BOOK REVIEW

Between Anchoring and Elsewhere: Aspects of Place in Northern Irish Poetry

Péter Dolmányos, Eger, Budapest, Paris: L'Harmattan Open Access, 2025, 150 pp.

From the middle of the twentieth century onwards, the issue of space gradually became a central topic within the humanities. One of the earliest examples of this preoccupation was Michel Foucault's seminal essay "Of Other Spaces" published in 1967. In this essay, Foucault argued that the humanities had entered an "epoch of space" and predicted that in subsequent decades space would "form the horizon of our concerns, our theory, our systems" (1986 [1967]: 22). It is clear today that these predictions were accurate. Fuelled by accelerating globalisation and the resulting hypermobility, by increasingly pressing concerns over borders and migration, and by the growing importance of virtual spaces, our fascination with space and place is now deeper than ever. While earlier spatiality scholars tended to focus on urban places, the countryside has recently started to take centre stage. Today, scholars are beginning to rethink the nostalgic pastoral ideals associated with rural areas in light of contemporary realities, especially globalisation, capitalism, and the climate crisis (see for example Gifford 2014 or Shucksmith 2018).

In literary studies, the spatial turn is equally evident and interest in literary representations of space shows no signs of waning. A number of scholars have noted that contemporary literature is characterised by a return to materialism (Tew and Mengham, 2006; Turner, 2013; Walezak, 2022; etc.) and frequently engages thematically with ecology and the environment. Naturally, when studying texts rooted in the physical world, space and place become essential analytical categories. Péter Dolmányos's most recent monograph *Between Anchoring and Elsewhere: Aspects of Place in Northern Irish Poetry* is part of this debate. Dolmányos explicitly situates his research within this context in the first chapter of the book, where he emphasises the importance of engaging with the concept of space in literature in general, and in Northern Irish literature in particular. Drawing on the work of theorists of spatiality, such as Henri Lefebvre or Edward Soja, as well as postcolonial scholars, including Edward Said, Dolmányos adopts Elmer Kennedy-Andrews's argument that "[p]lace is increasingly viewed as the product of global, interconnecting flows of peoples, cultures and meanings – of routes rather than roots" (Kennedy-Andrews qtd. in Dolmányos 2025: 19), problematising the view of place as stable or fixed. Instead, Dolmányos understands place as ever-changing, shaped by its relationship to other places, as well as by time, distance, and perspective.

In the remaining seven chapters of the monograph, Dolmányos attempts to uncover the meaning of place in the works of fours Northern Irish poets: Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, Derek Mahon, and John Montague. Throughout the volume Dolmányos successfully argues that each of these four poets portrays the locations in which their verses are set as ambiguous and unstable. Forces ranging from the weather and the sea to the slipperiness of memory cause the places of these poems to change their nature, as well as their meaning. In Chapter 2 Dolmányos outlines Seamus Heaney's poetics of place, noting that Heaney's understanding of place is always twofold: lived and learned, and these "two ways of knowing a place" (30) exist in "a dynamic relationship, challenging and in turn reinforcing each other" (43), a relationship

that Heaney himself described as a "marriage between the geographical country and the country of the mind" (qtd in Dolmányos 2025: 31). In Chapter 3 Dolmányos shifts his focus to the poetry of Derek Mahon. He argues that the geography depicted in Mahon's work is fundamentally ambiguous, since Mahon is "not a practitioner of minutely executed detailed descriptions of locations" (45). Instead, the poet assigns a major role to the perspective of the lyrical subject. This allows him to construct places that are not stable but created anew with every change in the perspective of the speaker. Chapter 4 presents a discussion of Michael Longley's concept of home. Dolmányos argues that Longley represents the home as "a non-exclusive category which can thus be associated with more locations" (63). The two places described as home in Longley's work are Belfast, the city of his childhood, and his country residence. Yet, although the "city of Belfast remains an essentially figurative, predominantly metonymic presence in Longley's poems" (66), it is through the juxtaposition between the two homes that the central significance of the County Mayo home from home is articulated.

In Chapters 5 and 6 Dolmányos reads the poetry of John Montague and Seamus Heaney, respectively, through a pastoral lens. He concludes that although both poets explicitly engage with the tradition, they ultimately find the pastoral mode inadequate. Montague rejects the idealisation of the pastoral. Instead, he depicts landscapes "in their tangible and often unattractive details" (79) and critiques the pastoral tradition "as one that fails to offer a credible and acceptable representation of proper lived experience" (89). This is also the case in Heaney's poetry, where "the anti-pastoral is a constant feature" (108). However, instead of a wholesale rejection of the pastoral, Heaney "incorporates the tradition as well as its critique, pointing towards the post-pastoral" (ibid.) as defined by Terry Gifford. In Chapter 7 we return to Derek Mahon. This time Dolmányos shifts his focus to the concept of elsewhere, which is a recurring motif in Mahon's work. Dolmányos argues that Mahon employs the motif "to facilitate more general reflections on experience by their difference from the familiar environment", allowing him to "readjust the speaker's relation to that environment" (126). The final chapter of the monograph returns to the poetry of John Montague, focusing on the motif of borders and border crossing in his 1984 collection *The Dead Kingdom*. Considering the island's turbulent history, it comes as no surprise that borders feature prominently in the Irish poetic imagination. In the analysed collection, the motif of border crossing is explored on multiple levels: as a literal crossing of a physical border, but also as crossing the border between past and present, and between life and death. Dolmányos concludes that the poems in the collection "demonstrate the speaker's awareness of the entanglement of the personal and the communal, with the latter inescapably bearing upon the former" (132).

Overall, *Between Anchoring and Elsewhere: Aspects of Place in Northern Irish Poetry* offers a truly in-depth examination of the role and significance of place in the work of the four poets. Each chapter provides a detailed and nuanced discussion of a very specific aspect of the representation of places, locations, and landscapes across the four authors' poetic works, supplemented by insightful close reading sections that help illustrate the more general or theoretical claims. Yet while the book contains a lot of fascinating content, the language and structure of the text might present some challenges for readers. Dolmányos's dense prose and highly complex sentences occasionally make it difficult to identify the core ideas. Moreover, although individually the chapters are carefully crafted, and each is methodical in presenting its central argument, the connections between them are not always made explicit beyond their shared thematic focus. The lack of both an introduction and a conclusion limits the space the author has to formulate his overall aims and hypotheses or to draw final connections between the ideas presented in the individual chapters. While some of these connections may be inferred

by the reader, they are seldom foregrounded within the individual chapters themselves. Because of this, the book may strike some readers as a collection of essays rather than a monograph advancing a single argument.

Despite these reservations, I believe Dolmányos's book makes a valuable contribution to ongoing discussions of space and spatiality in literature. Given its highly specialised subject matter and demanding style, it will find its audience mostly among literary scholars focusing on spatiality, contemporary poetry, or Irish literature.

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