

Nature as Listener and Consoler in Post-Classical Irish Poetry

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Introduction

From earliest medieval times the land and nature are depicted in Irish poetry as the chieftain's spouse, a sovereignty goddess in conjugal relationship with the ruling lord. Much has been written¹ about the many variants of this female personification of the land including studies on the emergence, in the seventeenth century, of imagery portraying Ireland as an unfaithful spouse and neglectful mother, and commentaries on the flowering, in the eighteenth century, of allegorical symbolism in *aisling* poetry which shows *Éire* as a beautiful, but forlorn, wife waiting in hope for the return of her beloved redeemer. While that imagery, which proliferates in the Irish poetic tradition, can never be far away in any discussion of Irish nature poetry, it will not be the focus of this paper. Instead, an attempt will be made to shed light on the relationship between poetic voice and physical environment in the poetry of address and dialogue, where the poets speak, not to a woman personifying the land, but directly to aspects of nature itself. Some representative poems of address will be examined and it will be argued that nature is sometimes presented in seventeenth-century poetry as a distant and only potentially

responsive auditor, while, in the eighteenth century, nature becomes a responding consoler who brings an authoritative message of hope. The textual commentary will be preceded by a broad discussion on the methodological challenges posed by post-classical poetry in Irish for the contemporary critic, and it will suggest a critical framework for examining the role of the natural environment in these poems of address.

Speaking to nature: the aesthetics of apostrophe as a critical framework

Most extant criticism on early post-classical poetry in Irish uses a 'historicist' approach (Dooley, Mac Craith, Caball). While a recent movement against that history-centered approach is gathering momentum, commentators rarely relate post-classical poetry in Irish to contemporary issues. The trend is toward a new form of aestheticism (Barry 299) rather than toward a form of presentism (Barry 291). While discussing an early seventeenth century poem, Pádraig Breatnach, for example, warns, using the words of Paul Zumthor, about 'that vast impassable abyss that divides our modernity from the middle ages' (Breatnach 52). Other critics (Nic Eoin 67) argue that the divide between modernity and post-classical poetry is even greater in Irish than in other traditions since it 'never made the transition to a modern idiom' (Breatnach 51). In attempting to find a methodology that would avoid projecting modern understandings and myths onto post-classical poetry, critics (Breatnach, O Riordan, Whelton) are returning to the texts themselves and especially to the study of their form. This new aestheticism is informed by both rhetorical stylistics and modern theories of figurative language. It is a welcome reaction against the too prevalent historicism of former years and, while it respects the otherness of seventeenth and eighteenth century poetry, at the same time, it acknowledges continuity, on the figurative imaginative level, between

post-classical and modern texts, a continuity to which the modern reader can easily relate. It is, therefore, in tune with the ecocritical enterprise (Barry 259) in two important ways. Firstly, it inspires a real dialogue between the modern reader and the post-classical text and secondly, it acknowledges that our understandings of figures and texts grow as new theories of figurative language emerge. For these reasons, new aestheticism provides an appropriate theoretical framework for this essay. Since the nature poems we will be examining below are in apostrophic form, and have their roots in what was essentially an apostrophic tradition (Leerssen 65, Ní Dhonnchadha 296 and Whelton), our framework requires that we first look to rhetorical theories of style which influenced that tradition, and also, to modern literary theory, to see what they reveal about the apostrophe of nature and its functions.

Both the form and content of Irish poetry began to be influenced in the early medieval period by new teachings about the art of rhetoric which were being propagated on the continent and which were having an impact on other vernacular traditions (O Riordan). In classical rhetoric, apostrophe is the technique by which a poet turns away from his main audience in order to address someone or something else. At first glance the apostrophe of nature would appear to be an ecocentric figure, in that nature is its main focus. Classical rhetoricians,² however, defined apostrophe not in terms of its *destinataire*, but in terms of its utterer. It is widely accepted, in rhetorical writings, that apostrophe presents the speaker as somebody in the grip of emotions and when used correctly, apostrophe awakens sympathy and deep feelings in the reader/audience. This emotive effect has been noted by modern critics as well. Friedrich, for

example, lists apostrophe as one of the tropes of mood and explains that its 'full philosophical and psychological implications are rooted in a speaker's underlying emotions, affects, and feelings' (Friedrich 30-31). Despite this, it would be difficult to read apostrophe as a purely anthropocentric trope as it gives a relational structure to poems, a structure which, unlike third-person narrative and story, shows the speaker processing his feelings and internal dilemmas in a dialogic dynamic.

Jonathan Culler, too, situates apostrophe in the context of communication and relationship, and, at one level, he sees the function of apostrophe as being 'to constitute encounters with the world as relations between subjects' (Culler 141). According to this reading, apostrophe tries to overcome anthropocentrism. The result, however, is not an ecocentrism, but, rather, the presentation of nature as another subject. For Culler, though, apostrophe does not create a simple type of encounter, since the poet may not always be trying to awaken an answer in his *destinataire*, and, sometimes, may even be trying to show to his audience that he has an almost magical power to communicate with the non-human thus drawing attention to his own vocation as poet and prophet rather than to his addressee:

One who successfully invokes nature is one to whom nature might, in its turn, speak ... He makes himself poet, visionary ... If asking winds to blow or seasons to stay their coming or mountains to hear one's cries is a ritualistic, practically gratuitous action, that emphasizes that voice calls in order to be calling, to dramatize its calling, to summon images of its power so as to establish its identity as poetical and prophetic voice (Culler 142).

Like Culler, Furniss and Bath also speak of how 'apostrophe seems to hark back to magic ritual and to primitive ideas that the... non-human can be

contacted, and their aid invoked' (Furniss & Bath 127). There are many examples from the Irish literary tradition which could be cited to evidence the other-worldly liminality associated with the person who addresses nature. In the well-known modern short story, 'Eoghainín na nÉan,' by Pádraig Mac Piarais, for example, we find the terminally ill child – the one who is between life and death – confiding in swallows. The motif of speaking with birds and other animals is common, also, in political songs and in the love-songs of unfulfilled desire. In the famous love-song, 'Dónall Óg' (traditional c.1650-1850), for example, the singer (who, because of her broken heart, is outside of normal everyday life) can access the all-seeing knowledge of birds and animals to confirm that her beloved is as heart-broken as she is herself. It is always a possibility, therefore, that the poet who addresses nature, especially in a culture which looked upon poetry as a supernatural magical practice (Ó hÓgáin), is reinforcing his status as poet and visionary by demonstrating that he can transcend the normal rules of communication.

Some rhetorical works present the apostrophe of nature as a branch of personification and in some treatises it is even called '*prosopopeia*' (Page 461-463). Some modern theorists suggest that apostrophe of the non-human is related to both personification and reification because the poet is given the ability to speak with, and be heard, by nature and, at the same time, nature is given the ability to understand human language (Paxson 52). Apostrophe, therefore, imagines an ontologically different type of world where there is no communicative division between humanity and nature. Of course, it could be argued in this context, that the apostrophe of the non-human draws explicit attention to the fictive nature of poetry

and to the attempt to transcend physical limitations using language. What it professes to do (hold a conversation with nature, a realm normally inaccessible to the human voice) is so illogical and impossible that the reader is immediately aware of its fiction (Culler 146). Apostrophe openly tries to put discursive time, the time of writing (where the impossible can occur) in the place of historical time (which has physical limitations). The non-human is 're-presented' and an effort is made to overcome dumbness using a literary technique which goes beyond personification and tropes on communication itself (Culler 135). One of the insights of contemporary structuralism is that there is always an absence at the heart of ordinary language, caused by the tension between signifier and signified (Ní Annracháin 21, 23). In apostrophe of the non-human, the speaker engages openly with this tension and draws particular attention to the impossibility of language to do anything other than signify that which is, in fact, without human voice. This, of course, as will become apparent below, may account, at least in part, for the emotional intensity of some apostrophic poems.

To summarize this section then, seventeenth-century and eighteenth-century nature poems of address have many immediate predecessors in the highly apostrophic bardic tradition. The literary theory of apostrophe provides, therefore, an excellent backdrop against which their aesthetic meaning may be interpreted. We have seen that the apostrophe of nature may have three different functions. In the next part of this paper, it will become clear that these functions are not mutually exclusive and are, in fact, often closely linked to each other. Sometimes the apostrophe of nature can evoke pathos, at other times it can emphasize the magical power of its utterer to communicate with a realm which is usually outside the reach of human voice. It always seems to constitute some form of

intimate relationship between the poet and his environment, the outcome of which can be to allow the poet to speak, in a confessional way, to his mute listener and also to bestow significant value on the aspect of nature addressed.

Nature as listener: some seventeenth century poems

Historically, the period c.1541-c.1800 is a period of enormous change and societal turbulence in Ireland. Seventeenth century poems, in which nature is apostrophized and cast as listener, are exponents, therefore, of a poetic tradition in transition. While the severing of nature's close association with human cultural activity is lamented in the first poem referred to here below, and while birdsong is presented in the second poem as a poor replacement for the harp-music of bygone times, in both poems, readers overhear the poet as he tries to forge a connection with nature in order to deal with loss. The gulf that has developed between humanity and nature is explored, and the ultimate failure of these life forces to forge a meaningful connection with each other serves to increase the overall sense of grief. The third poem below, is more hopeful and testifies to the yearning relationship which sometimes existed, in the early seventeenth century, between diaspora and homeland. In this case, the landscape of Ireland remains the hoped-for-listener of the exiled poet.

Around the time of the Battle of Kinsale (1601), the poet, Laoiseach Mac an Bhaire, addresses (*a thulach thall* – 'O hill yonder', IBP 10.1) and laments the destruction of a brown thorn (*sgeach dhonn*, IBP 10.3) that once adorned the hillside. The hilltop is referred to as a place of assembly and it is a cause of torment to poets that the hill is now in the possession

of enemies. These references suggest that the hill being addressed was a cultural site, possibly, as Bergin proposes, a site where chieftains were inaugurated. By addressing the site the poet is acknowledging its significance and value as a cultural site, once synonymous with important human activity and 'hallowed by long use' (Ní Dhonnchadha 296). Using apostrophe, the poet speaks from the heart (*Dubhach mo chridhisi um chum / fád bhilisi, a thulach thall* – 'My heart in my breast is sad for thy ancient tree, O hilltop yonder,' IBP 10.9, 10). The apostrophe creates a tenderness and an intimacy between poet and hilltop and the hilltop is presented as alive and listening rather than as deaf and non-human. From the fourth quatrain, however, the poet withdraws from the second person of apostrophe to the third person of description. In the light of insights from apostrophic theory, mentioned above, this movement towards narrative, this unsustained apostrophe, draws attention to the indifference of the poet's chosen confidant. Representing the beloved hilltop as a listener does not restore its former glory. The poet's attempt to overcome cultural absence by forging a bond with a celebrated part of the landscape is unsuccessful. The result is that the emotive effect of the poem is increased and the absence of human listeners, and cultural activity, is poignantly emphasized.

Another anonymous nature poem of address worth mentioning in this context is 'Tuar guil, a cholaim do cheól!'. It was written following the death of Uaithne Ó Lochlainn in 1617. His widow, Fionnghuala, had no children, and therefore, no succession rights. Upon her husband's death, she was required to leave the Ó Lochlainn castle. In the poem the poet addresses a dove as it makes sad music (*a chuilim an cheóil bhrónaig*, ÓTK 11.33) in the empty castle. But, unlike the hilltop in Laoiseach Mac an Bhaird's poem, the dove has no direct metonymic association with the

vacating castle-dweller. The poet considers the birdsong an omen of tears (*tuar guil*, ÓTK 11.1) which has replaced the rapturous sound of both domestic and cultural human activity. The sound the dove makes is only a very faint echo of the sounds that used to resonate within the castle (*An múr 'na aonar a-nocht / 'na gcluinn gáir chrot is chliar* – 'The wall is alone tonight / within which the chant of harps and bards used to be heard,' ÓTK 11.17, 18). As in the first poem, nature is cast in the role of auditor, listening to the poet's lament for a bygone era and to the poet's account of his own grief. The bird is singing but the birdsong is incomprehensible to the poet. He is not sure if his *destinataire* is ignorantly rejoicing (*an é do-bheir meanma ort ag nách éidir cosc do ghlóir?* – 'Is the cause of your joy that you are unable to prevent your voice from singing?,' ÓTK 11.7, 8), or mourning (*Nó an í an chumha dod chrádh?* – 'or does homesickness torment you?,' ÓTK 11.9). He is not even sure of the dove's origin (*Cosmhail nách den tírse thú...* – 'It seems that you are not of this country...,' ÓTK 11.13). The result, again, is that communicating with nature is exposed for what it is – an impossibility. Despite the dialogic form in which the poet constructs his words, with its accompanying notions of reception and potential for response, it is clear, from the content, that a real dialogue cannot take place between poet and dove. This tension between form and content increases the emotive effect of the poem. It shows that, despite the poet's surge toward the only sign of life left in the castle, there remains a gap between speaker and *destinataire* which cannot be overcome, and an awareness that conversation with the dove cannot replace the human voices and conversations of the past. Neither, of course, can the dove empathize with the solitary speaker in his grief. The communicative chasm between

nature and humanity is emphasised and their failure to make contact with each other increases the sense of loss for both communicators.

This same tension, between form and content, is evident in the poem *Truagh an t-amharc-sa, a Éire!* by Giolla Brighde Ó hEoghasa. Ó hEoghasa was a bardic poet who left his first profession in order to become a Franciscan priest. He was ordained in Malines in 1609. In *Truagh an t-amharc-sa, a Éire!* he explores the loneliness of exile. As the poet takes leave of Ireland, he makes the land auditor of his poem. He speaks directly to Ireland's radiant wooded contours, its purple hills and its bright streams but the close association of named chieftains to the land (*a chríoch Laoghuire*, DBM 6.6, *a chríoch Bhriain*, DBM 6.13, *a threabh Chonnla*, DBM 6.49) echoes throughout the poem, and as occurred in Mac an Bhaird's poem above, the beauty of the land as a cultural centre of human artistic activity is indicated. The personification of Ireland as shapely woman is also sometimes made obvious in this poem (*do dhruim dhealaighthe*, DBM 6.4, *do gheilchíoch gcorcra*, DBM 6.43).

From the outset the reader witnesses the speaker's attempt to come to terms with his homesickness. The poet confides in the landscape that he is leaving behind and exposes his feelings of loneliness (*Truagh an t-amharc-sa, a Éire! / rém chroidhe is cúis deirbhéile* – 'This is a sorrowful sight, O Ireland. It is a cause of anguish to my heart,' DBM 6.1-2). The relational structure shows the speaker engaging with and processing his homesickness as he attempts to prolong and sustain a closeness and an intimacy with a place that is fast fading out of sight. Even though he recognizes, in the content of the poem, that there is an ever-increasing distance and a wild rough ocean (*borblonn*, DBM 6.36) between himself and his listener, the communicative form denies the existence of that

distance. Instead, he goes on to confide his feelings of regret to his now unseen and mute listener. He laments that in choosing a new profession over the craft of poetry, he has been compelled to leave his homeland (... *mairg f[h]uair an iomlaoid gceirdi: / rom dheiligh-si rú agus r[u]ibh*, – '... alas that I exchanged it! It has parted me from them and from you,' DBM 6.58-59). He remains hopeful though, and speaks of leaving the precious slopes of the hills of the race of Connla only for a short time (*do shíor uadha ní anfom* – 'I shall not always remain away from them' DBM 6.52).

The poem finishes with the opening apostrophic address (*truagh an t-amharc-sa, a Éire*. DBM 6.68). The speaker's pain has not been resolved at the end, but instead the reader is brought back to the starting point. According to bardic rules for the closing quatrain ('dúnadh') poets were required to finish with one syllable which would echo the opening quatrain. In this poem we find the poet reiterating the first line in its entirety, emphasising that the poet's homesickness and torment is as it was in the opening line. The apostrophic address of the land has allowed the poet to give voice to his pain but it has failed to bring about a resolution. While this poem does not abandon the form of address or question its communicative effectiveness, the return to the opening address brings about a powerful emotive impact. It emphasises that the poet sought verbal intimacy with his native soil but has not yet attained that intimacy. The apostrophe has, so far, been a futile, tormented and solitary attempt to overcome absence. The reality of distance remains unbridged. However, unlike the previous poems, the poet is still trying to forge an intimate relationship with that for which he yearns. Vendler, for example, says that 'intimacy with the invisible is an intimacy with hope'

(Vendler 8). In this poem, both content and form express a vague hope of future homecomings.

Nature as consoler: some Jacobite poems

This tenor of hope is made much more explicit in eighteenth century Jacobite poetry and from c.1690 the exiled Stuart King³ is presented, especially in *aisling* poetry, as the legitimate spouse of Ireland who will return to redeem his beloved. In regard to nature poetry, one of the most interesting occurrences, during the Jacobite era, is the blossoming of consolatory dialogues between the poet and an aspect of nature (a bird or a hill, for example).

The function of dialogue in these poems and the function of dialogue, with the mythological *spéirbhean*, in *aisling* poetry is the same (Ó Buachalla 600) and it differs from the apostrophes, examined above, in two ways. Firstly, these vision-like dialogues occur in a private place, a place to which the audience is not privy, and the poem is an account, or a retelling, of that private dialogue. The result is that the poet is presented as an authoritative, almost druidic, intermediary who can interpret prophetic messages from nature for his audience (Ó Dúshláine 114-129). As mentioned earlier, speaking directly with nature in order to access privileged prophetic information is a common motif in Irish literature. By recounting a dialogue with nature, the poet is emphasising his own priest-like liminality and power to communicate with authentic dependable sources of wisdom. Secondly, these dialogues with nature are a closed form and the speaker and the audience are not left yearning for an answer. Instead, an answer was sought and that answer has been successfully transmitted from an all-knowing natural source. As will become apparent from the three examples which follow, this certainty

reinforces an authoritative hopeful message of consolation about the future (Ó Buachalla 566).

In *Agallamh le Cnoc na Teamhrach* Peadar Ó Doirnín († 1769), like Laoiseach Mac an Bhaired, addresses an important cultural site, the Hill of Tara (*A thulaigh an bhláth' chrín*, ÓD 3.1). In contrast to the seventeenth century poem, this poem is in the form of a dialogue. To begin with, the speaker poses despairing questions (*A thulaigh an bhláth ... / Cá bhfuil na hardrithe ... / Tá do bhunadh fáлта faoin líne ghallta is is éircigh do shlua. – 'O hill of the flower ... / Where are the high-kings ... / Your family are spiritless under the foreign line and your people are heretics, ÓD 3.1-4*). Even though the land of Tara lets us know that it is disappointed about the decline of the Stuart King, the addressee does bring a trustworthy message of consolation and an affirmation of its confidence in the validity of an ancient prophecy (*... má líontar tairngire na naomh ... / a scríobh go dearfa go scriosfaí an dream-sa le Gaeil go buan ... / is nár ba fada an t-am nó go bhfeictear... / ... mo shluaite i dTeamhraigh – '... if the prophesy of the saints ... who wrote positively that that crowd would be permanently destroyed by the Irish ... may it not be long until we see ... my crowds again in Tara,' ÓD 3.21-24*).

Agallamh le héinín, also by Peadar Ó Doirnín, recounts a dialogue which the poet had with a little bird which came from *tulaigh na ruag* to visit Ireland. Again, the bird is questioned about Charles's health and well-being (*... bhfuil Séarlas fá bhua i Londain gan ghruaim...? – 'Is Charles in cheerful mood in London...?', ÓD 5.5*). The bird replies with an

authoritative hopeful answer (... *tá Séarlas slán ...* – ‘Charles is safe ...’, ÓD 5.16).

Seanchas na Sceiche by Antaine Ó Raiftearaí (†1835) also deserves some consideration in this context. The poet recounts a dialogue he has had with an old thorn. The power-play between thorn and poet in this dialogue is interesting. At the beginning of the poem the poet behaves as somebody with the power to curse the *sceach* (*A sheansceach chaite fógraim gráin ort, / nár fhása choíche snua ná bláth ort ...* – ‘O old worn-out thorn I declare hate upon you, may no flower or bloom ever grow upon you ...’, R 46.73-74). Having received a reply from the *sceach*, the speaker takes on the role of supplicant and submits to his magical addressee (*Muise, a sceachín ... snua agus meas ó Rí na nGrásta ort, úllaí, piorraí ort ... agus cuir dom síos in aois do dháta* – ‘Well, o little thorn ... bloom and respect from the King of graces be upon you, apples, pears be upon you ... and tell me your age’, R 46.89-91). The effect of this is that the thorn’s authority as a prophetic source is emphasised: the *sceach* is more authoritative than the poet. As a result, it is easy for the audience to accept the validity of the message of hope and consolation which the thorn proclaims at the end. According to the thorn, God, rather than the Stuart Kings, is the source of hope (*Ná bígí gan misneach i bhfochair a chéile, / is treise le Dia ná leis na Cromwellians ...* – ‘Don’t be without courage in each other’s company, / God is more powerful than the Cromwellians...’, R 46.397-398).

Conclusion

When seventeenth century nature poems of address are examined against the backdrop of apostrophic theory, it becomes clear that Irish language poets hold colloquies with nature in order to signify, and process, their

grief as the world they inhabit begins to change beyond recognition. The pathos of mourning is all the more acute when the apostrophic attempt to forge intimacy with nature fails and the poet is tossed into a state of perpetual yearning and longing to be heard. When the dialogic nature poems of the eighteenth century are assessed within the same framework, it is apparent that poets give nature a very significant role as they move beyond the bardic duty to lament and commemorate in elegiac form, and undertake the role of priest-like comforter. By recounting a magical dialogue with nature, a dialogue which breaks the ordinary rules of communication, they give credence to prophetic messages of hope and, thereby, try to eliminate doubt. In contrast to the agony and unfulfilled striving of the apostrophic voice there is solace and consolation in the answer that comes from nature.

Notes

¹ For a comprehensive synthesis of research on this imagery in the literary tradition see Nic Eoin.

² An overview of apostrophe in classical rhetorical writing is given in Whelton 23-35.

³ The importance of the Stuart kings and their relationship with the Irish learned class has been discussed in detail by Ó Buachalla. It is clear from the poetry of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that James I and James II, as well as their successors and relatives, were accepted as rightful Kings of Ireland.

Abbreviations

DBM = *Dán na mBráthar Mionúr I* (Mhág Craith)

IBP = *Irish bardic poetry* (Bergin)

ÓD = *Peadar Ó Doirnín: a bheatha agus a shaothar* (de Rís)

R = *Raiftearaí: amhráin agus dánta* (Ó Coigligh)

ÓTK = *An duanaire 1600-1900* (Ó Tuama agus Kinsella)

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