

Nature (as) Language in the Poetry of Seán Lysaght

Wit Pietrzak

HJEAS

The resonance that landscape and animals have made throughout the history of Irish and Anglo-Irish poetry is impossible to overestimate. It is through the imagery of the land with its fauna and flora that Irish poets have sung the particular *condition irlandaise* and, among modern Irish poets, W. B. Yeats and Seamus Heaney transformed our perception of their local landscapes to the extent that Sligo can hardly be appreciated outside the remit of reference that Yeats's work offers. Heaney's poetry, less solidly connected to a single particular place than Yeats's, has, nevertheless, come to inform our view of the Irish countryside, whose "gravelly ground" (*Death of a Naturalist* 1) guttural sounds that "strangers found / difficult to manage" (*Wintering Out* 17), and the "[e]ncroaching horizon" that "the eye concedes to" (*Door into the Dark* 43) define in a precise, though brilliantly evocative, manner what it is that the Irish country represents. And yet, one might notice that there is a tendency among Irish poets, from Yeats through Patrick Kavanagh, all the way to Heaney and Michael Longley, to view fauna and flora as connoting cultural palimpsests. When Heaney tells the story of St. Kevin praying "inside / His cell" with one of his arms "out the window" so that "a blackbird lands / And lays in it and settles down to nest" (*The Spirit Level* 20), the blackbird is given over as a symbolic representative of all "that labour and are heavy laden" (Matt. 11.28). When Longley declares that he "named for you all the wild flowers of the Burren / I had seen in one day" (192), the four-line catalogue of various flowers, "many of which are endangered," as Justin Quinn notes, seems to suggest that "he could cure death with their fragrance or the fragrance of their names. Longley knows this is impossible, but still provides the consolation" (Quinn 128). On a broader note, Neil Corcoran argues that "[his] curative capacity, the capacity to make whole what has been wounded or broken, is the deepest element of the botanical interest in Longley" (166). It is such culturally or politically informed images of wildlife and landscape that are offset in the poetry of Seán Lysaght.

Born in 1957, Lysaght debuted in 1989 with the volume *Noah's Irish Ark*, thus coming into his own, along with such other Irish poets as Paula Meehan, Peter Sirr, and Maurice Riordan. Including Lysaght in his preliminary outline of Irish eco-poetry, James McElroy observes that Lysaght is "another bird enthusiast" who "set out to define himself as a naturalist [. . .] while insisting, at one and the same time, that his perspective was image-reflexive" (60). Although there are areas of affinity between Lysaght and his

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contemporaries, his verse, “image-reflexive” rather than culturally-inflected, sounds a separate note in its careful as well as caring attention to Irish wildlife and landscape. It is of particular importance that in his poems, he seeks to elude the sort of wider referentiality of animals and land that Heaney and Longley tend to adopt. This is not to say that his work remains indifferent to the crises and excesses of the contemporary world but, rather than transpose them onto the realm of nature, Lysaght seems to advocate the view that nature, particularly birds, represents a grander scheme of life than any culturally- or politically-inflected readings can afford. What is suggested here is that in his poetry, Lysaght looks to explore this grander scheme through investigations of birds so as to unravel the layers of significance of the surrounding world that are pre-human and pre-linguistic. It is this vast natural world, which eludes apprehension in language that Lysaght then sets against the modern world and its obsession with material productivity and pragmatic efficiency.

In an interview conducted in 2014, Lysaght admits to having developed a keen interest in birds early on: “I suppose it was an interest of mine from my father, going back to when I was a kid and being given a little bird book and a pair of binoculars and taken off for holidays in Kerry and so on” (Moynihan). When in “Catching Blackbirds” Lysaght’s speaker goes back to the moment he first became keen on birds, it is instructive that he sets out to catch a blackbird using a trap that his uncle showed him how to build. Whereas in the interview, Lysaght remembers that it was a book and a bird-watching tour that aroused his interest, in the poem, the crucial need in the young bird enthusiast is to capture the blackbird: “He was all prey, all blackbird // that I was ready to display to kin” (*Selected* 43). When the blackbird “explode[s] in screeches, / his beak a stabbing compass” (*Selected* 43), the speaker is shocked into releasing it. The instant is etched on his memory, a searing reminder of “my uncle’s rough words, translated / as the grasp that feels the sinews // and the pulse of the heart, and holds” (*Selected* 43-44). The “rough words” refer to the uncle’s explanation to the young speaker that there are “[n]o rules” in catching blackbirds, “Just get’em. / That’s the only shaggin’ rule” (*Selected* 43). The cruel disregard for birds’ lives haunts the speaker, for whom the words are “translated” into a physical sensation of capturing a living creature.

As a poem about the fate of animals at the hands of farmers, “Catching Blackbirds” adverts to Heaney’s “The Early Purges” from his debut volume. In the poem, Heaney’s speaker recalls the time when “I was six [and] I first saw kittens drown” (*Death of a Naturalist* 11). Like in Lysaght, the speaker in “The Early Purges” witnesses the bloody business which, in a dark

euphemism, is referred to as “[p]revention of cruelty” by a mentor-like figure, Dan Taggart, for whom the kittens are “scraggy wee shits” (*Death of a Naturalist* 11). The ostensibly neat parallel runs off when one realizes that whereas “The Early Purges” focuses on the speaker’s growth into emotional numbness from the overexposure to callousness, “Catching Blackbirds” insists on the close encounter with the bird as an experience the speaker cannot fully internalize, as he declares that like the blackbird that had “one wisp of dry grass / caught above his left eye” (*Selected* 43), “I walk in again, with small straws / on my clothes to tell where I’ve been” (*Selected* 44). For Lysaght, the meeting with the blackbird becomes an event that cannot be inscribed in a symbolic pattern not only because of its singularity but also because in the encounter, something exceeding poetic representation has revealed itself.

Lysaght has repeatedly argued that the poetic instinct for remaking the natural world into patterns of meaning must be complemented by the scientific naturalist drive to describe nature with no recourse to mythopoeia. In his critical biography of the Irish naturalist, Robert Lloyd Praeger, who, between 1909 and 1911, undertook to prepare the first major inventory of flora and fauna in a single place, Lysaght claims that in so doing, Praeger helped establish “Ireland as a biological and geographical territory of its own” (*Robert Lloyd Praeger* 12). Therefore, in Lysaght’s view, Praeger contributed as much to the reinvention of Ireland at the beginning of the twentieth century as the Celtic Revivalist Yeats, J. M. Synge, and Lady Gregory. What distinguishes Praeger, though, is the fact that he did not translate natural abundance into poetic expression; neither did he view Ireland’s natural separateness as offering grounds for nationalist politics (see Lysaght, *Robert Lloyd Praeger* 105-06). Instead, as Lysaght emphasizes, Praeger appreciated and paid close attention to nature’s multifariousness and malleability. It is this focus on nature unencumbered with ulterior, usually political, agendas that, according to Lysaght, even the greatest Irish poets like Yeats and Heaney lack. Addressing the evocations of nature by Heaney and John Hewitt, in turn, Lysaght suggests that unlike the two poets, Praeger “is conscious of a dimension to landscape, nature and the universe which transcends the competing political claims of nationalist and unionist, native and planter” (“Heaney vs Praeger” 73). He further contrasts Heaney’s and Praeger’s perceptions of nature by noting that

[i]n Heaney, Nature—like language itself—takes its colour from [transactions of power]: it is emblematic of cultural and political conflicts. The vision of nature and the universe demonstrated by Praeger in the

meditation on Erris is distinguished, in that nature is viewed as something greater than man, and, particularly, something greater than the domain of human political conflicts. ("Heaney vs Praeger" 74)

"The Early Purges" may be cited in support of Lysaght's claim in that the poem invites a political interpretation with its titular reference to acts of cleansing, which in the 1960s would have reminded readers of the violence of the long night of the Stalinist regime in the Soviet Union (see Parker 66-67).

Furthermore, Lysaght's claim that Heaney transposes cultural and political conflicts onto his evocations of the natural world can also be traced back to an observation by Heaney himself in an interview with Seamus Deane:

Poetry is born out of the watermarks and colourings of the self. But that self in some ways takes its spiritual pulse from the inward spiritual structuring of the community to which it belongs; and the community to which I belong is Catholic and Nationalist. I believe that the poet's force now, and hopefully in the future, is to maintain the efficacy of his own "mythos," his own cultural and political colourings, rather than to serve any particular momentary strategy that his political leaders, his paramilitary organization, or his own liberal self might want him to serve. I think that poetry and politics are, in different ways, an articulation, an ordering, a giving form to inchoate pieties, prejudices, worldviews, or whatever. (62)

While he refuses to pander to any single political side, Heaney perceives poetry as a way of structuring the world, of creating balances informed by the poet's cultural and political background rather than by the requirements of the moment. In this way, poetry, through its patterns and structures of imagery, may be able to help bridge fissures within a society, which, in turn, suggests that the personal "mythos" of the poet determines his characteristic treatment of the material. This is displayed in "Oysters," in which the speaker is upset by the fact that he finds himself complicit with imperial invaders, who "hauled their oysters south to Rome" (Heaney, *Field Work* 3), and for whom such pleasures would historically have been reserved. The image, as Michael Parker has shown, "challenges his social self, attacks his conscience" (155), forcing him to justify his enjoyment of the "Glut of privilege" (Heaney, *Field Work* 3). And yet, for all its keenness to give the oysters their due as victims of invaders' gluttony, the poem aims to expose a wider view of imperial oppression. Thus, although his depiction of the oysters he is being served is painfully accurate: "Alive and violated, / They lay on their beds of ice [. . .] / Millions of them ripped and shucked and scattered" (*Field Work* 3), the suffering of the mollusks is evoked as a springboard for a second layer of signification which

becomes central to the poem's conclusion. In a metaleptic transposition, the poet shifts the focus of his self-directed outrage, both because of the dubious position in which he places himself, and because his "trust could not repose / In the clear light, like poetry or freedom" (Heaney, *Field Work* 3) from the oysters themselves to the images of people's suffering of which the oysters are suggestive.

In contrast to Heaney's method in "Oysters," Lysaght emphasizes that nature merits attention not for what it reveals about human civilization and its conflicts but for what it reveals about the universe that remains outside the scope of our understanding. In "Before Anthropology," the speaker harks back to the time "[b]efore the first words in Ireland" to note that "there were sparse, post-glacial trees, / and northern birds" (Lysaght, *Selected* 11). This pre-linguistic state of Ireland resists poetic evocation, requiring instead a naturalist's intervention, which the speaker attempts by keeping close to the materiality of the natural world in a manner akin to those of Praeger and Éamon de Buitléar (1930-2013), a contemporary Irish documentary filmmaker and wildlife specialist. It is when he has adopted their perspective that Lysaght realizes that "[o]ur archaeology begins / in the first settlements / of birch pollen" (*Selected* 11). Although he knows that "there's more to do / and more to say" about the history "of passion, hate and vanity" human civilization has unleashed on the natural world, the speaker, much like in "Catching Blackbirds," concludes that it is the image of the pre-linguistic past that "the heart prefers" so that

in all I do
and say there's the scene
[. . .]
of that first loneliness
of trees
and northern birds. (Lysaght, *Selected* 12)

The speaker realizes that his actions and his language are not reflected in nature but, in lieu of the trope of pathetic fallacy, the flora and fauna, unencumbered by poetic evocations, constitute the core of "all I do / and say," thus making the poem a product of the recognition of the time "Before the first words."

Despite the unmistakable allure this remote era holds for the poet, he also understands that the path back to nature is shut, and any attempt to go back must result in complete abrogation of the human element. This is thematized in "The Village Tailor," as it recounts the story of "[a] man on the

run from Lord Sheffield / [who] took refuge in the carr” (*Selected* 16). While the political context of the English colonization of Ireland forms the background of the poem’s drama, it soon becomes occluded, as the focus shifts onto what happened to the escapee: “They found him crawling on all fours, / almost crab, mad from swampy nature” (*Selected* 16). The poem suggests that having become civilized, human beings cannot bear too much exposure to nature, which is both deadly to the consciousness and insurmountably appealing. The man’s loss of sanity undermines all efforts to understand or express human connectedness to nature. “The Village Tailor” records our failure to appreciate the tailor’s condition, which is highlighted by the insistently regretful tone adopted throughout the poem: “To no avail / the cunning-woman came with cakes / and a plea to submit to the Lord” (*Selected* 16). In a self-questioning gesture, the poem implies that one cannot escape assuming a vantage point, here religion, from which to apprehend nature, and it is in this paradoxical bin—between the desire to give utterance to humanity’s connection to nature and the impossibility of expressing that connection in an unmediated form—that “The Village Tailor” locates its *raison d’être*.

Lysaght’s most naturalist-oriented volume of poems, which alludes to the surveys that Praeger had taken up, is by far *The Clare Island Survey* (1991). In the titular poem, as he “step[s] ashore, . . . / [his] pages blank for the whims of day,” the speaker declares, “Here I will inscribe readings / for the Clare Island Survey” (Lysaght, *Selected* 18), hoping to “return [. . .], [his] face aglow / with a booty of old words, and new echoes” (*Selected* 19). Old words develop new echoes as the speaker composes his atlas of the Clare Island birds. In “Guillemot,” noting the word “mot” in the name of the bird, the speaker assumes “the guise of a maker” as he pronounces “*guillemot*” for the tutelage of his beloved, but also as a charm against the corruption of love:

I want you to have that name
for the first time,
to say it again
if our love stays unbroken. (*Selected* 24)

This fusion is symbolized in this poem by linking terms of endearment with the bodily closeness of the speaker and his beloved. Should their relationship break off, the word is to become “a word / between two boats at sea / after their oarsmen have spoken” (*Selected* 24). Although the poem suggests that the word “guillemot” could be endowed with new meanings, as though it was just conceived, the second stanza counters Yeats’s perception of birds as symbolic

of a supernatural element, what, in a 1937 radio broadcast, he called “the intellectual joy of eternity” (*Later Articles* 286; see also Yeats, *Plays* 696). For Yeats, bird symbolism comes with a freight of ulterior meanings, such as the swan, which tends to be identified with solitary, aristocratic souls (see *Collected Poems* 208); Lysaght, on the other hand, insists on the novelty presupposed in the name of the bird: “I want you to have that name / for the first time” (*Selected* 24).

In “Cuckoo,” the speaker tries to trace the eponymous bird by following its sound:

The song got louder
along the bristly edge of the headland
...
my uncle came
calling “Seán!”
and so I lost the cuckoo. (*Selected* 25)

The speaker’s meditation falters at the intervention of the mundane. Although reading the stanza in allegorical terms might be to miss its deliberately trifling tonality, the interruption of a meditative quest recalls Yeats’s “Man and the Echo.” In Yeats’s poem, the speaker ponders a lifetime of self-doubt and self-questioning, clearly suggesting that it is Yeats himself speaking these words. When he comes to ask, “What do we know but that we face / One another in this place?” (*Collected Poems* 346), his ruminations are thwarted by “some hawk or owl” striking a rabbit that “is crying out / And its cry distracts my thought” (*Collected Poems* 346). The similarity in terms of being distracted in an effort to trace the thought to its core notwithstanding, there is a marked difference between Yeats and Lysaght. Whereas the former is investigating the pros and cons of his actions for which the natural setting merely affords a background and eventually undoes his mental process, the latter is keen to learn more about the cuckoo and its song, with his own self completely abstracted from the picture.

Lysaght also seeks to evade the mythological pattern of reference so in “Chough,” as he “inspect[s] the fallen stairs, / the chimneys clogged with mortar and twigs,” he discovers “no gyre there for my late ascendant” (*Selected* 29). The place is most likely the O’Malley tower on Clare Island, a stronghold built in the sixteenth century, more or less at the same time as Yeats’s Thoor Ballylee, his famous Gort summer residence, which became one of his most potent symbols. While Yeats envisioned Thoor Ballylee as his legacy to future generations of Irish poets, endowing it with almost magical qualities, Lysaght

finds the Clare Island tower inundated by the “squeaky” voices of choughs that “are riding on the updraught,” and “When they settle / they displace old tenants of the castle, / Macbeth’s mad wife, and Yeats” (*Selected* 29). Yeats regards his tower as constituting a symbolic connection between himself and the aristocratic past, whose blood-thirsty obsessions are represented by Lady Macbeth. In effect, while he would “call / Images and memories / From ruin or from ancient trees” (*Collected Poems* 195), Lysaght sees such mythical invocations stifled by the choughs that are “a beacon only for themselves” (*Selected* 29).

Lysaght implicitly assumes the position of a “trail, convergence, go-between,” who can mediate between “[c]reatures that were seen are now flying / out of range” and his “convictions,” including the one that “no bird can help / as I take to the empty air, and dare myself” (*Selected* 31). This air of defeatism coupled with daring suggests that, as a poet, he must concede that his “convictions,” a word the old Yeats would apply to his most radical ideas, like those he expressed in the notorious *On the Boiler*, are ultimately derived from the encounters with the birds on Clare Island; the hope that “tak[ing] to the empty air” is to become “fledged,” thereby fusing with the birds that he initially says he “could be free of” (*Lysaght, Selected* 31).

The lessons learnt in *The Clare Island Survey* would carry over to Lysaght’s 1998 volume, *Scarecrow*. The volume centers on the themes of language and its relation to nature, thus bringing to mind Wordsworth’s strain of the Romantic crisis lyric best exemplified by “Ode: Intimations of Immortality.” In the crisis lyric, “the poet begins in a situation of pain and imaginative loss but is restored by the contemplation of the landscape” (Moore and Strachan 138). This compensatory potential is revealed in the “Ode,” when the poet concedes that “[t]o me alone there came a thought of grief; / A timely utterance gave that thought relief, / And I again am strong” (Wordsworth 331). It is the emphasis on “utterance,” which I here take to refer to the poem at hand—though it is often assumed to refer to another poem, most frequently to “Resolution and Independence”—that suggests the importance of language as a vehicle of regaining connection between humanity and nature. A similar tactic is adopted in “Resolution and Independence,” where the poet is reminded of the despondency of the human condition by the Leech-gatherer’s decrepit situation: “My former thoughts returned: the fear that kills, / And hope that is unwilling to be fed; / Cold, pain, and labour, and all fleshly ills” (Wordsworth 307). In the final two stanzas, however, “While I these [despondent] thoughts within myself pursued, / He, having made a pause, the same discourse renewed”; and it is the Leech-gatherer’s words “[c]heerfully uttered” (Wordsworth 308) that alleviate the speaker’s woeful musings.

Whereas Wordsworth returns throughout his poetry, particularly in *The Prelude*, to the view that language helps foster a reciprocal relationship with nature, Lysaght remains skeptical of that idea. In “A Field Guide,” which revisits the Wordsworthian context of “Ode: Intimations of Immortality” and “Resolution and Independence,” the speaker turns his musing eye to the landscape, identifying it as a “script” to be explored. In the fifth stanza, it is suggested in a manner reminiscent of Wordsworth, that

someone come[s] downstream
with a split-cane rod
a mere boy whose boots
are slapping the irises. (35)

While Wordsworth discovers that his “obstinate questionings / Of sense and outward things” (335), which come to him in encounters with the likes of the sage-like Leech-gatherer, allow his speech to come forth, or, as in the Leech-gatherer’s case, themselves produce words “[w]ith something of a lofty utterance dressed” (307), Lysaght’s “young / innocent will reveal himself / in a slip of the tongue” (*Selected* 35). This is a powerful swerve from Wordsworth’s stately diction, as Lysaght discovers that if there is any reciprocity to be found, it is in the instants when human language fails. In “Declensions,” he gazes at a sailor “stow[ing] cases for transport” onto his boat, which, “[l]ike a currach being hauled,” is suddenly identified with language that “sinks into a trough / and peaks again miraculously” (Lysaght, *Selected* 47). It is this language, with its own “words for weather, / for seaweeds, for stonechat, for flotsam” (*Selected* 47), that seems to represent the idiom of the “slip of the tongue,” a vernacular beyond human speech that is itself the language of nature.

The idea of the language of nature is given ample treatment in “The Marram-clocks,” a poem that raises the question of the origin of language in the pictogram form. Looking at “[t]he hanging stalks of marram,” the speaker likens them to “minute hands” which “the wind / spins . . . round in a compass” (Lysaght, *Selected* 50). No sooner has he mentioned them than he identifies the marram stalks as “[s]cribes of a lost language” and asks:

[. . .] are they the signatures
of some declining witness,
or the characters of the sea,
or the notation of scenery
with windy space translated? (*Selected* 50)

The marram-characters are shown to primarily signify movement and malleability: the sea and scenery “with windy space translated.” Unlike languages, such as English, the marram-language creates meaning not through propositions but through enactment of the landscape and its fluctuations. This, again, adverts to Wordsworth and his idea of language as the incarnation of thought (Milnes 48-49), but whereas Wordsworth remains ambiguous about the notion of incarnated language because this idea “threaten[s] to incarcerate thought and experience within the prison-house of language” (Milnes 49), Lysaght subscribes to the view that plants are their own idiom embodied. A similar view is propounded by Lysaght’s contemporary, Moya Cannon, who, in “First Poetry,” identifies “swallows, terns, or grey-lag geese” as “perhaps the original poetry” (17). Furthermore, Cannon, like Lysaght, underlines the transitional character of language for the birds are observed in flight. As Christine Cusick notes, Cannon inscribes her poem in Celtic mythology, where “Manannán mac Lir’s crane bag is said to contain, among other things, the letters of the ogham alphabet, the letters which some scholars observe ‘may have been suggested by flying cranes.’” She concludes that the suggestion that “swallows, terns, or grey-lag geese” are “perhaps the original poetry” “position[s] the birds as physically and conceptually bound to language, through image and origin, and in so doing posit[s] a central limitation to human knowledge of birdlife” (Cusick 186).

Lysaght’s approach to flora and fauna, as well as landscape in general, is similar in the sense that he sees the natural world as comprising the vestiges of an ur-language. Moreover, this idiom is far too fluid for modern eyes to decipher “what’s written by the wind / in the given hieroglyph” (Lysaght, *Selected* 51). Lysaght, thus, takes issue with a view of language advocated by Yeats, who claims that “if you liberate a person or a landscape from the bonds of motives and their actions, causes and their effects, and from all bonds but the bonds of your love, it will change under your eyes, and become a symbol of an infinite emotion, a perfected emotion, a part of the Divine Essence” (*Early Essays* 110). While for Yeats, liberation of a landscape—never complete—allows it to represent, albeit partially, “the Divine Essence,” for Lysaght, the landscape either remains elusive of human linguistic apprehension or, as in “Guillemot,” calls for an idiom that takes its signification from striving to unite the word with the material world it seeks to evoke. By implying that our cognitive abilities are constrained by the very language we employ to understand the world, “The Marram-clocks,” similarly to “The Village Tailor,” suggests a critique of poetry as a way of apprehending nature, except in the form of an exploration of the language inherent in the landscape.

In conclusion, while the poet regards the natural world as constituting a richness beyond human comprehension, the exploration of a landscape together with its inhabitants, as it is undertaken in *The Clare Island Survey* and *Scarecrow*, becomes a way of engaging with another form of language. It is not a culturally and politically inflected language, which Lysaght ascribes to Heaney, nor is it a symbolic evocation of “the Divine Essence,” as in Yeats, but rather a probing of the flora and fauna as constituting a language in themselves. What Lysaght offers is a less poet-centered version of Wordsworth’s crisis lyric, with the difference that while for Wordsworth, poeticizing nature provides a compensatory relief, in Lysaght, the poetic act may unveil no glimpse of humanity’s lost harmony with their environment; instead, revealing itself in slips of the tongue, or the arrangement of flora, this language points to our incurable alienation, and so, incessantly, “[t]his wide world has us jaded” (Lysaght, *Selected* 60).

University of Łódź, Poland

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