

The Narrative Creation of Place: The Example of Yeats

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Over the last two decades, as we have become increasingly agitated by the divisiveness of our cultures, a number of commentators have strained to find a point of stability, continuity and reconciliation in Irish life. More often than not the locus of that desire has been found in place and landscape. It was the historian J.C. Beckett who most pithily expressed what has recently been described as this 'desperate hope'. As Beckett remarked: 'We have in Ireland an element of stability - the land, and an element of instability - the people. It is to the stable element that we must look for continuity.'⁽¹⁾

The notion that place and landscape provide an antidote to the injurious effects of history is an alluring one and has captivated many. Roy. F. Foster, in his inaugural lecture to the first conference of the Cultural Traditions Group, reminded his listeners of varieties of Protestant identity, including kinds that were 'unequivocally Irish'. He did so by way of referring to another historian, F.S.L. Lyons who had, in turn, commented, 'an Anglo-Irish type still too little noticed by historians - the man or woman in whom love of place transcended divisions based on origins, religion or politics'⁽²⁾ Such remarks have given a new impetus to place and to local studies as a panacea for present ills. What class, religion, tradition and other allegiances hold apart, place (envisaged in a curiously Aristotelian way as a container of people and events) will somehow bring together.

It is not only Ireland, of course, that we hear of such locative aspirations. They are commonplace in post-colonial countries where different people have struggled for possession and re-possession of the land and where a myth of place is offered as an assuagement both for the guilt of the possessors and the grief of the dispossessed. The strategy, in Ireland as elsewhere, has been to move from the brute fact of conquest to a claim of spiritual inheritance which, retrospectively, legitimates possession. A poem entitled, blatantly enough 'The Pride' by the Canadian poet John Newlove illustrates the process well. It is honest enough in its way in that it speaks of desires, mirages and mirrors rather than title deeds, tenure or hereditaments. The claim is that the whites are the spiritual heirs of the prairie Indians:

the Indians still ride the soil
in us, dry bones a part
of the dust in our eyes
until at
last we become them
in our desires, our desires,
mirages, mirrors, that are theirs
and in this land we
are their people, come
back to life.⁽³⁾

Re-writing history as a myth of place where the current incumbents are presented as the spiritual heirs of the displaced natives is nothing new. We have some primary examples from our own nineteenth century, particularly in that most symptomatic of texts, Sir Samuel Ferguson's *Debate between the head and the heart of an Irish Protestant* where the land is all the domain of the heart.

The notion of a place as a resolver of difference, however tempting it may be, poses a number of problems. There are real difficulties involved in the very notion of taking the land itself - or indeed any other reality or context - as unproblematic ground or as a gold standard for continuity.

Beckett's view of the land-as-stable-element quoted earlier, functions within a particular conception of language, a conception that has come to be called objectivism. There is a land or a ground out there which, regardless of those who inhabit it, continues to exist and function over time in much the same way and with a stable significance. Hence it can be appealed to as an image - perhaps the only image - of continuity.

This view ignores a number of important points. It forgets that land and place are made up of language as much as, if not more than, they are made of earth and buildings. When we look at a landscape the stories in our heads direct what we see and fail to see. To take two rather startling examples, one from the Gaelic Tradition, the other from the Palestinian. There are two very extensive topographical poems from the 14th and the beginning of the 15th centuries by Seán Mór Ó Dubhagáin and Giolla na Naomh Ó hUidhrin with hundred of verses (1,600 in all) covering every nook and cranny of Ireland. Nevertheless they fail to make any allusion to the fact that most of the lands they describe as being in the hands of Gaelic chieftains were by then, and for hundreds of years, in the possession of Norman families.(4) The poems in this respect are similar to a recent P.L.O. map of Palestine/Israel which fails to show a single Israeli place name and which is written entirely in Arabic. Maps, like topographical poems, are traditionally based on a correspondence theory of representation. Whatever one thinks of the politics involved, both of these cultural texts are 'agents of blindness' to employ a Barthesian term. (5) They focus on a highly selective range of features and thereby provide an illusion of cultural stability and continuity. Such problematic representations, leads to a consideration of the changing narrative construction of place.(6)

Places are made of narrative accretion, they are communicated to us in stories. Indeed it is hardly an exaggeration to claim that, for many today, the west of Ireland, derives its satisfying sense of mystery, excitement and closure, not so much from anything on the ground west of the Shannon but primarily from the narratives that have been circulated about it - from folklore and legends and the lives of the western Saints to Jonah Barrington's *Wild Sports of the west* and Lady Gregory's *Visions and beliefs in the west of Ireland*.

Though the approach to place in terms of narrative involves inflation of language and deflation of stones, bogs and lakes, the idea itself is not new. William Morris, for example, a poet who was greatly to influence Yeats' construction of the world, came to a very acute realisation of the narrative construction of place when he had to explain to himself why on earth he visited the bleak barren wastes of Iceland:

Why do we long to wend forth through the length
and breadth of land
Dreadful with grinding of ice, and record of scarce hidden fire
But that there 'mid the grey grassy dale sore scarred by
the running streams
Lives the tale of the Northland of old and undying
glory of dreams.(7)

Two of the key texts which constitute / narrate Iceland are the ancient Volsung Sagas and the nineteenth century redaction of Morris' four volumes of *Sigurd the Volsung*. It is, thus, stories residence that constitutes a place - a point that Yeats understood very well when he praised Ferguson for restoring to our hills and rivers their epic interest.

The study of the wordy construction of place has been concomitant with the notion of place as a text which we can read or re-read or can no longer read as the case may be. Text is an appropriate trope to employ because landscape, like text, is a social and cultural production as well as an instrument of communication. According to such 'new geographers' as Barnes and Duncan, both text and place reveal:

- instability of meaning
- fragmentation of integrity
- lack of authorial control
- polyvocality
- irresolvable social contradictions.(8)

The landscape-as-text metaphor cuts away the support from under Beckett's contention that the land is the stable element. As text it is as volatile as its authors and readers, it escapes their control and may even lapse into unintelligibility as in John Montague's *The Rough field*:

The whole landscape a manuscript
We had lost the skill to read
A part of our past disinherited:
but fumbled, like a blind man
Along the fingertips of instinct.(9)

If narrative accretion and accumulation is a key to understanding the construction of place in words then inter-textuality - on text in relation to another text - is the way to grasp a topographical tradition. What offers itself as subjectivist description based on being here and doing that is often better described as intertextual work mediated by stories of what others have said and done. After all, even Yeats' seeming spontaneous desire to take a trip to the Lake Isle of Innisfree is propelled by, among other things, the Parable of the Prodigal Son and an advertising display the poet saw in Fleet Street, London. The desire for refuge is itself shaped by the poet's boyhood reading of Thoreau's *Walden*.

To complicate matters further; it is not only our stories that are intertextual, the land itself is intertextual. As Barnes and Duncan remark, 'Places are intertextual sites because various texts and discursive practices based on previous texts are deeply inscribed on their landscapes and institutions.'(10) To take but one example. The Burren Hills are a palimpsest composed of pre-Christian, pagan notions of the rocky place as a refuge for outlaws and wild men, the early Christian ideal of the *desertum* as locus of spiritual athleticism, late twentieth century values associated with tourism-and, more recently, heritage.(11) Indeed it is only when conflicts in land use cases arise, as in recent disputes over heritage centres, that these various readings come to the surface and the 'taken for granted' nature of the landscape is called into question. Competing interests - ecological, commercial and spiritual - produce opposing textual readings.

Texts too can recursively coil back on earlier texts and give them new significance. It is impossible, when at Elsinore not to think of Hamlet. Or on Inishfree not to think of Yeats. Indeed we have gone on to invent a Yeats Country with the result that we now have a Yeats Country Hotel and the Tourist Board points with confidence to Ballisodare as the site of the Sally Gardens. And the shores of Lough Gill are promoted as the location of the hazel wood where wandering Angus caught a little silver trout.

In short, we are dealing with what Baudrillard and Eco, in other contexts, described as hyper-reality. The boundaries between fiction and reality blur and scrips and simulations of the real become more real than reality itself. Lily Yeats foresaw the coming of Sligo and Galway hyper-reality patched together from bits and pieces of her brother's poems. In 1938 when the Land Commission took over an estate around Innisfree she wrote to W.B. '...there will be put up notices - this way to the Bee Glade...and interfering with the bee will be severely dealt with...The beans must not be eaten. They are the property of the Land Commission'.⁽¹²⁾

The narrative approach to landscape above offers, I believe, an especially pertinent framework for the study of place making in Ireland. Ireland is one of the few places left in Europe where stories remain at a premium. It is still a paradise for fabulists and narratologists not only in literature but in other domains that require rhetorical skills. I have argued elsewhere, in a study devoted to the Irish construction of place, that the Irish *genius loci* is not so much the genius of place as the *genius fabulae*, the genius of the story about the place.⁽¹³⁾ The place itself is of little or no importance and is more often than not allowed to go to rack and ruin. The evidence for the Irish failure to cultivate, cherish or enhance place in any material way is all about us. What is esteemed is the narrative woven about particular locations, not location per se. If we can speak about continuity at all we should speak about the continuity of stories and tales rather than the continuity of the land as Beckett suggested. In this way we can bring John Montague's Garvaghey and Richard Murphy's Inishbofin into relation with say, the toponyms and place stories recorded in the Dinnseanachas, the great onomastic collection first written down in the twelfth century.

III

With all this in view I would like to devote the rest of my discussion to Yeats' narrative making of place and, in particular, to the relation it bears to the Irish topographical and topological tradition. This will involve a certain amount of mild deconstruction of Yeatsian representations in order to explore the significant presence of certain elements and their significant absence. Why, for example, did the poet ignore the splendid gardens of Coole Park in his early poems and focus instead on the Seven Woods of the estate? Or, what inclined the young man in London to think that he could circumvent all rights of property and deeds of ownership and build a cabin on Innisfree without as much as a by your leave from anybody? If you think of it, it is a curious fantasy and reveals a certain high-handedness with regard to other people's islands.

Secondly, I wish to locate Yeats within the verbal tradition just outlined and to see what he does with it. His poetry, as I shall argue, reveals a number of characteristics or traits which make it a recognisable part of that tradition.

There are at least three distinguishable phases in the evolution of Yeats' poetic relationship to place which roughly correspond to three personas. Firstly, the landscape of the Poet as Wanderer, i.e. roughly the early poems. Secondly, the landscape of the

Poet as dweller, intermittently the middle poems. Finally, the landscape of the Poet as Revenant, haunting the later poems. These three phases have much in common and it is as well to note some similarities before embarking on differences.

Throughout his work Yeats evinces a striking lack of interest in nature or landscape per se. Hills and mountains, plains and rivers are important to him not so much for their intrinsic or even aesthetic value but insofar as they can be made to symbolise a world elsewhere or because they are connected with a particular incident: a fairy woman has manifested or an arrogant lady has cut off a cheeky servant's ear. Yeats is above all fascinated by two things: landscape as symbol and landscape as shaped by man (what the Scandinavians call aptly enough Kulturlandskap). Further, in all stages, the imagined landscape of the poems is dependent on, or related to Yeats' perception of his own self and its various permutations. Yeats is in turn a druidic magus, a renaissance courtier, an Anglo-Irish squireen and a ghost who re-visits all these earlier incarnations. The landscapes he constructs are a spatialization of these multiple selves. Throughout his work too there is a constant, obsessive juxtaposition of a mythical place which signifies timelessness and stability set against the actual turbulent world of incessant storm, change and fury. Ironically, but also logically, the place of greatest relative peace is the grave - though we know from 'Cuchulain comforted' it too has its liabilities. It is from this post-modern perspective that many of the later landscapes are composed. Indeed Yeats would probably have agreed with Leopold Bloom who, on a famous occasion, declared that the Irishman's home is his coffin. It is this non-at-homeness in the world together with an elaborate verbal artifact of place which aligns Yeats most completely with the native topographical tradition.

IV

In describing the setting of the early poems as landscapes of the Poet as Wanderer I am, of course, alluding to those many poems where a seeker traverses a symbolic countryside - 'The Wanderings of Ossian', 'The song of Wandering Aengus', 'The man who dreamed of faeryland', 'The happy townland' and so on. I use the term seeker in order to emphasise that the protagonists of these poems are not mere vagrants or feckless rambles, nor are they possessed of light-hearted *wanderlust* or desire for *freelutslive*. They are, rather, pilgrim souls, in active search for another world that is variously designated as Eden, Tir na nOg, the Land of Youth and paradise. Hence I would argue that the early poems - so often described as poems of withdrawal into landscapes of refuge and retreat - are, in fact, Yeats' early attempts to penetrate through to another dimension of being, an enterprise that will culminate on the transcendental heights of Mount Meru in *Supernatural Songs*. The regions quested after are not concrete locations or even the aesthetic space of the work of art but levels of consciousness which are presented in terms of their symbolic geography.

The familiar plane map with its fourfold categorisation of space in terms of shape, area, distance and direction would be of no use to Ossian, Aengus Fergus or the horsemen on their way to the 'happy townland'. They would require an altogether different system of representation, a chart much closer to the Tibetan *tanka* or the Kabbalistic Tree of Life. In these, the earth world is shown as one among a plurality of hierarchically ordered worlds, one Sephiroth out of a possible ten. A purely empiricist or aestheticist vocabulary, with the corresponding notions of the sublime and the picturesque in landscape - even *paysage interieur* of the symbolist poets - is hardly applicable to these visionary realms. While the young Yeats was appalled as his Pre-Raphaelite

breathren by the conditions of modern urban life, his reaction took a more metaphysical turn. Where they retreated in verse to wood or sea or walled garden to nourish their reveries, Yeats additionally explored other realms construed from his study of traditional folk belief and his experience of the occult.

Yeats' metaphysical land is not necessarily remote as in 'The wanderings of Ossian' or 'The song of wandering Aengus'. It may be near and close at hand, as near Coole woods in the prologue poem to 'The shadowy waters'. Yeats is interested in both Paradise-as-far-away (as transcendent) and in Paradise-as-near-at hand (as immanent). With regard to the first, Frank Kinahan has remarked that the poet's early work is imbued with a symbolic geography that is more or less fixed. The ocean stands for time, islands are 'refuge from the ravages of life' and the median shore between island haven and inland turmoil is a symbol for 'the intermediate state in which most of the figures in Yeats' early work find themselves'(14) Kinahan's presentation of this symbolic geography is self contradictory in some respects. On the one hand he aligns it with the refuge and retreat landscapes of the poet's early contemporaries, on the other his own very detailed - and very valuable - exploration of the Kabbalistic and Rosicrucian material point to Yeats as Platonic seeker on the path rather than to a Pre-Raphaelite escapee.

The other landscape, the landscape immanent in Coole Park, is best summed up in a declarative sentence Yeats once dreamt he saw written on an illuminated page: 'The Rivers of Eden are in the midst of our rivers'.(15) It emerges too in the hypnotic lines that dedicate 'The shadowy waters' to Lady Gregory. The poem describes the poet walking among the seven woods of Coole and, to those familiar with the place, his careful avoidance of any mention of the great garden. The reason is clear enough. The garden with its Roman bust of Macenas and exotic, imported trees, is an emblem of culture, even imperial culture. By eliding the garden, the poet can more easily assimilate Coole to early Celtic Ireland and pretend that the woods are nature and home of the Gods:

How shall I name you, immortal, mild, proud shadows?
I only know that all we know comes from you,
And that you come from Eden by flying feet.
Is Eden far away, or do you hide
From human thought, as hares and mice and coneys
That run before the reaping hook and lie
In the last ridge of the barley? Do our woods
And winds and ponds cover more quiet woods
More shining winds, more star-glimmering ponds?
Is Eden out of time and out of space?(16)

Yeats' reading of Coole's woods and ponds as a densification of a landscape that exists in a more subtle and luminous form on a higher plane was not his alone. There were many others at the time - George Russel and C.W. Leadbeater among them - who held similar exotic beliefs about the relation between the natural and astral worlds. If we recur to our earlier proposition about the landscape as text, then it necessarily entails a further notion of a textual community focused on that text. A textual community is a group of people who have a common understanding of a text and who organise aspects of their lives as the playing out of a script.(17) Quick examples would be the signatories of the 1916 Proclamation of Independence and the flocks of eco-theologians that have gathered to preserve the Burren and its 'tabernacle' mountain, Mullaghmore.

There were a number of textual communities formed around particular readings of the Irish Landscape in the nineteenth century ranging all the way from the Ordnance survey to the Land League. One such, and a very marginal one at that, was the Theosophical Society. Its esoteric deciphering of the Irish countryside in terms of occult forces, places of power or vision, pathogenic zones and so on was always a minority reading. Oddly enough it has proved easily assimilable by the tourist industry in, for example, the fey, pseudo-spiritual representation of the west of Ireland as a timeless, holy place, distant in time, as George Moore once averred, distant as Tibet. There have, of course, been spirited efforts to dispel this myth of the west by the metropolitan intelligentsia. Its very existence and persistence, however, is a reminder that control of the means of production does not necessarily entail control over the making of the meaning or modes of consumption. It is curious to think that many still read the west of Ireland through the intertext of nineteenth century Theosophy as we find it expressed in, say, the poem just quoted. Rather than a narrative of lost authenticity - as anthropologists have taken to describing the core fable of the west of Ireland - we have a narrative of immanent revelation. It is not difficult to detect a theosophical topography in the lines which follow on from where I left off:

Is Eden out of time and out of Space?
And do you gather about us when pale light
Shining on water and fallen among leaves
And winds blowing from flowers, and whirr of feathers
And the green quiet, have uplifted the heart?(18)

All the furniture of this verse - the elemental beings, the waters which facilitate vision, the winds which herald it, the incense which celebrates it, the bird that is the released soul and the twilight, dawn or dusk, that is the moment of revelation, all can be traced back to the Theosophical lexicon.

The theory of intertextuality insists that in the process of reading, all texts, including books and landscapes, come into dialogue with other texts with which the reader is familiar. We can read something in the light of a practice or experience quite unknown to the author and subsequent to him. A famous example is JanKott's eastern European re-reading of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as a tragic comedy about a world where everybody spies on everybody else.

The notion of intertextuality, of texts talking to texts and cross-fertilizing one another, can be helpful in reassessing the poems in which Yeats pictures himself as a dweller in an Anglo-Irish Landscape. These poems have been especially vulnerable to poststructuralist disembowelling. In the discussion of Yeats' attitude to Ascendancy Ireland and the values he embodies in the Big House, it has become the fashion to surround the poems with rent books, land bills and finance acts - and with the ideological tracts of Fredric Jameson and Terry Eagleton. Political and economic rhetorics are mobilised; the poems of Yeats-the-settler become a context in which to unmask the landscape of Anglo-Irish Ireland as delusive and the author himself as reactionary.

There are a number of ways of setting Yeats' ancestral houses in a more humane context, a context that would make Coole Park available to us, not just as an ideological but also as a cultural and even philosophical construct. Rather than interleave Coole and Ballylee with rent books or tradesmen's bills, I propose to consider them in relation to Heidegger's famous and very fruitful essay entitled 'building dwelling thinking' in which he sets out his concept of dwelling.(19)

For Heidegger, man dwells only when he is able to concretize the word in buildings and things. Building transforms a site into a place, confers definition and meaning. To dwell is not the same thing as to live or inhabit, still less to survive. Dwelling means to be at peace in a protected place. Heidegger provides us with the deepest, richest definition of dwelling when he points out that it includes both *edificare*, to build and *colere* to cultivate - to cherish and protect, to preserve and care for. In this sense, one might argue, a little tendentiously, that the Irish apart from the rath dwellers, have never truly dwelt in Ireland anymore than than the aborigines have *dwelt* in Australia. This may go some way to answer the second question posed at the beginning of this paper as to why Yeats could fantasise about building his cabin on Innisfree. Ideally, for him, the west of Ireland was uninhabited except for the spirit folk, a place whose orthography he could re-write and which he could construct anew.

In so far as there was any sense of place in the Heideggerian meaning of the term to be found in our traditions, it belonged, squarely, to those among the Anglo-Irish who cultivated their estates and who sought an attachment to place that was less problematic than an attachment to people:

Some violent bitter man, some powerful man
Called architect and artist in, that they,
Bitter and violent men, might rear in stone
The sweetness that all longed for night and day,
The gentleness none there had ever known.(20)

What Yeats celebrated in Coole park, first and foremost, was not caste superiority or aristocratic hateur but rather an exemplary instance of what in meant to dwell rather than inhabit:

A spot whereon the founder lived and died
Seemed once more dear than life: ancestral trees
or gardens rich in memory glorified
Marriages, alliances and families
And every bride's ambition satisfied.(21)

Such spots, rich in ritual and memory, however vulnerable and passing, were a precious testament to a possible fullness of life in a country in which one otherwise lived in a permanent state of crisis. The Anglo-Irish, we might say, dwelt in a land to which they did not belong and the Irish belonged to a land in which they did not dwell. And the uneasy awareness of this dwelling built on the fact of conquest comes to the surface again and again in Yeats' obsessive images of violence which counterpoint the peaceful *landschaft* of stability and cultural achievement.

It is worth adverting in this context of ideas about dwelling, and the narrative construction of place to the very different fates of Coole Park and Thoor Ballylee. The house of Coole Park has all but disappeared except for the foundations and the stables have been turned into a heritage centre. Thoor Ballylee has been tarted up and is a prime example of that pervasive Yeatsian hyper-reality mentioned earlier. The tower, like its name, is a piece of bravura plagiarism. Yeats got it for a song and his attempts to settle there were both a mode of imitation and an act of appropriation, a willed effort to inscribe himself in a tradition of dwelling. The poem 'Meditations in time of Civil War' moves from a first section entitled 'Ancestral houses' to defiant sections entitled 'My house', 'My table', 'My descendants'. Yeats literally constructed a storied residence for

himself that would eventually encompass not only the local history of Ballylee but the history of Anglo-Irish Ireland:

I declare
this winding, gyring, spiring, threadmill of a stair is my
ancestral stair
That Goldsmith and the Dean, Berkeley and Burke
have travelled there(22)

What was a bleak, rather unimpressive tower house, one of dozens in the west of Ireland, became the equivalent of Babylonian and Alexandrian ziggurats. a staircase to the heavens. The signifiers here have detached themselves from the signified in a way that Yeats never permitted to happen when writing about Coole Park which was, as it were, the real thing. The poet, it should be noted, is completely aware of his own myth making. Repeatedly he draws attention to the fabricated nature of his landscape. Hence the reiteration of words such as emblem, sign, image and symbol:

Blessed be this place,
More blessed still this tower;
A bloody, arrogant power,
Rose out of the race
Uttering, mastering it,
Rose like these walls from these
Storm-beaten cottages -
In Mockery I have set up,
And sing it rhyme upon rhyme
In mockery of a time
Half dead at the top(23)

If this place is holy, it is not because of a theophany but because of the performative word of the poet himself. And if the tower survives today and has been refurbished to bring it into closer alignment with the poems written about it, it is partly because of a verbal artifice that was felt to be more compelling than the actual stones and mortar of the neighbouring Big House.

Before leaving Coole Park and Ballylee it is as well to glance at what seems at first sight the remarkable un-Yeatsian concreteness and geographical precision with which the poet describes the river connecting Thoor Ballylee to the lake at Coole Park. Surely here, if anywhere, we have a naturalistic description that follows the actual contours of the world?

Under my window-ledge the waters race,
Otter below and moor-hens on the top,
Run for a mile undimmed in Heaven's face
Then darkening through 'dark' Raftery's 'cellar' drop,
Run underground, rise in a rocky place
In Coole demesne, and then to finish up
Spread to a lake and drop into a hole
What's water but the generated soul?(24)

The topographical accuracy and descriptive realism are deceptive, if only because the poem manages to ignore the presence of a substantial mill on the stream a few

hundred yards from the tower ('waters race', perhaps, conceals an echo of the water-race for the mill). The last line of the stanza '...What's water but the generated soul?' alerts us to the presence of yet another narrative, the revered Platonic story of the descent of the immortal soul into the material universe and its final absorption into the divine after many incarnations. The river, rising and falling through porous limestone on its way to the rocky place where it will eventually 'drop into a hole', is an analogue of the Platonic fable of generation as found in Porphyry's 'The cave of the nymphs'.**(25)** Nothing is impervious to the Yeatsian Platonic x-ray which shows that things below are mere copies of things above. Yeats's landscape, here as elsewhere, has a '...symbolic configuration that is antecedent to its natural occurrence'.**(26)** The landscape of 'Coole and Ballylee, 1931' is as much a construct and as shot through with story as, say, the pastoral fields and woods of 'The song of the happy shepherd'.

There is the occasional hint in Yeats' poem that Lady Gregory is such a *Genius Loci* 'They came like swallows and like swallows went./ And yet a woman's powerful character/ Could keep a swallow to its first intent...'. More often, however, Yeats projects himself, postmortem, into cherished places as their ancestral figure. It is not simply that he positions himself among the dead and speaks to us from beyond the grave.**(28)** He is more intent on haunting, on being a definite presence in the countryside from whence he will build his reputation as a great admonisher. The *locus classicus* of these post-mortem admonishments and instructions is, of course, 'Under Ben Bulbin' with its 'Swear by what the sages spoke', its 'Poet and sculptor do he work', 'Learn your trade' and, most famously 'Horseman pass by!'. If Yeats concedes the top of Ben Bulbin to 'that pale, long-visaged company/ That airs an immortality', he has appropriated the base for himself. All the items of the last verse - Drumcliffe, the Church and the ancient cross, are signifiers for his just faintly arrogant self.**(29)**

The extraordinary range of reference in this poem, from neo-Platonic philosophy to nineteenth century painters - Calvert and Wilson, Blake and Claude - all these have obscured the degree to which Yeats is here reactivating a native tradition in his treatment of landscape. For in this poem as in Irish culture - death, place and identity are inextricably linked together. A compulsive re-enactment of the codes of lamentation, of imagining oneself as dead or writing as a revenant in the third person post-mortem, as Yeats does, all this has a long lineage in Irish Verse. What is especially interesting in our context is that from *Seanchas na reilig* (The history of burial places) in the twelfth century *Leabhar na hUidhre* to *Cre na cille* and the poetry of Murphy, Montague, Kinsella, and Heaney, the right to belong to a place is justified, not by life but by death. Recall John Hewitt's lines where he, as a descendant of the Ulster Planters, calls on the dead to sanction the colonists' right to belong

So I, because of all the buried men
in Ulster clay ... am native in my thought as any here.**(30)**

When seen in this light 'Under Ben Bulbin' is an exemplary instance of the funerary-toponymic genre. It binds together story and death in the way in which they were bound together in the entries of the *Dinnseanchas*, the lore of high places, and in which they will be bound in Samuel Beckett. However Anglo-Irish, however Platonic, Yeats may be, he here continues one of the oldest native traditions, the tradition which repeatedly admonishes us that this earth is not our home.

All though Yeats' work we find an obsessive search for a landscape that is timeless, changeless and not quite of this world. Such a place is to be found in the work of art, in

the afterlife or in the Platonic heavens. All three haunt his poetry so that, like the works of the landscape painters referred to in 'Under Ben Bulbin', it too has

'...prepared a rest for the people of God'. (31)

NOTES

1. John Wilson Foster. 1991. *Colonial Consequences*. Dublin: Lilliput Press, 149.
2. F.S.L Lyons. 1979. *Culture and anarchy in Ireland 1890-1939*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 105; quoted in Maurna Crozier (ed.), 1989. *Cultural traditions in Northern Ireland*, Belfast Institute of Irish Studies, 14
3. John Newlove. 1968. *Black night window*. Toronto: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
4. The poems have been edited and translated by John O'Donovan in *The topographical poems of John Ó Dubhagáin and Giolla na Naomh Ó hUdrin*. Dublin: Irish Archaeological Society. 1862. There is a more recent edition by James Carey, Dublin: Gill, 1942, with an informative preface.
5. For a relevant discussion of Barte's phrase see James S. Duncan and Nancy G. Duncan, 'Ideology and bliss: Roland Bartes and the secret histories of landscape' in Trevor J. Barnes and James S. Duncan (eds.) 1992. *Writing worlds: discourse, text and metaphor in the representation of landscape*. London: Routledge, 36.
6. See Travers D. 'Placenames in South Lebanon' in this volume, 30-35, for such a consideration of place.
7. William Morris. 1877. *The story of Sigurd the Volsung and the fall of the Niblungs*. London: Ellis & White.
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