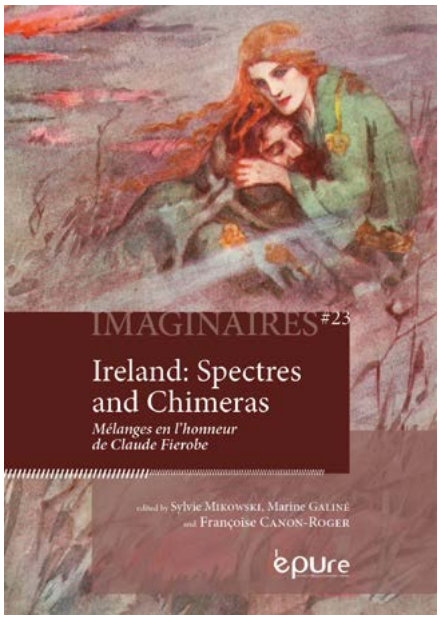
Resurrecting Alltar: Looking Past the *Anthropocene* with Liam Ó Flaithearta's *Dúil*



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Chapter three

Resurrecting *Alltar*

Looking Past the Anthropocene with Liam Ó Flaithearta's *Dúil*

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Abstract: This paper analyses how older work written in minoritised languages can be of use in forming more nuanced, less anthropocentric understandings of the climate crisis. To explore this question, two Irish language short stories from Liam Ó Flaithearta's 1953 collection *Dúil*, 'An Charraig Dhubh' and 'An Scathán' are evaluated as ecological art, using eco-critics Jane Bennett and Timothy Morton to do so. I argue 'An Charraig Dhubh' successfully de-centres the human, even if it relies on a touch of Anthropocentrism. However, though 'An Scathán' uses a similar style of distanced of narration in describing the non-human, its perpetuation of misogynistic hierarchies illustrates some of the difficulties in producing truly ecological, non-anthropocentric art. In conclusion, this paper affirms the importance of older work, especially that written in minoritized languages, in comprehending the climate crisis.

Keywords: Irish, Anthropocene, Minority language, Liam O'Flaherty, Eco-Criticism, Climate Crisis

In the Irish language there is a term *alltar*, which means the "other world" or "hinterland". It is considered to be the opposite of *ceantar*, which has come to mean "area", but it is also used to refer to the physical, human world. *Alltar* is no longer in common linguistic use, something that is perhaps unsurprising given that according to some, this is the Anthropocene, the age of the human. The use of such a term implies the triumph of human technology and a banishing of old spectres. In this paper, however, I seek to show how important it is to look to the past when considering present issues of climate change by examining representations of the non-human in a number of short stories from Liam O'Flaherty's 1953 Irish language collection *Dúil*. In opposition to the logic of the Eurocentric Anthropocene, I argue that minority languages like Irish are

no ghosts of the past but can act as vital mediums to improve human/non-human relations and bridge the nature/culture divide.

If there is a lack of consensus on what this current era should be named and when it started – alongside the Anthropocene, other terms such as "Capitaloscene," and "Plantationscene" have been suggested[1] – there is general agreement that the current dominant economic model is inherently unsustainable. That there is a climate emergency is increasingly recognised on both a political and societal level, witnessed through the rise in popularity of Green parties internationally and the emergence of large protest groups such as *Extinction Rebellion*. What is striking, however, is that despite this newfound awareness and desire to "do something" about the climate crisis, humans continue to contribute to its root causes: it is likely that the majority of countries will fail in their commitments made at the 2015 Paris Climate Summit, and greenhouse gas emissions continue to increase. Indeed, the impotence of human action in the face of what Timothy Morton describes in his work *Being Ecological* as a mass-extinction[2] is made clear by the fact that in February 2020, emissions in China declined by around 25 per cent on an annual basis.[3] The cause, however, was not a carbon tax, the adoption of renewable energy sources, or an increase in electric car sales, rather a viral pandemic – something that exists outside of human control. While greenhouse gas emissions have since rebounded – and are on track to grow by 5% this year globally – that such a dramatic contraction in emissions occurred as a result of non-human intervention underscores a need to revise current understandings of environmental change.[4]

Despite good intentions, it does not appear that the current "do something, do anything" approach towards the looming environmental catastrophe is working. How then can the climate crisis be better handled? According to an increasing number of theorists, including Jane Bennett and Timothy Morton, the solution lies in adopting what has been called a "thinkivist" rather than a "activist" approach.[5] Central to this shift is the relatively new philosophical line of inquiry called object-oriented ontology. Termed by US-American philosopher Graham Harman, OOO or triple O is a subset of the more loosely defined school of Speculative

1. For more, see the work of Anna Tsing, who proposes the "Plantationscene" as a term to account for the role of colonialism in the climate crisis, and Jason Moore who suggests the term "Capitaloscene" in light of capitalism's role on the process. Various starting dates for the current era of climate crisis have been proposed, including 1492 (the start of European imperialism in America), 1712 (the invention of the steam pump) and 1945 (the start of the Atomic age.)
2. Timothy Morton, *Being Ecological*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2018, p. 15.
3. https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/coronavirus-causing-carbon-emissions-to-fall-but-not-for-long (last accessed 18 June 2020).
4. https://www.iea.org/news/global-carbon-dioxide-emissions-are-set-for-their-second-biggest-increase-in-history (last accessed 05 May 2020)
5. https://www.mu.nl/en/txt/ethics-ecology-and-the-future-art-and-design-face-the-anthropocene (last accessed 19 June 2020).

Realism. The underlying principle in the manifesto of OOO is viewing the world through a "flat ontology", which dictates that 'all objects must be given equal attention whether they be human, non-human, natural, cultural, real or fictional.'[6] From the outset, therefore, object-oriented ontology seeks to subvert the human-centred philosophical tradition that describes the Anthropocene by treating the human as an ontological object no more significant than any other.

Art, often side-lined or commodified in neoliberal societies, is given a central position in this new way of thinking, with a role to help humans reimagine relationships with non-human objects through a critical process of making – what Morton terms – "ecological art."[7] Ecological art supports and articulates the idea that there are limits to human knowledge and agency, especially with regards to the environment, and that humans deserve no more attention than other types of beings, building on Latour's "network theory."[8] A number of contemporary visual artists can be seen to be incorporating the concepts above into their work. For example, the *Dear Climate* collective can be understood as practising this form of art through the medium of posters that question human/non-human relationships. Freely available to download from their website, helping them to reach a wide audience, the posters challenge the egocentrism of humanity, place non-humans in human contexts and reference the often-devastating agency that the natural world possesses.[9]

While eco-criticism is a growing area of literary criticism, and an increasing amount of contemporary fiction takes up environmental themes, these themes are often characterised, like the visual art movements mentioned above, as recent occurrences. In this paper, however, it will be argued that one can also look to older literature as forerunners to this line of thinking, especially work written in minority languages. To illustrate this, this paper will examine a selection of Liam Ó Flaithearta's early 20th century Irish language short stories, demonstrating how they can be seen to fit with more recent concepts of ecological, or non-anthropocentric art. In short, this paper will look backwards in an attempt to look beyond the Anthropocene.

Before the works themselves are discussed, it is important to fully anchor their relevance (and that of minority languages) to the topic of ecological art. Liam Ó Flaithearta was a writer from Inis Mór, an island off the coast of Galway and was raised in the Irish language. As an adult, he travelled widely and published predominately in English. Later in his life,

6. Graham Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything*, London, Pelican, 2018, p. 9.
7. Morton, *op. cit.*, p. 61.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
9. https://www.dearclimate.net (last accessed 18 June 2020).

in 1953, however, he published *Dúil*, a collection of short stories in Irish, many of which date back to the 1920s and all of which are set in Irish speaking communities in the West of Ireland.[10] The stories dealt with in this paper all derive from this collection. Minority languages, as is argued in this paper, could and should play a fundamental role in the environmental humanities. Although the very term 'minority language' is indeed broad, enveloping thousands of languages ranging from Itonam, a moribund language spoken by fewer than five people in eastern Bolivia, to Català, spoken by upwards of ten million, there are commonalities to be found between them: all have been or are still threatened by a larger, imperial language, and most have been deemed as irrelevant to the advance of modernity at some point, existing in the minds of many only as spectres of past eras. It is precisely this last point that potentially renders minority languages so valuable to the environmental humanities.

Latour claims in his seminal text *We Have Never Been Modern*, modernism created and is best characterised by a divide between nature and culture (and thus humans and non-humans).[11] If this is the case, then it could be argued that one should look to languages that were less implicated within modernism in an attempt to sidestep the human-centric perspective that became so dominant. European modernism was fundamentally intertwined with the colonial project, and thus the very minority languages that were suppressed (and in many cases near-eradicated) offer the potential to subvert the modernist approach to human/non-human relations. Though we are living in the era of postmodernism, the driving force of modernism – that is the industrialised capitalist economy – continues to shape the societies we inhabit, and the culture that is produced.

At this point, it might be helpful to return to the term "Anthropocene" and briefly problematise it. While the word implies a universality in the impact humans have on the earth, this understanding, as critics such as Donna Haraway have argued, lacks nuance. In a 2015 text, Haraway asks: "The anthropos–what is that? All of Homo Sapiens Sapiens? All of mankind? Well, who exactly?" She then continues to argue that the Anthropocene is a product of industrial humanity – i.e. the financially prosperous countries of the global north.[12] This is indeed obvious when one looks at the comparative greenhouse gas emissions of Germany and Ethiopia, for example. Although they have similar populations, Germany emits around ninety times as much carbon dioxide as Ethiopia.[13] When one talks about humans as responsible for climate change, in reality it is

10. https://www.dib.ie/biography/oflaherty-liam-a6753 (last accessed 18 June 2020).
11. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Cambridge, MA., Harvard U.P., 1993, p. 11.
12. Donna Haraway, "Anthropocence, Capitalocene, Chthulhucene. Donna Haraway in conversation with Martha Kenney", *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*, 2015, p. 255.
13. https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EN.ATM.CO2E.PC (last accessed 18 June 2020).

only the inhabitants of the global north, specifically the wealthy inhabitants, who are implicated. Therefore, through their exclusion from industrial modernity and new capitalism, minority languages and the culture produced in them might offer another way to examine human/non-human relations.

Within the spectrum of minority languages, Irish occupies a strange space. On one level, it is a native language of a wealthy Western European country, one which ranks amongst the worst greenhouse gas emitters in the world on a per capita basis[14]. However, it (alongside many aspects of Gaelic culture) was oppressed under British colonial rule, and its subsequent decline and minoritisation mirrors that of many smaller languages. Despite strong legal protections on a national and EU level (it is the only minority language to be granted status as an official language of the European Union)[15] the threats to the regions in which Irish is still used as a vernacular, namely isolation, emigration and lack of economic opportunities, are shared with many other minority languages. In a sense, Irish can therefore be seen to occupy a position between dominant and subordinate cultures. Though Irish is growing as an urban language, the rural nature of many Gaeltacht regions and the historical ties between Irish and landscape – evidenced by place-naming traditions which often refer to physical features – make it stand to reason that Irish language literature would feature a different way of representing the non-human. In the first few decades of the 20th century, there was a large emphasis placed on *Béaloideas* (oral tradition) and the primacy of the rural experience within Irish language literary production, which means that there are written records – both real and imagined – of how isolated communities interacted with the non-human before the widespread arrival of electricity or the car. Indeed, *An Cnuasach Bhéaloideas Éireann* (The Irish Folklore Collection), consisting of thousands of stories collected in rural communities from the 1930s, is amongst the most significant archives of its type in Europe.[16] Of course, it is important not to romanticise such positions – life in these communities was often difficult, and people there were still in contact with and subject to many of the same pressures seen in other parts of Ireland. Many of those who wrote in Irish at this time also published in English, and were based in the 'Galltacht',[17] including Liam Ó Flaithearta.

14. https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-eii/eii18/greenhousegasesandclimatechange (last accessed 25 Feb. 2020).
15. https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/eu-languages (last accessed 19 June 2020).
16. https://www.duchas.ie/ga/info/cbe (last accessed 18 June 2020).
17. The term *Galltacht* is often used to refer to regions of Ireland where Irish is no longer a community language. Though it sometimes is used disparagingly (*gall* meaning "outsider", historically in the context of Norman and English settlers), I use it here to contrast with the term and concept of *Gaeltacht*. Some sociolinguists make use of the term *Iar-ghaeltacht* (former Irish speaking area) instead.

In this context, "An Charraig Dhubh" (The Black Rock) is particularly striking. As John Cronin notes, it is one of a handful of Ó Flaithearta texts that were originally written in Irish and have no English translation,[18] and crucially, it is also one of only a few of his stories that involve no human characters. It is interesting to consider how these two facts might be connected, in terms of how language affects modes of thinking. Moreover, "An Charraig Dhubh" is not narrated from a noticeably human or personalised perspective, rather in the same distanced, third-person narrative style that is used in human-centred stories such as "Daoine Bochta" (Poor People). These traits alone are enough to highlight that "An Charraig Dhubh" deserves analysis as a piece of ecological art.

It is a brief story, describing a rock on the shore that is teeming with life: "Bhí mórghleo ag an iomad ainmhí, iad ag ithe go santach agus ag déanamh aeir faoi sholas gléigeal na gréine" [There was much noise from the many animals, eating greedily and enjoying themselves under the bright light of the sun.][19] Many types of non-human beings are described individually, including sea lice, periwinkles and crabs.[20] It is noteworthy that equal narrative time is given to describing each sort of life, enabling the reader to view the rock as something of a flat ontology. An argument against this perhaps would be the apparent hierarchy regarding the position of the gull at the top of the rock "ina sheasamh ar leathchois, a cheann faoi sciatháin agus é ina chodladh" [standing on one foot, its head under its wing asleep.][21] It could be argued that as the gull is described individually, rather than collectively, as is the case with most of the small animals, Ó Flaithearta allows a human bias towards large animals to enter into his work. Furthermore, when the rock is eventually destroyed by the ocean, the gull is the only animal whose survival is made explicit, the fate of most of the residents of the rock is to end up as "coirp bheaga bhídeacha na marbh ag imeacht ar bharr uisce san áit a raibh an charaig ina seasamh" [minuscule dead bodies floating on top of the water where the rock once was.][22]

However, the importance of such divisions comes into question when one considers how, in the face of the destructive power of the ocean, all of the rock's inhabitants are equal in defencelessness. This brings to mind Morton's theory of "hyperobjects" – objects that are "massively distributed in time and space compared to humans."[23] The climate or the ocean could be considered hyperobjects, as humans – and presumably

18. John Cronin, "Liam O'Flaherty and Dúil", *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua*, 7(1), 2003, p. 45–55 (https://www.jstor.org/stable/20557854).
19. Liam Ó Flaithearta, *Dúil*, An Spidéal, ClÓ Iar-Chonnacht, 2013, p. 22.
20. *Ibid*., p. 23.
21. *Ibid*., p. 24.
22. *Ibid*., p. 26.
23. Harman, *op. cit*., p. 232.

many smaller non-humans – are unable to comprehend them as a whole. Instead, humans are only able to interpret parts of them (rain in the case of climate, or waves in the case of ocean, for example). Whatever implied hierarchy there might be between the gull, crabs, mussels and sea lice is flattened by the hyperobjects of storm and climate. The reader ultimately is left with an impression of the transient nature of life, relative to the permanence of the natural world – an implication that resonates strongly with OOO theory.

The starkness of Ó Flaithearta's descriptions is also of relevance here: Despite the loss of much life, there is no attempt to romanticise the death and destruction wreaked on the rock by the storm. Instead, what unfolds is described in a clear, factual manner through short and direct sentences. Again, one can argue that insofar as is possible, human, and human-centric biases, are removed from the story. In this respect, "An Charraig Dhubh" is notable amongst Ó Flaithearta's work in not expressing any value judgement towards non-human things. This is in contrast to how in "An Seabhac" (The Hawk), for example, the hawk is described as not having any charity or fear in his heart.[24] Clearly, this is based on the human-centric idea of birds of prey as evil. This is a belief that lingers on today, demonstrated by the poisoning of twenty-three buzzards in West Cork in late 2019.[25] The transmission of such modes of thinking through art can be seen as an example of how culture can reinforce damaging stereotypes about non-human things. It should be noted that "An Seabhac" was first written in English and then translated, and is perhaps, therefore, influenced by English speaking perspectives.

While there is, as evidenced above, a strong case to classify the world of "An Charraig Dhubh" as an example of a flat ontology, given that it foregrounds the non-human both in its narrative style and subject matter, Ó Flaithearta also makes clear use of anthropomorphism. For example, he writes of the periwinkles, "…agus a gcuid adharca ag treabhadh an aeir amach rompu go luaineach mar a bheadh méaracha ceoltóra" […and their horns feeling the air ahead of them, nimble like a musicians' fingers.][26] This is a somewhat contested way of rendering the non-human. On one level, transposing human characteristics to non-human items might be seen as problematic, as it has the potential to reduce non-human objects to peripheral parts of the human experience.

However, it can also be argued, as Jane Bennett does in *Vibrant Matter*, that it is only through anthropomorphism that humans can attempt to understand the non-human and the concept of an interconnected

24. Ó Flaithearta, *op. cit.*, p. 14.
25. https://www.rte.ie/news/ireland/2020/0512/1138015 (last accessed 18 June 2020).
26. Ó Flaithearta, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

biosphere. As Bennett writes, "an anthropomorphic element […] can uncover a whole world of resonances and resemblances."[27] That is to say, while initially the use of anthropomorphism might be seen as narcissistic, by transposing human metaphors and emotions onto animals, it can help comprehend the experience of other living beings. In "An Charraig Dhubh", Ó Flaithearta's use of anthropomorphism, it can be argued, is benign in so far as it is used to help the reader (as a human) better imagine the actions of different non-human beings. Furthermore, while its use does enable the human reader to romanticise nature, the destruction of the idyllic appearing rock and its ecosystem by the storm can be seen to fit Morton's assertion that "ecological art must include ugliness and disgust."[28] However, if anthropomorphism can be seen as an inevitable, and perhaps helpful, aspect in creating ecological and non-anthropocentric art, questions remain as to Ó Flaithearta's renderings of humans in his work.

This paper will now turn to "An Scáthán" (The Mirror) to examine this. Interestingly, this story immediately follows "An Charraig Dhubh" in *Dúil*, and initially appears to share many of its stylistic traits. It is narrated from a third-person narrative perspective, and describes non-human beings in depth, including limpets and seaweed, while there is also a paragraph dedicated to the tide turning.[29] However, in contrast to "An Charraig Dhubh", the focus of the story is on a young girl collecting limpets on the shore. At the start of the story, Ó Flaithearta's descriptions of her appear neutral, and in the same vein as descriptions of non-human things. For example, the reader is told "bhí corrdhos dá fionnghruaig ag sileadh lena grua agus iad slíochtha le allas." [A tuft of her blonde hair fell on her sweat-slicked cheeks].[30] In addition, the girl is unnamed, allowing the reader to imagine "girl" as a species descriptor, in the same way as "limpet" is used (though the gendered aspect of this description must be taken into account). However, as the story progresses the descriptions become more human-centric and notably sexualised. Attention is paid to her breasts, and the fact that she is a "cáilín ríbhreá dea-dhéanta" [a beautiful, well-made girl].[31] It is at this point that one must consider the impact of the authorial 'male gaze'.

While the narrative style of "An Scáthán" masquerades as neutral, the objectification implicit within the descriptions of the young woman shatters this illusion, allowing the maleness of the author to intrude. While on one level the way in which the girl is described can be seen as

27. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, Durham, Duke U.P., 2010 (https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv111jh6w), p. 99.
28. Morton, *op. cit.*, p. 87.
29. Ó Flaithearta, *op. cit.*, p. 28.
30. *Ibid.*
31. *Ibid.*

her fitting in as part of the biosphere, this assertion is pulled into question when one considers that nowhere in *Dúil* is a male subject treated similarly. At the end of "An Scáthán", the reader is told that the girl has lost the shame surrounding her body, instead accepting her beauty and ??"le rún diamhair a broinne a chur i bhfeidhm" [to make use of the dark secret of her womb].[32] In a sense, Ó Flaithearta is playing into the notion that women's main purpose is to recreate and that this is their 'natural' role. Meanwhile, men in his work are given voices, free-will, and even names. In "Mearbhall" (Confusion), the story is told from a first-person perspective by a male narrator, and when he is faced with a ghost-like barkeeper, the narrator is given the agency to leave the bar by Ó Flaithearta.[33]

Timothy Morton argues that in neo-platonic, anthropocentric modes of thought there is the belief that humans act and animals behave.[34] In Ó Flaithearta's work it seems that men act, while women behave, and hence there is the implication that while there might be a flat ontology in *Dúil* between women and non-human things, men are positioned as separate and above this. Returning to the very notion of 'Anthropocene,' or the human-dominated earth, given the predominance of men in polluting and extractive industries, one might consider the Anthropocene to be a kind of 'Men-o-scene'. If one accepts this – even partially – Ó Flaithearta's portrayal of human beings starts to appear anthropocentric and, far from being radical, as work that upholds the misogynistic status quo. This, of course, is an issue that is much larger than Ó Flaithearta – nature writing remains a male-dominated field and the image of the solitary, white man endures in work set in wild spaces.

What, then, can be made of the above? In this paper I have argued for the importance of minority languages in *expanding* understandings of ecological art, presenting Irish as an interesting case given its geographical location and specific history. In "An Charraig Dhubh" Ó Flaithearta seems to successfully represent a flat ontology by not including humans in the narrative, and through dedicating time to describing a society of non-humans. However, this paper then argued that he is less successful when humans become part of the narrative, evidenced by the way in which a young woman is described in "An Scáthán" and the disparity between this and how men are portrayed elsewhere in *Dúil*. The gendered way in which he depicts males and females complicates attempts at classifying Ó Flaithearta's work as ecological, and the effect of language choice – whether work was written initially in Irish or in English – on portrayals of human/non-human relations deserves further study. Despite these issues, *Dúil* makes a strong argument for expanding the search for

32. *Ibid*., p. 32.
33. *Ibid*., p. 59.
34. Morton, *op. cit*., p. 63.

ecological art into the past, and for exploring minority language art in this context. It shows that art created before the Anthropocene can have just as much relevance as we attempt to grasp what comes next. Like the term *Alltar*, many minority cultures – especially non-European cultures – have been side-lined and overlooked for not being in sync with modernity and its demands. Perhaps this is exactly why non-majority cultures should be foregrounded now.

Callum Bateson is a postgraduate researcher at the VU Amsterdam and writer from West Cork, Ireland. His research interests include the capitalocene, minority languages, and contemporary Ireland as a (post)colonial space. He holds an M.Phil in Creative Writing from Trinity College Dublin and his creative work has been published in the College Green Journal. He has a forthcoming academic publication in *Networking Knowledge*. c.p.bateson@student.vu.nl

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