From Inis Fraoigh to Innisfree . . . and Back Again? Sense of Place in Poetry in Irish since 1950

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I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there of clay and wattles made.
Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee,
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.¹

Many generations of Irish schoolchildren have had Yeats’s famous poem, ‘The Lake Isle of Innisfree’, drummed into them. Despite its hackneyed overexposure on school curricula and tourist brochures, and indeed despite the older Yeats’s embarrassment at its success,² it remains a wonderful poem, particularly when recited aloud. Through the almost hypnotic incantatory use of sound and rhythm, allied to the sense of romantic relief from the filthy tide of the modern world suggested by the end syllable ‘— free’ in Innisfree, Yeats creates an imagined space in which he discovers a real peace ‘in the deep heart’s core’.

Innisfree is in one sense, however, in the English version of the name, a doubly imagined space. Inis Fraoigh in the original Irish means ‘The Island of Heather’ and has nothing whatsoever to do with freedom. Indeed, as the name implies, it is very much rooted in a physical, tangible world through the descriptive element of the place name. Yeats, however, through in this instance the happy but coincidental added value of the transliteration (as against translation) of the original, can actually add a layer of metaphoric significance to his poem not achievable in the Irish version of the name. Thus, though Inis Fraoigh does exist in the real physical world, and has a linguistic, cultural, and cartographic or spatial meaning as island of heather, Yeats’s Innisfree is at a double remove from that same reality.³ John Montague, in his poem ‘A Lost Tradition’, just like the schoolmaster in Brian Friel’s Translations, claims that the language shift from Irish to English, from Inis Fraoigh to Innisfree, leads to a sense of psychic, physical, and cultural loss or shattering:

² W. B. Yeats: The Poems, p. 437.
³ Yeats himself was very much aware of the meaning of the place-name in Irish and claimed that the ‘purple glen’ referred to in the poem in fact describes the reflection of the heather in the water (W. B. Yeats: The Poems, p. 437).
From Inis Fraoigh to Innisfree

All around, shards of a lost tradition [...] 
Scattered over the hills, tribal — 
And placenames, uncultivated pearls [...] 
The whole landscape a manuscript 
We had lost the skill to read; 
A part of our past disinherited; 
But fumbled, like a blind man, 
Along the fingertips of instinct.

In the Irish tradition, from the earliest literature down to the oral literature of the Gaeltacht today, *Dinneasnachas*, topography, the lore of placenames, or as it were the ‘skill to read the manuscript of the landscape’ is of fundamental importance, and I will argue here that it is also a significant theme in much modern poetry in Irish. The term *Dinneasnachas* refers specifically to a corpus of material relating to places assembled in manuscript form in the eleventh and twelfth centuries and known as *Dinneasnachas Éireann*. These texts constituted a fundamental part of the body of knowledge required of Irish bardic poets and their importance is attested to in the amount of such material found in the major manuscripts.

Place-names are explained in the *Dinneasnachas* — indeed sometimes pseudo-etymological or fictitious stories are invented to explain names — and this naming process not only explains but also validates and vindicates the cultural, social, and indeed political environment in which it operates. Such a process is, in a sense, a foundation mythology, and landscape, and indeed the land itself, are therefore loaded with ethical, epistemological, and aestheticized meanings of deep significance for those within the tradition. Place is thus, as Yi-Fu Tuan puts it, an organized world of meaning, ‘a center of felt value’.

Landscape is personal and tribal history made visible. The native’s identity — his place in the total scheme of things — is not in doubt, because the myths that support it are as real as the rocks and the waterfalls he can see and touch.

Seán Ó Tuama, identifying the familial link with their own territorial lands, common in Ireland even to this day, and alluding to the nuptial-like inauguration ceremony of an Irish chieftain, argues:
It seems that it is the sacred wedding of territory to chieftain — and by extension of territory to kin — which lies near to the heart of the passion for place in Irish life and literature.

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5 *Gaeltacht* is the generic name for the Irish-speaking regions in Ireland, mostly found on the west coast. There are three main Gaeltacht regions, in Donegal, Galway, and Kerry, with some 30,000 native speakers of Irish in these areas.
When one thinks of the Irish poetry of the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, from Ó Bruadair to Raftery, what Ó Tuama would call the literature of dispossession, allied to Daniel Corkery’s assertion that land is one of the key notes of all Irish literature, and when one considers much Irish writing in both languages in modern times, from W. B. Yeats to Seamus Heaney and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, and from Patrick Kavanagh and Máirtín Ó Cadhain to John B. Keane, there is no doubt but that the land itself, both in a physical and a political sense, and also in a psychological, cultural, and aesthetic sense, is a fundamental theme in much Irish writing.

Such a cultural, historical, and indeed aesthetic narrative gives a deep sense of rootedness and belonging in both a psychic and a physical sense. Communal, and thus personal, memory is thereby perpetuated and a definite and definable sense of both communal and personal identity established over time. This sense of identity connects the inner world of the psyche to the external world of the physical by providing as it were a complex of spatio-cultural co-ordinates for what Frederic Jameson calls the process of ‘cognitive mapping’. Knowledge and lived experience are thus grounded specifically in spatiality, making particular spaces, lieux sacrés, both real and metaphorical at the same time. This mapping of the psyche in a spatial context is also validated over time, a process into which many poets writing in Irish over the course of the twentieth century consciously assimilate themselves for reasons which vary not only from poet to poet but also over the century of writing as a whole.

This idea of the importance of place is, of course, in no sense uniquely Irish. Indeed, as can be seen from much anthropological research in many parts of the world, it is a universal cultural and social phenomenon. As Yi-Fu Tuan states:

It is not limited to any particular culture and economy. It is known to literate and non-literate peoples, hunter-gatherers, and sedentary farmers, as well as city dwellers. The city or land is viewed as mother, and it nourishes; place is an archive of fond memories and splendid achievements that inspire the present; place is permanent and hence reassuring to man, who sees frailty in himself and change and flux everywhere.

One cannot exist outside of, or independent of, space (nor, indeed, of time) as it were in a tabula rasa. Thus, coming to terms with one’s environment through the process of explaining or naming that environment over time is a fundamental human activity, a basic part of establishing a personal and communal identity. Arguing for the centrality of place in the construction of subjectivity in contemporary society, Nicholas Entrilein states:

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10 Space and Place, p. 154.
As agents in the world we are always ‘in place’, as much as ‘in culture’. For this reason our relations to place and culture become elements in the construction of our own individual and collective identities.\textsuperscript{11} 

Moreover, as James F. Weiner asserts of the Foi people in Papua New Guinea:  

A society’s place names schematically image a people’s intentional transformation of their habitat from a sheer physical terrain into a pattern of historically experienced and constituted space and time [...]. The bestowing of place names constitutes Foi existential space out of a blank environment.\textsuperscript{12} 

Thus, the concept of \textit{Dinnseanchas} as we know it within the Irish tradition is a unique manifestation of a universal phenomenon and the perspective offered, the symbolic universe created and interpreted, is specifically Gaelic, and moreover, I would also argue, language-specific in many ways. 

The Irish-language poetry of the Literary Revival of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was, among other things, a declaration of identity, and a pro-active repossession of a tradition, culture, and language that were in danger of extinction. Though ideologically indicative of the period, most of this poetry is seriously aesthetically challenged. As I have shown elsewhere,\textsuperscript{13} it tends to be traditionalist and backward looking, and portrays Ireland as a latter-day Gaelic utopia or \textit{Tír na nÓg} [The Land of Youth]. The Gaeltacht, both as the repository of the Gaelic tradition and as an idyllic rural alternative to the filthy modern tide berated by Yeats, is the symbolic representation of all that is good in the emerging new Ireland. 

Many poems of this period mention Ireland in a traditional and almost generic way and project an idealized view of the country and its Gaelic traditions. While in reality perhaps having more to do with the politics of identity and the project of the construction of an Irish nation-state at the time, they also draw on the poetic tradition of \textit{Dinnseanchas}, with Ireland being presented as the idyllic and idealized \textit{lieu sacré}. The nation is praised and presented in general terms (its physical beauty being to the fore) and the cultural and political agenda is always in evidence. The poems and songs of the Ballyvourney poet, Diarmuid Ó Muimhneacháin (1866–1934), while not perhaps aesthetically inspiring to the modern ear, are none the less fairly representative of the period. In his poem ‘An Áit is Cuí’ [The Proper Place], for example, he presents Ireland as a great nation since the time Noah was freed from the ark, and a beautiful, plentiful and sporting place to boot. The poem emphasizes from the outset the essential elements of the political ideology of the period. Ireland is seen as taking its rightful ‘free’ place among


the nations of the earth, which is her legitimate status due to the lengthy historical continuity of ‘síolra Éibhir’, the Gael, in the land. Both God Almighty and Christ himself underpin the legitimacy of this statement, which is also further legitimized by the ancient trope of plenty, fertility, and beauty associated with a place in which the rightful people reign:

An áit is cuí dá críochaibh féarmhar’,
An áit ’na mbíodh fadó,
An áit is cuí ina coílltíbh craobhach’,
Cláirseach bhinn a smól,
An áit is cuí do mhínghuth gléshruth,
An áit is cuí do fhír a sléibhte,
An áit is cuí do dhion a spéirghlan,
Atá a fhios ag Rí na gcomhacht,
Lérbh áthas í go sóch,
An áit ’nar shuíodar síolra Éibhir,
’S an áit ’na suífid fós.  

[The proper place for its grassy lands, | The place they were of yore, | The proper place in its leafy woods, | The sweet harp of its thrushes, | The proper place for sweet-tuned streams, | The proper place for the outline of its mountains, | The proper place for its clean roofy sky, | Almighty God knows this | And is happy knowing it, | The place where sat the sons of Éibhear (i.e the Gaels), | And the place they will yet sit.]

Most poems of this nature during the period tend to be more localized, however, and almost always set in rural, invariably Irish-speaking, areas. The native place — or in some cases the adoptive home place in a cultural and linguistic sense — is perceived as being at the centre of the universe and is always praised in the most superlative of exaggerations: it is the most beautiful, the most friendly, has the loveliest rivers, mountains and the most fertile land, and is of course a most Gaelic place in language, culture, and politics. The look is, however, invariably backwards, both in time and space, as indicated by the Irish word *siar* which can mean both westwards in space and backwards in time. In most cases, the poet looks back to his youth and describes a place from which he is in exile, an idyllic setting which is in stark contrast to his present (usually urban) circumstances.

The poetry of this period was in the main descriptive rather than interrogative, claiming a fixity and certainty of identity and worldview more in keeping with the premodern than the modern world rather than seeing the creative literary act as a means of quest or question. Moreover, while traditionalist in aim and concept in that it was an effort at reviving the ailing Gaelic tradition, language, and culture, it is strangely ironical that, even in such a traditionalist mode as that of *Dinnseanchas*, much of the verse

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composed during the period was more influenced by English romantic poetry than native Gaelic poetry in spite of the best efforts of the poets to be anything other than English.

Despite such less than auspicious beginnings, modern poetry in Irish came of age in the 1940s with the emergence of the major voices of the mid-century, Máirtín Ó Direáin and Seán Ó Riordáin. While there is very little similarity between their respective oeuvres — Ó Direáin is the stylist, the lyricist, the word-musician par excellence while Ó Riordáin is the introverted, intellectual, disturbed wordsmith — between them they ensured that poetry in Irish would henceforth be modern in tone, outlook, timbre, and form. Both also have, in their own distinct ways, a sense of place at the heart of their work.

The lifelong focus and lieu sacré of Ó Direáin’s poetry is his native Aran island of Inis Mór. The island pervades all his work and is constantly present even in its absence. His poetry is, in many ways, driven by the typical romantic notion of seeking to recreate and re-enter the lost perfect world of his youth from his exile in Dublin city, and the island is nostalgically presented throughout the work as ‘an t-oíléán rúin’, the secret island which is an ideal(ized) antidote to what he calls ‘an chathair fhallsa’ [the deceitful city] in his well-known long poem ‘Ár Ré Dhearóil’ [Our Wretched Age].

Despite this centrality of the island in his poetry, however, and moreover, despite the importance of the history and traditions of the island (as exemplified in his wonderful long poem ‘Ó Mórna’), not to mention the formative influences of people and events on him as a child in Aran, this sense of place is still secondary to the main thrust of his writing. Inis Mór remains Tír na nÓg [The Land of Youth], or paradise lost, and thus the island is in many senses more in the realm of the representative, of the imagined, rather than of the actual or real community.

The quest for communing, the idea of life as pilgrimage, as journey from darkness towards some measure of light, is at the root of most of Ó Riordáin’s poetry, and while this journey is mostly spiritual, and indeed psychological, a significant element thereof is situated in what could be called cartographic real-space. As with Ó Direáin, though in a more intellectually sophisticated way, the persona of Ó Riordáin’s poetry is a lost wanderer in utter darkness seeking deliverance from the frightening ontological freedom

17 Micheál Mac Craith, ‘On Oíléán Rúin go dtí Rún an Oíléáin’, in Cúime mar Chách: Aisití ar Máirtín Ó Direáin, ed. by Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith (Dublin: Coiscéim, 1993), p. 15, describes the poetry of Ó Direáin as a movement from the real geographic Aran Island of his early work to a symbolic representation of the island in his mature poems.
19 The importance of place in the poetry of Máirtín Ó Direáin is discussed in Isobel Ní Riain, Carraig agus Cathair: Ó Direáin (Dublin: Cois Lé, 2002); see in particular Chapter 2, ‘An t-Oíléán mar Ait agus mar Inspíríd Filochna’. See also Isobel Ní Riain, ‘Poetic Place and Geographical Space: An Analysis of the Poetry of Máirtín Ó Direáin’, Irish Studies Review, 10.3 (October 2002), 267-75.
of the wasteland in which he finds himself. One strategy of deliverance which Ó Riordáin develops throughout his work is the idea of rooting himself within the definable (in terms of time and space) native tradition. Eschewing his native Gaeltacht parish of Ballyvourney, where the language and therefore the culture and tradition in which he wished to root himself physically and, even more importantly, psychologically, were in danger of dying, Ó Riordáin claims that his personal salvation was to be found through a communion with the living native tradition as exemplified in the County Kerry Gaeltacht parish of Dún Chaoin. This is the central message of one of his best poems, ‘Fill Arís’ [Return Again], and the location of the doorway to the core of his own mind and true self at the cliff edge in Dún Chaoin is an essential detail in the precise physical and cognitive map delineated in the poem:

Dein d’fhaoistin is dein
Siocháín led ghiniún féinig
Is led thighe-sheet féin is ná tríóg iad,
Ni dual do neach a thighe ná a threabh a threigean.
Téir faobhar na faille siar tráthnóna gréine go Corca Dhuíbhne,
Is chifir thiar ag bun na spéire ag rátháíocht ann
An Uimhir Dhé, is an Modh Foshuítcheach,
Is an tuiseal gairmeach ar bhéalaíbhe daoine:
    Sin é do dhoras,
    Dún Chaoin fág sholas an tráthnóna,
    Buail is osclófar
    D’intinn féin is do chló ceart.20

[Confess and make your peace
With your own house
And your own people
And do not forsake them.
No man should forsake his tribe or habitation.
Take the cliff edge west some sunny evening to Corca Dhuíbhne
And you will find there shoaling on the horizon
The subjunctive and the dual number
And the vocative case on the lips of people.
That’s your door,
Dún Chaoin in the evening sun.
Knock and you will find opening
The core of your mind and feeling.]

This doorway to another consciousness, to another way of perceiving and of being, of understanding one’s own inner self and perhaps even destiny, precisely located in space and time, was to become an important, sometimes

defining element in much of the poetry written in Irish by the so-called *Innti* generation of poets who emerged in the late 1960s and revolutionized writing in Irish. Though rather lighter of spirit than Ó Riordáin, and significantly of their own generation and global culture, many of the *Innti* poets — Michael Davitt, Gabriel Rosenstock, Liam Ó Muirthile, and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill — went the westward road by the cliff face to Dún Chaoin to experience the real life of the Gaeltacht *in situ* rather than adhere to an outmoded construct of the idealized Gaeltacht as seen in the earlier poetry of the Revival period and later officially sanctioned in state ideology since its foundation. Michael Davitt, for example, speaks in a series of early poems of gaining a Dunquinian knowledge of himself on his Gaeltacht pilgrimage to Dún Chaoin, while at the same time never rejecting his Cork city self — a notion that would have been an anathema to the poets of the early twentieth century. The Gaeltacht in Davitt’s early poetry, and particularly in his first collection, *Gleann ar Ghleann* (1981), is the supreme lieu sacré, that significant place — again definable in both the inner and outer worlds — where one communes both with the physical place and the native tradition. In a defining early poem, ‘Ar an gCeathrú Rua’ [In Carraroe], he describes the effect of a magical weekend in that Gaeltacht area on himself:

\[
\text{Mhiosáil mo chroí bít ar an gCaorán Mór} \\
\text{éalaionn Muimhneach ó} \\
\text{ghramadach.}^{23}
\]

[My heart missed a beat in Caorán Mór | a Munsterman escapes from | grammar.]

This deliberate subversion of both the grammatical correctness of the language itself and of the form and formality of the poetic tradition, situated at the same time in the place where the language and the tradition still survive, simultaneously undermines and reasserts or redefines the validity of that tradition in its continuum in time and space, and thus also validates the pilgrimage to the place.

This concept of journey permeates much of the work of Davitt and is particularly evident in his collection *Scuis* (1998). Many of the life experiences encapsulated in his poetry from the outset are specifically grounded in

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21 Cf. ‘Chuamair faobhar na faille siar ar triall ar ár gceil on spéire. Dhealaigh sé gur dh fhíor an ior’ [We went west by the cliff edge looking for the core of our minds on the horizon. It appeared as if the horizon was true], Liam Ó Muirthile, ‘Ag cur crúca in inspioráid’ [Hooking Inspiration], *An Aimsir Óg*, 1 (1999), p. 80. See also Michael Davitt’s poem, ‘Foibhre na Faille siar in Anglia Deáin Ó Riordáin’ [West the cliff edge in Seán Ó Ríordáin’s Anglia], *Scuis* (Inveran, Co. Galway: Cló Iar-Chonnachta, 1998), p. 11.

22 See, for example, ‘Aisling ag Casadh na Gráige’ [A Vision at Casadh na Gráige], ‘Ar fhilleadh abhaile ó Dhún Chaoin’ [On Returning from Dún Chaoin], ‘Samhradh Inion Ui Riain’ [The Summer of Ryan’s Daughter], ‘I gcuimhne ar Lís Ceárnaighe, Blascaodach’[In Memory of Lis Ceárnaighe, Blasket Woman], ‘Seandaoine’ [Old People], *Gleann ar Ghleann* (Dublin: Sáirséal-Ó Marcaigh, 1982), pp. 11, 14, 23, 46, 62.

23 *Gleann ar Ghleann*, p. 39.
particular locations which not only resonate on the actual level of the narrative recounted but also form an intrinsic part of the inner reality described. Indeed, the function of poetry according to Davitt’s fellow Innti poet, Liam Ó Muirthile, is ‘na bóithre atá ann a léarscáilíú chomh foirfe agus is féidir. Ní theicimse aon bhóithre amach ach bóithre isteach’ [to map as perfectly as possible the roads that are there. I see no roads leading outwards, only roads inwards].

This process normally takes place at specific, identifiable locations in what Ó Muirthile frequently refers to as ‘náisiún na mbailte fearainn’ [the nation of townlands]. Concepts of spatiality, or what could be termed the notion of Dimseanachas, are fundamental to any reading of his work, as the titles of his second and third collections, Dialann Bóthair [Road Journal] and Walking Time, indicate. Many of his poems seek to create a moment of rare intensity, a oneness with the all, a kind of epiphany or intense experience of short duration in a sense out of space and time, and yet almost inevitably grounded very specifically in space and time. He situates many poems in County Clare, drawing both on the physical landscape and on its musical and cultural heritage for inspiration. His poem ‘Aois na Lice’ [The Age of the Rock], for example, begins in the town of Ennistymon and describes how the whole world narrowed in an intense focus on one particular location, a packed pub, where he felt as one with the whole:

Is tuigim duit nuair a shantaíonn tú deoch
I dtábhairne nach bhfuil puinn slí ann in Inis Diomáin,
Dearbhaíonn toisí gleoite an tí
Go bhféadfaidh gach duine ann féin a bheith iomlán.

[I understand when you want a drink | In a packed pub with no room to move in Ennistymon, | The beautiful dimensions of the house affirm | That each person can be whole in himself.]

This incident brings to mind another occasion in the Burren, that timeless megalithic stone formation in Co. Clare, where this feeling of oneness with place becomes strongly internalized:

Uair eile sa Bhoireann istóiche
Nior mhothaós riamaí chomh teilgte sa spéir
Bhi an mhósaic gheile thuas go léir ag freagairt
Don chosmas fáis a bhláthaigh nóiméad ionam féin. (p. 59)

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24 Liam Ó Muirthile, ‘Comhar-Rá le Gabriel Rosenstock’ [In conversation with Gabriel Rosenstock], Comhar (February 1984), p. 29.
25 See, for example, his article ‘Náisiún na mBailte Fearainn’ [The Nation of Townlands] in his regular Irish Times column, ‘An Peann Coitianta’ [The Common Pen], 29 April 1993: ‘Líon is ea é a mbraithim ceangailte ann uaireanta; uaireanta eile braithim gur mé féin atá á shuimh. ’ [It is a net I feel caught in at times; at other times I feel it is myself being put in position.] See also ‘Tír na mBailte’ [The Country of Townlands] Irish Times, 29 April 1993. Selections from Ó Muirthile’s column have been published in book form, An Peann Coitianta (Dublin: Comhar, 1991), and An Peann Coitianta 2 (Dublin: Cois Life, 1997).
[On another occasion at night in the Burren | I never felt so projected into the air | The full mosaic of brightness above corresponded | To the cosmos of growth that flowered a moment within me.]

On yet another occasion, while walking over the Corrib Bridge in Galway city, he felt similarly at one with a specific time and place, and in this instance the intensity of the emotion is portrayed through the common, flowing, amorphous Ó Muirímhle metaphors of water and music:

Tá an Choirib, an ailtireacht is an spéir
Aerach fós ón suirí a bhí acu aréir;
Cloisim uaim an chóisir lárabhann,
Tá tonnta consairtín ag seinm fonn
A chuireann ful an rince ionam ag rás,
Is braithim mar aon leis an maidin is leis an áit.28

[The Corrib, the architecture and the sky | Are all still giddy from last night’s courting; | Away from me I hear the mid-river concert, | Waves of concertinas are playing tunes | Making my dancing blood race | And I feel at one with the morning and the place.]

There is in these poems a conscious effort to achieve oneness with significant personal spaces and, moreover, a conscious movement from one place to another through some sort of defining boundary, normally associated with water. In both ‘Aois na Lice’ and ‘An Cúrsa Buan’ [Tha Abiding Course] the narrator passes over a river by means of a bridge, again specifically named and located, into the heightened consciousness of a new space and time. This pattern is replicated in the poem ‘Carraig Aifrinn’ [Mass Rock] when the narrator moves through a wooden gate on Muínis Beach in Connemara, and this physical movement is echoed internally through the two different modes of thought found in the poem. The rational, Cartesian mind is to the fore in the first part, and, having passed through the liminal boundary, again specifically located near water, the creative, lyrical, non-rational side of the mind takes over:

Seachas dúnta na soiniciubhachta
Oslaíonn mo chroí amach
Do gheata cois trà i Maoinis;
Treoraíonn sé go dscréideach mé
Isteach in aerspás Chonamara,
Agus san áit nach bhfaca mé féin
Ar chor ar bith
I locha dubha a súil
Faighim cuireadhd anois
Ó gheata admhaid i Maoinis.
Roinnim libh
Rún ciúin na maidine seo,
Rón muineach, ba ar dhuirling,

These personal _lieux sacrés_ where Ó Muirthile and Davitt, and many other poets, create heightened moments which make the journey both easier and, betimes, worthwhile are seemingly, to the reader at any rate, random and in no particular frame of time and space other than their own personal voyage. At the most simplistic level, they are real places that can be pinpointed on a map and visited in real time. However, while the poets do not normally seek to situate these places in the _Dinnseanchas_ tradition through references to history, mythology, storytelling, or place-lore, their symbolic significance resonates far beyond what Heaney calls the mere ‘daunting, consonantal noise’ of the placenames in the poetry of Patrick Kavanagh. Thus, while the places mentioned in the personal poetic odysseys of Davitt and Ó Muirthile are real at the simple level of the narrative text of the poems, they are also imagined — given image — in the interior world, in the personal symbolic universe of the poet. They are therefore simultaneously both real and imagined, thus ensuring that the real and metaphoric universes are both part of each other, both of the same world. Poetry of place in this sense is not a grid map with specific locations cartographically located and therefore defined for either the poet/narrator or the listener/reader. It is a metaphoric allusion to another reality — psychic, aesthetical, cultural — a perspective offering significance, meaning, and sustenance in a subjective rather than an objective sense. Thus, these poems trace a journey of the mind, a psychological _immram_ [voyage], which delineates the parameters of a personal foundation myth, and each individual poem is a significant signpost along that way. If poems in the _Dinnseanchas_ tradition contain an objective truth in a premodern world, in the work of present-day poets such as Davitt, Ó Muirthile, and others the voyage is individual rather than communal, questioning rather than descriptive, and while not oblivious to the tradition, is not exclusively rooted therein. It is worth noting in this context that, while Davitt

29 _Tine Chnámh_, p. 45.
31 As can be seen, for example, in the various intertextual references and ‘nativist’ techniques mentioned above.
and Ó Muirthile, both natives of Cork city, have situated some poems specifically in that city,\(^{32}\) and while their poetry is strongly urban and contemporary in tone and outlook,\(^{33}\) neither makes a particularly deeply rooted statement as to the significance of the ‘home place’ as being pre-eminent among their _lieux sacrés_.\(^{34}\)

A significant number of poets, however, most of whom are either of Gaeltacht origin or descent, do turn to the ‘home place’ as the locus of primary significance in their work. The poetry of Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill, for example, is consciously rooted in the native Gaeltacht tradition of her inherited world of Corca Dhuibhne. The idea of psychic voyage, of _immram_, or the process of individuation in Jungian terms, as noted by many critics,\(^ {35}\) is fundamental to the whole of her work from the outset. One of the coping strategies formulated in her poetry is rooted firmly in the idea of _Dinnseanchas_ which she describes as ‘the result of our emotío-imaginative involvement with the physical features and landscape of this island on which we live’.

In the oral tradition for many millennia, and in the written tradition for over 1,500 years, we have been involved with this landscape, projecting outwards onto it our interior landscape, the ‘paysage intérieur’ which is the landscape of our souls. This has resulted in an enormous repertoire of stories about it, not just in the written dinnseanchas, but the sort of thing a farmer taking a break from bagging potatoes in a field will tell you if you ask him what is that field called, or why is this road called such and such a thing. This is a living and vital knowledge and true for the whole length and breadth of the island, wherever there are people who have been in a place a long time. What you have is a covenantal relationship with the landscape.\(^ {36}\)

It is in Corca Dhuibhne that she gives form to this covenant which becomes her own personal _mandala_, the symbolic pattern, the internal map that will facilitate her cognitive mapping of her world as she is coming to know it, or again in Jungian terms, the universal archetype through which she images or imagines her own essence. She gives an outline of this _mandala_ in a series of

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\(^{32}\) Ó Muirthile’s long dramatic poem ‘Tine Chnámh’ (*Tine Chnámh*, pp. 87–112), for example, a dionysian celebration of Midsummer’s night, although universal in outlook, is very much grounded in Cork city.

\(^{33}\) Davitt claimed in an early poem that he was of a generation so removed from rural life that ‘ní aithneoinnse an chopóg ón neantóg’ [I would not recognize a nettle from a dockleaf] (‘Scandaoine’, *Gleann ar Ghleann*, p. 62).

\(^{34}\) It is, however, worth noting that many of their _lieux sacrés_ are city-based, laying to rest the common fallacy among some critics that contemporary Irish literature in Irish cannot deal with city life.


poems in her second collection, *Féar Suaithinseach*, and the journey is in effect a return to the place of her forebears:

\[
\text{Táim chun dul ar an dturas}
\]
\[
go 'Teampall Chaitlíona,}
\]
\[
áit a bhfuil sinsir mo chine}
\]
\[
is sliocht seacht sleachta}
\]
\[
de mo mhuinti}
\]
\[
curtha.}^{37}
\]

[I’m taking a trip to Teampall Chaitlíona where my ancestral race and seven generations and the seed of all my people lie.]

This journey *siar* [westwards and backwards] to the native place is from the outset indicative of her physical and psychic connections with Corca Dhuibhne and illustrates her strong sense of rootedness there, as illustrated in her early, now classic, poem ‘I mBaile an tSléibhe’ [In (the townland of) Baile an tSléibhe]. The poem begins with the powerful musical incantation of the place-names of the area and her proud assertion of her family’s (the Ó Duinnshléibhe) literary and cultural heritage:

\[
\text{I mBaile an tSléibhe}
\]
\[
\text{Tá Cathair Léith}
\]
\[
is laistíos dó}
\]
\[
tigh mhuintir Dhuinnshléibhe;}
\]
\[
as san chuaigh an fhir Seán}
\]
\[
'on Oileán}
\]
\[
is uaidh sin tháinig an ghruaig rua}
\]
\[
is bua na filiochta}
\]
\[
ánas chugam}
\]
\[
trí cheithre ghlún.
\]

[In Baile an tSléibhe is Cathair Léith above Dunleaveys’ house from which one time the poet Seán moved out to the Great Blasket: his foxy hair and craft of words came down to me through four generations.]

In the second verse, she illustrates her physical and almost synaesthesial response to the world of nature there, as illustrated in the local flora, to

which she specifically refers by the names by which they are known in the local dialect. This place-specificity is again re-emphasized through the incantation of place-names at the end of the verse:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Ar thaobh an bhóthair} \\
&\text{tá seidhleán} \\
&\text{folaithe ag crainn fiúise,} \\
&\text{is an feileastram} \\
&\text{bui} \\
&\text{ó dheireadh mhí Aibreáin} \\
&\text{go lár an Mheithimh,} \\
&\text{is sa chlós tá boladh} \\
&\text{lus anainne nó camán meall} \\
&\text{mar a thugtar air sa dúiche} \\
&\text{timpeall, i gCill Ura, is i gCom an Liaigh} \\
&\text{i mBaile an Chóta is i gCathair Boilg.}
\end{align*}
\]

[From April’s end into the heart of June the wayside stream is veiled under conspiracies of yellow flag and fuschia; the yard is scented with mayweed or camomile as it is called throughout this commonwealth of ground from Cill Uraidh to Com an Liaigh, from Baile an Chóta to Cathair Boilg.]

These elements of personal and communal heritage are drawn together in the final verse through the reference to the trout (symbol of the life force in the tradition), to the magic ships and the eagles of the storytelling tradition and the silken spancels on the contented sheep, again all building up to the final place-name, An Chathair [The City], almost an eternal city:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Is lá} \\
&\text{i gCathair Léith} \\
&\text{do léim breac geal} \\
&\text{ón abhainn} \\
&\text{isteach sa bhuicéad} \\
&\text{ar bhean} \\
&\text{a chuaigh le ba} \\
&\text{chun uisce ann,} \\
&\text{an tráth} \\
&\text{gur sheol trí árthach} \\
&\text{isteach sa chuan,} \\
&\text{gur neadaigh an fiolar} \\
&\text{i mbarr an chnoic}
\end{align*}
\]
The physical landscape of the native place and its associated lore and traditions thus open the door, already depicted by Seán Ó Riordáin in ‘Fill Aris’, to a universe of the imagination and at the same time provide a protective talisman against the alienation, the outsiderness, the otherness of the ‘real’ world. Speaking in 1992 at a conference on the Irish contribution to European culture, Ní Dhomhnaill confirmed this personal and communal genesis of ‘I mBaile an tSléibhe’ as follows:

What I experienced in Corca Dhuibhne then can only be described as an atavistic reaction. I felt a great sense of relief, a sense of belonging, of being a link in a long familial chain [...]. I used to sit on a ditch, with my cousin Betty, and have her name out to me all the townlands we could see from our vantage point: ‘Fán, Cill Mhic a’ Domhnaigh, Cathair Boilg, Baile an Chóta, Cil Uraidh, Baile an Liaigh, Com a’ Liaigh, Imileach Lach, Baile Treasna, Rath Fhionnán’ [...] and so on, a marvelous litany of sonorous phrases. This I used to make her do again and again, until I knew them all by heart [...]. This initial language experience of Corca Dhuibhne imbues everything I have ever written.39

Poems such as ‘I mBaile an tSléibhe’, and the many other poems of place Ní Dhomhnaill has written, are significantly more than mere formulaic or onomatopoetic recitations of place-names or simplistic, romanticized descriptions of the beauty of certain places as seen in the work of the Revival poets. There is an underlying voyage of discovery in her poetry, an attempt to map what she calls ‘an tírdhreach inmheánaích’ [the internal landscape]40 in an identifiable physical and cultural landscape. Her poetry is thus a Dinnseanchas

of the soul, a landscape of the imagination, which is at the same time firmly grounded in a specific frame of time and space. The narrator of the poems thus achieves significant moments of self-awareness and understanding in the familiar known world as opposed to the strange outside world where she wanders in dark unknowable places. As Ní Dhomhnaill herself has stated, ‘This feeling of being “istigh liom féin” — bien dans ma peau — the for me rare and wonderful state of not being out with myself, was something I always associated with Corca Dhuibhne’. Thus, both the symbolic and physical universes of the native tradition give meaning and comfort to her on a personal and a communal level, and she declares:

Labhrann gach cúinne den leithinis seo liom
ina teanga féinig, teanga a thuigim.
Nil lúb de choill ná cor de bhóthar
nach bhfuil ag suirí liom,
ag cogarnail is ag sioscarnaigh.42

[Every nook of this peninsula can speak to me
in its own tongue, in words I understand.
There’s not one twist of road or little grove
that can’t insinuate its whispered courtship at my ear.]

Moreover, Ní Dhomhnaill would claim further that this tradition of Dinnseanchas into which she consciously assimilates herself through her poetry is ‘not historical at all, but mythological, or paranormal […] beyond the ego-boundaries […] a picture of our collective soul, writ large […] a very valid and important way of dealing with the numinous […] a very different tradition to that of conceptual thought’. It is, moreover, a significant point of entry into the non-Cartesian mode of thought that is central to any understanding of her work.44

As with much of the work of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, the poetry of a group of Connemara writers—Seán Ó Curraoin, Jackie Mac Donnchadha, Micheál Ó Cuaig, Seosamh Ó Guairim, Joe Steve Ó Neachtain, Johnny Chóil Mhaidhc Ó Coistealbha, and others — draws much of its inspiration from what T. S. Eliot would have called ‘the local organic community’ and speaks, as Seán Ó Curraoin asserts, ‘le glór údarásach ó gharrantáí beaga Bhearna’ [with an authoritative voice from the small fields of Bearná].45

Indeed, Ó Curraoin, in his book-length serial poem concerning the life, times, and world of the prototype Connemara man, Beairtle, describes that world in the following terms:

42 ‘Ag Tiomáint Siar’ [Driving West], Feis, p. 119 [Pharoah’s Daughter, p. 133].
44 This notion of the importance of ‘an saol eile’ [the otherworld] in Ní Dhomhnaill’s poetry is discussed in my article referred to in n. 34 above.
45 Seán Ó Curraoin, ‘Toghadh na bhFataí’ [Picking Potatoes], Sölse ar na Domhchannaí (Dublin: Taibhse, 1985), p. 27.
There is also a sense of timelessness in much of this poetry, a sense of a long continuity over time, which establishes the home place as a strong point of reference and certitude in a constantly changing outside world. Thus the oral poet, Máire Úi Fhlatharta, in a poem on her home townland, Baile an Bóthair Bhuí in An Cheathrú Rua, paints a word picture of the Twelve Pins as if standing guard over Connemara and its people since time began:

\[
\text{Amach uaim bhí na Beanna} \\
\text{Mar óglaigh i bhfeisteas catha,} \\
\text{Is iad réidh le fód a sheasamh} \\
\text{Ó ré na gcloch aniar} \\
\text{I gcoinne scríos nó slada} \\
\text{Ruaig ó mhuir nó ó thalamh} \\
\text{Ar chine Chonamara} \\
\text{Ó Mhám go Bóthar Buí.}\]

[Away from me stretched the Twelve Pins | As heroes in battle gear, | Ready to stand their ground | Since the stone age | Against destruction and plunder | Attack from sea or land | On the people of Connemara | From Mám to Bóthar Buí.]

Such poetry sees Connemara, the home place, as the centre of the universe, a refuge for both body and soul against which the outside world is invariably unfavourably measured. As the well-known poet Tomás Mac Eoin, brother of Máire Úi Fhlatharta, says in his poem ‘Conamara’ [Connemara]:

\[
\text{Ná labhair liom ar áilleachtaí tíortha i bhfad ó bhaile,} \\
\text{Is cuma liom má mholann tusa iad;} \\
\text{Na radharcanna is áille, i gConamara atá siad,} \\
\text{Fágsaídh Conamara thú faoi dhraíocht.}\]

[Don’t speak to me of the beauties of lands far from home; | I don’t care if you praise them; | The most beautiful places are in Connemara, | Connemara will put a spell on you.]

This homage to the native hearth is a fundamental, even defining, element of the contemporary oral poetry of the Connemara Gaeltacht, an art form that traces an unbroken aesthetic and linguistic continuum back into the Gaelic

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46 Seán Ó Curraoin, Beairtle (Inveran, Co. Galway: Cló Iar-Chonnachta, 1985), p. 44.
48 Úi Fhlatharta and Mac Eoin, Loscadh Sléibhe, p. 18.
tradition and is almost pre-modern in many ways, as can be seen in the poetry of the likes of Joe Shéamuis Sheáin Ó Donnchadha, the brothers Learaí and Cóil Phádraic Learaí Ó Finneadha, Tomás Mac Eoin, Tomás Seoighe, and many others, which I have discussed elsewhere.\textsuperscript{49} It is also an underlying theme in much of the contemporary ‘literary’ poetry of the region.

In all this poetry, both ‘oral’ and ‘literary’, Connemara is mapped in the psyche through its ever-present physical features — land, sea, mountains, streams, fields, rocks — which shape the known world and, as a direct result, its accompanying worldview. Accordingly, Beairtle is described by Ó Curraoin in the opening sequence of his long poem as having been hewn from his environment, as being strong and deeply imbedded like a stump of bogdeal in mountainous land, ‘carcair ghiúsaí i dtalamh sléibhe’, or later as if cut from island greenstone, ‘de ghlaschloich an oileáin’.\textsuperscript{50} In the following defining sequence, Ó Curraoin presents Beairtle’s sense of oneness with his environment, his native place, as a passionate communion both in terms of the physical environment, including its place-names, wild birds, and physical features, and also of the cultural tradition, as represented by direct and intertextual allusions to the poetic tradition, songs, and dances:

\begin{verbatim}
Músclaíonn na Maoilíní na paisiúin i mBeairtle.
Is nuair a bhíonn sé imithe i mbaile
Bhionn maolchnoc is maoilín, droim is droimín,
Ag déanamh deibhí scaoilte ina aigne.
Éirionn a chroí le haoibhneas mar éirionn an ghaoth ar na Maola,
Is mar scaipeas an ceo ar Sheana Fhraochóg.
Cloiseann sé arís feed naosc is grág cearc fraoigh an tsléibhe
Ar na Maoilíní cuanna caomhha
Is bhíonn rímead air dá n-éisteacht.
Caitheann s éiscapanna is éirionn s é macho
Is buaileann s cóis ar sheanphoirt Chonamara.
Titeann ceo draíochta ina chormaí mine ar an nglaschloch [. . .]
Músclaíonn na Maoilíní na paisiúin
Is biogann an croí le mórghrá don bhaile.
Bhionn dionbhrat na Bóirne tríd an geac
Ar nós dílphóg mná óige dá mhealladh.
Tágaí an fhaidheannaí aoihbnis ón tirl thiar chuige
Is tig bhéarsai grá chun a bhéil,
Is nuair a thiteann an codladh ceadtaich ar a chéadfaí
Bhionn fuadach faoi na Maoilíní.

\textsuperscript{50} Ó Curraoin, \textit{Beairtle}, pp. 9, 65.
\textsuperscript{51} Ó Curraoin, \textit{Beairtle}, p. 53.
\end{verbatim}
[The Maoilíní awaken passion in Beairtle. | And when he is gone from home | The flat hills and hillocks, the ridges large and small, | Are as loose syllabic metres in his mind. | His heart jumps with joy just as the wind rises on the Maola, | And as the fog lifts on Seana Fhraochóg. | He hears again the note of the snipe and the cry of the mountain grouse | On the pleasant comely Maoilíní | And he rejoices in hearing them. | He throws shapes and becomes macho | And dances to the old Connemara tunes. | A magical mist rolls gently in upon the greenstone […] | The Maoilíní awaken passion in Beairtle. | And his heart leaps with great love for home. | The great cloak of the Burren through the mist | Seduces him like the loving kiss of a young woman. | Blissful vibes from back west come to him | And love songs are on his lips, | And when heavy sleep falls upon his senses | His heart races | Dreaming of the Maoilíní.]

Such an internal map, psychically and culturally grounded in the landscape and cultural tradition of the home place, creates a feeling of insiderness, of belonging to a specific place and time, which in turn leads to a sense of personal freedom. The quest for this same sense of liberation is a fundamental theme in the poetry of the Donegal Gaeltacht poet, Cathal Ó Searcaigh. Much of his early work depicts a gradual homeward journey, aptly expressed in the title of his first selected poems, *An Bealach ’na Bhaile — Homecoming*. From the outset, the native place is a touchstone for all experience in the great outside. Many of his early poems describe the life of the emigrant (mostly in London) and while there is, at times, a sympathetic depiction of city life and scapes, and in particular touching portraits of inhabitants of the underground culture of the city — navvies, prostitutes, and cruising gays — the predominant note in the poetry is a strong feeling of alienation, of outsidersness, of not belonging, with a corresponding constant backward look towards home. Interestingly, the title poem of his début collection, *Miontragóid Chathrach* (1975), draws on the incantatory power of recited placenames, already noted as fundamental to *Dinnseanchas*, to denote a sense of not belonging to the London cityscape:

Níl mé ag iarraidh go ndéanfaí faobhar m’óige a mhaolú is a scrios le meirg an diomhaointis i seomra beag tais an Uaignis, i gKilburn nó i dTufnell Park, i Walthamstow nó i Holloway, i gCricklewood, i gCamden Town nó in Archway.

Ni mian liom mo shaol a chaitheamh anseo leis an Uasal Uaigneas gan éinne ag tabhairt cuairt ar mo chroí.

[I do not wish that the sharpness of my youth be blunted and ruined by the rust of laziness in the small damp room | of Loneliness, in Kilburn or in Tufnell Park, in Walthamstow or in Holloway, in Cricklewood, in Camden Town or in Archway. | I do not wish to spend my life here with Mr Loneliness without anybody visiting my heart.]
Home is seen by the emigrant persona of these early poems as a ‘claí cosanta’ [protective ditch] from which he at first wants to escape, but the overall emotion of the poetry is a wish to return in the imagination to the native heath. His poem ‘Portrásid den Ghabha mar Ealaíontóir Óg’ [Portrait of the Blacksmith as a Young Artist] describes the city as a claustrophobic landscape, symbolized by the enclosed space that is his bedsit in the Dublin suburb of Dún Laoghaire. Such an unnatural environment destroys all creativity:

Áit chéanna a chrapatlaionn mo chuid oibre
mar ghabha focal
is a fhágann mé istoiche go dearóil
ag brú gaoil ar lucht óil
seachas a bheith ag casúireacht dánta do mo dhaoine
ar inneoin m’inchininne.

[A pokey place that cripples my wordsmith’s craft
And leaves me nightly in the dumps
Scrounging kindred among the drunks
Instead of hammering poems for my people
On the anvil of my mind.]

In complete contrast, Caiseal na gCorr, the native place, is a life-giving, vital force, both in the sense of being a meaningful place and also as the source of artistic creativity:

Á! Dá mbeinn arís i gCaiseal na gCorr
ní i mo chiotachán a bheinn, leathbhéo.
Ní hé leoga! Ach i gcearta na teanga
bheinnse go breabhsánta
ag cleachtadh mo cheirde gach lá. 54

[If I were back in Caiseal na gCorr
I’d not be awkward, half-alive.
No way! But in the smithy of my tongue
I’d be hale and hearty
Working at my craft daily.]

Poetry is, therefore, the act of recreating in the imagination the absent landscape of the home place encapsulated not only in its physical features of bog and hill but also in the frequent incantation of its placenames. Thus, in ‘Piccadilly: Teacht na hOíche’ [Piccadilly: Nightfall], while waiting for a friend in the menacing mouth of the Underground in a bitingly cold wind, hunger gnawing at his guts and surrounded by sullen Londoners, he states:

53 ‘Miontragóid Chathrach’, Ag Tníth leis an tSolas, p. 36.
54 Ag Tníth leis an tSolas, p. 75, trans. by Gabriel Fitzmaurice, Cathal Ó Searcaigh, An Bealach ‘na Bháile Homecoming (Inveran, Co. Galway: Cló Iar-Chonnachta, 1993), p. 85. It is, perhaps, worth noting here that while the Joycean metaphor of forging in the smithy of the soul is glaringly obvious, and certainly not original, the secondary Joycean notion of ‘literary forgery’ is absent in the Irish.
Tá mé ag fanacht ar dhuine inteach
le teacht na hoíche,
ag éisteacht i mo shamhlaíocht
le glaoch na genoc is na gcaorán
ó Mhín na Leá is ó Mhín na Craoibhe
ó Phrochlais is ón Dúnán.55

[I am waiting for somebody
in the dusk
yearning in my imagination
for the call of the hills and the bogs
from Mín na Leá and from Mín na Craoibhe
from Prochlais and from Dúnán.]

As with the poetry of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill which, we have noted, grounds her own personal mandala in Corca Dhuibhne, Ó Searcaigh also delineates the co-ordinates of his own psychic map in the home place. It is, indeed, symbolically appropriate for a returning emigrant that one of his best-known poems, ‘Anseo ag Stáisiún Chaiseal na gCorr’ [Here at Caiseal na gCorr Station], not only fulfills the wish expressed in ‘Portráid den Ghabha mar Ealaiontóir Óg’ above, but is actually situated at a ‘station’ which serves as a liminal entry point in both a physical and psychic sense to the home place. It is here that he specifically grounds a feeling of insiderness, of belonging to a personal history, to a communal sense of identity and to a creative and unbroken cultural and literary tradition. Echoing Ó Direáin’s concept, already noted above, of the sacred ‘oileán rúin’, Caiseal na gCorr is from the outset a timeless sacred place in which he feels at one with his surroundings, and its parameters are once more established through the incantation of the place-names. In contrast to the sterile, soulless city in which the emigrant persona is but an outsider, poetry here has meaning on many levels, from the personal effort of seeking to write out the vacuum to the sense of belonging that the native file [poet] experiences in his own community, long an essential part of the Gaelic literary tradition. This sense of intergenerational continuum is further enhanced through the perception of the land as book, poem-book and manuscript, which his people have written in the ink of their sweat and which, unlike Montague in ‘A Lost Tradition’, Ó Searcaigh has the ability to read:

Anseo, foscailte os mo chomhair
go díreach mar a bheadh leabhar ann
tá an taobh tire seo anois
ó Dhoire Chonaire go Prochlais.
Thíos agus thuaite tchim na gabháitais
a briseadh as béal an fhiántais.
Seo duanaire mo mhuintire;

55 Ag Tuath leis an tSolas, p. 120 [‘Picadilly: Nightfall’, trans. by Gréagóir Ó Dúill, An Bealach ’na Bhaile — Homecoming, p. 73].
An lámhscribhinn a shaothraigh siad go teann
le dúch a gcuid allais.
Anseo tá achan chuibhreann mar a bheadh rann ann
i mórdhán an mhintíreachais.\footnote{56}

[Here before me, open
like a book
is this countryside now
from Doire Chonaire to Prochlais.
Above and below, I see the holdings
farmed form the mouth of wilderness.
This is the poem-book of my people,
the manuscript they toiled at
with the ink of their sweat.
Here every enclosed field is like a verse
in the great poem of land reclamation.]

This sense of self-confident maturity is at the heart of much of the poetry
written in Irish since the late 1960s and is echoed in the celebration of place
that is a fundamental theme in the work of many contemporary poets. There
is, undoubtedly, more signification in the *Dinnseanchas* element of this poetry
than a mere formulaic, ritualistic incantation of musical names or the
simplistic romantic notion of natural beauty and its associated tranquility as
seen in the poetry of the early Revival Movement in Irish. The poetry of that
earlier period is somewhat ‘unproblematic’ and derives from an almost
binary worldview which speaks in certitudes and sees the function of poetry
as merely descriptive, celebratory, or revealing of obvious truths. The con-
sciousness of this poetry is more akin to that of the premodern world with its
fixity of identity defined by a claimed continuity of unbroken tradition,
strong religious beliefs, and a sense of a unitary, definable, boundaried
culture. By contrast, the modern, and even the postmodern, adventure as
experienced over the full extent of the twentieth century is totally at variance
with such a world of absolute certitudes, and this evolution in thought from
the pre- to the postmodern is reflected in the development of poetry in Irish
over that same period:

The postmodern apprehension of the world emphasises the inherent instability of
meaning, our ability to invert signs and symbols, to recycle them in a different
context and thus transform their reference. Earlier and less commercial cultures
[...] sustain more stable symbolic codes.\footnote{57}

Liam Ó Muirthile has written in similar terms of his own evolution in
thought from the objectively external to the subjectively internal:

\footnote{56} ‘Anseo ag Stáisiún Chaiseal na gCorr’, *Ag Tnúth leis an tSolas*, p. 126, ‘Here at Caiseal na gCorr
\footnote{57} Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels ‘Introduction: Iconography and Landscape’, in *The Iconography
Mhothainn le fada go raibh an ceantar seo (Iarthar Chorcaí) ina dhúiche anama, gur inti a lonnaigh na hionhána príomhordúla sin a dtráchtann Jung orthu, leaganacha ársa aircitípeacha den neamh-chomhfhios [...]. Tuigim anois go raibh breall orm mar gheall ar an dúiche anama. Istigh atá an léarscáilíocht le déanamh.

[I felt for a long time that this area (West Cork) was a region of the soul, that it was here that the primordial images that Jung speaks about, versions of the archetype of the unconscious, were to be found [...]. I understand now that I was wrong now about the region of the soul. The mapping must be done inside.]

The focus has changed. The function of poetry now is to illustrate the internal life, the psychic voyage. The process is, thus, a Dinnseanchas of the mind and spirit in the landscape of the imaginative or the imagined, though firmly anchored in a specific location in terms of both time and space. Many poets writing in Irish today consciously draw upon the symbolic universe of the world of Dinnseanchas through a process of internalization of the previously so-called objective. As Seán Ó Coileáin has noted of Fiannaíocht [Fenian] literature in Irish:

The places have become internalized as literature with no physical or other restriction beyond that set by the poem itself. [...] Some [...] may have never had more than a potential existence, as it were to be actualized only in the imagination of the hearer.

Speaking of the same process, Rolf Baumgarten notes ‘the reduction of the locative function [...] from denotation to connotation’.

A central, indeed in some cases defining, aspect of the poetry of Cathal Ó Searcaigh, Liam Ó Muirthile, Michael Davitt, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, and many others writing in Irish since the Second World War is an effort to construct a systematic psycho-cultural map of their own intimate lives, or as Gaston Bachelard would have it, ‘examiner [...] les images de l’espace heureux [...] la topographie de notre être intime’, a process he calls ‘topophilie’. This map, however, does not operate on a grid system with specific, objectively definable cartographic locations in what Ní Dhomhnaill might call ‘real-time’. It is, rather, a subjective personalized read on the journey, or immram of life, a metaphoric allusion (even illusion) to another reality, another perspective or way of reading the world in order to give it some sense of significance or meaning. Moreover, there neither is, nor can there ever be an absolute, immovable, incontrovertible certainty in this process. All is flux in the modernist and postmodernist worldview, and thus identity is ultimately a sense of becoming, of movement towards something one is seeking to define, rather than a principle set permanently in stone. As Edward J. Casey has argued:

Confronted with the actual emptiness of postmodernist space, each one of us attempts to move from the discomfort of disorientation in such space to the comparative assurance of knowing our way about. We do so by transmuting an initially aimless and endless scene into a place of concerted action, thereby constituting a dense placescape that, in close collaboration with our active bodies, guides us into orientation. Unplacement becomes inplacement as we regain and refashion a sense of place.

Moving bodies on land or at sea provide us with oriented and orienting placescapes. From being lost in space and time (or, more likely, lost to them in the era of modernity), we find our way in place.62

This sense of dislocation, of outsidersness, of not belonging is, without doubt, at the heart of the idea of journey that pervades much of the poetry of place discussed here. It is as if the lost postmodernist wanderer in the tourist town of Dingle, described in Liam Ó Muirthile’s poem ‘Sa Daingean’ [In Dingle] as ‘mise im chuarteoir aimnéiseach aonlae’ [an amnesiac day-tripper], were seeking to get away from the tourist route with its ‘eachtrannaigh liofa ag siúl an bhaile seo’ [fluent foreigners walking this town]63 in order to follow the narrator of a Cathal Ó Searcaigh poem on his Bealach ’na Bhaile [his way homewards] — and it must be noted, in this context, that the word abhaile [homewards] is not a place but rather a state of movement towards some, perhaps mythical, baile [home] whose existence is none the less posited by the very concept implied in the meaning of abhaile.

63 Ó Muirthile, Tine Chnámh, p. 34.