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Poetic Place and Geographical Space: An Analysis of the Poetry of Máirtín O Direáin

ISOBEL RYAN, *Cork*

Place is security, space is freedom: we are attached to the one and long for the other. There is no place like home. What is home? It is the old homestead, the old neighborhood, hometown or motherland. [1]

People who have a strong attachment to particular geographical features such as rivers, mountains, an island, have a touchstone on which to base their emotions. The concrete thing gives them food for imagination which may never be called for if they stay at home all their lives; however, if they leave their mountain or river or island, then the geographical becomes imaginative and the heart begins to long for, imagine and recreate islands, rivers and mountains. Even a colour can thus become symbolically important, none more so perhaps than to the colour green to the Irish abroad. Poetry written by immigrants is full of rocks and lakes and geographical reference of all kinds. Sociologists may not always take creative literature seriously as evidence of the effects of leaving home, but that bias can be overcome if one sees literature not as dealing in 'representations' but rather as a means for working out life-issues in a communicative manner. We start absorbing the geography around us as children but only become aware of how important it is to us when we leave the home environment and suddenly start defining the 'new place' [2] in terms of what is not present from the old familiar place. To understand the importance of place we need to look at the difference between the terms space and place. Place comes into being, according to Edward Relph, when the human dimension is added to space:

Places are fusions of human and natural order and are the significant centres of our immediate experiences of the world. They are defined less by unique locations, landscapes, and communities than by the focusing of experiences and intensions onto particular settings. Places are not abstractions or concepts, but are directly experienced phenomena of the lived-world and hence are full with meanings, with real objects, and with ongoing activities. [3]

Of all the Irish writers who have written about the importance of place, perhaps the one for whom it loomed largest was Máirtín O Direáin. O Direáin was born in Inishmore, the largest of the Aran Islands, in 1910. He was Gaelic-speaking from childhood. He did not become a fisherman, which was the traditional occupation of his relatives and neighbours, but went to Galway in 1928 to work in the post office. In 1937 he moved to Dublin to work as a civil servant, and it was in Dublin that he began to write poetry in the Irish language in which he reconstructs his island home, Inishmore.

For O Direáin the island is almost a character in itself. Most of his poetry is inspired one way or the other by life in Inishmore. Human beings are important in his poetry,

but the landscape, the rocks in particular, are just as important. He is not the only writer in Irish to have this relationship to the natural world. Liam O Flaithearta and Pádraic O Conaire also share in this interest in depicting nature. O Flaithearta (also from Inishmore) wrote several short stories about animals. One, entitled ‘An Charraig Dhubh’ (The Black Rock) shows the social life of crabs; ‘An Seabhac’ (The Hawk) gives an insight into the struggle for survival of a family of hawks.

The term that probably best sums up O Direáin’s relationship with his island home is Yi-Fu Tuan’s concept of toponophilia, which he defines as ‘the affective bond between people and place or setting’ [4]. Place is everything to O Direáin. Describing, recreating, agonising about Inishmore in much of his work provided the poet with a substitute home.

There are two points of interest here in O Direáin’s work: first, his poetic reconstruction of home and secondly his treatment of the island. One problem in discussing the island as geographical entity and the island as poetic construct is how to distinguish between the two linguistically. I have decided to call the geographical entity Inishmore and the poetic island Arainn. According to Ramesh Dhussa this naming is very important:

A name is very often associated with a ‘place’. Name gives a personality to a space. ‘Naming is power—the concrete power to call something into being, to render the invisible visible, to impart a certain character to things (Tuan, 1991).’ [5]

The island as geographical entity is one of the poet’s strongest points of reference. Rocks, stones, soil, all the features of the sea shore become raw material for poetic transformation into metaphors which come to stand for what is truly substantial in life, contrasted always with the transient nature of city life which O Direáin disparages throughout his work [6]. The built environment of the city is invisible and nameless when compared to both the natural and built environments of Inishmore. People are remembered as having built walls and dykes on the island, unlike the city where official records are all that testify to people’s existence. The poem *Stoite* (Uprooted) clearly sets forth the difference in posterity on the island from that in the city:

One man built a house
And another
A dyke or a wall
Which outlived him
And kept his name alive.

We will be remembered yet:
A stack of files
Weighed down with dust
Will survive in a government office. [7]

We see the importance of both physical things such as seaweed and the people’s experience of their everyday lives combining to create a sense of place in the poem *An t-Earrach Thiar* (Spring in the West):

A man scraping clay
From the tread of a spade
In the serene calm
On a warm day:

The sound is sweet
During Spring in the west.

A man throwing
A creel off his back,
And the red seaweed
Glittering
In the sunshine
On a white stone beach:
A vivid sight
During Spring in the west.

Women in the shallows
At furthest ebb
With their skirts tucked up
And reflections beneath them:
A tranquil sight
During spring in the west. [8]

Men and women are seen as having very clear roles on O Direáin's poetic island. The island is not mentioned specifically but is synonymous here with 'the west'. O Direáin's early poetry is almost entirely devoted to recreating a poetic home in the absence of the physical home. Edward Relph defines *home* as

the foundation of our identity as individuals and as members of a community, the dwelling-place of being. Home is not just the house you happen to live in, it is not something that can be anywhere, that can be exchanged, but an irreplaceable centre of significance. [9]

J. Douglas Porteous provides a significant insight I think by taking into consideration the space-group-time dimension of home:

Home is more than a house, an apartment, or any other physical structure. It is a building unit or area, of more or less measurable dimensions, in which a considerable emotional investment is made by the individual. Home is the space-group-time entity in which individuals spend the greater part of their lives. It is preferred space, and it provides a fixed point of reference around which the individual may personally structure his or her spatial reality. [10]

Home does not have to be a physical area, however. Home can be an imaginary construct such as the poetic Arainn of O Direáin. Based as it is on a particular space-group-time moment in his early life, the Arainn of the poetry remains a distinct place which comes into being through the poetry and which cannot be relocated when the poet returns to the island later in life in search of the home he once knew. As Heidegger described it, the word *brings into being*. So too does the poetry bring a version of home into being. Heidegger gives the poem *The Word* by Stefan George as an illustration of the power of the word as a giver of being:

Wonder or dream from distant land
I carried to my country's strand

And waited till the twilight norn
Had found the name within her bourn—

Then I could grasp it close and strong
It blooms and shines now the front along ...

Once I returned from happy sail,
I had a prize so rich and frail,

She sought for long and tidings told:
'No like of this these depths unfold',

And straight it vanished from my hand,
The treasure never graced my land ...

So I renounced and sadly see:
Where word breaks off no thing may be. [11]

O Direáin, too, creates Arainn through poetic language and eventually loses his island when he no longer finds himself writing about it. In a late poem called *Neamhionraic Gach Beo* (The Essence is not in the Living) he writes that nothing in life stays with us for ever, even the island has 'left his poem'. In the beginning he judges people in terms of whether they are the 'essence of an island' or not, but at the end of the poem he says:

Unliving things slip
Away from life and leave it:
Was it thus
The island left my poem,
Or did you notice? [12]

O Direáin was aware that the island he created in his poetry was not the same island as the geographical entity he once lived on. In a poem entitled *Berkeley*, he addresses this divergence between the physical reality and the mental construct:

On a rock, Bishop of Cloyne,
I was reared as a boy;
And the grey stones
And barren crags encompassed me,
But far from such you lived,
Bishop and philosopher.

Swift himself, the great Dean,
Was not mad, if it's true
He left you on his doorstep;
Was not the closed door a dream
In your mind, for thus you taught?
And why would he want to open it for you
Since it was only a ghost of itself?
Dr Johnson too
Kicked an adjacent stone
As if the assault
On the pure entity smashed
Your vision, and its implication
That in the mind was contained

All living substance and all inanimate matter.

I don't deny I agreed
With those great men for a while,
But since the grey stones began
To turn to dreams in my mind,
I do not know, my dear Bishop,
That you weren't the one who went on the deep
While the great men stayed on the shore. [13]

Berkeley's theory that all substance is really present only in the mind was attacked by Swift and Johnson, but whereas O Direáin had initially agreed with them, he came to realise that his island was a mental construct and not to be found in reality, thus leading him to sympathise with Bishop Berkeley's ideas. O Direáin believed in his early works that when he wrote about Inishmore he was writing about the island as it really was. However, as time went on, he realised that his Arainn and the Inishmore he grew up on and now visited were separate entities.

O Direáin uses the image of the island as a yardstick against which to measure the immorality of the city. The city represents all that is evil and depraved in modern life while the island still retains the integrity and values he associates with traditional rural Ireland. Yi-Fu Tuan says of the island as mental construct that

Its importance lies in the imaginative realm ... Above all, it symbolises a state of prelapsarian innocence and bliss, quarantined by the sea from the ills of the continent. [14]

O Direáin certainly portrays his Arainn as an Eden where men were men and women were women. This is already clear from *An t-Earrach Thiar* quoted above and particularly in poems such as *Stoite* (Uprooted). Throughout O Direáin's poetry there is a very clear idea of the type of work men should be doing and similarly what was women's work. Home is synonymous with traditional womanhood. In *Faoiseamh A Gheobhadsa* (I will find Solace), O Direáin maintains that true relief is only to be found in the home. Home always contains a shawled-mother figure, often accompanied by other women. Men are kept outside the inner circle in the poem *Rún na mBan* (The Women's Secret). City women, on the contrary, are seen as dangerous and depraved; in the poem *Ar Ré Dhearóil* (Our Wretched Era) they are united with their male counterparts in ruining themselves and society at large. Home is female for O Direáin. Just as he idealises Arainn he idealises the women of Arainn. Gendering home as female is not, of course, unique to O Direáin, as Doreen Massey notes:

The construction of 'home' as a woman's place has, moreover, carried through into those views of place itself as a source of stability, reliability, and authenticity. Such views of place, which reverberate with nostalgia for something lost, are coded female. [15]

Rún na mBan typifies O Direáin's vision of home as female. Arainn women are nearly always mother figures. Younger women are associated with the city. This portrayal of the countryside as 'pure' and the city as 'degraded' is typical within nationalist discourse. The Irish Ireland of the early twentieth century was very much devoted to a highly gendered version of traditional rural life. Women's roles were strictly confined to those of motherhood and home maker.

When I think of it now

Who knows what secret lore
Unknown to any man alive
I'd have snatched from the women
Ranged around the fire,
Drinking tea
With their shawls on their heads? [16]

O Direáin shows us traditional womanhood in particular as something that can be found only in the west (*An tEarrach Thiar*). Women do women's work but he portrays it as equal to that of the men.

Though living in Dublin himself, O Direáin remains fiercely anti-modernist in poems such as *Ar Ré Dhearóil* (Our Wretched Times). Here, women are castigated for living loose and useless lives, for not bearing children, and for putting luxury and entertainment before the traditional cares of the ideal Irish woman (home and family):

To compensate for the seed
That did not enter their flesh,
To compensate for the child
That did not grow in their womb,
That they didn't carry nine months
In the hollow of their bodies,
The least they'd accept as dowry
Was a spell at foreign languages,
A spell at the arts,
A spell touring
In foreign parts,
Sending home postcards
From Ostend and Paris,
Without one loving encounter
In all their journeys,
Knowing no grip
But the grip of apathy. [17]

Home for O Direáin became that period when he was growing up in Inishmore surrounded by people he knew well. O Direáin's Arainn is something like Michelet's bird's nest: it comes into being in the making (in this case the act of writing poetry) and it becomes an extension of the poet himself:

The house is a bird's very person; it is its form and its most immediate effort,
I shall even say, its suffering. The result is only obtained by constantly
repeated pressure of the breast. There is not one of these blades of grass that,
in order to make it curve and hold the curve, has not been pressed on
countless times by the bird's breast, its heart. [18]

The poetic island provides O Direáin with a substitute home while he is getting used to city life. And like Michelet's bird's nest it comes into being through the poet's craft and suffering.

On returning to Inishmore years later, O Direáin finds that he is no longer at one with his surroundings. In *Deireadh Ré* (End of an Era) he finds that home has suffered a metamorphosis, he no longer belongs there.

I grieve for the tellers of tales!
Death lays them low;

The shawled women follow
While I live on
Among the nameless crowds;
'Who is he?' doesn't spring to their lips,
My name to them unknown.
I no longer wish, by my soul,
To force friendship on grey stones!
The rock does not welcome me
And I seek my youth on the road,
And I am Oisín on the crags
And wandering on the strand
Making lamentation for the hosts of the dead. [19]

Relphe describes this change in sensation, the homecomer lost in the former home:

There is the common sensation of returning to a familiar place after an absence of several years and feeling that everything has changed even though there have been no important changes in its appearance. Whereas before we were involved in the scene, now we are an outsider, and observer, and can recapture the significance of the former place only by some act of memory. [20]

These feelings of strangeness on returning to the place so long dreamed about and written lovingly about brings out the changeable nature of place itself. Home is a special case in terms of place but no less susceptible to the effects of both time and group dimensions. Massey maintains that place can never be fixed and that it is not possible to fix the identity of places, as they are changeable by their very nature:

If, however, the spatial is thought of in the context of space-time and as formed out of social interrelations at all scales, then one view of a place is as a particular articulation of those relations, a particular moment in those networks of social relations and understandings ... But the particular mix of social relations which are thus part of what defines the uniqueness of any place is by no means all included within that place itself. Importantly, it includes relations which stretch beyond—the global as part of what constitutes the local, the outside as part of the inside. Such a view of place challenges any possibility of claims to internal histories or to timeless identities. The identities of place are always unfixed, contested and multiple. [21]

The concept of the island served as a useful symbol in much of O Direáin's poetry. He sums up his poetic work in terms of the island in the poem *Sólás na Ceirde* (The Craft's Reward):

Tolerate the terror inside you
Take it to bed with you:
Tolerate daily torment
If you are king of the world for a while.

Be subservient to all
A slave even,
In the service of your poem
If the word yields to you.

What harm is death in time?
 If even one poem outlives you
 Or even one line that cheers everyone
 You will be king of an island. [22]

It is difficult to say whether this last reference to the island is meant as a self-deprecating reference to the confines of being king of a small island such as Inishmore, or indeed of a small island such as Ireland. Perhaps given that O Direáin wrote in the Irish language, he sees any fame he might attain as being confined to a very small audience. However, if we see the reference to the island as referring to the poetic island then maybe O Direáin is saying that the most he can hope to have attained as a poet is sovereignty over one symbol that he has made to work for him for so many years.

In the end, O Direáin became attached to city life and never returned to live on Inishmore. The island had served its purpose as inspiration for almost a lifetime of poetry. The physical Inishmore felt strange, however, to the poet in later years and he felt like an outsider now on the island. As we have seen, many themes come to mind when discussing O Direáin's work: migration, gender, the urban/rural divide, national identity, and all of these are connected to the concepts of space, place and home. Like many other Irish-language poets, O Direáin's work is understudied within the general area of Irish Studies. The neglect of this wealth of Irish-language material represents a missed opportunity for theorists and analysts who are developing canons of Irish literature. O Direáin's poetry gives us not only a valuable insight into many topical themes but also, through his use of the Irish language, provides an additional dimension to studies of place, home and space.

NOTES

- [1] Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Edward Arnold, 1979), p. 3.
- [2] 'The new place was all idea, if you like; it was generated out of my experience of the old place but it was not a topographical location. It was and remains an imagined realm, even if it can be located at an earthly spot, a placeless heaven rather than a heavenly place': Seamus Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue* (Faber and Faber, 1988), p. 4.
- [3] Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (Pion, 1976), p. 141.
- [4] Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place*, p. 4.
- [5] Ramesh Dhussa, 'Phenomenology of Place: An Inquiry in Indian Cultural Context—Case of Delhi', in *The Spirit and Power of Place, Human Environment and Sacrality*, ed. Rania P. B. Singh (Mumbai, National Geographical Society of India, 1993).
- [6] Isobel Ní Riain, 'The Literary Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft in the Poetry of Máirtín O Direáin', in *L'Irlande, Imaginaire Représentation*, ed. Godeleine Logez-Carpentier (Lille, Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches Irlandaises de l'Université de Lille, 1997); and Isobel Ní Riain, 'Máirtín O Direáin—Oileánach agus Fear Cathrach', unpublished PhD thesis, University College Cork, 1994.
- [7] *Tacar Dánta*, selected and translated by Tomás Mac Siomóin and Douglas Sealy (Goldsmith Press, 1984), p. 13.
- [8] *Tacar Dánta*, p. 15.
- [9] Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, p. 39.
- [10] J. Douglas Porteous, 'Home: The Territorial Core', *The Geographical Review* vol. LXVI, no. 4 (1976), p. 390.
- [11] In *On the Way to Language*, Martin Heidegger (Harper & Row, 1971), p. 60.
- [12] *Tacar Dánta*, p. 121.
- [13] *Tacar Dánta*, p. 107.
- [14] Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values* (Prentice-Hall, 1974), pp. 118, 120.
- [15] Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Polity Press, 1998), p. 180.

- [16] *Tacar Dánta*, p. 11.
- [17] *Tacar Dánta*, p. 73.
- [18] Quoted in *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard (Orion Press, 1964), p. 101. Originally in *L'Oiseau*, Jules Michelet, 4th edn (Hatchet, 1858), p. 208.
- [19] *Tacar Dánta*, p. 37.
- [20] Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, p. 31.
- [21] Massey, *Space, Place and Gender*, p. 5.
- [22] *Dánta 1939–1979*, ed. Eoghan O hAnluain (Cork, An Clóchomhar Tta., 1980), p. 153 (my translation).

