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Writing the City

How do you write about a city? How do even define a city? A place, a history, geography, sociology, centres and peripheries, monuments and wastelands. A map of possibilities, an elusive map, coming in and out of focus, full of gaps and smudges. City is an abstract word like world or nation or country. You write from your particular apprehension of it, out of your own particular moment. Maybe you don't write *about* it at all. From it, out of it. . . I've always liked what Roy Fisher said about Birmingham – *Birmingham's what I write with*. The city as instrument, mode of exploration, investigation.

'All cities are geological,' Ivan Chtcheglov, tells us.

> You can't take three steps without encountering ghosts bearing all the prestige of their legends. We move within a closed landscape whose landmarks constantly draw us toward the past. Certain shifting angles, certain receding perspectives, allow us to glimpse original conceptions of space, but this vision remains fragmentary. It must be sought in the magical locales of fairy tales and surrealist writings: castles, endless walls, little forgotten bars, mammoth caverns, casino mirrors.'

If Ever You Go, an anthology of Dublin poems, is a brave attempt to map the geology and psychogeography of a city. It's necessarily a challenging and contradictory kind of project because for all its apparent coherence the vision has to remain fragmentary, lodged in the subjective imaginings of the poets and song writers the city has somehow impinged on.
The editors reach for the idea of a map to organise the material – this is, the book says, a map of Dublin in poetry and song and the book is organised geographically, to emphasise that idea, with its Northside, Liffeyside and Southside sections. Maps imply exhaustiveness, a comprehensive overview, a definitive charting of the territory. I think of John Rocque's great 1756 map with its 11,645 houses, every single building in Dublin according to the man himself. King George II was so impressed with it that he hung it in his apartments, maybe because it offered a tantalising image of completeness.

Poets, though, aren't cartographers and their collective responses can't really create a decipherable map. Precisely because of the complexity of responses – or indeed non-responses – a literary map is always a pretty notional idea.

I think for instance of Patrick Kavanagh who provides the title for this anthology. Dublin was many things for him – refuge, shark pond, village, a place of spiritual redemption. But it's his ghost that stalks the city in 'If Ever You Go to Dublin Town', the city viewed from the grave, where the print of his own past might linger, a dishevelled shade 'Playing through the railings with little children/Whose children have long since died.' Dublin for Kavanagh was the place he happened to be, an anyplace for the spirit to grow if it can. He leaves us his print, his map with its named streets, Baggot Street, Pembroke Road, Raglan Road, enough for us to make a Kavanagh-land out of, but he knows the place doesn't matter:

> He knew that posterity had no use
> For anything but the soul,
> The lines that speak the passionate heart,
> The spirit that lives alone.
> O he was a lone one,
> Fol do the di do
> O he was a lone one,
> I tell you.

Kavanagh's relationship is with his spirit, what he cultivates is the vagabond and uncategorisable life of the spirit: the city is where that cultivation happens, which is why it's both a private and universal place. What we see of the city in the poems is the urban village that was his stamping ground, a micro city, a city of the overlooked and under appreciated: canal water, barges

> the functional ward
> Of a chest hospital: square cubicles in a row
> Plain concrete, wash basins - an art lover's woe,

all of these the sites of the deepest kind of celebration, of loafing and soul-inviting.

Some writers need a city in order to discover themselves. Although he prowled its streets, bars, cafés, betting shops and bookshops, the city is less subject matter for Kavanagh than the stage he strides across or the backdrop for his own dramatic self-projections. He's not a *flâneur*, in the Baudelairean sense of someone who walks a city in order to experience it or write about it, but it's still the place where he situates himself, where he lets his poetic self wander, and in this sense he's a classic urban poet. By the time he writes the canal poems or 'The Hospital', Kavanagh has given up his material expectations of the city; he is content to sit in this quiet haven and celebrate both physical recovery and spiritual rebirth, and he is perfectly content to let his eye fall where it will, 'to wallow in the habitual, the banal' or to study 'the inexhaustible adventure of a gravelled yard.'

In one sense, his life makes clear what a slender hold the poet had on the city. His Pembroke Road tenancy was always shaky, he was perpetually broke. Kavanagh was the quintessential outsider, and, as often happens, the very qualities that made his life difficult – the irascible, overbearing, prickly yet enormously vital personality – are what charge the poems and make the best of them unforgettable. At the same time, for all the sustaining antagonism, Kavanagh was part of the visible cultural fabric of the city. Whether holding forth in pubs, drinking tea in Mitchell's tea shop in Grafton Street, addressing students in UCD, jobbing on the 'Standard', or appearing in an ad for Odearest mattresses in bare feet with his battered hat and horn-rimmed glasses, he was part of the iconography of the city.

For those who lived in Kavanagh's neighbourhood, the presence of the poet made itself felt in maybe unexpected ways. In her biography of Kavanagh Antoinette Quinn quotes the diary of a young engineer cum poet who lived in an apartment in Pembroke Road with his wife. He had missed the presence of the poet in the street when Kavanagh was on one of his doomed expeditions to London and had written to him when he returned to tell him he was glad to have him back. Why was it so good to have him back? She quotes his diary: 'it honours the city: it promises life'.

A city, in other words, is enhanced, in ways hard to articulate precisely yet easy to appreciate instinctively, by the presence in it of creative artists. It adds to the currents of energy that make up a city, and by the same token a city in which artists can't live, for whatever reason, is impoverished.

And yet of course there will be artists the city has no time for, and on whom the city exercises little imaginative influence. One of the ghosts who might stalk Dublin is James Clarence Mangan. Remember 'Siberia'?

In Siberia's wastes
  Are sands and rocks
Nothing blooms of green or soft,
But the snow-peaks rise aloft
  And the gaunt ice-blocks.

And the exile there
  Is one with those;
They are part, and lie is part,
For the sands are in his heart,
  And the killing snows.

I think of Mangan every day of my life as I walk down James Clarence Mangan Road, but he's not in this book because, as the editors explain, he didn't explicitly address the matter of his own city. There's a strange fittingness about this. I think of what Joyce said of him: 'Mangan has been a stranger in his country, a rare and unsympathetic figure in the streets, where he is seen going forward alone like one who does penance for some ancient sin'. It reminds us that for writers in their nook of it the city can be setting, subject, metaphor, instigator or absentee landlord.

Mangan's Dublin was a depressed backwater, sunk in its post-Act of Union torpor. But that story changes, as this anthology reminds us, and many poets are conscious that the city they inhabit is also the national capital, therefore a representative national space, seat of government, locus of national struggle and of the iconography of nationhood: the GPO, the museums and statuary. The city, in this work, is very much public space, theatre of national drama: a bitterly contested space, subject to radical and inalterable transformations:

> I have met them at close of day
> Coming with vivid faces
> From counter or desk among grey
> Eighteenth-century houses.
> I have passed with a nod of the head
> Or polite meaningless words,
> Or have lingered awhile and said
> Polite meaningless words,
> And thought before I had done
> Of a mocking tale or a gibe
> To please a companion
> Around the fire at the club,
> Being certain that they and I
> But lived where motley is worn:
> All changed, changed utterly:
> A terrible beauty is born.

It isn't only Irish poets that this aspect of the city affects. This is also the Dublin that impresses itself on the consciousness of the visiting Scottish Gaelic poet Sorley MacLean as he finds himself contemplating the paraphernalia of the Rising in the National Museum. For MacLean the most resonant image is the bloodstained shirt of the executed James Connolly, 'the hero/who is dearest to me of them all':

> The great hero is still
> sitting on the chair
> fighting the battle in the Post Office
> and cleaning streets in Edinburgh.

The ongoing sense of the contested space recurs in some poems, for instance in Máire Mhac an tSaoi's 'Fód an Imris: Ard Oifig an Phoist 1986'/'Trouble Spot: General Post Office 1986', with its questioning opening

> Anso, an ea, 'athair, a thosnaigh sé?
> Gur dhein strainséirí dínn dá chéile?
> Anso, an ea?
>
> Here, father, is this where it started?
> Here we became strangers to each other?
> Was it here?

The focal point of the Easter Rising is also here a locus of conflict between the poet and her father. City, nation, generational conflict, even linguistic difference are at issue, the poem closing in the English of her father's voice

> Cloisim a thuin aduaidh:
> An cuimhin leat an t-aitheasc a thugais
> Nuair ná raibh faiseanta fós?
> Mar seo do ràidhis é:
>
> I see no cause for rejoicing
> That Irishmen once again
> Are killing other Irishmen
> On the streets of Belfast!

The sense of the public, monumental Dublin informs Louis MacNeice's reflection on the city. His 'Dublin' combines intimacy and distance, the monumental and the human in an an attempt to define its essence. Interestingly, it's one of the few poems in the book that tries to do that, to take in the whole sweep of the place and come to some kind of conclusion. In that it's a classic outsider's poem – it takes the eye of the outsider to reveal the secrets of a place, maybe, the conjunction of heroic gesture and grimy poverty

> Grey brick upon brick,
> Declamatory bronze
> On sombre pedestals —
> O'Connell, Grattan, Moore —

but also

> the bare bones of a fanlight
> Over a hungry door
> And the air soft on the cheek
> And porter running from the taps
> With a head of yellow cream
> And Nelson on his pillar

Watching his world collapse.

Those of us who have lived our lives here or grew up here tend to see ourselves: we see the city through ourselves, or rather we can't see the city because our own selves are in the way. MacNeice's vivid realisation of the city comes from its alienness to him, the fact that it was never his town, and that 'she will not/Have me alive or dead' but equally part of its attraction for him is that it is an interstitial place, culturally ambivalent, lodged between England and Ireland, 'Augustan capital/ of a Gaelic nation' and so is an image of his own psychic division as English Irishman or Irish Englishman. 'I am so at home in Dublin,' he once said, 'more so than in any other city, that I feel it has always been familiar to me. It took me years to see through its soft charm to its bitter prickly kernel – which I quite like too.'

MacNeice's eye is panoramic, his poem a set of broad gestures capturing historical context as well as present reality. This is one of the things that makes it attractive; it is designedly an attempt to capture a whole place, to make the city and the poem's complicated connection with it into the chief subject. Surprisingly few poems do this – there are few poems with 'Dublin' as title or with the generalising impulse of MacNeice's poems. Maybe this is because the city is small and consequently people's chief engagement with it is local, parochial, highly particularised: this street, this patch, this garden, this remembered experience.

For other poets the city is first and foremost a material presence to be apprehended. A striking example of this is Trevor Joyce's 'Construction' where the poem is itself a highly conscious constructed artefact confronting the built bulk of a wall and street:

A. 1. I had just turned off from Stephen St.
Into Great Ship St., was confronted
By a massive grey stone wall.

The late rain lay in patches
On the pavements, shone
Between the grey-green cobbles

Of the roadway, throwing up
Grey facets of built stone.

The poem is set out as if it were an architectural diagram or a step by step analytical investigation of the material. The poem has a sculptural clarity as it relished its self-imposed limit, the gaze narrowing:

B. 1. This was suave ceramic
Fired in the mind's furnace.
I had to look again.

2. Each individual limestone cuboid
Chisel-squared and weathered
Rough and grimy, holding on its face
All its past history and the threat
Of its future. Streams
Of rust-brown rain had stained
The entire wall; each
Block realised its presence
In this pattern and the wider
Patterns of sunlight, shadows, tone
And the complete distributed
Weight of rock
Combined for the present.

The wall exists independently of the poet's observing mind, or of his mediation of its history

C. My brain had built
A scheme of echoes,
Of ancient meanings held
In rock, in sunlight on ice,
In the low beginnings of thunder

But this wall needed no exterior
Aid for its stability,
No echo in its circumstance.

A relationship with a city is always a relationship with oneself, and with time. The city is the stage across which time passes, and which holds our lives, which retains some echo of our lives and loves, we like to think. And the city itself, the old historical core, has its own particular life, its own print, its own personality which keeps getting into poems. The plain red brick, the spacious windows and fanlights, wide streets and parks provide a dreaming space very different from the anywheres of the suburbs. So the city functions as a map of emotional life, a set of marks in space and time that can be returned to and serve as emblems of self and society.

When I think of the realisation of the city in poetry for me an unavoidable presence is Thomas Kinsella. From the beginning the city appears in his work, sometimes casually but often in service to psychological complexity and interior life, including the dream life. Kinsella always gives us the coordinates: we always know exactly where we are, Thomas Street, Dame Street, Westland Row, Ely Place, Phoenix Street – in that sense he's the most consciously cartographic of the poets, even though some critics have tended to see the city as no more than incidental. For John Jordan in an early review there was 'little or nothing in his verse ('Baggot Street Deserta' could as well be 'King's Road Deserta') to suggest involvement with the city.' This is both true and not true; it's true in the sense that there is no overt memorialising of the city in the work, no comforting topographical identification, no sense of the city as city in the epic sense of Joyce's Dublin, but it misses the poet's intense and multi-faceted relationship with several Dublins: the city of his childhood with its narrow streets and dark yards; the Georgian city of his young adulthood, and the mangled boom-town with its 'Invisible speculators, urinal architects,/and the Corporation flourishing their documents/in potent compliant dance...'

His poems are often both preternaturally clear in their sharply focused attention on details of places and people and at the same time slightly blurred, their back stories withheld, their architectonics complicated. To read them is to be plunged without preamble or introduction into their immediate, urgent world. 'I was going to say something/and stopped.' ('Ancestor').

They're also strangely self-sufficient – they confound the usual expectation of resolution and closure and are open-ended, the dynamic intensely personal. What stops them from sinking into unmediated privacy is the force of their realisation as verbal objects. The paradox of Kinsella's work is that it often uses very personal material with the flinty objectivity of a Tribunal report. It is part of the process to which the poet subjects his material in order to extract the essentials. The challenge for readers as they follow the poet on his journey to the interior is to learn how to read a poet who resists the usual comforts. Eamon Grennan has said his poems must be experienced rather than understood, and Dennis O'Driscoll once likened reading him to adjusting to the dark in a cinema: 'you do gradually become accustomed to the kind of atmosphere and the kind of light that you're working in.'

A great deal of Kinsella's poetic energy still streams from the places and people of his childhood and his own growing self-awareness. 'All of these poems,' he has said in a note on '38 Phoenix Street', 'whatever their differences, have a feature in common: a tendency to look inward for material – into family or self.'

Kinsella's work in the Land Commission and later the Department of Finance at a time of rapid economic expansion gave another dimension to his work but also further reinforced his steely methodology as a poet. The Department helped him, he has said, 'towards viewing things directly. Staying with the relevant data, and transmitting them complete.'

The relevant data, for Kinsella, include the full span of human experience and the huge variety of response the human spirit and psyche has evolved to process it. This means that you can never separate the public from the private Kinsella, you can't say here is the Dublin of personal memory and here is the public entity, or here is the public and here the private voice. The nature of his pursuit is to find a way of writing which incorporates all of these and moves, often disconcertingly, from one to the other, from Robert Emmet on the scaffold to a Malton print of Thomas St in 1792 and on to the murmur of personal recollection.

There is another way in which Dublin operates in Kinsella that's much harder to pin down. The city is, often, the precisely delineated setting for intensely realised private moments or even hallucinatory waking dream. 'Westland Row' is typical of the first, a dramatically presented domestic scene as the poet and his wife leave the railway station. The scene is described with a hard cold vividness, movement and stasis, arrival and departure rapidly alternating:

> We came to the outer light down a ramp in the dark
> Through eddying cold gusts and grit, our ears
> Stopped with noise. The hands of the station clock
> Stopped, or another day vanished exactly.
> The engine departing hammered slowly overhead.
> Dust blowing under the bridge, we stooped slightly
> With briefcases and books and entered the wind.

'Stopped with noise'; stopped time, the cold motion of the wind – the poem proceeds along an edge of life and death, or seeming failure and seeming renewal:

> The savour of our days restored, dead
> On nostril and tongue. Drowned in air,
> We stepped on our own traces, not on stone,
> Nodded and smiled distantly and followed
> Our scattering paths, not stumbling, not touching.

The city in all this is setting, backdrop but also a kind of agent releasing itself into the consciousness of the protagonists, as the wind in the street turns into a gust of petrol

> Until, in a breath of benzine from a garage-mouth,
> By the Academy of Music coming against us
> She stopped an instant in her wrinkled coat
> And ducked her childish cheek in the coat-collar
> To light a cigarette: seeing nothing,
> Thick-lipped, in her grim composure.
> Daughterwife, look upon me.

You could even say that in poems like these the city itself is more throughly foregrounded and delineated than the physical personages that inhabit the poems or the inner psychological dramas that animate the poems' struggles.

'Ely Place' likewise carefully situates its action in its physical location

> In Mortuary Lane a gull
> cried on one of the Hospital gutters
> I.I.I. … harsh in sadness
> on and on, beak and gullet
> open against the blue.

The real world, or least the observable city, soon recedes and its place is taken by a dreamscape prompted by darkness and 'Down at the corner a flicker of sex/ — a white dress — against the railings.' Soon we're in the dark disturbing territory of a murderous vision

> A blood vision started out of the brick:
> a flustered perfumey dress;
> a mothering shocked smile;
> live muscle startling in skin.
> The box of keys in my pocket
> — I am opening it, tongue-tied.
> I unpick the little penknife
> and dig it in her throat,
> in her spirting gullet.

Kinsella said of this poem:

> I could make sense of ['Ely Place'] by falling back on Jung, if I wanted to [laughs] but I'm not going to ... The dream world is every bit as real as the other world that's going on and every so often it, it erupts like this and I make no attempt to control or suppress it.

A city ultimately is as vast as the collective consciousness and unconsciousness of its citizenry. It presents many faces to us simultaneously, and it is a palimpsest bearing the multiple inscriptions of generations of lives, buildings, art, every imaginable context and achievement. The sense of the city as a living continuum is important to many many poets, and I'd include myself in that, the sense of the layered city, the 'psychical entity' Freud writes of when he thinks of Rome:

> Nothing that has come into existence will have passed away … Where the Coliseum now stands we could at the same time admire Nero's vanished Golden House. On the Piazza of the Pantheon we should find not only the Pantheon of today, as it was bequeathed to to us by Hadrian, but, on the same site, the original edifice erected by Agrippa ...

The intermingling of past and present, the sense of all these lives rubbing shoulders with each other lie behind 'Essex Street', the excavation of which also inspires Moya Cannon's poem in the anthology

Is there no end
to what can be dug up
out of the mud of a riverbank,

no end
to what can be dug up
out of the floodplains of a language?

as well as behind Seamus Heaney's 'Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces'. In my own poem it's the irruption of the past into the present, that sense of the span of time melting, the endless psychical city that animates its voices. Everything is somehow equalised and neutralised in the poem's excavation

... we have fallen through
dragging our sun with us,
our bones settling in the pit,
our winters mingled

again and again the careful pencil
of the finds illustrator,
watches and ingots, an ash bowl, a remote control,
the roof beams tied together, the cloth drying,
standing at the door convincingly arrayed
to wonder who has called us from the fire

. . . we stand frozen and exposed
waiting for you to reach down, observe the season,
how the rain falls, the walls blacken, the streetlamps shine,
how as we approach each other
our bodies slip their ropes and drift,
how lightly, without hesitation or inquiry,
one steps into another, and stays there

Likewise in 'The Hunt' a search for accommodation turns into an encounter with the layers of the past:

We crossed a threshold
Rivals in the bedroom sniffed the air
investors in the kitchen
calculated rental income

...

We drifted through the intimate city
like dust, like light
settling briefly, silent but alert
looking for an opening
...

At 4.30 pm, the light withdrawn
the whole place pulled its chair
closer to the table
muttering secrets of itself

Skaldbrother
loped home with the booty
a crowd shifted outside the jail
old bones stirred

The poor, the triumphant
the pigkiller, the hanged
came out. We returned late
dust of centuries in our hair
old coins in our pockets
Tomorrow we'll spend them
A light long handled
will warm the brick again

I like the idea of the 'dust of centuries in our hair', the idea that, whether we realise it or not, the city inhabits us as much as we inhabit it, and likewise the fingers of time casually ruffle our hair whether we notice it or not. There is no one city, nor any one book to hold it, just a series of protracted small negotiations endlessly and fruitfully repeating themselves. Not the worst place to live in . . .

References

All poem references are taken from *If Ever You Go: A Map of Dublin in Poetry and Song.* Dublin: Dedalus Press, 2014, except James Clarence Mangan, 'Siberia', from *James Clarence Mangan: Poems*, edited by David Wheatley (Gallery Press, 2005) and Patrick Kavanagh, 'The Hospital' from *Patrick Kavanagh, Collected Poems*, edited by Antoinette Quinn (Allen Lane, 2004).

Moya Cannon, 'Isolde's Tower, Essex Quay', pp. 12-3.
Trevor Joyce, 'Construction', pp. 214-15
Patrick Kavanagh, 'If Ever You Go To Dublin Town', pp. 187-8
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Acknowledgements
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