HOSPITALITY, HOME, AND THE ENVIRONMENT IN THE WORKS OF AILBHE NÍ GHEARBHUIGH AND SIMON Ó FAOLÁIN[1]

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Abstract: This essay explores contemporary Irish-language poetry through a focus on the related concepts of rootedness and mobility. Examining works by Ailbhe Ní Ghearbhuigh and Simon Ó Faoláin, and drawing on theories of James Clifford, Zygmunt Bauman, and Emmanuel Levinas, I ask how these poets combine depersonalized and globalized perspectives with themes of proximity, hospitality, and care. By opening their poems up to different forms of otherness, they show hospitality as both an inevitable and potentially problematic aspect of contemporary world. While Ní Ghearbhuigh foregrounds gender inequities encoded in stereotyped notions (and biological facts) of motherhood, Ó Faoláin focuses on the ambiguous legacies of various cultures. In being simultaneously rooted in the local (already extremely diversified) literary tradition and informed by a globalized sense of connection, their poems speak of genuine care for vulnerable ecological communities and social, linguistic, or other "minorities."

Keywords: hospitality, home, climate change, ethics of care, proximity ethics, linguistic hospitality, Levinas

This essay explores works by two contemporary Irish-language poets, Ailbhe Ní Ghearbhuigh and Seán Ó Faoláin, who both deploy depersonalized and globalized perspectives to speak of matters that are closest to home: love, family, anxiety, and hope. By focusing on interpersonal relationships and intercultural

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and inter-species encounters, their poems testify to how concepts of proximity, hospitality, and care have evolved in a globalized world affected by climate change. Some of these poems are set within the private sphere of family and home, others take us to places far beyond the borderlines of the personal, or even the local and "the real." But they invariably show us how a sense of rootedness in a place, community, or tradition remains an important aspect of our inhabiting the world. At the same time, nonetheless, they accentuate inevitable counterparts of familiarity: the experiences of alienation, estrangement, and fear that follow from our consciousness of various global and local crises. My aim is to show how this diversified and extended concept of the "local," personal, or immediate enables the two poets to comment on matters pertaining to their experience of the wider world, and vice versa. Their works illustrate how – despite the growing infiltration of communication technologies into our lives and relationships, and despite the increasingly catastrophic manifestations of the deteriorating climate – our place in the world remains defined by principles of proximity and hospitality.

Both Ní Ghearbhuigh and Ó Faoláin came to prominence after the turn of the millennium. It would be wrong to claim, however, that they represent the first generation of Irish-language poets with a genuinely transnationalist perspective. It will suffice to remind ourselves of the international influences in the poetry of Seán Ó Ríordáin, the effect of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on the work of Eoghan Ó Tuairisc, the "rooted cosmopolitanism" of Máire Mhac an tSaoi,[2] or the internationalist outlooks of the *Innti* poets and some of their contemporaries, including Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Michael Davitt, Gabriel Rosenstock, and Biddy Jenkinson, to see how preposterous such a supposition might be.[3] While they are no less "rooted" in the local folklore and literary traditions than their predecessors, Ní Ghearbhuigh's and Ó Faoláin's versatility and openness to extraneous stimuli equally make them direct inheritors of previous developments in modern poetry in Irish.

[2] Rióna Ní Fhrighil, "Rooted Cosmopolitanism in Máire Mhac an tSaoi's Poetry," in *The Poets and Poetry of Munster: One Hundred Years of Poetry from South Western Ireland*, ed. Clíona Ní Ríordáin and Stephanie Schwerter (Stuttgart: Stuttgart University Press, 2013) 35-52.

[3] Tadhg Ó Dúshláine describes the group of poets (customarily referred to as *filí Innti* [*Innti* poets]) who helped to expand the reach of poetry in Irish in the 1970s and 1980s as representing "craobh de réabhlóid idirnáisiúnta" [a branch of an international revolution]. Tadhg Ó Dúshláine, "Anois Tacht an Eala," in *Léachtaí Cholm Cille 41: Filí INNTI go hiontach*, ed. Tadhg Ó Dúshláine and Caitríona Ní Chléirchín (Maigh Nuad: An Sagart, 2011) 129. Qtd. in "Réamhrá," in *Inside* Innti: *A New Wave in Irish Poetry*, ed. Ailbhe Ní Ghearbhuigh and Tristan Rosenstock (Cork: Cork University Press, 2023) xix.

What has changed since the time the founding figures of modern poetry in Irish were embarking on their careers, nevertheless, is the notional context. Over the past twenty-five years, the key concepts of social and cultural theory that influenced twentieth-century writers, i.e., "modernism," "postcolonialism," and "postmodernism," have been gradually replaced with a globalist consciousness.[4] In terms of Irish-language literature, we find an important early voicing of this globalized mindset in a 2003 article by Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, titled "Linguistic Ecology: Preventing a Great Loss." In her persuasive account of her intellectual and emotional life divided between several languages, places, and cultures, Ní Dhomhnaill rejects any narrow-minded, essentialist notions of a "national" language and literature.[5] Arguing for a more inclusive, truly ecological perspective,[6] Ní Dhomhnaill approximates the approach of American interdisciplinary scholar James Clifford who has written about the close interconnection of rootedness and mobility in various cultures. Clifford encourages us to think "comparatively of routes" and "roots of tribes" and consider these in relationships to various "neighbourhoods."[7] He proposes that even the pre-modern and "place-bound" communities often prove to be "'traveling cultures' associated with a wide range of places" and that these communities are in fact "diasporic in nature" and "derive their identity from connections to a variety of places ('routes') rather than their connection in just one locale ('roots')."[8] Focusing on both "travel" and "translation" in his account, Clifford suggests that language and the interface between different cultures through linguistic translation and communication are important aspects of this mobility.

Clearly, these claims are easy to apply to the Gaelic tradition and its narratives of travel,[9] and relevant for intercultural influences in Irish-language literature.

4 Ursula K. Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) 4.

5 Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, "Linguistic Ecology: Preventing a Great Loss," in *Lives in Translation: Bilingual Writers on Identity and Creativity*, ed. Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) 79-92. See also Biddy Jenkinson, "The Destruction of Poetic Habitat," *Southern Review* 31, no. 3 (1995): 407-408.

6 In a more recent text, Michael Cronin argues that small and minoritized languages such as Irish need to be considered in ecological terms since their future – just like the future of the planet – depends on the appreciation of diversity and otherness. Michael Cronin, *An Ghaeilge agus an Éiceolaíocht / Irish and Ecology* (Baile Átha Cliath: Foilseacháin Ábhair Spioradálta, 2019).

7 James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997) 36.

8 Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation* 6, 57.

9 Cf. the early tradition of *immrama*, the Irish sea voyage tales, and the *echtrae*, adventurous tales that involve elements of time travel and journeys to the otherworld. See Aisling

I claim that the two poets discussed in this essay represent new forms of "travelling cultures." These new cultures are shaped by communication media and technology-induced awareness of geographically and culturally distant narratives, scientific knowledge, and moral codes. Thus, although they represent notions of connectedness and accessibility, they also entail estrangement – one of the oldest methods of art and literature that these poets readily adopt. By making us aware of experiences, eras, and places significantly different from ours, they simultaneously make us see what is happening to us here and now.

The technique of estrangement, as Zygmunt Bauman explains, by necessity leads to an ethic of responsibility and "care": "the morality which we have inherited from pre-modern times – the only morality we have – is a morality of proximity, and as such is woefully inadequate in a society in which all important action is an action on distance. [...] Morality which always guided us and still guides us today has powerful, but short hands."[10] By choosing to write in Irish, these poets and their works confirm that they are securely rooted in – and that they, indeed, care about – the local life and traditions. Nonetheless, by incorporating these allegiances with explorations of other worlds and cultures, they also testify to how Irish and its literature have always had strong intercultural connections. As they play up the tension between what is close and what is far, what is familiar and what is strange, they help us see how the "short hands" of proximity ethics, articulated by Bauman, can be extended by the closely related concept of hospitality. Both Ní Ghearbhuigh and Ó Faoláin foreground ethical issues raised, on daily basis, by our interactions with the variously construed other, starting with family relationships and ending with our engagement with the natural world. To explore these complexities, I draw – beside the works of Clifford and Bauman – on the theory of Emmanuel Levinas and his attempts to extricate the ethics of care from principles of self-interest and instrumental value, while taking into account critical reactions to his thought. To argue that proper care for the other is not conditioned by the subject's will and cannot be derived from knowledge, Levinas propounds the notion of "duty without end."[11] This idea of an irreducible, primary nature of our responsibility to the other – proposed by Levinas as part of his hospitality ethic – has, however, been increasingly viewed

Nora Byrne, *Otherworlds: Fantasy and History in Medieval Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) 102-105, 111-12, 117-19; and David N. Dumville, "*Echtrae* and *Immram*: Some Problems of Definition," *Ériu* 27 (1976): 73-94.

10 Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993) 217, 218.

11 Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1998) 161.

as compromised due to its proximity to patriarchal, "fraternalistic," and anthropocentric traditions.[12] My aim is to show how Ní Ghearbhuigh's and Ó Faoláin's respective poetic accounts of "roots" and "routes" represent genuine – and sometimes sarcastic – testimonies to our thinking about home, intimacy, and care in a contemporary world defined by climate change and global connections.

Ailbhe Ní Ghearbhuigh's work has always paid close attention to the cognate themes of travel and home and drawn on a mix of local and international influences.[13] Following her first collection, *Péacadh* ([Germination] 2008), she published *Tost agus Allagar* ([Silence and Dispute] 2016) which springs from the creative tension between silence and communication and focuses on the interconnection between what is here and what is elsewhere. Another aspect that binds the poems in Ní Ghearbhuigh's second collection, however, is their relevance to the concept of "linguistic hospitality." Richard Kearney and Melissa Fitzpatrick define the term as "a type of hospitality rooted in conversation,

[12] David J. Gauthier, "Levinas and the Politics of Hospitality," *History of Political Thought* 28, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 158; see also Richard A. Cohen, "Emmanuel Levinas: Judaism and the Primacy of the Ethical," in *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish Philosophy*, ed. Michael L. Morgan and Peter Eli Gordon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 234-55; Jeffery Bloechl, "Words of Welcome: Hospitality in the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas," in *Phenomenologies of the Stranger: Between Hostility and Hospitality*, ed. Richard Kearney and Kascha Semonovitch (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011) 232-41; Tina Chanter, ed., *Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas* (Pennsylvania, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001); Roger S. Gottlieb, "Ethics and Trauma: Levinas, Feminism, and Deep Ecology," *CrossCurrents* 44, no. 2 (Summer 1994): 222-40.

[13] Born in Tralee, County Kerry, Ní Ghearbhuigh studied at Galway university and lived in Bordeaux, France, and New York before returning to Ireland and settling down in Cork. Her work testifies to inspiration by the Gaelic folk and literary traditions and is in constant dialogue with Irish-language poets of her own and the preceding generations. It also reacts, nonetheless, to a range of international impulses, including Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* (see "Tuairisc Cathrach" [City Tidings]) or a fictional Catalan poet (see "An Bhean Mhídhílis" [The Unfaithful Woman]; both from *Tonn Teaspaigh agus Dánta Eile* [Baile Átha Cliath: Éabhlóid, 2022] 90-92, 39). Commenting on Ní Ghearbhuigh's "affinity for the clandestine character of minority languages" throughout the world and her determination to find comfort and a home in a city (see "Filleadh ar an gCathair" [Back to the City]), David Wheatley alludes to the poet's "buoyant cosmopolitanism." David Wheatley, "Ailbhe Ní Ghearbhuigh," *The Wake Forest Series of Irish Poetry*, vol. 4 (Winston Salem, NC: Wake Forest University Press, 2017) 247, 252.

exchange, negotiation – finding a common ground."[14] This kind of essentially "ethical" linguistic hospitality then becomes one of the central principles in the poet's selected poems, *The Coast Road* (2016), published in a dual-language form and featuring translations by thirteen eminent Irish poets. In many of her poems, Ní Ghearbhuigh contemplates the fate of other, mostly small or endangered languages, thus asserting the vivacity of her own tongue, and the ethical implications of proximity, alterity, and hospitality are paramount in the poet's latest collection, *Tonn Teaspaigh agus Dánta Eile* [Hot Wave and Other Poems] from 2022. Yet, although the majority of its poems are dedicated to motherhood and various images of domesticity, home and house rarely represent safeness or familiarity in the collection. They are rather emblematic of a sense of the world and the self that is constantly challenged by the insistent closeness – and elusiveness – of the natural world. Moreover, in Ní Ghearbhuigh's lyrics, home is a place where any notion of safe seclusion is easily disturbed by the dramas taking place in far-off places that assert themselves through memory, media coverage, and accounts by friends and visitors (as a rule male) unfettered by family commitments.

Since the central theme of care betokens the tendency to demarcate and isolate, with these poems' speakers we often find ourselves teetering on a physical or notional threshold. Yet, although emphasized throughout the book, boundaries are also shown to be penetrable. Invaders permeate the house (and the book's pages), despite the female speaker's endless effort to keep them at bay. Ants keep swarming the house; fungi, vegetation, and the elements find their way in through the shut windows and solid walls:

> [...]
> briseann fásra trí gach scoilt,
> seo chugainn rúid seangán thar tairseach,
> iomadú feithidí gan áireamh.

[14] Richard Kearney and Melissa Fitzpatrick, *Radical Hospitality: From Thought to Action* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021) 6. Kearney and Fitzpatrick's concept of "radical hospitality" reacts to the anxieties stemming from current waves of global migration and recent refugee crises and, above all, the need to define mechanisms whereby fear and hostility can be overcome through narrative exchange and opening up to the unknown. In delineating the theoretical ground for her discussion of the relevance of hospitality for moral psychology, Fitzpatrick builds, among others, on Levinas's account of hospitality, including his religion-based phenomenology of alterity and the idea of the self as a host. See Melissa Fitzpatrick, "Impossible Hospitality: From Levinas to Arendt," in Kearney and Fitzpatrick, *Radical Hospitality* 75-87; and Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being* 117, 127, 141.

Cuirim faobhar leis an lann seo:
fásra, fiailí, neantóga le bearradh,
páistín fionn ag liú sa chúinne,
seal ag fás agus seal ag seargadh.

[...]
vegetation bursts through each crack,
here comes a rush of ants over the threshold,
an uncountable issue of insects.

I sharpen this blade:
grass, weeds, nettles to be trimmed,
a white headed child bawls in the corner,
a while growing and a while declining.[15]

The sense of responsibility that comes with the role of a carer and provider can be strangely empowering. The insistent proximity between people – and between people and other species – within the space of a home, nonetheless, makes coexistence a stressful and exhausting experience. Ní Ghearbhuigh's honest takes on motherhood and pregnancy undermine any clear-cut dichotomies between the inside and the outside, between a you and I. Indeed, as the lines cited above suggest, while the experience of motherhood provides the woman with a clear purpose, there are times in which the most persistent intruder appears to be one's own child.

As they complicate any received notions of hospitality, Ní Ghearbhuigh's poetic explorations of mothering and housekeeping call attention to what Melissa Fitzpatrick has termed "impossible hospitality."[16] In this conception, based on Levinas's thought, hospitality is perceived not as a willed act but something inherent; something that is the inevitable result of proximity which, in its own turn, entails exposure to alterity. Proximity is imposed on us (or gifted to us) without our having any say in it, Levinas explains, which means that we have no influence over the feelings of vulnerability and responsibility that follow from our exposure to alterity. Since we are unavoidably coexistent with and pervaded by the world around us, proximity equals "duty without end."[17]

15 Ní Ghearbhuigh, "Iúil," *Tonn Teaspaigh* 29. Trans. Eoghan Mac Giolla Bhríde (unpublished).
16 Kearney and Fitzpatrick, *Radical Hospitality: From Thought to Action* 75-87.
17 Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being* 161.

Ní Ghearbhuigh emphasises this kind of unasked-for responsibility or "impossible hospitality" in "Brú" [Pressure]:

Seo mar a bheidh feasta:
mairim anois i ríocht an teasa

naí ar an gcín nach féidir a bhogadh
lorg dóite ar mo lámha

cosán dearg go dtí an doras
ag seangáin, cuairteoirí agus lucha

[...]

tá an dún seo gan ghardáil
ar mo chrannsa a thiteann gach friotháil

fúmsa a bheidh in am an ghátair
an greim dheireanach bídh a dháileadh[.]

So this is how it must be:
I live now in the kingdom of heat

a child on the knee I can't budge
its trace burnt on to my thumbs

a burning path to my door
for ants, mice and visitors

[...]

this fort is without protection
it falls on me to feed everything

In time of need it'll be up to me
To divide the very last morsel[.][18]

[18] Ní Ghearbhuigh, "Brú," *Tonn Teaspaigh* 47. Trans. Billy Ramsell (unpublished).

While the interconnectedness of things, people, and species represents one of the key truths communicated by Ní Ghearbhuigh's collection, the overlapping of the house with the world outside also points to an ecological dimension. It is, perhaps, a truism that an interdependence between different life forms lies at the basis of ecology. The poet, nevertheless, offers a more concrete (and sinister) view of these relationships. Not only is the house no safe haven exempt from the struggle for existence, but at points it itself becomes a place of no escape. In "Uisce go com" [Water to the waist], it is described as a bleak island, about to be swallowed by the ubiquitous litter:

> Táim sall is anall
> ar fud an tí
> ag snámh-shiúl,
>
> ag cromadh síos
> chun bréagáin ar maos
> a phiocadh suas
> ón ngrinneall.
>
> [...]
>
> Obair in aisce
> triomú níl i ndán dóibh.
>
> *I'm back and forth*
> *throughout the house*
> *swim-walking,*
>
> *bending down*
> *to pick up*
> *soaking toys*
> *from the bottom.*
>
> *[...]*
>
> *Wasted work*
> *they'll never get dry.*[19]

[19] Ní Ghearbhuigh, "Uisce go Com," *Tonn Teaspaigh* 43-44. Trans. Eoghan Mac Giolla Bhríde (unpublished).

Like the omnipresent clutter, the titular "tonn teaspaigh" that keep surging from within and flowing in from without alternately represent the suffocating heat experienced during pregnancy or breastfeeding and the weather gone awry. Ecology is customarily defined as a discourse concerned with the interactions of living organisms with their environment and as such it denotes a habitat or the act of inhabiting, a connection that is confirmed also in the term's etymology. Since *oikos* means "house" in Greek, ecology is essentially the study of a dwelling place: a home. Yet, *oikos* is also believed to come from a Proto-Indo-European root *weik-* meaning "clan," i.e., a "social unit above the household,"[20] which implies wider relations. Ecology thus entails an interplay between a place-bound and global perspective, between "roots" and "routes." Even though environmental concerns are not the main focus of Ní Ghearbhuigh's poems, "ecology" – fused with the competing motifs of anxiety, affection, and care – does indeed represent an important binding element in the poet's latest collection. In her determination to show that proximity and hospitality come with their own unsolvable dilemmas and that the closest counterpart of affection is anxiety, Ní Ghearbhuigh proposes a bona fide ethic of care.

An important source of unease for the poems' persona is the realization that the responsibility and caring for the lives of others is often incompatible with requirements of ecological hospitality. If Kearney and Fitzpatrick suggest that "[l]eaving nature alone – that is, *respecting* nature [and its otherness] – is itself an act of hospitality that refuses hostile acts of exploitation,"[21] Ní Ghearbhuigh's poems focus on a more intricate aspect of that relationship. The idea, voiced by Kearney and Fitzpatrick in their conclusion, that "welcoming nature into our lives and letting nature welcome us back"[22] will help us deal with the planet's disrupted ecosystems and changing climate, can only be useful to a limited extent. Indeed, it is loudly and resolutely subverted with the welcoming of each new life into the world. Again and again, Ní Ghearbhuigh's lyrics remind us of Bauman's account of our inherent sense of morality based on proximity and its complications in a modern, globally interconnected world:

> Moral responsibility prompts us to care that our children are fed, clad and shod; it cannot offer us much practical advice, however, when faced with numbing images of a depleted, desiccated and overheated planet which

[20] See *Online Etymology Dictionary*, https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=ecology. The Indo-European root *weik-* can also have the connotations of "bending" and "binding" and is identified in words such as "vicarious," "weak," or "witch," all of which are also relevant to Ní Ghearbhuigh's persona. See https://www.etymonline.com/word/*weik-.

[21] Kearney and Fitzpatrick, *Radical Hospitality: From Thought to Action* 109.

[22] Kearney and Fitzpatrick, *Radical Hospitality: From Thought to Action* 109.

> our children, and the children of our children will inherit and have to inhabit in the direct or oblique result of our collective unconcern.[23]

Ní Ghearbhuigh earnestly shows us that while becoming a parent may be part of the ultimate instinct of life to perpetuate (and outlast) itself, parenthood is also coterminous with worry. It simultaneously makes us "blind" to any objective reality outside our immediate concern and "open[s] our eyes" to the world's pains and needs. In her poems, we are encouraged to acknowledge the terrible responsibility of motherhood and its paradoxical complicity in the world's destruction: "amuigh san aigéan tá cnocán plaisteach / ainm m'iníne greanta ar an scadarnach"[24] [out in the ocean is a mountain of plastic / my daughter's name carved on the refuse heap]. In a sense, to imagine that we can leave nature alone amounts to human supremacy of the highest order. By taking care of those closest to us we not only enact a morality of proximity but exploit and manipulate nature – not because it is "other" or "elsewhere" but because we are so inextricably enmeshed in it.

If it is true that our being is constituted by hospitality, as Levinas argues, gestation and motherhood seem to be quintessential examples of that. Our coming into the world, after all, is *conditioned* by the mother's (and nature's) hospitality. Yet, if the notion of "inevitable hospitality" also suggests that we are not only responsible for what we consent to, this is doubly the case for mothers. Ní Ghearbhuigh is acutely aware of this paradox and, rather than describing motherhood in Gaian terms,[25] illustrates how the Levinasian idea of the self as "first and foremost, a *host*"[26] can be problematic for mothers and women in general, especially in societies where the "home" delimits their accepted sphere of activity. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas defines home as a concept (and physical space)

23 Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* 217-18.

24 Ní Ghearbhuigh, "Brú" 48.

25 The idea of the biosphere as a living entity and the planet Earth as a self-regulating organism was first introduced by James Lovelock who named it after the Greek goddess Gaia – a proto-Earth or Mother Nature. See James Lovelock, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000 [1979]). Lovelock's theory has inspired some branches of the Green movement and a number of later scholars. For competing views on the concept and its usefulness in addressing the changing climate and the transformed concept of Nature as such, see Toby Tyrell, *On Gaia: A Critical Investigation of the Relationship between Life and Earth* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013); and Bruno Latour, *Face à Gaïa. Huit conférences sur le nouveau régime climatique* (Paris: Les empêcheurs de penser en rond, 2015).

26 Qtd. in Kearney and Fitzpatrick, *Radical Hospitality: From Thought to Action* 75.

associated with "warmth," "intimacy," and "the primordial phenomenon of gentleness."[27] Elsewhere, he cites the Talmudic wisdom that "The house is woman," meaning that by constituting a "moral paradigm" in the home, woman "makes the public life of man possible."[28] Ní Ghearbhuigh's poem "Safe as Houses," from the collection's latter part, seems to ironically oppose any such notions:

Seasaim ag faire gan chorraí
ar lasracha ag cuimilt díon is fallaí
ar bhladhmanna ag alpadh is ag milleadh
an tí nach ngéilleadh riamh don tine.

Cuimhním ar na céadta bladhaire beag
a d'adhain do shúile dorcha ionam;
leanaim rian na gcrúb scoilte,
caithim seile san abhainn a scarann sinn.

I stand without moving watching
the flames touch roof and wall
the flames devouring and destroying
the house that would never yield to fire.

I remember the hundreds of little flames
that your dark eyes lit in me;
I follow the tracks of the split hooves,
I spit in the river that separates us.[29]

With the force of a curse, these lines defy the ideas of stability and care suggested by the title, or the association of home with "gentleness" that we find in Levinas. Even though the burning house can be read both as a metaphor of a relationship gone asunder and, contrastingly, an emblem of sexual desire, the image of an "abhainn a scarann sinn" from the last quoted line suggests, indeed, a broader understanding. In view of our previous discussion of "proximity" and "hospitality,"

27 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969) 150.

28 Emmanuel Levinas, "Judaism and the Feminine," in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Seán Hand (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997) 31, 32.

29 Ní Ghearbhuigh, "Safe as Houses," *Tonn Teaspaigh* 68. Trans. Eoghan Mac Giolla Bhríde (unpublished).

the river may be taken to refer not only to a conflict between a husband and wife (or, alternatively, the humdrum of the everyday that keeps down the flames of passion), but to the discrepant roles of men and women in the society. It circumscribes the woman and keeps her confined in the house that, as we have seen, is described as everything but a safe haven. If Levinas identifies the "strange flow of gentleness" that emanates from the domestic space with "wife, the betrothed,"[30] Ní Ghearbhuigh's woman speaker vehemently objects to being cast in such a role. In this sense, her disdainful gesture can be read as a caustic response to the flow of authoritarian (masculine) thought that has banished women from the public space and separated the male Same from the female Other.[31]

The poems in *Tonn Teaspaigh* dispute their own seemingly endless supply of oppositions between life and decay, growth and stasis, love and anxiety, showing them to be aspects of the same experience. The themes of hospitality and proximity are consistently foregrounded and problematized throughout the collection. Although they are inherent and inevitable, they do not simply represent an ethical way of being. As she combines ecological concerns with feminist outlooks in her collection, Ní Ghearbhuigh uncovers oppressive elements of proximity and critically analyses the concept of unchosen hospitality. Through ecological exploration of relationships on the border between the self and the other, the home and the world, she launches her poetics of love and care.

Beside being one of the foremost poets writing in Irish today, Ní Ghearbhuigh is also an eminent critic. In her recent contribution to the book of essays *Contemporary Irish Poetry and the Climate Crisis*, she examines poetry by various Gaeltacht-dwelling authors, focusing on the recurrent image of the corncrake in their works. The bird, once common in Ireland during the summer months, has become a shorthand for the decline of Irish wildlife. Due to its threatened status and unmistakable rasping call, it has also been used by poets and critics to metonymically refer to the precarious status of Irish.[32] Still, while the corncrake

30 Levinas, "Judaism and the Feminine" 33.

31 In Levinas's conception, women represent a "finite" – or definable, circumscribed – "strange gentleness" which must be wedged into "the geometry of infinite and cold space" of the world and life experience. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* 150; and Levinas, *Difficult Freedom* 31.

32 Other poets and critics before Ní Ghearbhuigh have used the endangered corncrake, one-time prevalent in rural areas of Ireland, to refer to cultural disruption and environmental collapse – see, for example, Biddy Jenkinson, "A Letter to an Editor," *Irish University Review* 21, no. 1 (1991): 27-34; Lillis O'Laoire, "Murder in a Meadow:

has become a shorthand for the language, Irish itself has been used as a symbol of the "rootedness" and local aspects of the climate change.

Many of the poems Ní Ghearbhuigh chooses for analysis touch upon the competing pulls of separation and connection, apathy and urgency in the attitude of contemporary Irish culture to the ecological crisis (and the language issue). Yet, "[o]f all the contemporary poets writing in Irish today," Ní Ghearbhuigh claims, the one "perhaps most attuned to the climate crisis" is Simon Ó Faoláin. In the latter part of this essay I explore how ethics of hospitality and care register in Ó Faoláin's lyrics whose mobile personae and inadvertent contacts with the non-human world point us to a different understanding of the idea of inherent proximity that results in "duty without end." Archaeologist by training, Ó Faoláin bases his work on the tension between whatever is transient and whatever is solid in life, nature, and cultural heritage. His poems often mingle allusions to the Irish literary and folk traditions with vignettes from ancient cultures and snippets of scientific knowledge, combining them with a focus on natural or semi-natural settings. The latter tend to be remarkably eclectic and include locales from Ireland's South-West where the poet grew up and where he now resides, as well as various places across the globe – places that could be real or imaginary, or both. Yet, this sense of continuity over a vast timespace is invariably triggered in Ó Faoláin's poems by a strong identification with the here and now.

Ó Faoláin's field work makes him fully aware of how culture is part of nature, how it is dependent on its processes, materials, and mysteries, but how it also leaves a lasting stamp on nature. One of the side effects of this altered, diversified sense of attachment is a painful consciousness of one's own implication in the current state of the environment. As Ní Ghearbhuigh points out, "[a]rchaeological work, after all, cannot be carried out without collateral environmental damage to the site being excavated."[33] It is from this sense of close connection between the present and the past, the self and the environment that Ó Faoláin's poetry springs. The poet's layered relationship to place and land is furthermore reflected in his use of language. Gréagóir Ó Dúill commends Ó Faoláin's stylistic versatility and characteristic tone that oscillates between tentativeness and fluidity, pensiveness, and jubilation.[34] Mícheál Ó Ruairc fittingly describes him as a "[s]eandálaí focal a

Environmental and Cultural Extinction in Cathal Ó Searcaigh's 'Scrúdú Coinsiasa Roimh Dhul Chun Suain,'" in *From Ego to Eco: Mapping Shifts from Anthropocentrism to Ecocentrism*, ed. Sabine Lenore Müller and Tina-Karen Pusse (Leiden: Brill, 2017) 112-34.

33 Ailbhe Ní Ghearbhuigh, "The Corncrake, the Climate Crisis, and Irish-Language Poetry," in *Contemporary Irish Poetry and the Climate Crisis*, ed. Andrew J. Auge and Eugene O'Brien (New York: Routledge, 2021) 170.

34 See Gréagóir Ó Dúill, "Éiric," *Comhar* 73, no. 1 (January 2013): 26.

bhíonn ag tochailt faoi ithir Dhuibhnigh" [word-archaeologist who is digging under the West Kerry soil].[35] Although he knows the local lore and topography like the back of his hand, Ó Faoláin's style derives from the (actual and virtual) interface between diverse, seemingly disparate worlds and linguistic codes.

The title of his third collection, *Fé Sholas Luaineach* ([Under Flickering Light] 2014), connotes ephemerality and in-betweenness; something that may be on the brink of disappearance but promises a revelation. Yet, suchlike deliberate hesitation between alternative standpoints has informed Ó Faoláin's poetry from the start. In "Gabhar ar Itice" [A Goat on Ithaca], which takes us on a post-pastoral excursion to the Greek island of the same name, we witness the persona's encounter with a goat perched on top of a ravine. The Pan-like creature seems to be at once hemmed in by the speaker's gaze and holding him in check as they both vacillate between identification and estrangement – until this vertiginous poetic navigation of distances and altitudes ends with an unmistakable sniff from the mountainous nature god:

> Súile a bhreathnaíonn, is cosúil dom anois,
> Gan phioc den suim a shamhlaíos iontu neomat roimis,
> Ach le neamhshuim na seandéithe ar an bhfear bocht
> Básmhar seasta ag foinse *Arethousa* thíos fé[.]
>
> *Eyes which observe, it seems to me now,*
> *With no trace of the interest I imagined in them just before,*
> *But with the dispassion of the gods looking on this poor mortal man*
> *Standing rooted at the spring of Arethousa below[.]*[36]

The speaker who refers to himself as an intruder – "fear gan cháiréis" [a careless visitor][37] – has come to visit a local spring, associated with Arcadian nymphs and Odysseus's homecoming, only to find it all but dried up. Its stagnant, dead water is swarmed by wasps that the tourist's approach sends "ag luascadh suas i gcoinne éadan faille / [...] / Mar dheatach ag ardú ó íobairt dóite"[38] [swirling up against the vertical rock-face / [...] / Like smoke rising from a burnt sacrifice]. The last quoted

35 Mícheál Ó Ruairc, "Seandálaí focal a bhíonn ag tochailt faoi ithir Dhuibhnigh," *Tuairisc*, 4 February 2015, https://tuairisc.ie/leirmheas-seandalai-focal-a-bhionn-ag-tochailt-faoi-ithir-dhuibhnigh/.

36 Simon Ó Faoláin, "Gabhar ar Itice," *Fé Sholas Luaineach* (Baile Átha Cliath: Coiscéim, 2014) 37. Trans. Simon Ó Faoláin (unpublished).

37 Ó Faoláin, "Gabhar ar Itice" 37.

38 Ó Faoláin, "Gabhar ar Itice" 38.

line is also the final one in the poem and it affirms the nostalgia that seeps through the previous stanzas. The subject of this ironic elegy is the loss of intimacy between man and landscape, of a "hospitable" natural environment contingent on balanced ecosystems. Indeed, what the speaker's retreat into the parched and burning post-Arcadian world has yielded, is a silent rebuke from its nonhuman inhabitants about the "carelessness" with which we have sacrificed our mutual home on the altar of progress while bragging about sustainable growth.

Naïve pastoralism appears to be the object of ridicule in many other poems from the collection. "Teifeach" [Refugee] recounts a similar encounter, this time between a driver-persona and what seems to be a visitation from some other world ["saol eile"].[39] Despite being described as a representative of a Scottish cattle breed, the "*bó Gàidhleach*" with its characteristic long coat and "glib rua" [russet fringe], the animal is clearly out of its element near the traffic:

Gur coimhthíoch thú anso ba léir,
Ach nuair a gheitis romham sa ród
Ba chosúil nach mbeadh aon teagmháil
Eadrainn ina eaclóg.

That you are an outsider was obvious,
But when you shied from me on the road,
I knew that whatever might happen between us
Would be anything but an eclogue[.][40]

Regardless of these proclamations, however, once the horned spectre manages an escape by merging with the horizon, the tone of the poem changes. But although its latter part depicts the Kerry landscape in benign, almost idyllic terms, the poem is no eclogue, indeed, but rather a miniature, remedial *Táin* of the South-West. Instead of taking us to a bucolic setting, the cow's trajectory across the Dingle peninsula recalls the legendary Donn Cúailnge's final journey home and duly provides the author with an opportunity to include mentions of local place names and natural sights – only this time with the hope of a happy ending.[41] Despite

39 Ó Faoláin, "Teifeach," *Fé Sholas Luaineach* 42.

40 Ó Faoláin, "Teifeach" 42. Trans. Paddy Bushe, "Refugee," *Local Wonders: Poems of Our Immediate Surrounds*, ed. Pat Boran (Dublin: Deadalus Press, 2021) 65.

41 At the end of the famous epic, the "feisty" brown bull makes his way through the landscape inspiring various place names before succumbing to the wounds from his final, self-liberating battle. See *The Táin*, trans. Ciaran Carson (London: Penguin, 2007) 216-17.

having renounced the pastoral mode in the beginning, the text does, after all, provide a notional escape to a prelapsarian setting. As a result, it reads both as an elegy for the pristine landscape and a prayer. The speaker longs to follow his mysterious nonhuman cicerone across the threshold to freedom – "tairseach na saoirse"[42] – and leave behind a world girdled by roads and railways, along with his load of climate guilt:

> Go dté tú slán le hardchlár Bhréannainn
> Mar raon siar go Más an Tiompáin
> Is soir go Cathair Chon Raoi uainn,
> Ach beir ar dhrom leat ualach éadrom
> M'anama i measc na saor.[43]
>
> *May you safely reach the high ground of Brandon*
> *That you may range away west to Más an Tiompáin*
> *Then eastward towards Cathair Chon Raoi,*
> *Carrying on your back the airy burden*
> *Of my own soul among the free.*

Writing about our ethical obligations in today's interconnected world, Judith Butler concedes that "responsibility may well be implicated in a vast domain of the nonconsensual."[44] Whether our response to the news of violence and injustices taking place beyond the range of the familiar or parochial will be open and non-exclusionary, depends on the "limited but necessary reversibility of proximity and distance" without which "the ethical demands that emerge through global circuits" could not assert themselves, argues Butler.[45] As they keep coming face to face with the tragic effects of our civilization, Ó Faoláin's rambling personae insist on this reversibility of proximity and distance, not least whenever they contemplate the broadened yet emptied-out concept of "home." In a world glutted with waste and manifestations of "culture," home is at once everywhere and nowhere to be found. The disappearing animal species and the suffocating planet represent the ethical demand of the other and problematize Levinas's concept of our original

42 Ó Faoláin, "Teifeach" 42.

43 Ó Faoláin, "Teifeach" 42.

44 Judith Butler, "Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation," *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 26, no. 2 (2012): 137.

45 Butler, "Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation" 137.

"being-for-the-other" and the ensuing ethical responsibility.[46] As Ó Faoláin illustrates in "Baile do bhí" [A Home That Was], a poetic sequence included in *Fé Sholas Luaineach*,[47] amidst climate change reality, home implies both reassuring familiarity and disturbing otherness. The image of home also enables him to show, however, how with climate emergency time itself becomes a matter of ethics. As the site of memories and dreams, suggests Gaston Bachelard, the "home [...] contains compressed time."[48] The nostalgic longing that we associate with a lost first home and that propels us in search of an alternative refuge, nevertheless, betokens an impossible future – or, for us now, a future marked by our incapacity to respond to the climate threat. In Ó Faoláin's lyrics, home is no longer simply a point of origin but also an impossible destiny. His poems thus testify to Butler's conclusion, formulated in response to Levinas's concept of our "vulnerability" to demands from the other, that "[e]thical responsibility presupposes ethical responsiveness."[49]

This "ethical responsiveness" is, nonetheless, never a burden or an end in itself. It is a sign of openness that encompasses sensitivity to aesthetic and intellectual stimuli coming from culture and science. The persona in "Éigrit" [Egret] from Ó Faoláin's second collection *As Gaineamh* (2011) is making his way through an eerie urban wasteland at dawn. The weather is so bleak and dramatic, however, that it seems that daybreak will never come:

> Lá ghealann gan aon ghile
> Is ró-dhaingean mar chuing an baile,
> [...]
> Stoirme, scailp ceo, síorsileadh,
> Siúlaim siar le hais an inbhir.

46 Emmanuel Levinas, *Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures*, trans. Gary D. Mole (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994) 159. In this account, I do not take into consideration Levinas's own views on the moral standing of natural world and nonhuman animals or the ongoing critical debate about the relevance of his contribution to environmentalism as such. On the latter, see, for example, William Edelglass, James Hatley, and Christian Diehm, eds., *Facing Nature: Levinas and Environmental Thought* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2012); and David Boothroyd, "Levinas on Ecology and Nature," *The Oxford Handbook of Levinas*, ed. Michael L. Morgan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018) 769-88.

47 Ó Faoláin, "Baile do bhí," *Fé Sholas Luaineach* 14-25.

48 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1969) 8.

49 Butler, "Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation" 142.

A day that dawns without its brightness
the town's a fetter hard to brook
[...]
a thatch of fog, unceasing rainfall.
I walk the estuary this morning.[50]

Suddenly, however, the apocalyptic darkness is pierced through with the white shape of a bird, an image as bright as a ray of light: "Is faightear seoid i lár na láibe, / Giolla na gile nó a máistir, / Scáth bán coirre, scáthán gréine"[51] [And a jewel lies in the midst of the ooze, – a servant of brightness, or its master, – the heron's white shadow, a sun-mirror]. The poem gains its emotional force from being caught between the tone of an elegy and that of a eulogy – a quality it shares with its two most obvious intertexts: the eighteenth-century classics "An Bonnán Buí" [The Yellow Bittern] by Cathal Buí Mac Giolla Ghunna and Aodhagán Ó Rathaille's aisling "Gile na Gile" [Brightness Most Bright]. In comparison to Mac Giolla Ghunna's lyric, Ó Faoláin's "Éigrit" seems both markedly sobered up and more wilfully delusional. The older poet bemoans a dead bird who was "cosúil liom féin é ina ghné is a dhath; / bhíodh sé choíche ag síoról na dí" [so like myself in face and hue. / He was forever taking drink] – and yet he apparently died of thirst.[52] Although Mac Giolla Ghunna mentions several other birds as well it is only to suggest they are not equal to his dead bittern and he waves them off as not being worthy of his elegy. As species, however, some of these were soon to face the same poor prospects. If the bittern (itself a kind of heron and of the same family as egret) stopped breeding in Ireland in the nineteenth century due to the loss of habitat and excessive hunting, the common crane, or grey crane ("an chorr ghlas")[53] had met the same fate even earlier, during Cathal Buí's lifetime.[54] It is significant in this context that Ó Faoláin's poem roots for little egret (*Egretta garzetta*) that has recently

50 Simon Ó Faoláin, "Éigrit," *As Gaineamh* (Baile Átha Cliath: Coiscéim, 2011) 2. Trans. Simon Ó Faoláin (unpublished).

51 Ó Faoláin, "Éigrit" 2.

52 Seán Ó Tuama and Thomas Kinsella, eds., *An Duanaire 1600-1900: Poems of the Dispossessed* (Saint Paul, MN: The Dolmen Press, 1990) 134, 135.

53 Ó Tuama and Kinsella, *An Duanaire 1600-1900* 134, 135.

54 See "Confirmed Breeding of Common Crane in Ireland," *MKO*, https://mkoireland.ie/insights/confirmed-breeding-of-common-crane-in-ireland/; and "Gone for 300 Years, Common Crane Comes Home to Rewetted Irish Peatlands," *Bord na Móna*, https://www.bordnamona.ie/gone-for-300-years-common-crane-comes-home-to-rewetted-irish-peatlands/.

started breeding again in the south of Ireland after a long period of absence.[55] It is a sign of hope in a world marked by environmental disaster.

While none of this is obvious upon casual reading, of course, the poem's opening line clearly invites us to read the ensuing piece as an ironic response to Ó Rathaille whose famous aisling conjures up a personified Ireland through superlative phrases like the titular "Gile na Gile" [Brightness most Bright; or, "brightest of the bright"] in order to counterbalance the country's gloomy, post-Boyne reality.[56] Ó Faoláin begins by turning Ó Rathaille's genitive construction into the negative: "Lá a ghealann gan aon ghile." In the second stanza, "gile na gile" is even echoed as "Giolla na gile" [servant of light]. Indeed it seems as if Ó Faoláin was professing allegiance to the tradition while simultaneously disowning it through his shrewd adaptation. It has been argued that Ó Rathaille's ghostly vision of Ireland usurped by Williamite armies laments not only the country's situation at the time but foresees the latter's long-term cultural consequences: the end of the bardic tradition and with it the demise of Celtic, Gaelic-speaking Ireland.[57] Yet, the contemporary poet's avian image, described in the same breath as a "servant" and the "master" of "brightness," represents a chance of redress and continuing life. Hence it surpasses the atmosphere of decay and corruption that seeps through the lustre of Ó Rathaille's lines. In contrast to the bard's grief for his pure and uncorrupted world, Ó Faoláin's last two lines uncover an element of hope nested within the perils and contradictions of modern reality: "Coimthíoch a neadaigh d'ainneoin doineann, / Maignéisiam ag dó na habhann"[58] [A foreigner who nested in spite of storms, / [and the] magnesium burning the river].

55 Email from the author (6 May 2023). See also Robert Fullarton, "The Little Egret – The Snowy White Heron," *NewsFour*, 28 March 2017, http://www.newsfour.ie/2017/03/the-little-egret-the-snowy-white-heron/; and "Little Egret," *BirdWatch Ireland*, https://birdwatchireland.ie/birds/little-egret/.

56 *Aisling* (vision) is the name of a sophisticated, ornamental subgenre of eighteenth-century Irish Jacobite verse in which Ireland, subjugated by the Williamite forces, is invoked as an allegorical female figure. The Battle of the Boyne (1690) marked a decisive moment of defeat for the Catholic adherents of the deposed King James II. See Breandán Ó Buachalla, *Aisling Ghéar Na Stíobhartaigh agus an tAos Léinn 1603-1788* (Baile Átha Cliath: An Clóchomhar, 1996). See also Mícheál Mac Craith, "From the Elizabethan Settlement to the Battle of the Boyne: Literature in Irish, c. 1550-1690," in *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature* vol. 2, ed. Margaret Kelleher and Philip O'Leary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 166-71.

57 Ó Tuama and Kinsella, *An Duanaire 1600-1900* 134, 135.

58 Ó Faoláin, "Éigrit" 2.

Ó Faoláin's use of intertextuality, nonetheless, does not end with Ó Rathaille. Just like so many poems in the Gaelic tradition, Ó Faoláin refers to the state of the landscape in order to comment on the status of the Irish language and its speakers.[59] Dedicated to the poet's wife Zoë, who is English but has become an Irish speaker since her move to Ireland,[60] the poem is less a dirge for the language than a celebration of its tenacity and a tribute to all its learners and those who have carried it on. In the light of the earlier laments for dead birds and felled trees that also already bemoaned the precarious situation of the Irish-language community, it seems almost paradoxical that in the modern adaptations of the old tropes by Ó Faoláin and his contemporaries, Irish is still used to refer to the decay of natural settings and upheld as a source of optimism – not only for the indigenous languages and ecosystems but the global ones as well.

Ó Faoláin's egret is another representation of the concepts of "linguistic" and "inevitable" hospitality mentioned above in relation to Ní Ghearbhuigh's poetry. By accepting a new place as its home (or readapting to a former one), the bird automatically becomes part of its ecosystem and a host in its own right. Accordingly, it is described in terms of disruption as well as continuation of life: by speaking of change it can also symbolize renewal. In being firmly rooted in the local tradition and informed by a globalized consciousness of environmental change, Ó Faoláin's representations of contemporary Irish landscapes approximate Ní Ghearbhuigh's images of a home coterminous with the big world outside. Both poets juxtapose instances of linguistic hospitality with the sinister truths of ecological reality. By making distant concerns feel immediate and, conversely, by considering local and personal crises through a broader, worldwide perspective, they simultaneously highlight and overcome the limitations of proximity ethics in a globalized world. By opening their poems up to different forms of otherness, they show hospitality as both an inevitable and potentially limiting or problematic part of our experience of the world. While Ní Ghearbhuigh focuses on gender inequities emphasised by the stereotypes (and biological facts) of motherhood, Ó Faoláin examines threatened ecosystems and

[59] See, for example, the famous eighteenth-century song "Cill Chais" (Ó Tuama and Kinsella, *An Duanaire 1600-1900* 328) or a poem by Laoiseach Mac an Bhaird about the felling of an ancient tree (Osborn Bergin, "Unpublished Irish Poems. XXXIII: On the Cutting Down of an Ancient Tree," *An Irish Quarterly Review* 15, no. 57 [1926]: 77-78). See also Jenkinson, "The Destruction of Poetic Habitat" 404-408.

[60] Email from the author (6 May 2023).

vulnerable ecological "minorities."[61] Yet, they both foreground linguistic hospitality and the ethics of proximity as something necessary for the continuation of life on the planet and for the continuance of culture and identity in their diverse and multiple forms. Their poems are important current testimonies to the beneficial mutual interdependence between "routedness" and "rootedness."

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[61] See Aldo Leopold, "Scarcity Values in Conservation," *A Sandy County Almanac & Other Writings on Conservation and Ecology* (New York: The Library of America, 2013) kindle. At the end of the essay, Leopold asks: "Just why do we respect political minorities, and accord them a value worth preserving? Perhaps the answer would shed light on the value of ecological 'minorities' such as wild country or threatened species of wildlife."

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