

Home and places.

In several hot afternoons in Paros, I sat on rather too comfortable chairs, thinking about home which had seemed so solid before I left Ireland; I listened to other speakers talking about their homes. Glimpses of remote and peaceful places where the horses graze, of crowded pavements on which people live whole functioning lives, of flooded cities whose shapes are kept alive in the mental maps of their displaced inhabitants; stories of persecution and comedies of family life; experiences of joy, frustration, sadness, dislocation, exclusion. I realised that I myself had more than one definition of home, which I had not identified so exactly before. *My home* is a place lost in past time, in my life when I was a child; it was a place where children were sent out on messages into the city, a place where going to jail for political reasons was anticipated as a normal part of life, having been experienced by my father, grandmother and great-grandfather as well as by assorted aunts and uncles. A place where we were told by our schoolmistress in 1950 to pray that atomic warfare would not come to Ireland. Lost, impossible.

It has been replaced by *the place where one feels at home*, a quite different quantity, mobile in space, time and culture. The place where I feel at home is anywhere where the street and road signs are in two languages, both of which are the language of the place. Or a place where the neighbours know your business. Or the town of Casalattico in the province of Frosinone in Campania, from which so many Italians emigrated to Ireland. They think of Ireland as another home, and when they heard the voices of a bus-load of Irish people the centenarians came running out of their houses to talk with nostalgia about Navan and Portrush.

So it is: we travel in order to return, but, before returning, to pause, to turn through a hundred or so degrees and survey - what? A larger world in which the place we left glows in its setting. Not only the relocating of home, but the verification of distance now between ourselves and home, enables us to think and to create. When we remove ourselves from that daily intersection of competing demands we can see a home that does not exist in a single moment but is a summary of its past meanings. And it is the other-place where we find ourselves, indeterminate, away and outside, that captures the energy of the present.

Firstly I should admit that it's as a poet that I speak and that I perceive a division between the poet and the writer of most kinds of prose when it comes to place. I find in much prose an emphasis on the usual and, even when it is resisted, a gesture towards the communal. It's as a poet that I return, as often in my own past, to talk about my native city of Cork.

Cork is a fine place, founded by Vikings, walled and defended for centuries. It sits on an island, on a clutch of islands rather, in the river Lee. Over the centuries its pile-driven foundations bit into the wet soil, its walls hemmed in an oval in the surrounding marshland, it was pinned at either end by a pair of humpy stone bridges of which one still remains. It was occupied, reclaimed, then besieged and colonised by the English. The newest buildings on the main street - itself once a branch of the river - were built with the compensation money paid after British soldiers set the town on fire in 1920, destroying the centre including the City Hall. [That wasn't the first major fire; the city

had been badly damaged in 1622 and in the 1690 siege.] Between the new stone facades of that latest reconstruction are the older eighteenth-century houses which still predominate in a couple of elegant streets. The warehouses of the merchants from the same period, who made it a prosperous place (in part by provisioning the slave ships on their way to the French West Indies), are made of the characteristic and beautiful combination of red sandstone and white limestone sourced from local quarries. I'll get back to the stone later.

There are gestures at consistency. But much of the city is a haphazard succession of buildings dating from a mixture of periods, still following the medieval pattern of streets and laneways, crammed on their island site, churches, markets and houses. On the hills that surrounded the town suburbs grew up: some respectable, terraces with British Army names recalling Wellington and Waterloo, inhabited by the officers from the barracks higher up again; some grim and filthy with names like Brandy Lane, Spudtown, Cat Lane. I still remember the smell of the lanes and tenements, the public houses and their truculent customers, the shadowy shawled women making off down an entry clutching drink or money with equal desperation.

Is it clear that I am attempting to describe this place with love? Love aroused by the inexhaustible mystery of a place, by the acute nonchalance with which its history was worn, by the extreme oddity of its features. Let me pause and consider why the oddity was so marked. And why it might be of interest in a discussion of homelands.

The sense of home and of place must be, irrespective of genre, very largely mediated through the consciousness of a child, that is to say a consciousness where the notion of 'normality' has not yet established itself, because a child lives in a world of arbitrary uncontrollable change. The child's mind rapidly understands why the poor woman clutches her whiskey, why the poor families live in crowded flats, why the broken and distorted parts of cities are still there, as if forgotten when a bigger child moved on to a new game. The child may understand the ruined better than the new. The child is poor and often afraid, and is an expert at constructing temporary retreats. Thus, the strangeness of a street that was once the back entrance to a stable, with a featureless stretch of wall between two stable gates (which is in fact the last remaining vestige of an illegal eighteenth-century monastery) is the strangeness and hiddenness that makes sense to a child's mind. Its uniqueness incises it in memory.

My native place was experienced by me as unique, but also as invisible, unnamable. This wasn't just because it was a provincial city in a country which had a hyperactive cultural identity, but had partly shut itself out of a particular international connection known as 'the English-speaking world'. [This withdrawal into a Gaelic, scribal culture, especially in the province of Munster, has been identified as 'The Hidden Ireland' in the words of the Cork scholar Daniel Corkery.] It was also because my childhood was a time of cultural transition. As a precocious early reader I could see that both the English-speaking connection and the newer Irish national culture included expectations that a place would define itself as 'An English-speaking city' or 'an Irish city', to which this obstinate, self-centred, poor and largely ignorant place would not conform. After the departure of the soldiers of the Crown, the renaming of King Street and George's Street, some members of the generation who had taken part in the founding of a new state produced a realist prose which reflected the disarray of the city. I grew up as an apprentice poet who sensed the absence of a specifically poetic tradition which would express its invisible reality as a place that had been at least partially erased.

The erasures of history were powerful. The Anglo-Irish war of 1919-21, the fire, the murder by British soldiers of one Lord Mayor, the death of another on hunger-strike, were notorious, in Ireland and beyond, but on the spot they sank out of sight. I haven't mentioned the erasure of the Irish language, or the persistence of the geography which laid down that the oldest churches of any but the Anglican denomination, the ones that dated back to the time when the dominance of English was established, were still cramped on lanes and back streets or what the 'Parliamentary Gazette of Ireland' in 1846 refers to in this connection as 'squalid and irregular alleys'. Names too persisted and resisted; new names for an institution, 'St Finbar's Hospital' for example, did not succeed in replacing older descriptions, 'the Poorhouse' or 'the Union'.

The short story writers were not I think bothered by these historical irritants. They had a tribute to pay to the typical and provincial; the genre naturally positioned the city at a distance from a cultural centre. A story by Frank O'Connor described a Cork child reading a friend's copy of a British school story in which upper-class English boys frequented a school that was a romantically Gothic building, looking 'like the lunatic asylum with us'. A borrowed text, a powerless child reader, an imperial theme viewed from a provincial angle, an architecture borrowed and debased.

O'Connor's story showed the place's prose existence as multiply limited and occluded - this because of the rules of its own genre, which tended towards the 'scrupulous meanness' of the French and Russian masters as well as Joyce. The poet must I think have an unscrupulous approach: like the graffiti writer the poet must change the reality that is there, must appropriate and proclaim, create a new centre.

In 1960 I discovered the poetry of Patrick Galvin, a working-class emigrant from Cork writing in London, who had the authentic sense of how the meaning of the city needed to be resurrected. He makes the street names of large thoroughfares and unregarded back lanes sing out; inadmissible in realistic prose because of their sheer oddity, they are a kick-start for his apocalyptic poetry. I read his work in *Paros* in part because I know he is a poet who has not had his due, and was delighted by the response of some colleagues. From 'The Kings are out', in *Christ in London*:

In Patrick Street
 In Grattan Street
 In Ireland Rising Liberty Street
 The Kings are out.

Along the Mall
 The Union Quay
 In every street along the Lee
 The Kings are out.

With knives of ice
 And dressed to kill
 The wine flows down from Summer Hill ...

A decade later I and my friends got to know Galvin, by then back in Ireland, and presently the magazine of which I am one-quarter editor published poems of his. In an issue from 1976 I find his 'Ballad of Sister Mary'; he writes:

When Sister Mary rose from the dead
 And walked through Cork, the children fled
 And mothers tucked them up in bed
 And locked and barred the doors.

But Sister Mary issued fire
 From mouth and eye and wrinkled bone
 And neither cross nor earthly moan
 Could save a single child.

From Ballinlough to Spangle hill
 She hacked and chopped till all were slain
 The flesh she hung in Blue Boy's Lane
 The hearts she spiked in Douglas ...

The fury in the poems is the fury of history alive in a place; as in the same poet's 'Statement on the Burning of Cork'. These are proclamations that life does not consist only of the quotidian, and yet their surreal imagery keep them far away from the kinetic vulgarity (to quote Joyce) of political agendas. In Galvin's poetry the resurrected past is often feminine as well as fierce, and the wrong that is avenged can be political or sexual. In all of his work there is a moral compulsion (as in 'Statement on the Burning of Cork', and in his autobiographical writings) to offer oneself as a witness, and beyond that, an attraction to energy, including the female destructive energy which one participant in the Paros conversations, Kavery Nambisan, recognised as reminiscent of her own culture with its great angry goddess Kali. Irish folklore too has such dangerous supernatural females, of whom the Banshee, related to the ancient goddess Badb, is the best known.

In Ireland, especially in the 1970s, we were often told we were too interested in our own history, but we have continued to excavate, often social and sexual wrongs. And there is a poetry, and I include my own, which can only be written out of the sense of the absolute proximity of the real past, and the place which is home, from which history can be seen.

The real past is there everywhere - in landscape and cities, in every stepping-stone across a stream, and planted tree and roofed shed. The city is constructed by soldiers and politicians, but, underneath what we think we, see there is the layer of actual work, the work of carpenters and plasterers and electricians and stonemasons who polished and planed what had been drawn, who discovered the reality of the seasoned wood and the quarried limestone and the marble fetched from far places, who built and continually replaced. The best book about Cork is by a sculptor, Séamus Murphy, who recorded the lives and sayings of the craftsmen in stone with whom he had worked in his youth. He wanted someone to take over from him, to celebrate the other craftsmen, cabinetmakers and plasterers, bellfounders, smiths, glaziers, and their materials, among which the citizens still dwell unawares. Perhaps someone will add to his work some day.

In the same copy of *Cyphers* where I found the Ballad of sister Mary I happened on a poem of my own, called 'Barrack Street' which celebrated those crafts, as we moved in the mid-1970s into an age of wholesale demolition:

Missing from the scene

Home/Lands.

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The many flat surfaces,
 Undersides of doors, of doormats
 Blank backs of wardrobes
 The walls of tunnels in walls
 Made by the wires of bells and the shadows of square spaces
 Left high on kitchen walls
 By the removal of those bells on their boards,

The returning minotaur pacing transparent
 In the transparent maze cannot
 Smell out his stall: the angles all move towards him,
 No alcove to rest his horns ...

As imaginative writers we have the advantage of never ever having to say more than we mean. The corollary is that we are tied to what we have really known - in terms of a knowledge so authentic that it allows us to imagine, without claiming to own, the experience of others. A static provincial experience can offer an arrow-slit through which the mobile and the nomadic can be glimpsed. To return to the theme of travel, perhaps all wandering is a search for a lucky view. The wandering around the house looking for the moment when we see the far window reflected in the glass door blazing in afternoon light. I found such a view when I was asked to write a poem to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of an association founded to assist the victims of polio in Cork. I wanted it to be a poem about care and freedom, about my father who was an early activist in the group, but also about names, those stretches of sound taken out of the people's mouths or recreated from the ancient texts, written down in as many languages as we need and pinned to real places. I see it too as a continuation of the way Galvin wrote about the city, as the one real place in the world. I offered it at the Paros sessions as a link between the international and the intimately local:

The Polio Epidemic

No hurry at all in house or garden,
 The children were kept from the danger –
 The parents suddenly had more time
 To watch them, to keep them amused,
 To see they had plenty to read.
 The city lay empty, infected.
 There was no more ice-cream.
 The baths were closed all summer.

One day my father allowed me beyond the gate
 With a message to pass through a slit in a blank wall;
 I promised I would just cycle for two hours,
 Not stop or talk, and I roamed the long roads
 Clear through city and suburbs, past new churches,
 Past ridges of houses where strange children
 Were kept indoors too, I sliced through miles of air,
 Free as a plague angel descending
 On places the buses went: Cnocán na Biolraí,
 Watergrasshill, Commons Road, Friars' Walk.