a surprising degree, the Irish. Though they’ve got nothing to run to, except back to the wharfs of Boston or New York. A lot of them are sickly by the time they get here and end up buried in the field yonder. They’re a sad lot”. Mr. Wilkinson

was a round, blotch-faced man with thinning black hair and a porous-looking red nose that suggested a long-indulged affection for alcohol. “Ignorant and quarrelsome and addicted to drink,” he said. “The females as much as the men. And you can’t do much to improve them. Although my wife and I have certainly given it a try, she by schooling the little ones and me preaching every Sunday to them that will listen. But they breed faster than you can teach them, and when it comes to proper religions, Mister Brown, they’re practically pagans. Superstitious papists without a priest is what they are. I’ve about given up on ’em and just try now to get as much work out of ’em with as little expense as possible before they run off, or die.

“Sorry for sounding so harsh,” he said to Father, who sat on a straight chair and grimly regarded the floor. “But what you’ve got with these Irish is the dead ends of European peasantry. There’s little for them in this country. Little enough for them back there in their own country, I suppose,” he added, pulling on his chin. “Which, of course, is why they come over in the first place. For them, poor souls, I suppose it’s an improvement. They get to start their lives over” (Banks 1999: II.7, 213).

Almost every single negative stereotype about the “sad lot” of the Irish is touched upon here: “ignorant and quarrelsome and addicted to poor, pagans or “superstitious papists”, and lazy. This mirrors Swift’s description of the *Yahoos* in *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726), as well as the perplexing depiction of the Irish from the perspective of the proposer – projector – narrator in Swift’s *A Modest Proposal* (1729). Most academic studies have shown that Swift’s rhetorical strategies are extremely nuanced and complex, and traditionally agree that “the author’s meaning diverges from the narrator’s” (Phiddian 1996: 606). Instead of aiming at exposing the Irish in their poverty and overpopulation, Swift protested “against the unqualified maxim that people are the riches of a nation” (Landa 1942: 165), and “what Swift wanted for Ireland was not fewer people but more opportunities – opportunities that would present themselves if England adopted a less restrictive policy” (Landa 1942: 170). However, more recently it has been suggested that Swift’s intention was less benevolent than thought at first:

Contrary to traditional misapprehensions, *A Modest Proposal* is neither a Dickensian protest

at the conditions of the poor, nor a diatribe against English exploitation of Ireland, but an “economic” tract by a profiteering do-gooder who thinks the economy might be improved by exploiting the anthropophagous proclivities of the Irish natives. Swift is not friendly to these natives. He portrays them as a beggarly, thieving, adulterous riff-raff, who, if they could be taught that their bastard offspring were a cashable asset, might take better care to preserve and nourish them in infancy, and also refrain from beating their wives when they are pregnant for fear of a miscarriage (Rawson 2012: 5).

Rawson has adopted the questionable assumption that Swift’s perspective and the proposer’s are identical. In the same way in which Swift – according to Rawson – (or, as generally agreed upon: the proposer) may be considered “not friendly to these natives,” so is Mr. Wilkinson not friendly to their offspring, who have crossed the Atlantic and become immigrants. For sure, in *Cloudsplitter* this attitude is neither shared by the narrator, Owen, nor by the author, Banks. The latter seems to make a clear statement: the treatment of the Irish immigrants is regarded as appalling, which is why John Brown cuts his ties with Wilkinson. However, Wilkinson certainly has a point inasmuch as there is “little enough for them back there in their own country”, and that they have come over to seek improvement.

The visitor Mister Brown, impressed by his host’s viewpoint, addresses him thus: “I am curious, though, as to your reasons for agreeing to aid us in our efforts to carry Negro slaves off to Canada, when you appear to have so little fellow-feeling for the poor indentured men and women in your charge here”. This is his host’s opportunity to justify himself, albeit with an overtly mercantilist rather than humane reasoning, similar to Swift’s Proposer:

“Ah!” Mr. Wilkinson said brightly – he’d heard this argument before and was prepared, even eager to answer it. “Slavery is evil! That alone is reason enough for a Christian man to want to aid and abet you. But beyond that, slavery provides the Southerners with an unfair advantage in the labor market. No, sir, for the economic health of our nation, we all must do what we can to bring about the end of slave labor. And this is simply my small part, aiding you and your son and your Negro friend here, and your friend the famous Mister Douglass” (Banks 1999: II.7, 213).

Irritated at this lack of sympathy for their actual cause, John Brown would “cut their link from the chain”, arguing that “these Wilkinsons have it all wrong. They can’t be trusted” (Banks 1999: II.7, 215). When the group is about to depart, for a last time the reader gets a glimpse of the Irish miners, these alien-like creatures, their dullness increased by the gloomy atmosphere Banks has created to depict them as “dead souls” rather than as living human beings:

Hidden by the darkness, as we passed among the thick white trunks of the birch trees, we saw the miners. They were illuminated by the flickering light of the whale oil lanterns they carried – shadowy, slumped figures moving silently uphill. It was like a march of dead souls that we observed, and the image troubled me, and I found myself lingering behind the others, hanging back, fighting a strange impulse to leave the darkness and join them, to fall into line with the returning miners and merge my life with theirs.

Father grabbed at my sleeve. “Come, Owen” he said. “I know what you feel, son. Come away. We cannot help them,” he said, and I turned reluctantly from them and followed my father and the four Negroes into the forest (Banks 1999: II.7, 213).

Readers might ask themselves whether the emotion aroused by the dwellers is one of “fellow-feeling” and compassion, or rather disgust and contempt. While Banks deploys Owen to illuminate the first, his father seems to illustrate rather the second. Whereas John Brown the abolitionist goes out of his way to assist those of African descent, the Negroes, to whom he devotes his whole life, he seems to have given up on the Irish immigrants. More than helpless, he seems to consider them not to be helped. Or could he be suggesting, when he says “we cannot help them”, that he has his hands full with helping slaves and that he cannot save everyone who is treated like a slave in America? The issue is that even though the Irish miners live and work in terrible conditions and suffer much prejudice, they are neither technically nor legally slaves, but wage labourers. So saving or freeing *them* is not urgent, not even a necessity. On the other hand, without aiming to plunge into the depths of the religious dimension, Banks is perhaps too generous in his imaginative account of how

a low church hard-line Protestant such as John Brown might respond to any frontier Irish Catholic populations he encountered. Altogether, Banks might be using the Irish plight to show the complexity of racial and social prejudice in America and to indicate that slaves are the most, but not the only, exploited group in the country.

3. *The “shabby Irish laddies” on the Boston Common*

A third and last passage featuring persons of Irish descent in *Cloudsplitter* appears towards the middle of the book. The narrator, Owen, and his father John Brown are in Boston, hosted by the Howes, an abolitionist family, while awaiting a ship to carry them to England. John Brown has decided to make a killing, selling wool across the Atlantic – an initiative that will turn out a complete failure. Owen seizes the opportunity to attend a meeting of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, in which Mr. William Lloyd Garrison⁹ is to deliver a speech. He thus describes his way there:

I headed out, by way of Beacon Street, to the Park Street Church, which was located from Louisburg Square on Beacon Hill. Beacon Street ran alongside the wide expanse of the famed Common, with a facing row opposite, I kept to that side of the street, close by the tall, elegant houses and as far from the darkened Common as possible, for there – lurking among the shrubs and trees and appearing suddenly out of the darkness to glare and howl at the decorous, well-dressed men and women walking peacefully towards the church – was the enemy (Banks 1999: III.10, 321).

This thrilling description of the threat posed by some unknown beings hidden in the dark evokes Gulliver’s first approaching the *Yahoos*: “I walked very circumspectly, for fear of being surprised, or suddenly shot with an arrow from behind, or on either side” (Swift 2005: IV,1). Banks then goes on to describe these beings:

9. William Lloyd Garrison, a most radical and articulate opponent of slavery. He was the grandfather of Oswald Garrison Villard, editor of *The Nation*, (as mentioned in an earlier footnote), who tangentially appears in the novel.

They were boys, mostly, and young men, idlers and drunkards, brawlers, louts, whoremongers, and common thieves; there were numerous females among them, too, maps and doxies as wild and brutal looking as their brothers. It was not so much their unwashed physiognomies that made them appear brutal and coarse, as their rage. No matter how noble the human face in repose, how symmetrical, fresh, and clear it may appear, when the brow is bent and glowered down, the mouth misshapen by an obscene word, the nostrils flared in revulsion and the lips sneering, and when the fist gets doubled and held out like a weapon, one recoils as if from a sub-species, as if from a demonic, bestial version of one's self. How can we all be humans alike, when one of us has turned suddenly so ugly? And when a whole crowd turns itself into a mob, what species is it then? (Banks 1999: III.10, 321-2).

“Brutal and coarse”, full of rage, “a sub-species”, “a demonic, bestial version of one's self” from which one recoils...: this comes as close as possible to Swift's human animals or animalized humans depicted as *Yahoos* in Book IV of *Gulliver's Travels*. Furthermore, the hint at “a whole crowd (that) turns itself into a mob” and the doubts as to the “species” will remind the initiated reader of Jonathan Swift's famous letter to Alexander Pope, in which he makes a clear distinction between the individual and the “tribe” to which the former belongs. Moreover here Swift explicitly equates “animal” with “man” (“that animal called man”), which he hates, while disputing the definition of “animal rationale” attributed to it by biologists:

I have ever hated all nations, professions, and communities, and all my love is toward *individuals*: for instance, I hate *the tribe* of lawyers, but I love Counsellor Such-a-one, and Judge Such-a-one: so with physicians – I will not speak of my own trade – soldiers, English, Scotch, French, and the rest. But principally *I hate and detest that animal called man*, although I heartily love John, Peter, Thomas, and so forth. This is the system upon which I have governed myself many years, but do not tell, and so I shall go on till I have done with them. I have got materials toward a treatise, proving the falsity of that definition *animal rationale*, and to show it would be only *rationis capax* (Swift: 1999).¹⁰

10. The passages in italics are meant to highlight ./.

Owen continues with his account:

I could fairly smell the brandy and beer on the breath of the youths who stuck their whiskered faces out at me and brayed their Negro-hating sentiments at me and the other men and women who were silently, peacefully walking the sidewalk alongside me. The gang cackled and screeched and sometimes even tossed a rock and then ducked back into the bushes out of sight, to be replaced a few rods further on by another gang, whose drunken members would pick up the chant. “Nigger-lovers!” they hollered. “Yer nigger-lovers! “Yer niggers yerself! Ugly black niggers! Ugly black niggers!” And so on, stupidly, even idiotically they ranted – until we were walking a kind of gauntlet, it seemed, or proceeding through a maddened, howling mob to our own public hanging, headed not to a place of worship but to a scaffold (Banks 1999: III.10, 322).

The description of himself and the others “who were silently, peacefully walking the sidewalk alongside me” is distinctly reminiscent of Gulliver's first impression of the *Houyhnhnms*: “I saw a horse walking softly in the field; (...) looking with a very mild aspect, never offering the least violence” (Swift 2005: IV,1). On the other hand (and on the other side of the street), the sounds uttered and movements made by “the gang”, or this “maddened, howling mob” are those of enraged animals (or *hooligans*, at least), which bear an analogy with the *Yahoos*: braying, cackling, screeching, chanting, hollowing, ranting, tossing a rock and then ducking back. The contrast between the peaceful citizens and the ranting gang is as wide as the gap between Swift's *Yahoos* and *Houyhnhnms*.

Once inside the sanctuary of the church, Owen “breathed a great sigh of relief” after having been tormented by those “people with murder in their eyes” (Banks 1999: III.10, 322). Yet he is also tormented by himself and the overarching force of his father's rightness and moral correction. For no proper reason he suddenly leaves the congregation to wander around boulders and bushes, among the ghostly figures that step forward and then silently

././ the statement and are from the author of this essay. Translated into English these Latin phrases imply that the human being is not a ‘rational animal’, but merely an ‘animal capable of reason’.

withdraw, some of whom hiss to him or beckon for him to follow. He reflects on these outcasts:

Were these shadowy figures, these frail, gray wraiths and dark spirits, the same demonic figures I had seen earlier howling at the good Quaker abolitionists on their way to meeting? These people hardly seemed capable of raising their voices, much less shrieking obscenities and tossing rocks and other missiles (Banks 1999: III.10, 327).

Suddenly a change of scenario occurs with another group approaching:

But then I saw a band of ruffians, seven or eight of them, boldly approaching me, swigging from a shared bottle and laughing boisterously. They marched straight towards me, as if we were on a path and their intent was to force me out of it. They were boys, fifteen or sixteen years old, amusing themselves by banding together and playing the bully to solitaires like me. As they neared me, one of them hollered, "Out of our way, ye damned bunter, or we'll slice of y'prick and make y'eat it!" and the others laughed. Shabby Irish laddies they were, all puffed up with alcohol and the rough pleasure of each other's company, and I knew what they thought I was, out here in the night alone – a catamite, a molly-coddle, in search of another. Possibly, in a strange sense, they were right about who I was and what I was doing there, at least for this one night in my life. They had no way of knowing for sure, however, and neither did I. But regardless, I was not about to play the girl for them, or the nigger, and step aside so they could march past unimpeded. Instead, I waded straight into them, as if they were a low wave at a beach" (Banks 1999: III.10, 327).

At the thrilling height of that first account of the "band of ruffians" marching threateningly straight towards Owen, these brutes are identified as Irish ("Shabby Irish laddies they were"). Their way of boldly and boisterously approaching the stranger and hollering at him ("They marched straight towards me, as if we were on a path and their intent was to force me out of it"), bears a noteworthy resemblance to the *Yahoos* and their attitude towards the stranger Gulliver in their first encounter ("I had not got far, when I met one of these creatures full in my way, and coming up directly to me."). This seems even more striking when taking into consideration the interpretations according to which the *Yahoos* are said to represent the Irish, as discussed by some

scholars, such as Sir Charles Firth, Arthur Case, and Donald T. Torchiana. The latter argues that:

The evidence for Ireland in Book IV [of *Gulliver's Travels*] may have become even more apparent in the last thirty years. ... a mere glance at Houyhnhnmland suggests how closely it approximates the Ireland familiar to Swift on maps from his boyhood on (Torchiana 1975: 195).

Along this same line, Claude Rawson's more recent assertions push this point to an extreme:

Humanity's despised subgroups, Indians, Irish, women, beggars, are correctly seen for what they are by people who, when the truth is known, are precisely as despicable for the same reasons. It is thus that the *Yahoos*, that stereotype of "all savage Nations" (*Gulliver's Travels* Vol. 4, ii), embodying generic features of outlandish "Indians", and widely understood to refer specifically to the Irish "natives", are revealed to be biologically identical with the rest of us, ostensibly rather worse than we are, though, as is sometimes hinted, actually not quite so bad (Rawson 2012: 5).

To illustrate this, it is worth to look in more detail at Gulliver's account of his first encounter with these creatures, the *ugly monsters* who, indeed, in an utterly sarcastic twist, turn out to be of his kind:

At last I beheld several animals in a field, ... and one or two of the same kind sitting in trees. Their shape was very singular and deformed, which a little discomposed me, so that I lay down behind a thicket to observe them better. Some of them coming forward near the place where I lay, gave me an opportunity of distinctly marking their form. ...

Upon the whole, I never beheld, in all my travels, so disagreeable an animal, or one against which I naturally conceived so strong an antipathy. ... I had not got far, when I met one of these creatures full in my way, and coming up directly to me. The ugly monster, when he saw me, distorted several ways, every feature of his visage, and stared, as at an object he had never seen before; then approaching nearer, lifted up his fore-paw, whether out of curiosity or mischief I could not tell; but I drew my hanger, and gave him a good blow with the flat side of it, for I durst not strike with the edge, fearing the inhabitants might be provoked against me, if they should come to know that I had killed or maimed any of their cattle. When the beast felt the smart, he drew back, and roared

so loud, that a herd of at least forty came flocking about me from the next field, howling and making odious faces; but I ran to the body of a tree, and leaning my back against it, kept them off by waving my hanger. Several of this cursed brood, getting hold of the branches behind, leaped up into the tree, whence they began to discharge their excrements on my head; however, I escaped pretty well by sticking close to the stem of the tree, but was almost stifled with the filth, which fell about me on every side (Swift 2005: IV,1).

Contrary to reason, and unlike Gulliver, Owen neither thoroughly observes the despicable aliens who come his way, nor does he manage to escape “pretty well.” He recognizes placing himself in a situation “which has as its outcome only two logical conclusions – a miraculous triumph over one’s enemies, or one’s own death – so that the line between suicide and martyrdom is drawn so fine as not to exist”. Owen goes into the fray intentionally like a suicidal act and at the same time comes close to martyrdom. What ensues is a brutal beating that goes on for many minutes:

It was a contrivance of my own making, but I did not know it yet, when the first of the lads reached forward as if to grasp me by my placket, and I tore his hand away with my right hand and clubbed him in his grinning face with my left, sending him sprawling.

That was as close to miraculous triumph as I came, however. At once the rest of the gang was upon me like a pack of wolves taking down an elk in deep snow. In pairs and from all sides, they darted in on me and struck me in the face and belly and groin, kicked at my knees, and although I did some damage to them, they soon had me crouched over, and in seconds, with several hard, well-placed kicks to my ankles, they had me on the ground face-down, curling in on myself to protect my head and nether parts from their continuing barrage of kicks and blows. They said not a word to me or to each other, and now that they had me down, businesslike, went straight to work, pounding at me as if they wished to murder me. The beating went on for many minutes, until I was beyond pain, or so encased by it that I could no longer distinguish the individual blows. Their boots and fists smacked loudly against my spine and ribs and back of my head and the meat of my arms and legs, pitching my limp body this way and that, until finally the force of the blows tumbled me off the path into a shallow gully

beside it, where there was enough bilge and foul-smelling trash that they did not want to pursue me there.

I lay still and kept my eyes shut and heard them spit at me but did not feel it. I heard them laugh and call me names that I did not understand, and then at last they either grew bored with the game or thought me unconscious or dead, for the spitting and derision ceased, and I heard their boots against the gravel as they strode off. And then silence (Banks 1999: III.10, 327-8).

Thus ends the third – and last – passage in *Cloudsplitter* in which people of Irish descent play a role, a stunningly savage one in this case. Even in the context of the novel, which features a cornucopia of scenes including harsh violence, the depiction of this beating is particularly brutal. Owen has no chance whatsoever to respond to it. Eventually he is found, carried to the home of the Howes who are hosting the two Browns, and nursed by his father. In the process of his recovery Owen is seized by hallucinations and remorse, and the unfortunate encounter leaves a strong imprint on him.

Conclusion

The three instances in which members of the Irish immigrant community play a role in *Cloudsplitter*, and the way these characters and their circumstances are portrayed, with dramatic intensity, brilliant narrative skills, and psychological depth, suggest distinct resonances with Jonathan Swift’s depiction of the Irish (through the proposer) in *A Modest Proposal*, and the *Struldbrugs* and *Yahoos* in *Gulliver’s Travels*. Like Gulliver, who ends up in progressively stranger countries and crueller circumstances on each of his four travels (from accidentally stranded in *Lilliput* to being left marooned in the country of the *Houyhnhnms*), in *Cloudsplitter*, in each of the three scenes, as if they were arranged *in crescendo*, the Irish suffer a progressive dehumanization and degradation of their characters and their attitudes. The first scene depicts an extremely young and thin Irish prostitute who appears as a victim (of Owen – and of her circumstances) and who evokes sympathy and compassion. The second displays a group of Irish miners dwelling in shanties, a “sad lot”, who are so brutalized that they appear unable to take notice of anyone or anything surrounding

them. They also arouse compassion in the readers, yet are considered beyond help – even by John Brown, who, on the other hand, has declared it the goal of his life to free another disadvantaged community, the slaves. Finally, the culmination of human debasement is achieved with the third group, the Boston gang of “shabby Irish laddies” who brutally beat up the narrator, Owen, and abandon him for dead.

Altogether this essay illustrates how Banks might well have been harkening back to Swift

in his depiction of the degradation, despair, and violence of the Irish immigrant community in *Cloudsplitter*. Moreover by including these three significant passages on the Irish, Banks achieves to further enhance the role of the less favoured communities in *Cloudsplitter*. Thus these representations contribute to the reflection about race, class, and prejudice in nineteenth century America, while evoking links to the social struggles of eighteenth century Britain and Ireland.

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