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Beyond the Icon, Beyond the Human: An Ecocritical Reading of Francis of Assisi across Irish and British Poetry (1960s-2010s)

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the presence of Francis of Assisi across Irish and British literature from the 1960s to the 2010s, through the study of a poetic trajectory centring on a popular episode in his hagiography known as ‘the preaching to the birds’. Through an ecocritical lens, my analysis investigates how this narrative entails the theme of human–nonhuman relationality revealing the ‘mature environmental aesthetics’ of the poems under examination alongside the rise of ecological discourses in the contexts of their publication. By analysing five poems by different authors – Norman MacCaig, Seamus Heaney, and Michael Longley (1960s), and Paula Meehan and Ann Wroe (1990s-2010s) – this essay gauges how poetic renderings of Francis, beyond mere simplistic assessment of his ‘iconic’ status in contemporary culture, testify to his efficacy, as a poetic subject, to engage with current debates in the environmental humanities. Specifically, I discuss how, in the selected poems, Francis fosters a paradigm shift to still-dominant mental and physical habits that have led to the Anthropocene in conceiving humans and nonhumans beyond anthropocentric, dualistic figurations, while acknowledging forms of ontological and material continuity among them.

KEYWORDS: Francis of Assisi, preaching to the birds, ecocriticism, human–nonhuman relationality, posthumanism

1. Introduction

That Francis of Assisi (c. 1181-1226) represents a popular cultural *icon*¹ is undoubted. Since the Middle Ages, there have been many works, in different fields, dedicated to the saint, which have contributed to shedding light on *il Poverello*’s attentiveness to fraternity and poverty (Cook 2008), as well as

¹ This concept is intended to denote ‘a person or thing considered a representative symbol’, as defined by the OED (2024).

to his deep connection with creation (Johnson 2011), among other matters.² After more than 800 years since the establishment of the Franciscan order, the saint's appeal for artists of different kinds shows no signs of fading: the ever-growing production of cultural narratives—visual, textual, and performative—dedicated to his life, lifestyle, and spirituality are representative of his continuous reinterpretations (Golozubov 2015) and readaptations through different media, including film,³ opera,⁴ drama (Bower 2009), and even comics (Gasnick 2024 [1980]). As Cynthia Ho, John K. Downey, and Beth Mulvaney observe, 'the future of Francis is also the future of retellings and representing his story in other genres and religious climates' (2009: xii).

Literature has also contributed to both Francis' popularity and his cultural impact, especially within a 'mature environmental aesthetic.'⁵ In the Irish and British context, a trajectory can be identified since the 1960s that entangles Francis, as a poetic subject, with the topic of human–nonhuman relationality hand-in-hand with the rising environmental discourses developing in that period. In a time such as the one we live in, where the effects of major anthropogenic alterations of planet earth have been unequivocally connected to specific (anthropocentric, dualistic, etc.) mindsets and lifestyles, production practices, consumption habits, and, in general, to human actions,⁶ rethinking the paradigm underlying today's socioeconomic dynamics is a necessity.⁷ By referring to a specific episode of

² On Francis's legacy in art, literature, spirituality, and other fields, see Franco – Mulvaney (2015).

³ Among the most popular cinematic adaptations of the life of Francis are Roberto Rossellini's *Francesco Giullare di Dio* (1950) and Franco Zeffirelli's *Brother Sun, Sister Moon* (1972), as listed on IMDb (2024). As of today, the tag 'Saint Francis of Assisi' on IMDb lists 32 productions, including movies, documentaries, and series that are dedicated to or reference Francis (IMDb 2024).

⁴ For instance, consider Olivier Messiaen's opera *Saint François d'Assise (scenes franciscaines)*, which premiered on 28 November 1983 (McClain 2009).

⁵ With this expression, Lawrence Buell, a pioneer in ecocriticism, emphasised the need for narratives that illuminate environmental issues through an integrated, ecological understanding of humans and nonhumans, rather than a simplistic discussion of the environment (Buell 1995: 32).

⁶ While recognising different responsibilities depending on countries, practices, and individuals.

⁷ This type of action, often advocated by various disciplines and fields of knowledge, finds a useful framework in the posthumanist perspective. This perspective is valuable for attentiveness towards challenging dualistic, anthropocentric, and speciesist assumptions—among others—as essential tools to rethink the axioms that have led to the Anthropocene.

the life of Francis, commonly known as ‘the preaching to the birds,’⁸ the poetic trajectory under examination highlights the ways Saint Francis supports and fosters a revision of rooted anthropocentric dualistic figurations of humans and the environment, while also encouraging more ethical forms of relationality.

As observed by Timothy J. Johnson, Thomas of Celano (c. 1185 – c. 1265) was one of the earliest hagiographers ‘to perceive the saint’s sibling relationship with creatures’ (Johnson 2011: 147) since the Middle Ages. The ‘preaching to the birds,’ featuring, among other Franciscan sources, in Celano’s *Vita Prima*, describes Francis addressing the animals, praising them for their divine goodness in relation to their existence, and reminding them ‘of the incredible benevolence the Creator showered upon them,’ while imploring ‘all animals, and even inanimate creatures, to praise and love their Creator’ (Johnson 2011: 147). In the *Legenda Maior*—another relevant early biography by Saint Bonaventure (1221-1274)—similar episodes are reported in which Francis interacts with birds. These include references to the preaching to the birds where Francis addresses the animals, often calling them ‘brothers,’ urging them to praise the Lord and inspiring in them fascination, attraction, and excitement (Paolozzi 2011: 686). While these stories have often been interpreted allegorically (Sand 2014: 221), as references to Francis’s attention towards poor and marginalised people, recent ecocritical approaches allow for a different reading: they reassess the specificities of the human–nonhuman relationship portrayed by the episode, in light of current discussions on relational ethics in the Anthropocene.

This paper follows the latter approach by focusing on selected poems published between the 1960s and 2010s and pivoting on the episode of the preaching to the birds. While acknowledging the differences between the social, cultural, and religious specificities of the Irish and British contexts, this joint study will underscore similarities in the development of these Franciscan narratives across decades, as a transcultural and transnational phenomenon.

(Critical) posthumanism recognises an ontological and material connection between humans and nonhumans, compelling one to reconsider long-standing and rooted predatory attitudes towards the natural world. Additionally, this critical perspective highlights how these assumptions foster an exclusionary view of ‘the human’ as a subject, rooted in a Eurocentric, white, male worldview—thus marginalising other subjectivities (Braidotti 2019; Ferrando 2019).

⁸ This episode is reported in various Franciscan sources, the most relevant of which are Thomas of Celano’s *Vita Prima* (Chapter 21), *I Fioretti* (*The Little Flowers*, Chapter 16), and Bonaventure’s *Legenda Maior* (Chapter 12). See Paolozzi (2011).

The first part of this paper will be dedicated to contextualising Francis within Irish and British literature and culture by briefly elucidating the development of his popularity from the earliest traces to more recent expressions. This section also assesses Francis's relevance in recent discourses regarding contemporary ecological urgencies. In contrast, the second part of this essay offers an ecocritical analysis of the 'preaching to the birds' episode in the five selected poems. Based on the year of their compositions and publications, this section gathers the case studies into two groups: a) three poems from the 1960s (by Norman MacCaig, Seamus Heaney, and Michael Longley) and b) two poems published after the 1990s (by Paula Meehan and Ann Wroe).

2. The Spread of Franciscanism in Irish and British Culture: A Brief Account

Francis of Assisi is a long-standing presence in both Irish and British history. The earliest traces date back to the 13th century in the context of the spread of Franciscanism in Europe (Robson 2017: 25-26). On 10 September 1224, a group of nine friars reached England to lay the foundations of the first English province of the order (Robson 2017: 3). The success of the Franciscans in England was such that, by 1228, the first Province of London was further divided into Custodies (Robson 1997: 1). Thirty years after the arrival of the first friars, their number had grown to 1,242, a figure destined to increase due to their successful integration into the English church, and, in general, into the culture of the country over the next few decades. Similarly, in Ireland, the first convent was reportedly built in Youghal in 1224; six years later, the number of convents made it possible to establish a Province, leading to widespread success with one hundred convents in the country over time (Father Rudolf 1924: 126-127). Overall, the development of Franciscanism in England paralleled the one in Ireland.

With the Reformation, however, the rising popularity of Franciscanism came to a sudden halt. Following the Franciscan opposition to Henry VIII's divorce and to his supremacy over the papacy, the King issued a decree in 1534 ordering 'the arrest of Franciscans and the seizure of their friaries' (Borgia Steck 1920: 60). The harsh implementation of such a decree, occasionally entailing torture and murder, also led to the acknowledgement of the first martyrs of the order in England in subsequent years. Although the common people were initially disappointed by the suppression of the Franciscans, the movement progressively lost influence in the region, in part because the new Anglican religion grew

increasingly indifferent to the worship of saints. Yet after the Reformation, narratives dedicated to Francis in England did not fully disappear. Attention on him remained, albeit primarily in the form of delegitimisation. For instance, in the popular work by Bartolomeo Albizzi titled *The Alcaron of the Barefote Friars* (1542), reprinted in multiple editions until the 19th century, Francis was dismissed as ‘the quintessential popish idol’ (Heimann 2017: 406). Another example is Christopher Marlowe’s *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus* (1604), where the devil Mephistopheles disguises himself as a friar in Act 1, Scene 3, at the command of the protagonist: ‘Thou art too ugly to attend on me. Go and return an old Franciscan friar; That holy shape becomes a devil best’ (Marlowe 1993 [1604]: 127).

Throughout the Enlightenment, the decline of Francis continued, on account of what Mary Heimann describes as a general ‘fashionable distaste for medieval miracles and widespread aversion to mendicant and contemplative orders, combined with the low reputation into which Franciscan communities on the European continent had sunk’ (2017: 406). Over time, this transformation reduced the scope of *il Poverello*, who came to be primarily discussed as a distinctive topic of Roman Catholic doctrine and as a mystical phenomenon.

This situation finds a turning point only in the Victorian Age⁹ when Francis was rehabilitated thanks to the Oxford Movement,¹⁰ which sought to renew Roman Catholic thought and practice within the Church of England. Apart

⁹ This observation is based on the studies of Mary Heimann, who primarily focused on the development of English devotion to St. Francis and its transformations. She illustrates how ‘the rise in devotion to St. Francis became a significant feature of English spirituality in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries’. Heimann notes several aspects, including that as ‘a saint who boldly preached and lived the gospel, Francis appeared to earnest Victorians to offer a timely rebuke to those tendencies of which they were the most ashamed: materialism, the loss of “simple faith”, and uneasy doubts about the reality of the supernatural dimension of life’ (Heimann 2017: 409). Unless otherwise indicated, Heimann is the main source for this section.

¹⁰ The Oxford Movement, initiated at the University of Oxford within the Church of England, aimed to reaffirm the catholic heritage of Anglicanism. Also known as Tractarianism, its philosophy was expressed through a series of influential publications from 1833 to 1841, which outlined the movement’s beliefs and principles, asserting that Anglicanism was not merely a Protestant denomination but a branch of the historical Christian Church. These tracts also addressed issues related to liturgy, prayers, sacraments, and other devotional practices. This movement significantly influenced the development of Anglo-Catholicism. For a further discussion on the Oxford Movement, see Brown – Nockles (2012); Brown – Nockles – Pereiro (2017).

from the Oxford Movement, literature at large contributed to reviving interest in Francis with biographic works that became widely popular.¹¹ A case in point is Margaret Oliphant's 1868 biography of Francis, written for the first Protestant series on the saint, which, by gaining popularity beyond Catholics, touched upon 'Victorian sensibilities more generally' (Heimann 2017: 412). Oliphant, whose work was 'drenched in the [British] Romantic spirit', maintained that the saint was 'a man overflowing with sympathy for man and beast' and that he 'was relevant to her contemporaries' (Dunstan 2011: 275), thus underscoring a rising tendency to stress Francis' relationship with the nonhuman realm since the early English hagiographies.

Swiss Calvinist Paul Sabatier's *Life of St. Francis* (1894) was another pivotal publication: not only did this book go into forty-five editions but it also provided the public with a more secularised depiction. Starting from the 1890s, the effect was the cultural popularisation of an array of publications appreciating Francis in a range of different cultural contexts and revisions, including 'Francis the troubadour, Francis the poet, and Francis as the subject of Giotto's paintings or Dante's verses' (Heimann 2017: 414). As Heimann observes, this process led to a real 'explosion of interest in St. Francis of Assisi' (2017: 417) at the turn of the century:¹² the presence of Francis in WWI British discourse, as visible in the spread of the Prayer of St. Francis¹³ among families and soldiers during the conflict, is further proof of the rootedness of Francis in early twentieth century British culture.

By this time, hand-in-hand with the slow but steady rising of a proto-environmental sensibility in the country,¹⁴ Francis also begins to be more systematically associated with 'green' topics.¹⁵ On a more literary level, one can

¹¹ It is the case of Frederick William Faber's 1847 translation of L.F.C. Chalippe's *Vie de Saint François d'Assise*, acknowledged as one of the first biographies of the saint in England during the period. Similarly, the publication of the first English edition of Francis's *Little Flowers* by Henry Edward in 1864, followed in 1867 by an edition of St. Bonaventure's *The Life of St. Francis of Assisi*, further renewed interest in the saint in England (Heimann 2017: 417).

¹² This process was not exempt from controversies, including critiques of Roman Catholicism regarding secularised attitudes towards Francis (Heimann 2017: 418).

¹³ Albeit incorrectly attributed to St. Francis of Assisi.

¹⁴ In recent years, a growing focus on 'greening' Modernism has led to a revival of environmental themes in several early twentieth-century texts (Sultzbach 2016; Black 2017; Hegg Lund – McIntyre 2021). This trend bears witness to an increasing awareness of ecological themes in various literary forms of the period, including poetry (Rozzoni 2021).

¹⁵ For example, during a convention of ecologists in Florence in 1931, it was decided to designate 4th October, St. Francis of Assisi's feast day, as 'World Animal Day'.

consider G.K. Chesterton's popular 1923 biography, titled *St. Francis of Assisi*, where emphasis is laid on pastoral and environmental imagery.¹⁶ A similar example is offered by the words of Charles Raven (1885-1964), Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge from 1932 to 1950, who in the 1930s noted that 'it is probably his enthusiasm for the brotherhood of birds and beasts, more than the stigmata, that for us [Protestants/Anglicans] sets the seal upon his saintliness.'¹⁷

A full exploration of the complex sociocultural, political, and historical *milieu* of Irish and English Catholicism¹⁸ is beyond the scope of this article. However, it is worth reporting the contribution of Franciscans to the process of the Counter-Reformation, especially through their activity in major European universities in the 17th century, where they fostered a resurgence of the movement in the following centuries. Even though by 1817, the Irish Franciscan province was about to dissolve (Bhreathnach – Macmahon – McCafferty 2009), Franciscan spirituality did not succumb. On the contrary, after WWI, the Irish Franciscan Order proved to be culturally influential in the context of post-independence Ireland. As Mary E. Daly posits, the period from 1918 to 1963 represents a true 'second golden age' for Irish Franciscanism, marked by new vocations, structures, and cultural influences, up to the Second Vatican Council, where the spirit of renewal inevitably led to challenges in adapting Franciscanism to ever-new, contemporary necessities (Daly 2023).

3. Francis of Assisi in Contemporary Culture

As Heimann observes, 'by the late 1960s, the "Prayer of St. Francis" had become a familiar sight on countless tea-towels, post-cards, and posters of sunsets and beaches' (2017: 219). These words show that Francis' popularity in the examined context extended well beyond the arts, influencing a variety of (popular) cultural expressions. This trend continued in the following decades, when Francis surfaces

¹⁶ See the following clarificatory passage from Chesterton's biography with its reference to classical pastoral tropes from ancient Greek and Latin culture (Arcadia), where he declares: 'I too have lived in Arcady, but even in Arcady I met one walking in a brown habit who loved the woods better than Pan' (Chesterton 1944: 16), mentioned in Heimann (2017: 418).

¹⁷ This quote refers to Cowley (1933: vii), as mentioned in Dunstan (2011: 277).

¹⁸ For a further discussion on the differences between British and Irish culture based on their different cultural and spiritual backgrounds, see, among others, Hempton (1997); Dworking (2012); Bray (2021).

in many other fields, including political discourses¹⁹ and narratives dedicated to the British monarchy.²⁰

The 1960s represent a milestone in this process since, as already mentioned in the introduction, they testify to the academic resurgence of interest in Saint Francis entangled with the rising environmental discourse, of which the publication of Lynn White Jr.'s seminal essay, *The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis*, in 1967 remains a pivotal example. While exploring the influence of the anthropocentric legacy of the Judeo-Christian tradition on past and present appreciation of the environment, White highlights Francis's different 'ecological' vision. Specifically, White notes that Francis proposed 'an alternative Christian view of nature and man's relation to it; he tried to substitute the idea of the equality of all creatures, including man, with the idea of man's limitless rule of creation' (White 1996 [1967]: 14). With White's work, the saint became (provocatively) popularised in academia as the 'patron saint of all ecologists' (White 1996 [1967]: 14), a recognition later officialised by Pope John Paul II in 1979 (Pope Ioannes Paulus 1979). White's vision can therefore be considered a witnessing to a 'mature environmental' (Buell 1995: 32) figuration of Francis as a model for alternative approaches to the natural world and its relationship with human beings.

While White's assumptions have not been exempted from critical scrutiny and subsequent revisions (Jedan 2017; Brown – Volk – Wallsgrove, 2023), his essay favoured an ecological understanding (and popularisation) of Francis in the following years as shown by the publication of a number of academic works based on the same premises. For instance, one can consider the investigation of the interplay of nature and mysticism in Francis, as explained by Edward A. Allworthy (1973), or Steven Rockefeller's study (1992) on the intertwining of faith and ecological thought. Roger D. Sorrell (2010), on the other hand, discusses how Francis has influenced Christians' attitudes towards the natural world, while Gillian Rudd, among other

¹⁹ Margaret Thatcher's mention of Francis in her 1979 election victory speech is worth reporting: 'I would just like to remember some words of St. Francis of Assisi which I think are really just particularly apt at the moment. "Where there is discord, may we bring harmony. Where there is error, may we bring truth. Where there is doubt, may we bring faith. And where there is despair, may we bring hope" ...' (Thatcher 1979), cited in Heimann (2017).

²⁰ Reference to Francis of Assisi surfaced in a song sung at the funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales, in 1997 (*Make me a channel of your peace*) whose planetary broadcast becomes a powerful illustration of Francis's rootedness in British religious and secularised contexts (see Heimann 2017).

scholars, considers Francis's 'sense of connection not separation between humans and the rest of creation' (Rudd 2014: 29). Interestingly, the inclusion of White's essay in Glotfelty and Fromm's seminal collection *The Ecocriticism Reader*, published in 1996, gave further relevance to Francis in the context of environmental subjects on the verge of the ecocritical movement: a similar perception has been later corroborated by several studies exploring Francis's presence in literature (Siewers 2009; Chrulew 2016; Alphonso 2018) with regard to issues concerning human–nonhuman relationships, including plants, animals, and other entities.

The election of Jorge Bergoglio to the papacy in 2013 fostered this development. The influence of the Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'* promulgated in 2015 is a good example: with its title taken from the incipit of Francis's famous *Canticle of Brother Sun*—the popular prayer and poem in which Francis celebrated God for different aspects of creation—the document has become seminal in assessing the saint, and the Franciscan ethics, in general, as 'the example par excellence of care for the vulnerable and of an integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically' (Pope Francis 2015). This Encyclical Letter can also be seen as a way to acknowledge Franciscan ethics as a source of inspiration for responses to issues such as pollution, climate change, sustainability, and related social challenges: not only did *Laudato Si'* have multiple effects on culture and society in regard to these urgencies—including the rise of a worldwide movement and large media impact²¹—but it also became a popular topic in academia²² in different areas including posthuman philosophy. As philosopher Rosi Braidotti observed, this document can be seen as Pope Francis's 'supplementing Catholic dogma on Natural Law, with Naomi Klein's analysis of the destructive role of Capitalism' (2019: 66). Along this line, and in the context of Irish and British culture, there has also been a resurgence of Francis within environmental discourse, both inside and outside the Catholic Church.²³

Complementing this trend is *The Economy of Francesco*, an international movement of young economists, entrepreneurs, and change-makers initiated in 2019; it followed an invitation from Pope Francis to convene in Assisi (Pope Francis 2019) in order to engage with leading economists worldwide with a view

²¹ For a further illustration of the *Laudato Si' Movement* and its cultural influence, see <https://laudatosimovement.org/who-we-are/>

²² For studies dedicated to the Encyclical Letter, see, amongst others, Dale (2015); Zhang (2016); McKim (2019); Buckley (2022).

²³ For a further discussion on this topic, see the website of The Catholic Church. Bishops' Conference of England and Wales indicated in the bibliography.

to enacting a paradigm shift in economics inspired by Franciscan philosophies (Rozzoni and Limata 2024).²⁴

All these initiatives testify to Francis's enduring iconic relevance achieved through constant re-narrations—particularly in ecological discourse—as a transnational and transcultural process. My study examines such re-narrations in recent British and Irish poems addressing the issue of human–nonhuman relationality as a way of enhancing possible responses to the challenges prompted by the Anthropocene, alongside wider discussions on literature's influence on culture regarding these topics (Zapf 2016).

4. Francis and Birds in 1960s Irish and British Poetry: Norman MacCaig, Seamus Heaney, and Michael Longley

Assisi, written in 1964 and first published in 1966 in the collection *Surroundings*, is a popular poem written by Scottish author Norman MacCaig (1910-1996). The lyric develops along three stanzas depicting a street person with physical disabilities (referred to as a 'dwarf') sitting outside Saint Francis Basilica in the eponymous Umbrian town and interacting with a group of tourists.

MacCaig's poetic works can often be considered as 'attempts to approach the world outside, to find a relation with the Other as different from the Self in order to reconcile observer and observed and, also, reverse their respective roles' (Fazzini 2019: 14). Fazzini's remark fits the subject of the poem where the dwarf, seen as an *outcast* of society, plays the *central* role. Yet, descriptions of the dwarf's relationship with tourists and vice versa, are interspersed with references to Francis's preaching to the birds, which invites readers to a broad understanding of his relational ethics to both humans and nonhumans. Before proceeding further, it is worth noting that, in the context of an ecocritical re-reading of this poem, the theme of tourism is particularly effective for reflecting on human–nonhuman relationality in the Anthropocene. This is especially relevant considering the negative impact of mass tourism development on the environment over the past few decades. This growing scholarly field,²⁵ though only briefly mentioned in this

²⁴ For a further discussion on *The Economy of Francesco*, visit the website indicated in the bibliography.

²⁵ For a further discussion on the link between tourism and the Anthropocene, see Gren and Huijbens (2019).

study, contributes to the negative depiction of tourists in the poem when adopting an ecocritical lens, as will be illustrated in the following lines.

Both Francis and the Franciscan episode are mentioned in the very opening of the poem, where the saint is epitomised as ‘brother of the poor’ and ‘talker with birds’ (line 6): ‘outside the three tiers of churches built / in honour of St Francis, brother / of the poor, talker with birds’ (MacCaig 1964; 1966 [2011]: 309). This wording establishes from the start a sense of connectedness between human beings (‘the poor’, referring to the poem’s dwarf protagonist) and animals (‘the birds’), which runs through the poem, informing readers about the peculiarities of Franciscan spirituality within the broader context of Christian beliefs, through an all-embracing celebration of God’s creation.

The second stanza provides one more example of this connection by depicting a priest illustrating Giotto’s frescoes to some tourists and emphasising their power to convey God’s word to the Middle Ages’ illiterate viewers.²⁶ In actual fact, the frescoes of Giotto’s cycle in the Upper Basilica in Assisi provide narratives of the lives of Saint Francis and Jesus through some particularly relevant episodes, which seem to be recalled in these lines.²⁷ At the same time, the poem also points to the narrow mindedness of contemporary visitors, who, like their predecessors in the past, find it hard to grasp the sense of the images, owing to a different kind of illiteracy:

A rush of tourists, clucking contentedly,
fluttered after him as he scattered
the grain of the Word. It was they who had passed
the ruined temple outside, whose eyes
wept pus, whose back was higher
than his head, whose lopsided mouth
said Grazie in a voice as sweet
as a child’s when she speaks to her mother
or a bird’s when it spoke
to St Francis.

(Norman MacCaig, ‘Assisi’, in *Surroundings*, 1964; 1966 [2011]: 309)

²⁶ Cf. ‘A priest explained / how clever it was of Giotto / to make his frescoes tell stories / that would reveal to the illiterate the goodness / of God and the suffering / of His Son’ (MacCaig 1966 [2011]:309)

²⁷ This pertains to the Saint Francis cycle in the Upper Church. For further discussion on the possible interpretations of the cycle of the life of Francis and that of Jesus, positioned one below the other, see Moleta (1983).

The tourists' inability to perceive the frescoes as images of God ('the goodness / of God and the suffering / of His Son,') is not due to their lack of education but to their unresponsiveness to the priest's elucidation. Such stolidity is described through negative bird metaphors that reverse the connotations in the Franciscan episode. Whereas the birds, in the original tale, listened and enthusiastically responded to Francis' sermon, the tourists look like a noisy, shapeless, and inattentive flock who 'disperse, dissipate'²⁸ the valuable insights conveyed by Giotto's art: verbs like 'clucking' and 'fluttered' highlight the human–nonhuman parallel while underscoring the negative vision of confused and chaotic tourists offered by the poem. The same applies to the following lines, where the tourists' indifference to the Word of God is seen to couple with their indifference to His teaching: in fact, as the poem illustrates, they seem unable to recognise God in the 'dwarf'—an outcast of society and expression of vulnerability and sufferance, who, in the Christian tradition, especially according to Franciscan spirituality,²⁹ represents a manifestation of the Divine—by simply passing by and ignoring him ('It was they who had passed / the ruined temple outside'). The metaphor of the dwarf as a 'temple', beyond portraying him and his suffering ('ruined') body as a material manifestation of God, also allows for a contrast with the actual temple/church in Assisi, where the poem is set. The Basilica, in this context, appears primarily as a container of art rather than of the Divine, thus functioning more as a tourist attraction than a place of contemplation, with even priests acting as tourist guides rather than spiritual guides. On the one hand, the metaphor reflects a crucial aspect of Franciscan spirituality in the affection and care for human sufferance and vulnerability (Francis' conversion is also often associated with his first embrace of a physically ill person—a leper outside his family's fabric shop, Sulmasy 2006: 95); on the other hand, it builds on the Christian metaphor of the 'body as a temple' (Robinson 1977) and on the idea that God can be found in material relationships with others. The theme of relationality therefore re-emerges as a key topic in the metaphor, highlighting the importance of embodied and embedded expressions of God in the Franciscan ethos, which however extends beyond a mere anthropocentric view.

Two highly sentimental similes in the closing lines illustrate this effect, while further enhancing, by contrast, the negative portrayal of the tourists: the dwarf's

²⁸ See the definition of 'scatter' according to the OED (2024).

²⁹ For further discussion on Franciscan spirituality in relation to poverty and the outcast, see Wolf (2005).

gentle acknowledgement of the negligent tourists ('Grazie' or 'thank you' in English) is compared with the affective bonds between a child and her mother and, in turn, between the birds and Francis in the preaching episode.

The use of the Italian language for the dwarf's expression of acknowledgment, within the context of an English-language poem, evokes the challenge of direct comprehension without prior knowledge or a mediator. This mirrors the difficulty that tourists face in interpreting Giotto's frescoes. Additionally, this lexical choice emphasises the term's semantic and etymological Latinate origin from '*gratia*', which is associated with various expressions of ethical values in Franciscanism, such as pleasantness, favour, esteem, and indulgence (Simpson 2000: 267). This emphasis on thankfulness is particularly relevant in exploring traces of Franciscan ethics expressed in the poem, as it echoes the *Canticle of Brother Sun*, where the phrase '*Laudato Si*' (praised be) is a central expression of Saint Francis's relationship with God through appreciation of all creation, both human and nonhuman.³⁰ In this regard, this expression—'Grazie'—allows us to see the dwarf almost as an embodiment of Francis himself, making the specific qualities of his voice particularly informative on issues of relationality.

Sweetness is the main feature in these thankful relationships between the dwarf and the tourists ('said Grazie in a voice as *sweet* / as [...]'). a metaphor of a Franciscan ethos applied to relationships among humans (mother–child) which, however, the readers are invited to take as models of human–nonhuman relational dynamics as well (Francis–birds). Hence, transcending mere allegorical reading, and acknowledging the specificities of connection among Francis and the birds offered in the poem, *Assisi* suggests possible forms of trans-species ethical relationality that gains particularly relevance in light of current ecocritical debates: growing attention to affective attachment with nonhumans is emerging as a powerful means to reframe human and nonhuman subjectivity through both ontological and material connections (Bladow – Ladino 2018). The poem illustrates this effect through its linguistic and metaphorical devices that blend human and nonhuman subjects.

Emphasis on the connectedness between humans and nonhumans along practices of ethical relationality is again the distinctive feature of a highly popular Irish poem—*Saint Francis and the Birds* (1966)—by Seamus Heaney (1939–2013), who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1995. The lyrical text,

³⁰ Which includes fire, stars, sun, wind, and air among other elements described in terms of cosmic brotherhood and sisterhood. See Moloney (2013).

featured in the collection *Death of a Naturalist*—where environmental imagery is a distinctive feature³¹—offers a compact outline of the Franciscan eponymous episode, focusing primarily on the reaction of the birds to the saint’s address:

When Francis preached love to the birds
They listened, fluttered, throttled up
Into the blue like a flock of words

Released for fun from his holy lips.
Then wheeled back, whirred about his head,
Pirouetted on brothers’ capes.

Danced on the wing, for sheer joy played
And sang, like images took flight.
Which was the best poem Francis made,

His argument true, his tone light.

(Seamus Heaney, ‘Saint Francis and the Birds’, in *Death of a Naturalist*, 1966, 46)

Heaney’s poem depicts the high emotional level of the birds’ response to Francis’ preaching; their excitement is conveyed in the first stanza by such verbs of movement as ‘fluttered’ and ‘throttled up’. Unlike what happens in MacCaig’s poem, where ‘flutter’ refers to the flock of inattentive tourists, here the verb remains neutrally descriptive as it depicts the enthusiastic movement of the birds ‘up and down or to and fro in quick irregular motions’ (OED 2024).

The positive interaction between Francis, his fellow friars, and the birds—a symbol for the broader human–nonhuman relationship—is also highlighted by descriptions of the birds’ physical and emotional reactions to the saint’s words. The lines ‘Then wheeled back, whirred about his head, / Pirouetted on brothers’ capes’ emphasise the importance of the animals in the ‘preaching to the birds’ episode by showcasing their emotional responses. This perspective offers an alternative to the traditional anthropocentric view. In this new interpretation, the animals are not merely passive recipients of Francis’s words but are instead portrayed as active, responsive beings and central poetic subjects in the poem’s narrative.

In this description, the interaction between humans (friars) and nonhumans (birds) is highlighted through prepositions like ‘back’, ‘about’, and ‘on’, which clarify the birds’ movements *in relation to* other beings. The lexical choices in

³¹ On environmental images in Heaney’s poems and collections, see Padilla (2009) and Lindström (2015).

this passage also emphasise the joy and excitement of this relationship on both a semantic and phonological level. Phrases like ‘wheeled back’ and ‘whirred about’ convey the excitement the birds experience during Francis’s preaching, while the assonance enhances the emotional tone and musicality of the poem, also evident in its partially regular rhyme scheme (ABA CBC DBE). This emotional charge is further reinforced by the focus on the semantic field of dance, with words like ‘pirouetted’ and ‘danced’ amplifying the scene’s excitement. These features collectively lead readers to perceive Francis’s preaching as more than merely ‘deliver[ing] a sermon or religious address’ (OED 2024): it becomes an embodied and embedded expression of affective relationality between humans and nonhumans.

The notion of relationality emerges again in the passage through linguistic enmeshment that connects the animal and human domains, particularly through two similes in the first and third stanzas: ‘like a flock of words’ and ‘like images took flight’. These similes link the flight of birds with the words spoken by Francis and with images, inviting readers to consider the complex meanings associated with birds and their relationship with Francis. Specifically, just as Francis’s words in the popular ‘preaching to the birds’ are meant to glorify God, birds become instruments of praise through their essence and excitement, recalling the Franciscan notion of *perfetta letizia* (‘perfect joy’) as an expression of closeness to Christ, albeit reinterpreted.³² Similarly, as images, they become symbols of divine manifestations. In this sense, birds can be seen as bearers of affective capacities, which, in light of contemporary debates on human–animal ethics (Panksepp 2004; Davidson – Goldsmith – Scherer 2009), becomes crucial for developing an awareness of the ontological and material connections between living beings. This perspective challenges traditional anthropocentric and speciesist views, highlighting the importance of understanding these connections in a more inclusive and empathetic way.

Eventually, the polysemy of the term ‘tone’ sheds further light on the complexity of the metaphorical value of Francis’s preaching in the poem. According to the OED, in a more abstract sense, ‘tone’ identifies ‘a particular style in discourse or writing, which expresses the person’s sentiment or reveals his or her character’

³² The notion of *perfetta letizia* is rooted in a passage from the Franciscan sources, where Francis explains that enduring suffering, rejection, insults, and harshness from others is an expression of perfect joy, akin to Christ’s suffering on the cross. This highlights Francis’ deep connection to and identification with Christ’s experiences. For a more detailed discussion on the concept, see Cantalamessa and Martini (2003).

(OED 2024). This definition helps us interpret Francis's experience with the birds as primarily affective, suggesting that, as already discussed in reference to MacCaig's poem, the Franciscan ethos enables possibilities of human–nonhuman relationality through dynamics of 'affective attunement'. This means reattaching to nonhuman domains beyond dominant dualistic anthropocentric axioms, acknowledging a deeper emotional unity between them. This notion is surprisingly widely advocated by ecocritics to reassess the awareness of 'not liv[ing] apart from the world' (Bate 2000: 23),³³ reminding of the possibilities to acknowledge the sense of continuity (ontological and material) between humans and nonhumans. In times of crisis, such as the one we live in, this aspect highlights the importance of alternative bonds with the nonhuman world. *Assisi* exemplifies this by enhancing the depiction of the human–nonhuman Franciscan relational method, offering an alternative to dominant dualistic constraints. A similar reflection is offered by another Irish³⁴ poem from the 1960s, *Saint Francis to the Birds*³⁵ by Michael Longley (1939–present): it establishes an overt genealogical connection with Heaney's lyric as shown in the subtitle, which reads '(With Apologies to S. Heaney Esq.)', thus inviting readers to compare the two works.

Longley's five-quatrain poem, written in a regular rhyme and metric pattern, voices the (imaginary) words of St. Francis's sermon to the birds. The first-person narrator can in fact be taken as *il Poverello* himself—as also suggested by the poem's title—inviting the animals to praise God. The incipit '*And, summing up, I think of when / With cloud and cloudburst you confer*' (Longley 1966 c. [2019]: 229, emphasis added) posits the poem as the conclusion of a longer speech, thus echoing the themes and topics that have developed in time around the Franciscan story.

The first section (stanzas 1–3) focuses on making the birds aware of their qualities as part of God's creation while reminding readers of the peculiarity of Franciscan spirituality in assessing an appreciation of creation where (also) animals are central.³⁶ Stanzas 4–5 highlight the birds as correlatives of God and as

³³ According to Jonathan Bate, literature allows for 'thoughtfulness and attentiveness, and attunement to both words and the world' considering its capacity 'to acknowledge that, although we make sense of things by way of words, we do not live apart from the world' (Bate 2000: 23).

³⁴ It is worth noting that Longley also identifies as Anglo-Irish, recognising this heritage as an influence on the ethos of his poetry, as Brearton (2006: 17) illustrates.

³⁵ The poem is published in Wenzell (2019: 229–230).

³⁶ This is evident, for instance, in lines such as, 'By God's sheer genius lifted there' (stanza 1, line 3), 'It is perfection you rehearse –' (stanza 2, line 5), and 'Creating one more precedent,

the ultimate representatives of His creation.³⁷ It is worth reminding here that the central position of birds in the poem subverts anthropocentric (and speciesist) hierarchies ingrained in traditional approaches to the nonhuman (also in the Christian tradition), which usually hold a subordinate position.³⁸

The description of birds in stanza 5 makes this subversion explicit:

Quick emblems of his long estate,
It's good to have you overhead
Who understand when all is said,
When all is done, and it is late.

(Michael Longley, "Saint Francis to the Birds", 1966 c. [2019]: 229)

By underscoring the exceptional status of birds in God's creation, the attributive phrase 'emblems of his long estate' subverts the hierarchy revealed by the *Scala Naturae* (The Great Chain of Being) in traditional (Western) interpretations of human and nonhuman subjectivity, where human beings hold primacy (Ferrando 2019: 94). An emblem, in fact, is 'a figured object used with symbolic meaning, as the distinctive badge of a person, family, nation' (OED 2024); hence, birds depicted as possessing these features invite readers to consider the Franciscan ethos as a symbol of human exceptionalism traditionally associated with God's creation.³⁹ Similarly, the adverb 'overhead' referring to birds seems to invite human beings to re-consider traditional ontological hierarchies in the understanding of living (and non-living) entities. So does the poem's focus on the birds' ubiquitous comprehension of God's direct manifestations in space and time: ('Who *understand* when *all* is said, / When *all* is done, and it is late'; emphasis added).

/ With no less forethought, no less care / He gave you feathers and the air / To migrate to his best intent' (stanza 3, lines 9-12).

³⁷ In this sense, one can consider, for instance, stanza 4 (line 16), which reads, 'Birds, you are always on his mind', or this line in stanza 5: 'Quick emblems of his long estate' (line 17).

³⁸ For a detailed discussion on the influence of the *Scala Naturae* (Great Chain of Beings) on the establishment of anthropocentric and dualistic assumptions in understanding human and nonhuman subjectivity, see Ferrando (2019: 94).

³⁹ A discussion on human exceptionalism from a traditional Christian perspective has been offered, among others, by Stefan Sorgner, who illustrates how "From Plato until Kant, philosophers claimed that reason is the divine spark in us, and us possessing reason separates us in a categorically ontological manner from the solely material world. This paradigm has been taken for granted by most of the best-known philosophers in Western cultural history" (Sorgner 2022; 44).

The conclusion (stanza 6) further emphasises the birds' extraordinary divine qualities:

May my sermon, like your customs,
Reach suddenly beyond dispute –
Oh, birds entire and absolute,
Last birds above our broken homes.
(Michael Longley, "Saint Francis to the Birds", 1966 c. [2019: 230])

The adjective 'absolute' referring to birds is further proof of the reconfiguration of human anthropocentric absolutism. Besides, the birds' wholeness ('entire'), an attribute of God's creation, stands out against the fragmentation of human beings highlighted by the metaphor of 'broken homes'.

When read from an ecocritical perspective, the poem therefore illustrates how Franciscan ethos allows for a special kind of relationality, suggesting a critical re-examination of traditional assumptions in conceiving human and nonhuman beings, as well as alternative figurations and connected relational ethics. The idea that the Anthropocene is a direct effect of anthropocentric, dualistic assumptions—as explained by scholars from different research fields (Braidotti 2019; Ferrando 2019)—finds a worthy correlative in this poem, where readers are invited to negotiate their core dualistic cultural legacy in culture, in favour of a more pluralistic view of the environment.

5. Francis and the Birds in 1990s and 2010s Irish and British poetry: Paula Meehan and Ann Wroe

In the past few decades, enduring references to Francis of Assisi in Irish and British poetry, particularly regarding the episode of his preaching to the birds, can be found in the works of two female poetic voices who, in different times and ways, offer original interplays between (ever-)new cultural issues and Franciscan spirituality. This section will address Paula Meehan's *My Father Perceived as a Vision of St. Francis* (1994) and Ann Wroe's *Francis: A Life in Songs* (2018).

Irish poet Paula Meehan (1955-present) offers a biographical sketch of her father in a narrative poem made of three stanzas of 9 to 15 lines in free verse, with the third one specifically focusing on the image of Francis and the birds. The first two stanzas provide the context of the poem's setting: after waking up in the family house and observing the indoor surroundings (stanza 1), the lyrical subject notices that her father has entered the rear garden; as she glances (stanza 2), the man metamorphoses into the saint, surrounded by diverse kinds of birds:

They came then: birds
of every size, shape, colour; they came
from the hedges and shrubs,
from eaves and garden sheds,
from the industrial estate, outlying fields,
from Dubber Cross they came
and the ditches of the North Road.

(Paula Meehan, "My Father Perceived as a Vision of St. Francis", in *Pillow Talk*, 1994, 11-12)

Here, 'multiplicity' is the main theme in at least two ways: first, the list of nouns in the second line stresses the diversity of the birds populating the scene: 'size, shape, colour'; second, the anaphora—see the repetition of 'from' in lines 3-6—further details the animals' different provenance in terms of rural and urban locations ('from the industrial estate, outlying fields') but also specific sites ('Dubber Cross' and 'the North Road').

Moreover, the invitation to consider the connectedness between humans and nonhumans in the poem comes through the stress on the *physical, material* encounters among the father and the birds, rather than through sole *abstract* references to Franciscan philosophy. First, as suggested by the toponymy in the poem ('Dubber Cross'; 'North Road'), Francis appears in specific existing places, manifesting in the present-day world and engaging with it. Second, the poem suggests that, just as the father does, one can *become* Francis in one's daily actions and experiences. This material manifestation of a spiritual dimension acquires relevance in the context of Franciscan discourse, especially when viewed through the notion of 'affective piety'. This concept emphasises an emotional devotion that emerged during the Middle Ages, focused on the humanity of Christ and encouraging believers to visualise and concentrate on episodes from the scriptures to engage with their physicality.⁴⁰ This effect, also referred to in Latin as '*compassio*', finds a popular example in Francis of Assisi (and later Franciscan traditions), who often stressed the physical manifestation of God and his suffering in his spirituality. In the poem, this effect returns, but making Francis the very object of a physical and emotional engagement for the lyrical subjects. The key role of the animals in evoking and materialising the popular 'preaching to the birds' episode reinforces the importance of nonhumans in this transfiguration. This effect reassesses human–nonhuman relationality as a key topic in the poem's evoking of the Franciscan ethos. In ecological terms, this reading acquires

⁴⁰ For a further discussion on the notion of 'affective piety' in Franciscanism, see Davis (2016).

particular significance for its resonance with the current widely discussed necessity to consider human–nonhuman connectedness not only ontologically but also materially, an embodied and embedded sense of posthuman subjectivity that, as the poem suggests, Francis endorses.

Emphasis on Francis’ transformative power comes back in the following lines, illustrating his capacity to influence the way one engages with the environment, interspersed with biblical and literary references:

The garden was a pandemonium
 when my father threw up his hands
 and tossed the crumbs to the air. The sun
 cleared O’Reilly’s chimney
 and he was suddenly radiant,
 a perfect vision of St Francis,
 made whole, made young again,
 in a Finglas garden.

(Paula Meehan, “My Father Perceived as a Vision of St. Francis”, in *Pillow Talk*, 1994, 12)

In apparent contrast with the Edenic scenario depicted in the previous lines, where various species of birds harmoniously coexisted with the human (Father/Francis) in a garden, the phrase ‘the garden was a pandemonium’ recalls the location but with different implications: ‘Pandemonium’, in fact, retains a primary negative significant in light of its poetic genealogy starting with the imaginary ‘capital’ of hell, the palace where the council of demons is held, as in John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667), where the term was first introduced.⁴¹ The same is valid for a more generic meaning of the term ‘pandemonium’, which reminds of ‘utter confusion, uproar; wild and noisy disorder; a tumult; chaos’ (OED 2024). The reversal of these negative implications is evident in the joyful and affective human–nonhuman engagement described in the poem. The multitude of animals symbolises a moment of deep connection and enjoyment. This is portrayed through actions of caring (feeding the birds: ‘threw up his hands and tossed the crumbs to the air’) and the absence of fear (both the birds approaching Francis and Francis being surrounded by a storm of birds). Thus, while the poem retains the biblical reference to ‘pandemonium’ and its potential to evoke transcendental spiritual imagery, its common negative sense is transformed. The garden, with Francis’s presence, becomes an actual manifestation of the Garden of Eden, turning apparent chaos into the harmonious coexistence of life forms.

⁴¹ As also illustrated by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED 2024).

A similar understanding is favoured by another possible intertextual reference evoked by the notion of pandemonium, relating to William Blake's poem *And did those feet in ancient time*, written in 1804, featuring the preface to his epic poem *Milton*. In this lyric, England's green pastures are depicted as the location where a celestial Jerusalem can be created despite the growing impact of the industrial revolution on the natural landscape of the country at that time: this is referred to with the popular metaphor of 'dark Satanic mills' (Blake 1804 [1907]: xix), resonating with the imagery of devil and hell evoked by the notion of 'pandemonium'. Similarly, in Meehan's poem, a contrast is drawn between the rear garden where Francis's transfiguration occurs—with its depiction of verdant ecosystem and biodiversity—and the surrounding industrial setting. However, unlike Blake, Meehan's text depicts this scenario as already undergoing a transformation, as evidenced by the subversion of the traditional negative symbolism of the industrial context. The image of the chimney is 'cleared' by the sun shining on the scene, another well-established symbol of (Francis') divinity. The contrast with the blackness caused by industrial (air) pollution therefore becomes a surprising environmental narrative in the poem, where readers are invited to acknowledge, once again, the potential transformative power of Franciscan ethics, also in light of more evident, material, and 'modern' effects of industrialisation. This is a poem which seems to perform lyrically what is being actually illustrated in economic discourse on the possible implications of Franciscan philosophy for enacting a paradigm shift in dominant economic models through ethical alternatives.⁴²

The concluding lines of the poem reassess this idea by illustrating another effect of transformative power of the Franciscan ethos, this time referred to one's self. Seen through a Franciscan lens, in fact, the father becomes 'suddenly radiant' (where the symbolism of light newly empowers the divine nature of the transformative Franciscan ethics) and 'young again'. This change reverses the father's existential condition, bringing about a kind of rebirth and renewal, which bears upon the whole of his life ('whole'), thus proving that Francis is capable of influencing one's life(style).

Ann Wroe's recently published collection, titled *Francis: A Life in Songs* (2018), is based on similar assumptions. Unlike the other authors cited in this essay, Wroe

⁴² Rosi Braidotti, for instance, has extensively discussed how paradigmatic change in relational ethics among humans–nonhumans also has the potential for assuming economic and productive changes, even at the industrial level, as the poem also seems to indicate (2019).

is not primarily acknowledged as a poet⁴³ even though she has garnered critical attention. One of her recent poetic compositions, titled *Francis: A Life in Songs*, deserves our attention here since, once again, it focuses on Francis preaching to the birds in the context of (contemporary) British poetry hand-in-hand with discussions on human–nonhuman relational ethics.

The collection explores the life of *il Poverello* in different sections, each combining quotations from Franciscan sources, including words attributed to Francis himself, with some original poetic compositions. These poems are of two types: a) poetic renderings of selected episodes from the life of the saint, offering ‘an evocation of Francis at this point or this time’; and b) ‘reflection[s] of this aspect of him in the modern world’ (Wroe 2018: 9). Specifically, my reading focuses on a section titled *Bird-souls*, which blends references to two episodes from Francis’ hagiography involving volatiles. They are both drawn from Bonaventure’s already discussed ‘preaching to the birds’ and from Celano’s account of a fisherman giving Francis a bird, which did not want to fly away from his hands.⁴⁴

The short, free stanza poem begins with a paratextual caption locating the composition: ‘*Council garden, North London*’ (Wroe 2018: 162; emphasis in original). As already discussed in relation to Meehan’s work, this mention suggests a link between Francis’ ethos and the *actual* present-day world with its interpretative patterns, thus encouraging a new understanding of the traditional episode vis-a-vis contemporary reality. The opening of the poem offers a variation on the preaching to the birds episode, adding a reference to some sick animals and to the lyrical subject’s wondering how humans could respond to their needs and suffering:

The sick dove by the hedge
the thrush beside the fence
quiveringly challenge
our indifference–

We want to save them,
but are uncertain how–
long to lift them gently
to the here and now

(Ann Wroe, “Bird-souls”, in *Francis: A Life in Songs*, 2018, 162)

⁴³ As Kellaway observes: ‘Not known as a poet (she is obituaries editor on the Economist), Wroe has launched into rhyme as if (as must be the case) she has always been at home in verse’ (2018).

⁴⁴ As indicated by Wroe, it refers to Celano’s *Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul*, 2 CXXVI.

Despite the evidence of the birds' need for care, as their condition of physical distress ('quiveringly') demonstrates, the 'hedges' and 'fences' (first stanza) that separate them from humans make it almost impossible for the human subjects in the poem to even notice their need. They, in fact, remain 'indifferent' (like MacCaig's tourists facing the dwarf in *Assisi*) to the birds, an attitude clearly revealing an opposition to the Franciscan spirituality, which, as seen, makes compassion and attention to the weakest and most vulnerable a cornerstone. The line 'We want to save them, / but are uncertain how,' beyond illustrating the incapability of humans to respond to the birds' necessities, also figures as an admission taking up a symbolic meaning if regarded in ontological terms: the stress on humans' limited relational capacities becomes a reference to the influence of rooted assumptions in the figuration of the nonhuman domains along anthropocentric and speciesist axioms which, on a dualistic logic, are built on absolute (ontological) *separation* between humans and nonhumans.

Far from being unalterable, this condition, however, seems negotiable, especially in light of Franciscan relational ethics, to which the poem generally refers:

yet passing later
 we part-understand:
 shunning the clumsiness
 of human hand,
 they've stretched their necks,
 spread out their wings;
 not dying, flying
 past the end of things.

(Ann Wroe, "Bird-souls", in *Francis: A Life in Songs*, 2018, 162)

The image of returning to the place where the birds in distress are found ('yet passing later'), in the practice of 'retracing one's steps,' suggests a rise of awareness in the lyrical I, as the possibility to reconsider exclusivist assumptions in one's relationship with nonhuman others is contemplated. On the other hand, what the birds seem to teach humans as they shun the 'clumsiness of human hand' is precisely the inefficiency of the human approach—in other words, of the anthropocentric perspective. As the poem therefore suggests, inadequate human(istic) domains can be re-read when employing a Franciscan ethos.

The line 'not dying, flying' further clarifies this possibility: referring to the birds, after the human subjects in the poem ('we') have offered their help to the animals, these verbs suggest the efficacy of actions devoted to supporting forms of

otherness in difficulty, allowing them an escape from their destiny of succumbing (as the negative ‘not’ in front of the verb ‘dying’ illustrates). The verb ‘flying’, instead, illustrates the success resulting from a positive relationality between humans and nonhumans, which the Franciscan ethic ensures. The relevance of this passage is also testified by the alliteration (‘not dying, flying’), which strengthens the narrator’s emphasis on the benefit in following Saint Francis’ footsteps, enacting a similar sense of care and attentiveness. This effect, which allows for trespassing the metaphysical boundaries (‘past the end of things’) that exist in the traditional evaluation of (human)life subjectivity (Braidotti 2019), recalls the invitation of the poem to rethink established limits (and the ontological sense of separateness) illustrated at the beginning of the poem.

The final stanza expounds on the picturesque image of a swan at sunset near the coast, which prompts the narrator to reflect on its multiple interpretations:

Sunset:
 the wave
 bends down its head
 a ghost-swan
 or angel
 spilling
 Feathers
 Below the cliffs

(Ann Wroe, “Bird-souls”, in *Francis: A Life in Songs*, 2018, 164)

The swan’s metamorphosis into an angel and/or a ghost still refers to the episode of preaching to the birds by pointing to the volatile’s closeness to God: the dense imagery voices the multi-layered open significance of birds. While the swan’s spectral dimension (‘ghost-swan’) conveys ephemerality, the alternative reference to an angel (‘or angel’) signals the futility of clear-cut categorisations when determining one’s identity, while blurring the boundaries between entities. The plurality of meanings thus adds to the relevance of relationality and connectedness in the poem, both on a linguistic and formal level.

The image of the ‘sunset’ in the closing stanza, with its liminal encounter between day and night, stands as the ultimate example of such coexistence of opposite images. Thus, in contrast with the beginning of the poem, where divisions and boundaries are central, the conclusion establishes re-connectedness and relationality. A link between humans and nonhumans along the dynamics of Franciscan relational ethics presented in the poem is thus newly established.

Just like Franciscan ethics can change rooted assumptions, in the context of today's environmental crises, *bird-souls* prompt to revise the anthropocentric assumptions which have led to the Anthropocene. Readers are shown the possibility of ways out of current crises by reassessing new forms of relationality that Franciscanism demonstrates as adaptable to both past and present contexts.

6. Conclusions

The reception of Francis of Assisi in Irish and British poetry from the 1960s to the 2010s illuminates both the integration of this figure within the cultural context under examination and his adaptability to evolving cultural concerns. As I hope to have shown, the account of the preaching to the birds aligns with the emerging environmental discourse of the 1960s through complex illustrations of human–nonhuman relationality resonating with contemporary discussions in the fields of ecocriticism and environmental humanities in general.

Through an ecocritical lens, human–nonhuman relationality appears as a central facet of Francis' ethic in the poems under examination: even when the imagery of preaching to the birds is expressed through more indirect references, there always emerges the possibility of seeing Francis as a motivating form of trans-species engagement, alternative to more traditional dualistic relational models. Like Francis, readers can also reconfigure the dynamics of subjugation of alterities accordingly, both towards humans and nonhumans (MacCaig). The possibility to rely on forms of affective attunement between human beings and the environment is another trait suggested by the poetic rendering of Franciscan spirituality: the idea of a continuum between human beings and the environment is conveyed by a number of different images and stylistic devices, including linguistic effects illustrating forms of enmeshment between the animal and human domains (Heaney). On the other hand, this is what happens in the language of Francis's popular sermon: the way animals are described in this fictional account (Longley)—for instance, the emphasis on their exceptionalism—holds symbolic value, inviting readers to negotiate anthropocentric (and speciesist) conceptual hierarchies, which usually position nonhumans as subordinate to humans.

In recent years, Francis has also re-emerged in Irish poetry as a 'vision' capable of enabling transformative effects on the way one perceives and evaluates the environment and its entities. Traditional negative connotations rooted in dualistic cultural figurations of nonhuman domains might shift to more positive ones

(Meehan). Similarly, the potential of the Franciscan ethos to revise the alleged absolute sense of separation between humans and nonhumans features in Wroe's 2018 British poem, where the liminality of these two domains is highlighted with a view to re-evaluating their continuity and prompting a new sense of relationality. Therefore, given the current need to reframe and transform dominant assumptions concerning both human and nonhuman subjectivities underpinning the Anthropocene, these observations become particularly relevant to establish a dialogue between the analysed poems and present-day ecological urges.

From an ecocritical perspective, Francis of Assisi in 1960s-2010s Irish and British poetry also displays a degree of environmental maturity that prevents him from being reduced to superficial clichés—'the saint who speaks with animals' or 'the patron saint of ecologists'—as downsides of his status as a prominent, increasingly secularised icon. In fact, just as a poem represents an ultra-complex textual structure (Nünning – Nünning 2014: 63), so Francis as a poetic subject is imbued with a thought-provoking complexity that invites debate on his understanding of the interaction between humans and nonhumans. The religious *conversion* that Francis experienced—from a dissolute life to an existence dedicated to outcasts and expressing an encompassing sense of belonging with the creation—becomes, today, a powerful metaphor of an *ecological conversion* in understanding human-nonhuman relationships, challenging and rethinking anthropocentrism.

Beyond the icon, therefore, Francis can be seen as a *tool* for rethinking 'the human', exceeding traditional assumptions with the aim of establishing more ethical, pluralistic configurations, where humans and nonhumans bond materially, ontologically, and affectively. As challenging as this task may appear, Francis seems to have an additional advantage to facing it: his uninterrupted rich afterlife in literature and culture over the past 800 years—a trend expected to continue—reveals a momentum that allows for conceiving *il Poverello* as a figure informing possible, alternative ethical future scenarios within the context of human-nonhuman relationality. It is a *sustainable* logic particularly timely—and needed—in light of current environmental crises.

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