

The Place of Writing in the Poetry of W. B. Yeats and Patrick Kavanagh

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Abstract

This article addresses the theme of place in the poetry of W. B. Yeats and Patrick Kavanagh, focusing on the concept of place as a physical and psychological entity. The article explores place as a creative force in the work of these two poets, in relation to the act of writing. Seamus Heaney, in his essay "The Sense of Place," talks about the "history of our sensibilities" that looks to the stable element of the land for continuity: "We are dwellers, we are namers, we are lovers, we make homes and search for our histories" (Heaney 1980: 148-9). Thus, in a physical sense, place is understood as a site in which identity is located and defined, but in a metaphysical sense, place is also an imaginative space that maps the landscapes of the mind. This article compares the different ways in which Yeats and Kavanagh relate to their place of writing, physically and artistically, where place is understood as a physical lived space, and as a liberating site for an exploration of poetic voice, where the poet creates his own country of the mind.

Key words: place, space, history, poetic voice, home, writing, Yeats, Kavanagh, Heaney

Irrespective of our creed or politics, irrespective of what culture or subculture may have coloured our individual sensibilities, our imaginations assent to the stimulus of the names, our sense of place is enhanced, our sense of ourselves as inhabitants not just of a geographical country but of a country of the mind is cemented. It is this feeling, assenting, equable marriage between the geographical country and the country of the mind, whether that country of the mind takes its tone unconsciously from a shared oral inherited culture, or from a consciously savoured literary culture, or of both, it is this marriage that constitutes the sense of place in its richest possible manifestation. (Heaney 1980: 132)

In his collection of essays, *Preoccupations* (1980), Seamus Heaney echoes Yeats where he states that poetry "is out of the quarrel with ourselves and the quarrel with others is rhetoric" (Heaney 1980: 34). In addition to the quarrel with oneself, the poet, in the act of writing, is also influenced by the actual physical place of belonging. As Heaney puts it: "One half of one's sensibility is in a cast of mind that comes from belonging to a place, an ancestry, a history, a culture, whatever one wants to call it. But consciousness and quarrels with the self are the result of what Lawrence called 'the voices of my education'" (Heaney

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1980: 35). According to Heaney, this dialectical process is at the centre of the creative process—the bringing together of the two opposing forces, on the one hand, the geographical and historical, and, on the other hand, the psychological and transcendent. He develops this idea of place and the creative process further in his collection *The Place of Writing* (1989) in the following discussion about the work of art:

[. . .] to work is to move a certain mass through a certain distance. In the case of poetry, the distance moved through is that which separates the historically and topographically situated place from the written place, the mass moved is one aspect of the writer's historical/biographical experience, and each becomes a factor of the other in the achieved work. The work of art, in other words, involves raising the historical record to a different power. (Heaney 1989: 36)

The raising of the poet's historical or biographical experience to the different power of art is likened to Archimedes's claim that he "could move the world if he could find the right place to position his lever" (Heaney 1989: 19). It is this sense of positioning in relation to the place to which one belongs, and the place from which one writes, that interests me in the following exploration of the place of writing in the work of Yeats and Kavanagh.

I would like to begin with an extract from a letter by W. B. Yeats, written to his father, on July 16, 1919. He writes as follows:

I am writing in the great ground floor of the castle—pleasantest room I have yet seen, a great wide window opening over the river and a round arched door leading to the thatched hall [. . .]. There is a stone floor and a stone-roofed entrance-hall with the door to winding stair to left, and then a larger thatched hall, beyond which is a cottage and kitchen. In the thatched hall imagine a great copper hanging lantern [. . .]. I am writing at a great trestle table which George keeps covered with wild flowers. (qtd in Hone: 1943: 319)

Yeats, (born in Dublin, in 1865), was writing these lines from Thoor Ballylee—a medieval tower on the banks of the River Cloon, in the Barony of Kiltartan, in County Galway. He had bought the tower two years previously, in 1917, for thirty five pounds (Jeffares 1992: 40), on the recommendation of his great friend, and fellow Irish Literary Revivalist, Lady Gregory, who lived nearby at Coole Park, and he had it restored as a place of retreat for himself, his new wife George, and their

young family.¹ The tower, dating from the fourteenth century, was originally a Norman keep, descending from the great line of the de Burgos, the Anglo-Norman family who established themselves in Connaught in the thirteenth Century, and ruled over much of that part of Ireland. It consisted of four floors, connected by a winding stairway that was built into the seven foot thickness of the massive outer wall.

Thoor Ballylee became for Yeats a powerful symbol, both in his personal and in his professional life. It was a retreat from the turbulent political events of the day—a “blessed place” where he could be with his family and write poetry. If, as the cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan argues, “place is security and space is freedom: we are attached to the one and long for the other” (Tuan 2008: 3), then one can say that for Yeats, Thoor Ballylee combined both—it was a place of security that at the same time offered the freedom of creative space. In a letter to a friend, Olivia Shakespeare, in 1926, Yeats writes:

We are in our Tower and I am writing poetry as I always do here, and, as always happens, no matter how I begin, it becomes love poetry before I am finished [. . .] as you can see I have no news, for nothing happens in this blessed place but a stray beggar or a heron. (Yeats 1954: 714-15)

He writes about the tower in his poem “My House,” (from the longer poem “Meditations in Time of Civil War,” published in *The Tower* in 1928), as follows:

An ancient bridge, and a more ancient tower,
A farmhouse that is sheltered by its wall,
An acre of stony ground,
Where the symbolic rose can break in flower,
Old ragged elms, old thorns innumerable,
The sound of the rain or sound
Of every wind that blows;
The stilted water-hen

¹ In a letter to his life-long friend, Maud Gonne, written in May 1918, before moving into the tower, Yeats writes: “We hope to be in Ballylee in a month & there I dream of making a house that may encourage people to avoid ugly manufactured things—an ideal poor man’s house. Except a very few things imported as models we should get all made in Galway or Limerick, I am told that our neighbours are pleased that we are not getting ‘grand things but old Irish furniture’” (Yeats 1992: 393-4).

46 *Irene Gilsenan Nordin*

Crossing stream again
Scared by the splashing of a dozen cows;

A winding stair, a chamber arched with stone,
A grey stone fireplace with an open hearth,
A candle and written page.
[. . .] (Yeats 1990: 247)

Yeats began negotiations to buy Ballylee Thoor a few months after the Easter Rising of 1916. It was a time of great political upheaval, not only in Ireland. In Europe, the Battle of the Somme had broken out, and the following year, 1917, the Russian Revolution began. In Ireland, the War of Independence started in January 1919, and went on until July 1921, to be followed by the outbreak of the Irish Civil War, 1922-23. It is against this background of violence and civil unrest that we can understand the importance of Thoor Ballylee for Yeats. It was not just an empowering imaginative force in his writing, but also a symbol of stability—a symbol of a more ordered existence, a stay against confusion, which offered a counterbalance in a time of political and social uncertainty. He wrote of the symbolism of Ballylee in his poem “Blood and the Moon” (from his collection *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*, 1933) as follows:

Blessed be this place,
More blessed still this tower;
[. . .]
I declare this tower is my symbol; I declare
This winding, gyring, spiring treadmill of a stair is my ancestral stair;
That Goldsmith and the Dean, Berkeley and Burke have travelled there.
[. . .] (Yeats 1990: 287)

For Yeats, the tower was a monument to a heroic past; it was a romantic longing back to an ancient civilisation, the dignified life-style of the aristocracy, and the disappearing Anglo-Irish Protestant Ascendancy, whose lifestyle and values he greatly admired. He also admired the values of the peasant classes, representing harmony and simplicity. In his view, these two groups were in sharp contrast with the newly emerging Irish Catholic middle-classes, such as those he derided in his poem “September 1913,” from the collection *Responsibilities* (1914): “What need you, being come to sense, / But fumble in a greasy till / And add the halfpence to the pence / And prayer to shivering prayer,

until / You have dried the marrow from the bone” (Yeats 1997: 48). The “you” addressed here being the mercantile middle classes, whom Yeats considered greedy, money grubbing and petty, and who—with their ostentatious and vulgar ways—represented everything that he abhorred.

Situated in the far West of the country, far from the metropolitan, Anglicised East, Ballylee was an artistic and symbolic appropriation of what Yeats considered to be the real Ireland. The tower was placed in a historically and mythologically resonant landscape, which appealed to Yeats’s artistic sensibility, and satisfied his desire for ancestral continuity. It was his heroic response to ugly materialism and symbolised the promise of the permanence of art. In Ballylee, he wrote *A Vision* (1925), where he developed his elaborate philosophical system of the gyres, explaining the journey of the soul, and providing himself with a system that he regarded as a “stylistic arrangement of experience,” an important insight into the workings of the creative imagination (Yeats 1989: 25). In Ballylee, he also wrote his collection, *The Tower* (1928), containing many of his highly acclaimed poems, such as “Sailing to Byzantium,” where the speaker longs to escape from the physical constraints of an ageing and decrepit body, into an ageless world of art. The poem begins with the well-known lines: “That is no country for old men. The young / In one another’s arms, birds in the trees, /—Those dying generations—at their song,” and the second stanza continues the theme of longing to escape: “An aged man is but a paltry thing, / A tattered coat upon a stick, unless / Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing / For every tatter in its mortal dress” (Yeats 1990: 239).

The tower was not just a physical place of writing for Yeats, but also a psychological space where he could endeavour to write the kind of poetry he longed for, which—as he puts it in “The Fisherman,” from *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1917)—would be “as cold / and passionate as the dawn” (Yeats 1997: 59). The tower was not just a place of residence; as Heaney states, Yeats’s “other addresses were necessary shelters but Ballylee was a sacramental site, an outward sign of an inner grace. The grace here was poetry and the lonely tower was the poet’s sign. Within it, he was within his own mind” (Heaney 1989: 24). When Yeats was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1923, for what the Nobel Committee called his “always inspired poetry,” which “gives expression to the spirit of a whole nation,” he referred to the tower in his acceptance speech, given in Stockholm on 15 Dec, 1923 (later published as *The*

Bounty of Sweden in 1925). In his speech, he quotes some lines from his poem “The Stare’s Nest by My Window” (Yeats 1991: 580). This poem is a good example of the place of poetry, both physically and existentially. The poem was written at Ballylee during the Civil War, and, in his notes, Yeats describes the background to the poem and how the fighting between the two rival Civil War groups—de Valera’s Irish Republican Army, on the one side, and the Nationalists, on the other—came right up to the door of the tower. He explains: “Before they were finished the Republicans blew up our ‘ancient bridge’ one midnight. They forbade us to leave the house, but were otherwise polite, even saying at last “Good-night, thank you,” as though we had given them the bridge” (Yeats 1990: 642).

“The Stare’s Nest by My Window” was inspired by what Yeats calls an “overmastering desire not to grow unhappy or embittered, not to lose all sense of the beauty of nature” (Yeats 1990: 648). The poem begins with the image of honey bees building in the loosening masonry of the tower walls, and calls on the bees to build instead in the empty nest left behind by the stare at the speaker’s window (the stare is a local name for the starling). The second stanza continues:

[. . .]
 We are closed in, and the key is turned
 On our uncertainty; somewhere
 A man is killed, or a house burned,
 Yet no clear fact to be discerned:
 Come build in the empty house of the stare.

A barricade of stone or of wood;
 Some fourteen days of civil war:
 Last night they trundled down the road
 That dead young soldier in his blood:
 Come build in the empty house of the stare.
 [. . .] (Yeats 1990: 250)

The poem contrasts the contemplative life of the poet, in his quiet tower, with the troubled world outside, where the “dead young soldier in his blood” is “trundled down the road” in the darkness. Focusing on the healing powers of nature, the speaker concludes by suggesting that in the face of violence and death, with the heart “fed on fantasies” and grown “brutal from the fare,” that nature can teach us a lesson. The image of the honey bee coming to build in the empty house of the stare evokes the

promise of new life that will—in time—emerge from destruction and decay.

In the physical sense, the poem is an example of writing firmly situated in the experience of place and time—Ireland, at the time of the Civil War. But, also, in the existential sense, the poem demonstrates the place of poetry as something that, for Yeats, could unite intellect and art in a single vision, what he called “holding reality and justice in a single thought” (Yeats 1989: 25). It is an example of the poet’s attempt to fit his experience of the world into an intellectual framework to give it structure and meaning. It is poetry as an act of defense against the physical world of lived experience, and the chaos of the war and violence going on all around.

From Yeats tower at Ballylee, I want now to cross the country to the parish of Inniskeen (translated from the Gaelic meaning “peaceful island”) in County Monaghan, to where the poet Patrick Kavanagh was born in 1904. Kavanagh, generally considered one of the most influential poets since Yeats,² began his professional writing career in 1939, the year of Yeats’s death. Just as Ballylee Thoor was the writing place of Yeats, Inniskeen was the writing place for Kavanagh, but in a very different sense. Kavanagh was the son of a shoemaker cum farmer, one of a family of ten, who finished school when he was thirteen years old to work as an apprentice shoemaker to his father, and help on the family’s small farm. In contrast with Yeats’s backward glance to a disempowered colonial caste that he claimed kinship with, Kavanagh ignored history and recent political upheavals, and focused instead on the here and now of the simple everyday. He gave voice to the recently decolonised Catholic underclass, and as such his work represents a postcolonial turn in Irish poetry. He tapped into the consciousness of the majority of his countrymen, and, as Heaney expresses it, “raising the inhibited energies of a subculture to the power of a cultural resource” (Heaney 1980: 116).

Kavanagh wrote about the ordinary comings and goings of the rural community among which he lived, about the experiences of farm life, the spraying of the potatoes, the cutting of the hay, the milking of the cows, and so on. And in his poetry he gave the unremarkable countryside

² Apart from poets like John Montague and Seamus Heaney, poets touched by Kavanagh’s example include Eavan Boland, Paul Durcan, Desmond Egan, Eamon Grennan, Michael Hartnett, Brendan Kennelly and James Liddy. See Allison 2003: 57.

around Inniskeen a remarkable presence in the Irish literary landscape. If Yeats's place of writing was the tower, Kavanagh's writing place was the cottage; and his early poem, "My Room" (Kavanagh 1964: 29), where simplicity is woven together with Catholic iconography, can be read in sharp contrast with the lofty tower of Yeats's poem "My House." Kavanagh's poem begins with a basic physical description of the room: "10 by 12 / And a low roof / If I stand by the side wall / My head feels the reproof." Overshadowing this image of confined space, with the bed "in the centre / So many things to me," are five holy pictures: "The Virgin and Child / St Anthony of Padua / St Patrick our own / Leo XIII / And the Little Flower"—a very ordinary scenario in any rural Irish Catholic household at that time. However, the concluding lines of the poem transform this ordinary space into something extraordinary:

My room is a musty attic
But its little window
Lets in the stars.
(Kavanagh 1964: 29)

Kavanagh looked for the spiritual in the commonplace, finding it in the most unexpected places, as in his poem "The Long Garden" where he writes: "In the sow's rooting where the hen scratches / We dipped our fingers in the pockets of God" (Kavanagh 2000: 17). He gave a face to the mundane places around Inniskeen by naming them, and, in naming them, he gave them new meaning. He writes in *The Green Fool* (from 1938):

There were good names on these hills even though their soil was sticky and scarce
of lime. Poets had surely put the names on them. Translated from the Gaelic they
were: "The Field of the Shop," "The Field of the Well," "The Yellow Meadow,"
"The Field of the Musician." (Kavanagh 2001: 204)

The act of naming itself was important, as he writes in his poem "The Hospital":

Naming these things is the love-act and its pledge;
For we must record love's mystery without claptrap,
Snatch out of time the passionate transitory. (Kavanagh 2000: 119)

Less reverentially—and in a typically depreciating manner—he writes of the name of the townland in which he was born: “The name of my birthplace was Mucker [. . .] the name was a corrupted Gaelic word signifying a place where pigs bred in abundance [. . .]. Around our house there stood little hills all tilled and tamed” (Kavanagh 2001: 8). In his poem “Shancoduff,” he writes about these same hills, giving them new dimension and light:

My black hills have never seen the sun rising,
Eternally they look north towards Armagh.
Lot’s wife would not be salt if she had been
Incurious as my black hills that are happy
When dawn whitens Glasdrummond chapel.

My hills hoard the bright shillings of March
While the sun searches every pocket.
These are my Alps and I have climbed the Matterhorn
With a sheaf of hay for the three perishing calves
In the field under the Big Forth of Rocksavage.
(Kavanagh 2000: 8)

Kavanagh rejected the romantic idealisation of the rural that had inspired Yeats and the writers of the Celtic Twilight. He rejected the idioms that promoted a unified national myth, and was critical of Yeats and the Revivalists, whom he claimed professed “to be so frightfully Irish and racy of the Celtic soil,” but who were guilty of constructing “a thorough-going English-bred lie” (Kavanagh 2003: 306). He writes unsentimentally of his childhood experience as “the usual barbaric life of the Irish country poor. [. . .]. Poverty is a mental condition [. . .]. Poverty has nothing to do with eating your fill everyday; [. . .] the real poverty was the lack of enlightenment to get out under the moon” (Kavanagh 2003: 307). He was fiercely critical of post-independent Ireland’s nationalist discourse and the hypocrisy of religious pieties, and in *The Green Fool* (1938) he refers to the whin bushes—or the gorse that grows wild all over the countryside, especially in areas of poor land—as the “Yellow flame-blossoms of the whin [that] lit bonfires all over the landscape; [. . .] as persistent and fertile as sin and disease” (Kavanagh 2001: 8), suggesting that like the whin bushes, sin and disease were rampant everywhere—not least in the eyes of the Catholic Church.

Kavanagh's long narrative poem, *The Great Hunger* (1942), focuses on the blighted lives and the spiritually impoverished existence of rural life, and begins with the often-quoted line, "Clay is the word and clay is the flesh." The poem traces the frustrated and emotionally unfulfilled life of its central character, Patrick Maguire, who, feeling a prisoner on the land, demands: "Who bent the coin of my destiny / That it stuck in the slot?" He continues, remembering happier times in his youth:

I remember a night we walked
Through the moon of Donaghmoyne,
Four of us seeking adventure—
It was midsummer forty years ago.
Now I know
The moment that gave the turn to my life.
O Christ! I am locked in a stable with pigs and cows forever.
[. . .] (Kavanagh 2000: 40)

A similar anti-pastoral theme is explored in his well-known poem "Stony Grey Soil," which shows the bitterness of a wasted life, stuck on the farm:

O stony grey soil of Monaghan
The laugh from my love you thieved;
You took the gay child of my passion
And gave me your clod-conceived.
[. . .]
You sang on steaming dunghills
A song of cowards' brood,
You perfumed my clothes with weasel itch,
You fed me on swinish food.

You flung a ditch on my vision
Of beauty, love and truth.
O stony grey soil of Monaghan
You burgled my bank of youth!
[. . .] (Kavanagh 2000: 13)

While Kavanagh's physical place of writing was Inniskeen, the psychological place of his birth as a poet was Dublin, where he moved, when he was thirty five years old, in order to make a living as a writer. In his *Self-Portrait*, he writes of Dublin city as follows: "I came to Dublin in nineteen thirty-nine. It was the worst mistake of my life" (Kavanagh

2003: 307). Nevertheless, it was in Dublin that he gained confidence as a writer and was able to look back and get a clear perspective on his original place of writing. He describes this realisation as follows:

For many a good-looking year I wrought hard at versing but I would say that, as a poet, I was born in or about nineteen-fifty-five, the place of my birth being the banks of the Grand Canal. Thirty years earlier Shancoduff's watery hills could have done the trick, but I was too thick to take the hint. Curious this, how I had started off with the right simplicity, indifferent to crude reason, and then ploughed my way through complexities and anger, hatred and ill-will towards the faults of man, and came back to where I started. (Kavanagh 2003: 313)

Kavanagh's early work was a poetry of protest, mired in disenchantment and frustration, but his later work is celebratory and visionary. In his poem "Is," we see him at his best, as he rises above the resentment and bitterness to focus on the existential and transcendent:

The important thing is not
To imagine one aught
Have something to say
[. . .].
The only true teaching
Subsists in watching
Things moving or just colour
Without comment from the scholar.
To look on is enough
In the business of love.
[. . .] (Kavanagh 2000: 124)

Kavanagh came to realise the importance of just seeing: "To know fully even one field or one lane is a lifetime's experience. In the world of poetic experience it is depth that counts and not width. A gap in a hedge, a smooth rock surfacing a narrow lane, a view of a woody meadow, the stream at the junction of four small fields—these are as much as a man can fully experience" (Kavanagh 1977: 8). He placed great importance on the Parochial mentality which dealt with the "fundamentals" of experience, something which he saw as the direct opposite to the provincial:

The provincial has no mind of his own; he does not trust what his eyes see until he has heard what the metropolis—towards which his eyes are turned—has to say on the subject [. . .]. The Parochial mentality on the other hand never is in any doubt

about the social and artistic validity of his parish. All great civilisations are based on parochialism [. . .]. Parochialism is universal; it deals with the fundamentals [. . .]. In Ireland we are inclined to be provincial, not parochial, for it requires a great deal of courage to be parochial [. . .]. To be parochial a man needs the right kind of sensitive courage and the right kind of sensitive humility [. . .]. (Kavanagh 1952: 1)

To conclude, the importance of place resonates in the work of both Yeats and Kavanagh, and is closely related to the practice of poetry, as embodied by both of these poets. For Yeats, the challenge of poetry was “to hold in a single thought reality and justice,” where the poetic was a redress to the political. Heaney, in discussing Yeats as an example, points out that he shows how “art can outface history, the imagination can distain happenings once it has incubated and mastered the secret behind happenings” (Heaney 1980: 99). But that was not to say that the imagination took preference over “happenings.” As Heaney expresses it: “Yeats bore the implications of his romanticism into action: he propagandized, speechified, fund-raised, administered and politicked in the world of telegrams and anger, all on behalf of the world of vision” (Heaney 1980: 100). He “donned the mantle—or perhaps one should say the fur coat—of the aristocrat so that he might express a vision of a communal and personal life that was ample, generous, harmonious, fulfilled and enhancing” (Heaney 1980: 108). Apart from his “reactionary politics,” contempt for members of his own middle-class, his “silliness” and pretentiousness, his most exemplary moments are those when “this powerful artistic control is vulnerable to the pain or pathos of life itself” (Heaney 1980: 109). We see this, for instance, in “Sailing to Byzantium,” or his transformation of the violence of war into the healing power of nature, in the “The Stare’s Nest by My Window.” The place of poetry, for Yeats, is when it offers consolation and shows understanding of the common humanity that unites us all. He writes:

If we understand our own minds, and the things that are striving to utter themselves through our minds, we move others, not because we have understood or thought about those others, but because all life has the same root. Coventry Patmore has said “The end of art is peace,” and the following of art is little different from the following of religion in the intense preoccupation it demands. (Yeats 1980: 7)

For Kavanagh, the place of writing was located in the local and in the power of art to show basic humanity in all its facets; and while he did not reach acclaim until after his death, and never reached the heights of

fame achieved by Yeats, he nevertheless was an important influence of the young Irish poets that came after him, especially poets like Heaney who had their roots in the rural experience. To return to the metaphor of Archimedes: both poets “move the world,” but the lever used in each case is positioned differently. Kavanagh knew his physical place of writing—Inniskeen—intimately, and for him this lever was placed more directly, in the concrete, emotional and intimate, while for Yeats his positioning was in the abstract, intellectual and conceptual, and mediated through symbols. Interestingly, while Yeats could combine the physical writing place of Thoor Ballylee with the creative writing space of poetry, Kavanagh had to escape from Inniskeen in order to find his creative writing space. This new space—at a physical distance—allowed him the freedom and creativity to revisit in the landscapes of the mind the physical place of poetry that he had left behind in frustration and anger so many years earlier. Above all, Kavanagh demonstrates the need to return: “Now as I analyse myself I realise that throughout everything I write, there is this constantly recurring motif of the need to go back” (Kavanagh 1967: 205). This motif is addressed in his poem “Advent,” in the call to “return to Doom / The knowledge we stole but could not use,” which concludes:

And the newness that was in every stale thing
When we looked at it as children: the spirit-shocking
Wonder in a black slanting Ulster hill
Or the prophetic astonishment in the tedious talking
Of an old fool will awake for us and bring
You and me to the yard gate to watch the whins
And the bog-holes, cart-tracks, old stables where Time begins. (Kavanagh 2000: 66)

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