‘A capacity for sustained flight’: Contemporary Irish Poetry and the Ecology of Avian Encounter

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Belfast poet Ciaran Carson tells the story of a striking encounter with a blackbird just before his interview for the directorship of the Seamus Heaney Poetry Centre at Queen’s University Belfast, a meeting that, upon his appointment, would inspire Carson to inscribe the blackbird as the Centre’s symbol. The present website for the Centre recalls a genealogy of the image in the work of contemporary poets such as Carson and Heaney, as well as in the ninth-century lyrical tradition. While the selection of the blackbird as symbol for an internationally acclaimed Irish poetry centre is telling, what is perhaps more significant is the active inspiration and storytelling surrounding this selection, the impulse that drives the name, a synthesis of physical moment and meaning that stems from a serendipitous avian encounter, one that proceeds to represent an institution that is spurred by a trust in the value of poetic impulse. And perhaps this is especially appropriate given the Centre’s namesake. In Seamus Heaney’s Stepping Stones, Dennis O’Driscoll asks Heaney whether or not he ‘thinks poetry can play any practical or meaningful role in changing minds, and hearts on environmental issues’, the question softly framed with a reminder that in the past Heaney had conceded that no poem is strong enough to stop a tank. So, O’Driscoll prods, can a poem stop an SUV? Heaney wryly responds: ‘I think that one answers itself. What has happened, however, is that environmental issues have to a large extent changed the mind of poetry [...] [I]t’s a question of the level of awareness, the horizon of consciousness within which poet and audience operate.’

Both Carson’s context for the nomenclature of the Seamus Heaney Poetry Centre and Heaney’s reflective moment with O’Driscoll suggest that the poetic process has essential narrative components that when juxtaposed reveal the inherent intersections of human and nonhuman...
realities, a confluence that remains at the core of the emerging field of animal studies. In his incisive foreword to Scott Bryson’s study, *Ecopoetry: a Critical Introduction*, narrative scholar John Elder explains his reason for including narrative testimony as a means for introducing critical discourse:

> I have ventured this personal sketch by way of transition to another level on which our critical conversation is itself an ecosystem. It is a dialogue that arises from and shifts with our own eccentric evolutions as readers [....] One of the greatest advantages to an ecological approach to poetry may in fact be that it releases us from the fractiousness of the prevailing scholarly culture.4

Elder’s eloquent description of a critical conversation as ‘itself an ecosystem’ aptly befits the avian themes in the selected poetry of this study. More specifically, this study examines what Heaney describes as the ‘horizon of consciousness’ through the lens of the contemporary poet’s invocation and inscription of Irish birdlife. At no point does this study attempt to exhaust avian references in contemporary Irish poetry. Rather, this study desires to use examples of human and avian encounter in contemporary Irish poetry to explore the importance of reimagining and revaluing the inadequacies of human perception and knowledge of animal life.

The poets of this study generally record avian encounters in Ireland’s western terrain – Galway, Mayo, and Donegal – but this is not to suggest that such themes are absent from more urban spaces such as those we see in the poetry of Paula Meehan, or in the suburban terrain we find in Eavan Boland’s poetry. And this fluidity perhaps speaks to the particularities of avian studies. The quite obvious reality of birdlife as simultaneously near and far, at home, and then away again, becomes a metaphor for the challenge of animal studies in particular, the knowing and not knowing that defines human animal understanding of nonhuman animals.

Critics such as Rachel Billingheimer offer important studies of representations of birds in Irish poetry; these studies, however, remain concerned with a consideration of avian life as symbol in Irish culture.5 This study does not wish to negate the historical and symbolic significance of birds in Irish poetry but uses that foundation as a lens through which to read a contemporary poetic turn toward an ecological understanding of avian life. Offering examples from the poetry of Moya Cannon, Michael Longley, and Francis Harvey, this study argues that the poetic