

Kinship: People and Nature in Emily Lawless's Poetry

Heidi Hansson, Umeå University

Abstract

In both her prose writing and her poetry the Irish writer Emily Lawless (1845-1913) considers a number of environmental subjects, from mothing and dredging for shellfish and mollusks to gardening and the decline of the Irish woodland. A recurrent theme in her poetry is the concern for threatened environment, but dystopian images are balanced by portrayals of landscape as a source of spiritual wisdom and healing. Lawless's focus is often on more insignificant examples of the natural world such as moths, crustaceans or bog-cotton rather than more conventional representations of natural beauty. Lawless was a Darwinist, and several of her poems thematise the interaction between the human and the natural world, frequently reversing the power relationship between humans and natural phenomena. A re-contextualisation of her poetry within the framework of nineteenth-century natural history, Darwinism and early ecological thought brings to the fore her exploration of the connections between nature, self and national belonging.

Keywords: Emily Lawless, Irish literature, early twentieth-century poetry, nature poetry, ecological thought

At the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, the Irish writer Emily Lawless (1845-1913) published a number of poems on Irish subjects, many of them concerned with the natural world. The poems express an attitude to nature that is both scientifically informed and individually inflected, influenced by cultural as well as scholarly ideals. In relation to contemporary aesthetic and political movements, however, they appear quite old-fashioned. Approaching the natural world as real, she is out of step with the *fin de siècle* aesthetes who refer to nature almost exclusively in symbolic terms. By regarding nature as a field of study, she differs from pre-Modernist and Modernist writers who primarily use aspects of nature as a metaphor for the inner life of the mind. Insisting on Ireland as a natural, not only a cultural entity, she implicitly criticises nationalist endeavours that build on language, folklore and history but fail to attend to the realities of landscape, vegetation and animal life. In its concern with nature as nature, Lawless's poetry represents a retreat from modernity that may be dismissed as reactionary.

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From a present-day eco-critical perspective, on the other hand, the rejection of symbolism in favour of representations of the natural world as real seems remarkably progressive. In both her prose writing and her poetry Lawless considers a number of environmental subjects, from mothing and dredging for shellfish and mollusks to gardening and the decline of the Irish woodland. Like many other post-Darwin poets, Lawless addresses the place of humans in the universe, the role of other organisms and species in the system and the theological implications of Darwinism. Instead of meditating on picturesque or spectacular landscapes, she pays attention to insignificant plants like the bog-cotton (Lawless 1902: 75-80), small creatures like “the nibbling crew” of rodents (Lawless 1902: 35) and moths (Lawless 1909: 44, Lawless 1914: 37). In several poems she considers the interconnections between natural and national history. Her use of Darwinian language underscores the instability of an anthropocentric world order by activating the idea of evolution. In emphasising the strong bond between people and the land she introduces an ecosystem’s model for humanity’s place in the natural world that anticipates the environmentalism of a much later day. In several of her poems, the central insight is that the boundary between the natural and the human world is only illusory.

Enumerating topics researched in ecocriticism, Cheryll Glotfelty includes the question whether the values expressed in a particular text are “consistent with ecological wisdom” (Glotfelty 1996: xix). One of the most common charges levelled against the theory is that it might become “alarmingly prescriptive” (Mahood 2008: 6) and that it might justify redrawing the boundaries of the literary canon purely on the grounds of ecological soundness (Carroll 2001: 296). Such fears overstate the problem, and it is equally likely that ecocriticism, like other political paradigms, simply becomes a new approach to already-canonised works. In its unfashionable attention to nature as a physical reality, Emily Lawless’s poetry can neither be regarded as an expression of late nineteenth-century *Zeitgeist* nor a ground-breaking new departure, and in relation to dominant strands in Irish culture it remains an anomaly. A re-contextualisation of her poetry within the framework of nineteenth-century natural history, Darwinism and early ecological thought can however uncover how her poetic connections between landscape, self and national belonging problematise dichotomies such as nature and culture, and illuminates the history of Irish ecological poetry.

In her introduction to the posthumous collection *The Inalienable Heritage* (1914), Edith Sichel describes Lawless's sources of inspiration as "the visible pagan Nature of the senses, and the search into nature which means science, and the search concerning Nature which means thought" (Sichel 1914: vi). The poems are formally uneven, especially in the later collections, and their effect relies on the governing idea rather than the poetic expression. Lawless was a Darwinist, and on one level her nature poetry is the literary corollary of her scientific interests. Throughout the nineteenth century, the main purpose of nature study was to discover and describe as many botanical and zoological species as possible in the attempt to understand the natural world by ordering it into categories. Lawless took part in these activities by reporting sightings of moths and butterflies to entomological journals and collecting plants for the second edition of the flora *Cybele Hibernica* (Praeger 1903: 290; Moore and More 1898: 193). She sent a Letter to the Editor of *Nature* with some observations of the jellyfish Medusa (Lawless 1877: 227), and Charles Darwin briefly corresponded with her regarding a theory she presented about plant fertilisation in the Burren (Lawless 1899: 605; Romanes 1896: 58). Even so, there is a tension in her work between the value of taxonomical studies and what can be learnt *about* nature, and the value of a spiritual connection with the land and what can be learnt *from* nature. In *A Garden Diary* (1901) she suggests that the boundaries between the two perspectives are disappearing so that they no longer "appear to us so absolutely impregnable as they once were" (Lawless 1901: 177-78):

Given a mind that can feed on knowledge, without becoming surfeited by it; a mind to which it has become so familiar that it has grown to be as it were organic; a mind for which facts are no longer heavy, but light, so that it can play with them, as an athlete plays with his iron balls, and send them flying aloft, like birds through the air. Given such a mind, so fed by knowledge, so constituted by nature, and it is not easy to see limits to the realms of thought and of discovery, to the feats of reconstruction, still more perhaps to the feats of reconciliation, which may not, some day or other, be open to it. (Lawless 1901: 178)

The differences between scholarly and aesthetic approaches to the natural world are further explored in *The Book of Gilly: Four Months Out of a Life* (1906), where the young boy Gilly is caught between his tutor Mr Griggs who is engrossed in marine zoology and his friend Phil Acton who represents spirituality and sensitivity, rejecting positivist

science as limiting. Griggs is an “Avatar of the modern world, an embodiment of the scientific spirit, newly alighted upon one of the waste places of a darkened and unregenerate Past” (Lawless 1906: 169), and his main ambition is to collect information about marine species for his scholarly articles. Acton, in contrast, is “a born beauty-lover” (Lawless 1906: 112), and cheating life “of some of its prose was with him the first, the most spontaneous of instincts” (Lawless 1906: 180-81). In a passionate outburst against conventional nature study, Acton cries: “Rotten materialism! Rotten conceit! Rotten anything that could make a man suppose all earth, and sea, and sky were able to be summed up, packed away and settled by a handful of trumpery formula!” (Lawless 1906: 254). Acton’s spiritual connection with nature is privileged in the novel, but in her own writing, Lawless attempts to reconcile Griggs-like positivism with Actonesque sensibility. As a result, she frequently transcends the boundaries of genre and style. Scientific detail and the theory of evolution inform her poetry and fiction, whereas her scholarly contributions are presented in an idiosyncratic manner that establishes a personal connection with the objects of study and conceals her actual expertise (Hansson 2011: 65). Paradoxically, Lawless’s progressive ecological views owe a great deal to her exclusion from conventional scholarly networks. Ireland, in her view, is a natural and cultural entity where established forms of categorisation and rational explanations do not apply. In an 1899 article she characterises North Clare as “an interspace between land and water,” a landscape that does not “strictly belong either to the one or to the other” (Lawless 1899: 604). The idea recurs on a metaphorical level in her contention that Irish nature must be approached on its own terms, not according to received scientific systems, and in her explorations of a Darwinian model of human identity where the boundaries between the human and the natural world are permeable.

Like many of her contemporaries, Lawless located true Irishness in the West, but unlike the writers of the Irish Revival, she was not particularly interested in folklore. As a member of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy and a supporter of Unionist politics, she was skeptical of cultural nationalism, and instead turned to Irish nature to establish a framework for a national identity. Her first collection of poems is the privately printed *Atlantic Rhymes and Rhythms* (1898), republished as *With the Wild Geese* a few years later (1902). While the original title

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draws attention to the nature poems, the later one emphasises the historical and political poems about Gaelic resistance to the Tudor occupation and the Irish soldiers who left for the continent after the Treaty of Limerick 1691. Several of the pieces however connect the political and the natural, anticipating the ecocritical expansion of “the notion of ‘the world’ to include the entire ecosphere” (Glotfelty 1996: xix). *With the Wild Geese* was followed by *The Point of View* (1909), privately printed and sold for the benefit of the Galway Bay fishermen and *The Inalienable Heritage* (1914). In these collections, Irishness persistently takes the form of a personal relationship with the land.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the attitudes of Romanticism had been largely supplanted by the ideals of Realism and Naturalism, and Darwin’s theories made soulful expressions of the relationship between people and nature complicated. In Ireland nature poetry was however often politically charged. Despite being rather unfashionable, the nature poem continued to fill an important role in discourses of nationalism where it was frequently framed by issues of civic importance that made the natural world appear as a reflection of social realities. An alternative model was to produce a nostalgic image of a natural past free from social concerns with the help of poetic contemplations of landscape. In Lawless’s poetry, nature is however neither presented as a mirror of society nor as civilization’s Other, but as the very basis for the civic nation. The indissoluble bond between people and their environment is the central idea in several of the poems, as in “Clare Coast,” where she contemplates Ireland’s ability to inspire love and heroism regardless of its failure to nurture its people:

See us, cold isle of our love!
Coldest, saddest of isles –
Cold as the hopes of our youth,
Cold as your own wan smiles.
Coldly your streams outpour,
Each apart on the height,
[...]
But the coldest, saddest, oh isle!
Are the homeless hearts of your sons. (Lawless 1902: 9-10)

The poem is set in 1720 and the speakers are members of the Irish brigades in France. It is almost overloaded with negative images, and rather than celebrating the beauty of the West, Lawless draws a parallel

between the melancholy homesickness of the soldiers and the desolation of the land. When the poem was written, nostalgia had become understood as an emotional condition, but Lawless attaches to the seventeenth-century explanation of homesickness as a physical affliction to which soldiers in foreign service were particularly susceptible (Starobinski and Kemp 1966: 84; Boym 2001: 3). The pathological definition had its foundation in the belief that people were conditioned by their natural environments to the extent that dissolving the symbiotic bond could have fatal consequences. The concept is thus given an ecocentric dimension in Lawless's poem, since if identity is figured as a matter of rootedness, power is transferred to the land. The result is that the traditional relationship between humanity and nature is reversed.

The link between Ireland as a country of lack and loss and Ireland as a lost homeland is emphasised also in some later poems, like "A Bog-Filled Valley" where the poet herself appears to be the speaker:

Sick little valley, meted out for sadness,
Bent thorn-trees sparsely above your brown floods rise,
Brimming full your streams are, brimming full, yet holding
Little joyous commerce with the sun and skies.
[...]
Yet, oh little valley, little bog-filled valley,
I, who linger near you, grieving turn to part,
In your bareness finding, in your sadness seeing,
Something very tender, very near my heart.
[...]
Finding in your bareness, seeing in your sadness,
That which, going elsewhere, I shall find no more. (Lawless 1914: 47)

There is no attempt to transform the bog landscape to a place of beauty. As in "Clare Coast," negative images dominate. The valley is personified, but the human qualities it is bestowed are related to sickness and grief. The emotional correspondences between the speaker's sadness at leaving and sad appearance of the valley reinforce the idea that identity is rooted in the land. The theme is revisited on both a metaphorical and a literal level in "To a Tuft of White Bog-Cotton, Growing in the Tyrol," where the cotton-grass plant becomes a symbol of exile as well as a native Irish plant growing in the Alps:

And is it thou? small playmate of the fens,
Child of damp haunts, and pallid sea-borne fogs,

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Light flutterer over dank and oozy glens,
White-tufted, starry friend of Irish bogs!
What dost thou, tossed upon this mountain here,
Flaunting thy white crest in this alien air? (Lawless 1902: 75)

The poem is dated 1886, and in his Preface to *With the Wild Geese*, Stopford E. Brooke points out that it was written “in the height of the Home Rule struggle” (Brooke 1902: xxiii), a time when land and landscape were particularly charged literary themes. Although the hope for the “winged form of Peace” (Lawless 1902: 80) that concludes the piece could be connected to the political situation at the time, there are no references to contemporary conflicts, however, and past bloodshed is only represented in an unspecific, half-mythological manner. As in the previous poems, Lawless is primarily concerned with the possibilities of actual and symbolic transplantation, and the contrast between the Alps and the Irish bogland as suitable environments for the plant draws attention to the ecological dimension of the question:

Shall brawling torrent, lost to every beam,
White with its spoil of glacier and moraine,
Serve thee as well as some slow-moving stream
Brown with its brimming toll of recent rain. (Lawless 1902: 76)

The images of growth and transplantation are a logical manifestation of Lawless’s interest in gardening. In the mid-1890s she settled in Surrey, where she attempted to establish some Irish trees and plants in her garden. In the article “An Upland Bog,” she describes the bog environment as an eco-system that relies on a precarious balance between soil, climate and different zoological and botanical species (Lawless 1881: 417-30), and her reflections in *A Garden Diary* reveal an awareness of the problems of re-creating such conditions:

I have a profound affection for bog plants, which I hope some of them respond to, for they thrive fairly. Others are exceedingly difficult to establish, and rarely look anything but starved and homesick. Amongst these are the butterworts. Why the translation should so particularly affect them I have yet to learn, but the fact is unmistakable. Not all the water of all our taps, not all the peat of all our hillsides will persuade them to be contented. In vain I have wooed them with the wettest spots I could find ; in vain erected poor semblances of tussocks for their benefit; have puddled the peat till it seemed impossible that any creature unprovided with eyes could distinguish it from a bit of real bog. No, die they will, and die they hitherto always have. (Lawless 1901: 171-72)

The idea of an irreproducible eco-system that governs the poems about the lost homeland suggests an essentialist construction of Ireland and Irish identity. Such an interpretation is only partially off-set by poems like "To a Tuft of Bog-Cotton" where Ireland is established in the Tyrol. Depicting Ireland as a habitat for connected human and non-human lives that cannot be recreated elsewhere, Lawless employs an ecocentric perspective that suggests that humans cannot shape or control the natural environment.

The view of Ireland as a fragile eco-system recurs in the two dirges at the centre of *With the Wild Geese*. The destruction of the Irish woodland between 1600 and 1800 was the result of English colonial "policies of profit and prevention of their use by native armies" (Neeson 1997: 142). Lawless was well aware of how the Irish forests had been depleted by the need for fuel for iron foundries and the export of timber for ship-building and other purposes, as well as cut down by the Elizabethan armies so as not to provide shelter for the rebelling Irish (Lawless 1882: 543). In the "Dirge of the Munster Forest. 1581" (Lawless 1902: 35-37) the forest appears as the burial ground for the woodkernes killed in the revolt against Tudor centralisation led by Gerald, 14th Earl of Desmond. The poem's title installs the political context, but on the surface level, there is a notable absence of references to any social and political reality outside the woodland. The rebels are only one of the many species making up the "retinue" of the royal forest (Lawless 1902: 35):

Bring out the hemlock! bring the funeral yew!
The faithful ivy that doth all enfold;
Heap high the rocks, the patient brown earth strew,
And cover them against the numbing cold.
Marshal my retinue of bird and beast,
Wren, titmouse, robin, birds of every hue;
Let none keep back, no, not the very least,
Nor fox, nor deer, nor tiny nibbling crew,
Only bid one of all my forest clan
Keep far from us on this our funeral day.
On the grey wolf I lay my sovereign ban. (Lawless 1902: 35-36)

The enumeration of the forest species expresses Lawless's belief that the loss of the forest "by no means entails the loss merely of the trees: it also entails the death or dispersal of a whole world of beings, which, having

thriven under their shelter, shares their fate” (Lawless 1882: 543-44). The forest is an ecosystem where different species perform various functions. This interdependence of different forms of life is given an emotional dimension in the poem when Lawless imagines how the plants and animals participate when the rebels are buried.

The wolf is excluded, however, and is conferred no human qualities like the “faithful ivy” or the “patient brown earth” (Lawless 1902: 35). In seventeenth-century thought, wolves and forest-dwelling rebels were linked together as dangers to English colonists, and there were rewards for hunting them down (Neeson 1997: 140). From an Irish nationalist perspective, the wolf was instead connected to predatory colonialism, as a pack-hunting animal that would gobble up vulnerable woodland creatures. As a poetic image, the wolf is overloaded with symbolic meanings that are absent in Lawless’s poem. Instead, she constructs the wolf as fully animal, driven by animal urges and taking his place in maintaining the ecological balance of the forest, but devoid of anthropomorphic empathy or greed:

The great grey wolf who scrapes the earth away;
Lest, with hooked claw and furious hunger, he
Lay bare my dead for gloating foes to see. (Lawless 1902: 36)

Discussing twenty-first-century Irish nature poetry, Jody Allen Randolph maintains that “the recovery of ecocritical perspectives is the recovery of history,” and that poems about “losing a hillside” are centrally concerned with “losing a history, and even memory itself” (Randolph 2009: 57). There is a long tradition of double political-environmental meanings in nature poetry, and Lawless’s poem might, for example be juxtaposed with Margaret Cavendish’s “A Dialogue *between an Oake, and a Man cutting him downe*” (1653) where the oak asks the man with the axe why he wants to deprive himself of the protection the tree provides (McColley 2007: 102). Since oaks frequently symbolise royalty in Jacobite poetry and iconography, the tree doubles as a representation of Charles I, as Diane Kelsey McColley notes (McColley 2007: 102). In a similar way, “Dirge of the Munster Forest” historicises the loss of the Irish forest and shows how its disappearance leads to the loss of future opportunities as well as vital connections to the past. Although the poem’s fable concerns the woodland and its creatures, the title connects nature and nation, and like the oak in Cavendish’s poem, the forest shares the fate of a defeated

ruling order. As sanctuary for the rebels, it will be destroyed by the occupation forces, and seasonal rebirth is halted or precluded:

Lay bare my dead, who died, and died for me.
For I must shortly die as they have died,
And lo! my doom stands yoked and linked with theirs;
The axe is sharpened to cut down my pride:
I pass, I die, and leave no natural heirs.
Soon shall my sylvan coronals be cast;
My hidden sanctuaries, my secret ways,
No Spring shall quicken what this Autumn slays. (Lawless 1902: 36)

The Irish-language poem “Cill Chais” is a similar elegy to the lost woods, but Lawless was probably more influenced by a funeral song in John Webster’s *The White Devil* (1612) which builds on the same conceit of all wood creatures except the wolf participating in the ritual (Hansson 2007: 156). According to Edith Sichel, words and phrases in Lawless’s works “generally recall the Elizabethans, and the verse of the Elizabethans it was whose poetry most affected and most influenced her” (Sichel 1914: vii). Similarities in world-view strengthen the connection, and the dirge of the forest relies on the Shakespearean concept that human events are reflected in nature. The same idea characterises “Dirge for all Ireland. 1581” where nature, not the people, mourns the colonised nation:

Fall gently, pitying rains! Come slowly, Spring!
Ah, slower, slower yet! No notes of glee,
No minstrelsy! Nay, not one bird must sing
His challenge to the season.
[. . .]
And ye, cold waves, who guard that western slope,
Show no white crowns. This is no time to wear
The livery of Hope. We have no hope.
Blackness and leaden greys befit despair (Lawless 1902: 38-40)

In “Clare Coast” and “A Bog-Filled Valley,” human emotions reflect the barrenness of the landscape but in the elegies, the relationship is the opposite. From an ecocritical point of view, the idea that nature mirrors events in the social world may appear worryingly anthropocentric. Ernest Augustus Boyd however interpreted the attitude as an articulation of “the Celtic imagination, which sees in the external world the evidence of the

common identity of all life, as manifestations of the Great Spirit; which peoples the streams and forests with supernatural presences serving to link this world with the regions beyond Time and Space” (Boyd 1916: 208-09). To place prominent Irish writers in a nationalist context was of paramount importance for Boyd and his early twentieth-century contemporaries, but his formulation indicates that an ecological framework is equally justified. Separation between nature and society is alien to Lawless’s poetic thought, and if nature, culture and society are interwoven, it becomes logical that nature should respond to the conquest of the country by appearing in its bleakest aspect.

The natural world thus rarely symbolises life, growth or renewal in Lawless’s poetry. Instead, Lawless establishes a connection between Ireland’s violent past and its natural features by constantly foregrounding the landscape’s aridity and cheerlessness, and death is a more common image than life. This is true also of poems without political reference, like “To that Rare and Deep-Red Burnet-Moth Only to be Met with in the Burren,” where the setting is an unforgiving environment ruled by death, violence and desolation:

Sparkle of red on an iron floor,
In the fiercest teeth of this gale’s wild roar,
What has brought thee, oh speck of fire,
Speaking of love and the heart’s desire,
To a land so dead?

Rocks gaunt and grim as the halls of Death,
Sculptured and hewn by the wind’s rough breath,
Fortress-shaped, fantastic things,
Reared for some turbulent race of Kings,
Kings long since dead.

Wind-blown pools where no herbs grow,
Streams lost and sunk in the depths below,
Where scant flowers bloom, where few birds sing,
Thou, thou fliest alone, thou fire-winged thing!
Small speck of red! (Lawless 1914: 37)

But despite the accumulation of negative images, the poem celebrates life. Although the central idea is the dissimilarity between the moth and the dead landscape, the title undermines this contrast by specifying the unique interconnectedness between insect and habitat. On a symbolic

level, the moth becomes an image of defiance and survival, illustrating the possibility of love and beauty in the harshest of environments. On a literal level, it is an insect shaped by the conditions of a natural environment hospitable to only a very few species.

A similar literalisation characterises the poem "To the Winged Psyche, Dying in a Garden," where Lawless transcends the dichotomy between human and non-human by suggesting that sentience is not a human preserve. The title recalls Keats's "Ode to Psyche" (1819) as well as the Irish writer Mary Tighe's epic poem *Psyche, or, the Legend of Love* (1805), but in contrast to her predecessors, Lawless does not attach to the ancient myth of Eros and Psyche, nor does she build on the tradition of the soul materialised as a butterfly. These aspects are intertextually present, but the metaphor is literalised in Lawless's poem and the dying moth is a member of the Psychidæ or bagworm family, not a mythical being. As so often in Romantic poetry, the theme of Keats's ode is mutability, and the central paradox is the idea that the immortal gods can die when they are no longer worshipped. The themes of mutability and death surface in Lawless's poem as well, but the central paradox is the idea that the supposedly mindless moth possesses the secret of consciousness and sensation. In this way, Lawless reverses conventional power and knowledge positions so that the moth appears as the teacher and knowledge-bearer instead of an object for study. As a Darwinist, she was schooled in empirical research and the importance of observation, but she was also critical of the reductive properties of the scientific gaze (Hansson 2007: 57-63). The reversal of the gaze in the Psyche poem is one example of this distrust, made particularly poignant because of the common practice of pinning butterflies to the bottom of sample cases for display:

Reft of beauty, there you lie
Not yet dead, but left to die,
[. . .]
Stirs the thought could I but creep
Inch by inch to where you lie,
Narrow my gaze to an insect's eye,
Listen and listen before you die
[. . .]

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So I, even I, might understand
Something of what it is to *be*,
Some floating hint steal down to me
Of that riddle of riddles—Sentiency. (Lawless 1909: 44)

One problem addressed in ecocriticism is the tendency to privilege allegorical and metaphorical readings, interpreting nature in literature “not for what it physically is but for what it conceptually means or can be made to mean” (Kern 2000: 9). Since the butterfly is such a prominent poetic symbol, both as an emblem of the soul and as an image of transience and transformation, Lawless’s treatment of the moth stands out in its literalness. It is an example of an ecocentric representation of nature as physical reality rather than culturally determined sign where the referent is more real than the metaphor, to invert Simon Schama’s formulation (Schama 1995: 61).

The boundary between humanity and nature is destabilised in a diametrically opposite way in the poem “Wishes,” where the speaker yearns to be a part of the natural world to escape consciousness, responsibility and emotion. Human existence is rejected and non-human life-forms are privileged, but in contrast to the idea governing the poem to the Psyche moth, mindlessness is seen as nature’s blessing:

I would I were you, you scaly fish, swim-swimming in the sea,
Or a fox upon the hillside there, a hunter bold and free,
Anything but the man I am, crying, dear God, to thee!

I would I were you, you black sea-weed, toss-tossing on the sea,
Or you, or you, grey lumps of stone, which feel no misery
I pray you make me as these, dear God, since better may not be! (Lawless 1914: 66)

Explorations of humanity’s position in the chain of life are common in post-Darwinian poetry. Georg Roppen’s defines evolutionary poetry as “a poetic interpretation of existence” (Roppen 1956: 458) often proceeding from the argument that human existence is no more exceptional and frequently less enviable than that of other species (Holmes 2009: 132-33). Although Lawless’s treatment of nature in terms of blessed ignorance may seem to detract from the ecocentric valorization that characterises most of her nature poetry, it is actually another way of elevating the natural world. Instead of personifying nature with human traits, she asks to be relieved of the main attributes

that separate humans from other species. The poem not only asks to be part of nature but goes so far as to reject the human condition.

The idea of being one with the natural world finds its clearest expression in “Kinship: An Evolutionary Problem” where Lawless considers humankind as the sum of every stage since the beginning of life. The poem moves back through evolution, but there is no sense that humanity is the crown of creation, nor is there any attempt to romanticise nature. The theme is rather that the monstrous past is an integral part of the present makeup of humankind:

Love thou thy kind! Yea, but that larger kind,
The dumb, fierce, roving, nameless kind that live
Scarce less within our frames? True kinsmen these,
Only too near.
[. . .]
Threatening and ravenous, fiercely tooth'd and claw'd,
With eyes which stir, and redly glare across
The intolerable darkness. What of these?
Are these our brethren? Yonder crouching form,
Chattering, half prone, the inarticulate man,
The two-legg'd wolf—is he my brother too?
Another kinsman? (Lawless 1909: 46)

Comparisons between people and animals are normally applied to produce negative effects, and the practice was particularly charged in nineteenth-century Ireland, with the Irish given simian features in English cartoons. Introducing the theory of evolution complicates the issue, however. Although the violent language and repulsive images of previous evolutionary stages generate a sense of disgust that borders on misanthropy in the poem, the speaker is included and the central idea is the common origin of all life. Despite the abundance of negative imagery, there is no implication of self-loathing, and the poem leads up to the idea that God does not value human beings more highly than any other part of the creation:

Only of this be sure.
That He who ruleth hath no preference,
No narrow choice, no blind exclusiveness;
We and our kin, to the last drop of blood,
The first dull dawn of hovering consciousness,
Shall share and share. Aye, and not only we,
But all the crowded denizens of Space,

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World after world, till the long muster-roll
Be closed and sealed. (Lawless 1909: 50-51)

The poem foreshadows the ecocentric conception that humans do not master nature, but are part of it and ends on a note of equal complementarity between all life forms: “Now to our several tasks” (Lawless 1909: 51). Despite its potentially radical theme, “Kinship” is however unsuccessful as a poem, with poetic expression almost completely subordinated to the intellectual ideas. In Edith Sichel’s view, Lawless’s poetry is marked by formal ineptitude: “Form was not Miss Lawless’s strong point, that is when she sought it” (vi) which means that “in the poems of thought the verse is often but the scabbard for the finely tempered blade of the idea” (Sichel 1914: vii). Perhaps this is the reason why her poems on evolutionary questions are not discussed in the most comprehensive treatises of Darwinian poetry in the twentieth century, *Darwin Among the Poets* by Lionel Stevenson (1932) and Georg Roppen’s *Evolution and Poetic Belief* (1956). Neither is she mentioned in the more recent studies *Darwin’s Plots* by Gillian Beer (2000) or *Darwin’s Bards* by John Holmes (2009), despite the fact that both her poetry and her fiction repeatedly address Darwinian themes. In “Kinship” Lawless appears in her most cerebral poetic mode, and the poem is unwieldy in form, marred by uneven rhythm, archaic language and contradictory ideas. Its value lies in the way it functions as a theoretical framework for her attempts to erase the boundaries between human, non-human and landscape.

In Emily Lawless’s poetry, the social and the natural world are inescapably connected, and the definition of national identity is grounded in the landscape. Ireland recurrently emerges as an eco-system where environmental conditions determine people’s lives and character and hierarchical relations between humanity and nature are replaced by the vision of mutual dependence, frequently illustrated in the way natural and human events and emotions reflect each other. Landscapes and non-human species are primarily representations of the real, not cultural constructs and natural environments do not acquire meaning through people’s relationships to them. The introduction of the theory of evolution provides nature with a history and the possibility of change that undermines the function of nature lyric as an escape to a timeless, pastoral world. At the end of the nineteenth century, such valorisation of the natural at the expense of cultural meanings made Lawless

embarrassingly unsophisticated. Today, her poetry can be re-evaluated as a remarkably prescient expression of ecological awareness.

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