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IRISH PASTORAL: NATURE AND NOSTALGIA IN IRISH LITERATURE

by

Oona Frawley

**A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy. The City University of New York**

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Abstract

IRISH PASTORAL: NATURE AND NOSTALGIA IN IRISH LITERATURE

by

Oona Frawley

Advisor: Professor Catherine McKenna

The themes of nature and place in Irish literature have been neglected in critical circles, despite the engagement that Irish authors continue to have with both in their works. While cultural landscape is, of course, significant in the shaping of Irish identities, it is my argument that the actual, physical landscape is of as much significance, in that its presence in literature throws into relief the identities being shaped. Irish literature's keen involvement with nature can be read as a verbal charting of not only the physical but also the social landscape. This dissertation will provide an overview of what I will call "nostalgic nature constructs" in Irish literature: recurring ideas of nature often picked up by subsequent writers, in order to build a continuum of Irish identity through the centuries.

"*Nostalgic nature constructs*", because the Irish literary aesthetic, colored as it is by the "backward look", in Frank O'Connor's phrase, inevitably involves nostalgia. It would not be going too far to argue that Irish literature from the twelfth century on, in its

use of nature, is characterized not by a classical pastoral mode so much as of a nostalgic mode.

As an aesthetic modality, nostalgia centers upon a preservation of the past and the longing for lost culture, as in the case of twelfth Irish literature; by the time we reach the era of the Revival, this nostalgic mode shifts its focus to the preservation of a past that the authors have themselves not experienced; in this sense, by the early modern period, the nostalgic mode has absorbed something more of the traditional pastoral. These developments, to be traced in subsequent chapters, retain certain commonalities: despite the changing representation of nostalgia, landscapes remain the site at which the mode is expressed.

This dissertation will explore the subtle complexities of these changes as they emerge in medieval and early modern Irish literature: the way the medieval Irish nostalgic nature construct takes on more traditional – and romanticized – pastoral forms in the early modern period, and the ways in which a changing representation of nature reflects changing cultural and social landscapes.

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Angus Fletcher's seminars were, for me, sacred, and inspired much of my thinking on Spenser, as well as providing a model for thought and generosity of spirit.

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Introduction:

Nature and Nostalgia in Irish Literature

The themes of nature and place in Irish literature have been surprisingly neglected in critical circles, despite the obvious engagement that Irish authors continue to have with both in their works. While cultural landscape is, of course, significant in the shaping of Irish identities, it is my argument that the actual, physical landscape is of just as much significance, in that its presence in literature throws into relief the identities being shaped. Irish literature's keen involvement with nature, landscape, and man's interaction with that landscape can be read, then, as a verbal charting of not only the physical but also the social landscape.

Read this way, landscape – used throughout this work to represent a general prospect of the natural, physical world in all its guises – is always, as Simon Schama argues, a product of culture:

Landscapes are culture before they are nature: constructs of the imagination projected onto wood and water and rock. . .

But it should also be acknowledged that once a certain idea of landscape, a myth, a vision, establishes itself in an actual place, it has a peculiar way of muddling, categorizing, of making metaphors more real than their referents: of becoming, in fact, part of the scenery. (Schama 61)

Our ideas of landscape, in other words, settle over the land to form fossils in layers of sand and slate. What it is possible to do, then, is to sample the strata, as it were, for an overview of what I will call “nostalgic nature constructs” in Irish literature. These constructs are recurring ideas of nature – which is being used here to describe the external, physical world – often picked up by subsequent writers, in order to build a continuum of Irish identity through the centuries.

“*Nostalgic* nature constructs”, because the Irish literary aesthetic, colored as it is by the “backward look”, in Frank O’Connor’s phrase, inevitably involves nostalgia. It would not be going too far, in fact, to argue that Irish literature from the twelfth century on, in its use of nature, is characterized by use not of a traditional pastoral mode derived from Theocritus and Vergil so much as of a nostalgic mode.¹

The pastoral, as it was developed by Theocritus and Vergil, involves a seeming simplification and idealization of an existence in the natural world against the mostly unwritten background of the court or city. By the time of the Renaissance, when the pastoral bloomed under the twinned suns of Nature and Art, a literary convention had, as Edward Taylor points out, “become the vehicle for philosophic controversy” (Taylor 6). Thus what began as the “simplest” of modes became one of the most complex and highly wrought, a set stage for sophisticated ideas and ideologies. William Empson’s *Some*

¹ The term “pastoral”, when it is used in this work, indicates a mode inspired by Theocritus and Virgil’s poetry, involving a sophisticated lament for the passing of an idealized existence in nature, or a representation of nature that is idealized through distance from the realities of nature.

Versions of Pastoral and Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City* both explored and developed these ideas, demonstrating the endurance of the mode into modern literature.

Despite exposure to this original pastoral, Irish literature from the twelfth century onwards more frequently engages nature in relation to nostalgia, resulting in the development of the nostalgic mode. This mode has been identified by the sociologist Fred Davis in his study of nostalgia:

So frequently and uniformly does nostalgic sentiment seem to infuse our aesthetic experience that we can rightly begin to suspect that nostalgia is not only a feeling or a mood that is somehow magically evoked by the art object but also a distinctive aesthetic modality in its own right, a kind of code or patterning of symbolic elements, which by some obscure mimetic isomorphism comes, much as in language itself, to serve as a substitute for the feeling or mood it aims to arouse. (Davis 73)

The "code or patterning of symbolic elements", in terms of our subject here, involves the certain themes that will recur throughout the periods of study, and these patternings function as an invocation of nostalgia. As a sociological phenomenon, as well as a literary, aesthetic one, nostalgia serves as a preservative, stabilizing the past in a way that allows for a sense of continuity between past and present.

The word “nostalgia,” from the Greek *nostos*, home, and *algos*, pain, was originally used in 1688 by a doctor to describe a condition of homesickness.² The word as it is used now, however, has expanded beyond its original definition: when we say that someone is feeling nostalgic, we suggest that they are in a reverie-like state of remembrance for experiences which, as past, are unrecoverable. The French philosopher Gaston Bachelard has noted, however, that while memories represent the theoretically unrecoverable past, “the more securely they are fixed in space, the sounder they are” (Bachelard 1994 9). Bachelard’s idea suggests a possible explanation for the intersection between particular, localized, natural place and nature in Irish literature, and the theme of nostalgia. The more specific the description or setting for a poem or narrative, the more likely it will be to survive in the mind. This idea seems particularly important considering that Irish literature’s beginnings are oral; memory would clearly be of utmost significance in an oral tradition.

Ireland’s earliest literature demonstrates a marked preoccupation with place and the natural world; that whole tracts dedicated to *dindsenchas*, or the lore of place, exist attests to the significance granted to the subject. This tradition of a concern with the beauties of the external world and the local narratives of place survives through the centuries, making itself apparent in medieval lyrics devoted to the praise of nature, in

² Johannes Hofer coined the word in his “Medical Dissertation on Nostalgia.” See Fred Davis’s *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia*. New York: The Free Press, 1979, Chapter One.

Finn lore, in bardic poetry, and is inherited by the literature of the Revival, as well as by modern and contemporary authors.

Given the immense importance of literature in Irish culture, it might be well to pause at the influential image of nature in Irish literature other than nature writing. Because nearly everyone who lives in Ireland is within sight of landscape, and because the island is modestly sized, Irish literature in its totality has composed over the centuries a detailed relief map of the country. Just as few features of the landscape are without commemorative names and associations, so few regions and towns are without literary connections, making the literature a guide to rural Ireland of surprising colour and detail in the manner of topography and scenery. (Foster 1997a 603)

The impulses that have preserved nature and place to the extent described by John Wilson Foster have resulted in a literature that is consistently engaged in the commemoration of the physical landscape, and frequently such commemorations also memorialize loss – whether of the person for whom a place is named, or the social system that witnessed the landscape described. Nature and nostalgia are thus intimately connected in Irish literature over many centuries, in that nature becomes a frequent site for nostalgia.

What I would suggest is that as a literary mode, nostalgia comes to be about the preservation of the past. In allowing the past, by way of memory and longing, to filter in to the present, nostalgia serves effectively to bridge the two, allowing an individual or an even an entire generation to adapt to change. "Nostalgia," the sociologist Fred Davis notes, "thrives on transition, on the subjective discontinuities that engender our yearning for continuity" (Davis 49). In the face of a changing or threatened social structure, place and nature can be conceived of as a steady and unaltered realm beyond the reaches of the fluctuating culture, and it is for this reason that I believe Irish literature so frequently uses the natural world as a site for nostalgia.

In recent years, nostalgia has received attention as a mode that can determine the way in which the past is used in the present to various purposes. Several factors determine the presence of nostalgia within a culture. The first condition, as Malcolm Chase and Christopher Shaw point out, relies upon a western sense of linear time: the past is gone, and so unrecoverable. "In short, it is Western societies, with a view of time and history that is linear and secular, which should be especially prone to the syndrome of nostalgia" (Chase Shaw 3). The other factor is "some sense that the present is deficient" (4); a final requirement for nostalgia is that "objects, buildings, and images from the past should be available" (4). These three factors – the conception of time as linear and so forward moving; a sense of lack in the present; and an access to the past through physical and visual objects – determine the extent to which nostalgia can permeate a culture's consciousness.

The sense that the past is gone and was somehow better than the present leads to an idealization of that past. "A perpetual staple of nostalgic longing is the search for a simple and stable past as a refuge from the turbulent and chaotic present" (Lowenthal 21). In this, nostalgia seems to represent the sociological level of pastoral, which also seeks refuge in a simpler past. Nostalgia thus serves, quite effectively, as a safety mechanism designed to bridge past and present for cultures as they experience change. It is unsurprising, then, to find nostalgia operating within unstable political and social arenas like those the Irish experienced for so many years.

As a term, "nostalgia" has come to be perceived quite negatively; in popular culture, nostalgia has become its own industry, making its presence felt particularly in tourism.

Three perceived emphases engender special ire. One is the commercialisation of nostalgia and the inauthenticity felt to accompany it. The second is nostalgia's pervasion of the media, with its attendant sense of unreality. The third is nostalgia's reactionary slant, glossing over the past's iniquities and indignities. (Lowenthal 21-2)

Such strong reactions against the condition of nostalgia are inextricably connected to a kitsch presentation of culture: whether in the guise of souvenirs sold at tourist centers, book series that celebrate the glories of particular ages, etc. This type of consumer nostalgia, however, is different to the type that will be under discussion here. "Nostalgia" will not be used to signify a reactionary ideology that is adamantly opposed to change,

nor an absolute rejection of the present. In fact, the forms of nostalgia observed in this study of Irish literature, far from resisting change, serve to allow it to occur, as we will see. "Nostalgia", as it will be employed throughout this work, will signal a sociological phenomenon that revolves around a longing for lost culture or unrecoverable past. The manifestation of nostalgia will be different in different time periods, but, in a general sense, will always focus upon that condition of loss, and will always situate itself in nature.

As an aesthetic modality, nostalgia centers upon this preservation of the past and the longing for lost culture, as in the case of twelfth Irish literature; by the time we reach the era of the Revival, this nostalgic mode shifts its focus to the preservation of a past that the authors have themselves not experienced; in this sense, by the early modern period, the nostalgic mode has absorbed something more of the traditional pastoral. These developments, to be traced in subsequent chapters, retain certain commonalities: despite the changing representation of nostalgia, landscapes remain the site at which the mode is expressed, as will become clear.

In writing of the theme of genealogies in Irish literature, Donnchadh Ó Corráin argues that it is the changes from manuscript to manuscript over time that are significant: "what is important is not that particular motifs are there nor how old they are but how they are used and what they are used to convey" (Ó Corráin 1986 144). This same argument can be applied to the intersection of nostalgia and nature: the fact that the theme recurs is not so much the focus here as what that theme reveals to us about Irish culture over a period of centuries. In tracing the shift away from the pastoral tradition to the

nostalgic mode and back to a combined mode that calls upon both traditions. we will be able to assess the significance of nostalgia and nature within Irish literature, and to better decipher what the theme conveys.

What I propose to do, in this dissertation, is to explore the subtle complexities of these changes as they emerge in medieval and early modern Irish literature: the way the medieval Irish nostalgic nature construct takes on more traditional – and romanticized – pastoral forms in the early modern period, and the ways in which a changing representation of nature reflects changing cultural and social landscapes.

Such a study of the theme of nature does not exist; while it would seem an obvious topic to cover regarding Irish literature, there has been no such study done. Kenneth Jackson's 1935 work, *Early Celtic Nature Poetry*, provides the reader with the handful of poems deemed to be "nature lyrics," and offers a very limited (and by now rather outdated) commentary. Articles exist which study nature or landscape in specific authors, and in specific works, and a study has been done of *Swift's Landscape*, and of Joyce's *Epic Geography*, but nothing more comprehensive has been undertaken. John Wilson Foster, the editor of the 1997 *Nature In Ireland*, has done what is the most sophisticated work to date on the subject, in his three essays in that volume. In those essays Foster recognizes the complexities involved in representations of and ideas about nature, and notes the lack of critical inquiry into the subject, as does Yeats scholar Norman Jeffares ("I am inclined to believe that, as critics, we have paid too little attention to the importance of place in Anglo-Irish writing" (Jeffares 11)). Very little work has been done, as well, on the concept of nostalgia, and no work, to my knowledge, has been

produced to address the frequent intersection of nature and nostalgia. By examining the development of these themes in medieval and early modern Irish literature, it is hoped that the significance of these themes will be revealed, and further study done as to their role not only in the development of the Irish nation, but in other cultures that have experienced extensive change.

Nostalgia in Irish Culture

Nostalgia has been noted by many critics of Irish literature as playing a role within Irish culture. Frank O'Connor in *The Backward Look* signals just how significant a factor this sort of nostalgia is:

I am not sure that any country can afford to discard what I
have called 'the backward look', but we in Ireland can
afford it less than any other because without it we have
nothing and are nothing, and we must not cease to
remember Yeats' final words:

Cast your mind on other days

That we in coming times may be

Still the indomitable Irishry. (O'Connor 230)

O'Connor's view of Irish culture stands as a typical one: the value of the Irish culture, in many critics' and commentators' views, lies in its past. In post-colonial cultures, and in cultures that have experienced large scale emigration, one would expect to find high levels

of nostalgia: whether for the pre-colonial past, or for a time before emigration was financially and socially necessary. In Ireland, with its strange status as a western European colony, and its history of emigration, nostalgia functions at both of these levels.

Luke Gibbons, citing the historian Oliver MacDonagh, notes that the

tendency to collapse the past into an ever-receding present, is one of the distinguishing features of Irish political culture. . . As nationhood belonged to the cultural as much as to the political domain, what Frank O'Connor referred to as 'the backward look' also fixated literature and the arts within its controlling vision. While T.S. Eliot was trying earnestly to renew contact with a literary heritage in his famous essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', Irish writers such as James Joyce and Sean Ó Faoláin were attempting to escape the nightmare of history. (Gibbons 82)

In the Ireland of the early twentieth century the problem was not, as Gibbons astutely points out here, the threat of a loss of tradition; nostalgia had so permeated the national consciousness as to have a stranglehold on culture and politics.

Modern critics have not, however, invented the idea of looking towards the past for cultural value; the conception of the Irish as a nostalgic, sentimental people has existed for centuries. This sentimentality, this nostalgia, when it does exist, I will argue, derives from cultural instability: during times of unrest or insecurity, nostalgia functions to remind individuals, generations, and entire cultures, of times that, because of their

distance from the unsettled present, seem safer in some respect. In other cases, though, as we will find, the idea of the Irish as a sentimental people is one imposed from without, based on Romantic ideals. In both cases – in the actual, manifested nostalgia within Ireland, and in the ideas imposed from without – a connection is forged between nostalgia and nature, as will become evident in future chapters.

Why, then, does this connection between nostalgia and nature in Ireland arise? Why does the nostalgia within Irish literature and culture frequently focus on nature, as opposed to another subject? Landscape and the natural world are a relatively stable realm, usually unaffected in the extreme by political and social problems. It seems, then, as will be explored in the following chapters, as if Irish authors initially turned to the natural world within the pastoral tradition, searching for an imagined simpler life. Over the centuries, this tradition would turn on itself, as the natural world became, more and more, a site within which to express the loss of the Irish culture, a representation of the control which had been lost due to colonial rule, the initial imposition of the Church, and the eventual forbidding of the Irish language under English rule.

Sean Lysaght points out that a nostalgia has arisen around the idea of nature in Ireland in part as a representation of this loss of language:

In Ireland, . . . there is a particular obstacle to our relationship with nature which has to do with the fact that the old Gaelic vernacular has been lost to most of the country – and with it a range of names for plants and animals, the key to the old Gaelic's community with the

natural world. The decline of that primitive relationship with land and sea, and the extinction of its vocabulary, has given rise to a powerful nostalgia. It is as if the loss of the language carried with it the loss of the objects themselves.

(Lysaght 440-1)

As will be discussed in a later chapter, this mode of nostalgia can certainly be seen in early modern writing in Ireland, a period during which the overwhelming majority of authors wrote in English, and were largely unfamiliar with either modern or old Irish. The ability to invoke placenames that did survive in Irish, and had been translated into English, became an important, if indirect, way of recovering the past, in Yeats for example, just as the recovery of tales in Irish – by the likes of Lady Gregory and Synge – comes to signify the direct inheritance of the Irish language, and, consequently, of the past.

The Representation of Nature in Irish Literature

However, even before the loss of the Irish language – *Buile Suibhne*, after all, is written in Irish and still provides us with a strong representation of longing for a lost culture situated in nature – nature and nostalgia were connected in Irish literature. This appears surprising to students of English literature, in which landscape is aestheticized from early on; this is clearly not the case in Ireland.

In Ireland, the land is of course an economic and political category, and an ethical one too. . . . it is also, more frequently than in Britain, a sexual object, as the torn victim of imperial penetration. But it is, by and large, much less of an *aestheticized* concept – whereas in England, as John Barrell points out in his study of John Clare, it is hard to think of a word for an extensive tract of land, synchronically surveyed, other than the revealingly painterly ‘landscape’. (Eagleton 4)

The natural world of “landscape” in Ireland is not, in other words, generally represented for its aesthetic quality. If we have come to associate Keats and Wordsworth with a celebration of English landscape and hence English life, it is virtually impossible to do the same with Irish authors before the Revival. For, before this period, the natural world of Ireland is never simply a representation of the natural world of Ireland; it is, instead, a signifier of social and political issues.

[A]llowing for variations, it is clear that inherited landscape myths and memories share two common characteristics: their surprising endurance through the centuries and their power to shape institutions. National identity, to take just the most obvious example, would lose much of its ferocious enchantment without the mystique of a particular landscape

tradition: its topography mapped, elaborated, and enriched
as a homeland. (Schama 15)

Keeping in mind Schama's point here, it seems that, in many ways, the ideology of nature in Ireland developed in a different way. Far from aestheticizing the landscape as a space peculiarly Irish, Irish authors tended to represent the land as a symbol of all that *was* Irish: there is never a sense, until the Revival, that the landscape being described is securely Irish – that is, describes a national homeland other than in the past tense. The landscape is looked to as a site of past independence, past glory, and often individual happiness.

Irish literary landscapes are often enough decipherable texts
rather than aesthetic objects: places made precious or
melancholic by the resonance of the human. It is the
inscription of historical or contemporary meaning within
their material appearance which tends to engage the past's
attention. (Eagleton 5)

Representations of Irish landscape, inscribed with "the resonance of the human", can be read, translated, looked to for cultural meaning over time; they are never simple sketches meant to preserve the beauty (or barrenness) of the land itself.

Assessments such as Terry Eagleton's outline clearly how differently Irish
literature developed from English literature. Prior to its colonization by England at the

end of the twelfth century, however, the representation of nature in Irish literature demonstrates an exposure to a more traditional, pastoral mode, as we will see in Chapter Two.

Ireland was exposed to the original pastoral in the early Middle Ages, through Vergil, who was well known to the Irish Christian scribes working in Latin. As early as the end of the seventh century, classical texts were being translated into Irish by scribes both in Ireland and on the continent; allusions to Vergil's works – *The Aeneid*, the *Eclogues*, and the *Georgics* – in the poetry of such writers as Saint Columbanus and Sedulius Scottus attest to this exposure.

The other quite obvious way in which Irish literature was exposed to a form of pastoral was through Christianity, which brought to Ireland its own image for the archetype of a perfect existence in nature, in the story of Eden. However, while integrating significant elements of both the literary pastoral and the Christian story of a fall from pastoral perfection, Irish literature, beginning in the twelfth century, seems generally to have developed a quite different representation of nature, as will be discussed in Chapter Three. Instead of adopting the traditional pastoral mode, the literature begins at this point to operate in what I have called the nostalgic mode, which engages nature as the *site* of nostalgia and longing.

Since the medieval period in Ireland was one of tremendous cultural upheaval and change, it is unsurprising that the literature spends a great amount of time attempting to address those changes. Besides the momentous influence of Christianity on the period, there is also the equally significant push of the Normans into Ireland. It is my argument –

to be more fully explored in Chapter Three – that the twelfth century represents a shift away from early Irish literary themes as, in addressing these societal disruptions, the literature begins to develop the nostalgic mode, a mode that comes to have tremendous influence on the writing to come out of Ireland in the following centuries. Since the nostalgic mode centers on mourning for a lost or changing culture, and situates its mourning in nature, the representation of nature comes to signify a loss of culture, and in this the nostalgic mode is a strange distortion of the traditional pastoral, which laments the loss of a natural world. A further distortion results when one considers that the voice of the traditional pastoral belongs to a speaker outside of the natural world: pastoral was founded on “the nature of observation, of the scientist or tourist, rather than of the working countryman” (Williams 20). In medieval Irish literature, those who write or speak of nature are participants: there is no such distance allowed between the subject and object.

Twelfth century Irish scribes inherited a tradition from their earlier Irish forbears of writing about nature and place, and, as has been noted, were exposed to the pastoral as developed by Theocritus and Vergil. While by the twelfth century the pastoral was already widely popular in Europe, in Ireland, the pastoral was eclipsed by the development of the nostalgic mode, due to the reality of changing social conditions. Pastoral demanded distance from the natural world, but too it demanded something more: “From Vergil to Girardin, all those arcadias primitive or pastoral, had been lordly possessions” (Schama 546). Twelfth century Ireland, to a large extent, was experiencing

dispossession: out of this experience and the other changes underway, the nostalgic mode was to develop, as will be further detailed in Chapter Three.

Despite the connection with England forged at the close of the twelfth century, however, or perhaps because of it, Ireland's literature continued in the centuries that followed to address and represent nature in quite a different mode from England's literature, as will be outlined in Chapters Four and Five. As a colony of England, and as a space that was decidedly rural in economic and social terms, Ireland had a relationship with nature that was at once more distant and closer than the relationship with nature in England. One always feels that Wordsworth writes his lyrics from an interior space, observing himself, in retrospect, in the natural world; John Clare, an exception within the English nature poetry tradition, is one of few writers for whom the distance between subject and object did not exist. In Ireland, that distance did not exist by impossibility: "Nature in Ireland would often seem more a working environment," Terry Eagleton notes, "than an object to be contemplated which is in any case a typically urban way of relating to it" (Eagleton 5).

Nature may figure in Ireland as an ethico-political category as well as an economic one; it may even be seen as a kind of subject; but this is not quite the transcendental-vitalist subject which informs English speculations on the natural world from Coleridge to Lawrence. . . . Nature in Ireland is moralized and sexualized; and in so far as it is alive with mythic forces it is also transcendentalized. But it would

appear on the whole less an object of perception than in England, and one reason for this is not hard to find. It is that Nature in Ireland is too stubbornly social and material a category, too much a matter of rent, conacre, pigs and potatoes for it to be distanced, stylized and subjectivated.

(Eagleton 7-8)

Eagleton's brilliant phrasing here makes clear the forces at work in Ireland that have gone into the production of the idea of nature. The realities of the experience of nature in Ireland, particularly following the Kinsale era, then, did not allow for an aestheticization of the natural world to take place on the same scale as in England, where the middle and upper classes – the classes that tended towards the aestheticization of landscape – were a larger group. The only spaces within Ireland that compare to the aestheticization of land in England were desmesnes, which, as Terry Eagleton puts it, were "more artefact than agriculture" (Eagleton 5).

The rural existence of most people in Ireland through the centuries meant that nature was a practical, matter of fact experience, and the negative experiences associated with the land and with nature – from dispossession and evictions to the numerous rebellions and the Famine – made it almost impossible for a different attitude to develop, as will become evident in Chapter Six.

[W]hereas in the British context history becomes Nature, in Ireland Nature becomes history. And this both in the sense that, in a largely pre-industrial society, the land is the prime

determinant of human life, and in the sense that in the Famine history appears with all the brute, aleatory power of seismic upheaval, thus writing large the course of much Irish history. The British have naturalized their own social relations as providential; and the effects of Nature in this sense will then appear over the water as Nature in its most Schopenhauerian guise. This in turn will feed back to the metropolitan nation as an image of the Darwinism which is just about to shake them to their ideological core: Nature as random and purposeless, as a shattered landscape lurking as a terrifying possibility at the root of their own civility. Ireland and *Wuthering Heights* are names for that civility's sickening precariousness: for it had in its time to be wrested inch by inch from the soil, and is thus permanently capable of sliding back into it. (Eagleton 11)

The sense that Nature was a phenomenon beyond control and somehow bound up in the complexities of English control was to permeate Irish culture, particularly from the time of the Battle of Kinsale to the period following the Famine. Nature becomes, again and again, a betrayer, a force that eliminates possibility. In this historical context, it is unsurprising that Irish authors did not, until much later, produce a body of verse that can be deemed in any way to be "nature writing": "it would seem probable that a landscape traced through with the historical scars of famine, deprivation and dispossession can

never present itself to human perception with quite the rococo charm of a Keats, the sublimity of a Wordsworth or the assured sense of proprietorship of an Austen”

(Eagleton 6). It was not until the Revival, as we will see in Chapter Six, that nature and landscape would come to be aestheticized in a way parallel to English representations and would adapt pastoral nostalgia: before this period, the realities of Irish social and political conditions seem to have forbidden the development of landscape as an aesthetic object.

The development of this pastoral nostalgia within Irish literature corresponds to the development of an urban culture within Ireland that, prior to the era of the Revival, was relatively small. That the literary nostalgia of the Revival is the product of urban inhabitants makes sense, for

idealizations of rural existence, the longing for community and primitive simplicity, are the product of an *urban* sensibility, and are cultural fictions imposed on the lives of those they purport to represent. [. . .] The hankering for a return to nature and the simple life, therefore, is a form of nostalgia for a world which was lost, and is simply an attempt to restore to the countryside an ideology which was taken from it in the first place. (Gibbons 85)

Yeats, Synge, and others involved in the cultural movement of the Revival, relied upon what amounted to often sophisticated urban concepts of nature, with a distance that allowed them to engage in idealizations that led to the construction of the idea of the Irish nation as rural, traditional and, quite consciously, not English. The Revival, in making a

return to pastoral nostalgia, thus marks a shift in the representation of nature in Irish literature.

Changing Representations of Nature and Nostalgia Within Irish Literature

Within the Irish tradition of the nostalgic mode, there is a great deal of change between the medieval and early modern periods, and, in closing this introduction, it seems fitting to provide an example of the way in which nostalgia and nature interact in Irish texts of different periods.

In twelfth century Irish literature the experience of nature is one that is associated with those on the margins of culture,³ and so it is appropriate that the earliest of what has been called Irish “nature poetry”⁴ often appears as scribal marginalia in manuscripts. This marginality is represented by no figure as clearly as Sweeney, whose story will serve to introduce both the “nostalgic nature construct” and the use of the nostalgic mode in medieval Irish literature, which provided the writing of the twentieth century with so many of its themes.

³ Joseph Falaky Nagy’s impressive exploration of this theme as it is present in the Finn cycle is in *The Wisdom of the Outlaw*.

⁴ This term is a troublesome one because of its Romantic associations, and I use it only reluctantly here to represent those poems which have as a central focus the natural world or the poet’s place in that world; in this I am following Kenneth Jackson’s use of the term in his 1935 *Studies in Early Celtic Poetry*, the only full length text to examine the function of nature in Irish literature.

Upon hearing that a church is to be built in his territory, King Sweeney goes angrily to the priest and throws the Psalter into a lake in protest; the priest, as punishment, places the curse of madness on him. This madness takes the peculiar form of “disgust with every place in which he used to be and desire for every place which he had not reached” (*Buile Suibhne* 15). Sweeney has been condemned to flitting, bird-like, through the countryside, experiencing savage cold and an equally savage longing for his past life of splendid, often *indoor* comfort, and yet able, as a result of madness, to compose poetry celebrating the *outdoor* beauty of nature.

Compiled at some time between 1200-1500, “The Frenzy of Sweeney” is thematically representative of other nature poetry of these dates: while the natural world of Ireland is lovely enough to seduce Sweeney into poems of extravagant praise, it is clear that his appreciation is a result of having been forced into nature – displacement brings the natural world into focus.

Both the Vergilian and Christian traditions offered Irish literature versions of the natural world that, at least in part, coincided with its own. All three visions of nature – whether Vergil’s effortlessly green meadows, a retrospective longing for the Garden of Eden, or Sweeney’s sky-down view of streams bordered by watercress – involve a longing for something lost. However, while the Edenic tradition laments the loss of the garden as man’s natural and rightful state, and while the Vergilian tradition makes us aware that the pastoral life is under siege by a not too distant urbanism and the Roman equivalent of enclosure, the Irish literary tradition represents a strange view that fits neither into a pastoral nor an anti-pastoral mode: for it is the loss, one could say, not of

nature, but of *culture* that is lamented, and the lament takes place, even more strangely, within the context of the natural world that the other traditions mourn for its passing. Sweeney recognizes all of the contradictions of this fallen or displaced state when he says, “This is a spot for a madman, but yet no place is it for corn or milk or food; it is an uncomfortable, unquiet place, nor has it shelter against storm or shower, though it is a lofty, beautiful place” (*Buile Suibhne* 115).

For the Irish tradition, no matter how beautiful it may be at times, nature is far too real – whether cold or wet or uncomfortable – and far too threatening to be styled into purely pastoral artifice. Sweeney recognizes here that nature is for those who are somehow outside of the social realm: for a madman, in this case, who, in his marginal status, is unable to obtain corn or milk – both signs of cultivated and settled agriculture – and instead exists, uncomfortably, in nature’s beauty. Sweeney’s consignment to this “unquiet” outdoor world signifies the exchange of cultures taking place: the traditional Irish society of which Sweeney is a representative is being replaced by Christian culture, and nature becomes the site for expressing the nostalgia for the old life and the disorientation of the change, with Sweeney eventually coming, tentatively, out of wilderness into a semi-settled life, establishing a tie to another priest and, at his self-prophesied death, thanking God for his life and repenting any evil he has done – he has undergone, in effect, a rite of passage.

“The Frenzy of Sweeney” reflects a theme in medieval Irish literature – an existence in nature is marked by a nostalgia for a lost life. This theme recurs, with variation, throughout Irish literature. Edmund Spenser’s work, particularly *Colin Clouts*

Come Home Again and the Mutabilitie Cantos, displays this theme in its use of Irish landscape. Too it can be seen in bardic poetry, particularly in the century following the Battle of Kinsale, when the bards and their patrons are sometimes literally pushed out into the natural world as Sweeney was; here nature again becomes the site of nostalgia, this time for the destroyed bardic system and the culture that supported it.

Besides having a tradition of such writing on nature, Irish literature also has a preoccupation with place and landscape more generally, stretching from the medieval *dindsenchas* to the incomparable treatment of Irish place in *Finnegans Wake*. Such writing on landscape can be seen as a form of mapping. Topographical mapmaking involves a going over of the earth and so a claiming of it; thus mapping, as well as the naming involved in the process, is an assertion of control and/ or ownership, and in Ireland the modern process of both mapping and naming are associated primarily with British colonization. There are two significant mapping and naming pushes in modern Irish history: the Elizabethan drive to map Ireland, born of England's larger aim of creating a colonial empire, and the more recent drive of the Ordnance Survey, so movingly depicted in Brian Friel's *Translations*. Such expeditions asserted colonial control by insisting that knowledge of a land granted rights over it.

It is not surprising, then, to find that in the literature leading up to Irish independence, there is a conscious reclamation of the Irish landscape through a process of verbal mapping. This mapping, often in the form of detailed observation of the land and its natural beauties, as well as in a self-conscious return to nature themes of early Irish literature, is an identity-forming process that the Irish are not alone in undergoing –

a half century earlier, in attempting a conscious shaping of an American identity.

Emerson, Thoreau, and others turned to the land and an aesthetic of nature. It would appear that in fashioning a modern nation, then, there is a dependence, at least in part, upon an invented, and inventing, pastoral.

This tradition of Irish literature's involvement with place, nature, landscape, and man's interaction with landscape offered such an invented and inventing myth to writers like Yeats and Synge, who sought to regain in their works what amounted to an impossible, Darwinian origin of Ireland. Synge's *The Aran Islands* is a key text in considering this use of nature as a way of shaping "nation," in much the same way that Thoreau's *Walden* attempted to forge out of American wilderness a nation in words.

Stanley Cavell describes Thoreau's move to Walden Pond as a transcendental act, "an attempt to live the idea" (10). I would suggest that Synge's annual visits to the Aran Islands are similarly transcendental, attempts to live an idea. Thoreau was, of course, quite sure of the idea he was going to live; with Synge one senses that his idea is to be discovered, not only in the language of the peasants as it floats up to his room, but in the tongues of the taunting sea and the moaning wind. Even Synge's first trip to Aran is, one feels, in some way a return: for what Synge does, and what Yeats encouraged him to do, is to attempt to recover a lost Irish culture, and that lost culture is intrinsically natural. "I cannot say it too often," Synge writes in a notebook, "the supreme interest of the island lies in the strange concord that exists between the people and the impersonal limited but powerful impulses of the nature that is round them" (in Robinson xxxvii).

In journeying to the Aran Islands, Synge is searching, self-consciously, for some “primitive” (to use his word) Irish culture that he and Yeats and others of the Revivalists need to provide them with a bridge to the past. The Revival is characterized by this tremendous nostalgia for the past, and its reliance on past myths and metaphors to ascribe meaning to Irish culture. In Synge’s case, and frequently in Yeats’s, the nostalgia is situated in nature. In *The Aran Islands*, Synge removes himself to the physical and cultural margins of Irish society: “It gave me a moment of exquisite satisfaction to find myself moving away from civilization in this rude canvas canoe of a model that has served primitive races since men first went on the sea” (Synge 1907 12). In his sojourns to the islands, Synge thus creates for himself an existence that thematically resembles Sweeney’s in a significant way: in situating himself in this natural world, he immerses himself in a nostalgia for another culture, of the past.

Stanley Cavell remarks, after Emerson, that when we are attentive, watchful, our environment supplies us with “the knowledge of what is needful” (Cavell 78). One could say that, like Thoreau’s *Walden*, Synge’s Aran writings attests to the truth of this idea, for the Revivalists’ nostalgia needed a connection between past and present, and Synge, attentive and watchful as a gull perched on the craggy cliffs, finds that link: “[T]hose hovels I can just see in the south are filled with people whose lives have the strange quality that is found in the oldest poetry and legend” (Synge 1907 69). Situating himself in nature and forging a link between the present world and that world of “the oldest poetry and legend,” Synge writes in a nostalgic mode that constructs for himself – and for many of his generation – an intertwined idea of nature and nation, reflecting what he calls

the “psychic memory” (Synge 1907 54) that haunts Ireland’s landscape, and creating a culture, in the process, that relies on the natural world for continuity.

It is evident that there are major differences between the treatment and significance of nature in *Buile Suibhne* and *The Aran Islands*. For Sweeney nature is a place both of resignation and resigned love – for, inhospitable as the natural world may be at times, Sweeney emphatically declares his preference for it over the Christian culture that has replaced his own. In nature, then, as we have seen, Sweeney is subjected to a continual remembering of that now past life. Unlike Sweeney, Synge subjects himself to a world that he connects to nature, in the hopes of *recovering* memory. This fundamental difference shows that nostalgia itself has changed in the centuries between the two texts. Sweeney’s nostalgia is indeed a form of the etymological homesickness; Synge’s is far more complicated, in that he longs for a life he has never lived. This type of nostalgia I would call pastoral. Traditional pastoral is most typically written by a privileged class of urban dwellers who express a nostalgia for the simple life of the poor country peasant, *a life with which they have only a literary familiarity*, and Synge certainly fits into this class. Just as the Eclogues and the Georgics presuppose, “not very far away, the presence of state and city, the very world of human affairs, in fact, from which they are ostensibly in flight” (Schama 528), *The Aran Islands* presumes the presence of Dublin, Paris, as places hovering in the background of Synge’s experience. Thus it is evident that as the conception of nostalgia has changed, so too has the representation of nature in Irish literature. Nonetheless, Synge’s work, much like medieval Irish literature, situates itself in the natural world and focuses its yearnings on lost culture.

This example – of the interaction between a medieval text like the *Buile Suibhne* and Synge's *The Aran Islands* – serves to illustrate the themes that will be explored here. Through an examination of the contrasts between the representation of nature in Irish literature from the medieval and modern periods, it will become clear how the nostalgic mode has dictated much of the tenor of Irish literature.

Chapter Two:

Early Medieval Literature

In the earliest Irish literature, from the seventh through the tenth centuries, three ways of writing about nature represent different cultural strains: lyric poetry appearing largely as marginalia and examples of metrics in manuscripts, early Fenian poetry that has been presumed to be the written adaptation of an earlier oral tradition, and voyage literature.

Early Irish literature, because it is the product of a monastic tradition that emphasized classical learning, often demonstrates highly wrought and erudite styles. Thus much of the material – particularly the lyric poetry attributed to monks and hermits – frequently represents nature in a way that might be described as more a part of the traditional pastoral tradition than of the nature literature to follow; nature appears often within the framework of a poetic conceit that could be described as pastoral, as well as availing of a tradition that Maria Tymoczko refers to as “a poetry of masks” (Tymoczko 1996 187). At other points, in its matter-of-fact rendering of the natural world as a backdrop to narrative, works such as those that begin the written Finn cycle suggest a lack of distance between man and nature, resulting from what John Wilson Foster refers to as pre-Christian Irish culture’s lack of a “compulsive need to describe nature in any but formulaic and generic ways” (Foster 1987 17). In early Fenian literature we thus see representations of a supposedly pre-Christian Irish idea of nature as

something taken for granted.¹ However, in the poems ascribed to Finn, it is arguable that this work, too, involves the use of conceit, particularly since it involves the adoption of a well known character from Irish history or mythology to describe the natural world. Finally, in voyage literature, the artificiality of the natural world demonstrates the influence of both classical and Biblical ideas of an Edenic place, as well as pre-Christian beliefs in an otherworld attached to the known landscape.

What this chapter aims to demonstrate is the level of art used in the various strains of early Irish nature poetry, a charge that was vigorously denied by early critics, who believed these works to represent a relationship to nature that was innocent and naive. This demonstration of the level of art (and artifice) used by early Irish authors will serve to show that a form of pastoral and nature writing was in place in Ireland in this period, a form very different from the literature to follow, in that it lacks the connection between nature and nostalgia. This early pastoralism is marked by the influence of classical sources, an idealized natural world, or a construction of nature that appears superficially unremarkable.

Latin learning was introduced to Ireland in the sixth century, following the establishment of monasteries. Only a century later, Gerard Murphy points out, "hardly any Irish writer of note is to be found who does not betray some acquaintance with classical Latin" (Murphy 1932 373). Amongst Irish monks in exile on the continent,

¹ Despite the pre-Christian settings of these poems, these tales are, it is important to note, from the Christian era.

“many were distinguished for their knowledge of Vergil’s poetry” (Murphy 1932 374); continental manuscripts from the ninth century include poetry in Latin meters, a life of Vergil, and notes on the *Aeneid*.² Among these exiles Sedulius Scottus’s works attest to a certain familiarity with Vergil’s works, as allusions appear frequently to the *Aeneid*, the *Eclogues*, and the *Georgics*. Columbanus, like Sedulius Scottus, produced poetry in which the influence of Biblical texts and early Christian poets can be felt: “[a]mong pagan authors Vergil and Horace are his great favorites, but it seems probable that he was directly acquainted with the writings of Ovid, Prudentius and Juvenal, perhaps of Statius, Persius, Juvenecus, Lucan and others” (Kenney 190-1). Thus “there can be no doubt but that Sedulius and many nameless Irishmen of the 9th century had attained such a sympathy and kinship with the classic poets whom they studied. Their achievement may thus be fittingly compared with that of the 16th century humanists” (Murphy 1932 376).

Knowledge of classical literature was not limited, however, to Irish exiles. The appearance in Ireland of new poetic meters in the seventh and eighth centuries, modeled on Latin hymns, suggests that their inventors were either monks or native poets who had been influenced by monastic education and culture. Kenney, in his book *The Sources for*

² For a fuller treatment of what John J. Contreni refers to as “The Irish Contribution to the European Classroom,” see his article of this title in *Proceedings of the Seventh International Congress of Celtic Studies*, eds. D. Ellis Evans, John G. Griffith, and E.M. Jope, published by Oxford UP in 1986. Contreni mounts a convincing argument that Irish scholars on the continent were well integrated into the European system of scholarship and education, citing their influence on the teaching of Latin (through the production by Irishmen of at least eight grammatical manuals and the 9th century introduction of “the study of grammar [as] commentary on a text” (82)) as well as on the furthering of Greek studies: “the evidence of the manuscripts, particularly the glossaries and bits and pieces

the Early History of Ireland: Ecclesiastical, makes mention of the existence on the continent of several manuscripts on Vergil's *Bucolics* and *Georgics* that "evidently depend originally on Irish compilations. . . [T]he texts offer good evidence that Vergil was studied in Ireland in the seventh century" (Kenney 286-7). Gerard Murphy, too, argues that the fact that "some attention was paid to Vergil in the schools of the period is. . . assured not only by the Irish translation of the *Aeneid* [prior to the twelfth century]. . . but also by occasional reminiscences of the *Aeneid* found in other writings by Irishmen" (Murphy 1932 378). Latin was not the only classical language taught in early Christian Ireland, however; Greek too would have been studied, although not as widely. "[T]he freedom with which Greek words and phrases are used in the earliest Christian literature of the island evidences a practical familiarity with the language" (Kenney 251). This familiarity would have come to Irish scholars through what John Coltreni calls a "vicarious introduction" (84) to the language through the study of Latin grammars that employed Greek terminology and Greek doctrines.

The Idea of Early Irish Nature Poetry

What this information reveals is the extent to which early Irish Christian authors – the undoubted authors of the texts under discussion in this chapter – were schooled in Biblical and classical models. The use of the Latin language and Latin poetic

of *graeca* one finds in them, testifies to the fact that instruction in Greek by Irish masters reached far and wide through the continental classroom" (84).

models is attested to by numerous sources, as is the influence of a variety of classical authors. The tradition of classical education thus suggests that the poets and writers of the period were learned, and unlikely to produce either verse or narrative that was free of this influence. While this seems an obvious point to make, the recognition that early Irish writers were not only conscious of but schooled in literary models that employed conceits challenges early scholarship on the nature poetry of the period. Many distinguished early critics – Robin Flower, Nora Chadwick, Kenneth Jackson, and Kuno Meyer, to name a few – mentioned this early poetry in their work as the product of a rather naive and quite innocent people given *naturally* to the task. Kuno Meyer's description of early Irish nature poetry has become familiar to students of the period, and stands as a typical assessment that is often cited:

In Nature poetry the Gaelic muse may vie with that of any other nation. Indeed, these poems occupy a unique position in the literature of the world. To seek out and watch and love Nature, in its tiniest phenomena as in its grandest, was given to no people so early and so fully as to the Celt. . . It is characteristic of these poems that in none of them do we get an elaborate or sustained description of any scene or scenery, but rather a succession of pictures and images which the poet, like an impressionist, calls up before us by light and skillful touches. (Meyer 1911 xii-iii)

To ascribe early nature poetry to a racially inherent ability or skill not only begs the question as to the origins of and influences on early Irish writing generally, but immediately imposes a system of interpretation, popular after the Romantic movement, that wants to believe in earlier cultures as truly pastoral. To his credit, Gerard Murphy recognized early part of the problem with ascribing the production of nature poetry to some racially specific gift:

To explain the existence in early times of an Irish and a Welsh school of nature literature, critics have assumed that the Celt possesses to a unique degree the gift of sensibility to the beauty of irrational and inanimate creation. This explanation is unsatisfactory in view of the fact that nations, whose language neither is nor ever was a Celtic one, have developed schools of nature literature, schools which have differed less by reason of race than in accordance with the difference of motive inspiring them. (Murphy 1931 87)

To believe that early Irish nature poetry was produced by the sheer chance of genetic genius is, of course, unsatisfactory. In order to assess how this poetry did come about, then, it is necessary to examine early Ireland's attitudes towards nature and landscape as witnessed in legal texts and anthropological and geological research.

Nature in Early Ireland

The natural world that poets and scribes sought to represent in early Irish writing was one with which every inhabitant of early Ireland would have been familiar, for the reason that, at this time in Irish history, urbanity was extraordinarily rare. Schools of nature writing such as that produced in early Ireland, as critics such as Murphy and Foster have pointed out, arose in many early cultures in which the experience of nature was an everyday fact of life.

[I]n folk and mythic literature of all kinds, including the Koran and the Irish sagas which both function as expressions of the people or of a culture, whatever the origins of the works, men are never psychologically separated from nature in the fashion of modern urban men (for example, the Irish revivalists), but take their relationship to it for granted. (Foster 1987 17)

When the natural world is all that one knows, in other words, it is not remarkable in the way that it would be for a man of the city observing nature as a visitor. As a result, the natural world was the *only* world known to most of the population, and, by extension, to the original monastic authors of the poems whose works were collected by scribes in the centuries to follow.

However, while early inhabitants of Ireland might have taken their relationship to nature for granted, they certainly did not take nature itself for granted. The religion of the

early Celts, one author argues, “was essentially a nature religion, in which sacred places in the wilderness, usually associated with forests or water, took the place of temples” (Feehan 574). The introduction of Christianity to Ireland in the fifth century did not radically alter this attitude to nature. The landscape was still so sacred, in fact, that an entire legal tract – the eighth century *Bretha Comaithchesa* – exists chronicling the penalties for damaging trees. The Laws of the Neighborhood divided trees into four classes: *airig fedo* (nobles of the wood); *aithig fedo* (commoners of the wood); *fodla fedo* (lower division of the wood); and *losa fedo* (bushes of the wood). Intended to protect against unnecessary and thoughtless damage, the laws outlined penalties for such actions as the felling of a noble oak (two and a half milk cows) or the cutting of a branch of a common cherry without permission (one sheep). Such penalties illustrate the significance of the wooded landscape to the early Irish economy.

Unlike the forest, cleared land intended for farming was not communally owned in early Irish society. According to early Irish law tracts, most farmland was *fintiu* (kin land). A mistranslation of *fine*, kin group, as “tribe”, Fergus Kelly argues, led critics of this century into the belief that all land was communally owned by all members of the *tuath* in early Ireland. “In fact, early Irish society clearly attached great significance to the principle of private ownership of property, and even extended it to mines and fishing rights” (Kelly 105). Rights applying to all were limited; generally land ownership, as in many cultures, was permitted only to a select group. Despite the existence of private ownership, the emphasis placed upon family and communal ties would have meant that most of the population would have had a stake in an area of land, whether personally

owned or owned by a family member. Because so much of Ireland would still have been forested in the years at issue here, cleared land would have been particularly prized, since farming was practiced by virtually the entire population. Both forest and cleared land were tremendously significant to the early Irish economy, which relied on them for fuel and food. As a result, land and the natural world were all tremendously esteemed.

The coming of Christianity to Ireland would only have added to this reverence for the landscape and the products of the earth, which were seen as God's creations. Gerard Murphy, in his article on "The Origin of Irish Nature Poetry", goes so far as to suggest that the theme of nature in Irish literature might well stem from this Christian tradition. "Monotheistic religion, offering, as it does, a rational explanation of what is inanimate and irrational, and investing natural objects with a value akin to that which attaches to the work of an artist, has inspired more than one school of nature poetry" (Murphy 1931 93). While this seems to discount pre-Christian ideas of nature in Ireland too completely, it is still a significant point to keep in mind in the discussion to come, particularly since the early Irish tradition of writing is invariably Christian.

On a more practical level, since monastic communities also functioned as active farms, monks too relied upon good weather and decent farmland for sustenance. Thus the natural world would have been a significant part of daily life. In this respect, Christianity would have found itself very much aligned with early Irish ideas that deemed the natural world worthy of a great regard. One influence that the early Christian church brought to bear in Ireland was an idea of subduing nature:

With the advent of Roman Christianity, a different view of nature dominates. The new view is grounded in an interpretation of Genesis that sees man's role on earth as subduing and conquering the wilderness; paradise is conceived as the cultivated land of a Garden (Eden), and man's life on earth as a brief sojourn through a valley of tears which is merely preparation for an eternity of happiness in a future life, beyond death, which is not on earth. There is nothing peculiarly Irish about this perspective on nature. It is the vision that dominates throughout Europe. (Feehan 578-9)

This idea of nature, and the early Christian monks' practice of farming and so settling areas of land, undoubtedly influenced early Irish society.

Early Irish Nature Poetry

The poetry dealt with in this chapter, all in Irish, exists as either marginalia in predominantly Latin texts, or as examples in metrical handbooks. The fact that the Irish language appears mostly as marginalia in the earliest writing is indicative of the state of affairs in the scholarship of the period, which tends to employ Latin. As time went by, however, Irish was to make its presence felt as a language of scholarship as well; hence the existence of classical texts, Biblical exegesis, and glosses in Irish.

If the majority of early Irish writing pertains at some level, whether directly – as in the case of Biblical translation – or indirectly – in the case of “non-Christian” Irish narratives that draw upon the Bible for a model – to Christianity, it is hardly surprising, then, to find that critics have had to put a defensive argument together for the existence of a “pure” non- or pre-Christian Irish tradition of poetics and narrative prose. Somewhat surprisingly, though, as we will see in the following discussion, it was this form of argument that dominated early scholarship.

Kenneth Jackson’s 1935 *Studies in Early Celtic Nature Poetry* stands as the only work to attempt to address the thematic use of nature in Irish literature in any period. This study, which covers Welsh as well as Irish writing, outlines several types of nature poetry: hermit poetry; elegy and Fenian poetry; gnomic poetry; and seasonal poetry. Jackson goes through the various types and summarizes general characteristics, but the reader is left with a sense of uncertainty: an entire book devoted to the subject should surely have reached more definite conclusions about the significance of nature in Celtic poetry. That Jackson does not reach such conclusions seems to result from what later scholarship would deem to be two errors: first, the seemingly automatic acceptance of so-called “hermit poetry” as the product of actual hermits; and second, the insistence that Fenian poetry derives from an oral tradition in place prior to the arrival of Christianity – and writing – in Ireland, and so free from the influence of Irish Christian scholarship. The results of these two errors will become evident in the discussion to follow.³

³ Gnomic poetry will not be discussed in a discrete category; rather, it will be included under one of the other sections.

“Hermit Poetry”

The ten poems that Jackson refers to as “hermit poems” in his study of early Irish material were attributed by him to unknown monks living in the wilderness, writing of the simple beauties of nature. Jackson writes that these poems “are mostly stated or implied to be the work of monks or hermits” (Jackson 93); in a footnote, Jackson admits that four of the ten poems he categorizes as eremitic “show no evidence, internal or external, to prove that they are hermit poems; they have no context, and may be mere fragments. They are included here because they seem to have the same characteristics of the rest” (Jackson 93). Jackson thus concludes that at least six of the poems are truly eremitic. Between them Gerard Murphy’s *Early Irish Lyrics* and Robin Flower’s *The Irish Tradition* include an additional four poems that have been called hermit poetry.⁴ the total number of poems thus identified by critics as eremitic being fourteen.⁵ The sources for a third of these poems are medieval metrical handbooks; the rest of the lyrics appear in a range of manuscripts, frequently as marginalia or in glosses.⁶

⁴ In his *Early Irish Lyrics*, Murphy categorizes these poems as “Monastic” and does not call them “hermit poetry”; however, by titling two poems “King and Hermit” and “A Hermit’s Song”, Murphy, albeit seemingly unintentionally, adds to the argument for these poems as derivative of actual eremitic experience.

⁵ Donnchadh Ó Corráin’s extremely useful list in “Early Irish Hermit Poetry?” (*Sages, Saints and Storytellers: Celtic Studies in Honour of Professor James Carney*, Maynooth Monographs 2 (Maynooth 1989)) correlates various sources of publication for each poem.

⁶ Ó Corráin provides such a detailed account of the original sources in “Early Irish Hermit Poetry?” that it is unnecessary to repeat it here.

Jackson and other earlier scholars believed strongly in a native eremitic poetry untainted by the artifice of pastoral.

One of the most remarkable features of these texts is their very intimate love and sympathy for wild life. . . [While there are similarities to Theocritus] there is a notable difference of attitude which is one of the distinctive things about the Irish hermit literature. Theocritus only listened to the birds and noted that their song was pleasant, but the hermits did more than this; they lived so much among the wild creatures that they became almost one with them, almost own brother to them, as it were hardly conscious that there was any distinction of genus. (Jackson 100)

If Theocritus wrote “nature poetry”, the Irish hermits *live* nature poetry, by this definition – simply write down descriptions of what is around them at any given moment. The Irish hermit, then, writing in the wilderness, in isolation, is deemed by Jackson, Murphy, Flower and other early critics to be living an ideal pastoral existence, and to be writing “true pastoral” poetry⁷: that is, they believed the authors of this body of poetry to be living the ideal pastoral existence and writing true accounts of that life. Jackson recognizes similarities between hermit poetry and Theocritus, between hermit poetry and

⁷ “True pastoral” poetry is, of course, impossible: the pastoral tradition invariably represents an urban voice writing about unlearned country people.

the poetry of the Alexandrians, but concludes that Irish hermit poetry is somehow more genuine, providing no evidence but for the belief in a widespread Irish eremitic tradition.

The Alexandrians and the poets of other literary fashions
 were men wearied with over-civilisation in a city
 environment, who ventured out into the countryside,
 admired its charm and envied its inhabitants their
 apparently carefree existence, their *secura quies et nescia
 fallere vita*, from a distance and with the eyes of a
 confirmed city-dweller. (Jackson 107-8)

The Irish hermits, unlike these learned men escaping cities and corrupt urban life, were not creating a literature of artificiality; “they were “Simple Lifers” who really did live the simple life, and that in its simplest form” (Jackson 108).

Recent historical and anthropological research, however, has indicated that the actuality of eremiticism in Ireland was very different from the picture that Jackson paints. The monk who left his settlement and went to live in the wilds of nature, while a common figure in early criticism, was actually quite uncommon in early Irish practice:

Hagiographers may have praised the saints who fled human
 society, but the reality of monastic withdrawal is clear from
 a map of monastic foundations. The *desert* (wasteland) of
 the saints was rarely far from clustered settlements, called
clachans, or the ring-forts of single families, called *raths*.
 Even the stone cells of the western shores, once thought to

be the solitary retreats of hermits, were actually quite close to farms. They seem isolated today only because they were built on the seacliffs, and the wattled huts of their neighbors have now disappeared. (Bitel 37)

Monasteries were built in locations that were not only accessible, but, in all likelihood, adjoined to already existing settlements (Bitel 38-41). Choosing a site that was already inhabited provided assurance that one could live off the land in a particular area, and also provided monks with the society so necessary for the spreading of Christian belief. The native population was necessary not only for the passing on of belief, however; on a far more basic level, “their monasteries had to be accessible for client laborers and for traders bringing animals laden with goods to their gates” (Bitel 38).

While we receive, through hagiographical texts, descriptions of the lone monk abandoning family and peers for a sojourn into the wilderness, such journeys were in actual practice rare and strongly discouraged:

[E]xiles caused the disintegration of monastic communities, for they deprived other members of support in the mission to the laity, and left them more vulnerable to the world beyond their fences and clearings. Certainly by the ninth century, if not earlier, members of monastic communities strove to control and restrict the practice of voluntary exile. Some hint of this attempt was already evident in the seventh-century penitentials, several of which decreed that

the travels of monks, nuns and even bishops were subject to the permission of colleagues and superiors. . . Even the zealous *céili Dé* realized that permanent exile from a coherent community deprived a group of valuable members and brought only questionable good to exiles and those they left behind. Maelruain, the *céile Dé* abbot-saint, criticized pilgrims to foreign lands. He even disapproved of anchorites, who journeyed only so far as the local wilderness – he refused to allow a former anchorite into his community because the man had fasted so severely and practiced such heavy penance that he was too weak to do the normal work of a monk. . . The tone of the entire ninth-century document from which these episodes are taken is one of submission to the moderate and communal rule of the clients of God. (Bitel 229-30)

Such a story provides a clear example to refute the stereotype of the ascetic Irish monk living simply in nature and writing verse in praise of nature's beauties.

Recent work on the *céili Dé* themselves has shown that isolation in the wilderness was not, in fact, a large part of their rule; the movement was, instead, one of reform that aimed at “forging links between the ascetics of a variety of communities” (Dumville xxxv). While it seems that there was a tendency in the early Irish church to write of the ideal of eremitic isolation, in practice it would appear that ascetic monks living by a strict order

of rules removed themselves frequently in groups to extreme positions in the natural world.

Archeological evidence shows us the physical reality of this pursuit of nature's extremes – *cells and communities* on coastal and island stacks (the extreme Western equivalent of the pillar of the Levantine ascetic) in death-defying locations; *monasteries* deep in boglands or in various kinds of marginal or uninhabited territories. (Dumville lviii)
(italics mine)

The recent research, in other words, shows that when monks desiring to live by strict rule did remove themselves, they rarely did so alone. The erection of numerous cells and beehive huts, as well as whole monasteries, supports this theory. Frequent use of the word “*disert*” in relation to ascetic monks and particularly the *céili Dé* has been misleading: there is evidence that the word refers to “a part of a monastery, set aside for special members of the community” (Dumville lxiv). David Dumville, who has done the most extensive study to date on the *céili Dé*, concludes that “hermit poetry” and the “nature poetry” so often ascribed by earlier scholars to lone monks residing in the wilderness cannot be proven to have been written by actual lone monks: “A great scholarly edifice of attribution was raised on these associations: but it has now collapsed under its own unsupported weight” (Dumville xxiii).

If there is so little evidence to support the idea that eremitic life was

commonplace in early Irish Christian culture, a question arises as to why early critics such as Jackson were so determined that early lyric poems were the product of that life. One possible answer lies in the dates when such scholarship was itself produced. By the time Kenneth Jackson, Robin Flower, and other early twentieth century scholars of Irish literature came to write about these works, the idea of nature would have been far more romanticized than it was in previous eras: they wrote, after all, following the rise of Romantic ideals of nature. The desire to believe in a world in which nature was written about without the distance of the pastoral, without the artifice of pastoral, was tremendously strong throughout the nineteenth century, and would have unconsciously influenced those critics writing in its wake. As will become evident in a later chapter on the Revival and specific writers such as Synge and Yeats, Irish ideas of nature and land, and particularly the nature and landscape of the Irish past, relied upon a belief very similar to Jackson and Flower's: namely that the early Irish past offered a "pure" perspective on man's experience of the natural world. Thus critics of early Irish literature, like the Revival authors, are reading and critiquing with a nostalgic gaze that has idealized the remote past. Part of this nostalgic gaze is to believe that so-called "hermit poetry" was the product of actual hermits, rather than recognizing the devices at work behind the poetics of the period, devices that can be deemed "pastoral".

Besides the problem with ascribing authorship to hermits when little evidence exists to support a widespread eremitic practice, other problems exist and have been pointed out by recent scholarship. Another reason that early critics were so keen to

ascribe this grouping of poems to monks living in isolation is that they believed the poems to have been composed during the eighth century, when, according to an influential work by Robin Flower, there was a revival of anchoritism and asceticism: Flower's work, in its emphasis on this revived asceticism under abbots like Maelruain, has provided the framework for literary criticism of this body of poetry. As we have already seen, though, even Maelruain discouraged the practice of leaving the community of monks, and recent scholarship has thrown into doubt Flower's theories.

Even with evidence to support the claim that the eighth century saw a revived practice of asceticism and anchoritism, however limited that revival may have been, there is research to suggest that these poems were not in fact composed during the eighth century, providing further ammunition against earlier theories. Donnchadh Ó Corráin has challenged the category of hermit poetry on the grounds that it cannot be proven to be eremitic due to the dates of the poems and the lack of eremitic contexts. Ó Corráin goes through the first five of the corpus of fourteen poems, all of which occur in medieval metrical handbooks, and finds that there is no evidence to date them to the eighth century. "The conclusion is that none of these poems can be dated with certainty to the ninth century, though some may belong there. All are without a context (anchoritic or otherwise) in that they are unprovenanced examples cited in the metrical tracts" (Ó Corráin 1989 255).

What the five poems share is a simple ability to describe events of the natural world in an often lovely way: "the white-waved sea on earth"; "a blackbird from a yellow-heaped branch"; "beautiful beaklet of clear note"; and the tide swelling to fullness.

Such language indicates not that the authors were living in isolation and thus, like early Thoreaus, acutely attuned to their environments; the phenomena observed and related in these poems are of the simplest kind and do not require an in-depth understanding of the natural world. Several other poems deemed by earlier scholars to be eremitic Ó Corráin dismisses as lacking contextual and linguistic evidence of the appropriate dates. “Not one of these poems can be considered anchoritic poetry in any meaningful sense” (Ó Corráin 1989 256). The case for hermit poetry must be made, then, he concludes, on the final five poems. The erudition and artifice present in these final five poems, through the use of conceits and the poetic mask, demonstrates that early Irish scribes were representing nature not in a naive or innocent way, but in one based upon literary convention and Biblical tradition. The poems represent a learned tradition that early critics recognized as eremitic, rather than merely monastic. As we have seen, however, the claims for eremiticism are thin ones, and easily dismissed based on anthropological, linguistic, and contextual evidence. As Ó Corráin concludes,

These are not the ingenuous product of the primary emotions and experiences of hermit life, a spiritual autobiography in verse. Here, rather, religious life is seen through the conceits and tropes of cultivated and scholarly men writing to meet the needs and taste of a cultural elite.

[. . .] The naive hypothesis that this body of verse derives its inspiration from an eremitic movement, and that it is the

literary expression of their ideals and experiences by actual
hermits. cannot be sustained. (Ó Corráin 1989 264)

At this point, it is valuable to turn to Maria Tymoczko's enlightening essay on what she refers to as "A Poetry of Masks". Tymoczko begins by recognizing that "what is startling about native Irish and Welsh literature in the early period is the absence of lyric in the sense that. . . [t]here is an almost total lack of direct personal expression" (Tymoczko 1996 188). Most early Irish poetry seems to adopt what Tymoczko calls a "traditional poetic mask" (190) – the use of a historical or fictional character who is both recognizable to an audience and as such useful to an author in depicting a particular set of emotions.

The lyric poet in most literary traditions creates a mask,
but the mask is, paradoxically, usually a mask of the poet's
own face. . . Thus, it is not the masking per se that
distinguished Celtic lyric poetry from other lyric traditions.
it is the poets' assumption of traditional, pre-established
masks that marks the poetics. (Tymoczko 1996 190)

While this analysis is used by Tymoczko to discuss primarily poetry ascribed to particular historical or fictional figures⁸, there is a side of it which proves helpful in relation to hermit poetry.

⁸ This end of the analysis will be discussed more fully in the next section on the poetry ascribed to Finn.

Early Celtic poets do, of course, speak in their own voices, but what they speak is rarely personal in the strict sense of the word. . . [I]t can be argued that in composing these types of poems, the poet had already assumed a traditional role or function, which came in a sense with a traditional persona. Thus, many poems in which the poet seemingly speaks with his own voice are limiting cases of the phenomenon of masking, for the poet's voice in certain types of poems was already determined by training and cultural tradition. (1996 200)

While Tymoczko is discussing particular poetic forms here – satire and praise poetry, elegies and eulogies – the analysis is quite appropriate in a discussion of hermit poetry: for, as we as will see, the poets are adopting the persona of the hermit as a trope through which to praise nature and God. The early medieval Irish monastic poetry under discussion here employs anchoritic and eremitic personae, drawing upon both the classical and Biblical knowledge they had been schooled in, and so introduces into Irish literary tradition the nostalgic mode in a natural frame; but they did so as personae, and so wrote with a nostalgia for lives that they had never experienced, aligning themselves very much with the traditional pastoral mode.

Tymoczko herself recognizes that the theory of the poetic mask can be applied to eremitic poetry, and refers in the following passage to the poem Murphy has titled “The Scribe in the Woods” (“Dom-Farcaí fídbaide fáil”) – one of the five final poems that Ó

Corráin examines for eremitic context and content – as well as to the well known and frequently translated “Pangur Ban”:

Lyric poetry without a mask or a conventionalized persona is comparatively rare in early Celtic tradition, and where it occurs, it is the exception that proves the rule. . . I would argue that these poems are governed by a different set of conventions and norms from the lyrics already considered. Though in the Irish language and in Irish meters, they are aimed at a different social context; they are more European and have an international religious sensibility. The use of the “I” here is more typical of classical lyric than of early Celtic lyric as a whole, and the poems seem to be influenced by Latin poetics. It is no accident that both these poems are preserved in Continental Latin manuscripts rather than Irish manuscripts. . . (1996 204-5)

In other words, while poems such as “The Scribe in the Woods” do not fall in line with what appears to be an early Irish tradition of adopting a historical or fictional persona to express emotion, they are characterized by a wider set of what might be called European conventions.

When viewed through this lens, it becomes obvious that scribes would have been conscious and would have made conscious use of “masks” such as that of the eremitic voice, or the scribal voice, in order to write poems that quite conventionally praise nature.

particularly given the exposure of the unknown authors to European writing and traditional pastoral forms. "The Scribe in the Woods" is such a poem:

A hedge of trees overlooks me; a blackbird's lay sings to me
(an announcement which I shall not conceal); above my
lined book the birds' chanting sings to me.

A clear-voiced cuckoo sings to me (goodly utterance) in a
grey cloak from bush fortresses. The Lord is indeed good to
me: well do I write beneath a forest of woodland.

(Murphy's translation, *Early Irish Lyrics* 5)⁹

The poetic persona remains veiled here by the beauties of nature that are described; it is only subtly apparent that the persona is that of a scribe in the wilderness. The natural world that is described, however, is conventional: trees and birds are the only objects identified, and, in the poem's final two lines, it becomes clear that nature is praised in order to praise "the Lord [that] is indeed good to me." The adoption of the mask or

* Dom-farcaí fídbaide fáil
fom-chain loíd luin, lúad nad cêl;
huas mo lebrán, ind línech.
fom-chain trírech inna n-én.

Fomm-chain coí menn, medair mass.
hi mbrot glass de dingnaib doss.
Debrath! nom-Choimmdiu-coima:
cain-scribaimm fo roida ross. (Murphy 1956 4)

poetic persona of the scribe allows for a wider use of writerly artifice that praises God and nature with the same deft stroke.

The poetic mask is in further evidence in the poem Murphy has titled “A Hermit Song” (“M’ óenurán im aireclán/ cen deuinén im gnáis”), which represents very vividly an imaginary, future dream for a solitary existence in nature. Adopting this stance allows the persona to praise the idea of the lone pilgrimage while writing within the monastic enclosure:

All alone in my little cell, without a single human being
along with me: such pilgrimage would be dear to my heart
before going to meet death.

A hidden secluded little hut for forgiveness of all evil: a
conscience unperturbed and untroubled directed towards
holy Heaven.

Sanctifying a body trained in good habits: trampling like a
man upon it, with eyes feeble and tearful for the forgiveness
of my passions.

Passions weak and withered; renouncement of this
wretched world: pure eager thoughts: let God’s pardon be
sought thus.

Sincere wailings towards cloudy Heaven: seemly truly-holy
confessions: eager showers of tears.

A cold fearsome bed where one rests like a doomed man;
short hazardous sleep; frequent early invocation.

My food and what I should possess would make a lovely
hardship of my life: beyond doubt what I would eat would
not make me sinful.

Dry bread weighed out -- let us carefully cast our faces
down --; water from a bright and pleasant hillside, let that
be the draught you drink.

An unpalatable meagre diet, diligent attention to reading,
renunciation of fighting and visiting, a calm easy conscience.

How delightful. . . some pure holy blemish would be.
withered emaciated cheeks, skin leathery and thin!

I should love to have Christ son of God visiting me, my
 Creator, my King, and that my mind should resort to Him
 in the kingdom in which He dwells.

Let the place which shelters me amid monastic enclosures
 be a delightful hermit's plot hallowed by religious stones,
 with me alone therein. (Murphy's trans., *Early Irish Lyrics*
 19-23)¹⁰

¹⁰ M'óenurán im aireclán
 cen duinén im gnáis:
 robad inmuin ailethrán
 ré ndul i ndáil mbáis.

Bothnat deirrit diamair
 do dílgud cach cloin:
 cubus díriuch diamain
 dochum nime noib.

Nóebad cuirp co sobésaib:
 saltrad ferda for,
 súilib tláithib todéraib
 do dílgud mo thol.

Tola fanna féodaídi.
 freitech domnáin ché.
 coiclé bána béodaídi.
 ba sí dígde Dé.

Donála co ndílechtaí
 dochum nime nél.
 coibsin fíala fíretlai.
 frossa díana dēr.

Dérgud adúar áigthide

The persona's focus here is clearly aimed at an un-lived and so only imagined existence of hermit life. In positing his future as an eremitic ideal, the persona is able to adopt, through this mask, some of the qualities associated with the hermit, and to detail them. The mask, in other words, allows the reader to experience the eremitic ideal without that ideal

amál tálgud troch.
cotlud gairit gáibhíde.
diucra meinic moch.

Mo thúara, mo thuinide.
robad inmuin cacht:
nim-dingénad cuilide
mo longud, cen acht.

Arán toimse tírmaide –
maith don-airnem gnúis –
uisce lerga lígmaise
ba sí deog no lúis.

Longud serbda séimide.
menma i llebor léir.
lám fri cath, fri céilide.
cubus roithen réid.

Robad inmuin airidi
ainim nechta nóeb.
leicne tírmaí tenaidi.
tonn chrocnaide chóel.

Crist mac Dé dom thaithigid.
mo Dúilem, mo Rí.
mo menma díá aithigid
issined flaith i mbí.

Ba sí in chrích fom-themadar
eter lissu lann
locán álainn eladglan.
os me m'óenur ann. (Murphy 1956 19-23)

becoming a reality: it is purposefully left vague, in the realm of the imaginary. The descriptions of the cell and its site are unspecific: the hardship of the place is described, and the supplications that the hermit will undergo, but the actual setting is omitted. Indeed, the setting does not matter here: what the poem attempts to achieve is not a realistic portrayal of hermit life, but only the surreal presentations of the imagination of that life. In writing such a poem, one that deals with the stretching future as yet unexperienced, the author employs a nostalgia for that imagined life, a nostalgia that is aligned with the traditional pastoral form: the nostalgia, in other words, is for an un-lived life.

Murphy has titled another poem “Manchán’s Wish” (“Dúthracar, a Maic Dé bí”). In this poem and in the two to follow, the author has adopted specific personae for his mask: in this case the adopted persona is Saint Manchán of Liath, who died in 665 (Murphy 1956 29); that the voice is a persona can be concluded due to the fact that the language of the poem dates to the late ninth or early tenth century, and so it is unlikely that poem of Manchán’s survived for over 300 years before being consigned to writing. Thus we have a further example of the use of the “traditional poetic mask”, used here to describe an ideal that has not yet existed. And, as we might come to expect, the mask of the religious figure living in semi-isolation also allows for a catalogue of ideal natural surroundings:

A beautiful wood close by, surrounding it on every side, for
the nurture of many-voiced birds, for shelter to hide them.

A southern aspect for warmth, a little stream across its
 glebe, choice land of abundant bounty which would be good
 for every plant. . . (Murphy's trans., *Early Irish Lyrics* 31,
 stanzas 3,4)¹¹

The persona does not only wish for ideal natural surroundings, however; he also wishes for "a few young men of sense" for company in prayer, and for a church "decked with linen" (Murphy's trans., *Early Irish Lyrics* 31, stanzas 5,8). When the descriptions of natural surroundings are taken together with such descriptions of other aspects of this ideal life, it is clear that the poetic mask allows for a focus on a broad version of that life. Nature is, in a sense, incidental here, as it forms only part of the picture of the persona's imagined ideal life: its representation is part of literary convention.

The use of the persona allows the author to create, out of what is a not highly original description of an ideal existence, a poem that draws on an established literary tradition – that of the saint living in isolation with religion and nature. By making use of an historical figure, the author draws that history into his poem and makes a bid for

¹¹ Fidbaid álainn immocus
 impe do cech leith.
 fri altram n-én n-ilgothach.
 fri clithar día cleith.

Deisebar fri tesugud.
 Sruthán dar a lainn,
 Talam togu co méit raith
 Bad maith do cach clainn. . . (Murphy 1956 30 st. 3-4)

realism; however, based upon the dates, and the fact that this type of poem is not unusual, that realism ultimately can be discounted.

Another poem, titled by Murphy as “King and Hermit” (“A Marbáin, a dithrubaig”), is again a portrayal of an idealized existence in nature. The poem purports to be an exchange between a king, the highest representative of the socially constructed world, and his hermit half brother, a representative of the ascetic and spiritual life; we see here another use of the “traditional poetic mask” in the adoption of the persona of Gúaire, a king known to have died in ca. 666 A.D., and the invention of what Ó Corráin refers to as his “literary” half brother (Ó Corráin 1989 258). This mask allows for a dialogue to ensue that offers a comparison between two extremes of existence, and allows too for a lengthy catalogue of the natural world’s wonders and beauties; Marbán, when questioned by his brother as to how he can live the life he does, answers with thirty-three stanzas in praise of different aspects of the natural world, from his animal companions to the simple beauty of his surroundings, resulting in a total idealization of what critics such as Jackson and Flower have taken to be the eremitic life.

The fact that the poem exists in dialogue form should immediately signal the use of a poetic construct. Many of Theocritus and Vergil’s early pastorals make use of dialogue, and while this conversation differs from pastoral tradition in representing what is, in the context of the poem, an “urban” figure, elements of an idealized Christian pastoral are present here. Far from presenting readers with a realistic representation of nature, the poet presents an Edenic world in which nature is both bountiful and beautiful, a sign of God’s munificence. The poetic persona of Marbán, far from living in ascetic

isolation, describes a life that contain elements of society, such as mead and the signs of settled agriculture (Ó Corráin 1989 260), and ascribes his happiness in this ideal life to “gentle Christ” (Murphy’s trans., *Early Irish Lyrics* 19, stanza 31).

Nature is used in the poem to create a contrast to the life lived by the King and, presumably, by the majority of the population. In its focus on the difference between the life of the country and that of the “city”, this poem owes much to the tradition of the pastoral, and shows its debt in part through the use of dialogue, as well as in the tautly wrought descriptions of nature:

Long branches of a yew-green yewtree: glorious augury!

Lovely is the place: the great greenery of an oak adds to
that portent.

*

The wind’s voice against a branchy wood, on a day of grey
cloud: cascades in a river: roar of rock: delightful music!

(Murphy’s trans., *Early Irish Lyrics*, 13, 17, stanzas 13,
29)¹²

¹² Mong co libri
ibair éoglaís:
nósta cé!l!
Cain in magan:
márglas carach
darsin sén.

**

Fogur gaithe
Fri fid fleascach.
Forglas néol:

As in the poems already discussed, the descriptions of nature here, while forming a seemingly central part of the poem, are in fact used only to cement an argument, in effect, for the eremitic life. In this, the poem resembles traditional pastoral forms, which make use of nature in order to add to an argument, dialogue, or set of ideas.

A final poem serves to extend these arguments about the “poetic mask” and the use of nature as a conceit within that frame. What Murphy calls “My Little Oratory” (“M’airiuclán hi Túaim Inbir”) appears in a ninth century manuscript with Vergil commentary, Greek paradigms, Latin hymns, astronomical notes, and other Irish poems (Murphy 1956 172). As with the previous poems, this one is placed in the mouth of a persona, in this case that of Suibhne Geilt, a king supposed to have gone mad in the battle of Mag Rath in 639.¹³

Suibhne describes his hut in a *barr edin* (ivied tree-top) as delightful, roofed by the stars. As in earlier examples, the poetic persona thanks God for his situation, for having provided him with his naturally thatched roof. The poem cannot, however, be attributed to an eremitic tradition. Most significantly, it is ascribed to Suibhne, who was not a monastic hermit or saint but a wild man. While there are, of course, similarities between the ideal of the monastic hermit living in natural isolation and Suibhne’s

essa aba
esnad ala:

álainn céol. (Murphy 1956 12, 16, st. 13, 29)

¹³ For an analysis of the origins of the Suibhne story see Chapter Three’s section on *Buile Suibhne*.

existence in the wilderness as a bird-man. Suibhne is never, in any text, cited as being a monastic hermit, and is, in the longer, later manuscript to be discussed in Chapter Three, in fact driven to his madness by virtue of his anti-Christian stance. Thus the idea that this poem is eremitic seems impossible. Instead, the poem takes what we can begin to see as a fairly common trope – that of adopting an eremitic or pseudo-eremitic voice – and applies it to another “myth” of the period: that of the wild man. In this, the Suibhne poem represents a quite original work of art: but it is, after all, just that – a conscious, and conscientious, work of art, one that describes the beauty of nature within the framework of a poetic conceit. In this poem, as in the previous examples, the focus cannot be said to be the eremitic life, or even the scribal life; it is the description of nature that is most significant here, and so we can conclude that the adoption of such a voice provides a frame for it. In this, these early Irish poems, previously deemed to be eremitic, can be read as examples of a traditional pastoral form filtering into the Irish literary tradition.

Having reached such a conclusion, we need, now, to ask two questions. The first, which has already arisen, asks why early critics insisted on this small body of poems as being eremitic in their representation of nature. Second, what can be concluded about the representation of nature in these poems now that they are proven to be non-eremitic? The first question I will leave aside for the time being, and will address it in the chapter dealing with the Revivalists and early criticism of Irish literature; it will be enough for the moment to answer it by saying that early critics, like the Revivalists, were in the process – consciously or unconsciously – of shaping a nation, and so relied upon specific ideas of

the past in the process. One of those ideas would appear to be an idea of man's relationship to nature in the early Irish world as free of distance, detachment, and pastoral constructs. Non-Irish critics, far from offering a more realistic appraisal of this early poetry, by virtue of their age, also fell into the trap of opting to see early Irish literature as reflecting a pure relationship with nature untainted by any artifice. Influenced by Romantic ideals of nature, critics such as Kuno Meyer also believed in a relationship with nature in early Ireland free from pastoral artifice.

The second question is significant in terms of an analysis of how the function of nature in Irish literature changed over time. From these poems, we receive a picture of the natural world that is relatively simplistic: many of the poems simply catalogue beauty in the form of specific trees, plants, crops and animals, and give thanks to God for their production. Such sentiments, produced as we can now assume them to have been by monastic authors with a certain familiarity with classical and Biblical literature, and couched as they are within the framework of conceits such as the mask, suggest that this simplistic representation is not, after all, so simple. Instead one could argue that early Irish authors forged what we can think of as a Christianized pastoral, representing nature in a simple language that had as its inspiration not merely the literal world of Ireland or the spiritual world of God that early critics assumed to be their only drive, but a complexity of literary sources. From such sources as the works of Vergil, Irish scholars would have been familiar with the ideal of the natural world as producing men who were simple but hard working and honest. Knowledge of such sources, when combined with a thorough comprehension of Biblical books and exegesis, produced a literature that credits

God for the beauty of the natural world, and offers praise of God through the production of poetry in praise of his works. The adoption of an eremitic mask allowed poets to assume a familiarity with the natural world, and so, by implication, to assume a familiarity with God.

There is an implied pastoral nostalgia present in these poems: the adoption of eremitic masks whose real life personas had not existed for several centuries suggests that, like Vergil and Theocritus, the unknown authors of these poems are engaged in a nostalgic exercise of creating lives they have never lived. However, this form of nostalgia is very different from the nostalgia present in Irish literature after the early period, in that it does not mourn the loss of culture. Instead, this body of poetry suggests, through traditional pastoral conceits, a longing for a life unlived, a life centered not in the cultural arena of the monastery in which these poems were produced, but in nature. Drawing upon their knowledge of classical and Biblical texts, the authors of these poems used nature as a vehicle to offer praise to a God that had become astoundingly central to early Ireland, and did so not in the later anti-pastoral mode of Irish literature, but in the traditional pastoral form. It is this more traditional pastoral form that will return thematically to Irish literature during the Revival.

Fenian and Seasonal Poetry

If the treatment of nature in “hermit” poetry is benign and serene, the portrait that we receive of nature in the body of work known as Fenian literature is reflective of

an entirely different ethos. A great deal has been written about the *fian*, the group of traveling, hunting warriors with royal pedigree who are the focus of a wide selection of poems and prose tales. The word “*fian*” first appears, Kuno Meyer notes, in two ninth century manuscripts, the Book of Armagh and the St Paul Codex. The incidence of the occurrence of *fian* literature increases throughout the medieval period in a variety of manuscripts, with three occurrences Meyer has dated to the eighth century; seven to the ninth century; sixteen to the tenth century; and nine to the eleventh century (Meyer 1910 xv-xxxi). This indicates that the popularity of Finn and *fian* lore in literary circles was on the rise; and the widespread occurrence of the lore from the twelfth century onwards shows that it was considered a significant part of Irish literature, possibly in part because of the association of *fian* lore with almost every part of Ireland. Unlike Cuchulain, who is predominantly associated with and placed in Ulster, Finn and *fian* lore cover a much wider territory, and so could appeal to a wider audience.

Because a governing theme of the *fian* is the hunt, and because its members function on the periphery of society in nature, the natural world has been deemed by critics – from Kuno Meyer to Joseph Nagy – to be particularly significant in this literature. However, in *fian* literature from the ninth until the twelfth centuries, nature is in fact not at all prominent except in conventional terms. While the hunt is, of course, a primary occupation of the *fian*, it is used overwhelmingly as a mere frame for adventure and battle tales. It is only in the handful of “seasonal poems” ascribed to Finn that the natural world is a focus; in these nature is used as a seeming test of the persona’s ability for second sight. As in the previous section, we will find that, in their employment of

literary devices, neither of these literatures is, at this stage in their development, steeped in the nostalgia associated with later Irish literature that mourns the loss of culture, but only in conventional description of nature.

Early critics of the Finn cycle entered into great debate as to the historical reality of the *fian* and of Finn MacCumall, with most concluding that the *fiana* had been possibly real organizations, with Finn MacCumall as their central fictional figure. O Rahilly notes that, while Finn's death in the year 284 A.D. is listed in the Annals of Tighernach (O Rahilly 272), he and the members of his *fiana* "are entirely ignored by the genealogists and by the authors of the *Lebor Gabala*" (O Rahilly 274). This would suggest that Finn MacCumall is, like Cuchulain, a fictional figure around whom a cycle of tales was based, a cycle that reflected attitudes and mores of early Irish society. O Rahilly concludes that "to look for traces of Finn mac Cumail's *diin* on the hill of Allen is as vain to discover Bodb Derg's residence on Slievenamon or Mider's on Croghan Hill. The Otherworld is impervious to archaeological exploration" (O Rahilly 281).

The *fian* is traditionally headed by Finn, the son of a famous *fěnnid* and the grandson of a famous druid who existed – also fictionally – in the third century A.D.. This combination of *fennid* and seer merge in Finn and make him, as Joseph Nagy has pointed out, the ultimate outsider and the ultimate insider, a contradiction that allows Finn his place in the lore as one to whom men come seeking both military help and advice

on non-military matters. Finn's ability to discern truths and prophesy events by placing his thumb under his tooth adds to his strength as a figure in the literature, making him into a prophet-poet-warrior who claims the greatest of respect.

Finn's own upbringing – relayed in a handful of scattered tales – reveals a great deal about the ethos of the *fian* and its attitude towards the natural world. Raised almost solely by women in his early years, Finn lived in a forest, in a tree that had been carved out for his protection. Thus Finn's childhood involved an emphasis on the world of nature: women, traditionally associated with the more "natural" elements of the world, were his guardians, and, further, were his guardians in an environment that was wild. His upbringing placed emphasis on mobility, on the ability to identify, and to identify with, animals and prey of both land and sea. "The natural, as opposed to cultural, ambiance of Finn's early years indicates that he is still in an initiatory phase of existence, without any real social identity or role" (Nagy 1985 115). That a tree, however, had been carved out for his protection, signals what Joseph Nagy has astutely observed is the transformation of a natural object into a cultural one. This, Nagy argues, can be taken as an indication of the *fian*'s role: ushering youths from the world of nature into the world of culture. Too this is an appropriate summation of the ways in which the *fian* existed in nature: unlike a later figure like Sweeney, who lives in a natural world largely devoid of cultural elements, the *fian* carve out of the natural world a culture that is, by all accounts, an established one, vast numbers of men moving through the forest with musicians, animals, and families, and calling upon various kings and nobles for shelter in between hunts and battles.

The *fīan* (plural *fīana*) can be best described as a band of roving men whose occupations were war and hunting.¹⁴ It appears, from textual evidence, that “the early Irish *fīan* catered for propertiless males of free birth who had left fosterage but had not yet inherited the property needed to settle down as full landowning members of the *tuath* liable to military service” (McCone 205). Thus, as the first editor of the Finn tales, Eoin MacNeill, noted, the *fīan* is a social organization whose figures exist on the margins of society, outside of the landowning community (MacNeill xvii-xlii). Joseph Nagy’s invaluable contribution to the study of Finn-lore has been to expand on MacNeill’s original observation:

An adult becomes a *fēnnid* when his rights have been violated and no means of redress other than violence are available. . . . In addition to functioning as a “last resort” for hard-pressed members of the *tuath*, *fēnnidecht* also appears in literature as a *rite de passage* for youths undergoing the transition from childhood to adulthood. (Nagy 1985 20)

The *fīan*, then, provides a service to young men – and, very occasionally, women – in moving them through the transition from unlanded youths to landed men: from outside of the social structure to within the social structure. The *fēnnid*, as an outlaw, or literally

¹⁴ Kim McCone notes that the word “*diberg*”, plunderers or highway men, was used interchangeably with “*fīan*” in early texts, and came to be differentiated only by the time of the *Acallam na Senórach*. This emphasizes further the outside status of the *fīan*. For the purpose of clarity and continuity between this chapter and the next, in which the *Acallam* is discussed, I will be using “*fīan*” throughout.

“outlandish” figure, joins the *fian* “as an extraordinary means of reacquiring what one is legally entitled to within society” (Nagy 1985 48). Significantly, in its involvement in issues of ensuring legal rights to land or property, the *fian* is automatically concerned with the perpetuation of a class system in which the aristocracy owned land. In providing this service, the *fian* acts as both “a cause and effect of social change” (Nagy 1985 49) within narrative, but also forces the continuation of societal practices such as the passing on of land to rightful heirs.

The service that the *fian* provides is one that can be extended beyond that to individual youths serving out their initiation rite: the possibility existed for alliances between kings and the *fian*. Kim McCone has suggested that the *fian* might even have served as a freelance army of sorts, since the *fian* is occasionally called upon to act on behalf of a family or king or, as is the case in the *Acallam na Senórach*, on behalf of a *sídh*. This suggests that, if there was not direct hostility between *fian* and *tuath*, there was an alliance, however temporary, in effect. That the *fian* are often written of as being hosted by kings and nobles attests to their involvement with the more settled culture of early Ireland.

What this suggests is that the *fian*’s existence in nature is a strange one. While they do exist in nature in terms of their reliance on the hunt as an identity-forming activity, they are actively involved in culture, existing on a border between the two and so creating lives that are fundamentally a combination of natural and cultural elements. It has been an error of earlier critics, therefore, to conclude that nature is the sole determinant of identity within the *fian*.

It is known that Finn lore existed as an orally transmitted genre as well as in its written form. Murphy, in his work on the subject, describes many tales collected in the mid and late nineteenth century from storytellers throughout Ireland, tales that were unknown in written tradition. This group of tales tends to be simple in that they are variants of formulas found in most cultures' folk-tales. The tales and poems to be found in written form – sprinkled through numerous manuscripts – tend, however, to be more complex and of a greater variety thematically.

It would appear. . . that beside the class of Fionn lore which exists primarily by oral unlearned tradition, there is another class which exists primarily by literary and learned tradition, and which is distinguished from the unlearned, purely oral, Fionn lore by being found in modern manuscripts. . . . Learned, or manuscript, Fionn lore is not alone richer in genres and tale-types than oral lore, but the individual differences of tales and ballads inside those types are much greater than in oral lore. . . . Literary Fionn lore is then to be distinguished from folk Fionn lore less by differences in tale types than by differences in form or spirit. More closely constructed, presented in poetical or rhetorical language, unified often by the heroic, realistic, or visionary spirit that animates them, the literary pieces bear the marks of minds that have been trained to a mastery over

the matter of literature more complete than that attained by
the minds which molded what are known oral tales.

(Murphy 1953 xxxix-x)

The written form of the earliest Finn literature to be dealt with here can thus be assumed to be the product of Christian Ireland, regardless of its oral precedents. As with the body of hermit poetry, which reflects a learned and scholarly tradition, Finn literature reflects scholarly concerns, and, particularly, the Christian concern with adapting “native” tales to suitable Biblical and classical models. Not all early critics recognized this learned aspect of the tales. Gerard Murphy believed that the poets of the early Finn lore were men who did indeed live in the wilderness, citing proof “of the open-air upbringing. . . afforded by that familiarity on their part with the ways of hunting men. . .” (Murphy 1953 civ-v). As we have seen in the case of hermit poetry, though, it is dangerous to attribute poetry to the character or characters represented. Joseph Nagy is more cautious, and is convinced of the scholarly origins of the written texts, speculating that authors of this poetry, while not ivory tower intellectuals, were probably not wild men or hunters, but “the new literature intelligentsia of Christianized Ireland” (Nagy 1985 31).

The class of men represented by Finn literature, as Gerard Murphy has pointed out, is an aristocratic order, given the attention paid to royal genealogy, land ownership, and the accouterments of wealth, such as clothing, jewels, and precious metals. In this, literature surrounding the *fián* resembles heroic literature of other early cultures:

Heroic literature is aristocratic in outlook. As virtues it
recognises loyalty, prowess, and fulfillment of one’s word.

Boasting, provided that the boast is equaled by the deed, is not considered a fault. It idealises its heroes, yet remains fundamentally realistic: those heroes are made of flesh and blood: their success or failure depends more on character and action than on accident or magic, though fate and the gods may be regarded as inscrutable yet necessary factors in life. War is the profession of the princes of whom it treats, a type of war that is direct and straightforward, almost devoid of strategy, and commonly decided by the personal prowess of leaders. Description of ceremony of court life, of the interior of palaces, of the ornament of clothes and weapons, is universal in heroic literature.

(Murphy 1953 xii)

It is clear from Murphy's overview of the general characteristics of heroic literature that the Finn cycle can be seen as a part of a tradition in pre-Christian cultures of producing literature and oral tales celebrating the hero and his deeds: one thinks immediately of Homer's Odysseus in this category, but the tradition can be seen to extend to such orally derivative works as the Finn cycle. The natural world represented in Irish heroic literature is the product of a monastic scholarship that seeks, as Kim McCone has documented, to convert oral tales into the framework of Christian ideals, thus providing us with a window onto the differences between Christian and pre-Christian ideas of nature in Ireland. What we will find is that, prior to the twelfth century, this "translation" is not as obvious as it

is in a piece like the *Acallam na Senórach*. Instead, what we receive in early Finn lore is a natural world that is largely incidental to narrative, outlining pre-Christian Irish attitudes towards nature that consider it an unremarkable part of day to day life while engaging conventional nature description. Because these early pieces tend to focus unanimously on the heroic narratives, we can conclude that the belief that Fenian literature places the utmost importance on the natural world is in fact unfounded. Seasonal poetry, a small body of poetry within Fenian literature, does, however, focus more obviously on nature; in these poems we receive a portrait of a natural world evoked through the use of conceits and devices that are aristocratic and so arguably pastoral in outlook; in both cases the literature is devoid of the nostalgia that so marks the *fíian* literature of the twelfth century onwards.

Several examples of early *fíian* literature explicate the themes briefly explored here: namely that the *fíian*, while deriving their image from the natural world, are very much a cultural organization. From Kuno Meyer's list ordering *fíian* literature (Meyer 1910 xvi-xxxi), I have chosen a selection of poems and prose tales from the eighth through the eleventh centuries in order to demonstrate the fact that *fíian* literature did not, as is commonly believed, emphasize the natural world in an extraordinary way prior to the twelfth century. Rather, the literature tends to use the natural world as a setting that is almost universally incidental to the narratives.

One of the earliest extant prose tales dealing with the *fián* is edited and translated by Meyer as “The Quarrel between Finn and Oisín”.¹⁵ This tale, whose language dates to the eighth or ninth century, is, as Meyer points out, an adaptation of a universal tale of combat between father and son. Because Finn and Oisín are “throughout [the Finn cycle] on amicable terms and closely associated in their exploits and adventures” (Meyer 1910 22), the narrative model for the tale was clearly introduced from outside sources. Oisín and Finn are said to have argued, and Oisín has departed his company for a year. When Finn finds him “in a great wilderness” (Meyer 1910 25)¹⁶, they engage in a lighthearted verbal battle. Other than the initial reference to the wilderness, there is no use of the natural world in this piece; it is merely the backdrop to the tale.

This tale serves as a prime example of the way in which nature is represented in Finn lore up until the time of the *Acallam*: no special place is granted to nature, which remains in the background. In poem after poem, a forest or wilderness is the setting, but within that setting the poetic personae are concerned only with telling the tale of battle or heroism. “Reicne Fothaid Canainne”, an eighth century poem (Meyer 1910 10-21), follows this formula, as do two brief prose pieces. “Bruiden Átha” (“The Fight of the Ford”) and “Rucait Fhaghbala in Fesa do Finn inso ocus Marbad Cuil Dub” (“How Finn Obtained Knowledge, and the Slaying of Cul Dub”) (Meyer 1899 241-9). While place is specified, or fleetingly described, the obvious focus of the pieces is slaughter and the significance of those lost or defeated in battle.

¹⁵ In Meyer’s *Fianaigeacht* 1910, pgs. 22-7.

¹⁶ “Fangaib Find iarum i ndithrub mór” (Meyer 1910 24).

“Almu,” a tenth century poem printed and translated in Edward Gwynn’s *Metrical Dindshenchas* Part II (72), details the history of the placename that gives the poem its title: this tale will make its way into the *Acallam* in a slightly different version provided by Cailte. While place is what dictates the poem, it is quickly abandoned in favor of the tales of those involved in its naming, and no other mention of place or nature is made. This, too, is a typical way in which nature is used: place is commemorated, but is not, as might seem at first to be the case, the central theme of the poem. Instead, it is the cultural events that occur in a particular place that are given central stage.

This is evident in Whitley Stokes’s translation of “Finn and the Phantoms” (*Revue Celtique VII*), dated to the eleventh century. The poem tells of Finn’s run-ins and battles with various giants and a group of nine bodies (without heads), and nine heads (without bodies). While Finn and his men ride horses, race, and hunt, they are, throughout the poem, associating with the king, being entertained at a festival, and receiving gifts of wealth and animals. The cultural elements are, in other words, emphasized here; nature is again only a conventional backdrop to the narrative.

The final piece I have chosen from the body of early *fian* literature is “Úath Beinne Étair” (Meyer 1889 125-134), a tenth century prose tale with a poem inserted into the text. The narrative surrounds Diarmaid and Grainne’s flight from Finn, a tale of which there are many versions. In this, the couple make their way to a cave in the Hill of Howth, accompanied by an old woman. When the old woman later encounters Finn while on her own, she betrays the two, and, upon returning to the cave, recites a poem. The poem focuses almost exclusively on nature, detailing cold weather and its effect on places

and animals throughout Ireland. In its descriptions of winter weather this poem resembles some of the seasonal poems to be discussed next: rather than focusing on the effects of winter on a specific place, this poem details winter generally, as in the following stanzas:

Cold, cold!

Cold to-night is the broad plain of Lurg,

Higher the snow than the mountain-range,

The deer cannot get at their food.

...

On the little company of the birds has broken forth

Keen wind and cold ice,

The blackbird cannot get a lee to her liking,

Shelter at the side in Cuan-woods.

...

From flock and from down to rise

-- Take it to heart! -- were folly for thee:

Ice in heaps on every ford,

That is why I keep saying, <<cold>>!

(Meyer RC XI 132-4)¹⁷

¹⁷ Fuit, fuid!

Fuar inocht Mag lethon Luirc,
arda in snechta `nas an sliab,
nocha roichenn fiadh a cuid.

Asmaith do menpaid na n-en

Observations on seasonal changes and on weather form a mini-genre in early Irish literature: approximately ten such poems dating to the period prior to the tenth century are known. Because this particular example is within a story that does not need it for narrative purposes, it is likely that it was merely inserted and had a life of its own outside of the Diarmuid and Grainne cycle. We know that this practice was not uncommon in early and medieval Irish literature; poems that appear in the twelfth century *Acallam*, for example, appear in other medieval texts. This poem's focus on nature in the form of weather suggests further that it was composed outside of a Fenian context, particularly given its likeness to seasonal poetry. As a result, we can conclude, based upon comparison to other early Finn material, that this poem is an anomaly in its stress on nature.

This brief survey of early *ġian* literature demonstrates several things. First, we see that narratives and poetry in which the *ġian* were mentioned did not necessarily place Finn or other well known Fenian characters at their center; instead, Finn, Oisín, Cailte or the *ġian* generally are mentioned in connection with other mythological and / or historical heroes. Secondly, the natural world in these works tends to serve merely as a backdrop to

in gaeh *ger's* a[n]t oichred fuar:
 ni fagbann lon drom bad ail.
 din a toib i Coilltib Cuan.

...

Eirgi de colcaid's do cluim
 -- tucc dit' uidh! -- noca ciall duit:
 immad n-aigrid ar cech n-ath,
 isse fath fan-aprann << fuid>>. (Meyer RC XI 130-1)

narrative: no special emphasis is placed on elements of nature or on a life experienced in close connection to the natural world. The one exception in this group of eight examples is much more closely aligned with seasonal poetry, and so cannot be considered reflective of a particularly Fenian ethos. What we can conclude, then, is that, in Fenian literature prior to the twelfth century, the natural world represented is reflective of early Irish views of nature: while it is present, it is unremarkable, a given within the context of these works. This suggests a conventional rendering of nature as an additional element of artifice in narration, but nothing more. Finally, in the emphasis placed upon the cultural interactions of these figures – in battle, at feasts – it becomes clear that the natural world serves as a frame for what was deemed the more significant story: that of the heroic adventure.

Unlike other early Fenian literature, seasonal poetry places an immediate and obvious emphasis on nature. This group of approximately ten poems, many attributed to Finn, tend to herald a new season, offer general characteristics of a season, or describe weather. Kenneth Jackson has noted the similarity between this body of poetry and the “Natureingang” popular on the continent during the medieval period. This fashion of seasonal nature poetry “spread to most of the languages of Western Europe, including English, later Irish, and perhaps (as we shall see) twelfth to fourteenth century Welsh” (Jackson 1935 150); Goliardic poetry also shares certain characteristics with this work. However, since, as Jackson points out, these traditions did not reach Ireland until well after seasonal poems appeared – in the ninth and tenth centuries – they evidently did not

influence the Irish tradition, which did not tend towards the production of love songs set in nature until the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Nonetheless, it is worthwhile noting the similarity, as it suggests that early medieval cultures tended to produce poetry on the seasons and weather; the movement in Ireland was not unique. Jackson suggests that this type of poetry probably derives from “pastoral ritual[s] for ensuring fertility” (Jackson 160), in the case of “May Day” poems. Maria Tymoczko has suggested that seasonal poetry derives from a native Irish rather than Christian tradition of nature writing, citing the metrical structures as possible proof, and the attribution of all of the seasonal poetry to “legendary poets” (Tymoczko 1983 33), and particularly Finn, thought to be a product of the pre-Christian era.

Regardless, however, of whether these poems derive from a native tradition of commentary on and heralding of seasons, we know that these poems were written down – and probably written – by Christian authors. And, as we have seen the popularity of adopting well known personas as masks within other Christian Irish writing, it is quite possible that Christian scribes adopted native Irish heroes – Finn, in this case – to express poetic sentiment about nature.

The surviving poems, whether on winter or summer, share a great deal in common. Landscapes tend to be generalized, unspecific, and aim at an overview of the season in question, suggesting that the poet or chosen persona has a unique ability to see everything at once, and not merely the section of horizon before him; another similarity is thus this theme of vision. In her analysis of “Cétamon” (May Day), Tymoczko provides a useful overview of these and other common characteristics:

These textual characteristics of “Cétamon” are typical of other seasonal poems in Old Irish. First, the poems speak of the seasons in an eternal guise. They are not localized in time or space. Second, they are characterized by simultaneity of vision. The poet sees all the happenings of the season everywhere, rather than the limited landscape before his natural eyes. Third, there is extensive specificity. . . . Fourth, images are concrete and arresting, yet widely applicable. . . . Fifth, gnomic forms are widespread, but the gnomes are carefully integrated to form an overall picture of a season. Sixth, the persona of the poet is almost completely absent. Finally, where human activities emerge, they are usually in gnomic form and can be applied to the audience as much or more than to the poet. (Tymoczko 1983 26-7)

Seasonal poems, then, because they are ascribed to visionary figures such as Finn, tend to have behind them a prophetic and / or visionary strain: Tymoczko goes so far as to say that “Cétamon,” and by implication the other seasonal poems, stand as a testament to or proof of the poet’s visionary abilities. Finn, she argues, utters “Cétamon” to prove that he has indeed gained *imbas*, a knowledge derived, as already discussed, from the liminal space of the natural world.

Because the *fiana* were known to have existed in nature as hunters, they are inevitably presented as having a detailed familiarity with the natural world, a familiarity that the authors of this group of poems exploit. Nature is inventoried here: animals and plants are described in relation to the season, and nature's beauties celebrated in a matter of fact way, as in the following two examples:

Fair prospect of May Day,

fine, free season!

Blackbirds sing a full song

when day's first shaft shows.

The hardy firm cuckoo calls:

"Welcome, noble summer."

It settles harsh storm

which hacked the branchy wood.

. . .

The corncrake speaks, a loud bard.

The high, cold waterfall sings

a greeting to the warm pool

it reaches the rustling reeds.

. . .

A clear vision: the swamp lovely,

grass on the fine packed path

the speckled fish gives a leap

stout the fly – swift fighters. (Tymoczko 1983 23–4)¹⁸

I have tidings for you: the stag bells,

winter pours, summer has gone;

Wind is high and cold; the sun low,

its course is short: the sea runs strongly;

Bracken is very red: its shape has been hidden;

the call of the barnacle goose has become usual:

¹⁸ Cétamon cain cucht

rée rosair rann!

Canait luin laíd láin

díambi laí gaí gann.

Gairid caí c[h]rúaid den:

“is fo-c[h]en sam saír.”

Suidig[thir] síne serb

imme-c[h]erb caill craib.

. . .

Labraid tragna trén bard.

Canaid ess n-ard n-úa[r]

fáili do linn té

táinic lúachra láud.

. . .

Léig lath fáth féig

fér tar caín caí crúaid

cuirithir iasc brecc bedc

is balc gedc láith lúait. (Tymoczko 1983 23–4)

Cold has seized the wings of birds:

season of ice, these are my tidings. (Murphy 1956 161)¹⁹

These excerpts from “May Day” and the text of a poem on winter demonstrate a knowledge of many natural phenomena. As John Wilson Foster has noted, nature in these early poems is “Vital, autonomous, at times inhospitable, yet familiar, utterly knowable and classifiable and without mystery” (1997a 33). As Tymoczko has already noted, the poetic persona is almost entirely absent from these poems. This absence suggests several things. First, the focus of this poetry is not the speaker’s / author’s relationship to nature; instead, the natural world is seen in an almost objective, cinematic way as the poet pans his visionary gaze across the landscape.²⁰ Second, in his absence, the poet suggests that his relationship to nature is somehow undivided; the natural world is not

¹⁹ Scél lem dúib:

dordaid dam;

snigid gaim;

ro fáith sam;

Gáeth ard úar;

ísel grian;

gair a rrith;

ruirthech rian;

Rorúad rath;

ro cleth cruth;

ro gab gnáth

giugrann guth.

Ro gab úacht

etti én;

aigre ré;

seen as something separate from the poet's experience of the world. There is no indication, then, that the poetic persona feels anything particular towards the natural world, except that it is a part of his experience. As a result, none of these poems, though they focus on nature and landscape explicitly, present anything remotely like nostalgia. There is no longing, no human desire expressed in these poems; the poet simply states what are factual characteristics about the landscape. If summer is warm and beautiful and the poet longs for it to last, we do not hear this; if winter is a barren season for the poet as well as for the forest, we do not hear this either. Instead, we receive a visionary and somehow neutral representation of the natural world.

Seasonal poetry, reflective of an early Irish recycling of particular mythological poetic figures, presents a natural world that is the product of those figures' visionary capacity. The resulting overview of nature during a given season is both general and specific, covering all aspects of landscape – from lakes to rivers and waterfalls – while detailing the various plants and animals present in those landscapes. These poems, then, are in effect miniature natural histories of Ireland at particular times; they are not concerned with the persona's feelings about the natural world but with an almost scientific observation. The adoption by early Irish authors of personas such as Finn points to the use of the conceit of poetic inspiration and vision instead of mere observation of nature; to ascribe a poem to one gifted with prophetic and visionary abilities allows for a mystic element to poems that are often otherwise beautifully

é mo scél. (Murphy 1956 160)

written weather reports.

The theme of vision or prophecy is mirrored, although without the emphasis on nature, in some early *fian* prose tales. Nature, as the space in which the *fian* operate, is in between the different *tuatha*, but also in between worlds:

Nature, where the *fënnidi* live and from which they gain their livelihood, is the quintessential boundary zone in traditional Irish ideology. Not only does it separate the cultivated lands of the various *tuatha* but it also separates this world from the otherworld, which lies hidden in nature, just as the “fairy mound” (*sid*) contains and conceals a spacious otherworld. (Nagy 1985 39-40)

This ability of the *fian*, and particularly of Finn, to cross borders while existing on the periphery of society, and their ability to foresee and prophecy events, suggests that the boundary zone of nature provides a knowledge unavailable to others, a knowledge existing between the world and the otherworld. It cannot be accidental that figures such as Sweeney and Finn are depicted as poets, who had rights and privileges that extended beyond the boundaries of the *tuath*, and so possessed special knowledge as well.

However, as Joseph Nagy points out, the function of the traditional *file*’s poetry and the poetry of such figures is quite different. “The craftsmen can travel across boundary

²⁰ Tymoczko notes that in “Cetamon” the “vision” of the poem at times zooms in and out.

zones, but the poet-exile of myth – Finn, for example – actually exists in such boundary zones: in the wilderness that lies between or beyond *tuatha*” (Nagy 1985 36).

Finn’s capacity for prophecy and vision derives from the natural world as well, through the “Salmon of Knowledge,” at a time when he is in a liminal state, living in the wilderness. This suggests that in the natural world is the possibility for a certain type of visionary wisdom. The process by which Finn obtains his visionary talents is, Joseph Nagy argues, a theme in early Irish saga:

According to Irish poetic lore, *imbis* comes from a tree (or a grove of trees) located at the source of the great rivers of Ireland. Nuts fall from the branches into the water and are consumed by salmon. These fish in turn swim downstream and are caught and eaten by waiting poets, who thus acquire the sought-after *imbis*. (Nagy 1985 137)

This, in effect, amounts to an early Irish “chain of being” that believes in particular forms of knowledge deriving from the natural world, when one is living outside of more typical human society. The poet’s connection with such knowledge has resonance here, since so many of the *fian* are depicted as playing this role. When one considers the status – essentially an aristocratic one – granted to poets in early Ireland, it becomes clear that the *fian*, while operating outside or on the border of culture, commanded a certain cultural esteem.

Once Finn has obtained *imbas* – accidentally, as it would happen, when he burns his finger cooking the salmon for a poet, and puts his finger in his mouth – he also gains a social role previously kept from him. In his role as *rigfennid*, “king of the *fian*,” Finn leads a band of warriors in hunts across Ireland, and in various escapades of war and battle. The vitality and vigor with which the hunt is written about in the scattered tales tells us of its significance to the *fian*. The hunt can be seen as a primeval, basic way of life, one that existed primarily when humankind had not yet mastered the art of tool-making and settled agriculture. But what does the hunt become when it is life chosen during a time when settled agriculture is, in fact, the norm? That the *fian* opt to exist in a more primitive circle, when all around them is evidence of the pattern of a more “advanced” culture that has settled onto specific sites of land – they are, after all, involved in obtaining land promised to young men – tells us that they are *consciously* attempting to create an existence in nature; this existence is not forced upon them. This is significant; while the youths coming to the *fian* for help, as a last resort, are forced into their positions outside of the culture for a time, the permanent members of the *fian* – Finn, Cailte, and Oisín, for example – have chosen this life and are unable (or unwilling) to undergo the rite of passage they perform for so many others, as Nagy has convincingly demonstrated. Thus they live in nature at a time when they do not have to in order to survive, and do so permanently, in order to pursue the hunt and to act as the vehicle for rites of passage. Further, the type of hunt in which these men indulge is not in fact primitive. The literature informs us of the many hounds owned by the *fian*, of their horses and royal garments, of their precious metal spears and shields: this type of hunt is

a royal endeavor that relies on cultural resources and domesticated and trained – as opposed to wild – animals.

Thus while Finn and his men hunt voraciously, they are in fact not living primitive lives, and this is one of the ironies of their existence. While critics of this work often discuss Finn and the *fian* as existing in nature, they ignore the fact that, while these men spend a great deal of time in the natural world, they are in fact sheltered in the most luxurious homes and castles in Ireland. This fact contributes to Finn's status as supreme outsider and insider: while he may hunt by day in the wildernesses of Ireland, by night he is taken in by kings and royal women, and enjoys all of the trappings of wealth and honor – in other words, the trappings of culture. This band of men have created, then, lives that are literally the best of both worlds.

This combination must have contributed, one would guess, to Finn's popularity as a literary figure. Clearly poems ascribed to Finn over a period of several hundred years, and containing linguistic elements dating them to different eras, cannot all be the product of one man. Because of this enduring popularity of the Finn cycle, it seems likely that, as in the case of hermit poetry, the authors of these texts donned traditional poetic masks. To cite Tymoczko once again, "a sign of a *traditional* poetic mask in early Irish or Welsh literature is evidence that mythic, legendary, or heroic figure has been used over a considerable span of time as the vehicle for affective poetry associated with a limited but determinate range of feeling" (Tymoczko 1996 195). The adoption of the Finn mask, for example, automatically draws upon a particular range of characteristics: heroism.

prophecy, poesy, as well as a profound familiarity with elements of the natural world, ranging from hunting knowledge to knowledge of flora.

When a poet dons a traditional mask in an affective poem, he presupposes – indeed depends upon – the audience’s knowledge and recognition of the traditional character and the emotional situation evoked: the poet assumes that the audience will have a background of mythos or history for the persona, thus supplying a considerable context for the poem itself as it is performed. (Tymoczko 1996 196)

Since Finn lore covers so much of the geographical space that is Ireland, and since Finn occupies such an obviously large place in cultural, literary and imaginative space, he is an obvious choice for a poet assuming a persona, particularly since his persona allows for such a variety of topics to be covered, and particularly topics associated with the natural world. In discussing early Irish poetry in first person, Maria Tymoczko notes that

one can, for example, identify the use of masks related to “nature poetry” in Ireland: seasonal poems, particularly those of a mantic variety, are generally attributed in the manuscripts to characters who are themselves mantic poets, even when such poems are found outside a narrative context. Most of the finest poems of this type are presented as the production of fictional poets such as Finn, Athirne, or Amarigen, rather than attributed to the historical

medieval poets who actually composed them. (Tymoczko
1996 198-9)

Finn, with his background in the natural world, and his pedigree as a warrior, a visionary and a poet, is clearly a fine choice for a poet choosing to write under the guise of a persona.

Apart from the theme of vision in the seasonal poems, *fián* literature shows marked resemblance to other early Irish poems that center on nature. As in “hermit” poetry, poetic conceits – most significantly the adoption of a persona – are at work in *fiánaigeacht*. Again we find an implied nostalgia in the use of poetic personas whose lives center in nature. Once again, though, we must conclude that the natural world in these poems is not imbued with the nostalgia so characteristic of later Irish literature: instead, nature is catalogued and inventoried and so idealized, but exists unthreateningly.

Voyage Literature

The final branch of early Irish literature to contain a significant amount of representation of the natural world is voyage literature, the *immrama* and *echtraí*. *Immrama* (“voyages”) have been described by one critic as “massing about in boats” (Tracy 170); *echtraí* (“adventures”) do not necessarily involve boat travel, but tend to narrate general expeditions or outings. Both forms of voyage literature involve “a notion of going out of this world and into the other” (Tracy 170), and so involve an exploration

of an imaginative geography derived from early Irish authors' ideas about both the physical world beyond Ireland as well and the ideal otherworld. Such voyages form a part of the canon of early Irish literature, whether tales of saints' voyages or of secular figures. The earliest voyage literature, in depicting otherworldly landscapes, offers an idealization of nature that is pastoral; this idealization changes over time, until nature becomes more fantastical, more threatening. This change – from conventional pastoral to a romantic, fantastic representation of nature – is key in an examination of the secular voyage literature.

Both *The Voyage of Bran* and *The Voyage of Mael Duin*, as the two major sources for such a study, make inevitable use of Christian elements, but, generally speaking, they are not Christian voyage tales in the way that Brendan's voyage, for example, would be. These *immrama*, in other words, are not centered on a Christian quest: nor are they focused on the *peregrinus* who goes in search of a deserted landscape in which to renounce the world and so honor God – *immrama*, unlike the *peregrinationes*, always involve a return, so as to allow the hero to tell his story. *Immrama* represent a tradition in early Irish literature that focuses on a description of a land of promise, possibly based on a pre-Christian ideal. This earlier tradition of approximately the seventh to ninth centuries, reflected in both *The Voyage of Bran* and *The Voyage of Mael Duin*, differs from the later deserted landscape of the *peregrinatio*.

Secular *immrama* in all likelihood existed before the Viking raids, when Christian stories about saints traveling would have been in circulation; they represent, then,

another example of the integration of Christian and pre-Christian elements. Prior to the Viking raids, *immrama* such as *The Voyage of Bran* tend to employ characters and images associated with pre-Christian Ireland; following the raids, *immrama* integrate Christian elements more convincingly, as is the case in *The Voyage of Mael Duin*.

Oskamp, in the introduction to his translation of *The Voyage of Mael Duin*, lists these two sets of elements – the Viking raids, and the Christianization of Ireland – as the major influences upon voyage literature. The presence of Vikings who had come across the sea to Ireland brought, in an obvious manner, the idea of the sea voyage to the fore of the early Irish imagination, while the early Christian church, with its ideal of monastic asceticism, brought with it the ideal of the *peregrinus* traveling across land or sea alone in search of ways in which “to improve individual Man” (Oskamp 7). These two historical factors combine in various ways to impact the voyage literature of the early Irish period, which moves, as indicated above, from a traditional, pastoral representation of nature towards a fantastic representation.

As discussed at the start of the chapter, the natural world, in early Irish belief, was sacred. The ocean, as a part of the natural world at one remove from the stationary landscape, was also revered, and frequently feared. While the ocean is not a significant idea in other early Irish poetry that involves nature, it is of the utmost importance in a discussion of voyage literature.

For the early Irish the ocean was the ‘other world’, not only in the religious but also in a more general sense. He who left Irish soil had to be prepared to meet situations and

beings who were completely different from what he was used to, and who were not subject to the complex of rules and obediences determining life (social and religious) at home. In the 'other world', the 'outer world', the magic powers defending an Irishman in Ireland might be ineffective, and even the druids – 'the men who ought to know' – could not predict the behavior of the beings living in the 'outer world': there everything impossible in Ireland might be possible. Thus, the seafarer was not only threatened by storms and cliffs, but also by unknown 'presences' and their whims. (Oskamp 70)

By traveling outside of the boundary of Ireland, voyagers like Bran and Mael Duin expose themselves to the unknown, to the unpredictable, and, in particular, subject themselves to a geography of the mind. Through this process the otherworld becomes linked to the known physical landscape – by journeying from the known into the unknown, the real into the imagined, the otherworld becomes a place situated just beyond the realm of known fact, a possible reality at the edge of the Irish horizon.

That this world, in voyage literature, is found through the realm of the sea is not surprising. There is, in early Irish literature, a preoccupation with the threat of drowning; in the later *dindsenchas* and the *Acallam na Senórach*, countless tales are relayed about the drowning of various figures. This amounts to a "tradition regarding the dangers of the ocean. For the Irish any death, even drowning, was accidental, and therefore needed a

logical explanation. The *bestiae* in the ocean offer such an explanation – they pierce the hides and draw the sailors to the bottom of the sea” (Oskamp 70-1).

At the same time, the sea – while existing in the early Irish mind as a foreign, “unnatural” body – was also a familiar sight, an extension of the landscape. This seeming contradiction of the sea as both known and unknown offers an explanation as to why these voyage tales offer such a dramatic, qualitatively different view of the nature of Ireland compared to the earlier, land-bound poetry.

Voyage literature, then, as well as exploring the unknown through an imagined landscape of an otherworld, attempts to offer supernatural explanation for events in the known world. Through the return of the hero, explanations are symbolically offered to the general society of a natural world that is overwhelmingly unnatural. In the following examination of *The Voyage of Bran* and *The Voyage of Mael Duin*, we will see that early Irish visions of the otherworld portrayed nature as fantastical and exotic, an elemental place in which the hero attempted to make sense, and attempted too to survive despite the unnaturalness of his surroundings. As with other early Irish literature, these voyage tales do not integrate nostalgia into their portrayal of nature. Instead, the natural world of the otherworld is represented as extraordinary and so separate from Irish human experience. At the same time, a depiction of an earthly paradise connected to the known landscape implies a knowledge of pastoral Biblical literary sources and so a nostalgia for a life that was never lived. Too we will see the differences in the two voyage tales: while *Bran* offers an idealized portrait of a natural world that does not threaten humans in any manner, *Mael Duin*, written after the Viking raids, presents a natural world that is

overwhelming and constantly threatening. This movement away from a strictly idealized natural form suggests that the growing threat to the early Irish way of life from raiders and Christian missionaries is reflected succinctly in the literature: too this movement demonstrates the influence of Christian ideas of nature: "In the deceptive appearances and illusory splendour Maelduin encounters, one senses an early Christian distrust of the blandishments of the natural world" (Foster 1997b 309-10).

The Voyage of Bran is the earliest written secular *immram*, following Bran's journey to the Land of the Women, a paradise that can be reached through travel across the sea. Kuno Meyer, in his 1897 translation, asserts that the text was "originally written down in the seventh century" (Meyer 1897 xvi), basing his argument on Old Irish verb forms that appear throughout the text. Bran's journey is not so much a physical as a mental one, for unlike other *immrama*, "where the voyagers are always arriving at, nearing, or departing from yet another island, rather than sailing the open sea. Bran's chief adventures are passive and literary: his listening to two poems" (Tracy 171). The tale begins with the image of a branch in blossom (an image that will recur in *Mael Duin*) held by a woman who has come from paradise, a woman who wakes Bran from sleep.²¹

The unnamed woman tells Bran of the paradise:

Without grief, without sorrow, without death.

Without any sickness, without debility.

²¹ That Bran is woken from sleep at the start of the tale suggests that later medieval dream-vision literature such as *The Pearl* derived from a common early belief in the associations between dreams and such visions.

That is the sign of Emain -

Uncommon is an equal marvel. (Meyer 1897 6 st. 10)²²

What the woman presents is an Eden in which man exists in complete harmony with nature: there is no threat present either emotionally, as the above stanza demonstrates, or physically:

A beauty of a wondrous land.

Whose aspects are lovely.

Whose view is a fair country.

Incomparable is its haze. (Meyer 1897 8 st. 11)²³

This place offers a sanctuary from human worries and woes, enclosing those present in perfect beauty. Shortly after this encounter Bran is told to take to the seas, where he encounters the second figure to describe for him this perfection, in the guise of Manannán, the sea god.

The encounter with Manannán, who rides a chariot across the sea as though it were a smooth plain,

dissolves, or at any rate questions, the logical distinction

between sea and land, and questions what Bran sees and

²² Cen brón, cen duba, cen báa,
cen nach n'galar cen indgás.
is ed etargne n-Emne,
ní comtig a comamre. (Meyer 1897 7 st. 10)

²³ Cáine tire adamri,
ata comgnúsi cadli,
asa rodarc find fía,
ní frithid bíd a cia. (Meyer 1897 9 st. 11)

experiences as he sails. It is not just a challenge to his senses. It asserts that two realities can exist simultaneously in the same place at the same time. (Tracy 173)

That Manannán is able to exist on the sea as man does on land stands as testament to the early Irish belief in the otherworld's connection to the known world: thus both exist, one just beyond the other, but available to a traveler such as Bran who has been given an entree, in effect, through his boat. Manannan's descriptions of the sea as land offer are a water pastoral: the sea is the idealized world.

The sheen of the main, on which thou art,
The white hue of the sea, on which thou rowest about,
Yellow and azure are spread out,
It is land, and it is not rough. (Meyer 1897 18 st. 37)²⁴

Manannán asserts the existence of these two realities at once: while Bran experiences the sea as sea, Manannán is present to inform him that it is land. This irrational and unnatural idea of the sea makes it a zone that is in between worlds: between the world of Ireland and the Land of the Women to which Bran is sailing.

The sea, one might say, forms a neutral zone, differently regarded by mortals and Manannan – to the latter it is his pasture over which he drives a chariot. Moreover, as long as

²⁴ Lí na fairgge foratái,
geldod mora immerái.
rasert bude ocus blass.
is talam, nad écomrass. (Meyer 1897 19 st. 37)

Bran's company is traveling, or even stays in the boat. nothing happens; only when Nechtan regains contact with the soil of Ireland is the spell broken, and the man turns to dust. Behind this we recognize the Irish belief that outside Ireland anything may be expected, any unpredictable and irrational situation may arise against which one cannot arm oneself, not even by means of magic powers so useful in the natural world. (Oskamp 73)

As Oskamp points out, while Bran and his crew are in transit, they are out of danger. But, when they finally return to Ireland, danger arises. Nechtan, upon seeing the land of Ireland, is overcome by homesickness, and leaps from the boat onto the land, only to turn at once to ashes. Nostalgia, then, for the strictly "natural" world, has no place in this literature, and is in fact punished. Bran and his crew, having entered the otherworld, are unable to leave it without dire consequences. Their experience, while seemingly brief, has actually been over an extended period; they are told by one on Ireland's shore that Bran's voyage is legendary, indicating that, even without his return, Bran's voyage has been imagined.

This is particularly significant, as it reinforces the argument that the otherworld is an imaginary landscape that does not rely upon lived experience: those left behind were able to imagine, and so to create, the ideal land to which Bran traveled without the confirmation of his own story. That Bran himself has been more concerned "with the reason and the goal of his journey than with what might happen when traveling over the

ocean” (Oskamp 43) suggests that the journey can be recreated, or created, by those who have not yet heard his tale: *The Voyage of Bran* demonstrates that early Irish society emphasized the knowable quality of the otherworld without personal experience.

The idealization of nature in the otherworld in *Bran* is relatively simple. Although the Land of Women involves magical qualities – such as the ability of the women to reel in Bran’s boat and to cause Bran’s crew to live a distorted sense of time – the world of nature itself is idealized in a straightforward way. This world is unthreatening, offers a sanctuary from hardship, has none of nature’s whims. This is, in other words, a relatively obvious version of pastoral, in which the natural world is deemed to be void of the trials of the culture the travelers have left behind.

That *Bran* is believed to have been first written down in the seventh century tells us that the scribe of this piece was undoubtedly Christian, and it is not difficult to detect Christian influence on this work. Manannán’s prophecy of Mangan’s birth reads much like one of a Christ figure, and the description of Emain, the otherworld Eden, appears to draw upon Christian ideals of heaven and / or paradise. Because of the evidence for early Irish authors’ knowledge of classical and Biblical pastoral sources, it is not unlikely that this piece of early voyage literature also made use of such knowledge.

The representation of nature in *The Voyage of Mael Duin*, composed two centuries later, is quite different to that in *Bran*. Between the estimated dates of composition of these two texts, the Viking raids had occurred, and Christianity had put down stronger roots in Ireland. Oskamp believes that the text is “undoubtedly post-Viking, probably ninth century; and, most important, the pre-Christian material on which

the author draws now and then shows only remote resemblance to its pagan background” (Oskamp 43). That the text is “undoubtedly” from the post-Viking period is demonstrated in the tale’s focus on the journey itself; unlike *Bran*, *Mael Duin* is concerned with the events that occur in the process of travel, and with the anomalies encountered. The Vikings, having brought with them knowledge of distant lands and unimaginably long sea voyages, have influenced early Irish voyage literature by forcing it to look to lands beyond Ireland and even beyond the merely imagined and perfectly idealized space of the otherworld.

Mael Duin, unlike Bran, does not receive a visitation from the otherworld before his journey. Instead, he begins his journey out of what is a decidedly social need: to discover his true father. In this event we see the seeds of later medieval Irish narratives: what forces Mael Duin into his experience of nature is a social crisis in which identity and the role one plays in society are called into question. When he discovers that his foster parents are not his birth parents, he seeks out his mother in order to ask who his father is; when she tells him, he sets off on his voyage in search of this unknown father.

Mael Duin’s experience of voyage is very different from Bran’s. Rather than experiencing an idealized, paradisiacal landscape, Mael Duin finds a natural world that is, in its unnaturalness, overwhelming. Oskamp’s survey of the various episodes of Mael Duin’s journey is useful here in providing an overview of this unnaturalness. Mael Duin encounters islands of enormous ants, of large birds, of a horse-like monster, of giants racing, of wondrous fruits, fiery swine, burning rivers, oversized calves, as well as

encountering a sea of glass, a sea of cloud, and an arch of water.²⁵ These examples demonstrate clearly that the “natural” world in *The Voyage of Mael Duin* is far more unnatural than that experienced by Bran, suggesting that the Vikings and their raids on Ireland have caused changes in the early Irish perception of nature, and particularly in the perception of the sea and the dangers it holds: no longer is the natural world completely known or classifiable – there are now many things that are unknown and so threatening.

This threat is demonstrated immediately when Mael Duin sets sail: “A wind rose up against them from off the land, a violent and howling wind blows [them] from there, a twisted westerly course across the seal-inhabited ocean” (Oskamp 109)²⁶. There is no otherworld figure like Manannán to escort the travelers and to regale them with tales of their possible landing points: instead, Mael Duin and his men are sailing against nature. Their first encounter with land after leaving Ireland is no relief from this struggle:

When there was bright daylight for them they headed
towards the land. At the moment they were casting lots to
see which of them should go on land, a great swarm of ants
- and every one of them was the size of a foal - came to the
shore towards them into the sea. What they desired was to
eat them and their boat and they flee then for three days

²⁵ It is worth noting that many similarities exist between Mael Duin’s experiences and Brendan’s in the *Navigato*, not least of which are the strange islands. This suggests a continuum between secular and religious voyage literature and common ideological sources.

²⁶ Dargaib doib gaeth tar or talmun / gaeth garb glorach./ Dis de sen seol siar snimach / tar rian ronach. (Oskamp 108)

and three nights and they did not see land or ground.

(Oskamp 109)²⁷

The otherworld of *Mael Duin* is not merely unnatural or magical: it is also hostile, threatening the lives of the sailors. When they do manage to reach land that is not overrun with strangely exaggerated creatures, the text emphasizes the cultural comforts that the men revel in:

They went to an island with a high enclosure of the colour
of a swan in which they found a noble pavilion, a dwelling
of brightness.

Silver brooches, gold-hilted swords, large necklets,

beautiful beds, excellent food, golden rows. (Oskamp 123)²⁸

Cultural elements are clearly stressed here, and regarded as the highpoint of the journey. On such occasions, when islands are found abounding in riches and beds and women for all, the natural world is entirely ignored: the discovery of culture is granted far more significance.

During the course of the journey, Mael Duin and his men learn to be careful

²⁷ in tan *iarom* ba la *solus* doib sscuicsed don tir. *amal* *batar* oc cor *chtrandchoir* *dus* cia *craghad* dib a tir. is *andsin* *dolotar* *ealta* mor de *sengsaib* *ocus* meit *serraig* *cech* ai dib isa *traigh* a *ndochom* *ocus* isan *suir*. a *n-adcobairsed* a *n-ithi* *cona* n i *ocus* *techit* *iarom* tri la ele *teeoro* *aidchi* doib *ocus* n  *facatar* tir na *talom*. (Oskamp 108)

²⁸ *Dotar* do *indisi* co *fui riudh* *ard* / co *ndath* *ngessi*. / a *Faimeadcdar* *imscing* *n-ochrach* / *atreab* *nglesse*. / *Oeilge* *argaid* *claidim* *orduirn* / *munce* *mordhai*. *Eptha* *lighda* caie *beath* / *sretha* *ordha*. (Oskamp 122)

before setting foot on various islands, wary of being threatened by various creatures or the spells they might cast. On one occasion, viewing a land on which sheep turn from black to white as they move over a divide, the men decide to put a stick on the land first. They find out that it, like the sheep, turns to black. “‘We were wise to make that test,’ said Mael Duin. ‘Our colour would not be better than the colour of the rods’” (Oskamp 125)²⁹. Thus the men learn to view nature with both regard and fear, as well as awe.

The image of the branch that, though detached and so presumably dead, grows blossoms or fruit, recurs in *Mael Duin*, suggesting that the text does rely upon certain pre-Viking (and presumably native Irish) voyage literature tropes. While in *Bran* Christian elements, though, are not blatant, in *Mael Duin* they are made far more obvious. The men encounter several *peregrini* on their travels, ascetic Christian men who have left Ireland to commune with God in isolation. Such men share with the travelers the miracles that have been bestowed upon them by God: wells that produce different drinks for different feasts and days of the Christian calendar, and which provide enough sustenance to exist on, for example. Such natural miracles demonstrate the tendency we have already seen in “hermit” poetry to attribute the bounty of the natural world to God, and demonstrate too the spreading influence of Christianity into the realm of what was earlier a more secular literary genre.

Mael Duin’s goal of meeting his father is largely ignored through the course of the journey. But, like Odysseus, he does eventually reach his goal. Rather than going to

²⁹ ni sechbuid dun ar mael duin an fromudh sin nibudh. N-ar ndath oldate na bundsacha. (Oskamp 124)

battle against those who killed his father, as the men had originally planned, they instead make peace. “They made peace with the swift Mael Duin, [in the presence of] every fierce man; after true pledging they went to their country, a prosperous journey” (Oskamp 179)³⁰. Thus Mael Duin’s travels end with no repercussions for his experience in the world of Ireland. Unlike Bran, who is irrevocably changed by his experience in the otherworld, Mael Duin is returned to Ireland normally. This suggests that the experiences of Mael Duin’s crew are “real” in that they have not altered the crew’s ability to exist in real time, in the social structure from which they traveled. This, and the fact that the experiences of the journey are relayed with so much more emphasis than in *Bran*, suggests that *Mael Duin* is a fantastical tale with groundings in a purported reality, one that might be experienced by any traveler. Mael Duin’s return, rather than being marked by an alteration in his experience of time, is marked instead by a regaining of social status through the discovery of his father.

The western voyage, whether of Bran and the other Old Irish voyagers, [. . .] has something to do with redemption, social as well as personal. The *imram* voyagers must tell their stories, bring something back to redeem the lives of those at home. The voyage westward, after all, is a voyage to the land of the dead, and such voyages – Odysseus’s,

³⁰ *Sidhaighsit and fri mael duin dian / cach angbudh / diar nais fir / lotar dia tir toirtheach tarrgragh.* (Oskamp 178)

Aeneas's. Christ's descent into Hell – precede renewal: the purification of Ithaca, Troy, resurrection. (Tracy 182-3)

By returning to Ireland, both Bran and Mael Duin offer a renewal of this kind: Bran has experienced a form of renewal in that he no longer exists in the old world, but only in the otherworld; Mael Duin has regained his social status. Both journeys suggest that nature is the site for experiencing change, but, as yet, there is no nostalgia linked with that change. The “wilderness/ ocean is a virtual reality, which we can enter and wander as Bran and Mael Duin wandered their island-dotted idea-tormented seas, each island a new revelation, a new philosopher, a new adventure, and presumably a new stage in imaginative development” (Tracy 183).

From this brief examination of voyage literature, it becomes clear that the representation of nature is an imaginative one not reliant upon a real or experienced relationship to the natural world but, instead, upon early Irish ideas of nature. What we see, in the movement from Bran to Mael Duin, is a movement away from a simplistic (and classically derived) idealization of nature towards a more realistic – while fantastical – representation. In the time between the composition of these two tales some rupture has occurred – presumably caused by the Viking raids – between nature and man in early Ireland. Such a rupture was to occur again in Ireland, one that would have a profound impact on the literature of the medieval period, when the Normans invaded Ireland.

Early Irish literature offers a wealth of themes to later Irish writers who, like miners, will retrieve raw material and transform it into new energies. Nature, and writing

about the landscape of Ireland, was to prove one of these themes. This overview of the place of nature in the early literature has demonstrated both the range and limitations of the theme in the primary sources from which later writers would cull. What I have attempted to demonstrate is the presence of a traditional, and continental, form of pastoral in early Irish literature, a form that had at its roots continental and Biblical influence.

Because the authors of these texts – from the anonymous poetry that was ascribed by early critics to hermits to the secular voyage literature just examined – were inevitably Christian, and so classically educated, whether on the continent or in Ireland, many of them make evident a great deal of erudition, an erudition that most early critics denied to literature of this period. In hermit poetry and voyage literature, we receive sketches of the natural world that, in their similarity to either classical models or Biblical images of Eden, display not a naïveté about the natural world but rather a sophistication dependent upon continental ideas of nature. In neither of these bodies of work does nostalgia play a significant role, except as an implied force behind the creation of figures or personae who lived ideal lives unavailable to their authors.

Early Fenian literature, as the product of an oral, non-Christian tradition, represents nature in a manner that often lacks the sophistication of hermit poetry or voyage literature. Here the natural world serves only as a backdrop to romantic or heroic material and is rarely remarkable or remarked upon. Only in seasonal poetry, which makes use of nature to test a poet's visionary abilities, does the natural world come into

the foreground. Significantly, early Fenian lore lacks the nostalgia that is so obvious in the later medieval lore.

While the representation of nature in these bodies of work thus differs, there is an important commonality. Nature is, even at this stage in the literature, beginning to be associated with those on the fringe of society: figures who wish to leave monastic communities for isolation, Fenian heroes who have taken to the wilderness, voyagers in search of otherworldly experiences. It is not until the twelfth century, however, that this theme begins its entanglement with nostalgia.

Chapter Three:

Twelfth Century Literature

In the twelfth century, the various perspectives that characterized earlier medieval literature were eclipsed by a nostalgic mode, which engages nature as the site of longing and nostalgia. The classically conventional pastoral attitudes of “hermit poetry” and the secular *immrama*, the routine and matter of fact rendering of nature in early *fianaigeacht*, the sense of nature as hostile to mere mortals that is present in a text like *Immram Curaig Maele Duin* – all of these representations faded in the face of the tremendous cultural upheavals and change of twelfth century Ireland that saw the development of the nostalgic mode in literature.

Since the twelfth century in Ireland was a period of such upheaval – due to extensive ecclesiastical reform and the Norman invasion – it is unsurprising that the literature that has come down to us spends a great amount of time attempting to address those changes. These shifts in social and cultural structures give us several lenses through which to view medieval Irish texts, many of which were gathered, oddly enough, at the close of the twelfth century, when all of these changes were beginning to be felt. It is at this point that the earliest of large manuscripts were compiled, gathering together much of the earlier Irish saga material, as well as historical tracts, and marking a changeover from an oral to a written culture; this too comes to be a significant issue in twelfth century Irish literature.

It is my argument that the twelfth century represents a shift away from early

Irish literature, as, in addressing these societal disruptions, the literature begins to develop the nostalgic mode, a mode that comes to have tremendous influence on the writing to come out of Ireland in the following centuries. Since the nostalgic mode centers on mourning for a lost or changing culture, and situates its mourning in nature, the representation of nature comes to signify a loss of culture, and in this the nostalgic mode is a strange reversal of the traditional pastoral, which laments the loss of a natural world. Another difference between traditional pastoral and the nostalgic mode is apparent when one considers that the voice of the traditional pastoral belongs to one outside of the natural world; pastoral was founded on “the nature of observation, of the scientist or the tourist, rather than of the working countryman” (Williams 20). In twelfth century Irish literature, those who write or speak of nature are participants in the natural world; there is no such distance allowed between the subject and object.

Both the *Acallam* and *Buile Suibhne* have an obvious concern with place and the natural world, as do the tales compiled in the contemporaneous *dindsenchas*. All three of these works serve as a significant foundation to an Irish literary tradition that focuses on place and nature as a way of representing – and preserving – a culture experiencing change, and a culture under threat from outside forces. That nostalgia serves as the preservative in this literature is unsurprising, given the historical forces at work in twelfth century Ireland. Sweeney and Cailte both experience a displacement from the world of their particular cultures, a displacement that situates them in nature. In twelfth century Irish literature the experience of nature is one that is thus associated with those on the

margins of culture.¹ This marginality is represented by no figure as clearly as Sweeney, whose story will illustrate what I call the “nostalgic nature construct”, as well as the use of the nostalgic mode in twelfth century Irish literature.

The Frenzy of Sweeney

Upon hearing that a church is to be built in his territory, King Sweeney goes angrily to the priest Ronan and throws his Psalter into a lake in protest; the priest, as punishment, places the curse of madness on him. This madness takes the peculiar form of “disgust with every place in which he used to be and desire for every place which he had not reached” (*Buile Suibhne* 15).² Sweeney has been condemned to flitting, bird-like, through the countryside, experiencing savage cold and an equally savage longing for his past life of splendid, often *indoor* comfort, and yet able, as a result of madness, to compose poetry celebrating the *outdoor* beauty of nature. This opposition between indoor and outdoor quickly becomes an opposition between culture and nature that is one of the text’s most important themes, just as it was in the earlier Finn material.

¹ Joseph Falaky Nagy’s impressive exploration of this theme as it is present in the Finn cycle is in *The Wisdom of the Outlaw*.

² Irish language passages will appear in footnotes. Sweeney’s madness occurs during a battle after hearing a series of battle cries: “O`dchúala thrá Suibhne na gaire more sin agus a fhuamanna agus a freagartha i nellaigh nimhe agus i fraightibh na firmminnte rofhéich Suibhne suas iarum co rolión nemhain agus dobhar agus dásacht agus fáoinnel agus fúalang agus foluamain agus udmhaille, anbsaidhe agus anfhóistine, miosgais gach ionaidh ina mbíodh agus serc gach ionaidh noco roichedh. . .” (*BS* 14).

Although the three existing manuscripts of Sweeney were written from between 1629 and 1722³, the text is believed, based on the linguistic evidence, to have been composed during the twelfth century. This situates *Buile Suibhne*'s composition in the midst of the cultural and social changes occurring in Ireland during the same period.

Significantly, the Christian elements, as well as the presence of the natural world, become much more vital here than in earlier Irish literature. However, O'Keeffe, the editor of *Buile Suibhne*, remarks that the Christian passages could quite easily be removed without a disruption to the story. This would seem to indicate that the Christian passages were a later addition to what is, in terms of the historical record,⁴ a much older Irish tale, deeply situated in an early Christian milieu.

Regardless, though, of when these passages made their way into the story, they stand, and the text presents a narrative of the mixing of Christian and pre-Christian cultures, and uses this theme as a frame for the story. Sweeney, in attacking Ronan, is attempting to save his land from what he clearly perceives as an invasion of sorts: Ronan builds his church on Sweeney's land. This perception – based on Sweeney's own cultural background of hosts achieving dominance over an area by the crossing of unofficial borders – results in his misinterpretation of the signs of Christian culture, for which he

³ J.G. O'Keeffe's introduction to the Irish Texts Society's facing page translation of the *Buile Suibhne* gives a detailed account of the three known manuscripts. Two of them are in the Royal Irish Academy: one of these was written between 1671 and 1674, and the other in 1721-2. The third manuscript, in the Royal Library in Brussels, was written down by Michael O'Clery, one of the Four Masters, in 1629. For further details on the contents of each manuscript and the historical background of Sweeney see O'Keeffe xiii-xxxviii.

has no basis of understanding. When Ronan sprinkles holy water to bless the land, Sweeney reacts with violence, “thinking it was to mock him” (*BS* 11).⁵ Sweeney’s reaction indicates that he is attempting to interpret Christian culture based on his experience of early Irish traditions and mores.

Ronan, as a missionary of sorts sent to mark out new churches, is reluctant to be driven off the site he has claimed for the church: “Loth was I to be banished here/ from the place where I first settled; / though loth was I/ God has been able to prevent it” (*BS* 7).⁶ he says. This is an obvious and ironic treatment of the theme of Christian exile from Eden – Ronan fears exile. Thus exile from home – and the resulting homesickness and nostalgia – is a theme that functions on several levels here. Knowing first hand the potential misery of exile, Ronan subjects Sweeney to this very punishment once Sweeney displays contempt for the signs of Christian culture.

During his exile as a bird-man nesting and flying about Ireland, Sweeney occasionally utters poems – those thought to have been added on at the time the tale was written down – that are very close to those composed by early Irish Christian authors donning the hermit “masks” discussed in Chapter Two:

God has vouchsafed me here
life very bare, very narrow.

⁴ O’Keeffe offers, in his introduction, a historical account of the battle Magh Rath at which Sweeney fought; the battle was fought in A.D. 637. See xix-xxx.

⁵ “Agus andar leis-siomh bá da fochuidmedh rocroithedh an t-uisge fair. . .” (*BS* 10).

without music and without restful sleep.

without womenfolk, without a woman-tryst. (*BS* 17)⁷

Similar poetry exists as marginalia in medieval Irish collections; it tends to outline the eremitic life by describing the simplicity of the daily routine, praising the beauty of nature and thanking God for providing the writer with food and drink and the company of birds, trees, etc. The fact that Sweeney is situated in a forest, though, itself becomes an interesting opposite to the Christian pastoral ideal of Eden: Simon Schama raises the question whether “a whole forest [would] be a Christian place” (Schama 227), since Eden, he points out, was not a forest, but a garden. Sweeney’s situation, then, in a forest, indicates that he is an outsider not only to his own culture, but also to Christianity. The early Irish hermit persona, often based in wild and impenetrable landscapes, lived an existence similar to Sweeney’s in that both are left to wander in isolation. In this, poems thought to have been added at a later date such as the one quoted above are apt in *Buile Suibhne*, as they suggest both the differences between continental and Irish Christianity, as well as indicating the difference between Sweeney’s past and present conditions. Because it is clear that obviously Christian passages, though, could be removed from the text without much effect on the story, it becomes necessary to look beyond this confrontation between Christian and pre-Christian Ireland in order to assess the cultural

⁶ “Leasg lem-sa mh’athchar abhus/ ón bhaile céda rabhus./ gerbo lium-sa robadh les/ do Dhía táinic a thoirmesg” (*BS* 6).

⁷ “Dodheónaidh Dia dhamh-sa sunn/ betha iomnocht iomchumhang./ gan ceól is gan codladh sáim./ gan banchuire, cen bandáil.” (*BS* 16)

dynamics at play in the text. And of these dynamics, it is the dialectical opposition between nature and culture that is so striking in Sweeney.

Nature versus Culture

“The Frenzy of Sweeney” is thematically representative of other nature poetry of the same period: while the natural world of Ireland is lovely enough to seduce Sweeney into poems of extravagant praise, it is clear that his appreciation is a result of having been forced into nature – displacement brings the natural world into focus. The irony in “Sweeney,” of course, is that Sweeney’s displacement occurs as a result of the coming of Christianity, which imports its own image of the archetype for displacement, in the story of Eden.

Both the Christian and Vergilian traditions offered Irish literature versions of the natural world that, at least in part, coincided with its own. All three visions of nature – whether a retrospective of the Garden of Eden, Vergil’s effortlessly green meadows, or Sweeney’s sky-down view of streams bordered by watercress – involve a longing for something lost. However, while the Edenic tradition laments the loss of the garden as man’s natural and rightful state, and while the Vergilian tradition makes us aware that the pastoral life is under siege by urbanism and the Roman equivalent of enclosure, the Irish literary tradition of the twelfth century represents an opposite, strangely anti-pastoral view: it is the loss, one could argue, not of nature, but of culture that is lamented, and the lament takes place, even more strangely, within the context of the ideal natural world that

the other traditions mourn for its passing. Sweeney's displacement, in other words, throws into sharp relief a conflict between culture and nature, from which his nostalgia results.

Sweeney is displaced from his own culture by madness, and in this is in line with other Irish works on "the wild man." It is possible, as Pádraig Ó Riain points out, to outline a pattern for madness in Irish literature. Madness tends to be caused by a curse, a battlefield experience, or the loss of a lover; the state of madness is characterized by a move into wilderness, the growth of feathers or hair, a tendency to leap or levitate, intense restlessness, and hallucination. The restoration of sanity comes from intervention by a holy figure or the consumption of blessed food or drink.⁸ For the purposes of this study, what is particularly significant in this theme is the fact that madmen are forced into a retreat from society into the wilderness. The theme of madness, in other words, indicates "separation from wonted or due status" (Ó Riain 184), aligning liminality and displacement with the experience of nature. Ó Riain goes so far as to argue that "recourse to the wilderness was an all but necessary course of action for the weaker of two dynastic rivals or rival factions" (Ó Riain 193). Sweeney, in being cursed by Ronan, is made the weaker of the two, indicating that Christianity was to eclipse the older order in Ireland, and so is forced into the woods.

Once Sweeney begins to feel the results of Ronan's curse and moves beyond the realm of his society, a pattern is established in the text. Sweeney moves between two

⁸ See Pádraig Ó Riain's "A Study of the Irish Legend of the Wild Man" in *Eigse* 14 (1972), 182-4.

states: a revelatory appreciation of the beauty of nature and its seeming simplicity compared to the society he has left behind, and a fevered longing for that left behind life and the comforts it afforded him. The result is a series of laments that are “pastoral” only in the sense that they occur in nature; otherwise they are clear laments for the loss of culture. Walter Greg, in his book on the pastoral tradition, argues that “only when the shepherd-songs ceased to be the outcome of unalloyed pastoral conditions did they become distinctly pastoral” (Greg 5). This idea – that the pastoral derives from a non-pastoral setting – further defines Sweeney’s poetry as something beyond the bounds of the pastoral tradition; he is not mourning the loss of nature, but of culture, and is doing so, not as one observing nature from a distance, but as one in the midst of nature.

Thus the text emphasizes this conflict between nature and culture, and Sweeney’s fall from a state of culture. But it is even before Sweeney’s exile and madness takes hold that the text places an emphasis on the trappings of culture that surround the king.

In this wise did he appear. A filmy shirt of silk was next his
white skin, around him was a girdle of royal satin, likewise
the tunic which Congal had given him the day he slew Oilill
Cedach, king of the Ui Faolain, at Magh Rath; a crimson
tunic of one colour was it with a close, well-woven border
of beautiful, refined gold set with rows of fair gems of
carbuncle from one end to the other of the border, having in
it silken loops over beautiful, shining buttons for fastening
and opening it, with variegation of pure white silver each

way and each path he would go: there was a slender-
 threaded hard fringe to that tunic. In his hands were two
 spears very long and (shod) with broad iron, a yellow-
 speckled, horny shield was on his back, a gold-hilted sword
 at his left side. (*BS* 11)⁹

This description of Sweeney's attire calls attention immediately to his status in the society in which he lives. As a king, he wears gold, silver, jewels – all signs of an evolved culture – and as a proven warrior, he carries weapons made of precious metals. Such a description stands in stark contrast to later self-observations on his utter lack of clothes. The significance here is clear: when Sweeney is attired in obviously expensive clothes, he is a significant part of the society; when naked but for his feathers, he is the consummate outsider. Sweeney's ultimate nakedness is a matter of poetic justice, since, in his furor to reach Ronan on the first occasion he rushes out so quickly that when his wife grabs his cloak he ends up confronting the priest completely naked. This fact alone – that he confronts Ronan while naked – indicates that Sweeney, in his attack, is acting outside of his own society: none of the other members of the society react so violently to the

⁹ “As amhlaidh robaoi agus leine sreabhnaidhe síodae i cusdail fri gheilchnes dó agus fúathróig do srol rígh uime agus an t-ionar tuc Congal dó an lá romarbh Oilill Cédach rí Ua bFaoláin for Magh Rath, ionar corcra comhdatha esein co cciumhius dluith degfh highthi d’ór aluinn órlíoghthi ris, co sreithegar gem ccaomh ccarrmhogail on chionn gór arail don chiumhais sin, go stúaghlúbaibh síoda dar cnaipidhibh caoimettrochta re hiadhadh agus re hosgladh and, go bfoirbreachtadh airgid áoingil gacha cáoi agus gacha conaire imtheighedh; criaidhrinn chaoilsnáithaide don ionar sin. Dhá sleigh sithfhoda slinnleathna ina lámhaibh, sgiath breachbhuidhe bhúabhallda for a mhuin, claideamh órdhoirn for a chliú” (*BS* 10).

presence of Christianity, and so Sweeney, even at the start of the text, is acting as an outsider.

This status as an outsider – a quite literal outsider – proves to be what Sweeney mourns most. “‘My conscience!’ said he, ‘it is hard to endure this life after a pleasant one. . .’” (*BS* 25).¹⁰ On the first anniversary of his exile, Sweeney utters a poem which details all of the things he has gone without. He has lived in forests and glens “without covering around me”; “without a pillow beneath my head”; “without sword, without spear”; “without the company of women”; “without a foray with a king”; “without a house right full”; “without accomplished musicians” (*BS* 26-7).¹¹ All of these things are a part of a socially constructed world; Sweeney laments the fact that he is living the “ideal” pastoral life, foraging for food and drink, seeking shelter; he longs to be saved from the world of nature and returned to the world of culture where shelter is provided, where his status as a warrior and a man are restored.

This remembrance of his past life is a significant part of Sweeney’s madness, and results in many of his poems.

Though I be as I am tonight,
there was time
when my strength was not so feeble
over a land that was not bad.

¹⁰ -- ‘Mo chubhais eimh,’ ar sé, ‘as deacair an bheatha so d’fhulang tar éis deghbhethad. . .’ (*BS* 24).

On splendid steeds,

in life without sorrow.

in my auspicious kingship

I was a good, great king. (*BS* 27)¹²

His displacement into the natural world does not displace his memory, and it is the memory, the fact that “there was a time” that drives Sweeney to a frenzy of motion across the forests of Ireland. Simon Schama points out that “it is not too much to say that classical civilization had always defined itself against the primeval woods” (Schama 82); it becomes clear that the culture of which Sweeney was a part also defined itself by its position in the not-wilderness. In his attempt to adjust to his new condition in the wilderness, Sweeney turns his memories into a nostalgia that allows him, as a poet, to preserve his past and the culture that is under threat. In this way, Sweeney’s poetry acts as a historical and cultural preservative.

¹¹ “gan tuighe fóm tháobh:” “Gan cerchaill fóm chionn:” “gan fhaobar, gan rinn:” “Gan comhthocht fí mnáibh:” “Gan rúathar co rígh:” “Gan tegh lomnán lán:” “Gan áos comhlán ciúil” (*BS* 24.26).

¹² Robadhus-sa feacht,
ge bío mar `tú anocht,
ba neamhfhann mo nert
ar ferann nárbh olc.

Ar eachaibh co hán
i mbeathaid can bhrón,
ar mo righe raith
robsam rígh maith mór. (*BS* 26)

When he is visited by Loingseachan, in one of several attempts to retrieve him and to restore him to his previous position, we receive a dramatically clear presentation of what is ultimately the reverse pastoral of this story. The attempts at retrieval all fail in the long run: in Joseph Nagy's words, "Suibhne, obsessed with the past and capable of reading the data of the present only in terms of the past, is profoundly disturbed by the unrelenting "attack" of the present upon his perennially hidden but ultimately disclosed person" (*BS* 23). While a figure like Loingseachan is from the past that he longs for, Sweeney is aware that were he to return, it would not be to the past he obsesses over. Loingseachan too regrets that Sweeney should exist in his present state.

after having been in garments of silk and satin on splendid
steeds from foreign lands with matchless bridles; with you
were women gentle and comely, likewise many youths and
hounds and goodly folk of every art; many hosts, many and
diverse nobles and chiefs, and young lords, and landholders
and hospitallers were at your command. Many cups and
goblets and carved buffalo horns for pleasant-flavoured and
enjoyable liquors were yours also. Sad it is for you to be in
that wise like unto any miserable bird going from wilderness
to wilderness. (*BS* 53)¹³

¹³ . . . ier mbeith a n-éttai^{gh}ibh sroldae siregdha ar eachaibh ana allmurdha co srianaibh soinemhla dhuit, ocus mná málla maisecha let ocus iomad macaomh ocus miolchon ocus degháos gacha dana, iomad slúagh, iomdha iolarrdha d'urradhuibh ocus do tháoisechuibh ocus d'óighthighernaibh, do brughadhuigh ocus do bhiatachaibh dot réir. Iomad cúach

What Loingseachan's lament articulates is that Sweeney has fallen from a state of culture into a state of nature. When one considers the Christian tradition's belief in a fall from nature, and the literary pastoral's similar view, this development in Irish literature amounts to an original treatment of nature, one that is explained by the cultural changes taking place. Far from being seen as an ideal, the natural world represents the depression of culture in twelfth century Irish literature.

Gradually, through the process of his madness and through his forced appreciation of nature, Sweeney comes to consider the natural world as having replaced the culture from which he has been separated. In the poems and prose passages praising nature, Sweeney demonstrates an admiration for those aspects of nature which differ from the world of men, as in the following:

From Loch Dioiar of the cliff
to Derry Coluim Cille
it was not strife that I heard
from splendid, melodious swans. (BS 35)¹⁴

Such passages are significant for several reasons. As a now marginal figure, Sweeney no longer keeps within the realm of his own host, as most medieval Irishmen were required to do. Borders were heeded by all but the chief bards, who, because of their great learning,

ocus copán ocus benn mbreacegair mbúabhaill im lenuibh somblasda so-ola let bhéos.
Dursan duit bheith fon ionnus sin amail gach
n-en ttrug tarimtheachtach ó dhithribh do dhithribh. (BS 52)

¹⁴ O Loch Dioair an aille
go Dore Coluim Chille
nocha deabaidh rochúala

were allowed to pass from one *tuath* to another. The fact that Sweeney roams like a bird indicates that he is now completely outside of existing social structures. This passage also signals his appreciation for what he perceives as the peacefulness of the natural world, indicating that he has come to see his own culture in a new way: to an outsider like the priest Ronan, the society of which Sweeney has been a part had seemed terribly violent.

Thus Sweeney begins to idealize nature as he has his lost life as a king. After several years spent wandering in the wilderness, a transformation has occurred: the natural world has replaced the world of culture entirely, and the idealization of nature all but replaces his nostalgia for his past life.

When the proud turtle-dove
rises for us,
quickly do I overtake it
since my feathers have grown.

The silly, foolish woodcock
when it rises for me
methinks 'tis a bitter foe,
the blackbird (too) that gives the cry of alarm. (*BS* 75)¹⁵

ó ealaib búadha binne. (*BS* 34)

¹⁵ Fer[a]n eighinn iomuallach
an tan eirghius duinn,
goirid bhim da tarrachtain

By this point, other creatures have replaced the men of his own host. Sweeney, in his new existence and guise, has adapted his old language to his new conditions, so that turtle-doves, woodcocks and blackbirds have become allies and enemies.

Despite such idealizations, however, it is clear that Sweeney has been *condemned* to loving nature. Sweeney has become a bird / man on the fringe of society: “I go not to a gathering/ among warriors of my country,/ no safeguard is granted me,/ my thought is not on kingship” (*BS* 85), he says.¹⁶ The process of being displaced has, as is evident from this statement, eventually displaced his desire to return to his former position, and in this Sweeney recognizes that his return, in any event, would be to a changed world in which he would not retain the same power: it is impossible to regain the past.

Sweeney’s identity has thus undergone a thorough transformation.

I am Suibhne, a poor suppliant,
swiftly do I race across the glen;
that is not my lawful name,
rather it is Fer Ben. (*BS* 81)¹⁷

o rofas mo chluimh.

Creaghar osccar antuiccseach
an tan eirghius damh,
indar liom as dergnamha
an lon do[g]ni an sgál. (*BS* 74)

¹⁶ Ní theighim a n-oirechtus
edir oguibh mo thire,
ní déntar dam oinechtreas,
ní théit mh’aire re righe. (*BS* 84)

¹⁷ As mé Suibhni sirtheachán,
luath reithim tar glenn.

In this passage Sweeney goes so far as to admit that his name no longer signifies who he is and argues that his true name is now “man of peaks”. In so renaming himself, Sweeney reverses an Irish tradition in which name dictates place: most tales in the *dindsenchas* recall the naming of place after a person. Here, instead, place dictates name. It is once this transformation has taken place that Sweeney begins to utter his poems praising the great natural beauties of Ireland.

I love not the merry prattle
that men and women make:
sweeter to me is the warbling
of the blackbird in the quarter in which it is.

I love not the trumpeting
I hear at early morn:
sweeter to me is the squeal
of the badgers in Benna Broc.

I love not the horn-blowing
so boldly I hear:
sweeter to me the belling of a stag

nocha n-é mh`ainm dlíghtheachán,
mó is ainm damh fer benn. (BS 80)

of twice twenty peaks. (*BS* 77. 79)¹⁸

Sweeney's preference for the natural world has come now to undermine his view of society. However, it is apparent that this preference is the result of his memory of his past life fading. When that memory recurs, when he recalls his past identity, his present one becomes unbearable. "When I was Suibhne indeed/ and used to go on steeds - / when that comes to my memory/ alas that I was detained in life" (*BS* 87), he says.¹⁹

Sweeney recognizes all of the contradictions of his fallen or displaced state when he says. "This is a spot for a madman, but yet no place is it for corn or milk or food: it is an uncomfortable, unquiet place, nor has it shelter against storm or shower, though it is a lofty, beautiful place" (*BS* 115).²⁰ Sweeney recognizes here that nature is for those who are somehow outside of the social realm – for a madman, in this case, who, in his marginal

¹⁸ Ni charaim an sibheanradh
do[g]niad fir is mna,
binne liom a celieabradh
luin 'san aird itá.

Ni charaim in stocairecht
atcluim go moch,
binne luim a crocairecht
bruic mBennuibh Broc.

Ni charuim an chomairecht
atchluim go tenn,
binne lium ag damhghairecht
damh dá fhíched benn. (*BS* 76,78)

¹⁹ Antan robsom Suibhni-si
agus théighinnar eachaibh,
antan tig im c[h]uimh[n]i-si
mairg romfuirgedh a mbethaidh. (*BS* 86)

status, is unable to obtain corn or milk (both signs of cultivated and settled agriculture) but instead exists, uncomfortably, in nature's beauty. Sweeney's consignment to this "unquiet" outdoor world signifies the exchange of cultures taking place: the traditional Irish society of which Sweeney is a representative is being replaced by a Christian culture, and nature becomes the site for expressing the nostalgia for the old life, with Sweeney eventually coming, tentatively, out of wilderness into a semi-settled life, establishing a tie to another priest and, at his self-prophesied death, thanking God for his life and repenting any evil he has done – he has undergone, in effect, a rite of passage.²¹

The text supposes this rite of passage to have been Christian, but Sweeney clings to his pagan ideas to the end:

Moling: Delightful is the leaf of this book,

the psalter of holy Kevin.

Suibhne: More delightful is a leaf of my yew,

in happy Glen Bolcain. (*BS* 141).²²

This exchange with the priest who records Sweeney's story and the poetry resulting

²⁰ -- "Maith in t-ionach geilte so," ar sé, "acht namá ní hionadh eatha, blechta no bídh é. acht is ionadh anforusta ansocair agus ní díon ar dhoininn na ar cherthan bheith ann, gidh ionadh urartt aoibhinn é" (*BS* 114).

²¹ See A. Van Gennep, *Rites de passage* (Paris, 1909). Elements of Van Gennep's formulation of separation, transition, and incorporation are appropriate to Sweeney's story.

²² [Moling:] Aluinn duille an liubhair-si,
psaltair Cháoinhghin cháidh.
[Suibhne:] Aille duille mh'iubhair-si
i nGlinn Bolcáin báin. (*BS* 140)

from his madness signals that Sweeney comes to choose the world of nature over the world of a culture with which he is unfamiliar and, in his view, has destroyed his own culture. It is the Christian culture, though, that, as in the *Acallam*, allows for the preservation of the story. Moling tells Sweeney that “it is destined for you to be here and to end your life here; to leave here your history and adventures. . . you will come to me every evening so that I will write your history” (*BS* 143).²³ Sweeney agrees to this arrangement because it guarantees him food and drink, and so completes his life by living on the margin of culture: by day he roams the countryside, and at evening arrives at the priest’s house.

Sweeney, at the time of his death, repents and, it would seem, accepts the Christian faith with which he has been at war throughout the text. “To Thee, O Christ, I give thanks/ for partaking of Thy Body;/ sincere repentance in this world/ for each evil I have ever done” (*BS* 155), he says just before he dies.²⁴ However, it is significant that the stanzas preceding this outline for the last time Sweeney’s preference for the natural

²³ “... ar atá a ndán duit bheith annso agus do sáogal do thecht ann, do sgéla agus th’imthechta d’fhágáil sunn agus th’adhnacal i reilicc fireóin, agus naisgim-si fort,” ar Moling, “gidh mor sire gach láoi d’Érinn techt gacha herpurtan chugum-sa go rosgriobhthar do sgéla lium” (*BS* 142).

²⁴ Beirim a bhuidhe friot sin
do chorp, a Christ, do chaithimh,
aithrighe iodhan abhus
in gach old riamh doronus. (*BS* 154)

world over the world of culture, a world that now includes Christianity: “Though yonder in your church you deem melodious/ the soft converse of your students, more melodious to me is the splendid/ chant of the hounds of Glen Bolcain” (*BS* 153).²⁵

The process of Sweeney’s transformation is one that encompasses several steps. First there is the king, a proud warrior who refuses Ronan’s claim to Christian settlement. Second we see Sweeney as the lonely madman mourning the loss of his former position, nostalgic to the point of living completely in the past. And finally there is a Sweeney who has become, after many years, resigned to his fate, and who has come to appreciate his situation, despite all of its hardships. This series of personae is one that could well be a formula for individuals and cultures undergoing drastic change: a period of severe nostalgia is followed by an acculturation, however slight. Sweeney’s tentative – and often touching – relationship with Moling indicates to the reader that he has come to accept a Christian presence in Ireland at some level, bringing his story to a close.

Finally, it is worth noting that, as with the *Acallam*, there is a gap between the period during which *Buile Suibhne* is set, and the period in which it was composed. This distinction is significant in reflecting a general preoccupation during the twelfth century with adapting older Irish tales into contemporary, Christian frames. This process of adaptation is most in evidence in the *Acallam na Senórach*.

²⁵ Gidh binn libh thall in bhar ccill
comhradh mín bar mac leighinn,
binne lium ceileabhradh án
doghniad coin Ghlinne Bolcáin. (*BS* 152)

The *Acallam na Senórach*

Like *Buile Suibhne*, the *Acallam na Senórach* involves the encounter of early Irish and Christian cultures, weaving a narrative out of an imagined meeting between members of the mythological *fiana* and St Patrick with his entourage of bishops and clerics. The *Acallam* also marks the high point in Irish literature of what can only be called placelore. Many of the early Irish poems make mention by name of specific places in Ireland; by the twelfth century, through a figure like Sweeney, we see that more use is being made of – and more significance being given to – place. Where Sweeney frequently names places through which he passes, though, Cailte, in the *Acallam*, structures his entire narrative around the history of place, creating a verbal map of Ireland in the process. It emerges, in the course of Cailte's explanations of the histories of place, that he is experiencing an overwhelming nostalgia in his roamings through the Irish wilderness: nostalgia is, arguably, built into this text, composed in the twelfth century, set in the fifth, and looking backwards from the fifth to the era of the Fenians. Cailte, like Sweeney, is haunted by a past that he cannot reclaim except through memory, which is, as the *Acallam* makes clear, fading. While Cailte would have existed in nature when the *fian* were at their height, that earlier existence was not marked by nostalgia in the natural world: as we have seen in Chapter Two, earlier *fian* literature, while based in the natural world, is not tainted by this nostalgia. Thus we can conclude that Cailte's nostalgia, authored as it was in the twelfth century, was created out of a social uncertainty that had not existed when the earlier literature was written. When we will see in this text is a powerful

reliance on the past to provide a sense of continuity that has, as Cailte demonstrates, been ruptured.

Before examining the confluence of nature and nostalgia in the *Acallam*, it is necessary to examine several other themes of the text, themes that all attempt to address the significance of the past to the present; in this way, this prologue is necessary to an understanding of the mode in which nostalgia operates in this medieval work.

Eugene O'Curry, who translated part of the *Acallam na Senórach* for his 1861 *Lectures on the Manuscript Material of Ancient Irish History*, dates the Book of Lismore, of which the most complete version of the *Acallam* is a part, to the fourteenth century; the translators of the recently published version, *Tales of the Elders of Ireland*, date the same manuscript to the fifteenth century. Besides the Book of Lismore, three other recensions exist: MS Laud 610, MS Rawlinson B 487 (both at the Bodleian) and MS A IV (Killiney). The Bodleian manuscripts both date to the fifteenth centuries; the Killiney manuscript to the sixteenth. However, as is the case with *Buile Suibhne*, the linguistic evidence indicates that the story is older than the manuscripts and is likely to have existed in oral form for several hundred years. The *Acallam* must, however, be of a date later than 1142, for as Kuno Meyer points out, the monastery of Droichet Atha, founded in 1142, is mentioned (Meyer 1910 xxxi). Thus, regardless of whether certain elements were in existence in oral material prior to this date, the *Acallam* did not exist in its written form, the form that has come down to us, until then.²⁶

The Christian Mission: The Adaptation of Pre-Christian Tales

That this text was collected or authored in the period just prior to or at the start of the Norman invasion of Ireland and within the period of ecclesiastical reform puts it in line with the dates of many other texts of the twelfth century. Catherine McKenna has referred to the “gathering impulse” of this era prior to the major social shifts that followed on the heels of the Normans.²⁷ While there are substantial handfuls of manuscript material that can be definitively dated to the period prior to 1100, there are hundreds of texts dating from this crucial period. Of the collections, many are those that attempt to gather what amounts to lore of Ireland’s past. That tales revolving around the *fián* were included in this gathering period is not surprising. Kuno Meyer’s invaluable work on the Finn cycle, published in 1910 as *Fianaigecht*, demonstrates that, throughout the earlier Irish period, the popularity of *fián* lore was on the rise. The general trend is an increase in occurrence of poems or texts referring to the *fiána* or to characters associated with them; by the time we reach the twelfth century, there are twenty-one occurrences.

A substantial inquiry into why the pre-Norman era was marked by such a gathering impulse would reveal little; as we do not have accounts by scribes explaining why they undertook to preserve particular materials, solid conclusions would be mere supposition. However, a brief consideration as to the reasons for this gathered literary momentum is fruitful, if only because it reminds us to consider the social changes

²⁶ For a more detailed analysis of the oral tradition of Finn lore, see Chapter Two.

underway in twelfth century Ireland, and to consider those changes alongside the existing manuscript material. As noted at the start of this chapter, the twelfth century saw many changes mid-process: of these, one of the most significant is undeniably that of the Church's consolidation in Ireland. What I would suggest is that, at the time when texts like both *Buile Suibhne* and the *Acallam* were written, the Church's presence in Ireland, having increased dramatically, was virtually universal. This alone would explain in part the increase in literary activity. But what to make of the fact that of the material collected, much of it is, like the *Acallam*, a part of a specifically pre-Christian Irish tradition?

Early Christian Ireland's monks,

working within a historical framework modeled upon the Bible, could conscientiously regard their pre-Christian past as an object of worthy attention. In effect, narratives purporting to cover people and events prior to Patrick's mission and establishment of the true faith could be treated as a kind of 'Old Testament' of the Irish race, a socially, morally and aetiologically instructive God-given record perfected by no means invalidated by the new dispensation of Christianity. (McCone 77)

²⁷ In a series of lectures on medieval Irish literature given at NYU's Ireland House in the spring of 1999.

Adopting the pre-Christian past into the Christian present could, in other words, act as a form of prophecy that demonstrated that Ireland's pagan past led it towards its Christian present: Kim McCone has noted that "medieval Irish literature abounds in episodes testifying to the importance attached to the past as a sanction for present realities and aspirations" (McCone 105). The conversion of pre-Christian tales into Christian narrative and moral models could thus act as a means towards actual conversion: Irish monks, then, did not wish to merely preserve the pre-Christian Irish tradition. "Learned monastic interest in the pre-Christian past can be far more creditably ascribed to a desire to control and exploit its social and political potential with the help of perceived biblical parallels capable of being enhanced or even fabricated as the occasion demanded" (McCone 30-1). The adaptation of the pre-Christian past thus operates, in one sense, to replace poetry with scripture.

Dialogue Between "Pagan Past and Christian Present"

As a part of Ireland's pre-Christian heritage, the *féian* and its cycle of tales were a perfect example to which to apply this agenda. As a band of outlaws whose practices were not only decidedly "un-Christian" – particularly their attitudes towards sexuality and their use of violence – but also decidedly outside of the typical pre-Christian Irish codes, they could only be seen as troublesome in the context of contemporary Irish Christian ideology. Given the evidence for the lasting popularity of Finn mac Cumall and the tales of the *féian*, as discussed in Chapter Two, there was a definite need to translate

this group of tales into a Christian context. Citing Patrick's comment in the *Acallam* that storytelling is a tricky business. Joseph Nagy remarks that "storytelling is indeed a complicated business, and so is attempting to translate the old stories into a Christian and literary form without denying them their own worldview – a tricky procedure that is precisely what the author or authors of the *Acallam* were engaged in" (Nagy 1989 157).

Kim McCone notes as well this difficulty:

If further proof were needed that the *fian* was part of early Christian Ireland's pagan heritage, this is supplied by plentiful literary evidence for the Church's strong disapproval of this practice in the pre-Norman period. . . . Although Old Testament figures such as Jephthah of Gilead and, above all, King David himself had considerable potential as justificatory models for a youth spent in the wilderness at the head of a band of outlaws prior to becoming a leader or king of settled society, the clerical establishment tended to pass over this potion in favour of outright condemnation of the *fian* and what it stood for. Indeed, given the centrality of sexual license, gratuitous violence and pillaging to this way of life, it is hard to see how the Church could have reached a meaningful compromise compatible with fundamental Christian tenets. (McCone 218)

The compromise hit upon by the author or authors of the *Acallam* was that of a dialogue between the past and the present: between Cailte, one of the last surviving members of the *fian*, and Patrick, the bringer of Christianity to Ireland. Dialogue had been in use as a literary device for many hundreds of years by the time the *Acallam* came to be written down, and, as in the example of the Socratic dialogues, was an obvious tool for instruction. In medieval Ireland, Joseph Nagy suggests, the dialogue was used in a somewhat different fashion.²⁸ Not only did a dialogue allow for instruction between individuals, but also for the instruction of the present by the past: a discussion between, for example, Cailte and Patrick, allows the present to be in conversation with the past, and to integrate it as it proves necessary or useful.

This agenda is in evidence from the first pages of the *Acallam*: Patrick, upon seeing the surviving members of the *fian*, “arose and sprinkled holy water on these great men, for, until that day, a thousand legions of demons had been above their heads” (Dooley, Roe 5).²⁹ Immediately it is clear that Patrick’s mission is to Christianize not only the Irish present, but also the past, through cleansing what are living relics from Irish history and making them appear to be the fated precursors to the Christian present. The past, at this stage, is symbolically looming over the present: when Cailte and his men are seated before Patrick and his entourage, “the tallest of the clerics came only to

²⁸ See Nagy’s *Conversing with Angels and Ancients: Literary Myths of Medieval Ireland*.

²⁹ All quotations from the *Acallam* are taken from the recent translation by Ann Dooley and Harry Roe, which is based on their collation of the Irish texts. A bibliography of those texts is included in their version.

the waist or the shoulder-tops of these great men, who were already sitting down” (Dooley, Roe 5). Despite this overwhelming presence of the past, the *fīan* are suffering: “by this time their fighting abilities were much reduced” (Dooley, Roe 3). Patrick’s work, then, is to diminish the presence of the past, to cut it down to size, and make it employable in the service of the Christian mission. A part of that mission, it emerges, is to attempt to transform Cailte’s nostalgia for the past into a sense that, while the past is still significant and will not be forgotten in the present, it is the present that is the primary focus.

Patrick’s way of going about this in the narrative is clever: not only do we see the process of the past being explained as a precursor to the fated Christian present, but also the drawing of parallels between that past and the present, a device that reassures, in effect, by suggesting that the present is not too great a departure from the past. Shortly after the first real narrative in the *Acallam*, that explaining how the *fīan* came by their horses, Patrick is visited by his two guardian angels. They

came to Patrick and he asked them if it were the will of the King of Heaven and Earth that he be listening to the tales of the *Fian*. They answered him with one voice. ‘Dear holy cleric,’ they said, ‘these old warriors tell you no more than a third of their stories, because their memories are faulty. Have these stories written down on poets’ tablets in refined language, so that the hearing of them will provide

entertainment for the lords and commons of later times.

(Dooley, Roe 12)

This decree from God authorizes Patrick not only to listen, but to preserve the past: he can now enjoy the tales in good conscience, rather than worry over the disruption they cause to the religious life³⁰, thus working towards the conversion of the Irish past as well as the conversion of the Irish themselves. Patrick explains this mission to Cailte:

‘Do you know why you have all been brought to speak with me?’ asked Patrick. ‘Indeed we do not,’ replied Cailte. ‘So that you might submit to the Gospel of the King of Heaven and Earth, the true glorious God.’ Patrick, the head of baptism and faith of the men of Ireland, poured on them the waters of the baptism of Christ and Cailte put his hand to the rim of his shield and gave Patrick, in payment for his baptism and that of his companions, a block of ribbed, red, flamelike gold, weighing one hundred and fifty ounces, from the lands of Arabia. ‘This was my last gift from Finn the Chieftain,’ said Cailte, ‘and I give it to you, Patrick, for the good of my soul and the soul of the chief of the *Fian*.’

(Dooley, Roe 12)

³⁰ Prior to the angels’ visitations, Patrick expressed such reservations to Cailte. “If our religious life were not being disrupted, our prayers neglected, and our communion with the King of Heaven and Earth disturbed, we would enjoy conversing with you, good warrior” (Dooley, Roe 6).

Cailte's response to his baptism, giving Patrick Finn's last gift to him, symbolizes an exchange between past and present. This symbolic exchange is to continue throughout the tales: Cailte will provide the history of Ireland, while Patrick will provide its future. Patrick continues to reassure Cailte of the fatedness of his preservation through time. "You were preserved, dear Cailte, for great goodness, for the time of belief and of the holy and righteous, and in order to be in friendship with the King of Heaven and Earth," (Dooley, Roe 105), Patrick says when Cailte is lamenting his existence beyond his own time without the rest of the *fian*. This suggests that Cailte's stories were preserved for the same reason, to meet the Christian tradition and embark upon a cultural translation and exchange.

This exchange, made possible through the device of the dialogue, allows for a series of parallels between the *fian* and Patrick to emerge. The *fian* and Christianity both emphasize genealogy; passages outlining the history of *fian* members are written to parallel Biblical genealogies; this geneological preoccupation is universal in Irish tradition:

The son of Tadgn, son of Morna from the plain, son of
Faelan, son or Feradach, Son of Fiacha, son of Art from the
plain, son of Muiredach, son of Eogan. (Dooley, Roe 9)

This commonality is one of many. While the *fian* acted as a sort of moral standard outside of the Irish system of codes – of inheritance and right judgment, for example – Patrick now takes on that role. The first tale of the *fian*'s intervention on behalf of men denied their rightful inheritance is immediately followed by a tale in which Patrick

intervenes in a similar manner. When a man denies Patrick and his entourage hospitality, “the earth swallowed [him] up” (Dooley, Roe 18), along with all of his goods and animals. When Fulertach offers hospitality as a result, Patrick decrees that “‘you shall have the kingship tomorrow at the middle of the day,’ said Patrick, ‘and your race after you, unless you turn against the Church’” (Dooley, Roe 18). Patrick here acts outside moral law, the status previously granted to the *fian*. The *fian*’s use of magic and the forces of the otherworld are translated (and by implication compared to) Patrick’s miracles and use of God’s powers.

Patrick himself seems to recognize these parallels. The first time that he calls for a tale to be written down is after Cailte describes Finn’s advice to the *fian* in Christianized terms. Finn advises kindness, generosity, truthfulness, modesty, loyalty, moderation in drink, and preparedness, all traits very much in line with the Christian ideal. Patrick’s response is to call for Broccan, the scribe – “Get your book, your inkhorn and pen and copy out this story” (Dooley, Roe 20). Through this process of Christianizing the mores of the *fian*, the authors of the *Acallam* suggest that past can be edited to suit present.

Over time, as Cailte and Patrick come to have an obvious esteem for one another, they begin to work in tandem. The now Christian Cailte acts on Patrick’s behalf to create new traditions, as when he tells Bran that he must give “‘the belly of every cow and every pig and every sheep to Patrick and the Holy Church henceforth.’ ‘I shall do that,’ said Bran, ‘and my son after me.’ From that time on this custom prevailed among the

men of Ireland” (Dooley, Roe 30). Cailte is thus acting as a missionary too, and, through the recording of such a tale, creates new traditions, ones that are specifically Christian: no longer is Cailte requiring that offers be made to the *fian*, but instead to the Church.

Initially Cailte and Patrick’s missions – to preserve, respectively, the past and future of Ireland – are separate. Cailte, after his initial traveling with Patrick, departs. “‘Where are you going?’ asked Patrick. ‘To search out the hills and mounds and the heights where my companions and foster-brothers, the prince-warriors and nobles of the *Fian* once were with me, for I am tired of being in one place’” (Dooley, Roe 46).³¹ Following Cailte’s departure to seek out more evidence of the *fian*’s past, Patrick sets out to “preach the faith and the religious life, to expel the demons and the druids from Ireland, to choose the holy and the righteous, to erect crosses, penitential stations, and altars, and to destroy idols and spectres, and the arts of druidism” (Dooley, Roe 46).

As the narrative progresses, the parallels between *fian* and the Church are brought together, as when Cailte and Patrick act together to help a character named Coscrach. Coscrach “received two benefits that evening: Patrick saved his soul and Cailte protected his wealth and his grain by killing the troublesome stag that was destroying it” (Dooley, Roe 125). This combination of *fian* and Church working in tandem provides for the care of both soul and body, and it is the dialogue between past and present, Cailte and Patrick, that allows for the complete attention to such matters.

³¹ Compare this to Sweeney’s similar statement. The parallel suggests that restlessness is the mark of those outside of settled society, living in nature.

The Christian present is used to justify the pagan past, and vice versa, in a final significant way. Finn's ability to prophesy events and his visionary qualities are exploited to point to Christianity's presence in Ireland. Patrick inquires whether the *fián* had any knowledge of God, and is told that "the chief and warrior knew, for he was a wizard, a seer, and a prince" (Dooley, Roe 45). Finn's fore-knowledge of God was thus passed on to the members of the *fián*, as Cailte tells Patrick; in this way an 'ancient' justification of the Christian presence is offered, made stronger by the fact that Finn's vision also told him of Patrick's coming.

The Written Version of Oral Tales

This device of dialogue proves clever for another reason as well. Past and present converse in terms of subject matter, but also in terms of the oral and written traditions. That the tale is the written version of an oral conversation mingles the oral, pre-Christian tradition from which these tales are evidently derived, and the written tradition, brought to Ireland by Christianity, and symbolized in the *Acallam* by its first representative, Patrick. As has become evident from the discussion above, it is Patrick's authorization – received from God – that preserves the past and allows for this convergence of oral and written traditions.

Patrick is an appropriate figure to use as the receiver of such authorization and as the intermediary between oral and written traditions; as Joseph Nagy points out, Patrick himself, in his *Confessio*, struggled with the relationship between the spoken and written

word, and was evidently reluctant to write, but was obliged to do so in order to regain his authority:

Patrick's reluctance to write. . . . equated with an unwillingness or inability to speak, is dissolved through a kind of literary glossalia based on an implicit annexation of writing by speech. To write, then, is merely another way to speak. It is not to assume the onerous responsibility of individual authorship but potentially to become the mouthpiece of God or Christ. (Nagy 1997 28)

This meeting of the spoken and written traditions through the authority of God, made with the intent of uttering his word, recurs in the *Acallam* through Patrick's receipt of authorization from his guardian angels to hear Cailte's tales of the past. Heavenly permission, in effect, while authorizing, also almost authors the text.

Medieval Irish tradition viewed the recitation of tales as a form of remembering them.

"Remembering" a text had a definite performative dimension in a culture such as that of medieval Ireland, in which texts normally were read aloud. Indeed, there is ample reason to believe that Irish literati viewed remembrance and speaking as mutually implicated or even as inseparable. Knowledge, especially a story about the past, is forgotten if it is not told. (Nagy 1997 16)

Cailte, who has not had anyone to whom to recite his tales, suffers from loss of memory, as the angels inform Patrick. Likely as a result of his failing memory, Cailte quickly comes to recognize the written tradition as superior to the oral tradition, thus offering a recommendation, in effect, for the Christian tradition as well. After a spell away from Patrick and his entourage, Cailte announces, upon meeting them again, “O glorious men of God, I have seen a multitude of wonders that only a pen would be able to describe” (Dooley, Roe 88). Cailte thus authorizes the writing down of his own tales, and seems to have concluded that the written form is the only form in which it will be possible for the past of Ireland to be preserved, given both his own forgetting and the ignorance of others in the present of the histories he relates. By putting such a sentiment in the mouth of a character derived from oral tradition, the author or authors of the *Acallam* offer a seeming “proof” of the superiority of the written, Christian tradition of narrative, and so can replace the oral with the written.

Despite Cailte’s emphasis on the superiority of the written form, however, the narrator’s voice makes a rare intrusion into the *Acallam* to note the impossibility of recording the oral tradition, saying that “one cannot count the number of stories that Cailte and Oisín related of the great deeds of valour and prowess they had done, or their tales of the nobles of the *Fian*, as well as the local lore of each hill and region that the men of Ireland enquired about” (Dooley, Roe 75). Thus there are doubts on both sides. While Cailte doubts his memory and its ability to retain the tales of the past, the narrator here suggests that that memory is a better retainer than the written word.

This topos of the inexhaustibility of traditional memory and the subsequently inevitable loss in translation from oral to literary is closely connected with another favorite topos of the *Acallam*, one which we have already encountered: namely, the impossibility of communicating and enjoying fully the personal presence of hero and heroic deed through recollection or either available medium, the spoken or the written word. (Nagy 1985 156)

It is interesting, given this, that, when the *Acallam* closes at the Tara gathering, both Cailte and Oisín “told much knowledge and true lore in the presence of the men of Ireland, and all that they said was preserved by the ollaves of Ireland” (Dooley, Roe 220). The implication is that the *fian*’s tales are thus twice preserved: by the written tradition of the *Acallam*, and by the oral tradition of Irish poets.

The dialogue of written and oral tradition in the *Acallam* also touches on the idea of narrative; as the written version of oral tales, a tension between oral and written narrative arises in the *Acallam*. Critics have often viewed the *Acallam* as an almost sloppy compilation of stories that lead nowhere in particular. Joseph Nagy has argued that the *Acallam* is “more unified and internally resonant than most latter-day readers, and perhaps even its original composers and transmitters, have realized” (Nagy 1985 149), suggesting that oral narrative has its own logic, one that is, rather than linear, cyclical and spatial:

[T]hey are on the whole structurally repetitive and eminently predictable, and also, a large number of them tend, in one way or another, to end up where they began, sometimes to the point of negating any impression of progress or even of Aristotelian 'storyness' (i.e., having a beginning, middle and end). (Nagy 1985 150)

The compiler of this text is not interested in a linear narrative, but in getting down everything he knows: this leads to tales that often turn back in on themselves by returning to the same spatial point they began with. As a result, the *Acallam* can be seen as being about narrative tradition itself, its continuity, and how narrative is both created and written down. For, while Cailte is detailing the past of the landscape, new events are taking place that reinscribe meaning: narrative is continuous and constantly changing. The tales that Cailte details about the names of places can be overwritten by the very events of the present.

This sensibility – which evidently derives from the oral tradition of the tales – is at odds, as Joseph Nagy points out in the passage quoted above, with more classical modes of narrative that do insist upon linearity in both space and time. There is, in this text, a conflict between what is happening in the present, and what has happened in the past: another conflict is that between “traditional narrative, with its own appropriate sense of time and event, and a historical sensibility rooted in the coming of christianity and christian learning” (Nagy 1985 150). The governance of the *Acallam* does not rely upon linearity in time at all: this is clear from the concurrent existence of Cailte and Oisín,

and Patrick. Tomas O Rahilly excuses this: "Our storytellers may be forgiven for the fluctuating chronology they assign to Finn and his *fian*, for none of their alleged achievements has the remotest connexion with history" (O Rahilly 277). This suggests that the time factor of the *Acallam* is the result of a scribe or author confused by the various dates assigned to a mythological group; I would suggest that it is quite purposeful. The narrative does not need time as its narrative guide – instead, the *Acallam* uses spatial sequencing. Place becomes, in effect, the narrative device in the text, a way of unpacking the crates of the past.

Placelore

Place becomes a particularly significant concept when a culture is experiencing change, for place, as has already been suggested, can be perceived as a steady realm, and therefore a steadying force, a touchstone, within an unsteady culture. It is not surprising, considering the changes underway in twelfth century Ireland, that placelore became so significant a part of the literary tradition: if other perceived traditions, such as the Irish pre-Christian past, were seen as being on the verge of effectual extinction, a way of preserving that past was through the preservation of lore relating to the unchanging realm of the landscape.

The Irish are of course possessed by place. In part, such possession is a practical necessity, a way of distinguishing common and identical names by attaching to them a

uniqueness of place: O'Sullivan of Beare, Johnston of Ballykibed. But even from the beginning, the self and the places it came from and inhabits are bound: biography is indistinguishable from geography, place from genealogy. (Foster 1987 14-5)

If place began as a way of identifying and distinguishing people, it turns rapidly into a modality that preserves those people's pasts. And, when placelore becomes widespread enough to cover a great many individuals, what results is a mythological history of an entire people and culture. The Finn tales, and particularly the *Acallam*, cover such a wide range of characters all over Ireland that almost the entire island is covered. This is due in part to the tales' elasticity compared to a saga like that surrounding Cuchulain:

in particular they possessed (unlike Ulidian tales) a local adaptability, which contributed in no small measure to their increasing popularity. While Cuchulain belonged to the Ulaid alone, Finn had no exclusive connexions with any tribe, and he and his *fiiana* were free to indulge in war or the chase or adventure in any part of the country, so that eventually, as may be inferred from 'Acallam na Senórach', there was hardly a district in Ireland that did not acquire associations with them. (O Rahilly 274)

Out of the expansion of placelore, then, comes a text like the *Acallam*, which manages, by virtue of its heroes' exploits all over Ireland, to create a history of Ireland that can be constantly expanded simply by creating tales for any newly named site. As both Maria Tymoczko and John Wilson Foster have noted, "the landscape of Ireland was *seen* and *read* by the Irish through powerful cultural lenses" (Foster 1997b 43); the landscape, then, particularly through placelore, becomes a text that can be read beginning at any point in space.

The dialogue between Patrick and Cailte takes the form of questions and answers, most of them revolving around questions of place and place names. The first page of the *Acallam* contains Cailte's first poem, associated with the spring, which immediately puts place into historical context. While the poem begins as a general address of spring-like characteristics applied to a specific site, it quickly evolves into a history of the relation of place with the *fian*:

From you the *Fian* set out, where generous Coinchenn was
slain.

When Finn's *Fian* was slaughtered, in the morning above
Maelglenn.

From you went Fothad of the feasting, a warrior who
suffered sorrow;

He found a grave in the east, when slain at the battle of
Clarach.

Blai came to the head of the spring, the daughter of Derg the
eloquent;

With wailing cry and lament, after the battle of *Confaite*.

After the slaughter of dogs and men, after the wounding of
shining warriors.

Garad's cry was heard at night beside the spring.

(Dooley, Roe 6)

Cailte demonstrates here a form of narrative that does not follow traditional logic; rather, he remembers one thing on top of another – the name of the place recalls the beauty of the place; the beauty of the place leads to the story of what happened there – so that the story evolves into one dominated by history and not merely a celebration of place in the present. His addressing of the site in question here as “you” implies, significantly, that place is almost a character in and of itself, something to be considered in relation to the events that occur in it.

The tales that have arisen from place are, as well, almost physical presences. After detailing the tales relating to Sadb, Cailte says, “ ‘Here under you,’ said Cailte, ‘is that woman in her grave and those are the tales about her’” (Dooley, Roe 67). While the tales precede this statement, in many ways Cailte could merely gesture to the landscape, as the tales, in their vividness for him, do seem to be scattered about Sadb, as well as other places.

Cailte occasionally gives more than one possible history for a place, showing the adaptable nature of spatial narrative. In response to another question about the derivation of a name, he relays the tale of Almu dying in childbirth.

This green-surfaced mound was raised over her, and from
her is the mound named. It was previously called the
Mound of the Surveying. *Or* Alma was the name of the one
who held it in the time of Neimed. *Or else* Nuadu Duri built
a fort and stronghold there, and took a herd (*alma*) from the
forest, so that it is called Alma after this. (Dooley, Roe 39)
(my italics)

The landscape offers multiple possible histories, and so is inclusive; as in this example, Cailte offers several possibilities, all of which are acceptable: one details the present version – Almu who died in childbirth; the next gives its earlier name; the third offers a different version, the possibility of another person by the same name having lived on it; and the last offers an explanation of the name based on the linguistic connection between the name Almu and the word “*alma*”. Because we know that, at least according to Patrick’s guardian angels, Cailte’s memory is faulty, it is quite possible to see this type of explanation as an indication of the demise of memory. Too, though, it is possible that this versioning is part and parcel of the very idea of placelore, which seems governed by only one rule: if an event in the present and the person or people involved are of consequence, the name of a site can be overridden, and all information is valid; this could well be the author or author simply attempting to include everything he knows. But, as the example

above shows, previous names are not lost; they simply move further down the page, losing their top of the page status in the text of the landscape. This versioning of placenames is not merely, as Pronsias MacCana notes,

a matter of willful proliferation or the idle reiteration of stereotypes (though it could, and no doubt sometimes does, become so). The generation of variants and multiforms is after all a characteristic feature of myth, where truth – whether religious, historical, or ideological – may reveal itself under different aspects and the several variant accounts of a given datum are seen to confirm and to complement, rather than to contradict. (MacCana 335)

The text that results is one that by necessity, then, includes these “variants”, becoming, in the process, a layering of “truths” that contribute to the formation of mythology.

[I]n Irish tradition it seems likely that one of the original functions of citing earlier names of known places was to indicate an ancient mythico-historical time before the great events from which the existing names derived, and by the same token to demonstrate that the learned transmitter of the narrative had at his command the most distant memories of his people. (MacCana 338)

The *fian* is the ideal organization through which to read this text, functioning as they do in the natural world and so having such profound access to place.

From first to last, from the circumstances of its origin and transmission, [*fian*-lore] is the expression of a people whose preoccupation and whose joy are the fight and the chase. It is without subtlety, without sentimentality, and the memories that come back to [figures such as] Oisín are not the ghosts of old time, but the living companions of his youth summoned up by a powerful spell to range the battle again and again to follow the chase through the gusty glens and over the bald mountain summits of Ireland. There is much convention, but the reality behind the convention is that active life under the sky and all the environment of hill and wood and plain and sea, the shouting of men hard beset, the cries of the birds and beasts as they follow in the hunt. Natural things are seen here as they appear to a hunting people, to men who look long into the depth of a wood where the invisible deer lies couched, or hear the birds cry as they lie waking at either end of sleep in a mountain bivouac. (Dillon 103)

While I will take issue in a later section with Dillon's claim that the memories of the *fian* in later life are "without sentimentality," his description here of the vigor with which the *fian* engages in the hunt and their outdoor life is apt. In this life, the *fian* are so well acquainted with the natural world that they are well placed to provide, in effect, a natural

history of Ireland. Through their involvement with the natural environment as both hunters and the creators of tales out of their adventures, the *fian* thus become not only masters of the natural world, but shapers of its history, and, through this, shapers of a mythological history of Ireland.

Cailte, in response to a question of the king of Ireland as to who gave land to the *fian*, replies with the tale of the king Feradach Finnhechnach's two sons, Tuathal and Fiacha, dividing Ireland between them after the king's death.

'One of them took the treasures, the jewels, and the wealth, the cattle and herds, the bracelets and ornaments, the forest, strongholds, and manors, and the other had the cliffs and estuaries, the mast and produce of the sea, the beautiful speckled salmon and the beautiful surface-speckled deer, the heavy-sided boars, the plump, red does and the fierce stags.' 'Where did they make this division?' asked the king of Ireland. 'The hill on which we sit is the place where the two sons of the King of Ireland divided it all between them.' 'Those two shares are not comparable,' said the nobles of the men of Ireland. 'Which share would you prefer?' asked Oisín, 'the feasts of Ireland, the houses and wealth, as well, on the one hand, or the woods and wildernesses, the hunting and fishing on the other?' 'The

share that as the worse, in your opinion.’ said Cailte, ‘we think the better.’ (Dooley, Roe 76)

Cailte and Oisín’s story reveals the distinctive choice made by the *fíán*: to live a life in the natural world. This life is by definition outside of the rules of settled society; the *fíán* are governed by their own laws, and value, above all else it would seem, the freedom to move through space unhindered.

Since the *fennidi* of the Fenian tradition, including their leader Finn, then do live outside society in the wilderness, it is perhaps to be expected that their poetry would be more about their own ambience, which is natural and close to the supernatural, than about the ambience of society, where “regular” filid ply their craft, singing the praises of their human patrons. . . . Their poetry, like the nature verse that we find in the Fenian tradition, expresses not only a love of nature but also a strong preference for a “savage” life in wilderness, as opposed to a comfortable life in human society. (Nagy 1985 28)

This love of nature is evident from Cailte’s constant reminiscences about the hunt and the joy it brought to the *fíán*. However, what I would suggest is that the hunt as lived by the *fíán* is a venture dependent upon their aristocratic pedigrees and position as men respected within the Irish society they have left behind. As with Sweeney, we find here that the outsider was once the consummate insider, a leader within the community. While

Sweeney did not take to the wilderness of his own choosing, however, the *fián* did. But – and this is particularly significant – the *fián*'s existence in the wilderness is marked by tremendous wealth and the signs of a developed class culture. Cailte's gift to Patrick upon his baptism, the sword that Finn won for guarding Tara, the gold, jewels and crystals to which members of the *fián* have such easy access, all belie their existence in nature, which is marked by a level of comfort not afforded Sweeney at any point in his life in the forest. This comfortable existence, though, as we will see, was to change for the *fián*; for their existence too would come to be marked by nostalgia and the lack of culture.

The Hero's Relationship to Knowledge of Placelore

The characters of the *fián* – Finn mac Cumall, and Cailte, in the *Acallam* – because they are outside of settled society, are in liminal positions that allow them a greater scope with which to view both the natural and cultural worlds.

Being by definition abnormal, the hero does not fit neatly into ordinary human society and categories. As a superhuman but usually non- or only half-divine frequenter of the margin between men and god(s), society and outsiders, culture and nature, life and death etc., the hero can move freely between these worlds without belonging properly to any of them. Ambivalence and liminality are the hero's essential attributes. . . (McCone 188)

Because the *fíán* can move between the physical world and the otherworld, they can be seen as “stand[ing] guard on the boundary zone between culture and nature, which also forms the boundary zone between this world and the otherworld” (Nagy 1985 55). A characteristic that often accompanies this physical liminality is the capacity for prophecy and the discernment of truths. As has been discussed in Chapter Two regarding earlier *fíán* literature, the fact that Finn and Cailte (and occasionally other members of the *fíán*) are granted these special visionary abilities furthers their ability to read the landscape: in the context of the *Acallam*, it is Cailte’s ability to both remember events and histories and to discern them that allows for the integration of the past into the present.

It is Cailte who renews, and implicitly the *Acallam* that keeps alive. . . and restores the Fenian connotations of the placenames, reimbuing them with meaning. [. . .] It is the remarkably enduring Cailte who engineers and disseminates this remarkable Fenian renaissance, which coexists in apparent comfort with the Patrician reformation – a process that changed (and, in the text, changes) so much of the pre-Christian Ireland which Cailte can so easily and magically reinvigorate. Cailte himself is a living example of recycling and renewal. In the present of the tale he relives and re-enacts adventures that echo the past. (Nagy 1985 153–4)

Cailte, as a living record of the past, represents in Patrick's time the existence of the *fian*. The *fian*, an organization that supervises rites of passage, cannot themselves grow up and become part of society; they can help others, but cannot themselves achieve the rite of passage, assumedly because they continue to exist in nature.

People enter the world of the *fennidecht* during transitional and problematic phases of their social existence. The tensions and anomalies in these phases are fully expressed in that world and are ultimately resolved through acts of *fennidecht*. A new identity and an adult social role are revealed to the *fian* initiate, and the *fennid* can in time leave the wilderness and rejoin society as an adult.

(Nagy 1985 49-50)

It is the inability of the *fian* leaders to establish new roles for themselves that leads, in Cailte's case, to nostalgia, for, with the passing of the old order, and the loss of the *fian*'s significance in serving as an outside moral standard, he and Oisín and the other survivors no longer play any role in the functioning of the society parallel to which they previously lived. Cailte's narrative is remarkable for the extent of his nostalgia for these losses, and it is to this theme that I would like to turn now.

Nostalgia and Memory

Towards the end of the *Acallam*, after helping a *sid* that had been under attack from raiders, Cailte receives a gift from a character named Be.

‘Here is something for you from us,’ said Be. ‘What help might that be?’ asked Cailte. ‘A drink we give you to take to Tara for the remembrance of lore, so that any cataract or river or estuary that you encounter, you will remember it, together with its attendant battles and combats.’ ‘That is the help of friends and of a true family,’ said Cailte.

(Dooley, Roe 203–4)

Since Cailte recalls only a third of the lore of the *fian* and the lore of place, he receives gratefully this gift of a drink to inspire memory, which is of the utmost importance in his quest to keep the *fian* alive for himself and others. However, in many ways, Cailte might have been better off without this drink, for he is haunted by the past: the more he is able to remember – and even the one third is a great deal – the more he enters into a state of longing for the past.

One of the elements that so marks Cailte’s character is this longing, which causes him to weep for his lost leader and fellow *fian* members. At the start of the text, the surviving members are looking for lodging and come across Cama, a woman who knew the *fian* in their better days, and who, “when they told her their names. . . shed long and

bitter tears” (Dooley, Roe 3); when the group depart from Cama the next morning, “though they were manly warriors, they, together with Lady Cama, wept deeply and disconsolately” (Dooley, Roe 4). This initial occurrence of tears over what has been lost in the past indicates what is to come: for, with great frequency, when Cailte encounters the memory of the past through landscape, he weeps.

Cailte’s desperate sadness and nostalgia are situated, like Sweeney’s, in the natural world. Destined to roam Ireland across the *fián*’s former haunts, Cailte is, though, unlike Sweeney, still situated in the places that he lived previously, the places of the *fián*’s former glory. What has changed for Cailte and Oisín and the other surviving members of the *fián* is the fact that the natural world is no longer the site of the cultural organization of the *fián*. For while the *fián* existed in the natural world, it was a natural world very much connected to the world of culture: these men had constant interaction with settled society, and derived their fame from that same society, from the kings and noblemen who required their assistance or against whom they fought. In the Patrician present, though, Cailte and his small band exist in the natural world without the comfort and aid of those cultural connections, and in this way they exist very much as Sweeney does, lamenting the lack of culture in their lives.

There is also an implied lament in the recording of the tale itself. The author seems as steeped in a form of nostalgia as Cailte does:

There seems to be nostalgia for a glorious past, represented
here by Finn and his Fenians, when the unpleasant
Scandinavians were kept off the beaches, and the officious

Anglo-Normans and busybody Welsh had not yet arrived,
 and when humility, chastity and fasting were not at all
 considered virtues – when, somehow, hospitality and
 generosity of spirit were the rule. (Roe 1992 345)

Cailte is sentimental about the *fian*'s past to a great extent. Although the frame of the story is a dialogue between himself and Patrick, what results is not a conversation; Cailte simply delivers monologues that are reveries in response to queries. At times he is so deep in this state of remembrance that he does not even appear to hear Patrick's occasional replies, but simply continues with his story.

When Cailte does respond conversationally, it is inevitably with extreme displays of emotion. When Bran appears and declares to Patrick that he "wish[es] to learn the lore of the *Fian*, holy cleric," (Dooley, Roe 29), Cailte is touched to the point of tears. When Bran tells Cailte of his own way of hunting, "Cailte, in the presence of Patrick, wept tearfully and sorrowfully until both his shirt and chest were wet" (Dooley, Roe 29). This reaction becomes a topos to which the author or authors of the *Acallam* returns endlessly. When Cailte reaches the grave of his foster-brother Diarmuid, "He wept flowing tears of true sorrow until both his shirt and chest were wet, and said, 'Sad it is that my comrade and foster-brother has gone from me!'" (Dooley, Roe 47). After hearing a poem that reminds him of the past, "Cailte put the horn from his hand, and wept flowing, truly sorrowful tears that soaked his shirt and breast. 'What is the meaning of the quatrain,

dear Cailte?’ said the king. ‘I know the meaning,’ said Cailte, ‘though it is a sad thing for me to recall’” (Dooley, Roe 99). The recurrence of memory is constantly sad for him: he does not derive pleasure from it, but instead is steeped in a bitter nostalgia.

This nostalgia leads him to compare continually the past with the present. When he goes to hunt at a place known as “Forad na Feine” (Meeting Place of the *Fian*), Cailte says.

‘I have known this,’ said Cailte, ‘as a beautiful field, though it is now a leafy forest and a vast and sheltering thicket.’
[. . .] Then he recalled the loss of the friends, the foster-brothers, and the great hosts he was formerly with, and he wept heavy, truly sorrowful tears, so that his shirt and breast were drenched. Every hill and mound and fort he would wander by, it seemed to him that two or three or four or five or a band of the *Fian* would appear, but they were only empty hills and smooth, level plains with no hound or boy or warrior on them. (Dooley, Roe 101-2)

Haunted by images of the men with whom he formerly lived, Cailte is wandering through a landscape that is, for him quite literally, the past. He notices changes in the landscape, as above, and these changes are indicative of the way in which the *fian* existed in nature. Evidently they cleared trees in order to settle in this place, for now, years later, the forest has returned. This indicates that the *fian*’s existence in nature was marked by cultural undertakings: they did not exist in true wilderness, but shaped nature to suit their needs.

Realizing such changes in the landscape pushes Cailte into deeper despair, longing for the past to return. Many other sites spark this same feeling in him, as when he reaches the Rock of Weapons, where the *fian* used to sharpen their spears; Cailte again experiences a sadness that leads him to tears: "Standing there on the top of that rock he wept flowing tears of great sadness, remembering the great people that often stood on that rock with him in earlier times" (Dooley, Roe 125). At a site where another of his foster-brothers died, "Cailte then wept abundant tears of sorrow so that his shirt and breast were damp" (Dooley, Roe 135).

Such examples of Cailte's powerful sorrow when he remembers indicates the extent to which such memories haunt him and remind him, equally powerfully, of what he lacks in the present: the camaraderie and companionship – in other words the society – of the *fian*, in all of its former glory and respectability. While on the surface the *fian* appears at first to be an "anti-social" group, in fact it was a hierarchical organization that rivaled the culture it was pitted against; as a result, Cailte's nostalgia is not for the natural world that he used to inhabit – since he continues to inhabit the same places – but for the cultural elements of the *fian* itself. "These poems" Eleanor Knott notes, "bring us nostalgic memories of a perished golden age" (Knott 48).

Cailte's encounters with various men on his journeys indicate this: he compares the past with the present and finds the present lacking. To one such man he notes that "'although you are hunting alone,' said Cailte, 'I have seen you surrounded by many people, by fifteen hundred warriors, fifteen hundred boys, and fifteen hundred women in the Ford of the Meeting of the Three Rivers to the South, where the Suir, the Nore, and

the Barrow flow together” (Dooley, Roe 49). Cailte’s nostalgia, as in this passage, is not geared towards a quiet life in the wilderness: what he longs for is in fact quite the opposite – a huge organization of people living nomadically, moving to hunt, and bringing with them their own musicians, animals, and families: this is a complete cultural operation.

The *Acallam* is characteristic of other medieval and early Irish texts in its insertion of poetry into the prose frame. The poems seem to appear at moments of heightened emotion, when Cailte is feeling particularly nostalgic. One such poem Cailte recites after telling stories of *fian* members drowning in a particular lake:

Water of a sparkling stream, sound of a slippery boat,
Herdsman eyeing the dress of the *Fian*.

The seagull glides by the stormy shore.
The marsh is soon a coursing sea.

Ten men, ten score, ten hundred, no lie,
All brave warriors, long since dead.

Wherever I fought I kept my oath,
And killed only men of noble birth.

Shapeless, pale, confused, and slow,

My sense has gone, my groan remains.

Shapeless, pale, confused, and slow,

Age has broken my heart in three. (Dooley, Roe 129)

Such poetry, inspired as it is by the memory of loss, is inevitably followed by intense sadness. Patrick attempts to reassure Cailte, and to comfort him, almost tenderly.

Cailte suddenly became aware of the absence of his *Fian*

and his troops and his great followings and of his lack of

dexterity and skill, and was struck with a great sorrow.

‘Well, dear Cailte,’ said Patrick, ‘you have no need for grief

or sorrow, for you have fared better than any of them. I

have given you, beyond any other one of the *Fian*, the

goodness of the True and Glorious God, faith, piety, and

cross-vigil.’ (Dooley, Roe 129)

Despite such reassurances, and despite his adoption of the Catholic faith, Cailte laments in these passages not only the loss of the *fian* and its culture, but also his personal losses: he has grown not merely old but ancient, cannot fight as he once did, cannot move as he once did, and does not command the same respect as when he was a member of an esteemed – and probably feared – organization. As in the case of the Sweeney narrative, Cailte is presented as having come to accept the Catholic faith (although with none of Sweeney’s rebelliousness), and includes in his poetry Christian references. The dominant

imagery, though, and dominant themes remain, as they do for Sweeney, the loss of the past life and not this gaining of a new one through God.

Cold winter, a sharp wind, a fierce red stag rises.

No warmth this night on the mountain. The stag is swift to bell.

The stag of Slieve Aughty takes no rest,

Listening to the music of wolves.

Dark Diarmuid and I, and Oscar, keen and light,

Heard their music on a freezing night.

Today I am old, I know but few.

On icy mornings I shook my spear.

I thank the King of Heaven above.

That I held a host, though tonight I'm cold. (Dooley, Roe 107)

While this poem resembles other, earlier Fenian poetry in its addressal of a particular seasonal turn, and in its use of natural imagery, Cailte's situation injects the element of nostalgia as well. When Cailte says, "Today I am old, I know but few," the implication is clear that in the past, when young, he knew many; tonight he freezes in the wilderness without the company of his men and their entourage, and laments that he no longer is in a

similar position. It gives small comfort to know that he was once a leader, and for this he thanks his new God.

Still, despite this comfort, Cailte becomes more and more nostalgic as the text progresses: the frequency of poems increases, as do the number of occasions on which Cailte weeps for the loss of the past. “‘Nothing remains for us today,’ said Cailte, ‘but senility and old age’” (Dooley, Roe 139); not only has Cailte lost the fellowship and society of the *fian*, but he is now beginning to lose his memory of them.

Just before the meeting at Tara and the end of the *Acallam*, after answering questions about Finn’s origins and the regular members of the *fian*, “Cailte fell down on that hill, fainting and unconscious, and stayed there for three days and nights not able to travel or follow, pining for his comrades and his joint-fosterlings” (Dooley, Roe 185). The severity of Cailte’s reactions has thus increased through the course of the *Acallam*; he is aging, weakened, and cannot face the future happily without the *fian*; he is condemned to another seventeen years, as prophesied to him, of living in a natural world devoid of cultural meaning for him but for the nostalgia that defines the landscape.

From *Buile Suibhne* and the *Acallam na Senórach* we receive a portrait of the changing world of twelfth century Ireland. Both texts draw on the theme of nature and nostalgia, as we have seen, by situating a longing for a lost culture in the natural world; bereft of family and friends, of the comforts of wealth and shelter, Sweeney and Cailte issue poetry that describes their situations in sorrowful terms. Both texts too were situated by their twelfth century authors in the past – whether historical or

mythological – and so have a certain nostalgia built into them, in that they are looking backwards at times during which the authors themselves did not live. This suggests a significant question: does the writing down of the past – such a preoccupation for twelfth century Irish authors, for the reasons discussed earlier – encourage nostalgia in the sense that the past thus becomes reachable in a way that it has not been before? Both texts feature figures – Moling in *Buile Suibhne* and Patrick in the *Acallam* – to whom the stories are relayed, and who then record the tales for posterity. This commonality – the fact that the recorder of the past is written in to both texts – suggests that writing does in fact make nostalgia an almost automatic theme.

Speaking is associated with memory, in that it serves as an exercise for the speaker and a way of passing memory on to others. Since we have seen that earlier Irish literature, and particularly early Fenian literature derived from an oral tradition, is not marked by the nostalgia distinguishing the texts under discussion in this chapter, what I would suggest is that the written version of these tales is in some way a production of nostalgia. The relative stability of tales in written form seems to allow for reverie; the storyteller is not merely attempting to produce from the mind a particular set of elements for a story, but is attempting instead to consecrate those elements in a more permanent fashion. The desire to do this, to make memory solid and stable, so that it can be returned to, inevitably evolves out of nostalgia.

While we can only speculate as to whether the authors of these or other medieval Irish texts were themselves particularly nostalgic for the past – whether a past they

themselves had lived or not – what we can conclude is that this period, with its social upheavals and reforms, produced authors, authors undeniably Christian, who were greatly concerned with the past. That twelfth century Irish Christian authors chose to erect, in effect, tombstones (*memoria* in Latin, as Joseph Nagy notes (Nagy 1985 5)) to the past in their writings and had a particular concern with places suggests that a need for stability and continuity turned them towards the natural world – a realm beyond the bounds of human change – and allowed for the expression of a nostalgia that was to affect Irish authors for centuries to come.

Gerard Murphy argued, as other early critics of this literature did, that, following the twelfth century, Irish nature poetry loses some of its freshness. “One is tempted,” he wrote, “to see some connection between the decay of nature poetry and the decay of monastic influence on Irish poetry in general” (Murphy 1931 99-100). Although Murphy, in this brief but seminal article, does not elaborate, it seems as if the freshness he perceives as eroding corresponds to the development of nostalgia in nature writing. In many ways, the increase in the concurrent presence of nature and nostalgia was to have a much greater impact on Irish authors of future generations than the more “fresh” poetry of the earlier period; no other group was to prove more open to the themes of nature and nostalgia than the authors of the Revival.

Chapter Four:

Poesy and Patronage: Irish Bardic Poetry and Spenser

The poetry produced by bards¹ in Ireland² offers an opportunity to examine an inarguably “native” tradition for the themes of nature and nostalgia under discussion here. Attached to particular families, bards provided a service – of writing praise and commemorative poetry for a family, while providing social and historical commentary – that was highly revered. Schools existed to teach would-be bards their craft, which was passed down with a degree of secrecy and reverence for the tradition. Because of their intensive training, and because of their attachment to significant families in Irish history, bards were themselves held in high esteem within Irish culture. While the poetry was traditionally composed orally, examples were consigned to writing, and it is these examples – undoubtedly only a fragment of the lost oral corpus – that will be examined here.

This school of poetics existed (in oral form certainly, and perhaps in written form) for hundreds of years prior to 1200: the Annals regularly included the deaths of famous bards in the pre-Norman era, and there are several examples of praise poems dating from the seventh and eighth centuries. The period during which bardic poetry particularly flourished in Ireland, however, was from approximately 1200 - 1700, when

¹ J.E. Caerwyn Williams’s investigation of the etymology of “bard” concludes that the word meant “singer of praise” (Williams 26).

numerous manuscript compilations – of individual poets’ work, or of families’ bards’ work – were produced. As a poetics so deeply embedded in the social hierarchy, bardic poetry was inherently conservative and resistant to change. What I am suggesting is that, in its insularity – a topic to be expanded upon shortly – bardic poetry from 1200-1700 actually developed thematically the same way that other, Christian-Irish traditions developed between 800-1200.

Since bardic poetry was produced continuously for a period of at least five hundred years, and was, during that period, remarkably insular and linguistically self-perpetuating, it can be examined as a continuum for the development of themes such as nature and nostalgia. While bardic poets were not noted for producing nature poetry, they did make use of certain natural imagery, and frequently wrote poems of place. What we will find is that, while nature was not among the most significant of themes for bardic poetry, its presence in the poetry increasingly indicates over the five hundred year period the crumbling of the bardic order, and coincides, particularly in later bardic material, with the lament for that order’s passing.³ In this, as a significant segment of Irish literature, bardic poetry, despite its insularity and resistance to outside sources, reflects the preoccupation with nature and nostalgia that marks other Irish literature, although at a later stage than the twelfth century Irish literature examined in the last chapter.

² For a comparative analysis of bardic and “court” poetry in Welsh, Icelandic and Irish culture, see J.E. Caerwyn Williams’s *The Court Poet in Medieval Ireland* (Oxford UP, 1972).

³ This argument, it must be pointed out at the outset, in examining bardic material over a period of several hundred years, relies upon the available material that has been from

Among the most sophisticated work to date on bardic poetry is Joep Leerssen's 1996 work *Mere Irish and Fior-Ghael*, which argues that the poetry should not, as has been traditionally been the case, be "subjected to readings in *national* terms. [. . .] [P]oetry which was the direct expression, not of a feudal society or of a nation-state, but of a 'clan society', ought to be read accordingly" (151, 152). As the representation of such a society, bardic poetry was remarkably unchanging.

It should be remembered that bardic poetry cannot be accommodated within traditional literary periodization, which progresses from the middle ages through the renaissance into the seventeenth century; such period concepts have little sense in the context of this highly static, archaizing poetic tradition. (Leerssen 1996 152)

Bardic poetry, in other words, operated as a conservative institution in two ways: it was wary of any influence outside of its own traditions, and also functioned to conserve social systems and ideas. For this reason, it proves a very different poetics than other Irish literature that might have been produced concurrently, which, as we have seen, frequently attempted to integrate new and emerging ideas into the old: bardic poetry, as Leerssen suggests above, was far more resistant to change, and engaged new ideas with much more caution. It is for this reason that I am arguing that bardic poetic development runs not parallel to other Irish literature such as early nature poetry, voyage literature,

preserved, and does not account for the possibility that, were more material available earlier periods, we might find the theme to have had a stronger presence.

and twelfth century works such as the *Acallam* and *Buile Suibhne*. Instead, this poetics developed far more slowly in adapting and admitting the presence of change in larger Irish society; as a result, a meeting of nature and nostalgia occurred far later in this literature than elsewhere in the Irish literary tradition. Bardic conservatism allowed generally for only the slowest of change.

This conservatism derived at least in part from the role of the bard within Irish culture: to uphold and honor tradition and the historical-mythical past of his patrons, while holding a position in the society much like that of a modern journalist, providing editorial and critique of current events and politics. Thus the bardic poet “was the cultural guardian of the Gaelic heritage, whose task it was to guarantee historical continuity, to legitimize the present in terms of past history” (Leerssen 1996 153). The significance of the poet’s function in medieval Irish culture is well documented, and need not be repeated here. What is important to point out, though, is the fact that, as “cultural guardians”, and in their concern with the past, bardic poets were automatically engaged in a nostalgic exercise: the glories of the past dictated bardic poetics. The backward-looking tendencies of bardic poetry invite a nostalgia for times past, which it was the duty of the bard to preserve for future generations.

The organization of bardic learning ensured this conservatism and built-in nostalgia. The Marquis of Clanricade’s 1722 account of a bardic school offers one of few windows onto the actual educational activities of the bards. “The Qualifications first requir’d were reading well, writing the Mother-tongue, and a strong Memory” (quoted in Bergin 6). These three qualifications tell us a great deal about bardic ideology. The

emphasis placed on the Irish language denotes an insular tradition that did not look to continental or even a pan-Irish tradition; instead, it was the Irish, and specifically bardic, tradition that was revered. The significance granted to memory tells us that bards – as the aristocratic and educated in a culture in which literacy was far from universal – were the walking local history books, in effect, who allowed for the preservation of Irish history both as it had occurred already and as it continued to unfold in the present. Tradition, then, was of the utmost importance; since tradition is a reflexive bowing to the past, nostalgia becomes part of convention and the bard's duty to his patron.

So governed by tradition was bardic literature that more than one critic has remarked upon the “linguistic homogeneity of the poetry” (Gillies 110) over a period of five hundred years.

Practically all bardic poetry is written in one standard literary dialect, which remained almost unchanged for five hundred years. All this time the local dialects were diverging more and more, and there was no capital to set a natural standard. Yet the trained professional poet wrote in such a style that it is impossible to tell from his language to what part of Ireland or Scotland he belonged, or to fix his date even approximately. It is hard to say what they ought to have done, but what they actually did is clear. They made an artificial standard. They normalized the language by admitting into their verse only such forms and usages as had

the sanction of earlier poets of high repute. everything else
being rigorously excluded. (Bergin 13)

The standardization of language within bardic convention further indicates the emphasis placed upon tradition and continuity: change, where it diverged from “traditional” poetic practice, was unacceptable and risked exposing the bardic order to outside influence that might irrevocably damage it and, by implication, damage the goal of preserving the past and the glories of patrons. While there certainly existed room for innovation by individual poets, it is remarkable that, over the space of this five hundred year period, the same phrases appear again and again, as we will see, indicating the overwhelming tendency to rely upon this standardized form of language.

Most critics of bardic poetry have remarked upon this standardization:

That rigid turn of mind which kept their literary medium in
a strait-jacket for whole centuries, afraid not so much of
growth as the dangers that go with it, kept the doors of the
inventive faculties severely sentried, and for the self-same
reason. (Corkery 34)

The language in which Bardic Poetry was composed may
be fairly described as a standardised one. Every single word
in it (verb, noun, adjective, or other part of speech) was
subject to strict laws, any violation of which meant the
condemnation of a poet for carelessness or imperfect

training. These laws must have begun to be developed at a very early period, and had been codified long before the 16th century. Tracts containing them were used as text-books in Bardic schools, and some of these tracts have come down to us in our MS. collections. In consequence of the standardisation the Bardic language remained unchanged well on in the 17th century. In this respect Irish Bardic literature differed from contemporary literature of every other European country. (McKenna xi)

The creation of this “artificial standard” resulted in a poetry that some critics have found repetitious and unoriginal:

If we find difficulty in warming (say) to the tolerance of cliché, or to the absence of a palpable first person poetic persona in much of bardic verse, we should be mindful that many of our preconceptions about the nature of poetic creation are no older than the Romantic Movement and require to be un-learned before we can seriously come to grips with a mediaeval poetic tradition. (Gillies 109)

The need to adjust to a specific set of conventions and doctrines – and ones that often seem archaic and quaint, particularly at the end of the bardic period, when one considers other contemporary literary developments – is key to an understanding of bardic poetry. The bards made use of a specialized language which functioned through the recurrence of

a set of conventions. William Gillies has argued that

Classical bardic verse shows some internal evidence for the establishment and observance of a set of literary conventions, consonant with the more tangible evidence for the setting up of linguistic and metrical standards, and compatible with the likely historical background for these developments. (112)

This argument is convincing, relying as it does upon the repetition over centuries of a set of stock phrases, similes, and metaphors. These conventions appear in the best and worst of bardic poetry, further suggesting that they were learned at the outset of a bardic career in order to ensure a certain continuity of language. "In short," Gillies concludes, "I would tend to see the bardic curriculum and conventions as providing a safety net for the individual poet, as a practical means of ensuring the survival of enforceable minimum standards, but with scope for pyrotechnics in the hands of those with more to give" (Gillies 114).

These conventions indicate the social function of bardic poetry, for, in their very repetition and use by a diverse range of poets, they become signs of a particular set of cultural values. Bardic poetry, then, in the use of these conventions, "contains an unchanging ideological 'message', above and beyond its specific, personal reference. The 'message' is there for all to hear, and it asserts and upholds a set of values, a sort of ethical system in which wisdom and strength and beauty and birth are alike manifestations of the good" (Gillies 115). Gillies is discussing bardic eulogies in particular

here, but it is possible to read this argument as applying to all of bardic poetry. We must remember, Osborn Bergin urges,

that the Irish *file* or *bard* was not necessarily an inspired poet. That he could not help. He was, in fact, a professor of literature and a man of letters, highly trained in the use of a polished literary medium, belonging to a hereditary caste in an aristocratic society, holding an official position therein by virtue of his training, his learning, his knowledge of the history and traditions of his country and his clan. (Bergin 4)

That the bards were trained professionals and members of an unquestioned privileged class implies that the history they produced through their poetry was official, having the support of the ruling class to which the bards were attached. Thus it is rare to find a bardic poem in which the poet's personal view is expressed: as bard to a particular family, the poet acted as both private historian and archivist of the past, and not in relation to himself alone.

Following 1200, Joep Leerssen argues, the history that the bard sought to preserve and represent was not strictly factual.

Historical – or rather, pseudo-historical – interpretations were at work after 1200 which do not necessarily reflect the earlier Gaelic tradition itself, but rather a wishful retrospection on a golden, pre-Norman or pre-Viking past –

as it ought to have been, rather than as it was. (Leerssen
1996 152)

Even at this stage, then, of bardic development, nostalgia has crept into the conventions. The presence of the Normans in Ireland offered the opportunity for further patrons, and also inspired bardic poets towards more conservatism: they will take on the obligations of patronage to these new Irish, but will also draw more upon the store of Gaelic lore available to them through memory and tradition. Katherine Simms's conclusions are similar to Leerssen's:

In the post-Norman period, when control of the Church rested largely with the English king and the Continental monastic orders, Irish rulers had to turn elsewhere to find a theoretical justification for their authority – to the secular learned classes of bards, brehons, and historians, and to the immemorial tradition expressed in the secular inauguration-rites. (Simms 16)

The Normans did not pose a threat to the bard; this threat was to arise only with the presence of the Tudors, who threatened “the entire cultural tradition of which he was *ex officio* the keeper. And so we see the poet ply his trade in defense of that culture that kept him alive, which it was his task to keep alive” (Leerssen 1996 180). The Tudors were to so disrupt the narrative of the bardic order that, at this point, we see an increasing nostalgia and a desperation to keep tradition alive in bardic poetry. As patrons gradually became involved in the political difficulties of the Tudor presence, and as these

difficulties began to gnaw into the traditional governing structures, the bards began to experience the effects upon their own standing in Irish society.

In the tradition of a common allegiance to Gaelic honour and nobility on the part both of the poet and of the chieftain, the latter is now failing to perform his duty: as a result, the Gaelic cause henceforth can be seen to be defined increasingly in bardic, rather than merely political/military terms. . . [T]he Gaelic order is no longer defined according to the parameters of the chieftain's synchronic and diachronic relations with others, contemporary and historical, but rather in terms of the social position of the poet and the importance accorded to his calling and to the heritage he guards and embodies. (Leerssen 1996 182)

The poetry, in other words, began to focus on its own significance within the culture, and to judge the state of that culture by the value placed on the role of the poet. As the poet's role became threatened by the changing political and governmental structures, bardic poetry came to lament not only the deaths of patrons and their relations, but the death of the bardic order itself.

The Tudor conquest had a massive impact on the governance of land; many of the bards' patrons found their lands being confiscated or overrun. As a result, land, landscape and nature made an increasing appearance in bardic literature following the arrival of the

Tudors, the bards being as concerned for their own welfare as for that of their patrons. Ó Tuama has astutely pointed out this connection between the land and the bardic system:

Given that the land of Ireland had always been a central focus in the mythology and psychology of Irish people, and that most Irish personal relationships depended in a special way on property arrangements, it is not at all strange that the rape of the land caused much more immediate culture shock than the attempted imposition of the Protestant religion, or the promotion of the English language. The literary relationship which was possibly most affected was that of poet and noble patron. As ownership of property declined so did patronage.

(Ó Tuama 123-4)

The bardic culture, in other words, depended upon the inherited system of land ownership in Ireland, through which land was passed down through family. The interruption to this system led to a crisis within the aristocratic community in that traditional family lands were suddenly threatened, in turn threatening the bardic community, which relied on the generosity of patrons for their own land. The concern with land ownership and the concern with seeing familiar landscapes that were overwritten with historical and mythological significance taken over by the Tudor settlers was so disturbing that, as ÓTuama points out, the bards were not to pay as much initial

attention to the attempt at religious and linguistic reformation that the Tudors had as their goals as they were to the issue of land.

The Progression of Decline

I would like to turn now to an examination of a selection of bardic verse over the period of approximately five hundred years during which it was steadily produced and preserved. Because of the scarcity of written poetry earlier than 1200, and because of the unreliability of dating this significantly earlier bardic poetry (such as those tentatively ascribed by Bergin to the tenth century female bard Gormlaith), I have chosen to focus this discussion on poets whose work can be more accurately dated; as a result, the earliest poetry to be examined will date from approximately 1200, following the Norman invasion of Ireland. The process of selection was further governed by the need to select poetry in which nature or place is particularly significant; this selection does not suggest that nature and place play the most significant role in bardic poetry generally.

Giolla Brighde Mac Con Midhe's work offers perhaps the fullest representation of an early bardic poet because of its sheer volume. His period of activity dates from approximately 1220-1270, and so offers an early gauge of the influence of the Normans on Irish culture. In one poem estimated to have been composed in 1256, Giolla Brighde writes in praise of his patron Gofraidh Ó Domhnaill's residence, warning him in the process of the Norman presence at Sligo (N.J.A. Williams 275). In this poem – one that is close in idea, at least, to later country house poems – Giolla Brighde sets out to describe

the beauty of his patron's home at Inis Saimhéar, and, by extension, the beauty of the patron himself.

The poem offers an early catalogue of conventions and similes drawn from the natural world and used by the bards to offer praise. After a description of Ó Domhnaill's house, Giolla Brighde begins to unfurl this catalogue. Ó Domhnaill's face is "like the flower of the nut-tree," (N.J.A. Williams 57 stanza 13)⁴, and the bounty of his property – rivers teeming with fish, trees bursting into bud – is due to his own bounty, his goodness and generosity. Giolla Brighde closes the poem with a final simile: "He will be like the sprouting of a seed in a springtime field" (N.J.A. Williams 63 st. 29)⁵ that will not be routed by foreigners.

Another poem offers similar metaphors and similes in addressing another noble, and the bounty of the land is attributed to his rightful leadership:

There was no bay that lacked pale fish, no slope that was
not full of fruit, no drought by the edge of any plain, no
heavy rain except the shower of Maytime.

There was no wind over the top of her woods to move the
rich-earthed fields, no mist through Fodla of the feasts, no
battled being announced to chieftains.

⁴ "mar bhláth cnó" (N.J.A. Williams 56 st. 13)

⁵ "Budh biseach gráinne guirt earraigh" (N.J.A. Williams 62 st. 29)

There was no lack of nuts upon branching hazel-trees, no
 farmer with less than a hundred cows, no jealousy by man
 for living man; there was a banquet in every house around
 Teamhair. (N.J.A. Williams 185 st. 4-6)⁶

That "Ireland has come into her rightful place" (st. 10)⁷ is reflected in the natural world:
 the natural world prospers due to the leadership of a great man.

Absent from either of these poems is any sense that nature and nostalgia are
 connected: the natural world is simply used as one of many metaphoric vehicles through
 which to praise patrons. And, in particular, this set of conventions serves to sketch a
 symbiotic relationship between the natural world and governance: when leadership is
 rightful, the natural world reflects this; if all seems right in the natural world, then the
 leadership of a chief is assured.

This use of the natural world in thirteenth century bardic poetry is confirmed by
 another poet of the period, Muireadhach Albanach Ó Dalaigh, who was active around the

° Gan chuan in easbhaidh éisg gil.
 gan leirg nach lán do thoirthibh,
 gan tart i dtaobh gach moighe,
 ganfhalc acht braon Bealtoine.

Gan ghaoith ós cionn a coillteadh
 do ghlusacht ghort bhfearainntiugh
 gan cheo `mun bhFódla bhfleadhaigh.
 gan gheo d'fhógra d'fheinneadhaibh.

Gan easbhaidh gcno ar choll ngéagach,
 gan bhrughaidh nár bhóichéadach,
 gan tnúth bhfir re fear dá mair,
 fleadh i ngach thigh im Theamhraigh. (N.J.A. Williams 184 st.4-6)

same time, although in a different part of the country. Muireadhach Albanach's poem "The Dead Wife"⁸ is unusual in bardic poetry in that it is a personal lament, following the death of his wife. Simple metaphors in the poem make the woman a part of nature: she is a "white comely blossom" (st. 2)⁹, "her countenance like the white thorn" (st. 8)¹⁰, a "tall fresh lithe-fingered branch" (st. 11)¹¹, "my smooth hazel-nut" (st. 12)¹². Half of him is gone, the poet writes; the world he has been left in seems barren without the presence of this woman who was like a "hazel-blossom" (st. 5)¹³. William Gillies remarks that, while Muireadhach Albanach engages traditional phrasing and praise pattern, personal poems such as this one involve the extension of convention brought to bear on "the exigencies of personal crisis" (Gillies 117).

Already similarities between these two thirteenth century poets appear in the use of particular natural images: hazel-nuts, branches, blossoms, are all a part of the set of established conventions used by the bards. While in Giolla Brighde's poetry the conventions are used to praise his patron, in Muireadhach Albanach's poem they are used to eulogize his wife. The similarities between the two sets of images suggests a set of stock phrases to which the bards were able to return, and which could be used originally to suit the needs of a specific situation. These conventions are still in evidence

⁷ "táinig Éire 'na hionad" (N.J.A. Williams 186 st. 10)

⁸ All of the titles of poems are editorial conventions; they refer to the titles conferred upon the poems by Bergin.

⁹ "bhfaongha bhfann" (Bergin 101 st. 2).

¹⁰ "a dreach mar an droighean bán" (Bergin 102 st. 8).

¹¹ "an ghéag úr mhéirleabhar mhór" (Bergin 102 st. 11).

¹² "do thoirinn ar genú chorr" (Bergin 102 st. 12).

¹³ "bláth cuill" (Bergin 101 st. 5).

in the poetry of the sixteenth century, as in Lochlainn Óg Ó Dálaigh's mid-century poem "Great Expectations." Written in praise of three sons of the Thomond family, this poem outlines the greatness of the three sons, often by invoking the same nature metaphors as had Lochlainn Óg's thirteenth century predecessors. The three young men are "fresh young seedlings" (st. 2)¹⁴, "three stately trees ever fruitful" (st. 7)¹⁵, "swift birds of combat from one forest" (st. 8)¹⁶, "three fresh hazelnuts from the finest cluster" (st. 11)¹⁷ (all in Bergin 249). That such metaphors recur over the centuries suggests that, as William Gillies has said, that "the only reasonable expectation. . . is to posit a consciously observed convention" (Gillies 111) in which specific trees, animals and other natural images are part of a set of available metaphors taught to and so known by all bards.

It is following Lochlainn Óg Ó Dálaigh's time that the theme of nostalgia begins to intersect with the use of such natural imagery, indicating what has been occurring to the bardic order all over Ireland: due to the presence of the Tudors, their institution is under threat. Laoiseach Mac an Bhaird's mid-sixteenth century poem "On the Cutting Down of an Ancient Tree" addresses this decline through the sign of the tree. The tree, such a significant object in early Irish culture (as discussed in Chapter Two), is no longer regarded, in the Tudor period, as an object of worship and veneration: for the Tudors, the tree represented instead the means to economic prowess and control of the seas.

¹⁴ "an pór oirbheartach óigleabh" (Bergin 81 st. 2).

¹⁵ "na trí bhile buantoraigh" (Bergin 82 st. 7).

¹⁶ "meireoin áigh a haonfhoraigh" (Bergin 82 st. 8).

¹⁷ "Trí hurchna is uaisle mogail" (Bergin 83 st. 11).

The tree around which Laoiseach centers his poem has been cut down: in effect, Laoiseach uses the vehicle of the standard bardic eulogy to create a lament not merely for one person but for an entire culture. Once a gathering place, the hill on which the tree stood is now bare and causes the poet deep distress: “the cutting of the branch, my day of sorrow! the state of the land is baser thereafter” (st. 2 Bergin 232) ¹⁸. The natural state, the poet implies, is inextricably bound to the human state: what happens to nature signifies what is happening to the population. Not only has the tree been cut down, but the hill has been taken over by outsiders, and it is with this image that the poem ends: “The hill of the shoutings, torment of the schools, in the possession of enemies to-day! After its slopes sad to me is the fair hill that hath pierced my affection” (Bergin 233 st. 9) ¹⁹. This is an interesting piece to compare with Spenser’s *Mutabilitie Cantos*, which are situated atop a hill that has similarly been shorn of trees and overrun, and which is set in Ireland. Spenser is able to forge a mythology out of this narrative, as we will see: Laoiseach, too overcome with the significance of the loss, is unable to make a similar leap. What we receive instead is a lament for the loss of culture.

The Irish tradition of inaugurating a chief or a king beneath a tree on a hill top lurks behind the narrative of this poem that mourns the loss of the tree. The loss of the tree, then, indicates the loss of the culture in the face of “enemies” and the change they bring. The poet’s sadness manifests itself as a nostalgia for what the tree represented:

¹⁸ “buain na craoibhe, mo lá leóin/ daoire ’na dheóidh mar tá an tír” (Bergin 51 st. 2).

¹⁹ Cnoc na gconghár, crádh na gol,
a n-orláimh náamhad a-níodh:
d’éis a learg as dubhach dharnh.

“That bough was wont to guide my way” (Bergin 233 st. 4)²⁰. Something has clearly altered between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries in the way in which nature is represented in bardic poetry, and this poem serves as an early example of the result of that change. Rather than serving as stock metaphors to praise leaders or mourn deaths, this set of natural images is now used to signify a nostalgia for loss.

Eochaidh Ó Heóghusa’s poetry attests to this growing significance of nostalgia within the bardic order. As the bard to three successive Maguires, the last of which was Hugh Maguire, who joined Hugh O’Neill’s Munster campaign, Ó Heóghusa’s poetry inevitably leans toward lament for the crumbling of the culture in which he was formed and out of which he has made his living. Ó Heóghusa’s poem “A Winter Campaign”, written after his patron had joined the Munster rebellion and only months before Hugh’s death outside of Cork in March 1600, makes clear the growing theme of the presence of the natural world in poetry as indicative of a disturbance in the world of culture.

“Too cold I deem this night for Hugh” (Bergin 268)²¹, he begins: significantly, Hugh, in fighting against the demise of his way of life, is out of doors, forced into an outdoor battle: as with Sweeney and Cailte, displacement or struggle against change means subjection to the natural world. Ó Heóghusa depicts the extraordinary power of nature’s storms here, and that power seems unnatural because, it is implied, the events taking place are unnatural:

tulach ghlan do chealg mo chion. (Bergin 52 st. 9)

²⁰ “Do bhíoth chamh ag dénaimh eóil” (Bergin 51 st. 4).

²¹ “Fúar liom an adhaighsi dh’Aodh” (Bergin 124 st. 1).

To-night (it is venom to my heart) fiery showers are poured
 forth; to think of his encountering the frozen spikes is
 hateful to the soul.

Over the clouds' bosoms the flood-gates of heaven have
 been opened: it has turned small pools to seas; the
 firmament has spewed out its destruction. (Bergin 268 st.
 2-3)²²

Nature has become apocalyptic; the historical forces at work are effecting terrible changes. "Sad it is to me that Hugh Maguire, to-night in a strange land, lies under the lurid glow of showering, flashing thunderbolts, beneath the fury of armed savage clouds" (Bergin 269 st. 5)²³.

The attack by the English upon Maguire and the O'Neills and others involved in the rebellion is also an attack by nature, and a sign that something has gone wrong: if we

²² Anocht, is neimh rem chride,
 fearthar frasa teintidhe
 a gcomhdháil na gclá seacdhá
 mar tá is orghráin aigeanta.

Do hosgladh ós ochtaibh néll
 doirse uisgidhe an aiér:
 tug sé minlinnte `na muir,
 do sgé an fhirminnte a hurbhuidh. (Bergin 124 st. 2-3)

²³ "Sáoth leamsa Aodh Mhág Uidhir
 anocht a gcrích chomhoidhigh,
 fá ghrís ndeirg gcáorshoighnéen gceath
 fá fheirg bhfäobhoimél bhfuileach" (Bergin 125 st. 5).

look back to the thirteenth century examples of bardic poetry, the natural world is bountiful when rule is rightful. Here, because the leadership has been disrupted, the poet can no longer serve as what James Carney has referred to as an “intermediary between the prince and the mysterious powers of nature” (Carney 1958 11).

Ó Heóghusa’s chilling description of his mind’s picture of Hugh subject to the forces of both the English and the natural world extends until Hugh becomes the personification of nature, now being assaulted by the English: “Grievous to me - it has wounded my heart - that the soft slope of his smooth comely side should be crushed in the wild sullen night, in a suit of complete steel” (Bergin 269 st. 8)²⁴. Like the tree in Mac an Bhaird’s poem, Hugh becomes the symbol of an eroding culture as he is pummeled by the natural world and by the foreigners, and Ó Heóghusa makes this clear in his final stanzas:

Throughout Munster of the white mansions, because of the
ravager of the land of the Gaels, many are the courts bared
to the very edge and clad in glowing embers, hiding the
coldness of the air.

Because of Maguire’s circuit, throughout the west of the
fair sunset-land many is the court in flames, many the

²⁴ “Sáoth linn, do loit ar meanmain,
learg thais a thaoibh mindealbhaigh
’gá meilt a ngrúamoidhche ghairbh,
a mbeirt thúarfhoirfe iaim” (Bergin 125 st. 8).

territory without heir or great-grandson.

(Bergin 270 st. 18-19)²⁵

The trope of the symbiosis between leadership and nature is used by Ó Heóghusa to demonstrate the rupture that has occurred, with the elements representing here the chaos of the culture.

Another poem from the same date by Eoghan Ruadh Mac an Bhaird makes similar use of natural imagery to mourn the impending loss of culture in Ireland. Following the defeat of the earls at Kinsale, Eoghan Ruadh's patron, O'Donnell, sailed to the continent. This poem, "Looking Towards Spain", contains a nature that has been upset by the events in Ireland, and of which Eoghan Ruadh is suspicious. His patron has sailed "over the gloomy raging sea" (Bergin 222 st. 2)²⁶, and the poet asks "the gods who blow blustering winds" to "forsake their warlike apparel" (Bergin 222 st. 4)²⁷. Having been left behind in Ireland, the poet is without a patron, and so without a livelihood; the result is a poem that mourns the loss of his culture, the reflection of a man dismayed at his situation:

²⁵ "Seachnóin Mhumhan na múr ngeal
iomhda ó airgtheóir fhuinn Gháoidheal
cúirte brúachnochta a mbeirt smóil,
ag ceilt fhúardhochta an aieóir.

Iomdha ó chuairt Aoidh Mh éig Uidhir
feadh iarthair fhóid fhionnfhuinidh
cúirt na doighir, ní díoth nua,
críoch gan oigher gan iarmhúa" (Bergin 126-7 st. 18-19).

²⁶ "tar muir nduaibhsigh ndoighiordha" (Bergin 31 st. 2).

There are others like me: I myself especially, O Aodh, am
torn because of thy venture in the boiling wave of my mind.

The sea does not stir without bewildering me, the wind
rises not but that my mind starts, the tempest does not
alter the note of the stream without bringing anguish upon
me, now thou art gone. (Bergin 223 st. 13-14)²⁸

Once again we find that imagery of the natural world is inextricably bound to a nostalgia for a lost culture: Eoghan Ruadh situates the representative of that lost culture, his patron, in a natural world that is both changed and unreliable.

The theme of the bard being left behind to lament the fall of the aristocratic Irish order is altered, in Fearghal Óg Mac an Bhaired's poem "Love of Ireland." This time it is the poet who is in exile, and in this nostalgic look at the land that is no longer his home, he emphasizes repeatedly the nature of Ireland. Fearghal Óg writes of "the melodious waterfalls" (Bergin 225 st. 2)²⁹, "the tranquil fountains, that rich fair level land of soft

²⁷ "Go ttreigitt a ttrealbha laoch/ dea séite na sionghaoth" (Bergin 31 st. 4).

²⁸ "Atáid m'ionnsamhla eile,
atúsa, a Aodh, d'áiridhe,
dom buing do bhithin t'eachtra
i ttuinn fhichidh mh'aigeanta.

Ní chorraigh muir nach measg sinn,
ní éir gaoth nach gluais mh'intinn,
ní aithrigh síon séis mbuinne
nach sníomh dot éis oruinne" (Bergin 32-3 st. 13-14).

²⁹ "n-eas mbinn" (Bergin 37 st. 2).

soil" (Bergin 226 st. 11)³⁰. Towards the close of the poem Fearghal Óg includes several stanzas that are similar to earlier, ninth and tenth century poems in their luxuriant praise of landscape:

Green and flourishing is the grass of the island, thick are her
nut-sweet woods, plentiful is choice fruit upon the dry
smooth-sided hillocks.

To depart from her is a cause of misery, well carved are her
blue-timbered courts - I love them truly, smooth are her
noble rods.

To leave her is ground for weakness, sweet is the sound of
her gentle wind - green Banbha enclosed by woods - and
sweet is the voice of her rivers.

The speech of her birds bright-feathered and ruddy is sleep
music enough. O that I were to-day in that smooth land
abounding in salmon: hail to the land of bright fountains!

(Bergin 227 st. 20-23)³¹

³⁰ "thais thobarmhoill/ ... / an fhinshlim fhial oirearbhog" (Bergin 38 st. 11).

³¹ "Gorm fallán fēr na hinnse,
dlúith a coillte cnóimhillse,
cnuas toghtha is iomdha orra.

Clearly this is an idealizing exercise, a nostalgic longing for a land of pastoral perfection. What is significant about these four stanzas, though, and what stands out here is the inclusion of the poet's longing for the courts, as well as the natural beauties of Ireland. When the rest of the poem is reviewed, it becomes clear that Fearghal Óg is lamenting the loss of the bardic order: he sends blessings to Leinster's host, to the women of Ireland, to "the makers of eulogies" (Bergin 226 st. 14)³², and to "those who unravel genealogical branches" (Bergin 226 st. 15)³³, as well as to physicians, clerics, and musicians. The idealized presence of the natural world of Ireland in this poem is mere convention that serves to highlight a nostalgia that mourns the loss of culture, while placing a seeming emphasis on the natural world.

In another poem written slightly later, in approximately 1610, Fearghal Óg laments the now complete downfall of his patrons, the O'Donnells, and makes use of the

tolcha tiorma taobhchorra.

Triall uaithe as adhbhar doghra,
snoighthe a cúirte clárgorma,
grádh fire aca uaimse,
mine a slata saoruaisle.

A fágbháil is fáth maoithe,
binn foghar a fannghaoithe,
an ghormBhanbha fá bhfill fíodh,
's is binn orlabhra a haibhníodh.

Labhra a hén gclúimhgheal gcorcra
ní beag do cheól chodolta:
gan mé aníogh san mhín mhaighrigh!
mo chion don tír thobairghil" (Bergin 39-40 st. 20-23).

³² "na nduan molta" (Bergin 39 st. 14).

³³ "lucht sgaoilte gég ngeinealaigh" (Bergin 39 st. 15).

pathetic fallacy to emphasize the wrong that has occurred: “the withered forests of the fold of Uisneach are ever weeping for those four” (Bergin 231 st. 12)³⁴. As in earlier bardic poetry, the state of nature reflects and is indicative of the state of the culture: by this point, though, Fearghal Óg expresses the same symbiotic relationship employed by earlier poets – nature is now inseparably bound to his patrons and their plight.

Fear Flatha Ó Gnímh’s work demonstrates the increasing concern during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries with the demise of the bardic order. Frequently Fear Flatha writes poetry addressing what he perceives as a pressing need to continue the bardic tradition as it has been handed down, and to avoid the influence of the Tudors in Ireland. In a poem Bergin has titled “Art versus Nature,” Fear Flatha chastises Fearghal Óg for adopting new modes of composition: “This is comfortable, O Fearghal Óg: thou hast gotten gifts from the Trinity; without any need of a good teacher for thy verse thou framest fine scholarly art on horseback!” (Bergin 265 st.1)³⁵. By alluding to other, earlier bards going back several hundred years, including some under discussion here, Fear Flatha stresses the importance of tradition to the bardic order.

This concern is made most obvious in another poem, “The Death of Ireland,” composed in approximately 1609, following the defeat of the earls at Kinsale and their subsequent flight to the continent. This lament for the passing of a certain culture makes

³⁴ “as fíodhbhaidh chríon chraoi Uíshigh/ do shíor ag caoi an cheathrair-sin” (Bergin 48 st. 12).

³⁵ “Cuimseach sin, a Fhearghail Óig,
fuarois tíodhloicthi ón Tríonóitt;
gan féidhm ndaghoide ar do dhán
ag deilbh ghlanóige ar ghearrán” (Bergin 118 st. 1).

use of conventional natural imagery in order to make that lament clear: "this smooth land of royal Niall is being washed with innocent blood" (Bergin 264 st. 4)³⁶. Once again nature reflects the plight of the Irish: "The MacCarthys without a leader - great are the pains to tell - here are the cruel storms - it were perilous to mention it" (Bergin 265 st. 10)³⁷. The poet's nostalgia for what he perceives as an already defeated culture drives him to consecrate that culture's memory through a catalogue of the various families who have lost their status, and it is fear that that memory will fade that drives the poem: "It were a great mass of forgetfulness not to tell of ancient Blod's [sic] noble stock, triumphant heroes free from evil instincts, though esteem for them returns no more" (Bergin 265 st. 11)³⁸. Fear Flatha, then, is attempting to continue the traditional aims of the bardic order, unlike other bards whom he evidently believes to be selling the tradition short in crisis. Ultimately, however, that tradition fails him here, except in form, for the natural world indicates all too clearly that something irrevocable has occurred: "By the evil eye of Balar her fair cornfield is blighted, her corn is without blossom on the ground - a blessing be upon her soul" (Bergin 265 st. 17)³⁹.

³⁶ "atá an chríoch réidhse riNéill/ do chrú firéin dá folcadh"(Bergin 115 st. 4).

³⁷ "Clann Charthaigh gan cheann feadhna,

mór na teadhma ré n-aithris:

ag so na síona saobha –

dobudh baoghal teacht tairis" (Bergin 116 st. 10).

³⁸ "Dobudh mór an meall dearmaid

gan saoirshliocht seanBhloid d'fhaisnéis

caor rathmhar gan rún cionnta

gion go bhfuil ionnta aithspéis" (Bergin 116 st. 11).

³⁹ "Atá ó bhéim súl Balair

i dteidhm galair a gealghort

a hioth gan bhláth i dtalmhain

I would like to look at one final poem as an example of the progression in bardic poetry towards a nostalgic mood that is linked to nature. Giolla Brighde Ó Heoghusa's "An Exile's Yearning," from circa 1610, is in the tradition of the Irishman forced abroad by political circumstances. The result is a work that again uses natural imagery to evoke nostalgia for the poet's past with his patron, William Nugent. "O writing that speedest over the sea toward the Isle of the Gaels, go, as I bid thee, toward the ancient land of Fiachaidh's stock" (Bergin 276 st. 1)⁴⁰, he begins. The separation from his patron causes the poet great sorrow, and he couches his sorrow and longing for the past by saying:

By his side I found the happiest time that might be, near to
the smooth fortress of the verdant court of Brega, even
without reckoning the charm of the landscape. (Bergin 276
st. 8)⁴¹

Yet again the desire for the lost bardic order is articulated by the poet through landscape. The poet relies upon the metaphor of his patron as the sun that has now been taken from him, and without whom he suffers.

What is significant in this poem is not the fact that Giolla Brighde continues the tradition of an Irish poet writing in exile, but that he continues this with references that

bioth ar a hanmain beannacht" (Bergin 117 st. 17).

⁴⁰ "A sgrighionn luigheas tar lear
ar amus innsi Gáoidheal,
déna mar aderam ruibh
ar senfhonn fréimha Fiachaidh" Bergin 139 st. 1).

⁴¹ "Fuarusa re hais an fhir
seal dob áoibhne dár bh fheidir
fan ráith ccuirr um bhráoinlios mBreagh,

attest to an outside influence seeping into the bardic order. His reference to his “grief like the unborn offspring of the elephant” (Bergin 277 st. 16)⁴² suggests that the poet has been reading continental literature; elephants are not among the typical catalogue of animals employed by bardic poets.

Giolla Brighde, forced to leave Ireland, chose to settle in Louvain and became a priest, and never returned to his native land. The obvious influence of literature outside of the immediate bardic order indicates the direction of bardic poetry from this period on: for, following the defeat of the earls at Kinsale and the scattering of the patrons and their poets, the insularity of the bardic order is no longer assured.

What these examples demonstrate is an increasing concern over the centuries, and particularly from the mid-sixteenth century onwards, with demonstrating the demise of the bardic order, often by drawing from the same set of metaphors based in the natural world. While this demise is, of course, represented as well in language that is more obviously political, or more obviously mournful, the fact that bardic poetry too unites nature and nostalgia adds further evidence that this unification becomes an Irish literary tradition.

⁴¹ “s gan áoibhneas an fhuinn d’áireamh” (Bergin 140 st. 8).

⁴² “mar thoirrcheas n-elphant aguinn” (Bergin 141 s. 16).

Spenser and the “Mutabilitie” of Irish Landscape

The Elizabethan era is pivotal to this discussion of nature in Irish literature, marking as it does the transition from medieval to early Modern, and Irish language to English language literatures, as well as from “Irish Ireland” to colonized Ireland. Several themes serve as an introduction to these transitions: the idea of nature in England as opposed to in Ireland; the way the English idea of nature dovetailed with its increasingly empirical, expansionist outlook during this period; the significance of the map as a tool of empire; and the influence of all three of these ideas on Elizabethan Irish-based narratives that denigrated the Irish as uncivil. These themes provide a background from which to examine the writing of Edmund Spenser, whose career coincides with and serves to illuminate changes in Irish culture that were to affect the presence of nature in Irish literature in the centuries to follow.

The idea of nature in England had developed differently than in Ireland, particularly because there had been far more government and royal intervention in the natural world, and it was in part this divergence in development that led to a heightened English presence in Ireland during the Tudor period. In need of natural resources to sustain the growth of a young empire, Tudor England turned to Ireland, resulting in effects that were to change the course of Irish history.

While in Ireland nature had never been subjected to a form of central control, in England forest had been managed by the crown as a business from early on: the Chart de

Foresta of 1217 had rolled back afforestations, but did not do away with the system of courtly control. Thus, as Simon Schama points out, a contradiction existed in English culture: "As royal greenwood [the forest] was governed sternly but impartially for the hunt" (Schama 149), but it was also the site of entrepreneurial profit, as fines were paid for taking anything – whether plants or a hunted animal.

The real life Robin Hood was made, in 1308, to pay such a fine. The tales that grew out of this event are very much involved with the idea of the freedom and justice imagined to exist in the forest. "From the moment it appears, Robin's greenwood is an elegy for a world of liberty and justice that had never existed" (Schama 149). Robin Hood, then, is not a rebel, but a "passionate and nostalgic conservative" (Schama 149) who desires social justice. Robin Hood tales tap into what Simon Schama argues is an across-culture myth of the nation growing out of wilderness. But while these tales were growing in popularity, English government was operating in a manner at odds with that same ideal. Under the Tudors, England began to self-consciously think of itself as an empire; and an empire needed, amongst other things, an undefeatable fleet of ships, all made of timber. Gradually, nature came to be seen as offering service to empire.

Wooden ships did not endure, particularly under the critical conditions of weather and battle, and it was not long before the English forests were being depleted. Ireland, the colony closest, had, the English knew, an enormous amount of untouched timber, and could fill this gap: a seventy-four gun ship needed one hundred fifty feet of elm for the keel alone, while two thousand mature oaks were needed for an entire ship (Schama 173).

The English thus progressed far more rapidly than the Irish towards seeing the natural world as a resource to be exploited for the shaping of empire, and it was with these attitudes that the early “planters” arrived in Ireland in the early 1500s, having recognized the interrelationship between “sea-power, timber, and economic and political dominance” (Neeson 143). The goal of the settlement by “planters” in the 1500s was not, of course, limited to the acquisition of timber – there was also the serious aim of controlling and converting the Irish to Protestantism and civility after a troublesome period of rebellions – but the presence of untouched forest was what could make the colony economically viable. And, because of these clashes in the way that the two countries viewed nature, Ireland was to become “something of an early laboratory in which, not always knowingly, new ways of seeing the natural world were being generated and tested through the English colonizers’ encounter with a largely pre-scientific society and a largely aboriginal countryside” (Foster 1997a 46). Of these new ways of seeing the world, one of the most significant was through the tool of the map.

The Elizabethan era thus became a particularly significant time for Ireland, as colonial control was beginning to be self-consciously solidified, by the arriving waves of plantation settlers, and later by the defeat of the Irish earls: the physical and political – and thus literary – landscapes of Ireland were changed permanently under Elizabeth’s rule. It was during this time that the English empire began to establish itself firmly in the minds of the English people, who fanned out around the world to appropriate foreign lands in the name of their queen. In so exploring and colonizing, the Elizabethans entered into a period of momentous change in geography and map-making – in effect, an age of

atlases. Mapping, in the sixteenth century, was seen as a form of ownership: mapping made for a seemingly complete definition of a landscape. If it was possible to know the details of a landscape, it was possible, in some way, to also control that landscape. Mapping thus becomes an appropriate metaphor for the Elizabethan presence in Ireland, which was attempting desperately to assert control.

The Elizabethan interest in mapping was, of course, a logical outgrowth of the English interest in exploration and acquisition of land for their queen and the beginnings of self-conscious empire. Renaissance cartography and cosmography had advanced so quickly that, in the period of approximately 1475-1575, according to one historian of mapmaking, "European perception of the world land and water relationships changed more than it did in any comparable period" (Thrower 48). By Edmund Spenser's era, this new geography was a common element of the university curriculum. Significantly, there was also extensive communication between geographers and the Elizabethan court, and this communication resulted in "the parallel development of models of the globe and of the state, and was fundamental to the creation of that consciousness of an outward-looking empire which became so important in the centuries to come" (Cormack 16).

Perhaps because the English relied on outdated background material concerning Ireland and the Irish (as we will see), and perhaps because of the nature of their mission in Ireland, early English map-making ventures – both cartographic and narrative – were largely unsuccessful. In an essay charting Sidney's progress around Ireland during the period preceding Spenser's time, and charting too the resistance to the "planters'" presence in Ireland, David Baker notes that as "Sidney traverses Ireland, the country

presents itself to him as a jumble of relics, what is left after random insurrection has exploded the realm into spatial chaos” (Baker 84). The result of such spatial chaos was the inability. Baker argues convincingly, to establish a reliable, concrete map of Ireland:

Colonial cartography (in both its largest and most strict sense) is entirely possible, but what I have been arguing here is that it is not *finally* possible: in the ‘Ende’, as Sidney discovered, there is no ‘Ende’ to such mapping. The coloniser must always be prepared to define his terrain anew, remembering, despite himself, that the territory he has appropriated is populated by ‘others’ whom he cannot quite categorise, and who are actively trying to redraw his ‘map’ even as he sets it down. This continual conflict *within* the coordinates of power disorders it, I think, far more than outright contestation. (Baker 90)

The instability of Ireland, and the seeming impossibility of coming up with a stable map, led to the expression, in the later prose “maps” such as Spenser’s *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, of a fear of this unknown landscape.

It was not long, however, before the first maps deemed reliable by those who knew the landscape were prepared by John Speed for the Irish section of the 1612 *Theatre of the Empire of Great Britaine* (Andrews 202). While reliable, maps of Ireland from the period were different from those of other lands, one critic has argued:

English maps of Ireland were almost always designed for military and legal purposes, in order to establish strategies of attack and defence, and, in consolidating military success, in order to determine the boundaries of property – bluntly pragmatic concerns which distinguish these documents from the humanist, antiquarian, patriotic, scientific or aesthetic ambitions of printed atlases by cartographers such as Saxton, Camden or Ortelius. (Lupton 96)

Given the military goals behind Renaissance and Elizabethan map-making drives in Ireland, it is logical that writers like Spenser and many of his contemporaries were drawn to mapping Ireland by means of a narrative analysis, since they had much the same goals in mind.

The new knowledge provided by exploration had led to a significant change in the perspective used to draw maps: vision was not expanded by new information so much as altered, so that it was possible to grasp “in a single instant the convexity of the terraqueous globe” (Lestringant 5). It is difficult for those of us so used to seeing photographs of the world taken from the moon to grasp the dramatic nature of this development; we are accustomed to conceiving of the world as a whole. The *mappa mundi*, the representation of an entire globe was new to Spenser’s time.¹ What I would

¹ While “*mappae mundi*” was used to describe earlier maps, those drawn during the Renaissance were the first to represent the actual globe as we know it, as opposed to what was known of the globe in earlier eras.

suggest is that mapmaking ventures, the exploratory journeys that sparked them, and the resulting information about the physical world can all be seen as significant influences on Elizabethan narration, especially because all of these things passed so quickly into the realm of public knowledge: the cartographic mapping of empire becomes a metaphor for poetic, and epical, narration. The popularity of geography and cartography become, in Elizabethan prose and poetic works, a preoccupation with landscape and place, and the *mappae mundi* makes it possible to conceive of a totalizing narrative, one that encompasses not only the nation, but the empire.

To those of Spenser's generation who settled in Ireland as colonial servants, there was a strong impetus to survey and define – to map, in other words – Ireland. In writing these cultural “maps”, the English found themselves forced to consider nature in a new way: “nature played a largely tactical role as an obstacle to movement and as a refuge for the government's enemies” (Andrews 199). The woods, because they sheltered those pushed off their land by English settlers, became a site of fear and dread for the English, as well as the site of English economic exploitation. Unlike in France, where the beginnings of a conservationist effort were underway to preserve forests, in Ireland the idea was far from the front of the governors' minds.

In the political and social confusion that existed in Ireland throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, it was impossible for such an innovative idea as forest management to develop, much less be put into practice.

Gradually forests in Ireland became what Norman Forest

Law and the fractured political state of that country had prevented English forests from becoming five hundred years before the Tudor conquest: gathering places of opposition. Woodlands, in addition to being the wooden *el dorado* for the English, now became important rallying places and strongholds for the Irish – hence the common use in Ireland of the word ‘fastness’ to describe them. Elizabeth I, well aware of the two aspects mentioned above, expressly ordered the destruction of all woods in the country to deprive the Irish of this shelter. (Neeson 140)

Elizabeth I’s call for not only for the mapping of the Irish landscape, but also for the felling of the forests indicates the intertwining of English ideas of nature – both literal and human. Thus the English idea of nature and the increasing significance of mapping became inexorably intertwined in the Elizabethan quest to control – and convert – Ireland.

In seeking to draw both paper and cultural maps of Ireland, the English relied upon outdated material to bolster their arguments for converting and controlling the Irish in an attempt to establish an economically and politically sound colony. The primary source on Ireland for men like Richard Beacon (1567-1592), Richard Stanihurst (1547-1618) and Spenser (1552-1599) – all of whom wrote prose tracts on the Irish situation – was Giraldus Cambrensis, Gerald of Wales (1146-1223), whose claims in *Topographia Hiberniae* “were picked up by all subsequent English commentators on Ireland and, by the seventeenth century, many of them had become clichés repeated by almost every

English writer on Irish affairs” (Carpenter 236). Renaissance writers in particular, guided by the time’s pervasive idea of nature opposing culture, found in Giraldus justification for England’s activity in Ireland. While admitting that the Irish had “natural gifts... [they] are so barbarous that they cannot be said to have any culture” (238), Giraldus concluded. This lack of culture and civility Giraldus tied directly to the pastoral: “They are a wild and inhospitable people. They live on beasts only, and live like beasts. They have not progressed at all from the primitive habits of pastoral living” (239). The Irish, then, are somehow *too natural*: and, despite attempts by Irishmen like Seathrún Céitinn (Geoffrey Keating) to displace such ideas within the Irish imagination,² this medieval view remained firmly in the English imagination.

Gerald of Wales’s ideas on Ireland were not, however, limited to such early, pseudo-anthropological observations: most of his observations of Ireland were dictated by an interest in the fantastic and the abnormal, turning his supposed observations into allegorical tales. As John Wilson Foster notes, this move by Giraldus that added to his influence upon later English ideas about Ireland:

Bestiaries report real observations (and therefore belong to the history of natural history) but fauna and landscape are refracted through a cultural lens (an intense and pervasive

² Céitinn, in his 1634 treatise, *Foras Feasa Ar Erinn* (A Basis of Knowledge About Ireland), attacks not only Cambrensis, but also Stanihurst, Spenser and others for writing falsely about Ireland: “inasmuch as it is almost according to the fashion of the beetle they act, when writing concerning the Irish”: a beetle “keeps bustling about until it meets with dung of horse or cow, and proceeds to roll itself therein” (Céitinn Vol. I 5).

Christianity) through which few moderns see now. Through Giraldus, the approach to nature captured by the bestiary – full of the fantastic, the absurd, the true, and the instructive – entered into Ireland and pioneered the survey of Ireland’s geography, climate and fauna. In Giraldus can be seen the naturalistic and the allegorical in uneasy juxtaposition. The Elizabethan binary view of Ireland is perhaps traceable to this medieval double vision. (Foster 1997a 38)

The binary view of Ireland that Foster refers to here he defines as “practical economic desire and literary daydream” (Foster 1997a 30); and it is this view that would determine much of the attitude towards Ireland from Giraldus’s time to Spenser’s and, indeed, much of the time to come.

Elizabethans tended to view Ireland through the Christian myth of the fall and through that of the pastoral, believing that Ireland had somehow fallen – regressed – into the undeveloped, uncultivated state of which Gerald wrote. Part of this regression and barbarity was, of course, the Catholic nature of Ireland, which was at odds with the Protestant ethos that had swept England and in so doing had left a dread of popery as the potential undoing of the Elizabethan state. Ireland, then, as a Catholic land, was a direct threat to the queen. The English thus discounted Irish culture as primitive, “preferring to see it under the guise of nature” (Kiberd 277). Dealing with a country, then, that they perceived as *merely natural*, “the colonizers at different times paint both an Edenic and a

fallen landscape. . . This twofold depiction is both a cause and an effect of the deeply embedded European ambivalence about nature: nature is pristine and prelapsarian, innocent and good, but it is also sullied and savage, wild and unregenerate” (Foster 1997a 28). While this binary would seem contradictory, it encapsulates the struggle undergone by many Elizabethan authors in dealing with the idea of Ireland, a struggle most evident in Spenser’s works, which develop a trend towards topographical poetry (which, John Wilson Foster notes, “coincides with the acceleration of scientific surveying of the land, begun by the Elizabethans, which suggests that discipline’s influence on the poetry and a bridge between science and literature” (Foster 1997a 59)), and make such use of pastoral traditions.

As a literary convention, the pastoral fascinates because the lost world described is one that has never existed for the poet; it operates from the basis of a nostalgia and mourning for a life that the poet has not led. The pastoral’s conventional celebration of a lost rural life, idyllic in its simplicity, was extremely popular during Spenser’s lifetime, and so it is not surprising that even prose writers settled on this type of metaphor. However, it is significant that while the pastoral was celebrated as an ideal in Elizabethan poetry, it was an impossible reality to face in Ireland, which operated under an actual pastoral economy and would have seemed the perfect “foil” to the increasingly urban English court: hence the number of Elizabethan writers who resolved that Ireland must be reformed, and with force.

The analyses of Spenser and other “planters” of his era frequently attempted to assess where the Irish went astray, as well as why the English had been unable to control

them satisfactorily. While these assessments were only barely cloaked references to the Catholic-Protestant divide, they repeatedly turned to landscape. “[I]t eventually became one of the axioms of Anglo-Irish life that protestantism was symbolized by a tamed and domesticated environment, while catholicism was associated with wild forests and marshy places” (Canny and Carpenter 172). Sir John Davies’s 1612 treatise, *A Discovery of the True Causes Why Ireland was Never Entirely Subdued*, followed Spenser in the line it took towards the Irish: force was necessary to “subdue” them. Davies blamed the English for – among other things – “leaving the woods and mountains to the Irish” (289), and, in a long passage on the defects of the Irish character, identified as most objectionable the apparent disinterest in building and landscaping:

for though the Irishry. . . *possessed a land abounding with all the things necessary for the civil life of man*, yet, which is strange to be related, they did never build any houses of brick or stone, some few poor religious houses excepted, before the reign of King Henry the Second. . . Neither did any of them in all this time *plant any gardens or orchards, enclose or improve their lands*, live together in settled villages or towns, nor make any provision for posterity, which, being against all commonsense and reason, must needs be imputed to those unreasonable customs which made their estates so uncertain and transitory in their possession. (Davies 291-2) (italics mine)

In this passage Davies makes it clear that the uncivilized state that the Irish were believed to live in is closely aligned with the uncultivated state of the land; the implication is, of course, that if the landscape was cleared and tamed – if the Irish adopted a Protestant work ethic – so too would the people be: “In the settlers’ texts, the clearing represented the daylight world of civilisation and the conscious” (Kiberd 1995 16-7). Such an attitude provided justification for policies aiming to reform. Richard Beacon wrote repeatedly that “a reformation of a declined common-weale, is nothing els but an happy restitution unto his first perfection” (Beacon 18):

This reformation universall of the whole state and body of
the commonwealth, is nothing els, but a thorough and
absolute mutation and change, of auncient lawes, customes,
and manner of the people, and finally of the common-
wealth itselfe, unto a better forme of government.

(Beacon 39)

Beacon’s argument that Ireland has regressed or fallen into a state of backwardness and barbarity is framed by pastoral metaphors and the language of England’s burgeoning forest industry:

[F]or as the fatnesse and goodnesse of the earth, is easily
discerned by the large profit and benefite it yeeldeth to the
labouring hande; and the goodnesse of the tree by his
pleasanut fruite; so the corruption of manners in the
people, by his infinite evils, miseries, common calamities.

ruines. and destructiones of states. which everywhere it begetteth and bringeth forth. as by his severall fruites and effectes may be discerned. (Beacon 72-3)

*

[F]or no doubt like as the wilde olive and figge tree. by the continuall addressing of a skilfull husbandman. is made at the last kindly, profitable, and fruitfull. and not inferiour to the naturall braunches: so a common-wealth overgrowne with a generall corruption of manners. and thereby become savage, barbarous, and barren, like unto the wilde olive and figge tree may by the continuall pruning and addressing of a skilfull magistrate, be made obedient. civill. and profitable unto that prince, whom God hath constituted to be the labourer in that vineyearde. (Beacon 75)

While Beacon is drawing upon classical sources for some of his analogies³, they are in line with other contemporary analyses. and do much to further the argument that a more severe governance of Ireland is called for:

A severe Magistrate is herein required: for that a common-weale mightily corrupted in manners. is squared and reformed onely by the rule and line of Justice which wee call distributive. the which for the inequality thereof. may

not without great motions and sharpe remedies remedies
 reforme the enormities and mischiefes of the common-
 weale. (Beacon 82)⁴

Davies, like Beacon, went on to suggest that only a more active government could succeed in such a place, using similar analogies:

For the husbandman must first break the land before it be
 made capable of good seed; and when it is thoroughly
 broken and manured, if he do not forthwith cast good seed
 into it, it will grow wild again and bear nothing but weeds.
 So a barbarous country must be first broken by war before
 it will be capable of good goverment; and when it is fully
 subdued and conquered, if it be not well planted and
 governed after the conquest, it will eftsoon return to the
 former barbarism. (Davies 218-9)⁵

³ See Clare Carroll and Vincent Carey's introduction to *Solon His Follie*, pgs. XIII-XLIII.

⁴ Beacon does go on to warn that "great is the hatred which in such cases followeth the person of a severe Magistrate, and it draweth with it sometimes perill and daunger unto Princes" (83).

⁵ Davies is unusual amongst his contemporaries in his approach to the English presence in Ireland, attempting, in retrospect, to justify conquest through the law, and in his willingness to point out the repeated errors of earlier English waves in Ireland. Patricia Palmer points out that Davies is also unusual in his engagement with Irish legal terminology: "Davies's approach, his intellectual curiosity, his scholarly doggedness and his peculiarly non-judgmental reporting, is strikingly at odds with the conduct of his Tudor near-contemporaries" (Palmer 70).

Such mappings of the Irish cultural landscape in prose assessments like Beacon's and Davies's were typical: the English Protestant coloniser possessed civility, as well as a mandate to convert and reform the Irish.⁶

Spenser: Civil Servant and Poet

It was into this atmosphere that Edmund Spenser arrived: an unsettled political and social landscape that whispered of rebellions and uprisings, of clashing cultural ideals. As a revered poet and as one of the "planters", Spenser serves as a fascinating example of a servant to early English empire, with all of the above ideas playing themselves out in his work. Recent scholarly and creative work reflects the growing interest in Spenser as such a case study: the new edition of his prose tract *A View of the Present State of Ireland* appeared in 1997, a year that also saw the first full length study of Spenser's "Irish experience" since Pauline Henley's 1928 book, and 1997 too brought the playwright Frank McGuinness's *Mutabilitie* to the London stage. Such work has not only opened up the field of Spenser studies, but facilitates discussion of both Irish and English identity during the Elizabethan era, and, by extension, the implications of such identity formations in the shaping of nationhood.

⁶ A significant element of English "civility" was, of course, the language: the Irish language was almost entirely ignored in these prose "maps". As Patricia Palmer puts it, "There is an outflow of *Views, Discoveries, Descriptions, Images, Platts, Anatomies*, but, as the relentlessly visual register of these titles insists, Irish-speakers are looked at rather than heard. Their story is told almost without quotation marks" (Palmer 40).

In many ways, Spenser's work addresses such questions through the landscape and nature of Ireland, and it is for this reason that his prose and poetry are being considered in an analysis of nature in Irish literature. Because of this use of Irish landscape and nature, and because Spenser adopts a medieval language in his work during a highly significant moment that marked, ironically, the close of medieval Ireland's existence, Spenser serves as an appropriate figure with whom to close the discussion of medieval Irish literature. By Spenser's time, in other words, the English idea of nature was as significant in Ireland as the Irish idea of nature; it was no longer possible, following this point, to separate the two.

Most historians agree that the definitive fall of the Gaelic order came in 1601 with the defeat of the O'Neill family at the battle of Kinsale, and the subsequent flight of the earls to the continent: the waves of Tudor planters, and the following Elizabethan ones, finally managed to assert colonial control. Thus Spenser's time in Ireland came at a moment in Irish and English history that was to provide the basis of relations for the two hundred years to come; for following the defeat of the O'Neills the English were able to solidify control over their closest colony. As both a major poet and as a servant to Queen Elizabeth (and it is unclear at times which of these roles is the more vital), Spenser was not only one of the last poets to witness Ireland before the major shift in political landscape, but also one of the last to witness a certain physical landscape, for after 1601 the English were able to begin in earnest the process of clearing the forests that hid the "wood-kernes" that Spenser warned about in *A View of the Present State of Ireland*.

Spenser arrived in Ireland in 1580 in the service of Lord Grey de Wilton, who, as Lord Deputy of Ireland, became known for his vicious and underhand tactics in dealing with the Irish. Clearly desirous of improving his station in life, Spenser devoted himself to the cause of the English – and particularly of Elizabeth as Protestant ruler of the English – in Ireland. Despite his fervour, however, Spenser would remain for the rest of his life a minor civil servant on the fringes of the court society he described so vividly in his poetry. With only one two-year return to England in 1589, to present the first three books of *The Faerie Queene* to Elizabeth I, Spenser spent the rest of his life in Cork, until 1598, when, after his castle was attacked and burned by descendants of its original Irish owners, he was forced to flee to London, where he died.

As a civil servant, Spenser disdained the barbarism of the Irish; as befit a man of his background and position, he was dismayed by Catholicism, threatened by rebels, and altogether appalled by his circumstances. As a poet, however, Spenser recognized, in *A View*, that the Irish held in high esteem their bards, who wrote in praise of their patrons and lived well at their patrons' generosity. In recognizing the function of the bard, Spenser must have recognized too the similarity between the bard and himself, as a poet attempting to write a national epic in praise of Elizabeth while living on a small annuity granted to him by the Queen. In their introduction to *A View*, Andrew Hadfield and Willy Maley point out that, in admitting such positive aspects of Irish society, "Spenser would appear to be admitting that a simple polarity between the civilized English and the barbarous Irish cannot adequately account for the complexities of the colonial scene in early modern Ireland" (*View* xxii). It is the polarity of Spenser's own position, though.

that becomes most apparent in his writings, which struggle to make sense of the pastoral beauty of Ireland and its Catholic barbarity; of the idea of “home” and the idea of nation; and the idea of poetic and crown loyalty.

Settled in rural Cork as Sheriff, Spenser found himself in the midst of what must have been an Irish speaking population. One of the primary concerns of the planters was to establish English, and not Irish, as the primary spoken language.⁷ By the time Spenser arrived, the language problem persisted. A session of the parliament in Dublin in 1541 announced Henry VIII’s title as king of Ireland. Among those lords in attendance, only the earl of Ormond could understand the proclamation in English; this because of the fact that the families of those present had been in Ireland for generations (Deane Volume I, 143) and now spoke Irish. If, as Lord Chancellor Gerrade noted almost thirty years later (in 1578), “all English, and the most part with delight, even in Dublin, speak Irish” (in Deane 143), then Spenser was unlikely to have found neighbors in rural Cork able (or, at least, willing) to converse in his native tongue; as a non-Irish speaker, then, Spenser was even further estranged from his own culture. That the Norman English who had settled in Ireland were now speaking Irish was even more disturbing to Spenser, as it was to his superiors in London; this was viewed as a reversion on the part of the so-called English-Irish to a more primitive and uncivilized culture.

⁷ Terence Dolan notes that, while Irish was the language used by the mass of population, Latin was still in use by Church officials, and Norman-French still spoken amongst the ruling class; English was the language most recent to the island (*Field Day Anthology Volume I*, 141-8). See also Patricia Palmer’s recent study on *Language and Conquest in Early Modern Ireland*, which concludes that Irish was by far the dominant tongue, and had even recovered “lost ground” in formerly English speaking regions (Palmer 40-73).

Part of Spenser's intention in writing *A View of the Present State of Ireland* was to alert his superiors in London to this "backward" or "archaic" state of affairs in Ireland; this intention resulted in one of the fullest accounts of England's push into Ireland at that time. If the England of *The Faerie Queene* was, as we will see, at one remove, the Ireland of *A View* was painfully vivid for Spenser; there was no room for distance or perspective, as he wrote of the "present" moment. The best Spenser could manage, then, was to sketch a sort of cultural map for his readers: in its very title, *A View* presents itself as a visual aid, a lens through which to see, a way of examining Ireland. Much like descriptive geographers such as Richard Hakluyt, Spenser attempted, in his prose piece, to provide detail of what was considered uncharted territory, relying on the four century-old Gerald of Wales for background material that allowed him to present a narrative of English history that was fated and fateful. Because Gerald of Wales was highly critical of Irish pastoralism and the Irish generally, his writings fit in perfectly with the Protestant ethos of Spenser's generation, encouraging them to see themselves as potential saviors of an Ireland that had existed in a fallen state four centuries before. But what writers like Spenser would have found particularly interesting in Gerald was his argument that Ireland had in fact been *given* to the English: "From this it is clear that Ireland can with some right be claimed by the kings of Britain, even though the claim be from olden times" (99). This right, and the fact that Gerald prophesied the English empire in his closing remarks

to King Henry the Second⁸, allowed Spenser and his contemporaries to see their own positions in Ireland as fated.

Of the topics covered in *A View*, there are few that inspire the fear and anxiety in Spenser that the landscape and so-called “wood-kerns” did – the Irish rebels who have fled to the woods for refuge haunted Irenius; many of his plans center on how to rout them out and destroy the woods in order to deprive them of meeting places. In describing the landscape, and his recommendations for “civilizing” it, Spenser, along with contemporaries also writing tracts on Ireland, takes the tack of a surveyor. And, indeed, to those of Spenser’s generation settling in Ireland as colonial servants and planters, surveying the land was a significant employment. The nature and landscape of Ireland, for men such as Spenser, was seen in two ways: first, as a potential economic field for England, and second, as a source of tremendous anxiety, since the woods hid rebels and shrouded the country in mystery.

It is clear from *A View* that Spenser shares his contemporaries’ beliefs that the Irish needed to be taken firmly in hand: he is notoriously harsh in his judgment of the Irish people, recommending a violent drive by the English as the only way to sift through what in his time was already becoming a governor’s nightmare. If Spenser’s poetry celebrates the merits of a pastoral life, *A View* denigrates that life as primitive, savage: the pastoral “can evidently figure as an ideal only within the conventions of poetry; the

⁸ “As many as the lands provided by nature in these parts, so many are your victories. If the limits of your expedition are sought – there will be nor more of the world left for you before there will be an end to your activities” (124).

actual Irish cattle-based version posed too many problems” (Coughlan 52) for the English as they attempted to wield governmental and social control. The prose of *A View* is ferocious and Machiavellian in describing the steps that England should take in order to be done with rebellions: “where no other remedie may bee devised, nor hope of recovery had, there must needes this violent meanes bee used” (*View* 93). Irenius tells Eudoxus. Irenius goes on to recommend that garrisons of soldiers be sent over to drive the Irish rebel out of the woods, by destroying his food supply, so that

in short space his creete, which is his chiefe sustenance,
shall be wasted with preying, or killed with driving, or
starved for want of pasture in the woods, and he himselfe
brought so lowe, that he shall have no heart nor ability to
indure his wretchednesse, the which will surely come to
passe in very short time; for one winter well followed upon
him will so plucke him on his knees, that he will never be
able to stand up againe. (*View* 98)

To ensure that the Irish would not be able to retreat back into the woods for shelter, Irenius recommends “that order were taken for the cutting and opening of all places through woods” (*View* 156), thus ensuring, too, the safety of English travelers.

These ideas, however harsh they are to the modern ear – and Spenser is considered a stalwart enemy by most engaged in the study of Irish literature – were the view of the servant to the queen; the poet’s response to Ireland strained against such opinions, and vice versa. While passages recommending harsh measures against those

who had taken to the woods have gained Spenser a notoriety, especially among post-colonial scholars, *A View* also allows for a celebration of Ireland as an ideal. The landscape that hid the rebels and was in such desperate need of reform was also “a most beautifull and sweet countrey as any is under heaven” (*View* 27). Spenser was at pains, too, to point out the position held by the poet in Irish society, a position that most writers would envy:

There is amongst the Irish a certaine kind of people, called
 Bardes, which are to them instead of poets, whose
 profession is to set foorth the praises or dispraises of men
 in their poems or rymes, he which are had in so high regard
 and estimation amongst them, that none dare displease them
 for feare to runne into reproach through their offence, and
 to be made infamous in the mouthes of all men. For their
 verses are taken up with a general applause, and usually
 sung at all feasts and meetings, by certaine other persons,
 whose proper function that is, who also receive for the
 same great rewards and reputation amongst them. (*View* 75)

The “high regard” for Irish bards must have been a bitter pill to a man whose tremendous epic for his queen had not gained him the offer of a position in England but only a small annual income and an estate in Ireland; Spenser could not help but admire – and likely envy – the position of his Irish equivalents. The conflicting representations of Ireland present in *A View* would thus seem to indicate a contradiction in Spenser’s positions as a

poet (with loyalties to both antiquarian and pastoral traditions) and as a civil servant (with loyalties to the sovereign). The imaginations needed to construct an epic poem and to expand an empire would not, on the surface, appear to be at odds; indeed, *The Faerie Queene*, as an idea, would seem to perfectly adjoin the two roles. However, Spenser's work is so fraught with ambiguity about Ireland and about justice in Ireland that one can only conclude that he was unable to resolve the contradictions to his satisfaction, and unable to create a model for his thinking about Ireland that went beyond the simplistic binary relied upon by his contemporaries.

This binary is explored further in *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe*, a pastoral eclogue written in Ireland following his marriage. Spenser's pastorals have been examined endlessly within English and larger European literary contexts; they have not been assessed, however, within the frame of the Irish tradition of nature representation. Examined in the context of the Irish tradition that has been analyzed here, Spenser's pastorals, seen by so many as the height of the genre in English, reflect not only his famously uneasy relationship with Ireland, but also the way in which an interaction with the Irish landscape influenced his conception of pastoral. It is in *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe*, a late work, from 1595, that we see what may be the influence of the Irish view of nature, as represented by a figure like Sweeney. While there are indications that Spenser had a certain familiarity with Irish literature and intended to write on it, I do not claim that he was aware of texts such as "Sweeney" and the thematic treatment of nature; what I do suggest, however, is that by 1595, after so many years in Ireland, Spenser had undoubtedly gained a sense of the realities of the landscape, experiencing, in effect, some

of the realities of nature which are present in Irish literature. These realities – the exposure to the elements of which Sweeney complains, the bewildering labyrinth of the forests – have made their way into the poet's vocabulary, and into Colin's. Over the tropes of pastoral, Spenser lays a "real" pastoral drama – for here is the story of a genuine journey between court and countryside. Colin's fictional journey and Spenser's real one (his visit to London to present the first half of his epic) result in a poem that embodies pastoral and anti-pastoral tendencies, as if Spenser was torn between the English tradition as he had developed it and the Irish tradition as he had lived it.

In the dedication to Raleigh, Spenser offers the standard apology for his "unworthie" verse, but goes on to excuse it as "agreeing with the truth in circumstance and matter." As a preface to a pastoral, a genre not known for its realism and thus its "truth," this is enough to make the reader pause. Indeed, one is tempted to ask whether the "simple pastorall" can contain truth or reality at all, as the mode functions as a clear social idealization.

Once Colin has been convinced to tell his tale and gets underway, he is interrupted by Cuddy, who asks for particulars of the story, in this first instance wanting to know what songs Colin sang with the Shepherd of the Ocean. No sooner does Colin answer than Cuddy interrupts with another question. While initially these interruptions seem to operate as rather simplistic framing devices used to unfurl the story of Colin's journey to Cynthia's court, as the poem continues and others besides Cuddy force interruption and "break [Colin's] tale asunder" (ll.352), it becomes clear that the present, in the guise of these interruptions, controls Colin's pastoral narrative, which is

an expression of the past. The other shepherds urge Colin to continue on, force him to stop, redirect his narrative, or urge him to finish. The reader is thus made aware that the pastoral narrative is one that, as a representation of the past, is consciously shaped by the present.

Situated in the present in a supposedly ideal pastoral world, Colin – like Sweeney – expresses a complicated longing for the past (in the form of Cynthia's court) as well as a quite bitter disdain for the corruptions traditionally associated in the pastoral mode with the court: he is both drawn to the court, which has "no griesly famine, nor no raging sword" (ll. 314), and repelled by it, at least in part because it is responsible for his exile "into that waste, where I was quite forgot" (ll. 183). It is easy, here, of course, to replace "Colin" with "Spenser" and to see the merging of the poetic voices: and this is, ultimately, problematic. Rather than presenting a "simple pastorall," Spenser has drawn a map made complex by the realities and truths of both the English and Irish political landscapes, as well as by his personal experience of the lands themselves. By opting to tell his pastoral tale of a journey across land and sea, between country and city, Spenser has created a "map" of the English and Irish situations, unknowingly drawing attention to the gaps between English and Irish experience. This "map" is inherently unstable, as the early paper maps of Ireland were, as Spenser relies upon only his own and not a native perspective on Ireland and, on his return to London, finds it equally disorienting, as many an immigrant or colonial servant must have found similar returns "home".

When Colin manages to complete the part of his tale describing Cynthia's court and all of its glories, he is asked by one of the shepherds why he left.

And back returnedst to this barrein soyle.

Where cold and care and penury do dwell:

Here to keepe sheepe, with hunger and with toyle.

Most wretched he. that is and cannot tell. (ll. 656-659)

This passage is illustrative of the contradictions of the poem: the ideal pastoral place has been intruded upon by the present and the realities of the natural world. The earth, rather than producing all that the shepherds might need, is barren; the shepherds are thus transformed to hard working farmers threatened with hunger and poverty of a kind we might expect to find in a poem of mid-nineteenth-century Ireland. This sort of realism is reminiscent of earlier Irish works like *Buile Suibhne*, in which the actualities of a life in nature make it impossible to idealize that life. And, most interestingly, the shepherds are condemned to silence about the actual conditions of their lives – “Most wretched he, that is and cannot tell” – as the pastoral mode would shatter under the burden of such truths.

Colin's lament at this point resembles some of the bardic poetry examined earlier: his displacement results in a mournful pathos that centers on the natural world, which very obviously mirrors his feelings of displacement by becoming barren. While the poem attempts to reassume the traditional pastoral mode following such intrusions of reality, the attempt is unconvincing. Colin, like Sweeney and other Irish literary figures, experiences nature because he is a marginal figure: he is outside of the realm of the court, and, while he is able to recognize some positive aspects to this position, such as not being a part of the courtly corruptions and deceits, for the most part his tone is one of resignation, a reluctant acceptance of his marginal position. Spenser's failure to idealize

the landscape in the poem thus puts him in line with an Irish literary tradition. If Colin does recognize some beauty in the Irish landscape, it is, like Sweeney's, a forced recognition, and one that he would likely have foregone. It is his outsider's position, though, that allows Colin to see the realities – and not merely the surface glitter – of the court, and in this too Colin resembles Sweeney, who is also forced to recognize the negative aspects of settled, more “urban” culture.

Colin Clouts Come Home Againe is also, in its bewildered mixing of pastoral and anti-pastoral modes, an apt example of the confused beginnings of empire. Colin's ambivalence – his sense of exile, longing to return to Cynthia's court, longing to leave the court's corruptions, and the confused sense of the word “home” in the title – shows him to be in the new-to-the-era position of having to grapple with dual and dueling allegiances: thus pastoral convention and the realities of the natural world vie in the poem, in indication of a complex political situation for which little precedent existed. In importing the pastoral in full regalia into the Irish landscape and the Irish pastoral economy as the English experienced them at the end of the sixteenth century, Spenser evidently found that the pastoral needed to undergo fundamental changes. The literary pastoral's tendency to idealize the natural world was not as effective when applied to a non-imaginary, real landscape that was overrun with rebels and soldiers and real shepherds struggling to make a living in unstable conditions. While literary pastoral had traditionally been written from urban space about a relatively distant – and unknown – countryside, Spenser's pastoral eclogue was written from within rural space looking towards the

distant star of the court: these elements inevitably altered his conception of pastoral, and made it ultimately an impossible reality.

The complexities of *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe* are never fully resolved: Ireland remains an ambiguous space, an ambiguous notion, that calls into question the justice and effectiveness of the English court. When one turns to *The Faerie Queene*, these ambiguities are still present whenever Ireland is mentioned and, ironically, it is in attempting to address the space of Ireland that the poem abruptly ends.

The genre on which Spenser settled to praise and offer homage to his queen was the epic, a literary genre of particular interest and significance to the Elizabethans, as it lent itself to addressing issues of nationhood and national identity caught up in their changing and expanding world: the abundance of epic attempts during the era attests to the significance granted to such issues. Such epics are, as the recent *Geography and Empire* argues, the product of empire, attempts to define a nation, to sculpt in words the glories of a dominant and dominating culture. Such an attempt is made startlingly obvious in that most revered of Elizabethan epics, Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, which, oddly enough, was written in Ireland.

When its first installment appeared in 1590, *The Faerie Queene* was prefaced by the following dedication: "To the most mightie and magnificent empresse Elizabeth, by the grace of God Queene of England, France, and Ireland defender of the Faith &c." Spenser significantly grants Elizabeth the title "empresse" before "queene," and goes on to identify her in terms of place and geography: she is defined by the space of her empire and rule. This association is extended in the edition that appeared six years later: by 1596,

Elizabeth is not merely a “mightie and magnificent emperesse,” but is “renowned for pietie, vertue, and all gracious government,” and has added to her properties, like a skilled Monopoly player, the colony of Virginia. Based upon these changes, one senses that the “etcetera” – “defender of the Faith &c” – refers to the multiple, and expanding, roles Elizabeth must play as an acquirer of empire: she must now defend much more than the faith that her father swore to uphold. It would seem that the term “etcetera,” then, can refer as well to any as yet untaken, unconquered, or “undiscovered” territories; “etcetera” becomes the ultimate colonial motto, a description of both the responsibilities and expectations of empire.

These dedications, and the association of Elizabeth with place, are of particular interest when one considers that Spenser’s English epic was written in Ireland – written, that is, from the space of England’s earliest colony – and makes significant use of the Irish landscape. As both an epic poet and a servant to Elizabeth in a colonial territory, Spenser is thus a key figure in a consideration of the beginnings of British empire. *The Faerie Queene* is considered by many to be the first great *English* epic; what I would like to explore here is the strangeness of this epic as an attempt to create a national, verbal map – an attempt to chart a culture through time just as a geographical map charts space – while engaging a landscape other than its own.

As noted above, it would seem that the project of *The Faerie Queene*, as an idea, would seem to perfectly adjoin Spenser’s roles as poet and servant to Elizabeth. However, writing a national epic outside of the realm of the nation proper is a strange task, an exercise in nostalgia and the consecration of memory as opposed to a celebration

of a present-day, lived experience of place. Spenser's distance from the bounds of the nation proper meant that the England invoked in *The Faerie Queene* was necessarily an England of the past, a glorification of that which has already occurred; Spenser's decision to write in what was, in his day, an already archaic form of English reinforces this sense of the presence of past. The sense of archaic time could only have been enforced for Spenser by the continuing dominance of the Irish language over English.

In order to construct a narrative set in an almost mythological past, Spenser required the distance from England that a position in Ireland provided him with. The antiquarian, Susan Stewart writes, "seeks to both distance and appropriate the past. In order to entertain an antiquarian sensibility, a rupture in historical consciousness must have occurred, creating a sense that one can make one's own culture *other* – distant and discontinuous" (Stewart 142). Clearly Spenser experienced this "rupture": being in Ireland, he was physically, and thus intellectually, at one remove from the self-righteous faith necessary to an expanding empire: he was thus freed from the quotidian politics of the London of his own time. In addition to this, rather than being sent to the Pale of Dublin, the center of colonial Ireland, Spenser was stationed instead in Cork, at a rural outpost still hard to reach without car, compass and waterproof boots. Twice marginalized, Spenser lived away from the hub that was London, surrounded by forest and a way of life that must well have seemed archaic to a middle class man eager to move up through the court ranks.

If *A View* aspired to be a map of the Irish cultural landscape, *The Faerie Queene* attempted a far more complex and problematic charting of the infant that was the British Empire. I would like to return now to the idea of *The Faerie Queene*, as a national English epic, being written beyond the border of England proper, and its treatment of the Irish landscape. It is one thing to compose a prose map of Ireland from the perspective of a colonial servant recently settled in the land: it is quite another to create an epic poem as a testament to the glory of England while in a state of what Spenser frequently perceived to be exile, as we have seen in *Colin Clouts*, and to set much of the epic in Ireland, the site of that exile. While *A View* was a quite obvious account of one culture from the perspective of another that considers itself more civilized, and so offers what is a dramatically – and in our day often comically, as well as painfully – skewed map of Ireland, *The Faerie Queene*, and particularly the Mutabilitie Cantos, offered an often contradictory and always more difficult map of colonial power and empire, and it is these contradictions that I would like to briefly explore.

Angus Fletcher has argued that *The Faerie Queene* is not so much a story as a map, of an *imagined* geographical space.⁹ If one begins with this premise, it is interesting to consider the fascination with the labyrinth that Spenser demonstrates in his epic. The labyrinth is, by definition, unmappable: it is a directionless place, a space in which the compass ceases to be of help, a space over which it is impossible to gain perspective. In

⁹ This argument was presented in a series of lectures on Spenser given at the Graduate School and University Center, the City University of New York, in the fall of 1997. For the ideas in this section I am indebted to Professor Fletcher for his suggestions and comments.

this the labyrinths of *The Faerie Queene* resemble the Irish forests so objectionable to Elizabethan colonialists: the forests, like labyrinths, are sites over which no control can be exerted. Significantly, Spenser's English epic begins in such a labyrinthine forest, in the Den of Errour. Forest is space that is veiled to us – hence the adage that one cannot see the woods for the trees – and yet we can move through it, and this movement proves perilous in the first book of *The Faerie Queene*, as characters literally lose sight of truth in the guise of the character Una as they wend their way through the woods.

Movement through a wilderness, or a landscape that has been unmapped, necessarily means that that landscape is altered; the unknown becomes known, and gradually it becomes possible to trace a path, and to return to it – to recover truth, in the context of Book One. In Book One the knight is forced to negotiate the labyrinth of the forest; the poet Spenser was clearly engaged, if not enchanted, by the idea of a wandering wood. Spenser the planter and colonial servant, however, could only recommend, in *A View*, that the bewildering forests be cleared. In both poetry and prose, however, he was engaging what was an ages old trope: he sets civilized English culture against the wildness of some other (and in Spenser this other is regularly Ireland and the Irish), defining his own culture in opposition to the “primitivism” of this other, and issuing a cloaked warning as to what can happen when one enters a wilderness, as he himself had done in settling in Ireland.

The rise in such attitudes towards landscape coincided with the rise in mapping expeditions and the move towards empire building. Such sentiments meant that not merely the political landscape of Ireland changed under Elizabeth's rule: the physical

landscape was also altered permanently. It is thus appropriate that Spenser begins *The Faerie Queene* in a forest much like the ones known to have covered a still substantial portion of Ireland at the midpoint of the sixteenth century, and ends it with a very different map of the Irish landscape in the Mutabilitie Cantos, one that has been cleared, in effect, not merely of trees but also of prosperity, of significance. In these final cantos of his epic, Spenser engages the Irish landscape not as an economic prospect but mythologically, and so charts a map of a fallen and forgotten landscape.

Before closing this discussion of Spenser, I would like to turn to this use of Irish landscape in the Faunus episode of Mutabilitie Cantos. Its use here is much more complex than in *Colin Clout*, but for this episode too it is possible to read Spenser as using elements of an Irish tradition. In the Mutabilitie Cantos Spenser has moved away from the pastoral, instead relying on pageantry and allowing the hunt and the chase to govern the narrative in the Faunus digression. It seems worth noting that, as we have seen, the hunt is a dominating theme of Finn literature; while we assume that Spenser had Ovidian sources for Faunus, it is plausible that he knew too the tales of the Finn cycle, which celebrate the hunting lifestyle, and which were so widely collected in manuscripts, particularly after the twelfth century.

Arlo Hill, the gathering place of the gods, offers the most significant use of Irish landscape within Spenser's epic, and arguably within all of his work. Spenser imagines Arlo Hill as an abandoned meeting place of the gods; this is a very different presentation of Ireland than what we receive in *A View*, or any of his poetical works. The representation of Arlo Hill, as an edenic retreat gone wrong, goes beyond a mere pastoral

idealization of landscape and moves towards the creation of myth. This mythologizing of landscape recalls the old Irish *dindsenchas*, or lore of places and place names, which is also a form of verbal mapping; Spenser seems to have absorbed some of the Irish tendency to commemorate through place, a tendency which would have dovetailed neatly with his preoccupation with etymology. Rather than engaging the Irish landscape as a problematized space that must be tamed if it is to be of use to the English, or as a pastoral trope, Spenser maps out a mythological history that explains the “present state of Ireland,” and provides justification for the English presence, just as in the *dindsenchas* tradition there is a layering of history in the discussion of a procession of names over time.

After informing us that Nature will meet the pantheon and the upstart Mutabilitie atop this hill, Spenser famously poses the parenthetical question: “Who knows not Arlo-Hill?” (VI.36).¹⁰ The answer is, of course, that no one knows Arlo Hill, and Spenser knows that. So why insert the question? Why insist on our acknowledgment that we do not know this place that is at the center of his myth, and thus suggest that one can never know the center of myth more generally?

¹⁰ This question echoes, of course, another: “Who knows not Colin Clout?” The connection between the phraseology, and the obvious identification between Colin and Spenser has led critics to argue that the voice in the Mutabilitie Cantos is, like that of *Colin Clouts*, personalized. Harry Berger, Jr. argues that there is more lyricism in the Cantos than in many parts of the *Faerie Queene*; and Julia Reinhard Lupton, following Berger, has made the following point: “If, as Harry Berger, Junior, has argued, the poet’s voice is increasingly lyricised in the unfolding of the *Mutabilitie Cantos*, I would suggest that it is precisely the mythopoetic demarcation of the poet’s home-away-from-home which permits the appearance of a more concretised narrative persona” (Lupton 105).

In part, the reader's ignorance is a more general ignorance of the Irish landscape. Maps of the period did not include Arlo Hill, a rather small peak in the Galtee Mountains behind Spenser's castle. This ignorance allows Spenser his digression into the Faunus episode: it becomes necessary to give the history of the place that was of old "the best and fairest Hill/ That was in all this holy-Islands hights" (VI.37). So ideal was this location that the gods chose to adjourn there for what Spenser describes as "pleasure and rest" (VI.38) – here is the ideal pastoral landscape that proved so impossible in *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe*. The hyper-emphatic concentration on place gives way to the myth itself, of Faunus spying on Diana while she bathes in what becomes a "guilty brooke" (VI.47), and of the ensuing chase. The result of Faunus's spying is not merely Diana's displeasure, however, and the mock hunt – the incident allows Spenser to create a myth that acts as a prophecy of the destruction of Ireland, that points, in other words, to the Ireland of *A View*.

Diana abandons not merely the stream, "but also quite forsooke

All those faire forrests about Arlo hid,

And all that Mountaine" (VI.54).

In leaving, Diana issues a curse over the land: those places she once haunted are to be haunted by wolves, which would

... all those Woods deface,

And Thieves should rob and spoile that Coast around.

This argument is particularly interesting in the context of this work due to the element of nostalgia that Spenser evidently experiences as an exile.

Since which, those Woods, and all that goodly Chase.

Doth to this day with Wolves and Thieves abound:

Which too-too true that lands in-dwellers since have found.

(VI.55)

Spenser has thus managed to provide an explanation for Ireland's "fallen" state. In creating a myth of Ireland's fall from a state of pastoral perfection due to the "foolish" god Faunus, Spenser justifies the Elizabethan quest to redeem Ireland, to drive away the wolves, to rout out thieves. It initially appears extraordinary that, in his English epic, Spenser chooses to situate the classical pantheon atop what is, in reality, a rather small peak visible from his castle at Kilcolman. It is this positioning, however, that seems to allow him to explain the English presence in Ireland, and to situate himself on the map of Ireland, on the map of Elizabeth's Empire. In mythologizing, appropriating, and so mapping this place in the Irish landscape, Spenser acts as an agent of empire, acquiring, in Elizabeth's name, another territory that can be listed under the term "etcetera." Ironically, *The Faerie Queene* ends on this famously indeterminate note, leaving us with an epic as incomplete as the young empire to whose queen Spenser devoted his poetical map, leaving us – explorers, cartographers – to imagine the space he has been unable to chart.

The traditional literary pastoral upon which Spenser drew had transformed itself in his writings. Rather than writing from an urban space about a largely unfamiliar rurality, Spenser found himself, by virtue of his position as a colonial administrator, writing about the rural from a reluctantly gained firsthand knowledge. Pastoral nostalgia,

under these conditions, is also changed: Spenser's personal nostalgia for London court society becomes emphasized, making him, like Sweeney, into a figure who longs for culture while situated in nature. *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe* absorbs this type of nostalgia that is much more typical of Irish literature than of the traditional pastoral forms in which Spenser was grounded, suggesting that, as Spenser spent more and more time in Ireland, he unconsciously absorbed something of the Irish tradition that expressed a longing for the loss of culture while in nature.

Spenser's most obvious influence on Irish literature was not to make itself felt for several centuries, when he would be taken up by a figure like Yeats as part of Ireland's colonial history, and later by Heaney. Yeats and Heaney saw in Spenser one whose writing on Irish landscape was significant, disturbing, highly crafted, and highly ambiguous, a determinedly English voice settled in the mountains of Cork.

In another sense, though, Spenser's influence on Irish literature – and on the topic of nature in Irish literature that is being examined here – was felt much more quickly. Since Spenser wrote in English, in Ireland, he marks the beginning of a new era in Irish literature, which, following the battle of Kinsale, tends to turn to the English language far more than in previous centuries. In turning to the English language, Irish literature was to engage again some of the more traditional pastoral forms that had so influenced sixteenth century English writing, including Spenser's. As Ireland came under tighter colonial control, and as English became the dominant and dominating language, pastoral themes would reemerge in a way that they hadn't since the earliest Irish literature.

Chapter Five

Interlude: From Kinsale to the Revival

Between the time of the Battle of Kinsale that marked the end of Spenser's era in Ireland and the late nineteenth century, Ireland underwent many political and social changes that were ultimately to alter the representation of nature in the literature; in order to understand the ways in which the nostalgic mode was expressed during the Revival, it is necessary to understand something about the complex interaction of romanticism, nationalism, and colonial mentalities that dominated Irish culture in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

One of the most significant influences upon the perception of nature in Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was science, and particularly the natural sciences. The Enlightenment found the majority of the European powers producing scientists and philosophers who focused on scientific reasoning; such developments as Newton was to make for science would be a prime example of this movement. In Ireland, science, and the sort of thinking associated with it, was connected primarily with the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, the class descended from English settlers to Ireland (whether from the Norman or Elizabethan era) and who had become the landed gentry, in control of not only the land but the government of Ireland. Because of this association of science with the elite upper class, the majority of Irish people were underexposed to scientific developments and, in those cases where they were exposed to the ideas of the new sciences, they were inclined to disregard them because of their association with England

and Protestantism. As a result, Ireland developed, it can be argued, two very different views of nature following the era of the bards and the planters: the Ascendancy class's interest in scientific development and the tendency to asetheticize nature is offset by the tendency within other parts of the Irish community to view nature as a practical concern. Between the late sixteenth and late nineteenth centuries, these differing conceptions of nature were to merge into a new strain of pastoralism that was to dictate the tenor of the Revival.

Changing Attitudes Towards Nature and the Rise of the Natural Sciences

In terms of our focus here, the influence of modern science was felt in Europe in terms of its attitudes towards reforestation: France, for example, began reforestation far earlier than its neighbors, realizing that the process that felled trees without replanting would lead to catastrophe. England, because it had a seemingly unending supply of timber from Ireland, did not engage in such a practice in as serious a manner. Acts of Parliament between 1698 and 1791 to encourage the planting of trees were not very effective (Reeves-Smyth 552). As a result, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries found Ireland's forests being depleted at an alarming rate. The landscape of Ireland, once marked by vast forests, was now marked by thousands of acres of cleared land only punctuated by the remnants of the ancient forests.

Another way in which scientific development percolated down to ground level was through botany. The rising interest in the science of botany led to a parallel interest

in gardening and landscaping: the late seventeenth century saw a waxing enthusiasm for carefully manicured grounds. This move, towards controlling natural surroundings, towards taming wild nature, was felt in Ireland only on demesnes, the “big house” estates of the Anglo-Irish. The “big house” referred to the main house and land occupied by the landlord himself; the rest of the demesne was driven by the highly profitable leasing of land for the raising of crops and animals. Beyond operating as highly successful and diversified farms, however, demesnes, and the “big houses” that were at their centers, were the main arena in Ireland for the beginnings of landscape gardening, and were particularly influenced by the trend towards manicured grounds. However, it was not until the beginnings of Romanticism that the European trends in gardening would really impact Ireland on a more general level.

The mid-eighteenth century found a rise in fashion of “natural” looking parks, with features of the landscape such as streams, woods, etc. integrated into the park plans. The influence of natural science was beginning to make itself felt:

Outside formal science, the appreciation of nature was a part of the fashionable intellectual activity associated with the Enlightenment. . . Natural-history collecting and romantically landscaped gardens, shell grottoes and rustic summer-houses all became fashionable in Ireland, and contributed to the popularization of landscape and botanical study. (Chesney 369)

Participation in botany and natural history societies grew in Ireland's major cities, following general European trends; the Dublin Philosophical Society, founded in 1683, and modelled on the Royal Society of London that devoted itself to the study of natural history, math, and science, was an increasingly significant part of eighteenth century Dublin life, and had encouraged universities to establish chairs in related disciplines, which Trinity College did in 1711 with a chair in botany. The first president of the Dublin Philosophical society was Sir William Petty, who had been a member – along with other Anglo-Irishmen like William and Thomas Molyneux, and Narcissus March – of the Royal Society, and also the Surveyor General of Ireland (Chesney 368). Petty's role in particular makes clear the connection between Ireland's colonialist position and the rising interest in science and nature, since it grew out of his occupation as surveyor for the crown.

These earlier steps had led to a more general, more social interest in botany and natural history. An example is the Reverend Patrick Delany, a friend of Swift's, who turned his desmesne "Delville" – now part of the National Botanic Gardens – into a fashionable garden that became the center for meetings of his literary and artistic friends. Such involvements were particularly suited to a class that was constantly attempting to control its unruly colonists, since the trends in landscaping demanded a similar attempt at order.

These developments in botany, natural history, and landscaping impacted as well the literature of the period in Europe, as John Wilson Foster points out:

To describe nature (and natural historians 'described' species when they formally identified them for the first time) is to demonstrate order and design, and both are good, indeed ideal rather than particular: hence the eighteenth-century partiality to the stylized pastorals of the classical poets. (Foster 1997a 50)

Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope, writing in Dublin and London, respectively, exemplify Enlightenment ideals as they manifested themselves in the pastoral form. Control, wit, order, and design are paramount: nature is whittled into a new form, one almost unrecognizably tame. "Nature to be enjoyed", Norman Jeffares writes, "needed to be nature methodis'd, and Swift did enjoy methodising it" (Jeffares 14).

The Beginnings of Celtic Romanticism

The attempt to classify all things natural, to systematize them, resulted in an interest in displaying the findings of scientific study; this led to the establishment of natural history museums, in Ireland as elsewhere. Such a drive inevitably led to a general interest in the past, and, with the influence of early Romanticism, to a form of Celtic primitivism that began to flourish amongst Anglo-Irish writers at the end of the eighteenth century. In the work of this time, as John Wilson Foster points out,

Irish landscape was perceived as vestigial, ancient and ruined – not cultivated or tasteful in configuration or prospect like the Anglo-Irish desmesne, but nonetheless picturesque in its ruination. What was important was that the ruined landscape bore witness to a dignified pre-conquest culture. (1997c 413)

Antiquarianism, then, led also to an early form of nationalism that was connected to landscape. This “profoundly affected literary ideas about places, for patriotism naturally tends to emphasise place, which, however far back into the past patriotism penetrates, is always there” (Jeffares 17). Books such as Sylvester O’Halloran’s *An Introduction to the Study of the History and Antiquities of Ireland* (1772), Joseph Cooper Walker’s *Historical Memoirs of the Irish Bards* (1786), Charlotte Brooke’s *Reliques of Irish Poetry* (1789) and Edward Bunting’s *General Collection of the Ancient Music of Ireland* (1796) demonstrated this new interest. The attempt to retrieve the Irish past and translate it into the present was seen as a necessary action: as Brooke notes in her introduction to *Reliques of Irish Poetry*, “I trust that I am doing an acceptable service to my country, while I endeavor to rescue from oblivion a few of the invaluable reliques of her ancient genius” (3). This early form of Celtic Romanticism led to an interest in the Irish landscape beyond the realm of the desmesne’s manicured and well tended grounds.

The Romantic interest in the ruin, in signs of antiquity, was well suited to Ireland, which had ruined landscapes enough to occupy numerous budding archeologists. The rise in tourism that coincided with Romanticism meant that many more visitors were exposed

to Ireland, resulting in a new awareness of the Irish landscape and of the past as it was represented by that landscape. This new awareness stands in stark contrast to the views of the Elizabethans, held only two hundred years earlier. Where the Elizabethans saw ruination as a sign of rebellion, "wild" landscape as a sign of incivility and lack of culture, these early Romantics saw inspired beauty and mystery, and the remains of ancient culture.

This form of Irish Romanticism, though, was to develop in a different line than that of England. For the Irish, and particularly for those who were politically or socially active, the Act of Union (1800), which tightened English governance of Ireland and moved parliamentary control to London, had implications for landscape that were not covered by Wordsworth's lyricism alone. As was the case in England, enclosure laws had affected Ireland: farm estates in Leinster had been affected most rapidly in the late 1700s and early 1800s. Enclosure was to have a large impact, as was the crisis caused by absentee landlords. As is well documented by Jonathan Swift, this problem had been in existence for decades, but the Act of Union was to worsen the crisis.

One larger consequence of the Act was the linking of a rich country with one that was poor as a result of trade restrictions, exploitation and repression by the former. London now became the capital, attracting Irish landlords from their estates and, instead of prospering, the country became steadily more impoverished as rent-capital drained from it. (Neeson 146)

The bleakness of the Dublin landscape of the period is well known: Swift's essays and letters attest to rampant poverty, disease, and the threats of starvation and eviction. As a result of such constantly looming crises, English Romanticism did not take hold in Ireland, relying as it did upon a leisured class who had time to observe the natural world from a detached position. Within the Irish population was what Luke Gibbons has deemed a resistance to the romanticization of nature that had taken place in England. Given the

'romance' of colonization, it is not surprising to find a resistance to the cult of the wilderness, and the idealization of solitude and nature, in Irish culture. . . . Where the colonizer saw nature, the colonized saw culture. Accordingly, landscape in Irish romanticism answered not so much to the call of the wild as to the return of the native, its ruins, antiquities and associations with myths and legends testifying to the existence of disparate national narratives which asserted a tenacious hold on popular memory. (Gibbons 14)

Irish Romanticism tended to assert difference from England, and a part of that agenda was to find evidence for the existence of a pre-colonial culture. Demonstrating that that culture was not one of the wilderness, of wild nature, was an unconscious part of the goal. The wilderness, in English Romanticism, was the site of primitive, undeveloped culture;

for the Irish, who had for so long been charged with primitivism by the English.

Romanticism was thus very different.

If apologists for colonialism in the new world insisted on portraying America as 'virgin' territory, as if its native inhabitants were simply hewn out of the rock formations which dominated the landscape, then it was decidedly in the interests of native Irish historians to deny that Ireland was ever in a state of nature, and that it was culturally inscribed from the dawn of antiquity. (Gibbons 153)

As a result of its colonial status, then, Ireland during the rise of English Romanticism did not experience the same sense of worship for the simplicity of a life in nature. Instead, books of the period such as O'Halloran's and Brooke's tended to emphasize the cultural aspects of the Irish past, set within a ruined landscape.

The only place where the idealization of a life in nature was possible was on the demesne, where nature had rapidly become intertwined with culture.

The impact of nature poets and of the Romantic movement in Ireland were minimal in Ireland – except within the walls of the demesnes. Indeed, this identification of an interest and concern for natural and cultural heritage with the leisured class has persisted down to the present. (Feehan 583)

For the majority of the population, nature was a practical affair, and one that was not studied objectively for its aesthetic value. Far from producing a bevy of poets in line with Blake, Wordsworth, Shelley and Coleridge, Ireland during the Romantic period was preoccupied with other issues much removed from purely aesthetic concerns; the absence of industrialization in Ireland further eclipsed the possibility of a distance from nature that might have allowed for its romanticization. Irish writers recognized the association of Romanticism with liberty, and, as a result, some of the writings of the period are concerned with addressing the political implication of English (mis)rule or with glorifying the ancient Irish past as one unmarked by the presence of colonizers like the English. The best known pieces of writing from this era, though, because they were produced by Anglo-Irish writers, tend to avoid addressing the political situation too directly. Celtic Romanticism, then, was left to the hands of a Scotsman who turned to Ireland's past and was to have one of the most significant influences upon Irish and European Romanticism generally, and who had inspired the work of – or at least provoked a response in – some Irish antiquarians like O'Halloran and Brooke.

Beginning with James Macpherson's notorious forgeries of *Ossian* between 1760 and 1765, the Celt and Irish and Scottish mythology and literature gained a newfound popularity across Europe. While believing himself to have been working with a Scottish tradition, Macpherson was, of course, actually working with a shared Gaelic heritage of Scotland and Ireland; Macpherson did not write in Ireland, and did not intend to write on Irish material, which he claimed was not as old as the Scottish literary tradition. In Ireland, Macpherson was thus almost immediately regarded as having hijacked Irish

material, and so came to have a profound impact on the conception of Irish literature, sparking Irish scholars to stake their own claims for *Ossian* and its medieval sources.

Macpherson took as his subject the Finn tales, rewriting them and claiming that he had discovered ancient Scottish manuscripts that, coincidentally, dovetailed with his own day's sensibilities about nature. Macpherson managed, in his creation of a "real" medieval figure, to capture the spirit of an age that was looking increasingly to nature and an imagined simpler life that contrasted sharply with an increasingly complex and urban European culture. While the poems and tales, as their most recent editor notes, fell out of fashion, Macpherson was not subject to the same fate:

[*Ossian*] is one of those rare texts that generates a life beyond its own pages, not only by providing direct inspiration for numerous poems, paintings and pieces of music, but also through its much more nebulous influence on Western culture, and the popular image of the Celtic.

(Stafford i)

Macpherson came to cause such a stir almost by accident, it would seem: requested by an Edinburgh literary figure, John Home, to translate a piece, Macpherson came quickly to the spotlight, with the publication of *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* (1760). The appeal that this brief pamphlet had led to a period of research in Scotland that produced *Fingal: An Ancient Epic Poem in Six Books. Together with several Other Poems composed by Ossian the Son of Fingal*, and *Temora: An Ancient Epic Poem in Eight Books. Together with several Other Poems composed by Ossian the Son of Fingal*, in 1765.

In these works, Macpherson claimed to be translating poems and tales passed on orally for generations. While Macpherson did embark on copious research, it was clear – almost immediately to many – that the texts were not mere translations but the creative work of a contemporary poet.

Macpherson's emphasis on tradition and on the antiquity of the texts presented to his readers creates a melancholy, nostalgic mood in his characters that did much to associate the Celt with such sentiments. What is remarkable is the fact that Macpherson is in fact accurate in portraying Oisín (Oscian or Ossian, in his texts) as experiencing nostalgia, but this is an exaggerated, explicit nostalgia that incorporates elements of the traditional literary pastoral, complete with pathetic fallacy and an idealization of a lost natural world.

Son of the noble Fingal, Oscian, Prince of men! What tears
run down the cheeks of age? what shades thy mighty soul?
Memory, son of Alpin, memory wounds the aged. Of
former times are my thoughts; my thoughts are of the noble
Fingal. The race of the king return into my mind, and
wound me with remembrance. [. . .] Son of Alpin! the woes
of the aged are many: their tears are for the past. This raised
my sorrow, warrior; memory awaked my grief. Oursur my
son was brave; but Oursur is now no more. Thou hast heard
my grief, O son of Alpin; forgive the tears of the aged.

(Fragment VI Macpherson 14-5)

My eyes are blind with tears: but memory beams on my heart. [. . .] He fell as the moon in a storm: as the sun from the midst of his course, when clouds rise from the waster of the waves, when the blackness of the storm inwraps the rocks of Ardannider. I, like an ancient oak on Morven, I moulder alone in my place. (Fragment VII Macpherson 16)

It is night: and I am alone, forlorn on the hill of storms. The wind is heard in the mountain. The torrent shrieks down the rock. No hut receives me from the rain; forlorn on the hill of winds. (Fragment X Macpherson 21)

Even from these few excerpts, the similarities between Macpherson's version and the twelfth-century *Acallam* are apparent. Ossian, like his twelfth-century counterpart, laments his position as the sole survivor of his clan, and is presented as living in the natural world as a result of having lost his position in society. However, the difference here is the representation of nature, which in Macpherson, mirrors Ossian's emotions. Unlike in the *Acallam*, nature in Macpherson becomes the site of antiquity, a symbol of a lost time and a lost ideal in which man and nature lived in harmony. From the earlier discussion of *fian* literature, it is clear that the relationship between man and nature in twelfth century Ireland was not so simple; but Macpherson's texts, because they were

saturated with contemporary idealizations of nature, were far more appealing than the realities.

The impact that Macpherson had was far reaching, particularly upon Romanticism. As one critic puts it,

[t]he young Romantics had made of Macpherson's Ossian the ancestral father of their emotional life. [. . .] [T]hey had made of him a myth of a golden age of spontaneous emotion and noble thought inspired by close contact with Nature which had nothing to do with the Celtic tradition.

(Seaman 444)

Macpherson had taken the shell of a medieval story and had imbued it with the sensibilities of his own time, sensibilities influenced by increasing tourism and fascination with the unknown aspects of the natural world, and with "primitive" cultures and civilizations. As we have seen, stories of Finn and Oisín were, in their original medieval forms, not simple romanticizations of the natural world; Macpherson's version chose to ignore this fact and offered instead an idealized and sentimental version not only of Ossian and his life, but of the world in which he lived. Macpherson recognizes this idealization in an introduction to the first edition of *Fingal* (1761/2), where he writes that his characters' "virtues remain, but the vices, which were once blended with their virtues, have died with themselves" (Macpherson 35).

Marjorie Hope Nicholson's seminal work, *Mountain Gloom, Mountain Glory*, provides an indispensable social history of how nature in Europe came to be revered:

over a period of several hundred years, the idea of nature and landscape changed dramatically in Europe, becoming something alternately (and sometimes both) sublime and beautiful, rather than merely symbolic of the state of man after a fall from Eden. Macpherson occupies a key place in this story as an author who attempted to pass off his European touristic and Romantic sensibilities as authentically Celtic, an author who, in other words, represented the change in attitudes towards the natural world. And, indeed, this attempt at authenticity itself indicates Macpherson's position as father to the early Romantics – for he is consciously asserting the belief that earlier times and cultures were defined by an existence in nature marked by simplicity and, by extension, simple joys. Macpherson created, in effect, a new European pastoral for his age, one that astutely tapped into changing attitudes towards the natural world, and one that would thus provide a remarkably inspirational ground to Romantic poets from Goethe to Arnold.

Beyond his influence on the young Romantics and thus an entire school of European poetics, Macpherson was to leave a legacy that would eventually dictate the tenor of the Irish Revival. “Macpherson's style and the idea of Celtic antiquity immediately became directly associated, and gave rise to a Celtic-Romantic literary form which persisted for over a century and found its final expression in the Celtic Twilight of the early Irish literary revival” (Seaman 446). This Celtic-Romantic literary form was to pass from Macpherson's hands into the eager palms of several generations of scholars and writers, but only after one of the most stark periods of Irish history, a period that, ironically, went against the grain of the idea of Romantic nature.

The Famine: Ireland and the Violence of Nature

Progress within Ireland on literary and cultural matters was largely brought to a sudden halt within Ireland by two things: a heightened English presence in the country, and the Famine.

Before the catastrophe of the famine years, however, another event was to take place that would alter the idea of landscape in Ireland. The Ordnance Survey, which set out to map the entire island of Ireland in the 1830s, represented an assertion of colonial control over Ireland, an assertion that sent British soldiers into areas previously neglected, to record and alter place names.¹ That this was a determined colonial move is supported by the fact that Britain undertook a similarly intensive survey only in India, its other long term colony. While the detailed mapping of the Irish landscape sought to exert colonial control, though, it also provided archeological evidence that would later be picked up by those seeking liberation from England:

The English mapping of Ireland required the translation of Irish placenames or the coining of placenames in English and was a colonial enterprise. However, it is an irony that the cultural work of the mappers, discreetly conducted at the same time as their scientific cartography, resurrected

¹ See J.H. Andrews' *A Paper Landscape: the Ordnance Survey in Nineteenth Century Ireland*. Oxford UP, 1975. Brian Friel's *Translations* (first performed in 1980) addresses the work of English surveyors working for the Survey in 1833, as well as the consequences of this work for place names and the Irish language.

impressive and stimulating evidence of Ireland's pre-conquest culture. (Foster 1997c 413)

Daniel O'Connell's movement towards independence and Catholic emancipation relied, in part, on the ideas brought to life by this colonial endeavor. The outbreak of famine, however, would bring such nationalist movements abruptly to their knees.

If the Irish had maintained a close relationship to the natural world, that relationship was severed by the event of the Famine. Nature could no longer be seen as a neutral force; instead, it was a force that betrayed arbitrarily, holding the power of life and death in its hands. It is an irony that during the period of the greatest Romantic poetry in England, Ireland was suffering from a battle with nature that would prove fatal. Documentation of the number of deaths brought about during the years 1840-1850 is well known; but during this period the landscape, as well as the people, was dramatically impacted. Post-Famine Ireland resembled a war zone; land was in utter devastation; fields were unrecognizably blackened; much of the remainder of forest had been cut down for fuel; whole villages had been deserted due to death and starvation; the countryside was awash with men, women and children searching for food. The disruption to the Irish landscape – both physical and psychic – was enormous. If England had a gentle relationship with nature during the period, the Irish had what can only be described as a volatile, violent relationship. The trust in nature, if it had been firmly in place in the years before the Famine, was now shattered beyond recognition:

The Famine, the long memory of deprivation of the land,
and the loss of names for nature, all combine to stifle that

more romanticized view of the natural world that we get in England. We can express the problem as a series of stereotypes: English culture has given prominence to a sentimental, pastoral view of nature and countryside based on continuity, belonging, and fruition; Irish experience has been marked by the opposites: discontinuity, exile, and sterility. (Lysaght 442-3)

The recovery from such devastation was inevitably slow. Between the uncountable deaths and emigrations that took place during that decade, the Irish population had dwindled down to its lowest level in several hundred years. It is from this period, though, that Ireland's movement for independence derives. The phrase, "God brought the blight, but the English caused the Famine" is telling of the attitudes that arose out of that decade: resentment of the colonizer had grown to an alarming height, and was to fuel the movements that began the process of nation building. Given the severity of Famine conditions, it was a surprisingly short time before pastoral ideas began to creep into the rhetoric of the nation.

Post-Famine Scholarship and the Sentiment of the Celt

In the immediate aftermath of the Famine, though, much of the scholarship about Ireland was taking place outside of the country. Of the scholars of the post-Famine era, Matthew Arnold is particularly significant, and was to have a widely felt influence not

only on the perception of Ireland from without, but also within. Arnold, as both a poet and a scholar, was in a position of influence, and his lecture and essay "On the Study of Celtic Literature" (1867) demonstrated this power by impacting almost every author that was to be involved in the Revival, and, indeed, Arnold continues to retain some influence on contemporary scholars. Despite its title, the essay is not in fact about literature, but is instead an obvious product of Romantic and post-Romantic interests in philology and racial classifications as they arose out of Romantic Nationalism. Arnold is strongly influenced by new movements in science, particularly Darwin's theories, and sees the eventual merging of races within England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland as a natural and inevitable process.

The fusion of all the inhabitants of these islands into one homogenous, English-speaking whole, the breaking down of barriers between us, the swallowing up of separate provincial nationalities, is a consummation to which the natural course of things irresistibly tends; it is a necessity of what is called modern civilisation, and modern civilisation is a real, legitimate force: the change must come, and its accomplishment is a mere affair of time. (Arnold 20)

While Arnold has been criticized increasingly by post-colonial scholars for his obvious biases – undoubtedly he is imagining that the Scots, the Welsh and the Irish will become in some way more English, and not the other way round – he is, all the same, attempting to eliminate hostile difference:

I am inclined to think that the march of science – science insisting that there is no such original chasm between the Celt and the Saxon as we once popularly imagined, that they are not truly, what Lord Lyndhurst called them, *aliens in blood* from us, that they are our brothers in the great Indo-European family – has had a share, an appreciable share, in producing this changed state of feeling.

(Arnold 27)

Arnold argues that elements of the Celtic exist in other European groups, and this makes ironic sense, since those “Celtic” characteristics that he goes on to describe were assigned and created, in many cases, by non-Celts, and describe general human characteristics instead of racially specific ones – although critics of the time were not to see this so clearly.

After outlining this futuristic meshing of cultures into one larger, pan-British Isles culture, Arnold goes on to describe these characteristics specific to the Celt. In this section, Arnold evidently draws upon Renan’s earlier essay on Celtic poetry, but argues with his description of the Celt and furthers it.

Sentiment is, however, the word which marks where the Celtic races really touch and are one; sentimental, if the Celtic nature is to be characterised by a single term, is the best term to take. An organisation quick to feel impressions, and feeling them very strongly; a lively

personality therefore, keenly sensitive to joy and to sorrow; this is the main point. If the downs of life too much outnumber the ups, this temperament, just because it is so quickly and nearly conscious of all impressions, may no doubt be seen shy and wounded: it may be seen in wistful regret, it may be seen in passionate, penetrating melancholy; but its essence is to aspire ardently after life, light, and emotion, to be expansive, adventurous, and gay.

(Arnold 80-1)

This idea of the Celt being endowed with a sentimental character – an idea descending directly from Macpherson's Ossian – becomes Arnold's main thesis, one which he develops relentlessly:

For good and for bad, the Celtic genius is more airy and unsubstantial, goes less near the ground than the German. The Celt is often called sensual; but it is not so much the vulgar satisfactions of sense that attract him so much as emotion and excitement; he is truly, as I began by saying, sentimental. (Arnold 81).

Sentimental – *always ready to react against the despotism of fact . . .* Balance, measure, and patience, these are the eternal conditions, ever supposing the happiest

temperament to start with, of high success: and balance.

measure, and patience are just what the Celt has never had.

(Arnold 82)

Arnold offers here a justification of the Irish situation that relies upon a description of a national character. In attempting to classify a national character he is, of course, not unique to his time, or, indeed to previous eras – generations of writers, including such figures as Kant, despite all his practicality and sophistication of thought, attempted to do just the same. As a result of such a justification, “Irish identity was reduced to a cultural imaginary, in a restricted aesthetic sense, all the more to remove it from more quotidian matters of power and self-determination” (Gibbons 9). Beyond the direct political implications of such a move, what is curious here, for the purposes of our focus, is that Arnold, like Renan before him, connects his belief in the Celt as sentimental to an involvement with the natural world.

[H]is sensibility gives him a peculiarly near and intimate feeling of nature and the life of nature: here, too, he seems in a special way attracted to the secret before him, the secret of natural beauty and natural magic, and to be close to it, to half-divine it. (Arnold 86)

The forest of trees and the forest of rocks, not hewn timber and carved stones, suits [the Celtic people's] aspirations for something not to be bounded or expressed. (Arnold 95)

The Celt's quick feeling for what is noble and distinguished gave his poetry style; his indomitable personality gave it pride and passion; his sensibility and nervous exaltation gave it a better gift still, the gift of rendering with a wonderful felicity the magical charm of nature. The forest solitude, the bubbling spring, the wild flowers, are everywhere in romance. They have a mysterious life and grace there; they are nature's own children, and utter her secret in a way which makes them something quite different from the woods, waters, and plants of Greek and Latin poetry. Now of this delicate magic, Celtic romance is so pre-eminent a mistress, that it seems impossible to believe the power did not come into romance from the Celts.

(Arnold 120)

Arnold makes it quite clear that he perceives sentiment as being inextricably bound to landscape. As we have seen, though, the link between such sentiment and landscape is a different one in the original material to the one described here. Rather than perceiving the fact that, in medieval Irish literature, nature frequently becomes the site for nostalgia (a form of Arnold's "sentiment"), Arnold superimposes the post-Macpherson and post-Romantic (and urban) conception of the natural world as connected to a more primitive and more "magical" culture on to his description of the Celtic character. The

natural world of the Celt, as Arnold sees it, is one that is wild and untamed – “not hewn timber and carved rocks” – and thus more “natural”. The sentimental character of the Celt thus allows him to perceive the natural world in a way that is somehow unavailable to more advanced (and less sentimental) cultures. This is a clear demonstration of the influence of pastoral on Arnold’s thinking.

Arnold’s differentiation between several types of nature writing helps to clarify these ideas. He distinguishes between “conventional” nature writing (in which the eye is not on the object, where the natural world simply serves as a backdrop to the poetic action), “faithful” nature writing (in which the eye is on the object and attempts to detail a realism about the natural world), “Greek” nature writing (in which the eye is on the object as in “faithful” writing, but a certain “radiancy” is added that is the product of poetic adornment), and “magical” nature writing, the category that Arnold assigns to the Celt.

The idea of a “magical” perception of nature being available to the Celts derives, in Arnold’s eyes, from their ability to feel strong emotion. The influence of the “magical” upon European Romance is credited to the Celt who, with his ability to discern detail in nature and to feel the emotion Arnold connects to such an ability. This argument becomes one that permeates not only the literature of the Revival but also the scholarship that, like Arnold’s essay itself, was also a descendent of Macpherson.

Darwinism

Darwin, the influence of whose work was felt almost immediately in English writers and scholars like Arnold, took longer to reach Ireland except through the indirect impact of essays like Arnold's. Perhaps because the Irish were in recovery from the most severe experience of the chance involved in nature, because of a committed Catholicism, and because of the anti-Catholic politics of the mostly Anglo-Irish Protestants who were the Irish supporters of such science as Lyell, Darwin, and Tyndall produced, evolution was positively rejected by the people. In the North of Ireland, and in England, evolution was debated amongst Protestants.

The dissimilar situation in Ireland perhaps explains why the evolution debate did not occupy centre stage in Catholic Ireland: the strength of pre-scientific culture in Catholic Ireland and of the Catholic Church did not permit this to happen. [. . .] The political coloration of the scientists, particularly of Tyndall. . . must surely (however fractionally) have stiffened the resistance of the Irish Catholic hierarchy to science in general and biology in particular. (Livingstone 432-3)

If the debate that took place in Belfast is any indication of the way in which the Irish responded to Darwin's ideas, resistance would have been fervent. Tyndall's appearance at a meeting in 1874 resulted in a split between the scientific community that Tyndall

represented and the clergy, who did not take well to Tyndall's "missionary call to wrest from theology the entire domain of cosmological theory" (Livingstone 395). The clergy responded by issuing a letter, arguing that Darwin and Tyndall were allied with materialism and all that was anti-spirit: "In the aftermath of Tyndall's offensive, the Belfast religious community found it virtually impossible for at least a generation to find any rapprochement with Darwinian biology" (Livingstone 403).

Any chance that Darwin's theories had at rooting themselves in Ireland was further diminished by the frequent representation of the Irish by the English, in magazines like *Punch*, as monkeys and apes. "[T]he chimpanzee resemblance was surely prompted by Darwinism as well as African exploration and unfortunately accorded with outright anti-Irish racialism in Britain" (Foster 1997c 435). This attempt by British journalists and cartoonists to make the Irish primitive and somehow undeveloped, even non-human, would make Darwinism an almost impossible theory to believe in in Victorian era Ireland.

The late nineteenth century, besides being filled with the new doubts brought about by science, and the utter rejection of such doubts in Ireland, was, nonetheless, a period in which the study of natural science was again on the rise in Ireland. Particularly in the decades following Darwin, "Folklore collection and study (including dialect word study) were aspiring to the status of science at a time when natural history was taking to the field in a similarly vigorous and scientific way through the agency of the naturalists' field clubs" (Foster 1997d 612). Again, however, such involvement in Ireland was very much that of the Ascendancy class; "the plain Irish did not experience the nineteenth-

century English vogue for nature study, or the sentiment about animal welfare that was stimulated by living in cities" (Viney 545). The Irish had, in the words of Michael Viney, "a utilitarian view of nature" (545). The very words "'nature', 'landscape' and 'scenery', in fact, have among the bulk of the Irish people to this day a somewhat effete connotation and evoke an Anglo-Irish world view" (Foster 1997c 412).

The Revival

All of these various strands of history, politics, and ideas culminated in the period known as the Revival. The fact that the Celtic Revival is known by that name immediately indicates that, from its inception, this period of cultural development involved looking back to earlier traditions and literatures in Ireland. Unlike a "renaissance" – a rebirth – a "revival" looks to put life back into something which has died. This Revival was not merely a remarkable number of individuals involved in the production of significant works during a brief period of time; Revival authors and scholars were producing a body of work that consciously called upon Irish traditions eclipsed by years of colonialism, creating, in the process, the idea of a self-consciously nationalist Irish literature. The self-consciousness with which Revivalists made use of old Irish literature, myth, and history in the creation of this new, national Irish literature is well documented, and will not be repeated here. Instead, the remainder of this chapter will examine the extent to which looking back at earlier Irish traditions produced a literature that continued to operate in the nostalgic mode when treating landscape and

nature. What we will find is that the strain of nostalgia discussed in relation to twelfth century Irish literature, as well as bardic literature, re-emerges in major Revival authors changed and imbued with the spirit of a European Romanticism and pastoralism.

In recent years, the Revival has come in for heavy criticism for its “nostalgic falsifications of an ideal aristocratic past” (Kiberd 1982 19). Citing Marx’s division of revolution as based on ideals of either past or future, Fintan O’Toole notes that the Irish Revival was clearly based upon the ideals of the past (111). More significantly, though, for our purpose here, those involved in the Revival relied not just on Ireland’s past, but on an idealized vision of the past that engaged place and landscape as the site of the “real” Ireland.

In the post-Famine years, the issue of land, which had for so many centuries been a debate of quiet furor in Ireland, became more pressing than ever. These years leading up to the Revival saw the institution of such laws as the Ashbourne Act of 1885 and the Wyndham Act of 1903, laws that allowed tenants to buy out farms with money provided by the Treasury. The impact of these laws on land ownership in Ireland was enormous.

Throughout the later nineteenth century, Ireland functioned as a sort of political and social laboratory in which, parabolically, the English could test their most new-fangled ideas – ideas about the proper relation between religion and the state, about the changing role of the aristocracy, above all about the holding and use of land. (Kiberd 1995 23)

For the first time in several hundred years, Irishmen were encouraged by standing laws to purchase land. The result was twofold: first, the demesne and the power of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy went into decline, resulting eventually in a power vacuum that early nationalists would be only too eager to fill; and second, by 1914, “three-quarters of the country’s former tenants had bought their holdings” (Reeves-Smyth 551). The idea of landscape was to change drastically under such social changes. While tenant farmers who bought their land had reason to be more economically and practically hard-headed about the idea of land, the mystique of the land began to blossom amongst non-rural inhabitants.

After such an upheaval, a notion of the sacredness of the land, a mystical sense of place, could serve at once to give the landlord class a sense of spurious continuity by “aristocratising” the peasantry and on the other hand, by postulating an immanent and “natural” link between the peasantry and the land, to confer the sanction of time and place on a new and raw arrangement of property.
(O’Toole 111)

The “mystical sense of place” was encouraged by those at the fore of the cultural Revival, who saw this as a way of reclaiming the “real” Ireland of the past.

Most of the new petty landlords were far more concerned with land ownership than with land use, as a suspect new pastoralism took hold on the popular mentality. Worse still, the cultural movement in which this pastoralism

prevailed seemed devoted less to a *revival* of Irish culture than to its mummification. (Kiberd 1995 51)

The gains in control over land led, as Declan Kiberd points out above, to a form of pastoralism: the owning of land, so long an issue of sentimental yearning, developed that yearning into a full blown sentimentalization of the land itself. This pastoralism was, as is the case with most forms of pastoral, an urban creation. As the Irish peasantry gained new control over Irish land, a parallel movement was underway that asserted control over the psychic landscape of Ireland within Ireland's major cities, and particularly in Dublin. This period, one of relative stability in Ireland, allowed for the putting together of movements that were to lead in the end to independence. "It was a political image of the countryside which helped to create a sense of social cohesion in a country which was trying to define itself over against England", Fintan O'Toole notes (112). As the image of the countryside as the bastion of the true Irish past took hold within urban circles, literature and scholarship within Ireland were to make great strides.

Irish Scholarship: Standish James O'Grady

Arnold was, of course, one of many authors to become interested in all things Celtic, and his ideas were immensely influential throughout Europe in determining and reinforcing a stereotype of the Irish. These ideas were not, of course, limited to scholarship and writing outside of Ireland, but were also integrated into the internal scholarship of the

forming nation. Of Irish scholars, Standish James O'Grady (1846-1928) is undoubtedly the most significant in terms of the impact he was to have on countless poets and writers to read his material. Inspired by his reading of O'Halloran's *Antiquaries of Ireland*, O'Grady, who was called to the bar in 1872 after studying at Trinity, began a course of study that propelled him into a lifetime career on the subjects of Irish history, myth, and culture, using as his sources medieval texts: annals, *Lebor na hUidre*, the Book of Leinster, and the Book of Lismore, amongst others². Within the space of four years, O'Grady published a series of books that were to become of great importance to figures like Yeats: *History of Ireland: Heroic Period* (1878); *Early Bardic Literature, Ireland* (1879); *History of Ireland: Cuchulain and his Contemporaries* (1880); *History of Ireland: Critical and Philosophical* (1881); and *Cuchulain: An Epic* (1882). These works were to form the cornerstone of O'Grady's reputation, which continued to be bolstered by his publication of essays, criticisms, historical enquiries, fiction, and children's stories.

While O'Grady had a fascination with Irish history and culture, and attempted successfully to inspire such fascination in others, he was, as a member of the Ascendancy class, not a nationalist as the term would be used during his lifetime. He believed that the Ascendancy class could still lead the Irish, and, indeed, could save them from themselves, as it were. These sentiments, while not strictly in line with the nationalism of the Revivalists that were to follow him, were very much in line with the aristocratic thinking of a Yeats.

² See pgs. 425-464, for an example of O'Grady's analysis of his sources, in *History of Ireland: Critical and Philosophical*, the most "academic" of O'Grady's work.

O'Grady was sparked to his task by the reading not only of O'Halloran, but of Macpherson, who had "stolen" Ireland's literature for his own purposes:

Poor Ireland, with her hundred ancient epics, standing at the
 door of the temple of fame, or, indeed, quite behind the
 vestibule out of the way! To see the Swabian enter in,
 crowned, to a flourish of somewhat barbarous music, was
 indeed bad enough, but Mr MacPherson!

(O'Grady 1879 39)

O'Grady's response to Macpherson's forgeries of ancient Irish literature was to attempt to redress what he saw as an affront to Irish literature. In many ways O'Grady was to the Revival what Macpherson had been to the Romantics, a figure who paved a path that was to bear the tread of all those to follow. Like Macpherson too – despite his quite angry reaction to Macpherson's mode of scholarship – O'Grady took liberties with Irish material, although for a different purpose. O'Grady recognized that earlier Irish material was inaccessible even to those who spoke or read modern Irish, and so his response was to modernize it. This modernization took an odd and in some ways contradictory form, since O'Grady chose both to edit the older Irish material to what he believed was an acceptable standard and to make use of a dated English that aspired to seem antiquated.

O'Grady recognized too that his subject did not, at the moment, provoke great interest: "the author of a work on Irish history has to labour simultaneously at a two-fold task – he has to create the interest to which he intends to address himself" (O'Grady 1879 12). O'Grady's mode of creating such an interest was to modernize Irish history

through an editing process. "The true method would," he wrote, "certainly be to print it exactly as it is without excision or condensation" (O'Grady 1879 14); this method he deemed impossible, due to the volume of material he was dealing with, but also because he recognized that the early Irish language, and the early Irish mores that the texts represented, were too foreign to be acceptable in their original form.

The mode which I have myself adopted, that other being out of the question, is open to many obvious objections: but in the existing state of the Irish mind on the subject, no other is possible to an individual writer. I desire to make this heroic period once again a portion of the imagination of the country, and its chief characters as familiar in the minds of our people as they once were. As mere history, and treated in the method in which history is generally written at the present day, a work dealing with the early Irish kings and heroes would certainly not secure an audience. Those who demand such a treatment forget that there is not in the country an interest on the subject to which to appeal. . . . On the other hand Irishmen are as ready as others to feel an interest in a human character, having themselves the ordinary instincts, passions, and curiosities of human nature. If I can awake an interest in the career of even a single ancient Irish king, I shall establish a train of thoughts,

which will advance from thence to the state of society in which he lived, and the kings and heroes who surrounded, preceded, or followed him. Attention and interest once fully aroused, concerning even one feature of the landscape of ancient history, could be easily widened and extended in its scope. (O'Grady 1879 17-8)

The scholarship that preceded and coincided with the Revival thus followed Macpherson's lead by creating a fictionalized history of Ireland³, and one that emphatically envisioned an aristocratic peasant past:

To present the sagas in their original form and detail would have been to offer substance for accusations of crudeness and immorality. Hence a form of deception crept into the process of presenting these stories to the world; a form of deception identical in kind and in general purpose to that practised by the infamous James Macpherson. [. . .] The Ossianic controversy and Ireland's political aspirations had put Irish scholars in a defensive posture. O'Grady supposed, probably rightly, that a fictional epic of his own invention would do little to convince the world, or the Irish

³ As Joep Leerssen puts it, "The popular, often illustrated stories/histories of Ireland which were published in great numbers in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, were. . . all of them stories and none of them histories proper" (Leerssen 1997 153).

themselves, of the worthiness of the Irish heritage. To be politically effective the image of Ireland's glorious antiquity had to be presented as historically real and not a "literary phantom." And so O'Grady devised the following rationalization: the texts available were, he claimed, plentiful, but scattered and corrupt. The only course open to the historian was the imaginative one – try to construct a fiction consistent with the facts as they were known.

(Seaman 453)

Writing in 1879, a year after the first volume of his *History of Ireland* appeared, O'Grady outlined this theoretical approach to Irish history, claiming that he had committed an error in the first volume, "that I did not permit it to be seen with sufficient clearness that the characters and chief events of the tale are absolutely historic" (O'Grady 1879 31). This claim to historical fact indicates the contradiction of his work: fact and fiction mingling without differentiation. O'Grady's choice to create a real and at once imagined history of Ireland through literature, itself an imaginative presentation of the world, was to prove an enormously successful one. By editing passages from the original Irish material that might have proven offensive to modern sensibilities, O'Grady managed to preserve that material while at the same time contemporizing it. As is the case with Matthew Arnold's essay, O'Grady's material shows the infiltration of post-Romantic sensibilities and ideals, as well as the more complicated ideal and goal of Irish nationhood.

... Standish O'Grady, like other popularizers of the Celtic past in the nineteenth century, dealt with the stories of Ireland's legendary history by "superadding" to them a complete nineteenth century European value system composed of a peculiar mixture of Romanticism, Nationalism, and Christian morality. Thus they made a new myth of it, for myths are the stories through which a culture defines its values. (Seaman 456)

The new myth that O'Grady had created certainly became a north star to which writers and thinkers in Ireland turned for bearings. Not only was Ireland's historical status as a place of ancient literature almost instantly revived through O'Grady's work: inspiration was also drawn from the idea of an ancient culture that was independent of England. Thus Ireland's potential for independence was highlighted through O'Grady's translations:

When the study of Irish literary records is revived, as it certainly will be revived, the old history of each of these raths and cromlechs will be brought again into the light, and one new interest of a beautiful and edifying nature attached to the landscape, and affecting wholly for good the minds of our people. (O'Grady 1879 11)

That O'Grady chooses to focus upon this image of the landscape as representing the Irish past – as well as the possibilities for the Irish future – is telling. The prominence of the Irish landscape becomes a way of "confer[ring] permanence on the legacy of the

heroic age” (Gibbons 120), an age that was naturally aristocratic. Largely because of O’Grady’s influential shapings of the Irish past, “the most quoted poets of the revival were [to become] Ó Rathaille and Ó Bruadair, both of whom outdid O’Grady in their eloquent contempt for churls and upstarts” (Kiberd 1982 19). O’Grady’s focus on not merely the past, but on an aristocratic past, was to exert enormous influence.

O’Grady translated and interpreted medieval Irish material, and chose to cast the translations in an archaic English that emphasized the literature’s antiquity, and by direct extension, the antiquity of the Irish culture generally.

The impulse that led O’Grady to use old-fangled English past participles, *drave*, *wert*, *brake* and *slang*, helped to create a prose style really no closer to an elder Gaelic than Lady Gregory’s modern literary English laced with Hiberno-English idioms, and is part of the thrust of the Revival towards anachronism; going backwards, however vaguely, in order to go forwards. (Foster 1988 125)

Like Spenser’s use of an English idiom that was already archaic in his time, O’Grady’s use of dated English forms demonstrated a conscious preoccupation with the past, and in Ireland the past had, to a large extent, gone unexplored and had not penetrated the nation-to-be’s consciousness. John Wilson Foster’s description of such work as “going backwards, however vaguely, in order to go forwards” is thus fitting: in order to establish the idea of Ireland as a nation, few things would be as important as the ancient culture to

which authors and scholars alike returned. O'Grady's language was a bid for the historic authenticity that he realized was necessary to re-establishing that ancient culture.

Through O'Grady's publications, which were in many ways a response to Macpherson and to Arnold, the Irish, as Seamus Deane notes, "who had shown a marked inclination toward this view of themselves, finally took possession of the stereotype, modified the Celt into the Gael, and began that new interpretation of themselves known as the Irish literary revival" (Deane 1990 12-3). The Revival was thus launched, ironically, through the reclamation of stereotypes that were a part of the colonial heritage. By focusing on the idea of the "natural" aristocrat, one who was more often than not a peasant, scholars such as O'Grady

unknowingly nationalised colonial attitudes, internalising a process which belonged to the colonial mentality and selling it back to the outside world as a reflection of Irish reality.

The appeal of the peasant-as-child was an appeal to an imagined past, freezing and fossilising the country as an unreal category, a safe and conservative myth. (O'Toole 113)

Pastoral Politics

Such a reclamation of stereotype and the rewriting of history fell very much into line with a nationalist view of Ireland. History became, as Declan Kiberd describes, a commodity

to be admired, consumed, reducing its adherents to the position of tourists in their own country, whose monuments and heritage centres can be visited or re-entered by an act of will. Its people are lulled by their leaders to “become drunk with remembrance”, to recover the past as fetish rather than to live in the flow of actual history. The fetishizing, once permitted, affects everything – even the landscape is treated like a reified woman’s body – so that, after independence, the actual landscape is slowly transformed by the touristic industries until it conforms to the outlines of the original fantasy. (Kiberd 1995 294)

The politicians of the Revival, without realizing the end result described above by Declan Kiberd, tended to focus relentlessly, as the scholars did, on recovery of a glorious past. Both Michael Collins and Eamon DeValera made use of the images of rural Ireland.

Again and again, Collins returned to his beloved rural images, but his preference was, typically, to evoke them in a fallen urban setting. So, in a very famous passage, he

described how he felt like cheering at a sudden sighting of a donkey and cart in one of the suburbs of London. "I", he proclaimed, "stand for that". This was classic pastoral – an imagined setting that was, to all intents and purposes, English, and a setting, moreover, in which the city was the zone for an unexpected surrender to the values of the rural pastoral. Collins in that statement has given the pastoralist's game away without so much as a wink: he was, in more ways than one, an innocent abroad in England. (Kiberd 1995 487)

The use by scholars such as O'Grady of edited versions of the past was parallel to the edited version of history that politicians like Collins and DeValera chose to highlight. The result was that, for both scholars and politicians, rurality became a sign of Ireland's past, and the symbol of the goals of the Irish present: a psychological return to the land.

[R]ural Ireland was real Ireland, the farmer the moral and economic backbone of the country. That myth was given a further lease of life in each generation, by the urbanized descendants of landless labourers or by failed small farmers keen to create a compensatory fable of old times. (Kiberd 1995 492)

Such a sentiment, inherited as it was, in many ways, from non-Irish sources, encouraged a form of national pastoral that ignored natural realities such as the ones that had occurred

during the Famine and the less catastrophic but still devastating realities to be described later in the century by writers such as Patrick Kavanagh.

This form of political reverie was mirrored by both the creative writers and the scholars of the period as well as the politicians. Political nostalgia, like the Revivalists' literary nostalgia, chose to emphasize the connection of the Irish to landscape and countryside, despite its thoroughly urban roots.

The "national movement" for Irish political and cultural freedom has often been described as a more rural than an urban phenomenon. The fact that some of the fiercest fighting between the rebels and the forces of occupation took place in cities has never much dented the notion of rural Ireland as real Ireland. Like other forms of pastoral, this complex of ideas was a wholly urban creation, produced by artists like W.B. Yeats and George Russell and by political thinkers such as Eamon DeValera and Michael Collins. They were to a man the urbanized descendants of country people, and they helped to create the myth of a rural nation. (Kiberd 1995 481)

This new mythology was put into effect with a breathtaking rapidity: only fifty years after the Famine, when such a rupture had occurred between the Irish people and the natural world, politics and literature managed to reforge a bond based on the principles of the pastoral.

Pastoralism and the Revival Writer

It was this new mythology that was to take hold of the nation-to-be's consciousness. O'Grady was read by Yeats, Synge, Lady Gregory, and the majority of writers whose work occurred during the Revival. Douglas Hyde's *Love Songs of Connaught* had as much of an influence on the literary world as O'Grady's edited translations had: Hyde's works, as translations, had the effect of bringing Irish traditions of writing to new light. "In calling for a return to national traditions," Declan Kiberd remarks, "Hyde had made a telling point: that far from being fixated on the past, the Irish were in danger of making an irreparable break with their inheritance" (Kiberd 1995 147). Both scholarship and literature began to emphasize the need to return to tradition in order to build an independent future. Thus scholarship and literary production were inextricably linked during the Revival, as they had been hundreds of years before in Ireland, only this time the connection was to be forged to a third factor, that of nationalism.

A national culture such as the one outlined by the likes of both O'Grady and Hyde "must always be a nostalgia, visible only in an eternal retrospect as the after-image on a retina" (Kiberd 1995 301), since that culture relies on a vision of the past as peculiar to that culture. This is not to suggest that the Revival was a rude form in which the past was systematically raided to fit into some schema of the present; it was, in fact, the opposite, a highly complex interpretation of the past that relied heavily on pastoral reminiscence.

The Abbey Theatre, as a prominent – possibly the most prominent – vehicle for these ideas of pastoral, cultural nationalism, subscribed heavily to the ideal of the landscape as the site of the glorious Irish past, in its production of “peasant plays”. The peasant, as a figure, became the icon of real Ireland.

By being identified with the landscape, the peasant becomes a *primaeval* and uncomplicated figure, free from the complications of social and commercial relations. And already the language is the language of colonial paternalism. . . . The contrast implied. . . between city and country, is already cast in a late colonial mould, in which the object of attention – in this case the peasant of the west, in others the noble savage of the jungle – is at once patronised and idealised. (O’Toole 111-2)

That most of the leading figures in the Revival were not only urban-based but also of the Anglo-Irish class further contributed to the ability to perceive the peasant as child-like, uncomplicated, inherently “natural”, and, in a significant way, antique.

In presenting revolutionary new plays, the Abbey players were already presenting an image of their own collective past, already in a sense disowning the present. [. . .] The combination of museum-piece sets and props with the learned mannerisms of peasant speech and movement meant that for a Dublin audience which was often no more than a

generation removed from the countryside, a visit to the

Abbey was a travelogue into its collective past.

(O'Toole 112-3)

The "new" was thus linked inextricably to the "old", quite consciously. The Abbey, with its determinedly rural canon, attempted to tap into the pastoral myths, subtly transforming the idea of the present into an inheritance of the heroic past.

Yeats and Synge realised that the best way of coming to terms with the Gaelic tradition was not to write crude plays of nationalist propaganda, but rather to revitalise in their art the finest features of the old literature in Irish. Despite this, few of the major writers of the Revival proved themselves equal to the task of mastering modern Irish, not to mention the ancient literary language. Even Lady Gregory's successful *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* was based on previous English translations. Yeats was in an even less happy position when he set about his treatment of the wanderings of Oisín. . . as he based his material on a translation of an eighteenth century poem by Micheal O Duimin which he had found in the *Transactions of the Ossianic Society*.

(Kiberd 1993 95)

The use by Revivalist authors of old Irish material was not simple, in other words; for authors such as Synge and Yeats, arguably the two most prominent writers of the period,

and the ones to be under discussion here, the Revival was a process of translation in the broadest sense of the word. Not only did many writers, including Yeats⁴, rely upon translations into English, but they also made their own “translations” of tales, transforming them from their original tales into works that, like O’Grady’s, were more aligned with contemporary mores and ideas. The process, then, was like an assembly line of ideas, leading from the original sources of Irish history and literature to English language translations, ideologies of nationhood, an influx of pastoral thinking as it had filtered down to the Irish via Romanticism and nationalist thinking, and finally to the authors of the Revival itself.

Arnold and O’Grady’s influence can be seen not only on the creative writers of the period, but also on the scholarship to follow in its wake. One has only to glance over Kenneth Jackson’s analysis of Celtic nature poetry (see Chapter 2) to see the ways in which Arnold’s romantic determinations of nationalisms and O’Grady’s turn to the Irish past impacted scholarship on early Irish writing, both in Ireland and outside of it; and Jackson is not alone in showing these influences. Most authors of the Revival and those to follow – whether scholars or artists – demonstrate a tendency to turn to the Irish past for inspiration, but an Irish past thoroughly imbued with the spirit of European Romanticism. The enduring impact of Macpherson, Arnold and O’Grady might have peaked during the period of the Revival, but certainly did not disappear; the past, and the

⁴ Although not Synge: Synge’s ability to both speak and read the Irish language differentiated him from his peers, as Declan Kiberd’s *Synge and the Irish Language* documents. This issue will be discussed in greater detail in the pages to come.

idea of the backward look, were tremendously significant within the study of Irish material.

Neither was this tendency to look backwards limited to Irish sources. Yeats, for example, shared with William Morris

admiration for high craftsmanship and a gilded Middle Ages. [. . .] Medievalism – one should really say pseudo-medievalism (without intending pejoration) – was a form in the Revival meant to counter realism and romantic self-expression in literature; democracy and individualism in politics; science and rationalism in our understanding of the universe; Protestantism in religion; machinery and industrialism in our transactions with nature; and the Renaissance as an influence in the history of culture.

(Foster 1988 124-5)

The consciousness with which Revival authors such as Yeats made use of the literary and artistic past – whether Irish or more generally European, from the middle ages and the Renaissance to Romanticism – was an attempt to achieve a high level of art as well as an attempt to assert a politics that was to lead to independence. The backward looking nature of that art asserted difference from England through the series of oppositions cited by John Wilson Foster above.

The Irish Revival and its predecessors had the right idea in looking to some legendary past for the legitimising origin of

Irish society as one distinct from the British, which had a different conception of origin. But the search for origin, like that for identity, is self-contradictory. Once the origin is understood to be an invention, however necessary, it can never again be thought of as something “natural”.

(Deane 1990 17)

Deane’s critique here points out the inherent difficulties faced by Revivalists; the attempt to define Irish origins explicitly implies that those origins are obscured and unknown and so must be, in a sense, invented. The process by which Irish scholars and writers of the period settled on a primordial mythos of the Irish – and of the Irish nation – relied upon this invention, an invention that was, also inherently, nostalgic: the past, perceived from the instability of the present, was solid in that it could not be altered, ready to offer up an identity that had the advantage of being rooted in an ancient history.

To the extent that the recovery of a coherent community is associated with the desire to resurrect the sense of national cultural identity, this emphasis on the stability and coherence of the past, and on the importance of a model of community based on the heroic tales, is one of the most salient features of the Irish Renaissance. (McCarthy 168)

What evolved consequently during the period of the Revival was a new use of memory in literature, for what these authors did – whether scholars such as Arnold, O’Grady, Jackson, or Flower or writers like Yeats and Synge – was to make use of non-

living memory. That is, they managed to leap from the realm of actual, self-experienced memory to a realm of imaginative memory that was nostalgia.

To participate in the existentialism of the poetic, one must reinforce the union of imagination and memory. To do that, it is necessary to rid oneself of the historian's memory which imposes its ideative prerogatives. It is no living memory which runs along the scale of dates without staying long enough at the site of memory. Memory-Imagination makes us live non-event situations in an existentialism of the poetic. (Bachelard 1969 119)

Revival authors engaged in this process by choosing to make connections between their own time and the literature of the Irish middle ages, finding resemblances or connections that did not rely upon what Bachelard refers to as "living memory". In "On the Sublime," Burke deems such resemblances food for the imagination: "Hence it is, that men are much more naturally inclined to belief than incredulity" (Burke 17). The Revivalists, by searching out these resemblances, found inspiration in the past, experiencing as a result a nostalgia for a time during which they did not live: the question became, by the modern age, whether or not they were capable of belief, for, as Bachelard notes, "reverie extends history precisely to the limits of the unreal" (1969 122).

Given the tendency of the Revival to look to the past for poetic inspiration, it is unsurprising that nostalgia flourished as a literary form. Davis's identification of three types of nostalgia is helpful to review here. The first type he calls Simple Nostalgia, "that subjective state which harbors the largely unexamined belief that things were better (more beautiful) (healthier) (happier) (more civilized) (more exciting) *then than now*" (Davis 18). The second category is Reflexive Nostalgia, which is Simple Nostalgia plus the voice of a "Truth Squad or remonstrating Greek Chorus wanting to correct, deflate, correct, and remind" (Davis 21). The final type is Interpreted Nostalgia, which "moves beyond issues of the historical accuracy or felicity of the nostalgic claim on the past and, even as the reaction unfolds, questions and, potentially at least, renders problematic the very reaction itself" (Davis 24).

In these three categories can be seen the development of the Revival as a movement. Initially authors and scholars exercised something remarkably similar to Simple Nostalgia, before gradually moving towards a Reflexive Nostalgia in which they began to see the facts of the past as well as the idealizations. The third category of Interpreted Nostalgia is perhaps the most significant, as it divides, initially, as we will see, an author like Yeats from one like Synge. Where Yeats remained in a state of Reflexive Nostalgia for the Irish past, Synge moved towards Interpretive Nostalgia, coming to a critique of his own idealization of, for example, the Aran Islands.

Whichever category of nostalgia we are confronting in these authors works, however, nostalgia generally allowed all of the Revivalists to imagine and thus to posit a form of continuous identity for the Irish and the soon-to-be Irish nation.

Nostalgia's penchant for prizing "strange" and private facets of a past self bears an interesting isomorphic relationship to current life situations that are problematic for our identity. It is this isomorphism which more than anything explains the favored place accorded such memories and the poignant feelings they evoke in us. (Davis 41)

By turning to historical facts or mythological figures specific to Ireland, authors of the Revival period were able to bridge the past and present effectively, allowing for a continuity that glossed over and made easier a present highlighted by political and social uncertainty. Sociologically speaking, then, nostalgia was a phenomenon that made artistic and political sense for the revivalists.

The nostalgic element in the Revival is thus evident; it now becomes necessary to turn to an examination of the writing of the period in order to assess just how this nostalgia and turning to the past interacts with depictions and symbolization of the natural world. Yeats and Synge, as two of the dominating figures of the Revival, and two vastly different writers, serve as the best examples from the period to examine for these themes. What emerges is that Yeats and Synge both engage in the nostalgic mode, although in strikingly different ways, and with strikingly different results.

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Chapter Six:

Yeats and Synge

There are few Irish poets as associated with place as William Butler Yeats, whose name is now so intimately connected with Sligo that it is known to poetry readers world-wide as “Yeats’ Country”. Irish Tourist Board promotions have popularized this self-consciously romantic and implicitly nostalgic image of Yeats as connected to Sligo and various other places throughout Ireland, and Yeats himself did much to precipitate this image in the earliest stages of his work. To see Yeats, however, as writing about place and nature (and he does not often differentiate between these two concepts) in a merely romanticized, and so pastoral, form is too simplistic. While early Yeats does work his way towards a form of pastoral nostalgia, later Yeats offers a very different representation of nature, increasingly realistic and made complex by visions, infused with a new pastoral nostalgia for an Ireland of the imagination. By comparing early Yeats’ work – the influences on it, and the move towards writing of particularized Irish place – with his later, more mature work – made dense with increasingly concrete while visionary representations of nature – it will become clear that Yeats is far from being a simply nostalgic poet when it comes to his writings on nature.

Early Influences

Yeats points out in his autobiography that his first poetic attempts were pastorals: “I had begun to write poetry in imitation of Shelley and Edmund Spenser, play after

play" (Yeats 1955 66). If a poet can be judged in part by those who have exerted influence upon him, we can tell a great deal about Yeats' aesthetic from this start. Spenser and Shelley's poems are concerned with representations of nature. Spenser as the most prominent pastoral poet of the Elizabethan era, and Shelley as a leading figure of a Romantic movement that derived much of its impetus from the ideal of a close connection with nature. These influences, when combined with that of Blake, a profoundly mystical poet cum prophet, go far in illuminating early Yeatsian poetics and philosophy.

Yeats, in later life, writing about Shelley, said that a man's mind at twenty contains everything of importance it will ever possess. Whatever we think of this as a general principle, it does seem relevant to Yeats himself. *The Island of the Statues* [one of Yeats' first poems] takes its Circe-like enchantress from Spenser, and most of its verse-texture from Shelley, yet its decadent and savage theme is curiously Yeats' own, holding in embryo much that is to come. (Bloom 1970 53)

From the beginning of his poetic career, Yeats is attracted to poets for whom mysticism, nature, and vision are paramount, poets who had developed specific styles and forms of writing about nature.

The influence of Spenser and that of the English pastoral tradition upon early Yeats was not to last without undergoing change; for Spenser, Yeats writes,

the first poet struck with remorse, the first poet who gave his heart to the State, saw nothing but disorder. where the mouths that have spoken all the fables of the poets had not yet become silent. All about him were shepherds and shepherdesses still living the life that made Theocritus and Virgil think of shepherd and poet as the one thing; but though he dreamed of Virgil's shepherds he wrote a book to advise, among many things, the harrying of all that followed flocks upon the hills, and of all the 'wandering companies that keep the wood.' ("Edmund Spenser" Yeats 1961 372)

Yeats became conscious that Spenser was a national poet – indeed, a poet of empire – who had written the epic of his age while maintaining the contradictions already discussed in an earlier chapter. Yeats was to engage in a similar project of becoming a national poet *without* giving his heart to the state. The observation that Spenser could not reconcile "true pastoral" to his idealized version leads Yeats away from this early influence, although the impact of pastoral was to remain with him, in an altered fashion.

Yeats' own nationalist tendencies resulted in a partial eclipse of the influence of English writers such as Shelley and Blake, as well as Spenser: his encounter with Irish authors – including Standish James O'Grady – was to change his perception of what he might do as a poet.

I had begun to know a great deal about the Irish poets who had written in English. I read with excitement books I

should find unreadable to-day, and found romances in lives
 that had neither wit nor adventure. I did not deceive myself:
 I knew how often they wrote a cold and abstract language,
 and yet I who had never wanted to see the houses where
 Keats and Shelley lived would ask everybody what sort of
 place Inchedony was, because Callanan had named after it
 a bad poem in the manner of *Childe Harold*.

(Yeats 1955 101)

Significantly, it is place, and the potential familiarity of place within Ireland, that strikes Yeats in his reading of early Revivalist writers: he is drawn to these writers in part because they describe places with which he can connect, and to which he believed readers would connect. This theme was to resonate throughout Yeats' work from beginning to end. Place and nature became entrees into a world of Ireland that Yeats longed for, a world that he associated particularly with his Sligo childhood.

Yeats inherited Romantic ideas of the child and of landscape, and these two ideas were adjoined in his view of his own childhood in Sligo.

For Yeats, as for Synge, the child's earliest feelings were
 for the colour of a known and concrete locality, which even
 a baby could express in gibberish and syllables of no
 meaning. [. . .] The Sligo of his early childhood became a
 dream landscape, a never-never-land to which it was
 hopeless to expect to return. . . (Kiberd 1995 102)

Yeats' early identification with the landscape of Sligo came in large part through his explorations of that childhood world. A Sligo uncle shared his boyhood interest in nature:

When I said to him, echoing some book I had read, that one never knew a countryside till one knew it at night he was pleased (though nothing would have kept him from his bed a moment before the hour); for he loved natural things and had learnt two cries of the lapwing, one that drew them to where he stood and one that made them fly away. And he approved, and arranged my meals conveniently, when I told him I was going to walk round Lough Gill and sleep in a wood. I did not tell him all my object, for I was nursing a new ambition. My father had read to me some passage out of *Walden*, and I planned to live some day in a cottage on a little island called Innisfree, and Innisfree was opposite Slish Wood where I meant to sleep.

I thought that having conquered bodily desire and the inclination of my mind towards women and love, I should live, as Thoreau lived, seeking wisdom.

(Yeats 1955 71-2)

It is telling that the boy Yeats turned to the American essayist for inspiration. Thoreau, with *Walden*, had followed Emerson's lead in attaching the ideal of American independence and thoughtfulness to nature, and in doing so had done much to create a nation out of words, carved, as it were, out of tree and stone and canyon and clay. Yeats,

as a keen reader, would have been sensitive to these ideas, and, by his own account, was influenced by them: for the childhood dream of living like Thoreau produced one of his most famous early poems.

I still had the ambition, formed in Sligo in my teens, of
living in imitation of Thoreau on Innisfree, a little island in
Lough Gill, and when walking through Fleet Street very
homesick I heard a little tinkle of water and saw a fountain
in a shop-window which balanced a little ball upon its jet,
and began to remember lake water. From the sudden
remembrance came my poem *Innisfree*, my first lyric with
anything in its rhythm of my own music. (Yeats 1955 153)

While Yeats nurtured the ideal of living like Thoreau, he did not manage to follow it through, and would have been an unlikely candidate to do so. As a result, a poem like *Innisfree* arises out of a nostalgia – Yeats himself refers above to his “homesickness” – for something that Yeats has only in part experienced himself. The sound of water from an electrically powered fountain triggers the memory (for the memory) of something he has not experienced: the poem that results is a nostalgia for a time in Sligo when such an experience was still possible. Like the ninth and tenth century Irish poems that posited an imaginary, perfect future, “Innisfree” turns towards an unexperienced pastoral dream, what Declan Kiberd referred to as the unrecoverable “never-never-land”. In this imagined future, the poet will live a life that is almost directly an imitation of Thoreau’s:

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree.
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made:

Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee,

And live alone in the bee-loud glade. (60 ll.1-4)¹

While the images of a cabin for one and bean-rows are clearly derivative of Thoreau, other images are peculiarly Yeatsian, and particularly Irish in setting, resembling in some ways the early Irish monastic poems that centered on an ideal future of a private cell and the pastoral dream of raising crops enough to live on. Yeats' specification of place here is significant: this is not simply a poem about the desire for peace; he desires peace in a particular spot, associated in his mind with the quiet, steady reverie of childhood. Yeats plants the seed of Thoreau's experience and it grows into an Irish one, imagined from the space of the "pavements grey" (l. 11) of London; for, as Declan Kiberd notes, the move he had made from Sligo to London "was a fall from a pastoral landscape into a world of urban blight, war and treachery. . ." (Kiberd 1995 102).

Innisfree becomes a touchstone of a poem in the Yeats canon, for it is with this poem that Yeats asserts his determination to write a personalized, while nationalized, poetry, rooted in the place and nature of Ireland:

Though I went to Sligo every summer, I was compelled to
live out of Ireland the greater part of every year, and was
but keeping my mind upon what I knew must be the subject
matter of my poetry. I believed that if Morris had set his
stories amid the scenery of his own Wales, for I knew him
to be of Welsh extraction and supposed wrongly that he had

¹ All quotations of Yeats' poems are from Daniel Albright's edition, *W.B. Yeats: The Poems* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1990). Line numbers are given to accommodate the use of other editions.

spent his childhood there, that if Shelley had nailed his
 Prometheus, or some equal symbol, upon some Welsh or
 Scottish rock, their art would have entered more intimately,
 more microscopically, as it were, into our thought and
 given perhaps to modern poetry a breadth and stability like
 that of ancient poetry. (Yeats 1955 150)

Yeats, in other words, seeks to literally and figuratively ground his writing in the landscape most familiar, most known to him. This would allow for the “stability” to which he refers here, suggesting that Yeats desires to call upon the relative stability of place in order to create a stable identity not only for himself but for the Irish nation as it is forming in his and his contemporaries’ minds. And, as he makes clear above, the more stable the poetic image in terms of place, the more likely that image was, conversely, to reach a broad audience, implying immediately that the attachment to place was a phenomenon that Yeats expected to stretch beyond the realm of Ireland.

The Sense of Place

Despite this bid for an international audience, Yeats saw that all around him, in Ireland, was a tradition in which place in poetry was significant. Early in his relationship with Katherine Tynan, Richard Ellman notes, Yeats had written to her “that they both needed to substitute the landscape of nature for the landscape of art” (Ellman 165). The sense of place was to become the touchstone to which Yeats would refer in order to

ground his poetry: “all my art theories depend upon just this – rooting of mythology in the earth” (letter to Sturge Moore, in Ellman 271).

It is with intent that Yeats names in his poetry places and people who belong to Ireland’s living inheritance: names deeply rooted in the national being of a people before the poet shared Thoor Ballylee with the jackdaws or was laid to rest under the stone cross at Drumcliff. He builds on the strong foundations of inherited tradition, adding to places already made holy by some legend of saint or hero new significance. Other names he himself added: Innisfree and Lissadell, dear to his own childhood and youth. Others again, like Lady Gregory’s Coole Park with its seven woods and lake of the wild swans, or Rosses Point (the “Memory Harbour” of his brother the painter Jack Yeats) were made memorable by what Yeats and his friends there accomplished. [. . .] [In choosing names to include in his works,] he was performing the role of the ancient Irish *fili* (bardic poets) whose task it was to perpetuate in the memory, men and heroic acts; as Homer has made the names of Ithaca, Chois and Troy places of imagination for generations who never visited Greece. (Raine 6-7)

The use by Yeats in his poetry of well known places in Ireland allows him to act within a specifically Irish tradition of recording the story of place, whether by the compilers of the

dindsenchas or by the bardic poets; to this tradition Yeats adds the places significant to him on a personal level – such as Innisfree – resulting in a poetry in which place is paramount.

[I]n emphasizing locality, Yeats, Synge and Lady Gregory were deliberately aligning themselves with the Gaelic bardic tradition of *dinnsheanchas* (knowledge of the lore of places). But there was undeniably something strained about their manoeuvre, as Synge conceded in describing himself as a mere “interloper” among the islanders of Aran.

(Kiberd 1995 107)

The strain that Kiberd refers to here arises out of the distance that Yeats, Synge, Lady Gregory, and others among the Revivalists experienced between the natural world of Ireland, with its traditional tales of place, and their lives as urban, middle and upper class Anglo-Irish. The recognition that, in order to create an Irish literature, the distance needed to be bridged, despite the strain of doing so, is everywhere in the writing of the period.

I could not endure. . . an international art, picking stories and symbols where it pleased. Might I not, with health and good luck to aid me, create some new *Prometheus Unbound*: Patrick or Columcille, Oisín or Finn, in Prometheus’s stead; and, instead of Caucasus, Cro-Patrick or Ben Bulbin? Have not all races had their first unity from

a mythology that marries them to rock and hill?

(Yeats 1955 193-4)

This comment is perhaps misleading, for Yeats did not, of course, limit himself to the use of only Irish symbol or myth. What he recognizes, however, is the significance of place and landscape within a nation's literature, and he recognizes further that, in order to create a literature that is both modern and national, he can bind himself to that landscape. Yeats differed from contemporary nationalists in his commitment to a nationalism that was bound to place but also stressed "the roots of Irish intellectual revival in the ancient saga material" (R. Foster 307). The bind to nature and landscape, then, is not merely a sentimental exercise, but an intellectual one. Unlike Arnold, Yeats does not make the mistake of presuming the Irish to have a closer relationship to the natural world than other cultures. In the quotation above he makes this clear; all cultures are formed, he claims, and all myths created, out of a connection between a people and a landscape.

All literatures are full of these or like imaginations. [. . .]

I do not think [Arnold] understood that our 'natural magic'

is but the ancient religion of the world, the ancient worship

of Nature and that troubled ecstasy before her, that

certainty of all beautiful places being haunted, which it

brought into men's minds. ("The Celtic Element in

Literature" Yeats 1961 175-6)

While Yeats, unlike Arnold, recognizes what amounts to an international reverence for place, he has evidently absorbed something of Arnold's argument. While he does not

explicitly connect a familiarity with nature to a peculiarly Celtic sensibility. Yeats implies what appears to be a more general sentimentality: the “troubled ecstasy” of nature and the fact that place is “haunted” suggest that Yeats perceives a quite complex relationship between man and the natural world, one that he would address in his more mature poetry. Yeats’ claim that all cultures, in their early evolutions, were somehow bound to nature is, in his mind, a part of primitivism generally, a primitivism disappeared but for folk literatures: “All folk literature has a passion whose like is not in modern literature and music and art, except where it has come by some straight or crooked way out of ancient times” (“The Celtic Element in Literature” Yeats 1961 180).

In his autobiography and essays, Yeas describes his attempts to marry that “passion” and connection to nature from folk literature with his sophisticated European sensibility. No matter how embellished or lovely, he does not wish to create a poetry that lacks these primitive elements. Keats, Shakespeare, and Virgil, Yeats believes,

looked at Nature without ecstasy, but with the affection a man feels for the garden where he has walked daily and thought pleasant thoughts. They looked at nature in the modern way, the way of people who are poetical, but are more interested in one another than in a nature which has faded to be but friendly and pleasant, the way of people who have forgotten the ancient religion. (“The Celtic Element in Literature” Yeats 1961 178)

Having grown up on the Romantics and on a poet such as Spenser, Yeats is well aware

of the way in which the idea of nature has become tamed *as an idea*, and is equally aware, having spent such time on the study and imitation of the pastoral, of the distance involved in such an exercise. Significantly, while Yeats recognizes – and seems above to deplore – this distance, it is precisely that distance that produces a poem like “Innisfree”: for this is a poem written in retrospection, a poem deriving from an urban situation that reminds the poet of a more rural, and more peaceful, existence – and one that, in all likelihood, did not exist. And, despite this recognition of distance, he was to fall back on pastoral metaphors with a certain consistency, as in his autobiography, in which he describes his first meeting with Maud Gonne:

. . . in that day she seemed a classical impersonation of the Spring, the Virgilian commendation “She walks like a goddess” made for her alone. Her complexion was luminous, like that of apple-blossom through which the light falls, and I remember her standing that first day by a great heap of such blossoms in the window.

(Yeats 1955 123)

Such a description, made as it was in retrospection, is full of an implicit nostalgia, but, more than that, contains explicitly pastoral nostalgia, referring to Virgil directly. Maud Gonne becomes, for Yeats, a pastoral ideal, one from which he is inevitably distanced, as he is from other pastoral ideals.

Yeats and the New Irish Pastoral

Yeats has, then, in spite of his dislike of the distances between pastoral and reality, a background in pastoral not easily shaken; and he has, in fact, precisely the relationship he deplores in Shakespeare and Keats with Coole Park: he feels affection for it in large part because of its familiarity and the thoughts he has experienced in it. So while he disparages distance, he feels it nonetheless; hence in his writings of nature, an element of nostalgia is inevitably present.

Early Yeats is full of these pastoral ideals that are strongly influenced by Spenser, Shelley, and Blake. At the early stage of "The Wanderings of Oisín," Yeats' first poetic success, nature is indistinct, more an inheritance of poetics than an attempt to describe a specified landscape. Yeats' landscapes are, at this early stage, "increasingly weightless: they are evacuated into significance" (Albright xxvii). This indistinction, vacancy, and quite obvious distance from a reality of nature is due, at least in part, to Yeats' distance from his original sources for the poem. Rather than turning to the *Acallam* itself for inspiration, Yeats turned to translations, notably Michael Comyn's mid-nineteenth century version, "The Lay of Oisín in the Land of Youth".

He sits in the British Museum, himself knowing no Gaelic
(he never bothered to learn any) and he reads a version of a
version. He is so far from mythology, and indeed in every
sense so far from Ireland, that we need not be surprised to
discover that his poem ["The Wanderings of Oisín"],
despite its Celtic colorings, is in the center of English

Romantic tradition, and indeed in one particular current of that tradition, which I have called the internalization of quest-romance. (Bloom 1970 87)

While Bloom is correct that Yeats did not speak or read Irish, and turned to translations for information on the ancient Irish tradition, he is being slightly unfair here: Yeats certainly is distanced from his sources, and from the Irish language, but his claim that Yeats was so removed from Ireland itself is a cry too far, for Yeats, as we have seen, exists adamantly in an Ireland of the mind, and it is this Ireland that, particularly as he matures, is present in so much of his poetry and which contributes to the creation of a new Irish pastoralism in literature. Yeats' use of Irish sources also allows him to avoid a merely Romantic poetry, as we will see.

"The Wanderings of Oisín" is a combination of themes from medieval Irish literature that engaged Yeats: the otherworld, the Fenian life in nature, and the collision between Irish and Christian cultures. Although Yeats models his "Oisín" on the dialogic *Acallam*, the poem is not an exchange in any meaningful way: Oisín is so deep in reverie for his past that he frequently ignores (or at least seems to fail to hear) Patrick's very occasional comments or questions. His reveries frequently revolve around the life of the Fenians, their hunting, their successes, their battles. But because Yeats has chosen to focus his poem on Oisín's adventures with Niamh, the memories of Fenian life are secondary to the haunting memories of his time with her in the land of youth.

Opting to set his poem largely in the otherworld allows Yeats to produce a romanticized, idealized nature that is, at this stage in his poetics, unspecific and vague. The language of this (un)natural world is as rich and gorgeous as Spenser's tapestry-like

description of the Bower of Bliss: phrases such as Niamh's "O Oisín, mount by me and ride . To shores by the wash of the tremulous tide" (I ll. 80-1) or Oisín's description of galloping over a "glossy sea" (I l. 132) evoke a perfection that is of the imagination. But, like Spenser's Bower of Bliss, this world has a sinister undercurrent that leads eventually to Oisín and Niamh's sadnesses on the three islands. By Book II, the "glossy sea" has become "the sea's waste / shaking and waving" (II ..163-4): the experience of the otherworld, which negates Oisín's memories of his past life with the Fenians, is not all pleasurable. If we begin with an idealized world, we are rapidly shown into one that is far more difficult to negotiate; Oisín, in the otherworld, is an outsider, and his outsider status, and his displacement from the world of the Fenians, suggests a "cause" for this disintegration of the ideal.

Like the *Acallam*'s Oisín, Yeats' Oisín is nostalgic – "Remembrance, lifting her leanness, keened in the gates of my heart" (III l. 152) – for a time before Christian Ireland, for a time before his friends were mere memories. And, like the twelfth century Oisín, Yeats' Oisín experiences his nostalgia while wandering Ireland, although we do not, in this version, receive descriptions of place. Instead, Oisín's memory functions at an imagistic level, recalling pictures of landscapes of earlier times, and allowing Yeats to develop a representation of nature that is beyond Romanticism.

The resultant collision [between Yeats and Romanticism] exploded the original importance of nature to the form. For Yeats vision became the summoning of images and, in the highest case, active creation of them *de novo*. He pruned his natural descriptions radically, reducing them to a

minimum and exploiting their national associations. This transformed his predecessors' concern with tension between mind and nature to tension between mind and images. (Bornstein 206)

This exploitation of "national associations" offers a grounding to Yeats' poetry, and moves him beyond mere Romanticism, which he fought against:

It was his use of Irish material that, at a very early stage, redeemed Yeats from the merely picturesque use of exotic detail. The terror of nature has nothing to do with any moral feeling, such as that which led Wordsworth to feel that nature was after him because he had stolen a boat. The moral is a purely human category, a category to which wild nature, in these poems of Yeats, is an utter stranger. One might say that these poems, for all their use of some traditional romantic properties, contain implicit criticisms of the falsity and sentimentality of at least one romantic attitude to nature. [. . .] Again and again in Yeats' early poetry we find Irish folklore, Irish heroic story, Irish history and even Irish landscape working in his imagination to mitigate the excesses of a self-indulgent romanticism, of mere dreaminess and decorativeness. (Daiches 55: 63)

Ireland, then, and its history, literature, folklore, and landscape, prevented Yeats from falling into the usage of traditional Romantic forms. Yeats' notebooks, which

demonstrate this increasing commitment to Irish literature, were filled. Roy Foster notes, with “evocations and correspondences. The holiness of Irish landscape, in keeping with the old bardic doctrine of *dinnseanchas*, was stressed” (R. Foster 186). Such “correspondences” between the world of old Ireland and the Ireland that Yeats sought to create in the present were all aimed at the goal of a nationalist literature. These nationalist connections were in turn bound to the memories of childhood in the Sligo landscape. By so connecting his poetry to the world in which he moved as a child, and the world to which he returns in his mind continually, Yeats avoids the “excesses” of Romantic poetry, excesses which, however, were almost guaranteed to fail in his own time anyway: it would have been impossible for Yeats, writing in a post-Darwin era, to believe in a natural world as innocent or brutal but still entirely fathomable as the one represented in, for example, Shelley’s poetry.

I am very religious, and deprived by Huxley and Tyndall, whom I detested, of the simple-minded religion of my childhood, I had made a new religion, almost an infallible Church of poetic tradition, of a fardel of stories, and of personages, and of emotions, inseparable from their first expression, passed on from generation to generation by poets and painters with some help from philosophers and theologians. I wished for a world where I could discover this tradition perpetually, and not in pictures and in poems only, but in tiles round the chimney-piece and in the hangings that kept out the draught. I had even created a

dogma: "Because those imaginary people are created out of
the deepest instinct of man, to be his measure and his norm,
whatever I can imagine those mouths speaking may be the
nearest I can go to truth." (Yeats 1955 116)

The experience of encountering scientists that preceded and coincided with Darwin and expanded knowledge about the age of the earth and its evolutions was traumatic enough for Yeats that it eliminated the possibility of "simple" belief. For Yeats (who identified himself as an "evolutionist" while at school (R. Foster 32)),² in his early poetry, "nature's continual betrayal of man's expectations of it was part of the pattern of reality" (Daiches 50); this theme is reflected in poems such as "The Madness of King Goll", in which nature is a site of displacement, along very similar lines to *Buile Suibhne*. In the place of "simple faith", Yeats inserts the concept of tradition, a move that, again, implies an inherent nostalgia, and suggests an antidote to the displacement associated with the natural world evident in his early poetry.

As Daiches points out, nature, in the early poem "The Madness of King Goll", is full of this displacement and strangeness, to which the poet cannot align himself. "It is a disturbing sense of the essential *otherness* of the natural world that drives King Goll

² While Yeats was an enthusiastic naturalist as a young man and read Darwin, Tyndall, and Huxley, by the 1890s he had repudiated all of this reading and turned away from the purely scientific. As John Wilson Foster notes, however, the influence of scientific advances upon Yeats' work is still present: "[I]t is possible, as in post-conversion Wilde, to see Yeats as having retained the methods of science, applying them to non-scientific, or even anti-scientific, subject-matter. For example, he classified Irish fairies and fairy tales in an almost Linnean system, made claims for the 'scientific utility' of the study of fairy belief, and lectured to the Belfast Naturalists' Field Club in 1893 on the subject" (Foster "The Culture of Nature" 94 606). Foster goes on to point out that *A Vision* is also a scientifically systematized text.

mad, his madness being indicated by the refrain with which each stanza ends" (Daiches 51). The intensity with which King Goll experiences the natural world, and his sense of displacement in existing in nature, suggests not only that Yeats is making use of the medieval tale of Suibhne Geilt, but is also presenting us with a landscape that is incapable, in the post-Darwinian era, of existing as an Edenic, pastoral place. Oisín's trials reflect Yeats' disillusionment at the hands of Huxley and Tyndall. A faith in an actual, historical Eden was no longer possible; instead, Yeats creates his own Eden that is beyond the real, the realm of imagination. "Yeats," Denis Donoghue writes, "*implied* an Eden in history, where body was not bruised to pleasure soul" (1971 85 italics mine). Having lost his faith, Yeats turns rapidly to a natural religion: reading *The Fúeríe Queene* years later, he thinks of Shelley, the goddesses moving in procession, and the trees that belong "to the religion of the wilderness – the only religion possible in poetry today" ("On Spenser" Yeats 1961 377).

Yeats' early poetry reflects the combination of these ideas so far under discussion: the influence of traditional modes of pastoral (via Spenser and Vergil); that of Romantic poetry (through Blake and Shelley); a general late-Victorian European sensibility regarding the natural world (through Tyndall and Huxley); and the very significant influence of Irish poetics, discovered at a later stage by the young poet. These influences intertwine in Yeats' poetry to create what amounts to a new Irish pastoral heavily reliant upon the conception of landscape as one of the only available mechanisms that can bridge the present and past, while still representing the rupture between them.

Out of Nature

In Yeats' earliest poetry, though, these ideas are still in formation. Following "The Wanderings of Oisín," Yeats continues for a time to reflect the as yet unsettled philosophy that is forming in his mind. In "The Song of the Happy Shepherd", Yeats begins by declaring that "The woods of Arcady are dead,/ And over is their antique joy:/ Of old the world on dreaming fed:/ Grey Truth is now her painted toy" (33 ll. 1-4). The lament in these lines is explicit; the poetic persona mourns the loss of the possibility of dreaming as a source of inspiration and delight; instead, the modern world has forced the poet into accepting truths about the world that utterly contradict the traditional pastoral dreamworld of the shepherd. The highly stylized pastoral form at use by Yeats here is also an "antique joy," as he was to realize shortly; for it was not long after this period in Yeats' development that he began to move away from such already created imaginative worlds to the creation of his own.

"The Wanderings of Oisín" and other early poems such as "The Madness of King Goll" suggest a natural world that is the site for displacement, the realm of outsiders, whether because of divinity or madness. It was not long into his early phase that Yeats took up his interest in the occult, increasing the poetic significance of place, which Yeats' increasingly associates with ghostly apparitions, visitations, and memories of the past. As he wrote to Katherine Tynan, "This to me is the loneliest place in the world. Going for a walk is a continual meeting with ghosts for Sligo for me has no flesh and blood attractions – only memories and sentimentalities accumulated here as a child making it

more dear than any other place” (in R. Foster 73). Landscape, particularly the Irish landscape, is, in fact, the past.

Following this earliest poetry, where “most of the divinity is embodied in landscapes” (Albright xxvi), in his work of the early 1890s, Yeats tends to use nature as a mere symbol, as a backdrop to other action, as in “The Two Trees” and in the poems of *The Rose*. By the end of the decade, another movement had begun. By this point, it is clear that Yeats, like those to whom Niamh calls in “The Hosting of the Sidhe”, is being called away: the Irish literary past has established a firmer grip on his imagination. Like Lady Gregory, Yeats found himself increasingly interested in resurrecting the idea of a glorious Irish past. “His identification with the Gregory ethos was soldered through the sense of a disappearing past, acquiring as it receded the enhanced and idealized allure of nostalgia” (R. Foster 452). As he himself was to write, “literature dwindles to a mere chronicle of circumstance, or passionless fantasies, and passionless meditations, unless it is constantly flooded with the passions and beliefs of ancient times. . .” (Yeats 1961 185). *The Wind Among the Reeds* reflects this idea, that a reservoir of energy is to be found in mythology and its living symbols. By this stage it is clear that, for Yeats, the representation of the natural world is a part of his collection of images, the driving force of his poetics. These images, many of them recurring, frequently rely upon the memory of the past.

Looking Backwards

T.S. Eliot points out that Yeats “had to wait for a later maturity to find expression of early experience; and this makes him, I think, a unique and especially interesting poet” (Eliot 57). That backward looking tendency which Eliot describes is increasingly focused, by Yeats, on place. Yeats, in his autobiography, professes this love of and attachment to place that creates, inevitably, a nostalgia.

Certain woods at Sligo, the woods above Dooney Rock and those above the waterfall at Ben Bulbin, though I shall never perhaps walk there again, are so deep in my affections that I dream about them at night; and yet the woods at Coole, though they do not come into my dream, are so much more knitted to my thought that when I am dead they will have, I am persuaded, my longest visit. When we are dead, according to my belief, we live our lives backwards for a certain number of years, treading the paths that we have trodden, growing young again, even childish again, till some attain an innocence that is no longer a mere accident of nature, but the human intellect’s crowning achievement. (Yeats 1955 378)

Yeats, in writing his autobiography, is already exercising a form of nostalgia that centers upon place.³ Roy Foster notes that, from a very early stage, Yeats was conscious of the way the present would be remembered. Yeats realized, as a young man, how his experiences would be the “stuff of future memories. . . . This early, he was preternaturally conscious of the need to impose a shape on his life, and able to anticipate the way it would look in retrospect” (R. Foster 45). This sense of pre-formed nostalgia, in many autobiographical passages, as in the one above, implies that there is some sense of self (and some sense of past selves) to be found in particular places that is not to be found elsewhere.

It was in the already significant space of Coole that Yeats first experienced visions, visions that were to become so vital to his poetics:

I was crossing a little stream near Inchy wood and actually in the middle of a stride from bank to bank, when an emotion never experienced before swept down upon me. I said, ‘That is what the devout Christian feels, that is how he surrenders his will to the will of God.’ I felt an extreme surprise, for my whole imagination was preoccupied with the pagan mythology of ancient Ireland. I was marking in red ink, upon a large map, every sacred mountain.

(Yeats 1955 378)

³ Yeats is not alone in the exercise of writing an autobiography: in fact, he was to write his only after other autobiographies of figures of the period had been written: Lady Gregory’s, Katherine Tynan’s, and George Moore’s. The publication of memoirs and autobiographies at this point in time offers further evidence that Revivalists were conscious of the role of nostalgia in their work.

Yeats' surprise may not be shared by the reader: having spent a good deal of his childhood and early adulthood reading Spenser, Shelley, and Blake, all poets preoccupied with the prophetic and with the natural world, it seems in fact unsurprising that, having immersed himself in the space of prophecy, he should have come to the visionary.

Yeats' vision is unusual, however, in that it is preoccupied almost wholly with the past. As he says himself here, he was at the time preoccupied with ancient Ireland. The ancient Irish, in Yeats' view, "had a nature more lyrical than dramatic, delight in wild and beautiful lamentation" ("The Celtic Element in Literature" Yeats 1961 182). While other legends and other literatures dealt in strange woods and seas, "the Irish legends move among known woods and seas, and have so much of a new beauty that they may well give the opening century its most memorable symbols" ("The Celtic Element in Literature" Yeats 1961 187). Yeats, escaping from the city to the countryside of Lady Gregory's retreat, also moved among known woods, and it was out of this movement that his visionary poetry grew. "Has not the wilderness," he wrote in an essay on Spenser, "been at all times a place of prophecy?" ("On Spenser" Yeats 1961 378). Despite his intellectual involvement with prophetic poets like Spenser and Blake, though, Yeats was to focus his own visionary tendencies on the past, and not only an Irish past, but an imagined, universal one.

Yeats' interest in vision produces, even in his early poetry, a complicated representation of the natural world as the site of vision. In "The Man Who Dreamed of Fairy Land,"

Yeats is here combining with his earlier recurring idea of the dichotomy between man and nature a view of the destructive consequences of being possessed by a vision. The vision comes through nature, and is not entirely consistent, nor is it fully apprehended by the hero; but its partial and confused character is a guarantee of its genuineness. There is nothing simple or comfortable or utopian about the vision man gets from nature: it may contain glimpses of Byzantium, but it does not give the peace and wholeness of Byzantium; it disturbs and distracts, unfitting man for his place in the normal human world while not fitting him for any other. (Daiches 59)

Again we find that nature is somehow related, as an image, to liminality: this time, to the reception of several visions. The man who receives those visions is ill at ease, disturbed by the image of "faeryland", much as Suibhne is disturbed by his appreciation of nature's beauty. By 1928, when he composed "Sailing to Byzantium", Yeats is still concerned with vision, but the image of the imagined perfect (and so pastoral) world is not disturbing:

Yeats was not one of those rare visionaries who love the future, and he was most certainly a man who, in Stevens's phrase, had studied nostalgias, who loved a number of pasts, most of them historically quite non-existent. The Urbino and the eighteenth-century Dublin of Yeats'

nostalgias are mere idealization, and they are to some extent the idealizations of preciousness and snobbery. Byzantium would be a pernicious myth if Yeats had made the mistake of insisting too categorically on its historical adequacy: it moves us because it is out of space and out of time. (Bloom 1970 67)

As Harold Bloom points out here, Yeats' nostalgia is quite consciously for an Eden that he has created, one that escapes the nets of historically linear narrative and thinking, as, as we have seen, nostalgias do. "Byzantium," another critic notes, "is a new pastoral symbol and will be taken as that by anybody who sees more in the pastoral tradition than ideal shepherds and abstract sheep" (Tate 157). Yeats creates, in Byzantium, an imagined ideal world in an ahistorical past, one not linked with the linear historical development of the actual world. And, strangely enough, this imagined ideal is an urban pastoral, an artificial construction. "That is no country for old men." (239 l.1) Yeats begins, referencing the mythical and timeless Tir na nOg; immediately the poem is outside of time, outside of the traditional pastoral of the natural world, in an imagined universe. As such, Byzantium becomes a pastoral place, a pastoral reverie, born out of Yeats' nostalgia for a universal pastoralism, and not merely an Irish one. "Is there," he writes, "nation-wide multiform reverie, every mind passing through a stream of suggestion, and all streams acting and reacting upon one another, no matter how distant the minds, how dumb the lips?" (Yeats 1955 263). Yeats' inclination to believe in such connections is bound inextricably to his use of vision, which plays constantly upon an international memory and recurring themes and symbols. The poem closes:

Once out of nature I shall never take
 My bodily form from any natural thing.
 But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
 Of hammered gold and gold enameling
 To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
 Or set upon a golden bough to sing
 To lords and ladies of Byzantium
 Of what is past, or passing, or to come. (240 IV ll.1-8)

Yeats recognizes here that this imaginative Eden of his mind is in some way unnatural, perhaps in part because of its urbanity: the final stanza reflects a (Spenserian) preoccupation with the conflict and opposition between nature and art, and Yeats comes firmly down on the side of art – for the moment anyway. The poetic persona, he who will entertain, is also he who will speak of the world as it was, is, will be: time has become something flat in this Byzantium, capable of being read by the poetic persona regardless of his own position within time frames; in this the persona's abilities resemble those of Finn in medieval Irish lyrics. In this new form of pastoral, Yeats has moved beyond the tradition of a natural setting (even if an artificialized natural setting because of the idealizations involved) and has created a modern, urban setting that, because it is timeless and perfect, is still as much in line with pastoral as Spenser's eclogues.

This theme of a timeless, entirely knowable universe, suggests that the Yeatsian poetic universe is marked by a recurrence of images. Denis Donoghue points out that it is in part the significance to Yeats of Nietzsche and his central concept of eternal recurrence that urges such connections:

It follows that Yeats valued the past as the stuff of poetry and drama: he made a history of a dramatic poem, a long poem. The events themselves are fated, but what we make of them is free, with such freedom as can be wrested from fate. What makes such a poetry endlessly possible is the correspondence of mind and world, certified by symbols: this enables the poet to bear with the fact that a mind is only as rich as the images it contains. Yeats' mind was peopled by images drawn from mythology and history: he did not take dictation from these images, but turned them to theatrical purpose, setting them astir. He was not a mere parcel of memories. The mythology more congenial to him was Celtic, with some additions from Indian lore. The history most congenial to him was that of Renaissance Italy, mainly illustrated in the history of art, and with some important additions from the history of Ireland in the eighteenth century, Berkeley, Swift, Goldsmith, "the people of Burke and of Grattan". (Donoghue 1971 85-6)

Quite consciously, Yeats finds images and symbols from a wide selection of a world-wide past, and draws upon them to illustrate the desire and nostalgia for a perfected, and unified, version of all pasts, created out of vision. As more than one critic has noted, in Yeats "vision is more important than natural landscape" (Bornstein 194), no matter how inextricably the two are connected. Landscape, particularly local landscape, grounds a

poetry that is almost always, particularly in its early phases, running to the abstract. Unlike his Romantic predecessors, Yeats was not interested in the relationship between man and nature: instead, Yeats was interested in the opposition between them, as witnessed in "Sailing to Byzantium": "for Yeats, even in his early romantic phase, it was a conviction of the essential dichotomy between man and nature that most possessed him. Not relationship but difference was what haunted him" (Daiches 49).

Of course, the dichotomy of nature and man was but one of many oppositions to occupy Yeats throughout his lifetime; I do not suggest that this particular one is somehow the most significant. Certainly, though, nature was a key in the symbolic order that came to constitute Yeats' poetics. Byzantium, as an urbanized Eden of the mind, is a solid example of that order. In "The Second Coming", much as in "Sailing to Byzantium", Yeats "adopts the stance of a seer, and what he describes is not an actual landscape but a metaphoric one: we do not feel that a falcon flies before his eyes any more than that he literally sees a blood-dimmed tide" (Bornstein 201). Yeats, by turning the poetic persona into a visionary speaker, exercises another nostalgia beyond that for the never-in-existence Eden that was Byzantium: that for the visionary abilities that earlier Irish poets were reputed to have. "The Second Coming", though, represents an anti-Eden, an anti-Byzantium: the poetic persona is concerned with the start of another cycle of history, this one marked by the "rough beast, its hour come round at last" that "Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born" (235 ll. 21, 22). This poem, one of Yeats' best known works, is, of course, not at all connected to a known landscape, let alone an Irish one; the preoccupation with vision has eclipsed, here, the possibilities of such a

connection. It is almost as if, when the poet's sight is "troubled" by images such as the ones of the poem, the possibility for a non-abstract connection to the actual world is made impossible. Nonetheless, a nostalgia is present within the poem, for "the ceremony of innocence is drowned" (235 l. 4).

In such an exercise Yeats demonstrates a clear break from his Romantic influences in terms of a representation of the natural world; the world presented here is clearly unnatural, somehow centerless and broken. "As Yeats grew older," one critic notes, "he wanted to realize divinity less in haunted and moody landscapes than in himself – and in a few other select human images" (Albright xxxi).

This sense of the natural world being chaotic, centerless, marks an enormous change in Yeats' representations of landscapes.

The deeper the world plunged into the chaos of imperial war and freedom struggles, the more necessary did it become for the poet to secure the Sligo idyll against accusations of naiveté, and the harder. The more he sought to recapture the dream, the more it seemed to elude him. When the much older man finally brought his newly-wed English wife on a boat-trip across Lough Gill, he failed ignominiously to locate, much less land on, the lake isle of Innisfree: a sign, perhaps, that the past in that simple-minded version was not easily recoverable.

(Kiberd 1995 102-3)

Yeats' profound difficulty with reconciling his need of the past – witnessed in his preoccupation with Irish mythology and literature, as well as in his more selective interest in certain moments in Irish history, and too his faithfulness to the memories of his Irish childhood – with the impossibility of recovering that past ends in his creation of a place like Byzantium, out of time, out of nature, and yet somehow reliant on all of his previous experience.

In his later work, Yeats makes a return to that past, however, in a move that allows him to recover it as fully as possible. The way in which he does this is to rely upon the speech of peasants, fishermen, and other figures generally representative of the Irish people: as he said to George Moore, "it was only from the peasants that 'one could learn to write, their speech being living speech, flowing out of the habits of their lives, struck out of life itself'" (Ellman 150-1). The far more naturalized speech is immediately less formal; and yet, ironically, it is in this less formalized speech that Yeats makes a solid return to pastoral forms. Poems such as "Shepherd and Goatherd" and "The Fisherman" offer a new Yeatsian language that moves further towards the rootedness that Yeats had sought from early on, and that, towards the end of his life, he recognizes, in "The Municipal Gallery Re-visited":

John Synge, I and Augusta Gregory, thought
 All that we did, all that we said or sang
 Must come from contact with the soil, from that
 Contact everything Antaeus-like grew strong.
 We three alone in modern times had brought

Everything down to that sole test again.

Dream of the noble and the beggarman. (367-8 VI ll. 2-8)

The impossible recovery of the past is often Yeats' theme: the loss of the pastoral age, the loss of the possibility of the pastoral age, and finally the realization that these themes finally rested upon the expression of that impossibility, which, ironically, managed to preserve something – if only the sense of loss – of that lost past.

Yeats, over the course of his life, changed drastically the way in which he portrayed landscape and the natural world of Ireland. In his early poems, nature and landscape are unspecific, vaguely romantic, and it is not until Yeats comes to his reading of Irish literature that his poetry becomes grounded, rooted, in the place names of his Sligo childhood and in the Ireland of his adult life. In this changeover one finds the roots of the pastoral tradition, but also the Irish tradition of the *dindsenchas*: while the invocation of place in Yeats is often a part of a backward looking longing for some past, it is also an invocation that merely grounds what is an unstable present by connecting that present to the past. It is in these early and middle phases of his poetry that Yeats is the most sentimental and nostalgic: his use of figures such as Oisín offer a romantic and nationalist Ireland, one in which the beauty of wild nature is ever-present. It is not until the reality of present-day Ireland was revealed to him – primarily, it would seem, through the violence of the Easter Rising – that the poetry shifts into a much more concrete and sturdy representation of Ireland. Romantic Ireland being dead and gone. Yeats' nostalgia is tempered, refined, and opened up to images beyond those offered to him by Irish literature alone. Poems such as "The Second Coming" and "Sailing to

Byzantium" represent this shift: no longer is Yeats turning to images of the Irish past in a specifically Irish place for his lost Eden, which is, by the time of "The Second Coming", all but impossible. Instead, Yeats creates an imaginative pastoral place that combines all of his interests – in the spirit world, in the visionary, in the past, in mythology. The failure of the actual memory of the past to provide comfort and inspiration moves Yeats, as it will Synge, beyond the realm of lived memory into the memory of an unlived, unexperienced past. Where in his early poetry Yeats would have attempted the futile reconstruction of the perfect world of his Sligo childhood, in his later works he recognizes the impossibility of such a reconstruction

I thought: 'There is a waterfall

Upon Ben Bulbin side

That all my childhood counted dear;

Were I to travel far and wide

I could not find a thing so dear.'

My memories had magnified

So many times a childish delight.

I would have touched it like a child

But knew my finger could but have touched

Cold stone and water. ("Towards Break of Day" 233 ll. 5-13)

Yeats' use of landscape is particularly complicated. As one of the foremost Irish writers of the century, and certainly the most nationalist of that select group, he has

memorialized so much of the landscape that Sligo, for many, is inseparable from his work. Beyond the “dreamy Celticism” (Foster 345) that inspired much of the early poems like “Innisfree,” though, Yeats managed to forge a complex relationship between the idea of nostalgia – a theme implicit in so much of his work – and those of vision and landscape.

A final consideration in examining Yeats’ work for the development of the themes of landscape and nostalgia is an argument put forward by Edward Said in his essay “Yeats and Decolonialism”. Said urges us to see a side of Yeats other than that brought to the fore by the majority of literary criticism,

that of the indisputably great *national* poet who articulates the experiences, the aspirations, and the vision of a people suffering under the dominion of an offshore power. From this perspective Yeats is a poet who belongs to a tradition not usually considered his, that of the colonial world ruled by European imperialism. . . (Said 69)

This perspective is useful and particularly applicable when Said turns to an analysis of the Irish Revival (as well as other independence movements and their accompanying cultural revivals) in which he sees two distinct movements. The first movement Said identifies as the dawning awareness of imperialism, and the second as the more obviously nationalist and political movements associated with the Revival. The literature of the second movement, of which Yeats is a part,

develops quite consciously out of desire to distance the native African, Indian, or Irish individual from the British.

French or (later) American master. Before this can be done, however, there is a pressing need for the recovery of the land that, because of the presence of the colonizing outsider, is recoverable at first only through the imagination. Now if there is anything that radically distinguishes the imagination of anti-imperialism it is the primacy of the geographical in it. Imperialism after all is an act of geographical violence through which virtually every space in the world is explored, charted, and finally brought under control. For the native, the history of his or her colonial servitude is inaugurated by the loss to an outsider of the local place, whose concrete geographical identity must thereafter be searched for and somehow restored.

(Said 76-7)

Yeats' invocation of localized, specific place can be seen as a part of such a movement towards reclamation: for he attempts to restore, imaginatively, an ancient geography of mythological Ireland, as well as the Ireland of his own day. Citing the geographer Neil Smith, Said describes imperialism as the production of a space known as a "second nature":

To the imagination of anti-imperialism, *our* space at home in the peripheries has been usurped and put to use by outsiders for *their* purpose. It is therefore necessary to seek out, to map, to invent, or to discover, a *third* nature, which

is not pristine and prehistorical ("Romantic Ireland's dead and gone", says Yeats) but one that derives historically and abductively from the deprivations of the present. This impulse then is what we might call *cartographic*. . .

(Said 79)

While it might prove difficult to maintain a case for Yeats as a consistently anti-imperialist poet, particularly given the questions raised by his flirtations with fascism, it is certainly inarguable that Yeats saw himself as, and was, a national poet, and one who employed elements of this "cartographic impulse" that undoubtedly arose out of his sense of reclaiming Ireland. Yeats' nostalgia for his Ireland of the mind, and his imaginative work in reclaiming that Ireland, go far in creating that "third nature", a space that is increasingly realistic and less sentimentalized.

Synge

As writers, Synge and Yeats were working towards the same goal: that of developing and revising a tradition of Irish literature, a national literature. Their ways of approaching that goal, though, and the manner in which each viewed and represented Ireland could not be more different. Yeats's political involvements – in the organization of the Abbey Theatre, and later as a Senator – were far from Synge's experience, although Synge wrote what were considered highly political plays. Yeats, it could be argued, was the consummate insider, while Synge was, by choice, somehow on the fringe of the political activity that marked so much of Ireland in the early part of the twentieth century.

In line with Synge's position as somehow outside of the maneuvers of culture and society, he chose – and not merely at Yeats's recommendation, as Yeats often repeated – to remove himself to the Aran Islands in order to immerse himself in a form of Irish culture that was as foreign to him as that of the Parisians.

The Aran Islands, to the Revivalists, were an outpost of "pure" Irish culture, where the Irish language remained the primary tongue for communication, and where the past might be visited.

Successive generations of Irish thinkers – many of them members of the Protestant Ascendancy – were founding their separatist claims on the rediscovery of the Celtic soul, essentially at odds with the mundane progressivism of the

Anglo-Saxon. And this ancient, mysterious, spirit guide of the nation was to be called forth from the humble cottages of the last living representatives of the Celtic purity, the Irish-speaking farm- and fisherfolk, and pre-eminently those of the western seaboard. Aran, that forlorn outcrop of want, was to become one of the chief confines of this Ireland of the mind. (Robinson xv)

Revivalists found in Aran a sign of the Irish past that, to their minds, was “the uncorrupted heart of Ireland” (Robinson xvii). In attempting to recover the Irish past, Revivalists turned to the Aran Islands as a timeless space in which historical cycles were frozen, a space in which the natural world played a dominant part.

In moving to, building, and living at Walden, Henry David Thoreau had reenacted the Puritan mission of transcendental acts: as Stanley Cavell puts it, “an attempt to live the idea” (Cavell 10). Synge, in moving to the Aran Islands, is also attempting to reenact something, although it is not quite clear to him initially what that is. The life that Synge reenacts is one that he has read of, but not experienced directly; it is a life of the distant past, and Synge attempts to recover that past by imagining himself as existing in it.

“[T]he recourse to the west in Ireland,” Luke Gibbons notes, “is impelled by a search for community, a desire to escape the isolation of the self and to immerse oneself in the company of others” (Gibbons 13). In its search for communal interaction, the Revivalists’ concern with the west differs from Thoreau’s quest for what Emerson had called “self-reliance”.

[T]he image of the west of Ireland elaborated in the Anglo-Irish contribution to the Literary Revival represents the precise opposite [of the American image]: an escape from individualism and the fragmentation of community which Synge believed to be endemic in the modernizing process.

(Gibbons 24)

In *removing* himself, then, Synge is actually attaching himself, purposefully, to a community the likes of which he has been unable to find in urban Dublin culture, in an attempt to live out the ideal of communal inter-reliance.

In this attempt Synge is very different from Yeats and other Revivalists. Unlike his contemporaries, Synge felt himself removed from the politics of his social position as an Anglo-Irishman; Nicholas Grene notes that "the capacity to leave aside the problems of his class" (Grene 5) made him unusual. Disengaging himself from the world of Dublin and its political and cultural activities seemed to come naturally to Synge, who had grown up with a profound love of nature.

His attitude to the countryside was not that of a man who had grown up in it, had owned land or worked on it. It is rather that of the naturalist, of the city child who from an early age is fascinated by nature. The average 'countryman' – that is, the man who actually works on the land – is frequently indifferent to the aesthetic effect of landscape except at some subconscious level. It is the sportsman, the

angler or bird-watcher, those whose contact with the country is in the nature of a holiday or escape, who most appreciate natural phenomena in an aesthetic sense. All through his life Synge spent alternate periods in urban and rural environments. In the years between 1895 and 1902, he spent his winters in Paris, and returned to Ireland for the summer; while he was a director of the Abbey he used to take off two or three months a year in Kerry, Connemara or Wicklow. He was right to claim that he knew the Irish countryside, but he did not know it as an Irish countryman.

(Greene 16)

Synge's knowledge of Irish landscape has, then, a factor of distance to it: he sees the natural world with the eyes of novelty, from one of his class who did not find it necessary to toil in the fields. As a result, a certain amount of romanticism and sentimentality were inevitably to creep into his analysis of what he saw, as has been the case with the writers and texts addressed earlier.

This sentimentality was furthered by the fact that Synge, like Yeats, "regrets above all the decline in the cultural standards of the Anglo-Irish and, like Yeats, looks back with nostalgia to the eighteenth century – 'that one Irish century that escaped from darkness and confusion'" (in Greene 5). Synge turns to the countryside as a place that has been uncorrupted by urbanism; what he sought was a "real" Ireland untouched by present-day politics and attitudes, and an Ireland that still spoke Irish. "For him, the

remote country areas of Ireland still held the values which he saw threatened by an urban culture: he disliked the Gaelic League partly because he saw it as one of the standardizing urbanising influences in districts where there was a tradition of native Irish speaking” (Greene 9). Synge turns away from the newly formed institutions determined to preserve Irish culture and language, and removes himself instead to the Ireland of those institutions’ imaginations.

In moving to the Aran Islands, Synge’s task, as he saw it, was multifold. First, he would immerse himself in the Irish language, which he had been studying for some time; and second, he would so immerse himself in an ancient culture to which that language allowed him entry. Synge, as an Irish speaker, worked in both languages, thus ignoring the division between Irish and English observed by so many others. Even before he left for Aran, Synge kept notebooks in Irish; “For him,” Declan Kiberd notes, “Irish seemed to possess the status of a privileged secret language, a personal code in which he could record his feelings” (Kiberd 1993 29). Besides allowing him a linguistic space that was, outside of Aran and among his contemporaries, immensely private, Irish, and the Aran Islands, gave Synge a subject matter that connected him, in his mind, to the remote Irish past, thus allowing him to exercise a nostalgia and the desire to bring that remote past into the present. Synge’s surprise, in *The Aran Islands*, at finding English as common a tongue as the native Irish, registers this nostalgia. “[I]n general, I was surprised at the abundance and fluency of the foreign tongue” (Synge 1992 6). Such a comment shows clearly what Synge’s hopes were for Aran: to find a civilization untouched by the currents of history and politics.

These hopes were founded in large part upon Synge's study of Irish literature. Like Yeats, Synge found his discovery of Irish literature overwhelming – but Synge was to develop his discovery far beyond the realm of mere interest. Declan Kiberd's book *Synge and the Irish Language* demonstrates the extent to which Synge committed himself to a systematic study of both Irish literature and the Irish language. While at Trinity, Synge kept extensive notes of his studies, strongly influenced by Keating and by Irish language traditions. "In a real sense," Kiberd argues, "Synge can be seen as having revived that tradition" (Kiberd 1993 60). In an early article on Keating, Synge "sought to remind Irish writers and readers of their own lost European tradition. He explained that this was the classic Gaelic tradition, the central inheritance of his fellow countrymen" (Kiberd 1993 60). Synge thus set himself the personal goal of mastering the ancient language of Ireland, and the wider social goal of writing and circulating essays on the literary traditions of that language. Part of that process involved translation. Unlike Yeats, Synge did not rely upon English language versions of old Irish texts, but chose to read them in their original, translating them himself. Kiberd presents abundant information to support the claim that Synge's translation skills "went far deeper than a conventional flair for turning a piece of Irish poetry or prose into English. It involved a capacity to project a whole Gaelic culture in English, a language ostensibly alien to that culture" (Kiberd 1993 88).

Synge's desire to learn Irish and to educate himself in Irish literature was highly unusual within Revivalist circles. Certainly there was a movement to revive the Irish language, but that movement was a limited one, from which many writers of the period –

particularly of the Ascendancy class – were separated. Synge's commitment, then, irked some who were arguing for the translation and updating of the old Irish modes into English.

[I]t was his deliberate cultivation of the methods of classic works of Irish literature which outraged the so-called Gaels of his time. It was his honesty in confronting the native tradition in all its aspects, sweet and sordid, that brought him into disrepute with the selective revivalists of his own day. He was unique among the Anglo-Irish writers of his age in his total commitment to the Gaelic literary tradition; and he was unique among the Gaels of his day in his total commitment to the primacy of literature and the rigours of its craft. Other Gaelic writers emulated the ancient bards in their love of Ireland and praise of its people; Synge alone followed the bards in the lonelier discipline of their craft.

(Kiberd 1993 106)

Synge, then, in this commitment, bypassed the translations of O'Grady and others who had edited old Irish texts to a purpose; he was thus exposed to the Irish tradition as it existed in manuscript form, and not a modernized version of that tradition. His writings were to reflect that exposure, and it was this reflection that was to contribute to the often violent reactions to his later work.

In many ways, Synge became a scholar of the Irish traditions. His immersion in that field, though, because it was driven by the strong desire to unveil the past and pull it into the currents of the present, was marked by a nostalgia for that past. “The covert desire of his book [*The Aran Islands*], to *make the present past*, is something that Synge shares with all of his major creations. . .” (Kiberd 1993 xiv). The manifestation of that nostalgia and that desire was to be the writing of *The Aran Islands*, a study in nostalgia.

Recreating the Past

Tim Robinson, in his introduction to *The Aran Islands*, comments that Synge chose not to discuss two remarkable features of Aran:

the sheets of smooth naked rock that extend for hundreds of yards in terraces below the line of the villages, and the mighty stormbeach around the exposed southern shoreline and on top of the western cliffs. Synge does not mention these two astounding formations, which insistently raise the question of geological origins, of the processes of time: it is as if he wanted to generalize his island into elemental simplicity and atemporality. (Robinson xlii)

That Synge chose to ignore these most obvious aspects of the physicalities of Aran attests to his earlier experiences. Like Yeats, Synge read Darwin at a young age, but experienced a far more traumatic loss of faith: that experience, of being forced to see the

world as a planet marked by the time of millions, and not merely thousands, of years, led in part to Synge's abandonment of the Church as a career.

Before I abandoned science it rendered me an important service. When I was about fourteen I obtained a book of Darwin's. It opened in my hands at a passage where he asks how we can explain the similarity between a man's hands and a bird's or a bat's wings except by evolution. I flung the book aside and rushed out into the open air – it was summer and we were in the country – the sky seemed to have lost its blue and the grass its green. I lay down and writhed in an agony of doubt. My studies showed me the force of what I read, [and] the more I put it from me the more it rushed back with new instances and power. Till then I had never doubted and never conceived that a sane and wise man or boy could doubt. [. . .] By the time I was sixteen or seventeen I had renounced Christianity after a great deal of wobbling, although I do not think I avowed my decision quite so soon. I felt a sort of shame in being thought an infidel, a term which I have always used as a reproach. For a while I denied everything, then I took to reading Carlyle, [Leslie] Stephen and Matthew Arnold, and made myself a sort of incredulous belief that illuminated

nature and lent an object to life without hampering the intellect. This story is easily told, but it was a terrible experience. ("Autobiography" Synge 1982 10-11)

It is undoubtedly this experience, in part, that leads to the strange presentation of time on Aran, made evident by his determination to omit the processes of time whenever possible. Rather than address the temporal development of Aran as a geological formation – a development that, as Robinson notes, is at once obvious to a visitor – Synge opts to create an ancient Irish world that has been untouched by time. "The islands, then, exist only in the shallow, cyclic time of sunsets and tides and seasons, the rippling weather-like time so accurately metered by Synge's prose style itself" (Robinson xliii). This sense of time that relies only upon the most immediate of natural cycles ignores the larger implications of those cycles: those of change and evolution. Instead, Synge attempts to present a world that is untouched by evolutionary time, and untouched by time beyond the boundaries of the islands themselves. The book, which was written over a period of several years, also ignores, but in one or two places, the cycles of time that dictate Synge's own life. "The life-currents that bring him repeatedly to the islands and carry him off again are virtually unrepresented in the book, which suggest that progressive, autobiographical time is as irrelevant as history to the truths he is conveying" (Robinson xliii). Synge, then, makes a conscious choice, in the writing of his book, to stress the atemporality of Aran.

The timelessness of the space Synge presents is intimately tied to the use of the Irish language. "I have decided," Synge writes after finding English too prevalent on the

first of the islands. "to move on to Inishmaan, where Gaelic is more generally used, and the life is perhaps the most primitive that is left in Europe" (Synge 1992 10). The people spoke "with a delicate exotic intonation that was full of charm" (Synge 1992 9), he found. The use of particular words here, at the start of the book – "primitive", "exotic", "charm" – indicates the world that Synge is inclined to seek out: one that is removed from the outside world, and one that he sees from the standpoint of a man of urban, more worldly culture. This distance between Synge and the world in which he immerses himself, and the distance between his use of language and the islanders' use of language, was to prove valuable to Synge's art in the years to come. His characters, outside of those in *The Aran Islands*, employ this exoticism constantly.

The so-called exoticism of Synge's language is related to the remoteness of his characters from the 'big world' with its standardized versions of English. The greater the displacement, the more untamed the life and the more colourful its deviations from the linguistic norm. But the dislocation which makes these people colourful is also that which leaves them powerless. (Kiberd 1993 xiv-v)

Synge, in other words, finds such linguistic deviations "charming", "primitive", and "exotic". But as an outsider, as an observer, he cannot immediately see that by emphasizing such things, he is participating in a colonialist move to identify the observed as an other that can only aspire to the knowledge of the observer. It is not until later, after

having spent a substantial amount of time on the islands, that he is awakened to his own role in this process, and checks his nostalgia with the realism for which he is known.

This process is evidenced in *The Aran Islands*, which reads, curiously enough, as an evolution. Rather than existing merely as an early anthropological record, the book also functions as a record of Synge's evolving attitudes towards the islands, and, by extension, to Irish culture and history, and to his own ideas about these things.

His early time on Aran is marked by the emphasis on atemporality, as already noted, and the resulting emphasis on the primitivism of the islanders and their way of life: their timeless life is actually quite settled, in Synge's mind, in the remote past. "My sadness and delight," he writes, "are older than the walls about me, and have lingered round these rocks since men were hairy and naked, for emotion is as inherent a property to this place as the colour or odour of the waves" (in *Robinson* xlii). Despite having been so traumatized by his reading of Darwin, Synge observes as one who could only come after Darwin: he is conscious of the idea of antiquity, of ancientness, in everything he sees and experiences – aware, in other words, of evolution. Darwin's scientific reasoning allows Synge the space in which to imagine the distant past; but it is writing the likes of O'Grady's and Arnold's that influences his interpretation of that imagining. Like Arnold and other Victorian writers on Ireland, Synge makes a connection between emotion and place, and implies that an immersion in the natural world somehow leads to an intense emotional life, as restless and unsettled and exuberant as the sea. Being a man of the post-Darwin era, though, Synge cannot help but view this connection as primitive, and it is this aspect of the islands with which he is immediately enthralled.

“It gave me a moment of exquisite satisfaction to find myself moving away from civilization in this rude canvas canoe of a model that has served primitive races since men first went on the sea” (Synge 1992 12). Synge writes of an early journey to another of the islands. Being so steeped in Irish literature, Synge cannot help but make the connection between his journey and those journeys of the earliest Irishmen, examples of which were recorded in voyage tales. And, because of his desire to make the past present, Synge experiences “exquisite satisfaction” at the use of “rude” canoes that were the means of mobility for “primitive” men. Such a response – to the primitive and its connection to the present – is standard in the early parts of the book. Synge manages to insert himself into the distant past by insisting upon its relevance and involvement in the present: “I am in the north island again, looking out with a singular sensation to the cliffs across the sound. It is hard to believe that those hovels I can just see in the south are filled with people whose lives have the strange quality that is found in the oldest poetry and legend” (Synge 1992 69). The past is a constant presence for Synge as he exists on Aran, one that puts him in touch with a reality he has never known before.

This insistence extends to the islanders’ lives in almost every aspect. Their possessions are particularly significant because of being few and often handmade: “Every article on these islands has an almost personal character, which gives this simple life, where all art is unknown, something of the artistic beauty of medieval life” (Synge 1992 13-4). It seems obvious to point out that in idealizing a simple, “medieval” life, Synge chooses to see only the benefits of that life, ignoring, until much later, the very real poverty, isolation, and hard work that accompany it. Like early monks writing of an

imagined pastoral life. Synge edits his vision to focus, initially, on the most positive aspects of Aran life. Just as medieval Irish monks wrote idealized versions of the possibilities of their future lives that are pastorals. Synge writes of an idealized, pastoral existence on Aran, a life in which everyone is in communion, with each other and with the natural world.

It is likely that much of the intelligence and charm of these people is due to the absence of any division of labour, and to the correspondingly wide development of each individual, whose varied knowledge and skill necessitate a considerable activity of mind. Each man can speak two languages. He is a skilled fisherman, and can manage a curagh [sic] with extraordinary nerve and dexterity. He can farm simply, burn kelp, cut out pampooties, mend nets, build and thatch a house, and make a cradle or a coffin. His work changes with the seasons in a way that keeps him free from the dullness that comes to people who have always the same occupation. The danger of his life on the sea gives him the alertness of a primitive hunter, and the long nights he spends fishing in his curagh bring him some of the emotions that are thought peculiar to men who have lived with the arts. (Synge 1992 84)

What Synge sees, on Aran, is a life that resembles a communal Walden, where each individual is directly involved in almost every aspect of his own existence: from food and clothing production to the building of shelter, changing professions hour to hour as necessity deems. So enchanted is Synge with the idea of this life and its effects on the development of the individual that he believes, at certain moments, that he would like to live permanently among the islanders:

[T]hese men of Inishmaan seemed to be moved by strange
archaic sympathies with the world. Their mood accorded
itself with wonderful fineness to the suggestions of the day,
and their ancient Gaelic seemed so full of divine sympathy
that I would have liked to turn to the west and row with
them for ever.

I told them I was going back to Paris in a few days
to sell my books and my bed, and that I was coming back to
grow as strong and simple as they were among the islands
of the west. (Synge 1992 94-5)

This, one of the few times that Synge's life beyond Aran inserts itself into the text, is a clear representation of the pastoral Synge is creating. He desires to live a simple life on Aran, desiring to abandon his own (by implication) complex life beyond the realm of the islands. The result is almost startling: after being immersed in the world that Synge sketches, the mention of Paris seems overwhelmingly worldly and foreign next to the simplicity he describes. In this way Synge creates a text similar to traditional pastoral: a

man of urban education – if not of a strictly urban upbringing – longs for the simple life of nature as a remedy to the social and political complexities of his own world. Synge's nostalgia, which is implicit in such a longing, is for a life that he has never lived, and one to which he is, despite a long term presence on Aran, an outsider.

Declan Kiberd recognizes that Synge has created, through this process of glorifying the islanders and their lives, a pastoral form that describes a classless society that is only gradually being marked by rank and hierarchy.

In *The Aran Islands*, Synge constructed a sort of pastoral, which had many of the classic features of earlier forays in Africanist or Orientalist mode: the reconstitution of the setting as landscape of the individual consciousness. [. . .] Synge's pastoralism, however, is not of the conventional western kind which is designed to occlude painful class differences: in his world, rather than have aristocrats play at being peasants, he effects a revolutionary reversal, which allows him to impute to the islanders an aristocratic mien and lightness of foot. . . (Kiberd 1995 287-8)

While Kiberd's point is in part an astute one – Synge's pastoral is not typical in all ways – it places too much emphasis on the idea that Synge is employing a “revolutionary reversal”. While Synge does credit the islanders with a great deal, he is still conscious of a gap between their experience and his own, and allows himself to edit, in *The Aran Islands* at least, some of the experience in order to fit it in with his conception

of their ideal way of life. This editing process results. I would argue, in a much more traditional pastoral form than Kiberd admits to.

Synge omits subjects that do not interest him: the resulting text is thus not an anthropological account, but one shaped by the personal ideas of the author. In telling of an encounter with an islander, he writes, "From this he wandered off into tedious matters of theology. . . ." (Synge 1992 11). In another encounter, he omits a story told to him by a local as "a rude anecdote not worth recording" (Synge 1992 55). "Synge," Nicholas Grene notes, "felt great sympathy for the people of Aran, admired them and identified with them. Profoundly agnostic himself, he wanted to see them not as the devout Catholics they no doubt were, but as people whose orthodox Catholicism barely covered primitive pagan attitudes" (Grene 31). By editing out what was a significant element in the islanders' lives, Synge shapes his experience into what is, ultimately, a pastoral. John C. Messenger, in analyzing the value of the book as an anthropological study, comments that

although an exceptional work of art, it suffers from
primitivism, a lack of concern with the importance of
Catholicism in the lives of the folk, and the projection of
the author's tragic view of life into his interpretations.

(136)

Messenger defines "primitivism" as an "*idealisation of past or future cultural estates or of contemporary primitive and folk cultures*" (4 italics mine). This definition of the primitive implies the inclusion of nostalgia: in order to assess a culture as primitive, one

must idealize the past, which is precisely what Synge does in emphasizing the “primitivism” of the islanders.

Synge’s preoccupation with the primitive on the island suggests that modern life, as he sees it, has lost something significant in abandoning certain primitive ways. When he has to return to the mainland on errands and business, he is unimpressed by what he finds. “After my weeks spent among primitive men this glimpse of the newer types of humanity was not reassuring” (Synge 1992 44), he writes. Again Synge demonstrates that his observations would not be possible without the influence of Darwin. He is conscious that there are “newer types of humanity,” signaling a recognition, again, of the processes of evolution. This recognition appears many times. “The absence of the heavy boot of Europe has preserved to these people the agile walk of the wild animal. . .” (Synge 1992 21) he writes. In making such a note, Synge acknowledges here the connection between animal and human that had so shaken the world when Darwin published *The Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man*. Despite hating Darwin for depriving him of his faith, Synge has accepted his theories, even if unconsciously, repeatedly demonstrating observations that would not have been possible otherwise.

Synge as Naturalist

This way of seeing the world of Aran – as primitive and so a living record of the past – is inextricably bound to nature. “I cannot say it too often, the supreme interest of the island lies in the strange concord that exists between the people and the impersonal

limited but powerful impulses of the nature that is around them” (in Robinson xxxvii). It is the bond with nature that defines the islanders, in Synge’s mind, as primitive.

Synge had a committed interest as a child in the natural world: “Even at this time I was a worshipper of nature. I remember that I would not allow my nurses to sit down on the seats by the [River] Dodder because they were [man-] made. If they wished to sit down they had to find a low branch of a tree or a bit of rock or bank” (“Autobiographies” Synge 1982 5). This childhood love of nature led to his adult habit of walking through various regions of Ireland in order to know people and landscape. Writing sketches for an unfinished autobiography, Synge attributed his attachment to nature as having grown out of an unfulfilled longing.

I think the consciousness of beauty is awakened in persons as in peoples by a prolonged unsatisfied desire. . . Perhaps the modern feeling for the beauty of nature as a particular quality – an expression of divine ecstasy rather than a mere decoration of the world -- arose when men began to look on everything about them with the unsatisfied longing which has its proper analogue in puberty. . . (“Autobiographies” Synge 1982 13)

What Synge describes here is a form of pastoral longing. His own puberty brought the dilemma of facing Darwin’s theories of evolution, and, as we have seen, Synge eventually came to terms with the dilemma by turning to Carlyle and Arnold, and creating for

himself an “incredulous belief that illuminated nature” (“Autobiographies” Synge 1982 11). Unable to believe in human beings as the focus of the universe, and unable to believe in a God, Synge experiences a pastoral longing for a perfect existence in nature, the site of his longings.

Despite his resolution to focus upon the natural world as the site of a natural faith, Synge’s adult experience of nature is somehow detached in the sense that he is always moving in nature as an outsider: he is a visitor to the small Wicklow and Kerry towns that his walks lead him through, and is often recognized in Wicklow as one of a wealthy family. This distance between Synge and the world of nature is necessarily eclipsed on Aran, where the exposure to weather and wind was ubiquitous. In Aran, Synge finds a way of bridging the gap between himself as man and the natural world as something evolving separately.

The natural world of Aran, Synge finds, continually mirrors and reflects the lives and emotions of its inhabitants. Following a funeral, a thunderstorm mounts an attack on the sky, moving Synge to note the connection. “In Inishmaan one is forced to believe in a sympathy between man and nature, and at this moment when the thunder sounded a death-peal of extraordinary grandeur above the voices of the women, I could see the faces near me stiff and drawn with emotion” (Synge 1992 31). Synge desires to believe in this sympathy above all things, wanting a connection between the physical, outside world, and the spiritual and emotional life of the interior mind. Again this signals the impact of Darwin on Synge’s thinking: having lost his faith, he turns quite literally, as Yeats did in theory, to the life of nature as a form of faith.

Nature on Aran has, as Tim Robinson puts it, a “Darwinian ruthlessness” (xliv) that is evidenced daily. The danger to which islanders are exposed in their curaghs is another preoccupation of Synge’s. “Down in this shallow trough of canvas that bent and trembled with the motion of the men, I had a far more intimate feeling of the glory and power of the waves than I have ever known in a steamer” (Synge 1992 72). The primitiveness of the island allows Synge to experience nature as directly as he can: “Even, I thought, if we were dropped into the blue chasm of the waves, this death, with the fresh sea saltiness in one’s teeth, would be better than most deaths one is likely to meet” (Synge 1992 53). That Synge relishes the intimacy he can enjoy with the sea in Aran is overwhelmingly evident but, as an outsider, he is also very aware of the dangers of the sea, and exaggerates them. The threat of drowning is, for Synge as for early Irish writers, preeminent:

I could not help feeling that I was talking with men who
were under a judgment of death. I knew that every one of
them would be drowned in the sea in a few years and
battered naked on the rocks, or would die in his own cottage
and be buried with another fearful scene in the graveyard I
had come from. (Synge 1992 49)

This exaggeration – clearly not every one of the men will be drowned, or the island’s population would have died out – signals Synge’s position as an outsider, as one who views the danger of the sea without having much personal knowledge of it. “This continual danger, which can only be escaped by extraordinary personal dexterity, has

considerable influence on the local character, as the waves have made it impossible for clumsy, foolhardy, or timid men to live on these islands" (Synge 1992 49). The natural world is unforgiving, and while Synge goes too far in believing that so many men will die by the waves each year, he manages to recognize the symbiosis between man and nature on the island, and the Darwinian influence of environment upon personal development and, in this case, character.

Since, though, that environment is a changeable one, there is a danger to the inhabitants of the island, particularly, in Synge's mind, because of the lack of modern equipment. "The islanders' symbiotic pact with nature, then, leaves them helpless when it is broken, in the absence of civilization's support" (Robinson xlvii). This would have been quite evident to Synge, who not only had not been raised to maneuver a curagh through storms, but also suffered from ill health that relied upon modern medicine for relief. The struggle that he witnesses in Aran – that of a struggle with and against nature for a livelihood – impresses him as another example of the presence of the past in the islanders' lives.

In such a setting, man is constantly confronted with the harshest facts of his condition, his helplessness and his mortality. Synge understood this as an essentially pagan situation. In the underlying mournfulness of the people, in their fierce outbursts in the face of death, he saw the primitive response to the tragedy of human existence.

But if nature was man's enemy on Aran, if frequently he seemed to be alone in a hostile natural universe, it was also what gave beauty and distinction to the lives of the islanders. (Greene 37)

The islanders are granted this beauty to their lives by Synge, but it is a beauty to which they are quite oblivious: their existence is not marked by the divide between culture and nature that preoccupied urban men, the creators of the pastoral ideal. "Synge," Nicholas Greene notes, "is constantly trying to find in the islanders an emotion comparable to his own in the appreciation of nature, but they have none of his self-conscious awareness" (Greene 38). A paradox exists, then: those closest to nature were not conscious of the intimacy.

[T]he real Irish depicted by Synge . . . were closer to nature than the cultivators of desmesnes, but they seemingly could not distance, objectify or appreciate it. Even though their experience of nature was also cultural, mediated through husbandry and their own informal field sports, the distinction between nature and culture does not appear to have pressed urgently or philosophically upon them. (Livingstone 420)

If the islanders did not distinguish between nature and culture, neither did they distinguish between the natural and supernatural. Because of the unreliability of the environment, superstitions and folk beliefs abound on the island. Synge is quick to fall

under the spell of an indistinction between the natural and the supernatural, and quick too, it would seem, to believe in it, if to a more limited extent. "At first the people do not give much attention to the wilderness that is round them, but after a few days their voices sink in the kitchen, and their endless talk of pigs and cattle falls to the whisper of men who are telling stories in a haunted fashion" (Synge 1992 29). While the practicalities and daily activities demanded by the natural world of Aran are a subject of constant conversation, as would seem necessary, they give way to a different type of talk that relies upon folklore and myth. Synge is told about fairies and their connection to the landscape. "'It is there the fairies do be playing ball in the night, and you can see the marks of their heels when you come in the morning'" (Synge 1992 118), one man tells him. The influence of such stories upon Synge is strong enough that he ends by believing in the possibility of the supernatural. "Some dreams I have had in this cottage seem to give strength to the opinion that there is a psychic memory attached to certain neighborhoods" (Synge 1992 54). Both of these incidents draw upon the traditional Irish practice of *dindsenchas* and the possibility of knowing the past through the present landscape. Synge, so aware of Irish literature, would have been conscious of this connection, and so nurtured it. "[I]t is clear that the nature-mysticism, which is an important feature of Synge's plays, is derived to a considerable extent from his contact with these people who lived in communion with the natural world" (Price 79). Like his contemporaries, Synge sought and found evidence for an intimate connection between nature and the Irish. Strongly influenced by both Darwin and by post-Romantic ideologies about the natural world, he replaces his lost faith with a belief in the connection

between physical and spiritual worlds. "These people," he notes, "make no distinction between the natural and supernatural" (Synge 1992 80).

The Reality of Pastoral

However, Synge was to differ in a significant way from his contemporaries. His realism and his willingness to confront his own nostalgia set him apart and result in writing that is both pastoral and anti-pastoral: for Synge checks himself with a hard realism. This realism does not make itself felt immediately in *The Aran Islands*. The process by which Synge arrives at a more realistic view of the islands involves the passing of time, which he initially resisted inserting into the narrative.

At first, Synge finds that the red clothing of the island women "give a glow of almost Eastern richness" (Synge 1992 13). The emphasis on the exoticism of the women implies a foreignness with which Synge is utterly unfamiliar; his choice of the phrase "Eastern" demonstrates just how foreign the culture is to him. "Their red bodices and white tapering legs make them as beautiful as tropical seabirds, as they stand in a frame of seaweeds against the brink of the Atlantic" (Synge 1992 33). Synge continues here to emphasize the foreignness of the women, this time seeing them as exotic creatures of the sea, the element that dictates so much of the tenor of his visits to Aran. As Joyce would do with his famous "bird girl" scene in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Synge makes the observation of these women erotic, charged with a subtle sexual energy that is only implied with his choice of words. By the second year of his visits, though, the girls

on the beach “looked strangely wild and seal-like with the salt caked upon their lips and wreaths of seaweed in their hair” (Synge 1992 63). Very subtly – almost imperceptibly – Synge’s view of these women has moved away from the exotic, the erotic, towards a view of them as utterly foreign, separated from him by some natural phenomenon.

This change in perception is apparent elsewhere. “In some ways,” he writes, “these men and women seem strangely far away from me. They have the same emotions that I have, and the animals have, yet I cannot talk to them when there is much to say, more than to the dog that whines beside me in a mountain fog” (Synge 1992 66). There is a mournfulness in such an admission; Synge longs to be able to communicate fully with the people he has come to so admire, but he is recognizing here a gap that, it seems, is overwhelming. In part this gap seems due to Synge’s status as an outsider on the island, but he suggests in such comments that the gap is more significant than that, arising out of the gap between “civilization” and “primitivism”.

“This year I see a darker side of life in the islands. The sun seldom shines, and day after day a cold south-western wind blows over the cliffs, bringing up showers of hail and dense masses of cloud” (Synge 1992 61). Gradually Synge is forced to look beyond the obvious beauties of the island and the advantages of a life there, towards the mercilessness of the weather and the poverty that affects everyone. Unlike others of the Revival, Synge “worried constantly about the gap between a beautiful culture and the poverty that can underlie it” (Kiberd 1993 xiii). Declan Kiberd notes. The realization of that gap comes on the islands, and impacts all of Synge’s work to come.

Towards the end of *The Aran Islands*, Synge writes that he became “indescribably mournful, for I felt that this little corner on the face of the world, and the people who live in it, have a peace and dignity from which we are shut for ever” (Synge 1992 114). His longing to be a part of the community is overwhelmingly obvious. The gradual realizations of the life the men and women of Aran lead – forced to submit to the whim of weather and ocean, toiling without pause for mere survival – do not diminish Synge’s admiration.

Synge’s emphasis on the primitive quality of life on Aran is not just naive idealisation of the ‘noble savage’. By a return to a primitive milieu, he felt that he escaped from the accidental features of contemporary urban life, and reached essential truths. In Aran he found a community relatively untouched by the standard concepts of the ‘big world’ – progress, modernity, centralisation. He valued it accordingly, not only as it was archaic, traditional and picturesque, but as it showed ‘the thing itself, unaccommodated man’. (Greene 35)

Synge’s Aran experience does not offer him simply a foray into the world of ancient Ireland and a space in which to indulge his nostalgia for that unknown time; ultimately the experience serves as an autobiographical voyage tale, in much the same way as Thoreau’s *Walden* offers a personalized voyage of the mind.

Documentary value aside, from the literary critic's point of view, *The Aran Islands* is a profound spiritual autobiography whose landscape, like that of the Medieval [sic] penitential voyages, is utterly essential but ultimately emblematic, a spiritual projection. . . Beneath the apparent symbolism of primal unity, the western island became for Synge the pared habitat of the self: his lasting vision was not that for which he traveled to the Aran and Blasket islands, nor was it like that of the Sons of O'Corra who found God or Maelduin who found human companionship. Synge found his own solitariness, and so transposed the Medieval *Immram* into the 20th century. (Foster 1988 130)

After Aran

Synge's early writing, as many critics have noted, was relatively unsuccessful: the language of his early poems is straining towards expression. It was only after his experiences on Aran and after his time in Wicklow that he discovered a voice in which to write. Synge, in *The Aran Islands*, had attempted a shift from oral to written tradition, just as his medieval forbears had. Curiously, Stanley Cavell finds a similar shift taking place in Thoreau's work: Thoreau is searching, he argues, for a "father tongue" – a matured language – and one that is necessarily written, not spoken. The fact that such

different men, on two different continents, are involved in the same process suggests that a part of creating a modern national identity is this transformation from oral to written tradition. The oral tradition that Synge found in Aran was inspiration enough to alter his work irrevocably. What results is a

created authenticity. The language of the people is fashioned by Synge, not by transcribing what he heard, but by reworking it in accordance with his theoretical knowledge of Irish grammar and syntax, his sense of the genuineness of some phrases, his personal preference for others. What emerges is the distinctive, the unique dialect of Synge's plays. . . (Greene 29 italics mine)

This language, that relies upon Irish syntax so heavily, is, in many ways, pastoral, in that it is a created naturalism, a created rusticity.

In this, Synge revives Theocritus's and Vergil's classical pastoral forms, which relied upon the creation by the poet of a rustic speaker who knew nothing of the artifice of poetics. Besides the invention and use of a rustic language, Synge revives other traditions of Theocritus's pastorals: the battles between old and young, love complaints, and a natural sexuality that would outrage many of his contemporaries. Like Theocritus's pastorals, and like most pastorals, Synge's plays were not written for a rural audience; they were constructed for Dublin theatregoers. Synge "never tried to make his own plays comprehensible to country folk. On the contrary, his work consciously exploits the fact that it presents primitive material to a sophisticated urban audience" (Kiberd 1993 218).

The Playboy of the Western World and *The Shadow of the Glen*, Synge's best known plays, both move away from the initial pastoral of *The Aran Islands* into a realm that can well be described as anti-pastoral in the same vein as Patrick Kavanagh's poetry. The natural world is key background to all of the plays, and Synge himself professed the significance of nature as a theme for Irish theater:

An Irish drama that is written in Ireland about Irish people, and not on a foreign model will and must be national in so far as it exists at all. Our hope of it is that as Ireland is a beautiful and lovely country the drama that Ireland is now producing may catch a little of this beauty and loveliness. . . . A beautiful art has never been produced except in a beautiful environment and no where is there one more beautiful than in the mountains and glens of Ireland.

(*Collected Works* III 224-5)

While one might take exception to Synge's theory that art can only be produced in "a beautiful environment", one must take him at his word in terms of the significance of the theory to his own work. The world of nature, hovering in the background of Synge's drama, signifies his characters' outsider status, as well as the significance he grants to their lives: for nature, in Synge, is always an indication of value.

Synge's representation of the peasant on the Abbey stage in the guise of *The Playboy of the Western World* incited furor, despite his personal commitment to the peasant way of life. This furor arose because of Synge's candor in relating tales of rural

Ireland: while nationalism had already linked itself to rural Ireland, it had done so in a way that idealized that rurality.

Nationalist rhetoric had . . . already linked the Gaelic past and the Gaelic countryside but in a different way from the link delineated in Synge's world: that which was all Irish (or all too Irish, as Joyce might emend) was spotless in virtue and an important resource in the struggle against the English. (Dasenbrook 141)

Unlike many of his contemporaries, including Yeats in his early stages, Synge refused to present mere idealizations of Ireland, choosing instead to present a reality instructed by his own study of Irish literature in the original, as well as the rural Ireland he had himself experienced. In a letter to Stephen MacKenna, Synge wrote that "no drama can grow out of anything other than the fundamental realities of life which are never fantastic, are neither modern nor unmodern and, as I see them, rarely spring-dayish, or breezy and Cuchulainoid" (in Dasenbrook 136). Despite, then, his commitment to Irish literature and to the Irish past, Synge could not help but see that "Cuchulainoid" drama was unrealistic, and avoided much of the experience of rural Ireland at the start of the twentieth century. Synge's ability to see – and not merely to imagine – the realities of Irish life for the poor and the marginal had been developed in Aran, where, as we have seen, his vision sharpened into focus, leading him away from a purely pastoral representation to one that recognized the negatives as well as the positives.

In Christy, Synge “is using the Celtic Revival’s own creation, its cherished Celtic-peasant hero, to critique the very purpose of many of the revival’s adherents” (Holder 147). Christy’s ignorance, his violence, his desire to get away from the grueling cycle of work in rural Ireland, his fantastic storytelling, are all characteristics that many of the revivalists would have rather ignored. Despite these flaws, however, Christy also has his positive qualities: Synge is, after all, attempting to sketch a complete character, and not merely a hero or anti-hero. Christy has elements of the poet about him, and also loves nature. “A love for natural things is a sure touchstone of value in Synge. Our sympathy for Christy is engaged even as his pretensions to glory are debunked” (Greene 138).

Synge committed himself to exposing the reality of Irish rural life, based upon his experiences in the west as well as in Wicklow, and it was this commitment that provoked such violent responses to his work. The “Playboy riots” signaled just how deep a resentment could be invoked by what was seen as a betrayal of pastoral Ireland.

Synge’s fantastic realism was at odds with that cast of mind which, tensed in repudiation of the 600-year-long slurs that had accompanied colonization, would admit no defect in the life of Catholic rural Ireland and held that an Irish National Theatre should be the vehicle of patriotic propaganda.

(Robinson xxviii)

Synge’s plays, while evoking “traditional” Ireland through allusion to the old sagas and myths, ultimately refused to offer a simple idealization of that world.

[Synge's] critique of the middle class comes from the perspective of the outcast, whereas Yeats imagined that he was defending the ideals of a vanishing aristocracy.

The distinction here may be related to the difference between Synge's and Yeats's attitude towards the Irish past. For Yeats, the past represented a coherent organic state like the one Ruskin associated with the Middle Ages.
(McCarthy 167)

That Synge viewed the Irish past differently from Yeats is unquestionable. Rather than seeing the past as an idealized present, and the present as a declining version of the past, Synge saw instead the past as containing what we saw him refer to earlier as "the fundamental realities of life". Rather than idealizing those realities, he attempted to represent them, in his work following *The Aran Islands*, as truly as possible, relying on his reading of the past to inform the present. "If Synge evoked the greatness of the saga life, the better to mock the littleness of the contemporary peasant, then the irony works both ways, mocking also the portentous bearing and blind violence of the ancient protagonists" (Kiberd 1993 109). The irony that Kiberd identifies here is one that Synge's contemporaries, including Yeats, failed to recognize until the Easter Rising forced it upon them. Synge alone recognized early on the danger of poets and writers glorifying a violent past without realizing the implications for a soon-to-be nation that was fighting the bit and raring to be free.

As a result of the Playboy riots.

producers and actors had settled for a tamer option: to play up the lyricism, to encourage beloved national actors to lilt the lovely lines, and to present onstage a version of Eamon de Valera's pastoral, a vision of athletic youths and comely maidens at a crossroads dance. Constrained by a state subsidy, the National Theatre had converted a revolutionary play into a nationalist pastoral.

(Kiberd 1993 xi)

Synge's bewilderment in face of the response to his play is well known: like Yeats, he was disgusted by the inability of the audience to recognize the thematic significance of the play rather than focusing on details such as the word "shift" that ran up against the pastoral politics of contemporary Dublin society.

The Shadow of the Glen, the Synge play best known after *Playboy*, is believed by many to be a masterpiece, "for in it Synge had achieved his major aim of transmuting folk beliefs into modern dramatic form" (Kiberd 1993 175). The theme of the tramp, a common one in Synge's essays on Wicklow, is exploited here to full effect in the character of the chance visitor to Nora's cottage on the night of her husband's supposed death. The resulting drama pits the older husband against his younger wife, and the life of indoor comfort against that of wild nature. When Nora's husband awakens from his feigned death to denounce her behavior, she is forced to choose to go with the tramp on his journeys around the countryside. "A tramp, as Synge suggests, is most often a single dropout from an ordinary rural family who chooses to take to the roads for personal reasons of

temperament or circumstance” (Greene 88). The tramp in this play has evidently chosen his life on the road, living in the wilderness of the Wicklow mountains. Nora, however, does not choose a life in the wilderness at once; she is, by virtue of her situation, displaced, like Sweeney, into the natural world; she “clearly regards the life of the roads as a last resort” (Greene 96). Nora’s situation invites comparison with those who turned to the *fian* for help or justice; just as the *fian* offered a form of protection to those living the life of nature, the tramp offers her protection and companionship in her future life. And, the play implies, she might well be better off in the wilderness, which at least affords freedom.

As *Playboy* was inspired by Synge’s experiences in the west of Ireland and the tales he was told, so is *The Shadow of the Glen* inspired by Synge’s experience, this time in Wicklow. Synge’s was a Wicklow family, and he spent a great deal of his time wandering from village to village, talking with those he met along the way. As in Aran, he was struck in Wicklow by the tremendous isolation of the people he met, and their separation from the modern world. “People like these,” he remarks after a particular encounter, “like the old woman and these two beautiful children, are a precious possession for any country. They console us, one moment at least, for the manifold and beautiful life we have all missed who have been born in modern Europe” (“People and Places” Synge 1982 199). In Wicklow, then, too, Synge seeks out lives that he believes hold something that the modern world lacks, an indescribable something that he longs for and feels nostalgia for, despite having never experienced it.

Writing of an evening twilight in early autumn. Synge feels this longing come over him, wishing that

this twilight might be eternal and I pass these [cottage]
doors in endless pilgrimage. Yet they make me and, I
believe, many or most people who feel these things, more
dejected than any sight of misery.

At such moments one regrets every hour that one
has lived outside of Ireland and every night that one has
passed in cities. Twilight and autumn are both full of the
suggestion that we connect with death and the ending of
earthly vigour, and perhaps in a country like Ireland this
moment has an emphasis that is not known elsewhere.

("People and Places" Synge 1982 200)

Synge's language here is full of the influence of people like Matthew Arnold: he associates the moody sentimentalism he feels with the landscape, his longing with the sight of people he naively believes to be happier than he and his urban contemporaries are. Too, though, such a passage indicates the tragic element in Synge's philosophy. In Aran this made itself evident through Synge's preoccupation with the threat of drowning; here, in Wicklow, he sees the threat of the natural world being simply the impending threat of death.

The hills are to the Wicklow men what the sea is to the
Aran islanders, at once their source of livelihood and a

potentially terrible enemy. In the empty spaces of the Wicklow mountains, as on the bare rocks of Aran, nature seems at best indifferent, at worst malevolent and destructive. The shadow of the glen is more than the shadow of old age and death; it is that force in nature which crushes man's consciousness and denies his being, which annihilates him with the sense of his insignificance.

(Greene 86)

The liminality of twilight brings thoughts to Synge's minds much like those Thoreau experiences in winter at Walden when he witnesses the stripping of the ice from the pond. The natural world brings Synge to philosophical crisis, making him question the life he leads – in foreign lands and in cities – and forcing him to conclude that in nature is a purer, more satisfactory life: and, inevitably, that life is somehow separated from him.

The natural world serves, in Synge's works, as a site for reflection, a site of longing, and, in the case of his characters, of displacement. The power of nature, whether it is the power of the sea over the Aran islanders' lives or the power of the mountains over the Wicklow people's lives, is a dominating energy, one that Synge voluntarily submits himself to, again and again, in search of a more clearly defined reality. Within that search for reality, Synge focuses on marginal figures, much as his medieval forbears did, whether the Aran Islanders, whose physical existence at the edge of Europe marks them as outsiders to much of Irish and European developments, or the rural peasants of Wicklow, Conemara, and Kerry who are transformed into the characters of his plays.

In his preoccupation with characters who have no “place” – who must make for themselves an alternative world – Synge evokes a central issue of Celtic nationalism, which perpetually contrasted the “spiritual” qualities of Celtic culture with the crass materialism of Anglo culture, interpreting all that was bad in modern society as a result of British influence. (Holder 146)

In so doing, Synge allies himself with much of the movement of the revival, in a crucial way participating in the realm of pastoral politics. However, through his determined realism, and in his commitment to Irish literature as it had been produced hundreds of years before and not in contemporary translation, Synge emerges as a writer who engages pastoral forms while simultaneously demythologizing their power. That Synge’s final, incomplete work, *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, continues this theme of demythologizing, is telling, and indicates where his work might have gone.

In *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, he inaugurated what was to become an important current in modern Irish literature, the conscious de-mythologizing of Irish mythology. The “Cyclops” chapter of *Ulysses* and Flann O’Brien’s *At Swim-Two-Birds* are more extended, more self-conscious, and more comic efforts in the same direction. These later works are closer to the *Playboy* in tone than to *Deirdre*, but

they should all be seen as antidotes to Cuchulainoid
attitudes towards the Irish past. (Dasenbrook 142)

Synge began his literary career with an immersion in the Irish past, in his move to the Aran Islands, and moved gradually towards the realization that the past could not offer a model for the present except by illuminating the constancy of human themes over time. In reaching this revelation, his work moved towards a realism that was paralleled by Yeats's similar development, although over a longer period of time. Nature, and landscape, while they are initially the sites for a reflective nostalgia, gradually come to be much more complex in their signification, elements of an Irish past that contain both ideals and their opposites.

Following the era of the revival, Irish literature was to move into a new, far more international phase, through the works of authors like Joyce and Beckett. Yeats and Synge thus represent the culmination of pastoral forms as they contribute to the idea of nation. Modernism, in its urban, interior focus, was to move rapidly away from the natural world. Somewhat surprisingly, however, the theme of nature and nostalgia would be one that would persist.

Chapter Seven

Epilogue: Nature and Nostalgia in Post-Revival Literature

"It is generally held," Luke Gibbons writes, "that Irish society had to await the end of the de Valera era to awake from its nostalgic slumbers" (Gibbons 82). An era of pastoral politics and the Revival in literature of pastoral conceptions of the natural world, used as the foundations of the nation, was to exert what amounted to a strangle hold on Irish culture. There were writers, of course, who chose to remove themselves from this force whose effects Gibbons refers to as "nostalgic slumbers". and it was these writers, the voluntary exiles Joyce and then Beckett, who were to dominate the realm of Irish literature in the post-Revival period. In closing this discussion of the themes of nature and nostalgia in Irish literature, I would like to turn to a brief examination of the ways in which these themes have been developed since the Revival, particularly since Joyce and Beckett are, along with Yeats, the most critically acclaimed authors to have come out of Ireland during the last century. Despite their determined non-insularity, Joyce and Beckett were inevitably influenced by the history from which Stephen Daedalus was famously attempting to escape. How, then, do the themes examined here effect the post-Revival period?

Neither Joyce nor Beckett is known for literary representation of nature and landscape, and so we might inquire whether the tradition of a preoccupation with nature and landscape loses its force in the modern and post-modern eras as the unlikely avant garde writers Joyce and Beckett turned against tradition. However, the themes are

present, only changed: while earlier authors, up to and including Yeats, concerned themselves most obviously with an exterior landscape,¹ both Joyce and Beckett turn to the mapping of an interior landscape, and in both nostalgia serves a significant function, in that both authors question (explicitly and implicitly, respectively) its influence and control of contemporary culture. In so doing, Joyce and Beckett both engage in a critical process, that of forcing a re-evaluation of the status of Irish culture, of critiquing the ideology that relied so heavily upon a memory of the past to determine the value of the present.

After Yeats

Joyce's writing is, quite obviously, urban: he concerns himself, over and over again, with the Ireland that is to be found in the city of Dublin. The urban culture of which Joyce wrote was not concerned with the communal values that are to be found in so much of Irish literature up to this point. Joyce, instead, presents figures who, in their urban settings, struggle with solitude and the labyrinth of the self in the face of modernity, individuals who pass through the community without feeling an integral part of it. These figures, particularly in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses*, are concerned with the attempt to define themselves in space, the space of the city.

¹ Yeats, of course, was also concerned with the mapping of an interior world, but, given his preoccupation with antinomies generally, this concern is counterbalanced with another for the exterior world and the tradition he inherits as an Irish author.

Stephen, in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, expresses these concerns when he memorably makes an inscription on a school book identifying himself in local and then universal space. His experience of the world as a child is his walks around the city and to its borders. He is part of a new generation, reared in cities, whose family values are nonetheless traditionally rural. While he enjoys the cows and nature during the summer,

when autumn came the cows were driven home from the
grass: and the first sight of the filthy cowherd at Stradbrook
with its foul green puddles and clots of liquid dung and
steaming brantroughs sickened Stephen's heart. The cattle
which had seemed so beautiful in the country on sunny
days revolted him and he could not even look at the milk
they yielded. (66)

Stephen is thus one of the earliest characters to represent fully the push of the anti-pastoral into Irish literature. Rather than celebrating the countryside for its beauties, Joyce allows Stephen, the child of a city, to view it in all its guises. "Unlike other urban intellectuals in both Ireland and England, Joyce had no romantic illusions about the restorative powers of the countryside and did not look to a pre-lapsarian past for an unbroken, pristine Irish identity" (Gibbons 168). Stephen's disgust with the unromantic side of rural culture is also Joyce's disgust with a culture that idealizes rurality at the expense of progress and realism.

Joyce's flight from nature is obvious: the culture that he seeks to represent is that of the new urban sensibility. "In Joyce, nature has been absorbed – to the point of invisibility – into cultural schemes in the matter of literary modernism, which tends to the urban and international" (Foster 1997d 610). Still, while nature is absorbed, the countryside lurks in the background as the determining factor in characters' visions of the world:

What was clear, from the pages of Shaw and Joyce, was a picture of the new peasant proprietors in the countryside and of an emerging middle class in the cities and towns, which tended to be dominated by first- or second-generation immigrants from rural areas. . . Dublin was in 1904 a classic example of a periphery-dominated-centre, that is to say, a conurbation dominated by the values and mores of the surrounding countryside. (Kiberd 1995 484-5)

Dublin, as a growing metropolis whose population was never at far remove from the country, is represented by Joyce as lacking urban sophistication, still reliant on the old ideas and ways of rural Ireland that do not apply to urban life and result in the famous paralysis of inaction that determines *Dubliners*. Stephen's difficulty, in both *Portrait* and *Ulysses*, is attempting to find his way as an urban man through a labyrinth of the city (and thus the self) that has been determined by the traditional values of the countryside.

Joyce recognizes the influence of pastoralism on the era, and it frequently becomes a target for his quiet sarcasm and disdain. Stephen, as a writer in progress, is

frequently preoccupied with images of the natural world that summon words to his mind, but his experience of the natural world is always mediated through language and his experience of literature. He meditates on poetry, romantic poetry, and then, afterwards, considers the world:

He drew forth a phrase from his treasure and spoke it softly to himself:

-- A day of dappled seaborne clouds.

The phrase and the scene harmonised in a chord.

Words. Was it their colours? He allowed them to glow and fade, hue after hue: sunrise gold, the russet and green of apple orchards, azure of waves, the greyfringed fleece of clouds. No it was not their colours: it was the poise and balance of the period itself. Did he then love the rhythmic rise and fall of words better than their associations of legend and colour? Or was it that, being as weak of sight as he was shy of mind, he drew less pleasure from the reflection of the glowing sensible world through the prism of language manycoloured and richly storied than from the contemplation of an inner world of individual emotions mirrored perfectly in a lucid supple periodic prose?

He passed from the trembling bridge on to firm land again. At that instant, it seemed to him, the air was chilled

and looking askance towards the water he saw a flying
 squall darkening and crisping suddenly the tide. A faint
 click at his heart, a faint throb in his throat told him once
 more of how his flesh dreaded the cold inhuman odour of
 the sea. . . (*POA* 180-1)

Stephen's sensitivity to words, and to the images they summon in his mind, frequently focuses on such associations with natural images, but, despite his initial romantic leanings, Stephen always returns to the reality of those images: he cannot look at the milk of the cows, and dreads the sea, for example. Stephen's attempts to get lost in language, to lose the world of Dublin in his poetic dreams, always result in a stark realization of his "fallen" state:

Consciousness of place came ebbing back to him slowly
 over a vast tract of time unlit, unfelt, unlived. The squalid
 scene composed itself around him; the common accents, the
 burning gasjets in the shops, odours of fish and spirits and
 wet sawdust, moving men and women. (*POA* 152)

The poetic dream of pastoral perfection is "unlived", and Stephen cannot escape this fact: Joyce will not allow him to do so amidst the cityscape of Dublin. Joyce thus makes it impossible for Stephen to experience a nostalgia for the natural world, always checking the tendency with a strong realism, and even implies that nostalgia is the realm of the young writer, thus commenting upon the literary activities of the Revivalists as somehow immature and undeveloped.

Nonetheless, Joyce does engage aspects of the Irish literary tradition.² *Ulysses* is, in many ways, an inheritance of Irish literary history, in that it celebrates place in an obvious way. Joyce famously remarked that was Dublin to disappear, it might be reconstructed from his novel; this celebration of place takes its precedents from the *dindsenchas* traditions of medieval Irish literature, and carries them to their modern extreme, overlaid on the modern city instead of the general landscape of Ireland. In so memorializing 1904 Dublin, Joyce is exercising a form of mental nostalgia, writing as he is from the space of exile and memory. This nostalgic exercise makes its presence felt in the themes of the novel itself, as well, through Bloom. Bloom's preoccupation with the world of Palestine, his unvisited homeland, signals a nostalgia for a life that he has never lived. Bloom's nostalgia for this unseen world, an Eden of the mind, and for his past life with Molly – also significantly connected with images of the natural world – allows him to continue to function in a present that is dislocated and disturbing. In this, the intersection of nature and nostalgia in his mind functions as the preservative that it has been for many earlier Irish authors and characters.

However, despite Bloom's almost sentimental musings about Palestine and its lush, Edenic climate that produces melons and exotic fruit, he does not seriously consider the possibility of moving; he is too focused on the reality of his daily life as, Joyce suggests, most men are. The sentimental dream of pastoral perfection is a private one that

² Maria Tymoczko's *The Irish Ulysses* explores in depth the influences of medieval Irish literature upon Joyce's book, mounting a strong case for Joyce as a part of Irish literary tradition. As I am concerned with only specific Irish literary themes, Tymoczko's impressive case will not be fully explored here.

remains in the realm of Bloom's mind and is not acted out in the present as it was for Yeats's characters or for Synge. Where Stephen is checked in his tendency towards romantic musings by "consciousness of place", Bloom is simply too busy concerning himself with his errands, his work, and his deeply private worries about Molly to entertain but as an idle fantasy the possibility of a pastoral dream.

By employing parallels to the *Odyssey*, Joyce further concerns himself with *nostos*, with homesickness, and the attempt to return home. Bloom's preoccupation with the Orient, with things eastern and exotic, is also a concern with Orient-ation, with his ability to locate himself in space, to make it familiar, and, in the process, to return to known space, that of his home with Molly.

Through these themes, Joyce comments upon the inheritance of Irish literature, and particularly upon the movement of the Revival that saw such emphasis placed upon rural Ireland and its peasantry and the exoticism associated with "primitive" cultures believed to be close to nature. Far from engaging nostalgia for lost culture as many of his near contemporaries were doing, Joyce offered instead a critique of that nostalgia by turning away from the country towards the city, which, he saw, had determined the romanticism with which the countryside was viewed. Ironically, in doing so, Joyce offered what was the closest Irish literature had come to a map of contemporary Ireland: the geography of mind that Joyce invented is also a geography of space.

Michael Seidel, in *Epic Geography*, traces the spatial parallels between the *Odyssey* and *Ulysses*, and notes that for Vico, such an important influence on Joyce's work, language is "a fable of the mind's perception of bodily forms, what Joyce calls the

“mappamund” in *Finnegans Wake*” (Seidel 44). Vico’s writings on “Poetic Geography” suggest that the body is landscape, and Joyce was to merge these two ideas in his preoccupation with imaginative geography to create the most complex of Irish literary landscapes in *Finnegans Wake*. The *Wake* uses dream language to chart the progress of HCE through the night, but also depicts him as a giant whose body forms the landscape around Dublin, and his wife as the Liffey flowing through that landscape. The resulting novel is a memorializing mythology of Dublin and environs. In writing the *Wake*, Joyce calls upon the Irish literary tradition of memorializing place through historical-mythical figures. Despite this, though, Joyce’s final work does not sentimentalize the landscape, and is not nostalgic in the same vein as earlier Irish literature. His scope, though fundamentally Irish in many significant ways, is too wide to allow him to focus on the continuation of only Irish themes.

After Joyce

Despite his European influences and his life on the continent, it has been easy for critics to claim Joyce as a quintessentially Irish author due to his settings and subject matter. To make the same claim for Beckett has proven more difficult, as the mature Beckett’s work rarely offers anything so obvious as a solid geography, Irish or otherwise. It would seem at first that Beckett defies the Irish tradition and grants nature and place only an insignificant role in his works. The plays seem, initially, to operate on a level that many have considered “unnatural”, and there is nothing about the sets that would

immediately suggest that nature does play a significant role. Beckett does not offer the reader or theatergoer portraits of a traditional Irish landscape: there is none of the deceptively simple beauty of the early Irish nature poetry, none of the pastoral artifice of Spenser, no Syngian celebrations of the wild Connemara winds, not even a Joycean dream language to ascribe a surreal, seductive voice to the land and sea. Thus Beckett seems to exist outside of an Irish tradition.

However, while Beckett clearly operates outside of the romantic and often stereotypical traditions of Irish and English nature writing, he is in fact very much aligned with the Irish tradition in which nature is the site of nostalgia. Just as Vladimir and Estragon exist symbiotically in *Waiting for Godot*, so nature and the intersection of memory and time function symbiotically in the plays of Samuel Beckett. The natural world, as evoked by Beckett, functions as a bank of memories, of an imagined time before the plays begin. Read this way, Beckett's plays can be interpreted as absolute anti-pastorals. Rather than an idealization of the natural world and man's place in that world, Beckett's plays offer a nightmarish vision of a world in which nature is all but absent. In a rather dated but nonetheless interesting book on pastoral drama, Jeannette Marks writes that the pastoral aspires to

a fundamental idealism which led men to envelop [man and nature] in a certain opalescent, unreal atmosphere. A large part of mankind is usually engaged in longing not so much for a better life but for an easier life, in which 'nothing to do' makes the dream more golden. (Marks 30)

One could very well substitute “pessimism” for “idealism”, “nightmare” for “dream”, and have a rather ironic description of the world of Beckett’s plays. Besides the extreme lack of activity, there is a constant nostalgia for the past, for some idyll that haunts the characters by its absence. When anything of the natural world is present in the plays – a tree, the memory of a lake, of mountains – the characters are reminded of their despair, lamenting not only the loss of that world but their memory of it.

One of Beckett’s signatures is his ability to draw out the time of a play’s performance into what is a torturous experience of the present lived eternally. This sense of unending and futile attempts to consign the present to the past permeates characters’ lives, making its way across the threshold of the stage and into the arena of the audience. In *Waiting for Godot*, seizing the day, so to speak, is not a choice, but the only possibility. In an eternal present, the past – whether immediate or long term – is questionable, memory is questionable, and consequently the existence of nature itself an uncertainty. The tree of *Godot* is the focal point of this theme, setting in motion the question of reality and the possibility of knowing reality.

James Knowlson lists several sources for *Godot*, among them two paintings by the German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich, one of the most influential artists of symbolic landscapes. At various times, Beckett referred friends and critics to “Mann und Frau den Mond betrachtend” and “Zwei männer betrachten den Mond” as the inspiration for *Godot* (Knowlson 342). The paintings, of silhouetted figures near a solitary tree gazing at the moon are, as Knowlson notes, mimicked at the close of both

acts. This landscape serves as a starting point from which to approach the play, and underlines the surprising importance of landscape to Beckett.

Despite the initial inspiration of a northern German landscape painting, the world in which Didi and Gogo live and the rhythms of their speech have an Irish feel. The world of Synge's beggars and thieves and tinkers lurks in *Godot*, present in the stories of nights spent in ditches, the waiting by the roadside, the world of tales told for no reason but to pass the time. The two worlds – of Friedrich's landscapes and the wild bleakness of Synge's western Ireland – combine into a world that is almost wholly unrecognizable. We are nowhere, anywhere. It is cold, gray, barren, desolate. By tracing the revolution of the play about the tree, the only sign of life in this setting, it is possible to trace the links between nature and nostalgia in Beckett.

The play begins with a description of landscape: "A country road. A tree. Evening." This tree, bare in the first act, is vital to the play, as it is the spot where Godot is supposed to appear. Estragon and Vladimir's recognition of the tree is tentative. "Despite the uncertainties of memory and recapitulation, it is not enough for Vladimir simply to be there: he must confirm this present tense by reference to an anticipated retrospect" (Connor 119). Vladimir will reenact this role again and again, attempting to move beyond the present to a moment in which he can know both the past and the future. This, of course, is impossible within the world of the play. In this uncertainty of the tree as an actual tree, both characters' anxiety over the long awaited meeting surfaces. What if it is the wrong tree? What if it isn't a tree at all? The first exchange about the tree signals the two possibilities in the world of the play: either there exists no tree of life, or, if one

does exist, its status as a tree, as life, as reality, will be called into question. There is no certainty, no assurance that the natural world and human kind exist, because there is no possibility, without memory, for the certainty of retrospect.

Because the present is flattened out, and memory made impossible, nostalgia is also an impossibility. The tree, then, in the context of Beckett's first dramatic masterpiece, becomes the sign of the longing for memory. In this, Beckett employs a trope of nature – the tree of life – to signal not the pastoral longing for the past, but instead the futility of that longing. The characters inevitably return to the tree as a topic of conversation – discussing in turn its significance as the potential meeting place, the possibility of hanging themselves from its branches, or hiding behind its too thin trunk, but the possibility of creating an idealization out of its presence is gone. Landscape has been whittled away to a state of meaninglessness, and the tree remains to haunt the characters as a symbol of the hope for the possibility of nostalgia.

If nature has been shattered and has lost its place of privilege in the world of *Godot*, in *Endgame* it has all but disappeared. In the first draft version of this play and of *Happy Days*, Beckett included references to a nuclear holocaust that had taken place. In the final versions such references have been edited out, but that a holocaust of some sort has taken place is evident. As in *Godot*, the presence of any natural elements proves to be haunting. Memories of a world before the unnamed and unknown event that has leveled the world into “zero” (Beckett 106) invoke natural landscapes. Whether these natural elements are present in actual fact or through memory, they serve as a constant reminder of time's dictatorship, which is even more forcefully present than in *Godot*.

“Had we but world enough, and time,” Marvell writes. In *Godot*, with its open set and stark, bare landscape, it is clear that there is far too much world as far as the characters are concerned. The opposite is true of *Endgame*, whose (in)action confines itself to a claustrophobic room with two small windows, sparking some early critics to interpret the play as taking place within a skull, a drama of the interior mind. But the time that weighs so heavily on Didi and Gogo’s hands weighs even more heavily in *Endgame*; the characters have far more time than they would ever wish to have. This overabundance of time has replaced the natural world, which has been reduced to greyness.

A picture remains hanging on the wall but is reversed so that the painting itself is invisible, and is eventually replaced with the alarm clock; the onslaught of time has replaced the possibility of viewing landscapes. Hamm, as a blind man, relies on Clov to interpret the visual world for him and his memories of the natural world differ sharply from the reports that Clov offers of the greyness of earth and sea.

It is thus fitting that the painting should be turned toward
the wall, and finally removed, in a universe where colored
landscapes seen through the imaginary window of a
painting in perspective have turned to a flat, barren,
uncertain grayness that offers only fleeting, fragmentary,
indistinct images to the eye of the observer. (Hale 47-8)

A good deal of the conversation between Hamm and Clov involves such fleeting images of the “without”, as the outside world is referred to in the stage directions. Trapped inside what resembles a fallout shelter, Clov informs Hamm of all he sees through the windows,

and Hamm, a teller of broken tales, weaves narratives that center on the loss of the natural world:

Hamm: Nature has forgotten us.

Clov: There's no more nature.

Hamm: No more nature! You exaggerate.

Clov: In the vicinity.

Hamm: But we breathe, we change! We lose our hair, our teeth! Our bloom! Our ideals!

Clov: Then she hasn't forgotten us. (Beckett 97)

As in *Godot*, the decline of the characters, both physically and psychically, is equated with and, in this case, has replaced, the natural world. Nature functions as death; there is "no more nature", just as there are no more painkillers, no more pap, no more sugarplums, tides, coffins. "Something", Hamm repeats, "is taking its course". The "something" is an inexorable decline, the atrophy of the world. Hamm and Clov, while resigned to the fact of inevitable decline, seem to retain a certain hapless hope at moments, forgetting for instants the futility of such hope.

Hamm: Did your seeds come up?

Clov: No.

Hamm: Did you scratch round them to see if they had sprouted?

Clov: They haven't sprouted.

Hamm: Perhaps it's still too early.

Clov: If they were going to sprout they would have
sprouted. [Violently.] They'll never sprout. (Beckett 98)

Clov does not hope that time will bring any change here; at later points in the drama Hamm will take on this role of ultimate pessimist. As is the case with Didi and Gogo, Hamm and Clov need each other desperately, and although both long for the release of death, they persevere, Schopenhauer-like, beyond their own desires.

The elimination of nature, of the natural world, has eliminated the possibility for a normal existence in *Endgame*; the possibility of regeneration is gone, and is in fact dreaded by both Hamm and Clov at different moments. The absence of nature thus comes to signify the lack of human possibility, of any change or movement. The times when nature and landscape were present, then, become significant memories to the characters. This theme is also present in *Godot*, when the absence of nature signals the absence of the possibility of memory. Beckett's work employs nature in a way that thus unconsciously seems to recognize the link between nature and memory. This recognition is made most clear in *Krapp's Last Tape*, a short piece written in English in 1957, in which all of the character's significant memories are connected to the natural world in some way, and indicate an intense and overwhelmingly sad longing for a lost and unlive past.

It is possible to conclude, then, that the absence of landscape and nature in Beckett's drama is as significant as their presence might be in Synge's. The impossibility of attaching oneself to an unrecognizable landscape impacts characters' abilities to remember, and it is that inability for memory – and the equal impossibility of forgetting that inability – that haunts Beckett's works. While Beckett's drama is certainly not

consciously engaged with an Irish literary tradition the way that even Joyce was, his works nonetheless offer a commentary on that tradition by moving away from it.

While Beckett's dramas represent landscapes decontextualized and barren of historical geography, his fiction is much more concrete in its representations of landscape. Declan Kiberd has noted a similarity of theme between Beckett and his Irish forbears:

The Irish landscape of south county Dublin in particular was celebrated through famous passages of the trilogy in the concrete, chaste, descriptive style of the Celtic nature poets, without the burden of abstract metaphorical meaning, without any patriotic eroticizing of this or that landscape as a synecdoche for the whole of Ireland. But, as with the Celtic nature poetry, what was offered in such passages was an *exile's* celebration, which seemed once again to illustrate a bleak law: the imaginative possession of the Irish landscape seemed possible only to those who were removed from it. (Kiberd 1995 535)

Kiberd's observation here suggests a further reason for the connection between nostalgia and nature: the long lists of Irish literary exiles, often with a heightened sense of *nostos*, reclaimed through imagination the memories of home, and those memories were frequently of landscape. Even Beckett, who only at extreme moments can be deemed a sentimental writer, memorialized the landscapes familiar to him from childhood and engaged in this process.

Beckett's works, so profoundly philosophical and void of the hope of a pastoral reprieve, suggest that, in the post-World War II era, the question of a national literature is eclipsed by far more pressing questions about the nature of humanity and man's place – or placelessness – in the world.

After Beckett

In modern Ireland, the theme of nature and nostalgia as intertwined has persisted down to the present day, and has spread from the realm of the literary into that of the visual arts. As western culture has become increasingly touristic over the last hundred years, the images associated with that tourism, such as the souvenir and the postcard, have become, in many cases, the signs of memory (*souviens*) and nostalgia, closely related to the conception of kitsch. Luke Gibbons has analyzed what he refers to as "the nostalgia which suffuses the postcard image" (39):

This is not simply an evocation of an idealized past, but a very distinctive form of longing: *nostos*, to return home, *algos*, a painful condition – the painful desire to restore the sense of belonging that is associated with childhood, and the emotional resonance of the maternal. (Gibbons 39)

Postcards, one of the most obvious sites of visual cultural identity, have, in Ireland as elsewhere, come to represent a modern longing for the past, a sign of cultural memory, through their frequent representation of historical sites, buildings, and landscapes. Irish

postcards, which tend to be almost unanimously of the countryside, invoke nostalgia imperceptibly by representing aspects of Irish culture that are past.

Postcards, as visual images produced for foreign consumption, can be interpreted as one of the ways in which a nation wishes itself to be seen. In offering images that are outdated – a very small percentage of the population of Ireland would continue to live in thatched cottages, and yet photographs of them abound on postcard stands³ – those who market Ireland's image have allowed for the present-day form of nostalgia to continue, and, in fact, encourage its persistence. In a different way, postcards of sites such as Glendalough also represent images of the past that have historical significance within the culture, and the primary experience in the present of that past is through landscape.

As a nation that sent so many of its inhabitants abroad as emigrants, Ireland also experienced, and continues to experience, the nostalgia of those who have moved away. The nostalgia experienced by emigrants for the pristine and simple life of the countryside of Ireland is a common one, and is not limited to first generation emigrants: the lines at the National Library's Genealogy Service attest to the enduring sentiment for a past that most have never experienced personally. The nostalgia for the simple life of the countryside is one that ignores the harsh facts of Irish country life over the last hundred and fifty years, and thus signals a chasm between the reality and the imagined past:

the backward look towards a peasant arcadia does not
represent a form of *continuity* with the rural past of the

emigrant, but a *break* with it. The shock of the city and the new world resulted in a dislocation rather than a continuation of the emigrant's previous rural experience.

The precipitating factor in the construction of romantic Ireland, then, was the metropolitan centre, and by extension the social upheavals wrought by the modernization process.

(Gibbons 85)

Once again, nostalgia can be seen as a social preservative, a way of allowing individuals – in this case emigrants – to adapt to their changing social circumstances. Just as those actively involved in the literary Revival tended to be urban dwellers, those who emigrated tended to settle in urban centers, whether London, New York, Boston, or Sydney. The romanticization of rural Ireland, then, was shaped on all fronts by urbanity.

Personal photographs also attest to this process, and play a role in the production of visual nostalgia:

When colour photographs first appeared in Irish family albums, they were usually the images left behind by returned immigrants, and were thus more redolent of memory and desire than of the grey realities which characterized everyday life in Ireland. In this setting, the

³ In fact, so few thatched rooves are in evidence in Ireland that there are preservation orders for those remaining; occupants receive grants from the government towards maintenance.

mass-produced postcard became the Irish immigrant's way
of phoning home. (Gibbons 39)

Images of Ireland in postcards and in emigrants' photos inevitably carried in them the weight of nostalgia, a nostalgia that was to influence not only the visual depiction of the culture but also the literary and political culture. Nostalgia, and the desire to preserve traditional Ireland, led to a view of the culture that dominated even taxation schemes:

Those who left the land grew ever more sentimental about
the world which they had lost, and the effects of their
pastoralism could be discerned in state policy. The brothers
and sisters, mothers and fathers who remained on the land
were spared heavy taxation, supported by government
subvention, and some of them would eventually enjoy an
affluence that was in excess of that known by most of the
inhabitants of Dublin. . . [R]ural Ireland acquired many of
the trappings of a sophisticated urban culture.
(Kiberd 1995 495)

The nostalgia for the landscape of Ireland experienced by emigrants led to the infiltration of rural Ireland by more modern ideas, particularly of the idealization of rurality. As rural Ireland changed and progressed, and sent more and more of its inhabitants to urban centers within Ireland, the possibility for nostalgia changed, however. This change, Gibbons points out, is reflected in the attitude towards the postcard images that have remained almost constant for fifty years: "[W]hile nostalgia during the first life-cycle of

these postcards was directed towards the rural idylls they depicted, now it is directed at the postcards themselves, and the optimism of the halcyon days of modernization in which such images were possible” (Gibbons 43). Since the population of Ireland has increasingly become urban rather than rural, in the last five decades, and the landscape of Ireland has become increasingly industrialized, with factories, technology centers, and housing developments in what were considered not long ago remote country areas, the nostalgia for landscape and natural beauty has become focused, more often than not, on the lost possibility of the rural Eden.

Whereas nature has always in fact been part of culture, i.e. always been culturally perceived by human beings, it was in Western society perceived as being outside culture *in its essence*. Nowadays, however, nature is increasingly perceived as *essentially part of culture*. . . Indeed, nature, like culture itself, is more and more being tacitly understood as *the representation of itself*, and ‘itself’ is often understood as *its former self*. . . (Foster 1997d 618)

John Wilson Foster’s observations astutely point out the connection between nature and culture that has been increasingly forged in Ireland. As the possibility of believing in a mythos of rural Ireland as real Ireland has diminished, nature has been increasingly turned to as a representation of “its former self”, a sign of inherent nostalgia. Thus natural sites such as Glendalough or the lakes of Killarney have been turned into “cultural centres” where the categories of “nature” and “culture” are blurred and blended.

This sort of nostalgia is not limited to the visual images of postcards and photographs, however. Irish film has also fallen prey to the theme. Luke Gibbons notes that there is a thematic consistency in Irish film: “*the idealization of the landscape, the persistence of the past, the lure of violence and its ominous association with female sexuality, and the primacy of family and community*” (Gibbons 117 italics mine). That Gibbons’ first two themes are so similar to those we have been examining here for Irish literature is striking, and shows that these themes are not fading in contemporary Irish culture.

Or are they? Many social critics in the 1970s and 1980s deplored the hold of tradition over Irish culture, claiming that the reliance on tradition has prevented the culture from progressing and modernizing. The city, such commentators claimed, whether Dublin, Galway, or Cork, represented the push of modernity, while the rural villages and midland towns represented a backward way of viewing the world.

The argument that the time-warp of tradition was never really dislodged in Irish society, and that rural values were the main factor retarding the forces of progress, was thrown into bold relief in a newspaper headline, following the abortion referendum in 1983: “TWO NATIONS!” proclaimed the *Irish Independent*, as if henceforth the main division in Irish society was not between the North and the South, or even labour and capital, but that which existed between the country and the city. (Gibbons 84)

Such differences have been gradually eroding, however, even in the period since the date of the headline Gibbons cites. Through the booming economy and its association with the European Community, Ireland has changed at a breathtaking pace. Within this momentum, the persistence of the idea of rural Ireland as real Ireland has been marked, and has, in fact, contributed to the nation's ability to absorb change: images of modern Ireland continue to call upon the idea of rurality, with the result that

an increasingly urban and industrialised reality [is] made palatable, both to ourselves and to those whom we wish to attract, by being wrapped up in harmless rural folksy images. For the last hundred years, Irish culture and in particular Irish writing has been marked by this dominance of the rural over the urban, a dominance based on a false opposition of the country to the city which has been vital to the maintenance of a conservative political culture in the country. (O'Toole 111)

Images such as those used in IDA (Industrial Development Authority) advertisements – most often geared towards enticing foreign business into Ireland – picture, as Luke Gibbons has noted, shamrocks and serene landscapes more often than they do factories and industrial estates. Irish Tourist Board commercials, particularly those that run on American television networks, tend unfailingly to show rural scenes, with no sign of Temple Bar or the chaos of Dublin traffic.

By retaining a notion of a real, true Ireland of nature and landscape and sturdy peasantry, it has been possible to modernise the countryside, to turn it into a profitable base for American multinational industry and EEC capitalist farming, while still believing that the heart of the nation remains pure. (O'Toole 115)

Nostalgia, then, in the subtle form of marketing and advertising strategy, continues to make its presence felt within Irish society.

The increasingly urbanity of Irish life has led, though, to a new literature that has taken its realistic tack from Joyce. There is a rise in popularity of a generation of new "urban" writers: Colm Toibin, Roddy Doyle, and even Frank McCourt all point towards the growing interest in representing urban Ireland as the site of a reality previously underrepresented by Irish literature. Even the Abbey Theatre, founded to grant a forum to an overwhelmingly rural representation of Ireland, "has found it increasingly difficult to reconcile its "national" duty to perform a largely ruralist canon with its "civic" desire to service its immediate hinterland" (Kiberd 1995 653). The result has been the production of dramas by younger authors like Frank McGuinness and Marina Carr, whose work does not focus exclusively on the concerns of rural Ireland. Curiously, though, in the opinion of at least one critic, Fintan O'Toole, this genre of urban literature and drama is still being influenced by the rural and the pastoral:

The persistence of the literature of the Golden Age, drawing its poetry from the past, as the dominant mode of Irish

writing, has affected urban literature as much as rural. . . .

The tenement is essentially an urban version of the rural setting [since it] excludes the world of the streets and the world of work, the two crucial elements of urban experience. (O'Toole 115)

That many of the writers cited above – notably Roddy Doyle, Frank McCourt, and Marina Carr – have set their narratives and dramas within the space of either tenements or the poorer areas of Ireland raises the question as to how far Irish writers have moved away from elements of a Revival ideology that relies heavily on a sort of innocent communalism.

However, the most critically acclaimed and exported writer of the last several decades is much more obviously aligned with the tradition that has been under discussion here. Seamus Heaney, with his consciousness of both rural and urban life, and life in Northern Ireland and in the Republic, manages to engage a vast number of themes, but none of them, perhaps, are as enduring as that of place:

We are dwellers, we are namers, we are lovers, we make
homes and search for our histories. And when we look for
the history of our sensibilities I am convinced. . . that it is
to. . .the stable element, the land itself, that we must look
for continuity. (Heaney 1980 “The Sense of Place” 148-9)

Place allows for a sense of stability, continuity of identity when historical circumstances dictated tremendous change and upheaval. In place, despite his position as a North of

Ireland Catholic, despite his constant awareness of the volatile nature of Irish politics, Heaney finds a redemptive medium that represents non-human, super-human memory: “. . . I began to get an idea of the bog as the memory of the landscape, or as a landscape that remembered everything that happened in and to it” (Heaney 1980 “Feeling into Words” 54). The idea of the bog, the idea of digging, become early metaphors in Heaney’s work signifying this delving into the past, into a memory eclipsed by history. Land, landscape, and nature become, for Heaney, a way of uniting infinite strands of identity, infinite strands of thought.

[I]t is Heaney who has brought to fulfillment the Romantic Irish depiction of nature that is hostile to science, despite an evident knowledge of nature accumulated during a country boyhood. . . For Heaney, Irish nature is a mythic-aesthetic-female-nationalist complex. (Foster 1997d 609)

The complexity of Heaney’s representation of nature is given a good summation here by John Wilson Foster: the layers of meaning in Heaney’s poetry, whether mythical, aesthetic, feminine, or nationalist, all signify the increasingly complex relationship between nature and culture in Ireland, and their increasing interchangeability. Much of this complexity arises out of the relationship between Ireland and England as Heaney perceives it, and it is this relationship that determines the language of his poetry:

Certainly the secret of being a poet, Irish or otherwise, lies in the summoning of the energies of words. But my quest for definition, while it may lead backward, is conducted in

the living speech of the landscape I was born into. If you
 like, I began as a poet when my roots were crossed with my
 reading. I think of the personal and Irish pieties as vowels,
 and the literary awareness nourished on English as
 consonants. My hope is that the poems will be vocables
 adequate to my whole experience. (Heaney 1980 "Belfast"
 36-7)

That experience was one that encompassed both Ireland and England, and, more
 significantly, perhaps, the Irelands and Englands of the mind that Heaney found himself
 forced to address.

Heaney laments the loss of "The Sense of Place" in Irish culture, but, in his 1977
 lecture of that title, notes that its presence persists at a different level. He credits the
 Revival with having renewed the interest in place that generations of English rule had
 dulled. Yeats had, Heaney writes, a double purpose: "to restore a body of old legends and
 folk beliefs that would bind the people of the Irish place to the body of their world" and
 "to supplement this restored sense of historical place with a new set of associations that
 would accrue when a modern Irish literature, rooted in its own region and using its own
 speech, would enter the imagination of his countrymen" (Heaney 1980 "The Sense of
 Place" 135). The result, Heaney argues, is the immediate recognition of certain places
 associated with Yeats:

All of these places now live in the imagination, all of them
 stir us to responses other than the merely visual, all of them

are instinct with the spirit of a poet and his poetry.

Irrespective of our creed or politics, irrespective of what culture or subculture may have coloured our individual sensibilities, our imaginations assent to the stimulus of the names, our sense of place is enhanced, our sense of ourselves as inhabitants of not just a geographical country but of a country of the mind is cemented. It is this feeling, assenting, equable marriage between the geographical country and the country of the mind, whether that country of the mind takes its tone consciously from a shared oral inherited culture, or from a consciously savoured literary culture, or from both, it is this marriage that constitutes the sense of place in its richest possible manifestation. (Heaney 1980 "The Sense of Place" 132)

The sense of place, then, can operate as a unifying force that drives together the disparate histories of Ireland and of the Irish people in their relationship with the English over an extended period of time. Where Yeats was interested in describing differences between various sets of oppositions – Irish and English, nature and culture, spirit and material, past and future – Heaney is attempting to describe similarity and continuity, whether between Irish and English, country and city, or self and other.

While Heaney engages much of Irish tradition when it comes to nature writing, he does not write simple pastorals. "The luxuriant vocabulary of the pastoral genre,

implying a fruitful, accommodating environment, is quite out of place in Heaney's sparse, rather comfortless landscape". Sean Lysaght notes (444). Rather, Heaney objects to "the scientific attitude of mind as one that is cut off from primal patterns of feeling. In its stead, Heaney wants to restore the relationship with place through an understanding of placenames and the history they register" (Lysaght 444). It is worth recalling, in this context, Edward Said's and Seamus Deane's arguments about the imaginative reclamation of space in post-colonial culture; Heaney, whose work embodies much of the debate over themes like colonialism and independence, seeks to restore space as an historical context. Luke Gibbons has argued, however, that such a restoration is all but impossible:

[T]here is no possibility of restoring a pristine, pre-colonial identity: the lack of historical closure, therefore, is bound up with a similar incompleteness in the culture itself, so that instead of being based on narrow ideals of racial purity and exclusivism, identity is open-ended and heterogeneous.
(Gibbons 179)

Gibbons's assertion here is quite applicable to Heaney's work: while engaging in a process that consciously reclaims place, he is also aware of the impossibility of a complete restoration, as the landscape bears witness to pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial cultures in a tangled web. What results out of this consciousness is a sense of shifting identities and shifting loyalties within the reclaimed space, and this sense is often bound together with nostalgia and longing and an acute presence of the past as somehow illusive.

Heaney's earliest published work, *Death of a Naturalist*, is also his earliest attempt to sort through the strands of these themes. This book of poetry graphically charts the process that gives the work its title and one of its central poems: the poet moves from childhood to adulthood and from the ideal of the pastoral into the realm of rural realities. "Heaney's poem", one critic notes, "could have been more accurately entitled "Death of a Pastoralist," since it is the notion of a pastoral, childhood Eden that actually dies" (Hart 22). Like Yeats and Synge before him, Heaney was to move – although far more rapidly – away from the traditional modes of pastoral towards a mode that more clearly represented his experience. The mode that results is one that digs deeper and deeper into the idealizations of landscape and nature in order to reveal the violence and hardship of the reality of such a life. The violence charted by the collection. John Wilson Foster writes,

seemed gratuitous at the time, but the poet was to remain aware of the menace that lies beneath the quiet surface of Irish country life. And on hindsight, the first couplet of 'Digging' implicates the poet at some level in that menace and reminds us that Heaney has never been a pastoral poet oblivious to the awkward realities of political (and therefore in Ireland, paramilitary) power. (Foster 1995 8)

Rather than remaining at the surface, Heaney will delve beneath "the quiet surface of Irish country life" and find realities unrepresented by pastoral poetics, but in a seductively lush language that seems pastoral.

Heaney's essays on Irish literature reveal his awareness of a different form of nature writing within the Irish tradition, and his further awareness of the changes within that tradition. Citing a poem ascribed to Oisín on Ben Bulbin, Heaney writes that

Scholars might classify this as an elegiac poem as much as a poem of place and it does indeed have a backward look which gives it a more modern tone, a more alienated stance: but in the first flush of the hermit poetry six or seven centuries before this poem was written, it is not to the tears of things but the joy, the lifting of eye and heart, that we respond. (Heaney 1980 "The God in the Tree: Early Irish Nature Poetry" 185)

Heaney recognizes here that the "backward look" was not initially a part of the tradition of Irish nature writing, but grew out of a later time period with, as we have seen, a set of circumstances that encouraged nostalgia. What is interesting in Heaney's statement is that he cites the backward-looking nature of the poem as modern, suggesting that nostalgia is a development of modernity, as the individual is forced further away from the natural world. As we have seen, this is not actually the case: the authors of early Irish "hermit" poetry were in all likelihood no closer to nature than their later medieval heirs, but it is significant that Heaney believes this, as it informs his own poetics to a large extent. Early and medieval Irish poetry, though, he argues, is "sustained by a deep unconscious affiliation to the old mysteries of the grove, even while ardently proclaiming its fidelity to the new religion" (Heaney 1980 "The God in the Tree" 186). Heaney's poetry, seen in

the context of such arguments, can be seen as representing that “deep unconscious affiliation” with the natural world while at the same time addressing the conscious, and unavoidable, realities of that world in both past and present. Aware of the trend in Irish literature that turned towards nostalgia and the backward look, Heaney attempts, by looking backwards, to return to “the joy, the lifting of heart and eye” of the early poetry, ironically engaging both traditions at once.

One critic notes that “Heaney’s text. . . is not about the pastness of that past but its presence. This is in accord with the living in a critical space of Ireland which [the critic] Virilio would see as a paradigmatic postmodern condition” (Docherty 212). It is certainly true that the Ireland that has informed Heaney’s poetics is a “critical space”: it is contested space, space inscribed with two histories that are both actively resistant to their inter-involvement. To claim that this is a postmodern condition, however, ignores the realities of Irish life over many centuries: the past has, as we have seen, been a presence for authors as far back as the twelfth century. Heaney, by addressing this space and by attempting to write from and through it, aligns himself with much of the Irish tradition.

Following *Death of a Naturalist*, in which “poems often begin in rural splendor, only to fall into the painful recognitions of enervating labor, decay, starvation, sexual turmoil, and fears of natural and political catastrophe” (Hart 11), Heaney addresses these themes further. The collection entitled *Wintering Out* relies more heavily on the type of pastoral with which Heaney most identifies, that of Patrick Kavanagh. Kavanagh’s “The Great Hunger” is, for Heaney, “a kind of elegy in a country farmyard, informed not by

heraldic notions of seasonal decline and mortal dust but by an intimacy with actual clay and a desperate sense that life in the secluded spot is no book of pastoral hours but an enervating round of labour and lethargy" (Heaney 1980 "From Monaghan to the Grand Canal: The Poetry of Patrick Kavanagh" 122). The elegiac and the sense of the anti-pastoral that Heaney learned from Kavanagh's poetry is a felt presence in *Wintering Out*, as is the influence of much older Irish writing such as *Buile Suibhne*. In poems such as "Bog Oak", "The Backward Look", and "Traditions", among others, Heaney continues digging, as Kavanagh did, removing himself to the outdoors, as Sweeney did, in order to assess again the strands of thought and theme that inform life in Ireland and Northern Ireland.

Other poems in *Wintering Out* are concerned not with depth-readings of the Irish earth but with topography. The signatures of the past are inscribed for us to see above as well as below the ground. In these 'landscape poems' which are also 'language poems', parts of speech and parts of landscape are identified as a Catholic Ulsterman looks and listens around and considers what he has gained and lost by living in the planted North. It is a kind of respite on the sidelines of conflict; it is interesting to note that Heaney around this time gave up his post at Queen's University, Belfast, and for a few years became a full-time writer in the

South of Ireland, away from the war zone. (Foster
1995 14-5)

Following his move to the Republic, Heaney's writing takes a new approach to pastoralism, when he adopts the figure of Sweeney as a metaphor of the condition of being an "inner émigré" (Heaney 1990 "Exposure" from "Singing School" *New Selected Poems*, l. 31 90). "Heaney's Sweeney", as he has been called by many critics, is, like Heaney himself, struggling to balance culture and nature, uneasily, living both within and without, struggling to repossess a composure of selfhood while consigned to a wilderness: like Sweeney, Heaney has fled into nature "to the poetic quarrel with the self rather than the political quarrel with others" (Kiberd 1995 595).

Heaney's struggle was also against pastoral models. In a review of a collection of pastoral poems, Heaney takes issue with the editors' claims that pastoral modes have not survived beyond the early 20th century. Like Empson, he believes in "versions" of the pastoral, identifying Synge and Kavanagh as working on what he tentatively calls "frontier pastoral" (Preoccupations 80), and rejecting as unrealistic the models provided by Theocritus and Virgil. However, he criticizes the editors, who evidently espouse Raymond Williams' Marxist protestations against pastoral, and defends pastoral poetry for its purely aesthetic qualities: it is this creed that he will continue to follow and aim for in his own work. "His poems", Henry Hart notes, "strive for greater realism and at the same time cultivate the gritty world into a vestigial pastoral of seductive music and enchanting story" (Hart 13). Heaney's poetics, in other words, while overtly critiquing

traditional pastoral modes as unrealistic, achieves a pastoralism purely through language, and the play of sound, even while presenting images of a reality that is anti-pastoral.

The pastoral usually draws on an implicit sense of hierarchy, elevating shepherd over city dweller while maintaining urban sophistication in the face of rural gaucheness. Heaney wants to dismantle the hierarchy. He documents a democratic equilibrium between two classes that in traditional pastorals traded costumes but retained preestablished identities. Rather than harp on differences between metropolitan artist and rural craftsman, between sophisticated poet and illiterate potato farmer, he emphasizes the similarities between them. (Hart 24)

This emphasis on sameness is, ultimately, an emphasis on continuity. The generational rupture that Heaney's own family experiences – his father and grandfather were farmers, but Heaney himself is a poet – is viewed as one that can be bridged with metaphor, with language: son, father and grandfather are all engaged in the act of digging, of rooting out. Resemblances become a way of recognizing pastoralism, a way of asserting a longing, a nostalgia, for the world from which he has broken, while also representing with the clear-sightedness of distance the cold realities of the longed for life. In this way nature is almost always a site of nostalgia in Heaney's work, but it is nostalgia of tremendous complexity, one that recognizes its own impossibility in the face of contemporary social and political life.

His mature style, eminently represented in *Death of a Naturalist* and in the books that follow, orchestrates a synthesis between rustic beauty and the harsh exigencies of farming. Writing poetry, which Heaney repeatedly compares to plows versing and reversing through fields and spades digging through historical soil, becomes a curative pastoral activity in itself. Heaney's unsentimental way of equating rural laborer and cultivated poet, which directly opposes the traditional way of dressing up city boys in swain's garb and transporting them to Arcadia to sing of ideal loves, reveals not so much the death of naturalism or realism as their healthy resurrection. . . His pastorals represent the first step in a scrupulously self-critical career that invokes traditional discourses in order to break through their mystifying values and assumptions. (Hart 31)

Seamus Heaney continues to operate in this way, depicting the complexities of contemporary life in Ireland/ Northern Ireland through the "curative pastoral activities" discussed above. Place and the natural world become a site of longing – for the past of childhood, for the past of Ireland – but one that is imagined. In an essay on Patrick Kavanagh, Heaney begins by describing a tree that was planted during the year of his birth. When the tree is later cut down and the poet muses on the space where the tree used to be, might have been, he realizes that "[t]he 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 it can be located at an earthly spot, a placeless heaven rather than a heavenly place” (Heaney 1988 “The Placeless Heaven: Another Look at Kavanagh” in 4).

Seamus Heaney’s preoccupations with land, landscape, and nature, and the longing associated with them, all testify to the continuation of a significant theme in Irish literature. In a culture charged with change – whether from invasion, colonization, religious conversion, desperate poverty, famine, or political violence – nature and landscape have served as a steady realm somehow both beyond the clutches of such changes and a testimony to them.

In its earliest stages, Irish literature was marked by traditional and classical pastoral influences brought about through the monastic culture. Nature, while a subject of idealization, was not a site of nostalgia: it was idealized along traditional pastoral lines. It was only with the solidification of Norman and Christian control that Irish literature began to deviate from classical models and engaged nature and landscape as the sites for cultural longing. Twelfth century Irish literature, as has been demonstrated here, is thus strikingly different in tone in its representation of nature, which signifies displacement and the loss of culture. This move away from the pastoral mode towards the creation of what I have called the nostalgic mode was to have a tremendous influence on Irish literature and also upon the perception of the Irish and Irish literature from without. It is evidently from this period that the stereotype of the Irish and Irish literature as

sentimental and “backward-looking” dates: *Buile Suibhne* and the *Acallam na Senórach* attest to these changes, in which traditional Irish culture becomes marginalized. The theme of marginalisation in nature is reflected as well in the bardic poetry that post-dated this era.

By the early modern period, when Ireland entered into the stage of its cultural Revival, the nostalgic mode would be revised to encompass more traditional pastoral models, in that the nostalgia of an O’Grady, a Synge, a Yeats, was for a life unlived: however, nature would still be represented as the site of lost culture, that of the unrecoverable ancient Irish past.

In the post-Revival period, Irish authors rebelled against this idealizing impetus and conscientiously debunked the myths perpetrated by the Revivalists, but nostalgia was still a pervasive ingredient, associated, even if ironically, with the natural world. Seamus Heaney, the foremost inheritor of these traditions, represents most fully the currents of the contemporary debate, engaging nature as a site of nostalgia and lost culture, aware, at the same time, that while the natural world cannot serve as the salve for a seeming instability, it is underwritten with the histories of many cultures and many times.

Irish authors have almost continually looked to landscape as a site of stability and continuous identity, and it is worth speculating that other cultures, particularly those that have found themselves under the yokes of colonialism and imperialism, would also turn to nature as a stabilizing, constant realm that is the site of their own lost or elided culture. In examining representations of nature and landscape in literature and their coincidence

with nostalgia, the underlying cultural and social histories can be revealed in a new way, and can cast light on the resistance and adaptation to social change.

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