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Introduction

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Introduction

The Emerald Isle, for all her lush pastures and forty shades of green, proved relatively impervious to environmental pursuits in the cultural and academic spheres or in economic and social circles, until the fall of the Celtic Tiger. The Celtic Tiger years successfully relied on, and reflected, a dual picture of global business attractiveness and unspoiled nature, promoting the pure waters of Green Erin – together with its fiscal leniency – as the ideal setting for pharmaceutical and IT companies and a unique location for salmon fishing. “Nature”, as a focal point in the stereotypical representations of Ireland – together with rain, leprechauns, and the modest shamrock of Saint Patrick fame –, is perpetuated at home and abroad as part of the nation’s brand. Thus Ireland’s totemic colour conveniently contributes to the country’s perceived closeness with the natural environment. Only after the fall of the Celtic Tiger did another landscape begin to emerge: that of a dilapidated, polluted environment, symbolized with striking effect by the mushrooming “ghost estates” that now scar the Irish countryside and suburban areas. Such visions of the New Ireland reflect the concrete, geographic impact of post-industrial late capitalism, thus placing Ireland onto a global map of environmental crises and largely debunking a myth that is still desperately advertised by the national tourism industry today.

In this context of growing environmental concern, while the successive governments’ neoliberal agenda continues unabated, the past decade has seen a proliferation of academic works examining Irish cultural production from an ecocritical perspective. First heralded by Oona Frawley’s study of Irish pastoral in the 20th century [1], then spurred by American scholars already familiar with the environmental humanities [2], Irish ecocritical studies have now taken hold in the country’s academic circles [3]. The present issue of *Études irlandaises* brings together Irish, French and international scholars to contribute to what has become a globally thriving academic debate.

Historically, two conflicting visions of Irish nature coexist. On the one hand, a peaceful Irish pastoralism grounded in (credulous) Catholicism and tinged

1. Oona Frawley, *Irish Pastoral: Nostalgia and Twentieth-Century Irish Literature*, Dublin, Irish Academic Press, 2005.
2. Tim Wenzell, *Emerald Green: An Ecocritical Study of Irish Literature*, Cambridge, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009; *Out of the Earth: Ecocritical Readings of Irish Texts*, Christine Cusick (ed.), Cork, Cork University Press, 2010.
3. See for instance Eóin Flannery, “Ireland and Ecocriticism: An Introduction” in the special issue of *The Journal of Ecocriticism*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2013, *Irish Ecocriticism*, p. 1, and, by the same author, *Ireland and Ecocriticism: Literature, History and Environmental Justice*, London, Routledge, 2015. See also Donna L. Potts, *Contemporary Irish Writing and Environmentalism: The Wearing of the Deep Green*, London, Palgrave, 2018.

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with Celtic spirituality: such perception of domesticated nature culminates in the De Valeran nationalist ideal of cosy homesteads, grazing fields and comely maidens – illustrated in John Ford's 1952 film *The Quiet Man*. On the other hand, the classic colonial representation paints simian-looking savages impervious to the civilizing forces of progress[4] and inhabiting a wilderness – the inhospitable landscape of the bogs which, ironically, results from thousands of years of human presence[5]. Such threatening nature occasionally turns against men – for their sins, as evangelical providentialists conveniently understood the Great Irish Famine[6]. Arguably, both stereotypes are the opposite sides of a single vision of Ireland as naturalized, or essentialized, generated by the colonial process but appropriated by the newly independent nation.

Essentialist tropes positing Ireland as a refuge of authenticity and wilderness in the Western world have endured from the colonizer's naturalizing discourse since the Norman era, to the surge of the nature tourism industry in Victorian time, and to British conservationism, thus identifying a specific attitude towards Irish nature with the colonizing process. The colonizer went through a symbolic process of dehumanization in order to reduce natives to mere parts of the landscape – a landscape whose ownership by the colonizer was posited as a natural process of history. The confiscation of natural and agricultural resources and the alienation of the native cultural heritage were epitomized by the brutal overhaul of toponymy and subsequent destruction of the symbiotic link between native place and native language[7], thereafter fantasized by nationalist mythology. It is therefore no surprise that the early ecological activism of 1970s Ireland largely considered environmental degradations in terms of damages inflicted by outsiders and denounced the globalized avatars of British capitalist imperialism rather than the policies implemented at home[8].

The issue of colonization has long dominated Irish Studies. Environmental debates intersect with it, albeit not in entirely predictable ways. Colonization has affected the geographical landscape of the country, from the massive deforestation that accompanied Elizabethan plantations to the transformation of Ireland into

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4. Flann O'Brien / Myles na gCopaleen famously recycled this offensive stereotype in his 1942 satirical novel *An Béal Bocht* [*The Poor Mouth*], which portrays Irish peasants whose speech is undistinguishable from that of their pet pigs.
5. Tim Robinson, *Connemara, Listening to the Wind*, London, Penguin, 2006, p. 55.
6. See among many others Christophe Gillissen, "Charles Trevelyan, John Mitchel and the Historiography of the Great Famine", *Revue française de civilisation britannique*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2014, p. 195-212, and Patrick Brantlinger, "The Famine", *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2004, p. 193-207.
7. See for instance Brian Friel's acclaimed 1980 play *Translations* (London, Faber and Faber, 2012), and Tim Robinson, *Connemara, Listening to the Wind*, p. 81.
8. Hilary Tovey, "Environmentalism in Ireland: Two Versions of Development and Modernity", *International Sociology*, vol. 8, no. 4, 1993, p. 413-430, and, by the same author, *Environmentalism in Ireland: Movements and Activists*, Dublin, Institute of Public Administration, 2007, p. 29.

Britain's breadbasket in the first half of the 19th century[9]. However, colonization cannot be considered as shorthand for univocal environmental destruction, following the stereotype used elsewhere of the "ecological native"[10]. The mutual definition of England and Ireland in terms of each other under the colonial relationship[11] meant that, given England's status as the industrial leader of the world from the mid-18th to the early 20th century, Ireland had to be conceived of *as nature*. Ireland therefore played a great part in how nature was conceptualized in an Anglocentric perspective. Early English conservationism was thus transplanted in Ireland with a colonial zeal that paradoxically played against the interests of the Irish environment, as John Feehan remarked as early as 1997:

> The identification of nature conservation in the rural mind with a privileged elite (West Britons and Castle Catholics), which could afford to spend its abundant leisure time in the collecting and recording of wild plants and insects and in visiting and drawing old forts and castles [...] has survived to our own time, and has been one of the most stubborn of all obstacles in the campaign to educate the community to an environmental consciousness. It still surfaces [...] when individuals or organisations outside of Ireland voice their opposition to some development in this country, and it is [...] skilfully exploited by protagonists of development projects who seek to mobilize the political power of the multitude behind them[12].

Today, Ireland's carefully managed representation of the environment, to bolster tourism and attract foreign investors, aims to hide the very real damage done by neoliberal economic policies to Irish landscapes and wildlife, from urban sprawl to water pollution and the loss of natural habitats. Ireland's poor environmental record can no longer be read as a perverse legacy of colonization, all the more so as the very actors of self-inflicted environmental damage are often those who recycle postcolonial arguments[13].

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9. Frank Mitchell, Michael Ryan, *Reading the Irish Landscape*, Dublin, Town House, 1997; Francis Ludlow, Arlene Crampsie, "Environmental History of Ireland, 1550-1730", in *The Cambridge History of Ireland*, vol. II, *1550-1730*, Jane Ohlmeyer (ed.), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018, p. 608-637; Kevin O'Rourke, "Agricultural Change and Rural Depopulation. Ireland 1845-1876", *The Journal of Economic History*, vol. 51, no. 2, 1991, p. 464-466.
10. See for instance Shepard Krech III's *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History*, New York, Norton, 1999.
11. As Declan Kiberd famously quipped: "If England had never existed, the Irish would have been rather lonely. Each nation badly needed the other, for the purpose of defining itself" (*Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*, London, Vintage, 1996, p. 2).
12. John Feehan, "Threat and Conservation: Attitudes to Nature in Ireland", in *Nature in Ireland: A Scientific and Cultural History*, John Wilson Foster, Helena C. G. Chesney (eds.), Dublin, Lilliput Press, 1997, p. 583.
13. See Rob Kitchin, Cian O'Callaghan, Mark Boyle, Justin Gleeson, Karen Keaveney, "Placing Neoliberalism: The Rise and Fall of Ireland's Celtic Tiger", *Environment and Planning*, vol. 44, no. 6, 2012, p. 1302-1326, and Sharae Deckard, "World-Ecology and Ireland: The Neoliberal Ecological Regime", *Journal of World-Systems Research*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2016, p. 145-176.

Irish artistic and cultural production has become a fertile ground for critical reflection on Ireland's ambiguous relationship with its "nature", understood as a form of congruence between its identity and its environment. Thus the mythical status of the West, the central question of land ownership but also the puzzling under-representation of the sea given Ireland's insular status constitute so many aspects of a national ecopsychology that transpire in artistic productions[14]. How might we therefore develop an adequate theoretical and critical apparatus to describe the specific nature of the Irish relationship to the environment, while avoiding both essentialist and constructivist pitfalls? First, Irish Studies critics must be aware of the temptation to naturalize Ireland in variously detectable ways. The issue at stake is the relationship between Ireland's *nature*, defined and romanticized from the outside, and its *environment*, the natural and non-natural surroundings of human societies. *Nature* tends to evoke landscapes, bucolic aesthetics and nostalgic longing. *The environment* raises directly concrete issues such as urban planning and the future of extractive industries. Both terms have been criticized and it can indeed be argued that neither satisfactorily accounts for the relationship between human consciousness, behaviour and culture and the non-human world. Both set man apart from the rest of the known world.

Nature, Descartes' *res extensa*, is what the *cogito* has extracted itself from. This absolute distinction makes it easy for postmodern or deconstructivist thinkers to show that nature is first and foremost an idea, a cultural creation which veils the world (understood as a chaotic, "idiotic" and unattainable real) and ensures that it remains always beyond human reach[15]. The *environment* also betrays an anthropocentric bias by placing human perceptions and needs at the centre of its ecological vision. It has been called into question by deep ecologists who have tried to reclaim the idea of nature and to offer a different understanding of man's place in it[16]. On the other hand, the deep ecology movement falls in the opposite trap by ignoring the crucially social and historical dimension that links social and economic struggles to environmental crises past and present. Ecocriticism is part of a critical current that seeks to understand the relationship between human cultural productions and the world "out there" in terms that move beyond mere representationalism.

Defined as "a field of literary studies that addresses how humans relate to non-human nature or the environment in literature"[17], ecocriticism allows for a reading of all literary productions through this perspective, including those not overtly concerned with environmental issues but which reflect a specific understanding

14. The concept is borrowed from historian Theodore Roszak. See *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind*, Theodore Roszak, Mary E. Gomes, Allen D. Kanner (eds.), San Francisco, Sierra Club Books, 1995.
15. This is Clément Rosset's central thesis in his book *L'anti-nature: éléments pour une philosophie tragique* [1973], 4th ed., Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 2004.
16. David R. Keller, "Deep Ecology", in *Encyclopedia of Environmental Ethics and Philosophy*, John Baird Callicott, Robert Frodeman (eds.), London, Macmillan Reference USA, 2009, p. 206.
17. Loretta Johnson, "Greening the Library: The Fundamentals and Future of Ecocriticism", *Choice*, vol. 47, no. 4, 2009, p. 623.

of our relationship with the natural world. Besides literature, however, it is our contention that the discipline is relevant to a wider range of discourses and attitudes to the environment, including the visual arts and social and economic discourses addressing, or impacting, the natural environment. Cheryll Glotfelty has shown how ecocritical studies share the awareness that "we have reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet's basic life support systems. Either we change our ways or we face global catastrophe [...]"[18]. Awareness, then, is a common trait of ecocritical approaches to cultural and social productions. Another common feature is the fact that, as Lawrence Buell explains, environmental criticism (a term better suited to the variety of issues under examination than the reductive "ecocriticism") is issue-driven rather than method-driven, uniting a wide range of critical practices over the common awareness of current environmental crises[19]. As the so-called second-wave ecocriticism of the late 20th century considered iconic texts such as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) and Vandana Shiva's *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India* (1988), the discipline paralleled the rise of social environmental movements across late-capitalist countries and postcolonial countries in the past decades.

Environmental criticism should not be seen as monolithic or programmatic. It overlaps with issues of imperialism, postcolonialism, race and class, and the politics of place. It is also the locus of passionate and necessary debate, as the succession of "waves" within the movement shows. Nor does it stand isolated in the critical landscape: environmental criticism is part of a wider theoretical tendency to rehabilitate the material world, the increasingly shared recognition that, as new materialist physicist-cum-philosopher Karen Barad puts it, "language has been granted too much power"[20]. It is indeed time to move beyond an understanding of language as ultimately self-sufficient and self-referential, and the various recent "turns" in academic inquiry such as the spatial, material, and ethical turns, which all aim to rehabilitate the outside world, are congruent with environmental criticism. New materialisms, textual materialism[21] or geocriticism[22] all encourage the literary and cultural critic to gain a precise understanding of how the natural world works by borrowing insights from geography, the life sciences and quantum physics. It can therefore be expected to generate much

18. Cheryll Glotfelty, "Introduction: Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis", in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, Cheryll Glotfelty, Harold Fromm (eds.), Athens – London, University of Georgia Press, 1996, p. xx.
19. Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2005, p. 11.
20. Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2003, p. 801.
21. See Bill Brown's introduction to the issue of *PMLA* he edited on the topic (Bill Brown, "Introduction: Textual Materialism", *PMLA*, vol. 125, no. 1, 2010, p. 24-28).
22. "Géocritique" is a term coined by French critic Bertrand Westphal in his book *La géocritique: réel, fiction, espace*, Paris, Minuit, 2007. It is part of a broader movement of "literary geography" that also includes geopoetics; see Michel Collot, *Pour une géographie littéraire*, Paris, J. Corti, 2014, as well as Maryvonne Boisseau and Marion Naugrette-Fournier's article in the present volume.

stimulating cross-disciplinary discussion. In this respect, material ecocriticism, which invites us to see the non-human world as an assemblage of narratives, thus generating a sense of continuity, or co-construction, between matter and culture, is a particularly exciting development to follow[23].

The first two articles in the present volume provide insights on the evolution of the Irish environment and in different ways remind us that nature should not be perceived as the immutable "other" to be opposed to human civilization. In other words, nature has a history too, both as material reality and as a concept. As such, ideas of nature interact and merge with political and ideological issues.

Marjan Shokouhi's broad-ranging study of deforestation in Ireland de-centres classic anthropocentric narratives of colonization. She traces the twists and turns of the complex relationship between the cutting and planting of trees in Ireland and the history of the colonization of the island, which to this day has one of the lowest rates of forest cover in Europe. Tudor Plantations involved deforestation both as a military strategy and for the purposes of timber exploitation, which drastically reduced Ireland's forest cover. However, the manner in which reforestation was propounded by the landed gentry from the 18th century onwards, with little care for the value of the land as a source of food for a populous peasant class, led to a shift in attitudes to the forest. While colonizers considered Irish forests as a source of profit, the independent Irish state has in fact adopted the same viewpoint, as evidenced by the plantation of non-native species such as Sitka spruce for the growing forestry industry. Focusing on Thomas Kinsella's translation of 6th-century poetic fragments, Shokouhi asks whether poetry can repair the broken link between the Irish and their formerly forested environment.

In her analysis of Gerald of Wales' *Topographia Hibernica*, Nolwena Monnier shows how topographical description served the purpose of justifying the Anglo-Norman colonial enterprise. The medieval, pre-Descartes understanding of nature was inclusive and did not posit a radical distinction between the human mind and the rest of the world. Therefore, writing about geographical landmarks, flora and fauna helps raise the question of origins and of the mythical affinity between landscape and people. Monnier traces stereotypes about the country and its people to Gerald's account, thus explaining some of the origins of the essentialized vision of Ireland. However, *Topographia* also generates a sense of hybridity. By borrowing from Celtic sources – a method reminiscent of the *dinnseanchas* tradition – the text interrogates the boundaries that humans draw in order to define their individual and collective identity. These include the limits of the species: Gerald recounts narratives of inter-species hybridization borrowed from Gaelic lore, echoing Seamus Heaney's *Sweeney Astray* in the 20th century (see the article by Anna Pilz and Tom Herron in this volume).

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23. See in particular *Material Ecocriticism*, Serpil Oppermann, Serenella Iovino (eds.), Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2014.

The next contributions to this volume focus on questions of nature and the material environment in literary and visual artworks, thus grappling with Seamus Heaney's question "How does the real get into the made-up?"[24]. The idea that art should probe the link between form and material reality interrogates the arbitrariness of the sign and the materiality of the work of art itself, something which is especially perceptible in artistic performance or in recent travel diaries such as Garrett Carr's *The Rule of the Land*[25]. As such, novels, poems or paintings, beyond their mimetic function of representation, ask if literature and the arts can make Ireland a habitable place.

Marie Mianowski discusses the symbolic significance of buried human remains in the context of the detective novel. In Brian McGilloway's *The Nameless Dead*, a search for the disappeared bodies of the Troubles in the borderlands yields tiny skeletons buried in a *cillín*. In the novel, the land of the borderland, a theatre of endless violence and retribution, is opposed to the soil, whose vitality can generate new, liberating narratives. Mianowski draws from new materialist philosophy such as Karen Barad's agential realism, in order to trace the intra-actions between the soil and human bodies both living and dead. This profoundly ecological vision in McGilloway's novel transcends the ideological stasis generally associated with the Troubles thriller.

In her reading of Paula Meehan's poetry collection *Geomantic* (2016), Florence Schneider also considers the significance of the soil, as a surface upon which signs are inscribed. The earth retains the trace of events present and past, thus relocating humans within a geological and cosmic whole. Borrowing from Hinduism and Yeatsian occultism, Meehan recontextualizes Ireland's recent past, focusing on the Celtic Tiger and the Irish fascination for commemorations. Her rejection of anthropocentrism ultimately has political significance as it reintegrates traditionally marginalized groups: women, Celtic Tiger victims, non-human animals. By paying close attention to form, the poetic voice goes beyond individual consciousness to uncover a mystical "language of nature". Schneider shows how the tight-knit structure of the poems explores the relationship between language and the world, beyond mere representation.

Manuela Palacios examines Sinéad Morrissey's poetry, whose conceptual depth and intellectual rigour contrasts with the organic fluidity of eco-poets such as Paula Meehan or Medbh McGuckian. Using Merleau-Ponty's ecophenomenology, Palacios uncovers the environmental stance of Morrissey's poems, showing how speakers establish meaningful relationships with non-human "others", from gulls to a beached dolphin. The human gaze is inherently political in Morrissey's spectacularized nature, and rehabilitating sensory perception helps de-centre anthropocentric and logocentric perspectives. Following the posthuman insights of Rosi Braidotti, Palacios explains how Morrissey's poetry considers the human body not solely as

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24. Seamus Heaney, "Known World", in *Electric Light*, London, Faber and Faber, 2001, p. 22.
25. Garrett Carr, *The Rule of The Land: Walking Ireland's Border*, London, Faber and Faber, 2017.

an object but as an instrument of knowledge. Her ecological vision therefore sees humans not so much *in* the world as *of* the world.

The issue of interspecies relationships is central in Anna Pilz and Tom Herron's reading of Seamus Heaney's *Sweeney Astray*. Drawing on Jane Bennett's ecological philosophy, they show how interspecies encounters and hybridization lead to a re-enchantment of the world in the poem. Sweeney's curse – his banishment to the woods in the form of a bird and subsequent madness – helped Irish culture negotiate the delicate transition between paganism and Christianism. The forest and the trees constitute the liminal space enabling the encounter between Celtic and Christian traditions, and between man and nature. Sweeney's madness is only temporary, thus making him a poetic messenger between the human and animal, pagan and Christian worlds, finally enabling a re-enchantment of the world.

The ethical significance of the poet's engagement with the world is also central to Maryvonne Boisseau and Marion Naugrette-Fournier's discussion of Derek Mahon's poetry. For Mahon, global environmental issues take precedence over the timeworn questions of Irish self-definition. The sea and the beach are liminal spaces connecting Irish locales to the global environmental crisis. In this sense, Mahon's writing is more accurately described as geopoetic than ecopoetic, being more about mapping out the world than promoting a definite political project. The sea enables the poet to articulate local and global concerns, while the motif of the stranded debris metonymically represents human activities and their environmental impact. The beach becomes a metaphor for the creative process whereby disjecta are recovered and re-presented by the artist.

Yvonne Scott furthers the analysis of artistic responsibility in the representation of the sea as a critically endangered environment in the visual arts, focusing on Barrie Cooke and Gwen O'Dowd, whose paintings were displayed as part of the *Clean Irish Sea* exhibition at Dublin City Gallery in 1988. For these artists, the sea is not the stable background that it used to be in earlier landscape painting, but a dynamic, living entity, endangered by human activity. In the immediate post-Chernobyl period, *Clean Irish Sea* focused on the threat of nuclear fallout, a radical gesture in a country that was still largely unaware of environmental issues. The two artists use different techniques to convey the urgency of marine endangerment. Barrie Cooke explores the various shades and connotations of the colour blue, from the vivid hue of tourist brochures to the blue water of water expanses (as opposed, in hydrological terms, to the green water stored in the soil and living organisms). Gwen O'Dowd undermines viewers' expectations of landscape painting through audacious compositions that suggest both the surface and depth of the water. As such, her work, often described oxymoronically as "abstract landscapes", questions the relationship between emotional states and material reality.

Last but not least, this issue is honoured to be hosting poems by acclaimed novelist, short story writer and poet Mary O'Donnell. Mary O'Donnell has won numerous prizes for her work, which includes seven collections of poetry. Her latest collection, *Those April Fevers*, came out in 2015 (Todmorden, Arc Publications). Here, O'Donnell addresses our relationship with the natural world through

epiphanic encounters with animals – dolphins, crows, a heron – and the Irish landscape of the bog. Nature exposes the travails of time, as “the composition of ancient self continues”, imparting us with a sense of the unending vitality of the earth. O’Donnell’s final evocations are an apt note on which to conclude this issue. In a time of crisis, the poet’s urgent task – and gift to us – is one of hope.

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