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## Chapter Nine

### The corncrake, the climate crisis and Irish-language poetry

Ailbhe Ní Ghearbhuigh

An RTÉ news report in July 2020 described the efforts of Feargal Ó Cuinneagáin to create a hospitable habitat for the corncrake on the Mullet peninsula in Co. Mayo. Formerly a common summer visitor, the number of corncrakes in Ireland has dramatically declined over the past 100 years, and the bird is now threatened with global extinction. This is largely due to changes in farming practices which have resulted in the destruction of the corncrake's nest and habitat (BirdWatch Ireland 2021). Explaining his endeavours, Ó Cuinneagáin remarks:

They are an intrinsic part of the culture of rural Ireland especially along the western seaboard. If you lost the corncrake, it's not just losing a species, it's part of the culture as well. The corncrake is mostly confined to the Gaeltacht areas [...] It's a real bird of the Gaeltacht. Where the Irish language persists, you have corncrakes. They go together. (Manion 2020)

It is a striking analogy: the endangered corncrake and the endangered language of the Gaeltacht. A 2015 report, commissioned by Údarás na Gaeltachta on the viability of Irish as the spoken language of the community in the Gaeltacht, makes for alarming reading (Ó Giollagáin & Charleton 2015). Put simply 'the Gaeltacht as a linguistic entity is in crisis and struggling with the pressure of an advanced stage of language shift' (Ó Giollagáin & Mac Donnacha 2008, 118). Extinction, though primarily an ecological phenomenon, can also be used in a metaphorical sense to convey the 'death' of a language: 'the biological metaphor of extinction especially is frequently invoked to describe language shift; the process whereby, in

a bilingual community, one language gains precedence over and eventually supplants the other, so that the community comes to use only one language' (Ó Laoire 2018, 113). It is against this backdrop that certain critics have posited a correlation between the environmental threats posed by humans, and the decline of the Irish language (Denvir 2018; Ó Laoire 2018).

In his dual-language essays *An Ghaeilge agus an Éiceolaíocht / Irish and Ecology* (2019), Michael Cronin contends that the language issue is fundamentally an ecological one, a view that will inform the discussion of Irish-language poetry below. Cronin's approach tends to be 'ecolinguistic rather than ecological', as Daniela Theinová has observed, in that he writes about the climate to highlight the urgency of the language issue, rather than the inverse (Theinová 2020, 30); however, this is not to detract from the 'valuable conceptual apparatus' provided therein (Nic Eoin 2020a, 11). Given the dearth of scholarly material that addresses the relationship between the Irish language and ecology, this essay will use Cronin's book (2019) as a key text.

In pointing to the significance of ecological knowledge available in 'small' languages, Cronin draws on the work of Russ Rymer on the predicament of endangered tongues:

Small languages, more than large ones, provide keys to unlock the secrets of nature, because their speakers tend to live in proximity to the animals and plants around them, and their talk reflects the distinctions they observe. When small communities abandon their languages and switch to English or Spanish, there is a massive disruption in the transfer of traditional knowledge across generations – about medicinal plants, food cultivation, irrigation techniques, navigation systems, seasonal calendar. (Rymer 2012; cited in Cronin 2019, 20)

In considering the Gaeltacht as a fragile ecosystem, heightened by the precarity of Irish as a community language, this essay explores how contemporary Gaeltacht poets engage with the climate crisis at both local and global levels. It will discuss how some poets link the notion of environmental extinction with the threat of extinction of the Irish language in the Gaeltacht. Under discussion will be poems by Pádhraic Ó Finneadha and Jackie Mac Donncha from the Conamara Gaeltacht; Máire Dinny Wren and Proinsias Mac a'Bhaird of the Donegal Gaeltacht; and Bríd Ní Mhóráin and Simon Ó Faoláin who live in the West Kerry Gaeltacht of Corca Dhuibhne. Although reasonably well-known as poets within the Irish-language literary milieu, their work has not received much academic attention to date, nor has their work been widely translated to English. All English translations in this essay are literal renderings by the author for the purpose of the discussion.

In approaching the work of these poets from an ecological perspective, it is important to acknowledge Lillis Ó Laoire's ecocritical analysis (2018) of Cathal Ó Searcaigh's poem 'Scrúdú Coinsiasa Roimh Dhul Chun Suain', a poem which is itself a meditation on the killing of a corncrake. Ó Laoire's accomplished treatment of Ó Searcaigh's poem reveals it to be 'a call for an end to an anthropocentric Cartesian ecology based on patriarchal values', and an appeal for an holistic, ethical approach to all life (Ó Laoire 2018, 118). His work demonstrates the rich discursive potential of the intersection between minoritized literature and ecocriticism.

Significantly, the corncrake analogy also features in the Irish-language poet Biddy Jenkinson's letter to the editor of *Irish University Review*, in which she outlines her views on translation to English:

I prefer not to be translated into English in Ireland. It is a small rude gesture to those who think that everything can be harvested and stored without loss in an English-speaking Ireland. If I were a corncrake I would feel no obligation to have my skin cured, my tarsi injected with formalin so that I could fill a museum shelf in a world that saw no need for my kind. (Jenkinson 1991, 34)

While acknowledging the power-disparity between the Irish and English languages in Ireland, Jenkinson displays a defiant commitment to personal convictions, and a ‘necessary admonishment to those who pay lip-service to the Irish language’ (Carson 2008, 19). Her rejection of the idea that the Irish language is a natural resource from which riches can be extracted, closely corresponds to the ecocritical reading of the poems that follow.

In the first of the poems under consideration, the fate of the Irish language is tied to that of the corncrake in Pádhraic Ó Finneadha’s poem ‘Don Traonach’ (‘To The Corncrake’). The poet recalls the bird’s sweet, rasping call as it harmonised with the music of a scythe being whetted on its sharpening stone. A mower with a scythe, of course, progressed slowly, allowing the corncrake ample opportunity to move on to another meadow unharmed. The past relationship between corncrake and farmer is depicted as one of mutual understanding: the bird paid little heed to the farmer, safe in the knowledge that the farmer respected the corncrake and was considerate of its nesting places. This concept of cohabitation, of human and animal sharing the land is, of course, fundamental to ecological thought. The poet takes note however, that farming practices have changed over time, the rasp of scythe and sharpening stone is no longer to be heard. It has been replaced by the roaring of the machinery that not only drowns out the corncrake’s song, but destroys its habitat: ‘búireach

an innill bhradaigh / ag plúchadh scread d'éagoine' ('The roaring of the plundering engine / smothers your lamenting cry'). There is an unmistakable violence in the words 'plúchadh' (smother) and 'scread' (scream), and the adjective 'bradach' describing the engine conveys a visceral sense of trespass or plunder. The corncrake's nest and eggs, and the future they embody, are now destroyed. The poet empathises with the bird:

A thraonaigh chaoin, is trua liom do chás,  
'gus is rómhaith mar a thuigim duit,  
mar is amhlaidh 'n scéal le glór na nGael,  
is tá imeacht as i léas an dóchais. (Ó Finneadha 2020)

(O gentle corncrake, I feel for you / and understand your plight / because it's like that of the  
Gaels / whose voice is vanishing in a ray of hope.)

The poet, then, draws a comparison between the silencing of the corncrake and the silencing of the Irish language; both disappear in a 'léas an dóchais', a ray of hope. The poem, like many in the oral tradition, concludes on an optimistic note, the poet hopeful that his prayers will result in the joyous return of the corncrake to the grasslands, accompanied by the music of his community's (Irish) language. Neither corncrake nor language, however, can be sustained on goodwill.

Ó Finneadha writes 'in the traditional style' (Duais de hÍde 2018), and is a grandson of Pádhraic Learaí Ó Finneadha (1886-1957) and a nephew of Learaí Phádhraic Learaí Ó Finneadha (1932-1999), both poets of the oral tradition in Conamara. The latter is discussed by the critic Gearóid Denvir in term of the 'ecopoetics' evident in his work, which 'protest[s]

against the destruction of the Irish countryside as well as the slow death of the Irish language’ (Denvir 2018, 99). It could be said of Pádhraic Ó Finneadha’s writing today, that he is, like his ancestors before him, continuing ‘a hereditary, traditional craft’ (Denvir 2018, 100). Although Ó Finneadha has yet to publish a full collection, the poems available are written in the song metre prevalent in the oral tradition of Conamara, and correspond thematically to the work of his uncle, particularly the treatment the devastation of the Irish landscape.

Jackie Mac Donncha, from Cill Chiaráin in Conamara, has published one full-length collection of poetry to date, *Gainneamh Séidte* (2003), and although certain poems conform to the song metre of the oral tradition, his work is perhaps more indebted to the taut succinctness of Máirtín Ó Direáin.<sup>1</sup> This terse mode of expression is exemplified in ‘Fainic’ (‘Beware’) (Mac Donncha 2003, 14), which is of interest to the current discussion on the corncrake. This poem is addressed to an unnamed returning visitor, almost certainly the swallow. The poet refers to himself as an ‘Eoghainín’ awaiting the birds’ return, an allusion to the short story by Pádraig Mac Piarais, entitled ‘Eoghinín na nÉan’ (‘Eoineen of the Birds’), in which the spirits of an ill boy are lifted by the returning swallows. Like the relationship between the farmer and corncrake in Ó Finneadha’s poem, there is a tenderness in the rapport here between human and bird. Nevertheless, the poet issues a stern warning to the flying swallow not to alight on the earth in order to ensure survival into next year. To emphasise the gravity of his warning, the poem ends with the knowing, pithy phrase: ‘Tá’s agatsa / céard a tharla / don traonach’ (‘You know / what happened / to the corncrake’.). The poet’s joy at seeing the swallows return is tempered by the knowledge that the environment is no longer hospitable to its kind.

The poem's overall message, then, is less a celebration of the returning swallow, and more a stark reminder of the corncrake's extinction in Conamara. This could be read as a rejection of the romantic vision of Conamara, of what John Elder has noted in the context of Irish literature in English as the 'escape from the elegiac mode' (Elder 2010, 1). Yet, any reading of work in Irish must recognise the Gaelic tradition as distinct from that of the English language in Ireland. The intimate relationship between language and landscape is central to the work of the Gaeltacht poets under discussion here. Angela Bourke and Diane Negra's observations about this connection can further elucidate the work of Ó Finneadha and Mac Donncha:

The natural environment of most Gaeltacht areas includes large uncultivated areas whose dramatic scenery reflects fragile ecosystems of mountain, bog, lake and seashore, often home to rare species of animal and plant life, where damage to one element can have far-reaching consequences for all. The cultural ecosystem encoded in the Irish language is similarly unique in global terms, and similarly fragile. (Bourke and Negra 2019, 9)

The interconnectedness of everything on the earth, of the interdependence between people and the environment, is a cornerstone of ecological thinking. This understanding is reflected in the Gaelic tradition, whereby the goddess of the land granted sovereignty to the rightful king (Mac Cana 1955). The fecundity of the land, and even the weather, is determined by this alliance between ruler and the natural world. Máire Ní Annracháin has recently explored this interdependence of the land and the people in the work of canonical Irish-language poets, such as Seán Ó Ríordáin and Máirtín Ó Direáin, among others (2020). This interrelatedness underpins Bríd Ní Mhóráin's poem, 'Slabhra na Beatha' (The Chain of Life) which was

published in May 2020 and refers to the Covid-19 pandemic. It echoes the poetic form seen in Martin Niemöller's 'First they came...', which is itself an admonishment of passivity in the face of the Holocaust and an acknowledgement of neglected responsibility.<sup>2</sup> Ní Mhóráin's poem opens with the silencing of certain birds, including the corncrake:

Nuair a tháinig tost ar ghlór na fuiseoige,  
an traona, an chuirliúin dúchais;  
Ní dúramar faic. (Ní Mhóráin 2020, 26)

(When silence befell the voice of the skylark, / the corncrake, the native curlew; / We said nothing.)

In using this famous confessional form, Ní Mhóráin points to the potential for catastrophe posed by indifference, and suggests that inaction is a form of complacency. The first-person plural form encompasses poet and reader and society in general. When the music of the whales is hushed, their stomachs full of plastic, this, too is met with apathy. When the bees and their humming disappear, 'we' paid little attention. When throngs began to die in Wuhan, 'we' heard the rumours and when it spread to Lombardy, 'we listened' to the statistics. However, this act of listening, of paying attention, is only the first step on the road from passivity to action. The poem concludes with a sense of futility, as the scourge now knocks on the door of the people of Ireland, while 'we' are locked inside: 'Éistimid le glórtha na gcomharsan sa chiúnas' (We listen to the voices of our neighbours in silence). This silence could be read as the diminishing voices of the neighbours, or as a depiction of fearfulness and alarm, as the extent of the pandemic became apparent in March / April 2020 when this poem

was written. The ‘silence’ of the last line is also linked to the silencing of the natural world, of the birds and whales and bees.

Ní Mhóráin’s poem can be read as an extension of the aforementioned motif found in Gaelic literature whereby disorder in the natural world is a sign of turmoil or impending doom for the community. ‘Slabhra na Beatha’ could also be considered as a continuation of Seán Ó Ríordáin’s appeal against apathy, ‘Ní Ceadmhach Neamhshuim’ (Ó Ríordáin 1971, 40), translated by Peter Sirr as ‘Against Indifference’ (Ó Ríordáin 2014, 181). The scholar Máirín Nic Eoin posits that Ó Ríordáin’s poem ‘prefigures contemporary ecological concerns as it entreats us to be mindful of non-human as well as human life’, reading it as ‘an exhortation to direct our capacity for loving and compassionate contemplation to the planet in all its aspects’ (Nic Eoin 2020b).

While Ní Mhóráin adopted a European confessional form for her ecopoem, Donegal poet Máire Dinny Wren borrows from the famous 18<sup>th</sup> century song ‘Cill Chais’ (Ó Tuama & Kinsella 2002, 328) for her own poem on the climate crisis, ‘Cad a dhéanfaimid feasta’ (Wren 2019, 16-17). It is an apt choice, given that, as Lillis Ó Laoire surmises:

environmental change is marked in Gaelic poetry as a passing of the aristocratic order, patrons of poetry, song and dance, supporters of the poor, and crucially from the present point of view, careful stewards of their lands. The landscape in the song “Cill Chais” is utterly transformed. The song’s famous opening lines, ‘Cad a dhéanfaimid feasta gan adhmaid?, tá deireadh na gcoillte ar lár / What shall we do without timber?, the last of the woods is gone’, lament the complete razing of the forests by the new

invaders and how the environment has been utterly transmuted as a result. (Ó Laoire 2018, 128)

Wren's remodelling of 'Cill Chais' draws attention to the impact of the destruction of the rain forests on the quality of air. The idea of interdependency is prevalent here, too: the cities are choked and polluted ('tachta is truaillithe') and there is a strange or alien silence in the countryside ('is tá ciúnas coimhthíoch fán tuath'). In the course of several verses, she describes the effects of these changes on wildlife such as the red deer, the fox, the hedgehog, birds, fish and earthworms, while the last verse reveals the benefactors of deforestation as 'lucht an rachmais', the wealthy class. What begins as an echo of an 18<sup>th</sup> century song ends up as a plea against the commodification of natural resources.

Both the original song, 'Cill Chais', and Wren's 21<sup>st</sup>-century rendering of it bring to mind the notion of 'sacrifice zones' as understood in the discourse around environmental justice.

Invoking Naomi Klein, Cronin states that Gaeltacht areas in Ireland often 'functioned as our own sacrifice zones, less because they had to play handmaid to extractivist industries, with the exception of the Shell pipeline in Rossport, Co. Mayo, and more because they were places "where residents lacked political power, usually having to do with some combination of race, language, and class"' (Cronin 2019, 13).

Proinsias Mac a'Bhaird, a native of the Árann Mhór island Gaeltacht, touches on this concept of extractivism in relation to the Gaeltacht in his bitter poem 'Langán' (Mac a'Bhaird 2010, 59). The word 'langán' can be translated as unwanted remnants, literally 'the discarded portion of seed-potato'. The poem describes how various parties traipse to the Gaeltacht, each aiming to extract all they can from the community. Among these uninvited visitors are Raidió

na Gaeltachta (the Irish-language radio station of the state broadcaster, RTÉ), the Folklore Commission, and a whole host of ‘caomhnóirí is coinnitheoirí, / conraitheoirí is coláisteoirí’ – protectors and preservationists, Gaelic Leaguers and ‘Irish-College’ students. These organisations scrounge and haggle (‘ag stocaireacht is ag mangaireacht’), collecting ‘a cuid scoilteán’ (seed-potatoes). Mac a’Bhaird depicts the Gaeltacht, a feminine noun in Irish, as an exploited female repository. The personified Gaeltacht responds to her despoilers: ‘Fuist, a deir sí / fág agam scéal nó dhó / a ghiorraíos aistear na huaighe domh’ (Hush, she says / leave me a story or two / to shorten my journey to the grave). The inevitable demise of the Gaeltacht seems to be hastened by outside factors, particularly by an extractivist attitude that strips her not only of her natural but also of her cultural resources.

This anxiety about the future of the Irish-speaking community of Árann Mhór is again explored in ‘Creimeadh’ (Mac a’Bhaird 2010, 23), in which the natural erosion of the island’s coastline is linked to its dwindling population. The shoreline is slowly being eroded with each wave; each gale is eroding the mountain bog, revealing its vulnerable core or ‘heart’ (‘nochtar croí / an tsléibhe’). Every death on the island devastates the diminished community:

Le achan tórramh  
cois cladaigh  
cealaítear giota beag eile  
d’anam an oileáin. (Mac a’Bhaird 2010, 23)

(with every funeral / by the seashore / another little bit of / the island’s soul / is consumed.)

Seán Ó Tuama's assessment on the importance of place to Irish writers is certainly borne out in these lines: 'the importance of community supplants the importance of place; to put it in another way, place becomes a community, community place' (Ó Tuama 1995, 262). Also relevant is Cronin's reflection on the neglect of severe erosion of the Irish coastline in the contemporary moment: 'although much attention has been focused on territorial issues around Brexit, there is a startling lack of attention to the ecological dimension to sovereignty' (Cronin 2019, 69). He suggests the need to revisit the link between territory and sovereignty, referencing Bruno Latour's concept of *souveraineté partagée* (Latour 2015, 358, cited in Cronin 2019, 69) which he reads as 'power-sharing in the sense where we look at non-human agents (water / temperature / soil) as constituent parts of our common world' (Cronin 2019, 69).

This sense of 'power-sharing' informs 'Ar an Chladach Dhearóil' (On the Wretched Shore) (Wren 2019, 12) by Máire Dinny Wren, in which water pollution is told in a series of memories of an imagined fish. The poem alternates between memory and absence of memory in which the fish recalls 'Is cuimhin liom' (I remember), or fails to recall 'Ní cuimhin liom' (I don't remember). This approach portrays the gradual process of water pollution, as the fish, due to the ingestion of microplastics, declines in health and is finally deformed. This process of degeneration is interspersed with happier memories of swimming in the mouth of a harbour, in the riverbed, of 'fiadhúlra muirí' (marine wildlife). The final stanza finds the fish swimming among pieces of plastic, 'mo chineál á ndíobhadh ag an chine dhaonna, / ár gcnámha scaiptha ar an chladach dhearóil' (my kind being driven to extinction by the human race, / our bones scattered on the wretched shore.) The poem, while flirting with didacticism, is a powerful outcry against ecological catastrophe. The subject is clearly of immense

importance to the poet, given that it is the opening poem in her collection *Tine Ghealáin* (2019).

Of all the contemporary poets writing in Irish today, Simon Ó Faoláin is perhaps most attuned to the climate crisis. Born in Dublin, Ó Faoláin was raised and now lives again in West Kerry Gaeltacht of Corca Dhuibhne. He worked for a time as an archaeologist, a career that perhaps sensitized him to ecological issues. Archaeological work, after all, cannot be carried out without collateral environmental damage to the site being excavated. His poetry reveals a deep attentiveness about the changes he witnesses in his immediate environment, and an intense anxiety about the state of the global environment. Lawrence Buell's description of 'environmentally orientated work' certainly applies to Ó Faoláin's poetry in that it demonstrates an understanding that human interest is not the only legitimate interest, as it considers human accountability to the environment, and exhibits an awareness of the environment as a process rather than a constant (Buell 1995, 182).

'Imeacht le Sruth' reflects on the changes in the Milltown River where the poem speaker is fishing, or attempting to do so: 'D'ainneoin fán fada ar an bport / Is beag breac atá ann' (Despite a long wander on the bank / there are few fish) (Ó Faoláin 2011, 25). The river has been depopulated by 'slad sruthlíonta' (the plunder of drift-nets) beyond the bay, 'truailliú cogarnach ag síorshileadh' (conspiring pollution constantly trickling), 'Bualtach scaipthe roimh bhailc báistí (the spreading of cow manure before a downpour of rain). Once, enormous salmon could be seen shimmering in its depths: 'Ríoga, bródúil as cumhacht gheal / I ndaingean diamhair donn-uisceach' (Regal, proud of their bright strength / in the mysterious brown-water fortress). Due to human transgression, the river is now only a 'fásach fliuch', a wet wasteland or desert. As the speaker reels in his fishing line, his thoughts

turn to the ancient annals of the monks in which they describe the mysteries of climate and nature, such as blood-red rain, glens choked with acorns and towers of fire floating in the air. The speaker wonders how long it will be before his own descriptions of the natural world will become equally unintelligible, before his references to ‘anam-cheol loin, shain-eitilt seabhaic’ (the soul-music of the blackbird, the glide-flight of a hawk), or the salmon in Milltown’s River will become a foolish old man’s babble that will send the eyes of youth rolling towards heaven.

The poem was written in memory of Ted Hughes, a noted naturalist and fisherman-poet. In an interview published posthumously in *The Guardian*, Hughes declared: ‘any kind of fishing provides that connection with the whole living world. It gives you the opportunity of being totally immersed, turning back into yourself in a good way. A form of meditation, communion with levels of yourself that are deeper than the ordinary self’ (Hughes 1999). Ó Faoláin’s fishing poem engages in such meditation, as the speaker considers the changing river, and the role of humans in its decline. ‘Ag Imeacht le Sruth’, it should be noted, could be literally translated as ‘to go with the flow’, but the idiomatic meaning is closer to ‘to go down the drain’.

In the Gaelic tradition, the poet was often considered to be endowed with the gift of prophecy, and it was often through dreams such prophetic visions were thought to manifest (Ó hÓgáin 1982, 271-274). In the poem ‘Fís ag Liónadh’ (‘A Vision Overflowing’) (Ó Faoláin 2014, 31), Ó Faoláin alludes to this tradition. The poem describes a vision of torrential rainfall, reminiscent perhaps of the extreme weather events chronicled by the monks in ‘Ag Imeacht le Sruth’. The rain falls on ‘suitable, welcoming’ ground to such an extent that a ‘machaire mór méith uisce’ is formed, a ‘fertile plain of water’. The downpour

continues ‘without mercy’, creating a temporary grave for the living. The deluge takes land by force (‘mar fhearann creiche’), flooding the habitat of the badger and stoat, hedgehog, deer, goat, hare, squirrel both red and grey. All these species seem to have vanished without a trace. The extent of the flooding is hauntingly illustrated by the image of an eel coiled in a rabbit hole. In the final stanza, people begin to carefully make their way out in small boats and *naomhóga*. They steer their vessels lightly, careful to avoid disturbing the water for fear of what they might see in its depths:

Óir tá an scéal amuigh ó mhaidin

Go bhfuil a gceannaithe siúd nach maireann

Le feiscint beo ar bharr na díleann

Sna tuile-thailte mar a mbaintear fómhar taibhreamh. (Ó Faoláin 2014, 31)

(Because the story is out since morning / that the heads of the perished / can be seen on the crest of the deluge / In the flood-lands where revelations are harvested)

Here the poet ably adapts to the role of ‘seer’, delivering a nightmare vision of rising water levels, a powerful warning of what the climate crisis may have in store. Each stanza ends with the line ‘Tuile-thailte mar a mbaintear fómhar taibhreamh’ (Flood-lands where revelations are harvested), building a sense of urgency and impending doom.

‘Tearmann’ (Refuge) features a foretelling of a more playful, tongue-in-cheek kind. When the poem’s speaker sees a new sign for a ‘Seal and Wildlife Sanctuary’, it occurs to him that some apocalyptic prophecy is being fulfilled:

Áitreabhaigh iomadúla

Farraige fairsinge,

Ruachnoic is dlúthcoille

Tagaithe ag éileamh

Áite ar chúl scéithe

A namhaid sinseartha. (Ó Faoláin 2011, 14)

(the numerous / various inhabitants / of the vast seas / russet hills and dense woods / have  
come forthrightly / demanding the dominion / of their ancient enemies.)

This often-antagonistic relationship between wildlife and their human ‘enemies’ is explored in Ó Faoláin’s animal poems ‘Tyger’ (Ó Faoláin 2011, 45) and ‘Scannán: an Thylacine deireanach, 1933’ (Ó Faoláin 2011, 55). The former, prompted by reading that the tiger population in India had fallen below 1,000, describes how the forest at night is rendered bleak in the absence of ‘bright-burning’ creatures weaving among the trees. Ó Faoláin’s Blakeian ‘tyger’ is left with nothing to fear but us (‘sinne’). The poet asks who will save the animal – and us – from our plunder, our ferocity, our own sense of being made in God’s image (‘ónár ndéantús-in-íomhá-Dé’). The poem concludes by acknowledging the human traits that have been detrimental to the tiger’s survival:

Ó dhubhdhraíocht ár n-inneall,

Óna n-inchinn réamhstairiúil

Ó neamhshiméadracht scanrúil? (Ó Faoláin 2011, 45)

(‘From the dark magic of our engines / From our prehistoric brain / From fearful asymmetry?’)

The last line is a distorted echo of Blake’s line, ‘Dare frame thy fearful symmetry’, evoking perhaps man’s ‘unnatural’ behaviour towards the tiger. The references to the industrial age (‘our engines’) and our ‘prehistoric brain’ are particularly striking when considered in the context of John Berger’s essay ‘Why Look at Animals’ (1980). He suggests that the first metaphor was animal and that the combined forces of industrialisation, urbanisation and late capitalism have ruptured our intimate relationship with the natural world (O’Connor 2010, 152).

The poem, ‘Scannán: an Thylacine deireanach, 1933’ (‘Film: the last Thylacine, 1933’), responds to footage of the marsupial sometimes known as the Tasmanian Tiger. The short clip shows the last known thylacine who would die in captivity in Hobart Zoo in 1936. The poem alludes to the creature’s unnatural incarcerated state, while also describing the movements of the animal as it licks its fur, smells the air, yawns.

Ó Faoláin, it should be noted, presents the thylacine as female, and thus, it is tempting to imagine the animal as a symbol for the Irish language, which is itself a female noun in Irish. This reading, however, would overlook its engagement with the global climate crisis.

The thylacine, as Ó Faoláin presents it, has no understanding of her predicament and hence no desire to mourn or be mourned. This is emphasised by the lines ‘Ní thuigeann a dán’ (She knows not her destiny), and ‘Ní chaoineann a cás’ (She does not weep for herself), which are repeated throughout this tightly structured villanelle. Ó Faoláin references the idiomatic

phrase, Oisín i ndiaidh na Féinne’, which describes how the legendary Oisín, on his return from the Land of Eternal Youth, was bereft to find his former companions long-since dead. The thylacine, like Oisín, is the last of her kind. However, her incomprehension and lack of self-pity make her quite ‘unlike’ the legendary hero. The poet’s own grief and despair at the animal’s plight builds to a crescendo that culminates in the villanelle’s final four-lined stanza:

An bhfuil taibhsí na sinsear

Díomách féna sliochtach

Nach dtuigeann a dán

Is nach gcaoineann a bás? (Ó Faoláin 2011, 55)

(Are the spirits of the ancestors / Disappointed in its descendant / Who does not realise her destiny / Who does not weep for herself?)

Of course, this last stanza ostensibly refers to the thylacine, but it could also be read as humanity’s own relentless march towards annihilation as it blindly ignores the climate crisis.

Ó Faoláin, as noted above, highlighted the captive state of the thylacine. In this context, it is worthwhile to consider John Berger’s comments on zoos and on the altered relationship between animal and man:

The zoo cannot but disappoint. The public purpose of zoos is to offer visitors the opportunity of looking at animals. Yet nowhere in a zoo can a stranger encounter the look of an animal. [...] Therein lies the ultimate consequence of their marginalisation. That look between animal and man, which may have played a crucial role in the

development of human society, and which, in any case, all men had always lived until less than a century ago, has been extinguished. [...] This historic loss, to which zoos are a monument, is now irredeemable for the culture of capitalism. (Berger 1980, 28)

Many of Ó Faoláin's ecopoems mourn this loss of kinship or rapport with animals or express anxiety about the changes in the environment. The vivid images in 'Kinesis', for example acknowledge how the natural world is in flux, and the precariousness of these changes: 'Níl rud dá bhfuil ann socair / Tá chuile rud ar tinneall / Nó cheana féin ar mire. // I log ag snámh go fann / Tá bóin samhraidh ann / Is n'fheadar an dtiocfaidh as' (Nothing in existence is settled / Everything is on edge / Or already in a frenzy // In a pool of water feebly swimming / is a ladybird / I'm unsure if it will survive.) This struggle for survival is central to Ó Faoláin's work.

It would be misleading to suggest that the work of Gaeltacht poets always neatly aligns with the values of mainstream environmentalism. Jackie Mac Donncha's view of the peatlands, for example, would not be shared by many conservationists. In 'Teaspach' (Mac Donncha 2003, 17), the poet contends that the practice of turf-cutting brings no significant degradation to the peatland bog. This, Mac Donncha contends, is due to the turf-cutter's expertise: 'Tá an sleánadóir paiteanta' (The turf-cutter is exact). He describes how the scraw that is cut from the turf-bank is placed on the cut-away bog where it continues to grow, thereby replenishing the bog's resource: 'Ní fhaigheann sí bás / ach fásann / mar a bhí ar an mbruach' (It does not die but grows as it did on the turf-bank.) Turf, it should be noted, has long been a traditional domestic fuel, and Mac Donncha describes how the turf-cutter triumphantly brings home 'a year's worth of central heating'. The poet insists that the turf-cutter's instinct and expertise of will ensure the preservation of the resource for future generations.

Cheryll Glotfelty's describes ecocriticism as an approach that 'takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature. As a crucial stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on the land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman' (Glotfelty 1996, xix). It is quite surprising therefore, that it is not used more often as a lens through which to view literature in Irish, particularly given the 'repeated and systematic engagement with the non-human world' (Cronin 2019, 17) in Irish folklore and mythology, a well of inspiration upon which so many modern writers draw. Similarly, the significance of placenames in the Irish context could be explored in from an ecocritical perspective, given that they are at the interface 'between nature and culture', as the work of Tim Robinson has illustrated. Lillis Ó Laoire has pointed out that American ecocriticism has been slow to address the ecolinguistic dimension of American Indian perspectives (Ó Laoire 2018, 113).

Ecocriticism, in the Irish context, could do a lot more to incorporate the literature and culture of the Irish language. Eóin Flannery's book *Ireland and Ecocriticism: Literature, History and Environmental Justice* (2015), for example, does not address any Irish-language writer. *From Ego to Eco: Mapping Shifts from Anthropocentrism to Ecocentrism* contains two valuable contributions to the Irish-language dimension of the topic by Lillis Ó Laoire and Gearóid Denvir (2018). Daniela Theinová is among the few critics to date to use an ecocritical approach to contemporary Irish-language poetry, and the threats posed by the Anthropocene to the minoritized language (Theinová 2020). Noteworthy, too is Máire Ní Annracháin's considered essay on the *comhbhá on dúlra* trope in modern poetry (2020). There is certainly scope for further engagement across the entire historic Gaelic tradition,

building on the 2017 published volume of the *Léachtaí Cholm Cille* series, *An Éiceolaíocht i dTraidisiún na Gaeilge*. It is hoped that the present essay, by delineating Gaeltacht poets' engagement with the climate crisis at local and global levels, will contribute to this burgeoning area of study in Irish-language literature while demonstrating the value of considering marginalised voices in the field of ecocriticism.

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<sup>1</sup> For an account of nature in Máirtín Ó Direáin's poetry, see Máire Ní Annracháin's essay (2020): 'Seeing the natural world: Comhbhá an Dúlra', in *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy: Archaeology, Culture, History, Literature*, Vol. 120C, 349-364.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the various versions of Niemöller's text and the issue of reception, see Marcuse, Harold (2016) 'The Origin and Reception of Martine Niemöller's Quotation, "First they came for the communists..."', in Berenbaum, Michael, Libowitz, Richard and Sachs Littell, Marcia (eds), *Remembering for the Future: Armenia, Auschwitz, and Beyond*. St Paul, Minnesota: Paragon House, 173-200.