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# Seeing the natural world: *Comhbhá an Dúlra*

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## ABSTRACT

*Comhbhá an dúlra* is the name given to the idea that Nature acts in sympathy with rightful rulers. It is one of the most enduring tropes of Gaelic literature from earliest times. If the correct ruler was in place and acted justly, Nature was deemed to flourish and the weather would conspire to support him. If he died, suffered mishap or misbehaved, Nature would be held to wither and even the weather would deteriorate. Modern poets, whose work is examined in this paper, have taken up the trope of *comhbhá an dúlra* in intriguing and fruitful ways. Their work often display a high degree of irony as they reflect on non-traditional forms of relationship between humans and the natural world. In doing so they demonstrate the malleability and acuity of the modern Gaelic poetic tradition, which now challenges the supremacy of humans, sometimes in an ecocritical spirit, while reconfiguring some of the most deeply rooted Gaelic images.

## Anthropocentric concepts of Nature

Irish literature has from earliest times been imbued with three core concepts that relate to the relationship between humans and the land. Collectively they served to affirm the sovereignty of political or other leaders. They were, first, the understanding that Ireland, or individual parts of it, could be personified as a woman, whether goddess, human, or of intermediate status; second, that Nature was a site of almost paradisiacal abundance; and third, that Nature responded to the fortunes of those who inhabit the land and in particular to the fortunes of the rightful leader. The sympathy of nature, *comhbhá an dúlra*, is the focus of this paper. It is somewhat akin to, but not identical with pathetic fallacy. The latter attributes human feelings to Nature or can seem to a human observer to do so, while *comhbhá an dúlra* represents a quasi-magical response by the natural world to important events in a leader's life, for good or ill. Thus, Nature would rejoice and be fruitful if a leader or other important man, or a man whom one wished to construe as important, succeeded in important ways; however if he died or failed in some respect, Nature had many ways to express distress: it might scream

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in pain or wither, crops might fail, birds might fall silent. Its sympathy was to an extent conditional, in that it could be withheld in response to culpable failure.

Although a trope of great antiquity, for the sake of brevity I confine myself for background to three still popular examples from the relatively recent eighteenth and nineteenth century. Consider first ‘Bímse buan ar buairt gach ló’, by Seán Clárach Mac Domhnaill, an eighteenth-century song that laments the absence of the Stuart king, figured here as a lion. The birds, it says, have fallen silent, the sun has failed to rise, the moon is overshadowed and hurricanes roar. All this, improbably, is a result of his departure:

Ní haoibhinn cuach ba suairc ar neoin...  
Níor éirigh Phoebus féin ar cóir  
Ar chaoinchneas ré tá daolbhrat bróin  
Tá saobhadh ar spéir is spéirling mhór  
Chun sléibhe i gcéin mar d’éalaigh an leon.

(The cuckoo no longer rejoices at noon / even the sun failed to rise / a dark shadow of sorrow spreads across the moon / the sky is turbulent and the hurricane is mighty / since the lion departed to distant mountains.)<sup>1</sup>

Another near contemporary, but more intimate, example is Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill’s lament for her husband, Art Ó Laoghaire, killed in an ambush in May 1773. She exhorts his dead body to mount his horse and take the road to the east where even ‘the streams will narrow for you, the bushes will thin out for you’ (‘mar a maolóidh romhat an sruth, mar a n-ísleoidh romhat na toir’).<sup>2</sup> The circumstances of the composition of this lament are unclear in certain respects but a number of the strophes included in Seán Ó Tuama’s edition are generally taken as having been composed at the end of the summer of 1773, when Ó Laoghaire’s body was exhumed and transferred for burial in a different cemetery. They relate that his crops are growing and his cows are giving milk: ‘Tá do stácaí ar a mbonn’ and ‘Tá do bha buí á gcrú’. These strophes appear at odds with Eibhlín Dubh’s earlier confidence in the sympathy of Nature; they are either an instance of literal truth colliding with imaginative fictions, or alternatively, if they belonged after all to the days in May directly after his death, they could be considered a call to Ó Laoghaire to return to life and take charge of the chores that are pressing. Either way, there is a disjuncture between his widow’s reiteration that she herself is still locked in her grief, and the continuing abundance of Nature.

A third well-known example is ‘Cill Aodáin’,<sup>3</sup> a pre-famine poem by Antoine Ó Reachtabhra (now commonly spelt ‘Raiftearaí’) which is a proven favourite of many Irish people. His home district, to which he longs to return, is presented as overflowing fertile to the point of being paradisiacal, with overtones

<sup>1</sup> E. Ó hÓgáin (ed.) *Seán Clárach Mac Dónaill* (Baile Átha Cliath, 2011), 59.

<sup>2</sup> E. Dubh Ní Chonaill, ‘Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire’ in Seán Ó Tuama (ed.), *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1961).

<sup>3</sup> A. Ó Reachtabhra, ‘Cill Aodáin’ in P. Ó Canainn (ed.) *Filíocht na nGael*, (Baile Átha Cliath, 1958), 151–52.

of the Book of Isaiah, a place of harmonious human relations, care for the weak, abundance of flora and fauna, and drink available gratis.<sup>4</sup> The poem starts out moderately, stating that Cill Aodáin is a fertile place: ‘Cill Aodáin an baile a bhfásann gach ní ann / Tá sméara, subh chraobh ann is meas ar gach sórt’ (‘Cill Aodáin is the townland where everything grows / Berries, raspberries, fruit of all kinds’). However two points should be noted. First, the extravagant bounty of nature is secondary to the presence and company of the community. To be among his people would be akin to being in a paradisiacal, timeless world that would restore him to youth: ‘Dá mbeinnse im sheasamh i gceartlár mo dhaoine / D’imeodh an aois díom is bheinn arís óg’ (‘If I stood right among my people / age would leave me and I would be once again young’). Moreover the picture he paints of life in Cill Aodáin is that of the traditional big house, the realm of the rightful lord in traditional terms, with feasting among nobles, leisure games and copious drinking, all generating a clear link between abundance and political sovereignty. Second, as in the pieces by Séan Clárach Mac Domhnaill and Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill, an element of the fantastical interposes itself, suggesting in each case that it is not to be understood entirely literally. Raiftearaí’s extravagant litany of abundance and fertility, too long to quote here, verges on the extreme. To give just one example, he names no fewer than fourteen sea creatures that can be found inland in Cill Aodáin, in a list that is nothing short of fanciful: pike, trout, eel, crab, periwinkle, mackerel, seal, salmon, wrasse, basking shark, tortoise, lobster, turbot, gurnet and to cap it all, generalised ‘fish’.

The examples quoted underscore the discontinuity between the trope of *comhbhá an dúlra* and actual circumstances, whether by veering into plainly absurd exaggeration or, in Eibhlín Dubh’s case, by poignant reference to the continued flourishing of Nature. Irish literature is replete with more plausible assertions of Nature’s sympathy. Eleanor Knott, however, in her introduction to *The bardic poems of Tadhg Dall Ó hUiginn*, one of the best known and most revered formal bardic poets of the sixteenth century, refers somewhat disparagingly to Tadhg Dall’s tendency to use what she terms ‘stereotyped phrases’:

The beneficial influence of a rightful ruler is usually pictured in stereotyped phrases with little reference to actualities: the chief pacifies the raging sea; the trees of the forest bend down to him in reverence; the earth yields her fruits in abundance even before their due season; the weather is all that can be wished for...<sup>5</sup>

Leaving aside the fact that not everyone would concur with the implied valorisation of originality in her words, Knott’s observation is a reminder that the figurative dimension of *comhbhá an dúlra*, which was in full flower during the bardic

<sup>4</sup> L. Ó Laoire, “...d’imeodh an aois díom”: Tír na nÓg agus Talamh na hÉireann’ in W. McLeod and M. Ní Annracháin (eag-í) *Cruth na tíre* (Baile Átha Cliath 2003), 39–68.

<sup>5</sup> E. Knott, *The bardic poems of Tadhg Dall Ó hUiginn (1550–1591)*, (London, 1922), LXII.

period, was established in Ireland well before the eighteenth century, and also that it should not always be interpreted as fully realist.

The concept of the sympathy of Nature, where Nature is conceived as the female spouse of the rightful leader, is connected with the traditional concept of the divine right of kings. It raises obvious issues of gender inequality, which have been analysed in detail by scholars. Of more immediate relevance to this paper, it also raises more general issues of the power relations between humans and the natural world. Not all Irish scholars subscribe to the idea that the relationship was one of unremitting male dominance. Breandán Ó Buachalla for instance, argued for the existence of a partnership, on the grounds that the bestowal of sovereignty on the male leader was depicted as the gift of the goddess of the land, and she moreover was represented as proactive in responding to his life, which included her being willing to express disapproval of his misdemeanours, military defeats or other failures to live up to the obligations of his role.<sup>6</sup> Thus Ó Buachalla argues against the by-now widely held feminist view that the female personification of the land and the concomitant sympathy of Nature serve as a bulwark of male power and prestige, leaving the male leader as protagonist and the female role as one of response.<sup>7</sup>

Whether traditionally an expression of partnership or of a relationship of dominance and subordination, post-Revival poetry throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century takes up these and many other traditional tropes, reimagining them creatively and often ironically. Finding or imagining a fissure in the idea of Nature's supposed sympathy with male leaders has led to radical reassessment of gender relations, both public and private. Over and above gender, it is clear that with the shift in perspective brought about by the current era of climate disruptions, new and fruitful ways of relating to Nature are discernible, or can be inferred from the radical engagement with traditional tropes that certain poets have undertaken.

Not all relevant social and political developments are of recent origin. Most obvious from the eighteenth century was the failure of the messianic king-over-the-water to fulfil his promise to Ireland; the success of democracy more widely, which undermined the belief in great leaders automatically possessing the right to rule; Freudian insight into the controlling power of the unconscious over the will; and the belief, since Darwin, that it is humans who adapt to their environment, not Nature that responds to them in a subordinate manner. More recently, the women's movement has been remarkably instrumental in challenging the belief in a strong, dominant individual man with a God-given right to control his own mind and actions, his territory, his people and in some cases large swathes of the planet with its multitude of inhabitants. A word of warning

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<sup>6</sup> B. Ó Buachalla, *Aisling ghéar: na Stiobhartaigh agus an t-aos léinn, 1603–1788* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1998), 469–82.

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, M. Nic Eoin, *B'ait leo bean: gnéithe den idé-eolaíocht inscne i dtraidisiún liteartha na Gaeilge* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1998).

against two interpretative extremes is warranted. First, the long tradition of *comhbhá an dúlra* from which contemporary poets emerged did imply a recognition of the interdependence of the land and the people, but, Ó Buachalla's analysis notwithstanding, it is difficult to characterise it as anything other than firmly anthropocentric, to the extent that Nature responded to and reflected human action (or in certain cases reflected the glory of God or other supernatural figures, notably Fionn Mac Cumhail). Thus it is fair to say that Irish remained largely free of the popular semi-mystical ascription to the Celtic world of an undifferentiated unity between humans and all other life forms, expressed by, for example, Bartosch as an awareness of a 'shared creaturely situation of human and nonhuman animals'.<sup>8</sup>

On the other hand, notwithstanding its anthropocentrism, Irish literature does not give widespread witness to the enthronement of the sovereign human subject within the context of 'burgeoning enlightenment concepts of freedom and human dignity...[as Adorno] stresses how freedom and dignity for the subject are bought at a high price, namely the price of unfreedom for everything non-human, for the other, that is, for nature'.<sup>9</sup> The Irish language world, at least when expressed in literature produced in Ireland, has no real tradition of the extremes of extractivist exploitation that came to characterise the industrial revolution and the conquering of the new world by empire builders. We will see later some examples of struggle between besieged humans and a harsh land, but nothing to compare with, for example, the characterisation by Theodore Roosevelt in his address to the Sorbonne University of the American taming of the new world as out and out subjugation: 'To conquer a continent, to tame the shaggy roughness of wild nature, means grim warfare...To conquer the wilderness means to wrest victory from the same hostile forces with which mankind struggled on the immemorial infancy of our race.'<sup>10</sup>

This then is the current local context for Irish-language literature: neither mistily at one with Nature nor fully dominant over it. Thus current trends in post-human analysis would require a degree of modification for Irish-language literature, which retains a memory of *comhbhá an dúlra*, unbroken, from earliest times. The global context may be a little different. If individual leaders may have lost their sheen, they have been replaced by other forms of human dominance. The current climate emergency reinforces the doubly ironic message

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<sup>8</sup> R. Bartosch, 'Against exuberant ecocentrism: Kafka, Coetzee and transformative mimesis' in S.L. Muller and T.-K. Pusse (eds), *From ego to eco: mapping shifts from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism* (Leiden and Boston, MA, 2018), 218.

<sup>9</sup> C. Schmitt-Kilb, "'Poetry's a line of defence": ecopoetry and politics in the 21st century' in Muller and Pusse (eds), *From ego to eco*, 140.

<sup>10</sup> T. Roosevelt, (1910) 'Citizenship in a Republic', delivered at the Sorbonne, in Paris, France on 23 April 1910. <http://www.worldfuturefund.org/Documents/maninarena.htm> accessed 3 July 2020.

that Nature resists human control and, simultaneously, that the crisis is indeed a response by Nature to human actions.

### Ironic modern re-imaginings

The remainder of this paper will consider a small cross-section of recent and contemporary efforts to re-imagine the relationship between nature and humans on the part of poets who are themselves immersed in a tradition that foregrounded *comhbhá an dúlra*, the sympathy of nature.

#### *Seán Ó Ríordáin: personal memory, cultural depression*

Few readers of modern Irish-language literature would dispute the canonical status of Seán Ó Ríordáin's poem 'Adhlacadh mo mháthar' ('My mother's burial').<sup>11</sup> Ostensibly, it is a reflection on an incident in a blossom-filled orchard in June as the poet-speaker reads an old tattered letter from his deceased mother and is transported back in memory to the day of her burial: 'Thit an Meitheamh siar isteach sa ngeimhreadh / Den úllghort deineadh reilig bhán cois abhann...' ('June fell back into winter / the orchard became a white cemetery by the river...'). The high status this poem enjoys derives not only from the personal grief of the speaker but from its resonance as a dark, ironic evocation of the main traditional tropes that pertain to the land of Ireland. The identity between the woman, in this case the speaker's mother, and the land is no longer one of supernatural personification but of cold materiality as she literally becomes part of the soil she in which she is buried; the woman is no radiant otherworldly young woman or *spéirbhean* but a dead elderly woman for whom the process of transformation back from aged hag or *cailleach* to young fertile woman has stalled, and the land, initially a fertile orchard and a site of abundance, has become, in the poet's imagination, a cemetery. Through this funereal vision the poem can readily be considered to reflect an attitude of cultural depression of a type not uncommon in the literature of recently liberated nations, when self-determination fails to produce the hoped-for transformations, and the life-cycle from youth to old age and back to youth is interrupted at the point of death.

In describing the effect on Nature of the death of the speaker's mother the poem breaks new ground, combining personal memory and the sympathy of Nature with the speaker's plight. The sudden regression of June into winter ('Thit an Meitheamh siar isteach sa gheimhreadh') is consistent with the magical response by Nature to human calamity, while simultaneously making it clear that that response is also an obvious metaphor for the speaker suddenly remembering the day of his mother's burial. In traditional Irish poetry Nature often falls silent when mourning a death, or alternatively screams in pain, particularly in the poetry of the eighteenth-century Munster poet Aogán O Rathaille, whose

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<sup>11</sup> S. Ó Ríordáin, *Eireaball spideoige* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1952), 56–8.

influence can be discerned throughout Ó Ríordáin's work. Following Ó Rathaille, Ó Ríordáin then presents the black hole of his mother's grave in the whiteness of the snow covered cemetery, as a mouth screaming: 'Do liúigh sa sneachta an dúpholl' ('The dark hole screamed out from the snow'). To refer to June as falling back into winter is a metaphor for losing oneself in memory; yet by retaining the memory of the older trope, a sense is retained of Nature empathising with the grieving man. There is a further complexity in that the speaker's trauma—the death of the woman-mother-goddess and the transformation of the fertile orchard in his mind into a cemetery—is both the immediate cause of his grief and a traditional response to a calamitous event in a hero's life. This poem has gripped the imagination of Irish language speakers for reasons that are not entirely clear, but that may well derive at least in part from the recognition of the deep roots of its basic premises regarding the land of Ireland. Those roots appear here in a form that accords with a prevailing mood of cultural depression in the mid-twentieth century.

*Máirtín Ó Direáin: heroic struggle, nostalgic memory*

Máirtín Ó Direáin, a mid-twentieth century contemporary of Seán Ó Ríordáin's, is the poet who more than any other found himself at odds with the pre-Famine idea, *à la* Raiftearaí, that Nature was a source of rich bounty and support for humans. Men could survive and proved themselves by their struggle with Nature, in particular the harsh terrain of his native Aran. He largely abandons the traditional heroic understanding that men were to act and Nature's role was one of response; rather a man becomes heroic now through engaging with Nature as adversary. The mark of a man was his own resilience, strength and determination and the support of his family and community as in 'Gleic mo dhaoine'<sup>12</sup> ('My people's struggle')

Cur in aghaidh na hanacra  
Ab éigean do mo dhaoine a dhéanamh  
An chloch a chloí, is an chré  
Chrosanta a thabhairt chun míne  
Is rinne mo dhaoine cruachan,  
Is rinne clann chun cúnaimh.  
Dúshlán na ndúl a spreag a ndúshlán...  
(Fighting against adversity / Was what my people had to do; / Subduing  
stone and levelling out / The stubborn clay, they toughened up / And  
raised a family to help. / Nature's defiance made them defiant...)

Men must take on the might of Nature, not that of other men. Nature's power and agency appear implacable in Ó Direáin's work, even casting men in its

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<sup>12</sup> M. Ó Direáin, *Selected poems / Rogha dánta*, ed. and trans. F. Sewell (An Spidéal, 2018), 96, 97.

own image, and usurping the role of artist and creator, as in ‘Cuimhne an Domhnaigh’<sup>13</sup> (‘A Sunday Memory’):

Chím mar a chaith an chloch gach fear  
Mar lioc ina cló féin é  
(I see how the stone has sculpted each man / Worn him down to its own  
shape)

Although the iconic anti-urban poem ‘Stoite’<sup>14</sup> (‘Uprooted’) admits that the forebears who lived on Aran recognised ‘féile chaoín na húire’ (‘the soil’s beneficence’), and even admits the possibility that a sense of exultation might accompany the struggle, this acknowledgment is slight compared to the account given of the struggle. It recalls that ‘our fathers / and forefathers / Grappled with life / Wrestling the bare rock...As they withstood / The power of the elements’. (‘Ár n-aithreacha bhíodh / Is a n-aithreacha siúd, / In achrann leis an saol / Ag coraíocht leis an gearraig loim...Ag baint ceart / De neart na ndúl.’)

Even a heroic struggle with Nature, the same poem says, is not enough; Nature must be transformed by cultural activity, such as house building, if the traditional requirement of heroic poetry is to be met, namely that one ensure that one’s memory be preserved: ‘Thóg an fear seo teach / Is an fear úd / Claí nó fál / A mhair ina dhiaidh / Is a choinnigh an chuimhne buan’. (‘One man builds a house, / Another a boundary / Or dry stone wall / That outlived him / And preserved his memory.’) To build a house or a wall may be a feasible alternative to a life in the civil service which was a target of Ó Direáin’s particular opprobrium. Less realistic is his Canute-like apostrophic address to the drifting sand that threatens to engulf St Enda’s church on Aran. ‘Teaghlach Éinne’<sup>15</sup> (‘Eanna’s Household’) is a strenuous exhortation, emphasising how cultural heritage is at risk from the power of Nature. Its final stanza makes this clear:

Fóill, a ghaineamh, fóill!  
Stad is lig don bhall,  
Fág binn, stua, is doras;  
Ní cuibhe ar shaothar Mhic Chonaill  
Brat an dearmaid ar deireadh.  
(Hold back, sand, hold back! / Halt, and let the wall be. / Leave gable,  
arch and doorway. / Mac Conaill’s work does not deserve / To end in a  
shroud of oblivion.)

Ó Direáin’s adversarial attitude to Nature does not always entail a desire to abandon it. In one of his best known poems, ‘Ár ré dhearóil’<sup>16</sup> (‘Our wretched era’), he compares a life separated from Nature to a prison, leaving him surrounded by prisoners ‘Since we said goodbye / To the land and shore, / And necessity crashed /

<sup>13</sup> Ó Direáin, *Selected poems / Rogha dánta*, 102, 103.

<sup>14</sup> Ó Direáin, *Selected poems / Rogha dánta*, 68, 69.

<sup>15</sup> Ó Direáin, *Selected poems / Rogha dánta*, 112, 113.

<sup>16</sup> Ó Direáin, *Selected poems / Rogha dánta*, 140–53.

Down upon us’ (‘Ó d’fhágamar slán / Ag talamh, ag trá / Gur thit orainn / Crann an éigin’). Strikingly, the deprivation suffered by the urban migrant is expressed in language of a type commonly used to express traditional *comhbhá an dúlra*. No birdsong or murmuring streams for such workers: ‘Níl éan ag ceol / Ar chraobh dó, / Ná sruthán ag crónán / Go caoin dó.’ Striking, too, in this poem is the characterisation of life in the city and in offices as one of struggle and sterility, while the former relationship with the land is expressed almost neutrally, without criticism or praise and without reference to a struggle: ‘Níl a ghiodán ag neach / Le rómhar ó cheart’ (‘Here no one has / His plot of earth / to dig...’)

It is becoming clear that Ó Direáin’s position was more nuanced than some of the examples first quoted from his work would suggest. Poems that register childhood memories confirm this nuanced approach. His memory of the natural world of his childhood, admittedly nostalgic, was predominantly of a halcyon world. In ‘Maidin Dhomhnaig’<sup>17</sup> (‘Sunday Morning’) he recalls his grandmother praying with ‘[A] rainbow-coloured butterfly / Extending its empire / On the wing of a gentle breeze’ (‘Féileacán ildaite / Is a ghlóir-réim á leathadh / Ar eite na leoite séimhe’). A similarly romantic impulse generates a series of vignettes in the iconic ‘An tEarrach Thiar’ (‘Springtime in the West’), in which he recalls a series of treasured memories.<sup>18</sup> First is the ‘sweet sound’ ([b]inn an fhuaim’) of a man scraping his spade clean ‘In the peace and calm / Of a warm day’ (‘sa gciúnas séimh i mbrothall lae’). This is followed by the ‘shimmering vision’ (‘Niamhrach an radharc’) of a man with a creel with ‘the red mayweed / Glistening / In a ray of sunlight’ (‘an fheamainn dhearg / Ag lonrú / I dtaitneamh gréine’). Next is a ‘dreamy sight, / Springtime in the West’ (‘Támhradharc sítheach / San Earrach thiar’) of women gathering shellfish in ebb-tide pools. Finally, the sound of the fishermen’s oars sounded across ‘a slow, gold sea’ (‘órmhuir mhall’). These memories have either elided or contradicted the rhetoric of struggle, and add a certain counterpoint to his grimmer pronouncements.

Nature even occasionally appears as a defence for the older way of life on Aran, to which Ó Direáin was greatly attached, in which he found solace, and whose passing he lamented. In ‘Ómós do John Millington Synge’ (‘Homage to J.M. Synge’) he laments: ‘Tá cleacht mo dhaoine ag meath, / Tá cabhair feasta an tonn mar fhalla’ (‘My people’s ways are in decline, / The wave no longer a protective wall’).<sup>19</sup> Synge, a visitor to the Aran islands on five separate occasions at the turn of the nineteenth century, asserted that ‘In Inismaan one is forced to believe in a sympathy between man and nature’.<sup>20</sup> Arguing that Synge reveals the sea as both provider and potential, indeed probable, killer, Kennedy-O’Neill suggests

<sup>17</sup> Ó Direáin, *Selected poems / Rogha dánta*, 62, 63.

<sup>18</sup> Ó Direáin, *Selected poems / Rogha dánta*, 72–75.

<sup>19</sup> Ó Direáin, *Selected poems / Rogha dánta*, 106, 107.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in J. Kennedy-O’Neill, “‘Sympathy between man and nature’: landscape and loss in Synge’s *Riders to the Sea*” in C. Cusick (ed.) *Out of the earth: ecocritical readings of Irish texts* (Cork, 2010), 36.

that ‘his work is hard to place in a strictly pastoral, Romantic or transcendental pigeonhole’ and suggests, as an alternative, a view of Nature as ‘Darwinian indifference’.<sup>21</sup> For Ó Direáin, writing within an Irish tradition albeit with a clear familiarity with Synge’s work, the relationship with nature is best viewed less as one of indifference but as one in which the traditional belief in the responsiveness of Nature to human action comes under pressure from the specific harshness of the terrain in Aran.

*Somhairle MacGill-Eain: Nature flourishing despite human death and loss*

It is appropriate to adopt an inclusive Irish–Scottish approach to the analysis of Gaelic literature in view of the deep shared roots and shared literary language until the early modern period of Irish and Scottish Gaelic. In that spirit, and because *comhbhá an dúlra* was a literary cornerstone in Gaelic Scotland, just as in Ireland, the poetry of the Scottish Gaelic poet Somhairle MacGill-Eain demands attention. His poem ‘Hallaig’<sup>22</sup> is arguably the most radical mid-twentieth century evocation of the trope of the sympathy of Nature and, incidentally, of *aisling*-type visions, in either Irish or Scottish Gaelic. The poet-speaker relates an otherworldly vision he had with the cleared and subsequently deceased community from his native island, Raasay.

To describe a visionary encounter with the dead in the wild trees that spread freely across the townland of Hallaig after the people were cleared was a remarkable reversal of the core Gaelic trope that traditionally maintained that land prospers when its rightful sovereign is in place and ruling wisely, and withers or suffers when he dies. Here the land blooms and is beloved not only despite the catastrophic loss of the people, but directly as a result of it, as the departure of the people allowed the trees to extend over the area.

Tha iad fhathast ann an Hallaig  
Clann Ghill-Eain ’s clann MhicLeòid,  
Na bh’ann ri linn Mhic Ghille-Chaluim:  
Chunnacas na mairbh beò.

Na fir ’nan laighe air an lianaig  
aig ceann gach taighe a bh’ann  
na h-igheanan ’nan coille bheithe,  
dìreach an druim, crom an ceann.

(They are still in Hallaig, / MacLeans and MacLeods, / all who were  
there in the time of Mac Gille Chaluim: / the dead have been seen alive.  
The men lying on the green / at the end of every house that was, / the girls  
a wood of birches, / straight their backs, bent their heads.)

<sup>21</sup> Kennedy-Ó’Neill, ‘Sympathy between man and nature’, 43.

<sup>22</sup> S. MacGill-Eain / S. MacLean, *Caoir gheal leumraich / White leaping flame: Collected poems in Gaelic with English translations*, eds and trans, C. Whyte and E. Dymock, (Edinburgh, 2011), 230–35.

The poem is too long and complex to analyse fully here but it should at least be noted that no real restitution takes place through the vision in ‘Hallaig’ and none is claimed, apart from a temporary respite from the enduring pain of the Highland Clearances in the nineteenth century, and that only for the duration of the speaker’s life. If there is a disjuncture in ‘Hallaig’ between the glorious vision of the resurrected dead and the admission that Nature appears to be flowering in spite of the suffering of the people, some parallels can be seen with the fact that Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill’s assurance of the support of Nature for her dead husband came, in the end, to nought, as Nature continued to bear fruit in his absence. Subtle levels of irony pervade both poems: Nature will continue to flourish notwithstanding the plight of the people.

*Pádraig Mac Fhearghusa: frozen Nature withholds support*

A generation after Ó Ríordáin, Ó Direáin and MacGill-Eain, Pádraig Mac Fhearghusa has published six volumes of remarkable, if under-acknowledged, poetry. Among his various sources of inspiration is an extended consideration of the grief that endured for many decades following the loss of what is presented as an early love. With the title of his first volume, *Faoi léigear (Under siege)* the sense of life as an assault takes hold and persists throughout much of the subsequent work.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly in such a context, the heroic relationship with supportive and responsive natural forces is undermined.

If Ó Direáin figured the relationship as one of a struggle for dominance against a harsh land and sea, Mac Fhearghusa, at some distance from the extremes of Aran, is free from the obligation to wrestle physically with the land for survival. He writes as though personally thwarted by the forces of Nature, which treat him as an interloper. I draw attention to two aspects of this hostility on the part of Nature. The first is a marked preference for images of frozen landscapes. In ‘Dó seaca faoi chorrán gealaí’<sup>24</sup> (‘Frostbite under a crescent moon’) he proclaims that his separation from the beloved is a source of pain-as-coldness that remains unabated long after their separation. His frequent returns to where she lived have been of no avail; all he has from her is cold: ‘An fuacht, b’shin díot mo chuid’. A focus on her hard, cold breasts sets up a clear echo of another cornerstone trope, namely the female personification of the land, which is closely related to the belief in the sympathy of Nature. His lost love has become the whole cold world: her breasts are described as ‘cruinne-chíocha’, where ‘cruinne’ denotes both ‘round’, and ‘the universe’. This poem, in which the woman and the world are cold and the male speaker is frozen by them, sets up a remarkable circular movement whereby Nature on the one hand empathises with him in his loss and sorrow by freezing over, and on the other hand, ironically, it is the coldness of the Nature-woman that causes him to freeze. It is as though a mutual

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<sup>23</sup> P. Mac Fhearghusa, *Faoi léigear* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1980).

<sup>24</sup> Mac Fhearghusa, *Faoi léigear*, 11.

process of freezing the other were set in motion between Nature and the speaker, in tandem with the freezing he experiences from his beloved. In its examination of the pain of lost love, this poem taps into the complexity of the human–Nature relationship as it has been imagined in Irish literature across the ages, including our own. In the context of *comhbhá an dúlra*, the speaker’s sorrow might be considered to have generated the big freeze, placing Nature in the role of sympathetic responder, but its response piles further suffering on the speaker and mirrors closely the actions of the one who initially brought him down.

A second notable elaboration of the relationship between Nature and humans takes place in Mac Fhearghusa’s third volume, *Faoi Shliabh Mis agus dánta eile*, a title which translates as both *At the foot of and/or Concerning Sliabh Mis and other poems*.<sup>25</sup> Slieve Mis is the mythological site of the fortress of Cú Roí, who abducted a young woman, Bláthnaid, from her father’s house. She, in love with the Ulster hero Cú Chulainn, tricked Cú Roí and facilitated Cú Chulainn’s entry into the fortress, where he duly killed Cú Roí. An eponymous suite of seventeen poems, ‘Fá Shliabh Mis’<sup>26</sup> recounts an ascent of Slieve Mis in Kerry, along the lines of a dark *aisling* or vision poem. Traditional *aisling* visions often take place either in a form of supernatural mist that envelops the fairy woman who comes to visit a poet-speaker, or in sleep. Note that the word ‘néall’ can denote both ‘cloud’ and ‘sleep’. In Mac Fhearghusa’s sequence the mist turns menacing and literal, suggesting that Nature lacks sympathy with the speaker’s quest and pointing to his failure as a heroic adventurer along life’s journey.

The speaker of the poem sets off one ‘long brown’ autumn day in the town below the mountain, a dismal place of overflowing rubbish bins. He departs in haste, for fear of the changing weather that threatens to turn the ground to mud and blanket the mountains with snow, a transformation that echoes, but is less dramatic and less magical than the turn from June to winter in the Ó Ríordáin poem discussed earlier. While the journey is an opportunity for reflection, with echoes of pilgrimage, it mainly repeats the ascent into the wilderness that marked the traditional location of many *aisling* poems. After a short respite in a ruined church along the way, as in a pilgrimage, the atmosphere reverts to something seemingly pre-Christian and unremitting as he proceeds through the heather and the ‘aiteann Gaelach’ (‘Gaelic furze’ i.e. dwarf whin). There is now no possibility of rest in a place that is described with a hostile martial metaphor:

Cónaí ná sos ní fhéadaim,  
Saighead gaoithe im dhrom...  
Bíogann íor na farraige aníos  
Bláthaíonn an tsúil ina blár gorm  
(I cannot stop or rest, / An arrow of wind in my back... / The sea on the  
horizon mounts up / The eye sees a blue battleground)

<sup>25</sup> P. Mac Fhearghusa, *Fá Shliabh Mis agus dánta eile* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1993).

<sup>26</sup> Mac Fhearghusa, *Fá Shliabh Mis agus dánta eile*, 38–55.

Combining Christian and heroic pre-Christian language, he admits that ‘the sin here is the indifference of cowardice’ (‘Is é is peaca anseo neamhshuim na meatachta’). It is notable from a Gaelic perspective that the heroic struggle required here is not against an external enemy, in which he might have expected the support of Nature, but with Nature itself, as some of Ó Direáin’s poems also contend. The speaker of this poem is a humble searcher after wisdom, who lacks the heroic dimension that Ó Direáin’s men displayed in their grappling with the forces of Nature. Nature declines to endorse him but rather ramps up the pressure as he proceeds with his ascent, assailing him with the cold, the approach of darkness and a very literal blanket of fog:

An fuacht faoi dheoidh a ghoin m’aire,  
An ghrian ag sleabhcadh ar Bhinn os Gaoith,

...

An ceo ina míle teanga ar mo shála  
(‘It was the cold that took my attention / The sun slipping down on Binn  
os Gaoith / ...The mist a thousand tongues around my feet’)

At this point his foot trips on the heather, causing him to fall, terrifyingly, almost losing his life. As in *aisling* poetry, he is now visited by otherworldly beings, three in this case, each of whom exhorts him in a different direction. As he eventually extricates himself from his predicament he is assisted, not by Nature, apart from the light of the moon, but by banal goods manufactured by humans: his protective anorak and coffee from his flask. Such anti-heroic markers indicate that he is no colossus, with no hope of support from Nature.

*Dòmhnall MacAmhlaigh: Contemptuous Nature*

Returning briefly to Scottish Gaelic, the short poem ‘Am fiar-Chath’ (‘Devious fight’)<sup>27</sup> by the mid-twentieth century poet Dòmhnall MacAmhlaigh is another clear example of the type of ironic discourse that has in recent times been used to give expression to the awareness that Nature, far from supporting great heroes, defeats them effortlessly.

An laoch  
a bha gheal an-uiridh  
gabhar am-bliadhna a thuireadh:  
thill e à iomadh cath dìreach  
glan-bhàireach.  
Chaidh e air chall san fhaoilleach  
's tha a lorg air a bàthadh  
fon t-sior chathadh air a gilead  
(bha fhuil gun a leigeil

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<sup>27</sup> Dòmhnall MacAmhlaigh, *Deilbh is faileasan / Images and reflections: Dàin le Dòmhnall MacAmhlaigh / Poems by Donald MacAulay* (Steòrnabhagh, 2008), 48, 49.

ragadh gu bàs e –  
mullach na tàmailt)  
Choisinn am fiar-chath ùmhlachd.  
'S e comharra g' eil an t-earrach a' teachd  
gun leagh  
am bodach-sneachd'.

(The warrior / who, last year, shone bright / this year his death-songs are  
sung: / he returned from many straight fights / leaving a clean trail.  
He got lost in the dead of winter /and his footprint is drowned / by the  
incessant snow falling on its whiteness / (His blood was not let / his death  
was by freezing – / a source of the greatest shame) /He succumbed in a  
devious fight. A sign of spring's approach / is that snowmen / melt.)

No ally of heroes here, Nature is a harsh adversary that refuses to play fair and deprives the warrior of the glory of a bloody and martial death. This inglorious death undermines the heroic code and the traditionally subservient relationship of Nature to humans. The tone, initially respectful of a true hero who had taken part in many glorious battles, slides almost imperceptibly into mock heroic, lightly ironising the tragedy of dying from the cold rather than heroically. To consider such a death tragic is made to seem faintly ridiculous, for who today could seriously hold it against the weather that it fought dirty, or consider it tragic in traditional terms that a hero be forgotten because his footprints in the snow were effaced. Nature has undermined the hero by revealing him as a mere snowman. It is not clear whether the death is caused by a failure of judgment or unavoidable circumstances, but either way, Nature is implacable. But it is also full of life, because it is the advent of spring that heralds the snowman's death.

This poem contrasts with other great struggles between heroic individuals and adverse weather forces, such as Jack London's short story 'To build a fire',<sup>28</sup> in which a foolishly unprepared traveller falls prey to the existential threat of the snow in the Yukon. By underestimating the danger, he is destroyed. In this case he was brought down not only by the power of Nature but also by a combination of his own arrogance and foolishness. MacAmhlaigh makes no such judgment of the hero in his poem but suggests that, since the hero is no more resilient than a snowman in the face of Nature, his demise is simply a part of the natural order, and the natural order is not necessarily at one with or supportive of humans. Intriguingly, this echoes slightly the irony in 'Hallaig'. The two poems offer alternative versions of the strength and independence of Nature. 'Hallaig' investigates its cause; 'Am fiar-Chath' its effect. In 'Hallaig' the forced departure of the people allowed Nature to expand; in MacAmhlaigh's poem it is the gentleness of Nature, not its harshness, that

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<sup>28</sup> J. London, 'To build a fire' (1908), available at [www.owleyes.org/text/build-fire/read/Build-Fire#](http://www.owleyes.org/text/build-fire/read/Build-Fire#), accessed 3 July 2020.

brings the hero down, as the snowman melts with the advent of spring. Neither suggests support for humans.

*Biddy Jenkinson: towards ecocentrism*

An issue that regularly arises for oppressed groups is whether or not they can achieve liberty and equality without seeking to replace their position of subordination with one of dominance. The recognition of Nature as a formidable adversary can seem threatening, or, more hopefully, can seem like a prophetic note of warning about the future relationship of humankind and Nature in a world transformed by climate change. However there are, happily, alternatives to a simple reversal of power relationships. Among contemporary Irish-language poets, the major poetic voice heard expressing a desire to forge a new relationship between humans and Nature is that of Biddy Jenkinson. True, some of her work does appear to engage in a type of polar reversal, which can have radical ethical repercussions, not least because of the degree of precedence afforded the natural world. But other pieces go farther and seek to transcend the binary relationship of dominance and subordination in a more radical way.

At its simplest, Jenkinson allows her speakers to overturn the traditional expectation that Nature would follow the fortunes of people, as in, for example ‘Dá mbeadh an lá go breá / Do bhéarfainn gean duit féin...’<sup>29</sup> (‘If the day were fine / I would give you love’ or ‘Tá an fharráige ard, an ghrian go hard is táimse lán de ghrásta’<sup>30</sup> (‘The sea is full, the sun is high, and I am full of grace.’) In the latter, the benign presence of the sea and the sun appear to take on the mantle of angels, as they bring about the state of grace familiar to Catholics from the prayer known as the ‘Hail Mary’, which memorialises Mary’s visitation by God, through an angel, and her consequent conception of Jesus. Grace in this poem clearly does not require the subjugation of Nature.

Complex statements are found in several poems that probe the implications of a relationship in which Nature is accorded an even greater degree of precedence. The prioritisation of Nature inevitably involves the loss of human privilege. In the poem ‘Oileán na Caillí’<sup>31</sup> (‘The Hag’s Island’), Nature rules in two guises, namely as the sovereignty goddess in her eponymous and familiar hag form, and as the cows that belonged to her and to which she allows free rein, in fact free reign, on her island. These animals, we are informed, have made their own of the land now that humans have left. They

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<sup>29</sup> B. Jenkinson, *Dán na huidhre* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1991), 13.

<sup>30</sup> B. Jenkinson, *Uiscí beatha* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1988), 16.

<sup>31</sup> Jenkinson, *Uiscí beatha*, 49. (Note that this poem predates recent debates about the climate risks associated with the national herd, which have had the effect of defining cows as part of the problem rather than, as here, a sign of the restitution of the sovereignty of the natural world.)

have assumed sovereignty themselves, somewhat to the dismay of the former owner, the speaker of the poem:

Tá gréinleach a gcúirt ríoga ar mo léana  
is táimse in amhras i dtaobh uisce an tobair.  
Tá an tseamair dhearg ite síos go fréamh  
is tá steaimpí déanta acu den mhagairlín gaelach...  
Níl clái gan bearna bó.

(There are tufts of grass covered in dung in their royal courts on my lawn, / and I'm worried about the water in the well. / The clover is eaten to the root, / they have trodden down the wild orchid... / Not a fence remains without a gap left by a cow.)

The poem's title, 'Oileán na Caillí' ('The Hag's Island') refers to the island as the possession of the hag-goddess of sovereignty and therefore under her sway; it is safe to assume she is satisfied with this new state of affairs. This is corroborated in other poems by conventional examples that indicate the response of Nature to a rightful leader, as in 'Muirfin' ('Merrion'): 'Tá an ghealach ag bláthú; tá searraigh chúir á scaoileadh ag an bhfarráige, éiríonn an spéirlíne ar sciathán éan'<sup>32</sup> ('The moon is waxing; foals of foam are launching onto the ocean, the skyline rises on the wings of birds.') Nature is plainly delighted with the new dispensation; the deposed human owner is left bemused and bereft; and the poem succeeds in aligning itself with the forces of Nature against the human speaker who appears over-controlling and unfree. But the tone is playful, with no sense of violence or domination. If the sovereignty of Ireland was in the gift of the goddess of the land from earliest times, within Bidy Jenkinson's poetry she once more retains it, holding it firm and holding it dear.

Much more could be added to this paper's investigation of a strand of thought that continues to develop in Irish-language poetry as it seeks new forms of relationship between humans and the natural world. There are poems, not discussed, that revisit the land as human cemetery or as wild paradise; poems that seek to de-commodify the land by exalting the tiniest, shyest and, in instrumental terms, more or less useless, flowers; poems that infuse the naming of the land with love, not ownership; there are many forms of ecopoetry. Like the pieces we have discussed, such poems find multiple ways to ironise traditional tropes. They reside within a tradition of great antiquity, which provides an ethical and emotional ground for reflections on how to live well in the contemporary world. Poets may subvert the tradition, find in it fissures that can act as a foothold for a new vision, or even attempt to displace it, but only rarely, if at all, can they forget it, or pass it on unaltered.

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<sup>32</sup> Jenkinson, *Dán na huidhre*, 19.