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Modern Ireland — A Place Not Quite Home

From the “shiny grass” of Anahorish to the “green and lovely lanes of Killeshandra,” few nations are as well known for their environment and landscape as Ireland. Once an island full of forests, Ireland lost its trees at the hands of the English (and later the British), who used the timber for profit and shipbuilding. Ireland’s landscape has featured prominently in its literature, from Revivalist romanticism, to the streets of Joyce’s Dublin, and through to today. *Solar Bones*, written by Mike McCormack and published in 2016, as well as *A Line Made by Walking*, written by Sara Baume and published in 2017, continue the legacy of prominently featuring the environment in Irish writing. Both authors interpret the tradition of “place” in unique ways, illuminating their manuscripts with a visual viscerality of contemporary Irish life. In *Solar Bones*, humanity and nature are often at odds with one another, but metaphysically connected. In *A Line Made by Walking*, a house does not become a home, just because one wills it.

As a historically agricultural society, the Irish people have been tied to their land for generations. Over time, the Irish language receded into the furthest corners of the isle due to British colonialism. Lacking the link to their native language, the bond between the Irish and their land increased to compensate. Feehan writes that the English/British cut Irish forests because “of the refuge they offered outlaws and rapparees, and for short-term economic gain” (Feehan 580). The British would eventually force the Irish to farm a monoculture of potatoes, cementing the connection between the Irish people and their land but also heavily restricting it. British colonial rule prevented much of Ireland from industrializing; even after independence, Ireland continued this rural mindset. This is largely a result of postcolonialism; Carroll describes Ireland as “a Free State that imitated colonial institutions more than it lived up to the

revolutionary ideals of 1916” (Carroll 1). The Irish landscape is put on a pedestal in many Revivalist works, such as “Cathleen Ni Houlihan”, where the people and the land are intimately intertwined. In contrast, Joyce exposed the dimness that was Dublin life. *Solar Bones* and *A Line Made by Walking* were written during the housing collapse subsequent to the Celtic Tiger boom, which, combined with Ireland’s postcolonial attitudes to nature, inform the backdrop that the two works developed in.

Solar Bones is a story about a deceased man named Marcus Conway returning to Earth on All Souls’ Day and recounting his life, narrated in a slipstream fashion of a single run-on sentence. The book is set in rural Ireland where nature, the environment, and landscapes frequently appear throughout Marcus’s thoughts. His wife Mairead becomes seriously ill as a result of a *Cryptosporidium* outbreak in the town’s water, with the town continually failing to resolve the issue. The environment and the town are out of sync. Marcus works as a civil engineer, transforming the landscape around him. He runs into an issue at his job, because the politician Moylette encourages Marcus to sign off on a project that Marcus knows is not up to standard. A school’s concrete foundation will, as Marcus says, “tear itself apart in three different directions whenever the temperature goes through a sudden change” (McCormack location 328.3). Moylette wants to ignore the natural weather cycles in the interest of profit and political prestige. Once again, the human side of Marcus’s region is at odds with the natural world. This is especially ironic because Moylette acknowledges the rural nature of his electoral base. He says the county is:

the largest and most far-flung constituency in the whole country – leaflets, clinics, church gate collections – the whole lot, anything to harvest a quota of first preferences in an area

with no major urban centre, just a few scattered villages, an area which is, by and large covered with some of the widest bogs and the highest mountains in the whole province, an area populated in the main by black-faced sheep. (McCormack location 328.3)

This inability to harmonize with the surrounding land stands in contrast to the common perception of Ireland.

Some echoes of Ireland's druidic, nature-worshipping past reverberate throughout *Solar Bones*. Right from the beginning, a bell is described as ringing:

The Angelus bell ringing out over its villages and townlands, over the fields and hills and bogs in between... which gathers this parish together through all its primary and secondary roads with all its schools and football pitches all its bridges and graveyards all its shops and pubs... the made world with all the focal points around which a parish like this gathers itself as surely as the world itself did at the beginning of time, through mountains, rivers and lakes. (McCormack location 5)

Nature, the environment, and the surrounding landscape are imbued with an ineffable air. All of the world gravitates towards a singularity, collating like the astral dust that created our solar system once did. The phrase "mountains, rivers and lakes" repeats several times throughout *Solar Bones*, always in regards to an abstract thought about the world, as if mountains, rivers and lakes are a fundamental unit of existence. Besides the angelus bell, other mentions of harmony and sonic oscillation are sprinkled throughout. Marcus describes himself as "...a kind of bounded harmonic, a bouquet of rhythms meshing into one over-emergent melody which homes me within the wider rhythms of the world, the horizontal melody of the cosmos" (McCormack

location 398.2). Like nature, sound waves are cyclical and harmonic, and harmony's meaning can be interpreted in an acoustic sense as well as one of unity. Existence, life, nature, and everything else that exists, are portrayed as vibrations. Through this, people are irrevocably connected to the land in *Solar Bones*, making it unsurprising that when the citizens of County Mayo hurt the land around them, they also hurt themselves. Marcus, describing his lineage, says, "...my line traceable to the gloomy prehistory in which a tenacious clan of farmers and fishermen kept their grip on a small patch of land through hail and gale hell and high water..." (McCormack, location 9.4). His ancestors were able to survive with a close connection to their land, a synchronicity that appears to be missing in the present generation.

The damp, chilled portrayal of the world in *A Line Made by Walking* is cyclical as well, albeit with more of a personal focus. The main character, Frankie, is a directionless and lonely artist, who appears to be morbidly fascinated by death. Each chapter is titled after a dead animal that she takes a picture of. Perhaps she relates to these animals; the animal that describes Frankie best is a penguin that she watches in a nature documentary. This penguin is "a single penguin that has broken away from the group and set off in the opposite direction, towards the mountains" (Baume 44.5). The penguin is described as "deranged," but it also parallels Frankie's attitude toward the world around her. She says "The world is wrong," referring not just to the physical landscape but the human one as well (Baume 44.5). Frankie, like the people in *Solar Bones* has also become desynced from her surrounding environment. She feels as though the house she grew up in, which she calls the "famine hospital," because it was built during the Famine, is no longer her home. She says "For a week before I came here, I stayed beneath my parents' roof, and even then, I continued to chant it. I want to go home, I want to go home, I want

to go home, even though I was there. But that house doesn't feel like the place I grew up any more" (Baume location 22.5). Being a stranger in one's own home is a long-running theme throughout Irish literature and history. She does not feel much more at home in the city either, stating "I wasn't very good at living in Dublin" (Baume location 39). No matter where Frankie goes, she feels like an outsider, just like the penguin.

Frankie lives in her late grandmother's house that she's dubbed "turbine hill." Frankie says she moved to turbine hill because "The point of being here, alone in the bungalow on turbine hill, is to recover" (Baume location 50). Turbine hill is embedded in the heart of rural Ireland with few neighbors to speak of. Frankie's closest neighbor Jink is an eccentric, highly religious, and potentially dangerous born-again Christian. Perhaps Jink is also looking for recovery in his isolated surroundings; if the countryside can heal, does that mean the city is damaging? Is the countryside even effective at healing in the first place? The iconography of the turbines that Frankie names the location after suggests renewable energy and health, while the abundance of death in the area, from Frankie's grandmother to all the animals Frankie comes across, suggests decay. Frankie leads as poor a life in her late grandmother's home as she does anywhere else; perhaps the issue is not the physical location, but the mental one. Like many of her ancestors before her, Frankie decides that she cannot "open my eyes tomorrow morning to that same patch of ceiling I open my eyes to every morning," and sets out on a boat. The very ethos of Ireland is fundamentally misaligned with Frankie, so she embarks to horizons unknown.

The often-celebrated verdant pastures of the Emerald Isle have a history mottled with strife that contradicts the commonly held narrative of a people in tune to their land. An ancient Celtic connection to the Earth, combined with the environmental effects of colonial economic

exploitation, has given rise to a national zeitgeist that strongly embraces its own geography. Literature from past epochs through to the present engage with this concept; modern writing frequently features Ireland's dual-natured existence. In *Solar Bones* as well as *A Line Made by Walking*, nature is both healing and damaging. Ireland is not just its flora and fauna however; it is also the culture and the people, who in turn influence the landscape, repeating an ancient cycle. Modernity, however, cannot quite align with its druidic past. (1697 words)

Works Cited

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