

‘Art, Place, Kanturk’

William J. Smyth (Department of Geography, U.C.C.)

A presentation by Professor William J. Smyth at a seminar at Kanturk Arts Festival, March 14th 2009

“Blindness to experience is a common human condition” – so says the Chinese-American geographer, Yi-Fu-Tuan¹. But it is possible to articulate and give form to subtle human experiences. The Drumlin Country of South Ulster had no voice until Patrick Kavanagh articulated the experiences of so many who lived there, just as Bernard O’Donoghue has for his homeland of Cullen and Duhallow. Bernard, I greatly enjoyed exploring your poetry. Bernard and I are practically the same age and we are both from rural backgrounds. There was much in say, *Poaching Rights*² that I recognised and identified with – horsemen, landgrabbers, bonesetters, pisheogue-makers, fowlers, going to patterns and Munster Finals although mine were to hurling finals with Tipperary. In such poetry, we can see how the articulation of the personal nearly always illuminates and stimulates our collective memory. There is the shock of recognition and the texture and feel of things we knew but never expressed. Bernard “fills in the generations, signing them as his own”³. And poetry also commemorates as in that beautiful, haunting and powerful poem – ‘The Humours of Shrone’ – with its echoes of Art O’Leary’s horse arriving back home, riderless⁴ and Tony O’Malley’s 1964 painting of ‘Hawk over Quarry, (in memory of Peter Lanyon)’ now in Cork’s Crawford Gallery.

I was greatly impressed with the exhibition of children’s paintings in every Kanturk shop-window this weekend. Children know the world more sensually and more directly than most of us adults. Everything is new to the growing child and so is assimilated. The theme of ‘My Home Place’ brought forth a great variety of responses from the school children. It was interesting to see that this young generation can define their own bedroom as the home place – a privatisation of experience that was not that of a previous generation growing up in more crowded homes. I noticed only one painting that took a birds-eye view of this town and only a few that saw the whole earth as home. The great majority were of the family home and gardens and surrounding landscape. But there were also subtle gender differences – more of the boys mentioned their home place as a sporting /recreational arena. Some girls did too but more were inclined to provide a richer picture of their own home place. The artist seems to develop sophisticated skills in his/her adult life and so articulate deep feelings – give them external form – and thus keep the door open to the richness or otherwise of childhood.

So maybe a first question for discussion is our human need for artistic expression – for externalising, for given form to all kinds of experiences, fear, terror, love, happiness, beauty; the need to cultivate the inner self and give it external form. I am thinking here of the therapeutic role of art for the artist and for us all. I do believe that everybody is an artist – has that capacity – but most of us adults lose it. We get so preoccupied with other things – careers, possessions, deprivations, etc. – that part of ourselves, that inner life is lost. We repress that which we have forgotten to express. Yet you can begin to open up to such experiences at any stage of your life – Bernard O’Donoghue did not start writing poetry until his early thirties – the little poetry I

have written did not begin until I was fifty and, I gather, this late ‘vocation’ is also true of other people here today.

A second artistic need may be the need to interrogate the worlds we live in. In cultural geography, we stress that at the heart of any people’s culture is the taken-for-granted things, the deeply embedded hidden assumptions about right and wrong behaviour, about values generally⁵. For example, in the business of inheriting farms in the Irish countryside we hear the judgment that “he should have given the farm to his nephew (or niece) and not sold the farm – it was not natural what he did”. We should substitute the word ‘cultural’ (i.e. learned behaviour) for ‘natural’ in the above statement – given that in other countries as in England, for example, there would be no expectation that land should pass to a nephew.

In our daily routine, we rarely attend to what we know. In contrast the artist zones in on the hidden or taken-for-granted aspects of the culture – on other truths - and so increases the burden of our awareness and enlarges our self consciousness.

Enough about Art *per se* – now onto Place. Perhaps a question for discussion is that relationship between Place, Memory and Identity. Memory is embedded in place as Marie Foley has explored in her field maps and the memory of her father’s work as a drainage contractor – excavating the layers and reclaiming the many fields in various townlands around Kanturk. Marie’s father reminds me of Heaney’s poem Belderg.

“When he stripped off the blanket bog
The soft-piled centuries fell open like a glib”⁶.

Through these field drainage drawings, Marie reclaims the past which has been an inspiration to her sculptural work in bog-oak, yew and ash and her inspired beautiful timber/stone sculptures. From the field maps, Marie explores the symbiosis between oak leaf patterns, river systems and the whole wide world while her stone/timber sculptures speak to themes of renewal, rebirth and resurrection.

Here, it may be useful to note the geographer’s distinction between ‘place’ and ‘location’. The road maps and even the drainage maps with their geometric lines and symbols illustrate the infrastructure of an area – they are about distance, orientation, height, depth, in short rather abstract locational details. The notion of place is different. Places are where human beings live and die and love and fight and talk. Places are saturated with meaning (and sometimes meanness).

Both Marie’s and Bernard’s love of the place-names of this region is a pointer here. Place-names link geography and language and Irish place-names and their meanings open doors to a host of hidden worlds and stories. They facilitate journeys into other imaginative arenas and is not one of the key artistic functions all about story telling in its different forms?

I supervised two outstanding students from this region who took postgraduate degrees from UCC – Jean Lucey from Millstreet⁷ and Kathleen Curtin⁸ from across the border in Tournafulla. What I most remember about their work is their revelation of the richness of the poetry and storytelling – and the poets and storytellers – who are living or have lived in this region. In short, the voices of Duhallow. So a related question worth exploring is the deep aesthetic appreciation of storytelling and poetry in this

region (not to mention the music). What are its roots? What does it tell us about Duhallow?

One final observation about place in Kanturk and Ireland and anywhere. Love of place has many dimensions, and it may seem strange for a geographer to argue this but it is not primarily the physical landscape and its beauty which inspires that love. Love of place may have much more to do with people and community and the sense of nurturing and security we received from loved ones. So home place has strong notions of nurture and (hopefully) stability. But not necessarily. It can be a place of pain. As one poet has observed: “One can be lost, unhappy, and at home”.

But it is far more likely that it is when we are away from home – on the frontier, on the border of a new world – that we can best articulate the many meanings of the home place. Most Irish painters (and indeed writers) seem to have to go away from home so as to give form and shape to their feelings⁹. Distance from home – is this another artistic necessity? The need to be away from Kanturk?

So we come to Kanturk – the third pillar of this seminar. Kanturk – like every place – is the centre of its world. I have one very good friend who was born in Kanturk, Peg Fitzpatrick (who married a hurling comrade of mine, the late Tony Loughnane). Peg used to say: “Kanturk is the biggest town in the biggest barony in the biggest county in Ireland”. So Kanturk has its own cosmography.

- a statement about centrality
- a pride and appreciation of place
- and a sense of the hierarchy of places.

And even more than country places, towns like Kanturk are places where time and memory are deeply embedded - this built world of streets and houses, street names, institutions, monuments, an inscribed bridge and the three rivers which dominate and centre its shape and history.

I will make just four points – and related questions about Kanturk. I am a bit of a romantic and may be inclined to overemphasise the positive qualities of a place. Yet I note that Kanturk’s population since the Great Famine has declined dramatically – the town and its population shrank¹⁰. So we have a story of much uprootings, defeats, the Great Famine itself, migrant/emigrant worlds and the rupturing of life and memory.

What happens to place and memory with so much discontinuity? There is enormous pain here both of the inner émigré as well as the illumination and stimulation of collective memory that such poetry brings. And if there is a return from exile to Kanturk – are we like Ulysses, sated with the marvels of his travels abroad? Will we weep tears of joy at the sight of our Ithaca - our Kanturk – small and green and humble – or will our response be one of pain and bitterness?

My second question. I grew up on a farm and then went to the city. In both places, I had a sense of spaciousness and freedom. But for my PhD research, I studied, amongst other things, the small town of Clogheen in Co. Tipperary, not unlike the rather larger town of Kanturk.¹¹ What struck me then was the opposite of spaciousness – a feeling of congestion and claustrophobia. Kanturk, like Clogheen, is full of laneways and vistas. Is this feeling of being enclosed true? And if so, how formative is this for artists? Tony O’Malley came from the small town of Callan in

Co. Kilkenny – yet he always looked to the land and the sea for his freedom – to his father’s world of Clare Island.¹²

My third question follows on from the above. Is Slieve Luachra the place of spaciousness and freedom for the denizens of Kanturk? (I note that Dingle peninsula functioned in this way for the young Bernard O’Donoghue).

My final question. When I look at the map of County Cork and Kanturk’s position in it, I see that it is on the boundary of two worlds, maybe two cultures, two civilisations. To the east, the rich farming, wealthy landlord world of the Blackwater valley where the English language gained early supremacy – and to the west, the late-settled pastoral uplands where old ways of life and speech were and are still sustained. Kanturk is the meeting place of these two cultures, peoples, and classes and such meeting places have always been conducive to creativity.

What tensions have these conjunctions generally?

What hybridities?

What poetry?

What art?

Notes and References

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9. As, for example, Roderic O’Connor, James Joyce and Samuel Beckett.
10. See Joan A. Buckley, *The Town of Kanturk, 1800-1901*, BA. Dissertation, UCC.
11. W.J. Smyth, *Clogheen-Burncourt: A Social Geography of a South Tipperary Parish*, Ph.D Thesis, N.U.I. 1969.
12. See Vera Ryan, ‘Transition Years’, chapter in B.Lynch (ed.), Tony O’Malley, *An Artist in Exile*, Scholar Press, 1996, pp.37-93.