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Peopling the Place

The essential feature of a city is that people live, work and move through its streets, parks and buildings, interacting with it and at once defining and being defined by the locale they inhabit. This short talk will consider some of the ways in which poems in the *If Ever You Go* anthology visualise and present people in the city environment of Dublin. I will start with Paula Meehan's poem, 'My Father Perceived as a Vision of St Francis'. This is based around a glimpse of her father as he gets up early in the morning to feed the birds. It is a poem of beginnings, all taking place at dawn while the rest of the household is still sleeping.

It was the piebald horse in next door's garden
frightened me out of a dream
with her dawn whinny. I was back
in the boxroom of the house,
my brother's room now,
full of ties and sweaters and secrets.
Bottles chinked on the doorstep,
the first bus pulled up to the stop.
The rest of the house slept.

The poet is awoken first by that whinny of a piebald horse in the garden next door, 'frightening [her] out of a dream', an image that carries a suggestion of a nightmare transcended but is primarily a local detail of the horse-owning in the inner city and suburbs. The poem is observational, and suggests various angles of vision. The word 'vision', used in its spiritual sense, is there in the title; the 'dream' from which the speaker is awoken is another mode of seeing, and the main burden of the poem is about watching her father's actions – we infer that she watches from the window of the boxroom she has slept in, although the viewpoint is not stated explicitly. At first there is a suggestion of recognising a quiet familial love and responsibility in the actions of her father, as she hears him busy about readying the house for the morning – clearing the grate, heating the kettle. Then there is a moment of transition from domestic interior to the larger outside world, exposed to seasons and the weather and the sky. In the third stanza one detail of the portrayal aligns the central figure with that outside world, as the poem moves from telling us that the early-morning frost had whitened the rooftops to noticing the silvered hair of the father, bringing a sudden awareness of his age. In fact, all the first part of the poem is about time – the time of day, the time of the year, the time of life. Its culmination, however, is about place, or more precisely places – specific places with names. As the birds flock to be fed, they come from

eaves and garden sheds,
from the industrial estate, outlying fields,

from Dubber Cross they came
and the ditches of the North Road.

Now placenames are mentioned, and the poem becomes grounded in a specific part of Dublin, the area around Finglas. There was a flourishing of 'Finglas poets' in the 1980s, particularly associated with Dermot Bolger and his Raven Arts Press – among Bolger's own poems in the anthology are 'Fingal Driving Range' and 'Finglas, 1979', each parading its place-name. It was as if there was a deliberate endeavour at the time to make that north-Dublin area visible to poetry.

But Paula Meehan's poem is more than an exploration of, or a celebration of, the local. While the concluding section of the poem anchors it in the neighbourhood, it also transfigures her father. While he was seen earlier as a human individual caught up in daily domestic tasks and vulnerable to ageing, now he becomes an iconic figure in the image of St Francis feeding the birds, and in the gesture of throwing up his hands he almost leaves the earth to become associated with the rising sun and the air, and is made young. So, while this is a Dublin poem, a Finglas poem even, what strikes one is the centrality of a person as its medium, the use of a character to enter into the environment – quite literally, as the father has been described going out of the house into the garden and bringing creatures to him from the surrounding area – and then transcending that environment.

In the poems written about Dublin as a place, there is nearly always a character or characters introduced. The city exists as a place in which actions and awareness are played out. This is a difference from poetry of the countryside. There is a long tradition of rural or pastoral poetry in which the landscape is written about in largely descriptive terms. Landscape paintings exhibit a similar trait. Indeed, in landscapes of the romantic age, the focus was on nature. Human figures, if added, tended to be small and on the periphery, introduced simply to add a sense of scale, and in many cases were a detail left by the artist for an apprentice to add in, almost as an afterthought. Indeed, even in the city paintings by the American artist Edward Hopper, the streetscapes and external scenes that he painted concentrate on the line and colour of buildings and are often almost unnaturally devoid of any human presence. But if you look through the poems in the *If Ever You Go* selection you will see that in almost every case the sense of Dublin is mediated through a character additional to the poet. The environment is peopled. There are of course exceptions, such as Patrick MacDonogh's 'Feltrim Hill', but Feltrim Hill is – or was when MacDonogh wrote the poem sixty years ago – outside the city conurbation. In Meehan's poem we are aware of the speaker herself, observing and remembering; equally we are aware of her father as he is in age, and then imagined as reverting to youth and being seen in the guise of St Francis; there are also peripheral figures such as the brother whose room the poet has slept in on this visit home, and of the neighbours, the O'Reillys. This is a peopled landscape.

The interaction of consciousness with the material environment of the city is a recurrent factor in these poems about Dublin. It occurs in various forms. For instance, Patrick Kavanagh was notable for the transition he made from Monaghan to Dublin, and in his Dublin poems there is a tendency to fashion for himself what Antoinette Quinn, in her book about Kavanagh's poetry, has called an 'urban self-image'. Kavanagh situates

himself in Dublin, to the extent that areas around the Grand Canal are now indelibly associated with him.

The image Kavanagh projects of himself in Dublin, however, is often that of a disembodied spirit, imagining himself after death. His poems are full of ghosts, often of himself. In 'On Raglan Road' the poem in its final stanza moves towards the 'quiet street where old ghosts meet'; in 'If Ever You go To Dublin Town' (the poem from which this collection takes its title) Kavanagh directs attention to a time after his death and indicates how he expects to be remembered and spoken of in Baggot Street and Pembroke Road and thereabouts. Dublin, its pubs and libraries, becomes his haunt.

If ever you go to Dublin town
In a hundred years or so
Inquire for me in Baggot Street
And what I was like to know.
[...]
On Pembroke Road look out for my ghost
Dishevelled with shoes untied,
Playing through railings with little children
Whose children have long since died.

His sonnet, 'Lines Written on a Seat on the Grand Canal, Dublin', looks forward to a time after his death and sets out how he wants to be commemorated. At the same time the poem is expressive of present contentment with the actuality. The movement in the poem is similar in some aspects to that in Paula Meehan's 'A Vision of My Father' which we looked at earlier. Just as there the figure of the father is fulfilled by the arrival of the birds flocking from other parts, here Kavanagh greets the fantastic light that floods through the arch of a bridge and the barge coming from Athy and other far-flung towns. The common effect of these moments is to recognise that there is a larger world outside the immediate streetscape, and to suggest that the buildings and other structures of the city do not limit the interaction with the world of experience. But Kavanagh, foregrounded as he is in his Dublin poems, is concerned with an idea of himself. The mention of old ghosts meeting in 'On Raglan Road' is an incidental occurrence of an image that he has used at various times in his poetry, but in the other two pieces here the afterlife presence that he conjures up suggests a concern to order how he is to be perceived. Both of them give instructions, imperatively or imploringly. 'If you go to Dublin town in a hundred years or so, this is how you will seek and find me, or this is how to commemorate me'. There is a certain pleasing irony in the fact that Kavanagh, a poet of impeccably rural beginnings, transmuted into an *habitué* of Dublin, with his later poems foregrounding the city thematically and in many respects taking possession of the capital.

'Statue' by Paddy Bushe takes us into the centre of the city. This is an address to the figure of Daniel O'Connell, perpetuated in the poem's phrase after his death by the memorial statue that now stands at the head of O'Connell Street – 'pedestalled in stone' is the phrase. This poem is the opening of a longer sequence by Bushe, called 'Counsellor', focussing on the figure of O'Connell, and it reminds us that O'Connell was an incomer to Dublin from his home place of Kerry and Derrynane. Although O'Connell is now dead and represented by inanimate material, the poem evokes a vital interaction

between history and the present, encompassing both the 1916 Rising in Dublin and the contemporary passers-by as it addresses the figure of O'Connell:

But history won't be repealed by you
or me. Let the hare sit for now.
Emancipated from responsibility,
you can harangue the passing crowds.

The statue stands as a sort of reproach to contemporary Dublin.

The Paula Meehan poem with which I started is a 'looking-out-of-the-window' poem, of which there are several in the anthology. Clairr O'Connor's more recent 'Eyrie Christchurch Place' is one such, and is also set at early morning. Whereas Meehan's poem reflects the northside suburban environment of Finglas, and the demographic movement out of central Dublin in the 1950s and 1960s, O'Connor's is from the perspective of the high-rise apartments. And, like Bushe's poem, it is a centre-city poem. In this poem again, a locale and angle of view are specified: Meehan looked down from an upstairs bedroom, the figure of O'Connell is imagined looking down from his pedestal, but Clairr O'Connor's speaker is many storeys up, removed and – 'eyeball to eyeball with the weathervane on Christchurch Cathedral'. The level of consciousness is different. Meehan is comfortable in moving on to name the neighbours and to make a sympathetic identification with her father, O'Connell might harangue the passing crowds posthumously, but from O'Connor's point of view, there is only the distant external prospect of an unidentified lone reveller making his way through the early morning. Here is a vignette of the changed circumstances of Dublin city life. Whereas Kavanagh inhabits the streets, roads and canal-banks of the city, later poems are more likely to be written from an awareness of an enclosed or limited life.

Both the Meehan poem and that by O'Connor are window poems, but perhaps the archetypal poem of that sort in this anthology is 'Baggot Street Deserta' by Thomas Kinsella. This is an early work by Kinsella, who went on to write many Dublin based poems – indeed, a few years ago they were gathered into a special selection of his work entitled *A Dublin Documentary*. Several of those poems are also included in this anthology, some of them with titles that are specific addresses recovering autobiographical memories – '38 Phoenix Street'; 'Ely Place'. But 'Baggot Street Deserta' is not a retrospective poem looking back over a life. It is a night-time meditation. The speaker looks down on the empty street below and imagines the sleeping population of Dublin, released from the felt experiences of living in the waking world of emotion, thought and art. 'The passing crowds' under O'Connell's statue mentioned in Paddy Bushe's poem are here imagined under a different aspect. Kinsella's city is present in two different ways: it is internalised in the poet's consciousness as his mind ranges over the activity of life, and it is imagined as a neat geographical unit situated on the river that defines its position between the origins in the mountains and the sea estuary. There is no sense here, in this 1960s poem, of Dublin as a cosmopolitan or European site of international connectedness; it is simply the locus for sombre and ultimately inconclusive introspection. The dismissive couplet at the end, as the speaker finishes his smoke and breaks away from his thought, suggests a weary acceptance of things as they are.

My quarter inch of cigarette
Goes flaring down to Baggot Street.

This is very different from the transfiguring leap to St Francis we get at the end of Meehan's poem.

Baggot Street, already mentioned by Kavanagh, and again here by Kinsella, gets a good outing in these mid-twentieth-century poems. Another prominent space in Dublin is Phoenix Park, an open parkland within the bounds of the city that contains a number of civic and national institutions. It figures in several poems from various periods, including the 'Epigram on the New Magazine Fort in Phoenix Park', by Jonathan Swift, 'Magazine Hill' by Harry Clifton and 'Wellington Testimonial' by Richard Murphy – this last another poem on a memorial, like Paddy Bushe's 'Statue'. Another Phoenix Park poem, 'At the Polo-Ground' by Samuel Ferguson, was written in the 1880s, and focuses on a contemporary event – the 1882 assassination by the Invincibles of the recently arrived viceroy Lord Frederick Cavendish and his secretary T. H. Burke as they strolled by the polo-ground outside the viceroy's residence – now *Áras an Uachtaráin* – in the Phoenix Park. The poem is a sort of interior monologue by one of the Invincibles, James Carey, who organised the attack by giving the signal for the killing. The attitude of the poet here is slightly complicated. Ferguson, although sympathetic to the nationalist claims of Irish culture, was a Unionist in politics, and his poem is an attempt to enter into the mind of Carey. It is possible that he may have chosen Carey as a mouthpiece because Carey subsequently turned informer; Ferguson, now an elderly establishment figure, complete with a knighthood and other honours, could have seen him as a sort of bridge to the alien ideology of the Invincibles. Ferguson wants to anatomise the motives and mindset of an accessory to political killing, and the Phoenix Park is a sort of open space in the city within which this can happen – an open space, perhaps, but not altogether neutral. Quite apart from the viceroy's residence, seat and symbol of British power, and the magazine fort associated with military force, the polo-ground itself is a part of the park which bespeaks social and political division. As the arrival of Burke and Cavendish is awaited by Carey, his attitude to the polo-players is imagined in the following words:

Young fops and lordlings of the garrison
Kept up by England here to keep us down;
All rich young fellows not content to own
Their chargers, hacks and hunters for the field
But also special ponies for their game;
And doubtless, as they dash along, regard
Us who stand outside a beggarly crew.

This nineteenth-century poem shows Dublin as the site of social and political division, explicitly raising questions about the distribution of wealth, property and power. These are questions which, if they arise at all in more recent Dublin poems, occur only implicitly – they are not foregrounded, even though the city is still at the centre of administration and government in our polity.

To finish, let's look at another of Paula Meehan's poems, 'A Child's Map of Dublin', which sees the city in yet another guise. Two characters, the speaker and an addressee (her lover, as it turns out) are introduced in the first line, together with a third by allusion: 'I wanted to find you Connolly's Starry Plough'. James Connolly is referenced as a figure from history, and the subsequent action of the poem is played out around the streetscape and in the context of history – national, natural and personal. Between the high culture of the museums and the popular culture of the cinemas, the poet tells of walking 'the northside streets/that whelped [her]', but, she continues, 'not a brick remains / of the tenement I reached the age of reason in. Whole / streets are remade, the cranes erect over Eurocrat schemes / down the docks'. Here, in passing, is the Dublin of recent decades, the workings of the financial centre that have pushed Connolly's ambitions for workers to the periphery, out of town to the satellite settlements in Finglas, Ballymun, Tallaght. It seems to be a Dublin of loss – lost ideals, the lost world of childhood, a whole lost life. But the end of the poem offers a redemptive exchange, and the map referred to in the title becomes a guide to the self, to the personal, to a loving exchange.

You'll ask me no questions. I'll tell you no lies.

Climb in here between the sheets
in the last light of this April evening. We'll trust
the charts of our bodies. They've brought us
safe to each other, battle-scarred and frayed
at the folds, they'll guide us to many wonders.
Come, let's play in the backstreets and tidal flats
till we fall off the edge of the known world,

and drown.

The poem offers an escape from the city into a gentler peopled interior setting, as the Eurocratic scheming of the dockland is supplanted by the erotic scheming of the couple. Dublin has become at once the site of – and the imagery for – love. The city cedes place to its people.

References

All references are taken from *If Ever You Go: A Map of Dublin in Poetry and Song*. Dublin: Dedalus Press, 2014.

Paddy Bushe, 'Statue', p. 40.

Samuel Ferguson, 'At The Polo Ground', pp. 91-2.

Patrick Kavanagh, 'If Ever You Go To Dublin Town', pp. 187-8 ; 'On Raglan Road', pp. 284-5; 'Lines Written on a Seat on the Grand Canal, Dublin', p. 279.

Thomas Kinsella, 'Baggot Street Deserta', pp. 190-2.

Paula Meehan, 'My Father Perceived as a Vision of St Francis', pp. 125-6; 'A Child's Map of Dublin', pp. 185-6.

Clairr O'Connor, 'Eyrie, Christ Church Place', pp. 231-2.

Acknowledgments

Paula Meehan, 'My Father Perceived as a Vision of St Francis' and 'A Child's Map of Dublin', *Pillow Talk* (Gallery Press, 1994).