
Precursors, the Environment and the West in Seamus Heaney's "Postscript"

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Abstract. Being the final poem in Heaney's 1996 collection *The Spirit Level*, situates the poem "Postscript" significantly in Heaney's poetic oeuvre. The collection was Heaney's first to be published after winning the Nobel Prize for literature, it was also his first published amidst the changed social and political context following the 1994 paramilitary ceasefires in Northern Ireland. Here, I will explore the manner in which "Postscript" interacts with previous work by Heaney. Looking closely at the language, imagery and procedures of the poem, I argue that the poem embodies a fundamental shift in Heaney's approach to the natural environment but that this change is reliant on poetic procedures which Heaney had come to trust early in his career. Heaney's descriptive precision and openness to the "marvellous" combine to produce a uniquely effective poem. "Postscript" treats the natural world and the human subject in a manner atypical of Heaney's procedures yet stands among his most accomplished work. I will consider the manner in which Heaney's poem simultaneously exists "post" the "scripts" of literature mythologizing the West of Ireland while remaining in close dialogue with perhaps the most famous of these: Yeats's poem "The Wild Swans at Coole".

Key Words. Seamus Heaney, "Postscript", "The Peninsula", landscape, W.B. Yeats.

Resumen. Al tratarse del último poema del libro de 1996 *The Spirit Level*, de Seamus Heaney, "Postscript" tiene un lugar privilegiado en la obra poética del autor irlandés. Este poemario fue el primero que publicó tras ganar el premio Nobel de Literatura; también fue su primera obra publicada tras los cambios en el contexto político y social de Irlanda del Norte provocados por el cese de la lucha armada en 1994 por parte de grupos paramilitares. Este artículo examina la manera en la que "Postscript" interactúa con la producción poética anterior de Heaney. Tras un análisis exhaustivo del lenguaje, las imágenes empleadas y la organización del poema, se avanza la tesis de que en este texto Heaney efectúa un cambio en su enfoque del medio natural, aunque este cambio se basa en determinadas prácticas poéticas que Heaney había empezado a manejar al inicio de su carrera. La precisión descriptiva de Heaney y su apertura a lo "maravilloso" se combinan aquí para producir un poema de gran efectividad. En "Postscript" Heaney trata el mundo natural y el sujeto humano de una forma atípica dentro de su trayectoria; al mismo tiempo este texto se destaca como una de sus

mejores creaciones. Se considerará asimismo la manera en la que el poema pervive tras los “post” de aquellos escritos (“scripts”) que ahondan en la mitología del oeste de Irlanda, al tiempo que dialoga con el más famoso de todos ellos, “The Wild Swans at Coole”, de W.B. Yeats.

Palabras clave. Seamus Heaney, “Postscript”, “The Peninsula”, paisaje, W.B. Yeats.

Dennis O’Driscoll refers in passing to Seamus Heaney’s poem “Postscript” as “sublime” and “one of his very best poems” (*Troubled Thoughts* 144). Medbh McGuckian writes that features of it “astound” and she finds herself almost reluctant to “dissect its music” (34). As the final poem in Heaney’s 1996 collection *The Spirit Level*, “Postscript” is situated significantly within Heaney’s poetic oeuvre. The collection was Heaney’s first to be published after winning the Nobel Prize for literature and was written during a changed social and political context following the 1994 paramilitary ceasefires and tentative peace process in Northern Ireland.¹ *The Spirit Level* was self-consciously and unavoidably attuned to the political context in which it was published. The penultimate poem, “Tollund”, revisits the “The Tollund Man” (from 1972) but ends with protagonists “footloose, at home beyond the tribe” now ready, “to make a new beginning / And make a go of it, alive and sinning / Ourselves again, free-willed again, not bad” (*Opened Ground* 443). “Postscript” ends a collection which both addresses what went before and which faces into a new political and cultural reality. Here, I will explore the manner in which “Postscript” interacts with previous work by Heaney, arguing that it embodies a fundamental shift in Heaney’s approach to the natural environment while drawing on earlier poetic procedures. Heaney’s poem is one of many in contemporary Irish literature either set in or concerning the West of Ireland. I will conclude by examining the manner in which Heaney’s poem both manages to reflect back on, and exist beyond, the “script” of a particular exemplar – Yeats’s “The Wild Swans at Coole”.

1. Potential Drives: “Postscript” and “The Peninsula”

“Postscript” takes its place among a number of significant poems by Heaney where the perspective is that of a driver. In this instance, the drive is through the landscape of West Clare:

And some time make the time to drive out west
 Into County Clare, along the Flaggy Shore,
 In September or October, when the wind
 And the light are working off each other
 So that the ocean on one side is wild
 With foam and glitter, and inland among stones
 The surface of a slate-grey lake is lit
 By the earthed lightning of a flock of swans ... (*Opened Ground* 444)

After taking in the impression of the swans against the “slate–grey lake” the protagonist decides against the futile endeavour of trying to preserve the moment:

Useless to think you’ll park and capture it
 More thoroughly. You are neither here nor there,
 A hurry through which known and strange things pass
 As big soft buffetings come at the car sideways
 And catch the heart off guard and blow it open. (*Opened Ground* 444)

The effect is to inspire an epiphanic moment, engendered by the immediacy of experience. That the protagonist is “neither here nor there” is fundamental to the poem’s arrival at a moment which catches “the heart off guard” (*Opened Ground* 444). The narrator’s sensation of an “opening” heart is closely related to the transience of the experience; it may also result from the narrator’s realisation of the relative insignificance of the self when placed against the natural landscape.

“Postscript” may be treated most literally as a postscript – as “something written after” – when considered in relation to Heaney’s poem “The Peninsula” from his collection *Door into the Dark* (1969), published almost three decades earlier. “Postscript” references “The Peninsula” from its opening lines, the earlier poem also commences by recommending a drive, this time around the Ards peninsula in County Down: “When you have nothing more to say, just drive / For a day all round the peninsula” (*Opened Ground* 21). Further, “The Peninsula” posits this drive as a conditional one the opening word – “When” – indicating a time which has not yet occurred. Despite the provisional status of the drive itself, the poem develops a powerful and immediate sense of direct experience. Likewise, “Postscript”, while grounded both geographically (“Into County Clare, along the Flaggy Shore”) and temporally (“In September or October”), opens on a potential rather than an actual journey (“And some time make the time”) (*Opened Ground* 444). It is a journey that someone – the poet or another – may or may not make. As well as the shared conditional context, the poems have structural features in common: both are 16 lines long; “The Peninsula” consists of four quatrains rhyming a–b–b–a, while “Postscript” is a single 16-line poem. If “Postscript” is taken as a slightly extended sonnet its turn occurs at line 13. Likewise, the earlier poem, in the course of its fourth stanza (beginning on line 13), turns from the description of physical imagery of preceding stanzas, to the poetic illumination of the need to “uncode” landscapes by “things founded clean on their own shapes” (*Opened Ground* 21).

For all its clarity and ultimate uplift, “Postscript” retains something of the sense of the “sad freedom” (the phrase is from “The Tollund Man” – *Opened Ground* 64-65) which Neil Corcoran has identified as characteristic to most of Heaney’s “driving poems” (23). Given the solitary atmosphere that both “Postscript” and “The Peninsula” evoke, it is noteworthy that Heaney has recalled both poems as originating from more sociable settings. He reports that: “It [Postscript] came from remembering a windy Saturday afternoon when Marie [Heaney] and I drove with Brian and Anne Friel along the south coast of Galway Bay. We had stopped to look at Mount Vernon, Lady Gregory’s summer house – still there, facing the waters and the wild; then we drove on into this glorious exultation of air and sea and swans” (O’Driscoll, *Stepping Stones* 366). Heaney further states that part of the reason for publishing it in the *Irish Times* was as “a way of sending a holiday postcard – a PS of sorts – to the Friels” (O’Driscoll, *Stepping Stones* 366). Perhaps more surprising is that “The Peninsula”, which recommends a solitary drive when “there is nothing more to say”, also originated from a day spent in company. Heaney recounts that he and Marie often went on drives with Michael and Edna Longley, commenting that during the mid-sixties: “We were all getting to know each other and getting to know the countryside around Belfast. A poem of mine, ‘The Peninsula’ – about the Ards peninsula in County Down – was written after one of those drives” (O’Driscoll, *Stepping Stones* 77). The remembered actual experiences of sociable drives are poetically posited as potential and solitary journeys in the poems. Not only are the contexts depopulated, the actual experiences are transposed into narratives whose bases are tenuous and conditional.

Heaney also positions both poems as offering advice or counsel (whether to the self or others). The context created becomes amenable to a meditation upon poetic craft, and the reader is alerted that these poems may be read as formulating and embodying distinct artistic

credos. The counsel that each poem offers is quite different, despite the value that both place on the specificities of physical description. “The Peninsula” hopes to discover or “uncode” truths through attention to physical description and material actualities. “Postscript”, in taking the landscape on its own terms, and remaining open to place and experience, does not grant the narrator any defining comprehension over it. The later poet of “Postscript” has clearly absorbed such lessons of clarity and precision but now, rather than “uncoding” the landscape, the narrator finds himself displaced by the immediacy of the physical environment.

In her reading of the two poems Helen Vendler states that as the “self” of “Postscript” is: “Itself unfounded, it can hardly hope to ‘found things’ in the way the younger self thought to do” (*Seamus Heaney* 26). The point is exact, but it is also fair to note an implicit humility in Heaney’s method of utilising the clarity of physical description to “uncode all landscapes” (*Opened Ground* 21). Such an understanding, for Heaney at the time of “The Peninsula”, is dependent on fidelity to the physicality of things themselves and to seeing them as accurately as possible. “The Peninsula” traces the process of Heaney teaching himself where to turn “when there is nothing more to say” (*Opened Ground* 21). Twenty-seven years later, it is due to the primacy of the narrator’s perceptual role that the poet arrives at the point of imagining the self as merely a “hurry”, caught “off guard” (*Opened Ground* 444). It is worth noting that the poet of “The Peninsula” also shares some of the more unstable attributes of the “neither here nor there” protagonist of the later poem (*Opened Ground* 444). The enjambment between the first two stanzas of “The Peninsula” reads “so you will not arrive / But pass through”, an idea later reflected in “Postscript”’s protagonist who, by the end of the poem, is more foundering than “founded” (*Opened Ground* 21, 44). Nonetheless, Vendler identifies a particular change in register between early Heaney and the author of “Postscript”: the former could hope to use the natural imagery for allegorical purposes. The older Heaney, now more open to “marvels”, produces poetry where the tone is one more fully cognisant of the limits of human comprehension.²

The different contexts in which the “The Peninsula”, and “Postscript” were written is reflected in the language and poetic figures utilized by the respective poems. Christopher Ricks makes the observation that common to Heaney, along with other Northern Irish poets of the period, is the poetic figure which William Empson defined as the “self-inwoven simile” (qtd. in Corcoran 21). Ricks relates this to the context of sectarian conflict, with the Northern Irish poet’s imaginations acknowledging, yet wishing to reconcile, the opposing forces (qtd. in Corcoran 21). Corcoran points to examples of the reflexive image in Heaney’s poetry (such as “things founded clean on their own shape” from “The Peninsula”) and notes that Heaney’s driving poems present a consciousness separated from its perceived environment (21). This figure takes the self-reflexive imagery to its logical conclusion. In this light, “Postscript”, as “The Peninsula”’s “post-ceasefire” descendant, can be seen to exchange the “self-reflexive” image for a more dualistic use of imagery. The narrator of “Postscript” advises making the trip when wind and light are “working off each other”, the “foam and glitter” of the ocean is reflected by the “slate-grey lake” and the “earthed lightning” of the swans (*Opened Ground* 444). The landscape of the poem is primarily a dual waterscape of ocean and inland lake (albeit separated by the Burren’s stony landscape). Following on from Ricks’s observations, the reflexive images of “The Peninsula” – produced out of a context of civil conflict – in “Postscript” become instead the dialectical imagery which we can view as reflective of a society moving towards a more enabling environment in the context of the peace process. In this vein, it can be noted that in “Postscript” hearts are “off guard”, and that buffetings which hit the car are enabling, not destructive: the heart here is blown not apart but open. Specific identities are demoted (the “you” is “neither here nor there”), and the “hermetically sealed environment” of the car is now opened up by “big soft buffetings”, which touch and profoundly affect the hitherto isolated observer (*Opened Ground* 444). Given the context in

which “Postscript” was published it would be difficult not to read it as politically and culturally emblematic. On one level then, “Postscript” can be viewed as the product of a sensibility less concerned with “uncoding” than with opening out the landscape. It may also be possible to view the move away from the “self-inwoven” simile, which Corcoran applied to “The Peninsula”, to “Postscript’s use of more open, even dialectical, imagery, as a movement reflective of, and bound up with, an altered social and political landscape moving out of civil conflict in a process towards peace.

2. Heaney and Elizabeth Bishop’s “At the Fishhouses”

Heaney has written illuminatingly on the American poet Elizabeth Bishop. In the title essay to *The Government of the Tongue* Heaney closely reads her poem “At the Fishhouses” (Bishop 64-66). Heaney describes the movement from Bishop’s characteristic attention to particulars until “detail by detail ... a world is brought into being” (*Government* 105). Heaney notes that the poem’s final, metaphysical lines are enabled (or permitted) by the strength and precision of the observation of everyday items built up beforehand throughout the poem. Heaney describes the “unchallengeability” of these lines, stating that that they are “as hallucinatory as they are accurate” and suggesting that such achievements are necessarily hard-won (*Government* 106).

In contrast to the hesitations and diversions by means of which “At the Fishhouses” reaches its metaphysical destination, Heaney’s “Postscript” progresses quietly and inevitably towards a transcendent occurrence. This is achieved by a focus on the elemental rather than the human characteristics of the landscape. Even the swans as “earthed lightning” are both removed from the biological world and nod directly to Yeats’s eternal creatures (*Opened Ground* 444). Heaney’s poem achieves a meditative, metaphysical tone early on. Notably, in comparison with Bishop’s poem, the transcendence at the heart of “Postscript” remains relatively minor, a personal conscience disrupted – a heart blown open – but remaining earthbound. Elmer Kennedy-Andrews noted that in Bishop’s work a visionary moment must “be handled with caution if it is to be credible” and commented that such moments are what Heaney, in his poetry, has waited for (98). Bishop’s example seems to have resonated for Heaney, not so much for the fact that it displayed an openness to the transcendent, but for the strict terms under which her poetry allowed itself to move towards the otherworldly: by first insisting on fidelity to the actual, for which a discipline of precise observation was requisite. Bishop’s poetry may have proven most significant to Heaney in its need to balance the “hallucinatory” against the “accurate” and the painstaking lengths she went to achieve this.

3. Heaney and Ecocriticism

While the narrator remained the defining presence in Heaney’s earlier nature poetry, “Postscript” evidences a change in the positioning of the narrator in relation to the natural world. In so far as the poem describes an undefined but perceptible change in the narrator’s consciousness, it can be argued that in “Postscript” the narrative persona ultimately remains central. However, after the first mention of the drive, the narrator’s role remains purely observational until line 11: “Useless to think you’ll park ...” (*Opened Ground* 444). The majority of the poem comprises sensory description without reference to the narrating subject. As elemental imagery incrementally populates the poem the effect is to make both the car and driver recede even further. With the swans on the lake (“earthed lightning”) aligned with the elements, the driver and car are left as the only non-elemental figures in the landscape, consequently miniaturising them and relegating the protagonist further into the background (*Opened Ground* 444). Also, the use of insubstantial and quite literally “airy” imagery and

language, including the heart “blown open”, “buffetings”, the nominalisation of “hurry”, culminate to form a sense of the transitory nature of experience and the fragility of the human (*Opened Ground* 444). This implies that the realisation of the sense of human insignificance within the natural environment is itself the revelation that profoundly affects the protagonist.

In “Postscript”, then, the human protagonist is a component of a wider landscape which finally evades his full comprehension. Such features bring the poem within the theoretical range of eco-criticism’s radar. That “Postscript” is a poem amenable to being read under such discourse demonstrates it as anomalistic within Heaney’s body of work. As Edna Longley writes: “If Heaney is a Green or environmental poet, it is usually not in the sense that he subordinates human consciousness or human rights to ecosystems, but in the sense that the fabric of his poems heals modern splits between / within self and world” (106). Longley here indicates the manner in which Heaney’s poetry, while cognisant of and often focused on the natural environment, usually attempts to align the natural world with human concerns. To privilege the environmental over the human would go against the grain of a poetic practice which commonly aligns the natural world with human identity, history or politics: albeit to differing degrees at different stages in his career. Early poems such as “Toome” or “Broagh” provide much-discussed examples of Heaney’s historical and archaeological response to landscape in his poetry, and indeed Heaney’s poems were often written with an eye to the *dinnsenchas* tradition, which he discusses in his essay “The Sense of Place” (*Preoccupations* 131-149). This has led critics such as Frawley, for example, to surmise that Heaney’s “intense relationship” with land and place is due to the pressures on personal and national identity which resulted from the conflict in Northern Ireland (139). This in turn allows Heaney to be read as having “an almost ethnically or racially determined attachment to place” (Frawley 145). Such a nativist approach, along with Heaney’s generally Romantic, or even, as Foster states, “patriotic” approach to nature, might prove problematic for eco-critics (“Challenges” 10).³

In “Crediting Poetry”, Heaney stated that latterly he was attempting to “make space in my reckoning and imagining for the marvellous as well as the murderous” (*Opened Ground* 458). Edna Longley points out that when the Heaney of *Seeing Things* focuses on “crediting marvels” his procedures explicitly follow the theological tradition of immanence, “whereby Nature encodes messages from a creator to mankind” (107). The focus remains firmly on the human subject. As Longley writes: “The ‘self’ of Heaney’s poetry, then, moves between instinct (animism) and control (agriculture), but its own boundaries appear quite firmly drawn. It rarely dissolves into the unconscious (“sub-soil”) or cosmic flux or earthly ecosystem. Instead, the cosmos moves centripetally towards the human figure” (105). Given this, “Postscript” signals an important shift in Heaney’s register in relation to the natural world, the positioning of the “self” in relation to nature becomes more ambiguous while the poem tends towards being read as ecological rather than as anthropocentric. That “Postscript” may be regarded as indicative of a change of perspective is bolstered by the later poem “Höfn” from Heaney’s 2006 collection *District and Circle*. The poem deals directly with climate change in the form of an encounter with a melting Icelandic glacier (*District* 53). David Wheatley notes that in “Höfn” the act of melting is both “message and medium” as, “Like the glacier, the poem melts away before our eyes ...” (36). In “Postscript” the narrative self is diminished to a mere “hurry”, the poem “Höfn” embodies dissolution in a more threatening form. While Wheatley notes Heaney’s play here between physicality and absence, the sheer physicality of language in “Höfn” might ultimately disrupt the poem’s dialectic between presence and absence, weighing it too heavily towards the former. “Postscript” is a more understated, but ultimately more profound poem, as the protagonist finds his certitudes and habitual sensibilities dissolve. Ironically, it is this genuinely ecological poem which has a narrative

dependent upon the very un-ecological (and very Heaney-esque) device of making a journey through the natural landscape by car.

4. “Postscript” and the Western Landscape

The ecological heart of the poem “Postscript” is bound up with notions of “the West” in Irish literature. Largely due to the influence of the Irish literary revival at the start of the 20th century, the West of Ireland has continued to be viewed, both popularly and culturally as “a repository of authentic value” and the ripples from the literary revival still affect how it is represented (Welch 58). Tom Herron notes that what is striking in contemporary portrayals of the West is the manner in which its mythic status is maintained by the preference of many contemporary poets for depopulating their poems in favour of “pristine ecological experiences” (81). On occasions, in poems putatively about the West of Ireland, the area becomes a destination rather than place: the car-bound poets are often not even in the West, instead they are in their cars “on his or her way there, echoing the element of pilgrimage to the holy and mystical site of the West to be found in much Revivalist writing” (Herron 76). This “into the West” car journey is a genre to which “Postscript” clearly belongs; however, “Postscript” takes place entirely in the West itself (notwithstanding the implied journey there). Further, it is a genre which Heaney, given the production of notable “driving” poems throughout his career, helped to create.

While “Postscript” contributes to the artistic depopulation of the Western landscape, it largely elides the narrator along with any other potential human characters. This suggests that “Postscript”, in ignoring possible human subjects, is working on a level deeper than the attainment of a congruence between the aesthetics of the landscape and the work. Edna Longley notes, in Louis MacNeice’s poem “Western Landscape”, from 1945, (MacNeice 265-267) that “the West represents what is perpetually unsatisfied in aesthetic desire itself” (123). She argues that, along with the associations between the West and definitive form or authentic culture, the idea of instability has also been bequeathed from earlier artistic responses to the West (121-124). This trope of instability is evidenced in “Postscript”. The isolation and vantage provided by the car journey, rather than protecting the narrator, allows a clarity of vision which leads to him becoming overwhelmed and destabilised by the elemental landscape to the point where he becomes “a hurry”, or a mere conduit. Such a dissolution requires an unpeopled context, allowing the poem to be formed from the conjunction of a lone consciousness and elemental landscape.

The contemporary Irish poet who makes most frequent use of a Western locale, particularly as a ground where the narrator’s persona becomes destabilised, is Michael Longley whose work has long utilised the trope of an insubstantial narrator.⁴ “The West” from Michael Longley’s 1972 collection *An Exploded View* depicts the narrator, ostensibly on holiday in the West, as “Materialising out of the heat-shimmers” (94). The narrator appears only to partially exist in the Western landscape, his presence as delicate there as the “news from home” or the “Light that powders at a touch” (94). In this instance the narrator seems barely corporeal, let alone a visitor or resident. The trope is characteristic in Longley’s poetry, which frequently has the narrator dissolve or disappear. “The Rope Makers”, where the narrator backs out the door until “... you / Watch me diminish in a square of light” is typical (67). In Michael Longley’s Western pastorals, assumedly corporeal narrators – implied visitors to the West, and from an implied city – find, instead of ideas of authenticity and wholeness, a dissolution of identity itself. Gentle language and imagery are used to evoke such dispersals, and illusions of fixity and coherence are incrementally undermined. For Longley, as Peter McDonald has suggested, the “home from home” of the West offers a way of *undoing* the settled nature of an identity rooted in its own place of origin” (120). Longley’s

“disappearing” narrators may also be suggestive of a poetic approach which attempts to render the physical landscapes of his poems as clearly as possible, achieving this by allowing the least possible intrusion on them by the lyric persona. The contrasting sensibilities between Heaney and Longley are very apparent: “Postscript” focuses on the elemental features of the Western landscape: Burren rock, lake and sea. While the associations of the territory the poem traverses are only subtly alluded to, they remain Yeatsian. Longley’s Carraigskeewaun does not have the same resonances in contemporary literature, his focus is on the fragile and the endangered, rather than the geological and elemental. Despite this, Heaney’s relation to the natural world in “Postscript” is so atypically light-footed, and the protagonist so unsettled and decentred, that the cumulative influence of Michael Longley’s approach to the West is discernible.

“Postscript” might be considered by the etymology of its title: in the sense of what is *post* to *script*, or what comes after writing. Heaney’s poem, with its detailed focus on physical imagery and the verities of landscape achieves both a unique presence for itself as poem, and for the place itself, beyond, or in spite of, all the “scripts” associated with the West of Ireland. Despite the palimpsests of “script” and myth, through which the Western landscape must inevitably be mediated, Heaney insists that the actual place still affords a valid, heart-lifting experience. Heaney has written:

Yet even a disenchanted critic, tired of exposing the mystifications of social and economic reality in that old Celtic Twilight of cottage and curragh, cannot fail to respond to vistas of stone-walled plains running to the horizon and shifting cloudscapes underlit from the Atlantic. For in spite of the west of Ireland’s status as a country of myth, the actual place can still waken an appetite for experience that is pristine and unconstrained. (*Padraic Fallon* 11)

While the landscape of “Postscript” is home ground to the myths and mystifications of the Celtic Twilight, Heaney attempts to render the locale on its own terms, by keeping physical description of the landscape at the heart of the poem’s construction. Heaney had an apparent faith that the Western landscape retains the capacity to “catch the heart off guard” – if it can be clearly apprehended. The setting of the poem, in close geographical proximity to the site of Lady Gregory’s summer house, may allow the title of Heaney’s poem to be taken as a questioning of how far it is possible to let the place itself be realized, or how possible it is to achieve, in Heaney’s terms, “pristine and unconstrained” experience from beneath the weight of the numerous literary texts which necessarily pre-condition perceptions of the West of Ireland. In this light, the poem may be seen as an attempt to clear the way: to view the landscape anew, unfettered by prior literary conceptions.

5. Heaney’s Wild Swans

One of the remarkable elements of “Postscript” is the degree to which it simultaneously evokes just such a “pristine” or unfettered experience while yet engaging with its most formidable literary predecessor: Yeats’s “The Wild Swans at Coole” from the eponymous collection published in 1919 (233). “Postscript”’s engagement with Yeats’s poem is evident, yet it has a clarity of imagery and a self-sufficiency that allows it to stand on its own terms. Part of the success of “Postscript” is a lightness of touch which enables “The Wild Swans at Coole” to be referenced repeatedly by the later poem, but this engagement is not forced on the reader, nor does it lessen the poem’s effect of a seemingly unmediated sensory engagement with the immediate landscape. “Postscript” is very much its own poem which nevertheless

does not neglect to make numerous, seemingly casual, nods in passing to Yeats's poem as it lightly acknowledges that a prior claim exists.

"The Wild Swans at Coole" is written in ballad quatrains with an additional couplet on each stanza. Despite the ballad quatrains, it is a lyric poem. Heaney's "Postscript", though structurally and metrically freer than Yeats's poem, also engages with established form: its 16 lined, single stanza construction can be taken as an extended sonnet with the turn occurring at line 13. Helen Vendler has noted the manner in which Heaney acknowledges Yeats's poem in his rhyming of "stones" and "swans", which reflects the end of the first stanza of Yeats's poem: "Upon the brimming water among the stones / Are nine and fifty swans" (*Seamus Heaney* 26). "Postscript" employs further oblique references to Yeats's poem, sharing rhymes and end-words which include: "shore" (picked up twice if we include Yeats's rhyme of "sore"), "heads" / "head", "lit" / "twilight", "sideways" / "away" (*Opened Ground* 444; Yeats 233). These are only the end-words: throughout "Postscript" Heaney employs assonance and internal rhymes common to "The Wild Swans at Coole". It is not the least of "Postscript's" achievements that Heaney's acknowledgement to Yeats is incorporated throughout the fabric of the poem, despite his vocabulary appearing almost sparse and his poem focusing on the depiction of the landscape and the apparent immediacy of the experience.

"Postscript's" recurrent dualities (of air and light, stone and water) are features which Heaney's poem also shares with "The Wild Swans at Coole". The third and fourth lines of Yeats's poem read: "Under the October twilight the water / Mirrors a still sky;" (233) while the third, fourth and fifth lines of Heaney's poem has wind, light and water in close conjunction: "the wind / And the light are working off each other / So that the ocean on one side ..." (*Opened Ground* 444). The phrase "working off each other" may here refer not only to elemental but also to intertextual connections. "Postscript" is set "In September, or October..." (*Opened Ground* 444), sharing a seasonal as well as a geographic setting with "The Wild Swans at Coole": "Under the October twilight ..." (Yeats 233). Yeats's first stanza ends by setting out the heavily symbolic natural scene: "Upon the brimming water among the stones / Are nine and fifty swans" (233) while Heaney, again "among stones", has a "slate-grey lake" lit with "the earthed lightning of a flock of swans" (*Opened Ground* 444). O'Driscoll has pointed to Heaney's line "Their fully grown headstrong-looking heads" with its repetition of "heads" as being a possible weak spot in an otherwise immaculate poem (*Troubled Thoughts* 144). However, in this context the swans somewhat "heavy-headed" appearance may be a subtle allusion to the symbolic weight Yeats had his own swans carry. Yeats's swans may be "wilder" than Heaney's, they "scatter wheeling" upon "clamorous wings", yet the feathers on the swans of "Postscript" are "roughed and ruffling" and the "clamorous wings" of Yeats's swans may be picked up by Heaney later in the "big soft buffetings" which "come at the car sideways" (Yeats 233; *Opened Ground* 444). The language of "Postscript" echoes Yeats's poem insistently.

But while the language of "Postscript" consistently alludes to "The Wild Swans at Coole", the two poems differ entirely in outlook. Yeats's swans in "The Wild Swans at Coole" are rendered wholly symbolic by their constancy. They exist more fully as an idealisation than as individual creatures, and are therefore valuable for what they signify – this ranges from idealized love, to solitude, or constancy. Harold Bloom places "The Wild Swans at Coole" in the tradition that Abrams defined as the Greater Romantic Lyric: the speaker in a landscape undergoes a process in which the mind confronts nature and the resultant interplay constitutes the poem (15). As such, Yeats's poem follows in the tradition of Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" and, most directly, in that of Shelley's "Alastor" in which a lover's unhappiness is intensified by contemplating mated swans (Bloom, 15). Notable here is the degree to which the natural scene is used to reflect and define the feelings of the narrator of the poem. This was more pronounced in Yeats's first version of the poem, which ended on

what ultimately became the final version's fourth stanza: "Passion or conquest, wander where they will, / Attend upon them still" (233). Engelberg has noted that by ending instead on a contemplation of a future which includes the presence of the swans and absence of the poet ("Among what rushes will they build ...") that "Yeats is on the way towards a genuinely holistic perception" (qtd. in Bloom 19). However, the poet's absence here may not be total. Castle has commented that while Yeats, by the poem's close, worries about being left behind, he also "positions himself *in time*, for he speaks from the very future he fears he will miss: delight *will have filled* the eyes of men yet to come" (146). Even while imagining a future without himself, Yeats ensures that he is there.

For Yeats, the primary purpose of the eponymous swans is to provide a symbol of constancy which in turn enables the narrator's act of self-definition. The swans in their constancy, their "passion" and "conquest", with hearts which "have not grown old", bring the despondency of the narrator into sharp relief (233). The narrator of "Postscript", encountering a "flock of swans", differentiates between the behaviour of individual creatures (their heads are variously "Tucked or cresting or busy underwater" – Heaney, *Opened Ground* 444). While for Yeats the swans are wholly symbolic, for Heaney they each comprise an individual element of a specific natural scene, existing in the present moment of the poem. Heaney's swans are an element in a scene whose function, ultimately, is to "catch the heart off guard and blow it open" (*Opened Ground* 444). Intrinsic to this "openness" is the realization that attempting to capture or own the scene is futile. There is nothing constant about these swans which exist (elementally but insubstantially) as "earthed lightning" against the "surface of a slate-grey lake" reflecting an ocean "wild / With foam and glitter": taking the transient properties of light, water and wind onto themselves (*Opened Ground* 444). They are described with a particularity that individualises but which does not immortalize them. The adjectives employed emphasise motion and change (these include "roughed", "ruffling", "tucked", "cresting", "busy", "buffetings", "blow") and even a noun can be a nominalised transient verb ("a hurry") (*Opened Ground* 444). The narrator of "Postscript" – in a manner antithetical to Yeats – is unable to fully comprehend the experience which has such an effect on him. ("You are neither here nor there, / A hurry through which known and strange things pass ...") (*Opened Ground* 444). Crucial to the poem is the sense that, despite his incomprehension, the poet is lightened (if not enlightened) by the experience.

While surmising that "Postscript" has paradoxically "captured" the transient scene altogether "more thoroughly" than it allows, so too are there hints that the narrator of Yeats's poem has something in common with the narrator in Heaney's. For one, the enumeration of the swans at Coole Park was not, finally, achievable: "I saw, before I had well finished, / All suddenly mount / And scatter ..." (233). Also, the poem conveys an existential awareness of the passage of time. Despite concluding with a contemplation of the eternal nature of the swans, the poem is equally concerned with the inability of humankind to keep up ("Their hearts have not grown old") (233). The final verb to describe the action of the swans in "The Wild Swans at Coole" is "drift", the final adjectives are "mysterious" and "beautiful": both Yeats's and Heaney's poems ultimately convey a degree of incomprehension (Yeats 233; *Opened Ground* 444). Steven Matthews reads "The Wild Swans at Coole" as haunted with "potential for a loss of placing and attendant definition" (63). This move towards the transient was a deliberate one on the part of Yeats: the poem's original order had the last note as a plaintive one of lost time and waning enthusiasm ("All's changed since I, hearing at twilight, / The first time on this shore, / The bell-beat of their wings above my head, / Trod with a lighter tread" – 233). The final version moves towards what Vendler describes as the "generous gesture" as the narrator: "relinquishes the swans to others, leaving himself as their merely transient possessor" (*Our Secret Discipline* 300). This is reflected in the "neither here nor there" status of the narrator in Heaney's poem (*Opened Ground* 444). Nevertheless, the

swans of Yeats's poem have served a very definite narratorial purpose in a manner antithetical to Heaney's. For the narrator of the "The Wild Swans at Coole", the scene provides a mode of reflection and self-definition before reaching its own point of transcendence by being able to envisage a future where the narrator has departed and where the swans remain for others to view. A fundamental contrast between the two poems is that Yeats's meditations are from a heart "grown old", while, for the narrator of Heaney's "Postscript", the experience of the landscape leads to a life-affirming moment, the heart "blown open" and enlivened.

6. Conclusion

Heaney's "Postscript", in part by following the procedures suggested in the early "The Peninsula", in part by out-growing them, conveys a life-altering experience of place, of a physical landscape which works on the narrator's consciousness rather than being worked on by it. What this serves to heighten, is the sense of how far, in the poem "Postscript", Heaney has at once subsumed and moved on from his own poetic procedures in relation to the natural environment. He does this with an ease that allows the poem – paradoxically yet successfully – to draw on and negotiate its pre-eminent literary precursor, "The Wild Swans at Coole", while evoking a "pristine and unconstrained" meditation on landscape and the effect this has on the poet. But, while this suggests a significant turn in Heaney's engagement with landscape, "Postscript" also remains of a piece with Heaney's poetic turn towards an acceptance of, and emphasis on, "the marvellous" and in this it remains coterminous with the collection *Seeing Things* from 1991. Foster has noted that the change of emphasis in Heaney's work at this time involved an increased utilisation of words denoting "the language of the elemental, the transformative, the unconstrained" ("Crediting Marvels" 207). "Postscript" shares both the language and techniques common to these poems, to the extent that it becomes one of the most convincing examples of this (at times almost dangerously habitual) Heaney sub-genre. The quietly accomplished, but fundamental, reworking of Heaney's poetic relationship with the natural environment is essential to the achievement of this assured, underplayed and astonishingly adept evocation of the "marvellous" placing it among Heaney's most successful poems.

Notes

¹ But, as Brandes notes, the majority of the poems in *The Spirit Level* had already been arranged in manuscript form by the summer of 1995 – before Heaney was awarded the Nobel Prize in October of that year (30). Many thanks are due to Conor McCarthy, Lorraine Bourke, and the two anonymous readers for *Estudios Irlandeses* for their helpful comments and advice.

² The reference is to lines from the poem "Fosterling" from Heaney's 1991 collection *Seeing Things*: "Me waiting until I was nearly fifty / To credit marvels" (*Opened Ground* 357).

³ McCarthy makes the point that Heaney's attachment to place was never uncomplicated: "In fact, Heaney's work, while expressing a desire for home, holds that desire in tension with a recognition that 'at-homeness' is already pre-problematized" (35).

⁴ Edna Longley discusses this aspect of her husband's work in *Poetry and Posterity* (124-133).

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