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Review of From Landscapes to Cityscapes: Towards a Poetics of Dwelling in Modern Irish Verse by Marjan Shokouhi

Camille d'Alençon

Université Rennes 2, France, camille.pinettes@univ-rennes2.fr

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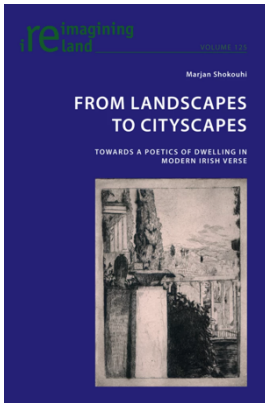
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BOOK REVIEW

From Landscapes to Cityscapes: Towards a Poetics of Dwelling in Modern Irish Verse, by Marjan Shokouhi, Oxford: Peter Lang, Reimagining Ireland vol. 125, 2023, 238pp., ISBN: 978-1-80079-870-0.



Though the notion of place has long been a central concern within Irish studies, ecocritical voices have recently been changing the way we look at the land, both as a construct and as a material reality. Marjan Shokouhi's volume *From Landscapes to Cityscapes: Towards a Poetics of Dwelling in Modern Irish Verse* is an important addition to the growing body of scholarship on the environment in Irish studies.

Shokouhi's study challenges the metanarrative that associates Irish identity with a romanticised idea of the landscape. Shokouhi focuses on the trope of the landscape as a hallmark of Irishness in revivalist poetry and contrasts it to Patrick Kavanagh's and Louis MacNeice's poetics of the city. The author interrogates the concepts of "environment" and "land" by questioning the dichotomies that pit wilderness against agriculture and landscapes against cityscapes.

This volume examines key moments in Irish history, from pre-Christian Ireland to the Literary Revival: Shokouhi's chronological approach is particularly helpful, since it provides readers with a panoramic view of evolving attitudes to the landscape. As the book unfolds, it becomes clear that the concept of environment does not only include landscapes, but also describes the cities many of us live in. As Shokouhi demonstrates, ecocritical studies are beginning to pay more attention to cityscapes. She shows that the attention to place in Ireland has continually been destabilised by forces such as colonisation, industrialisation, and globalisation.

Shokouhi's meticulous scholarship is evident in the many close readings of poems that illustrate her analysis; the author's approach makes for a very

effective blend of literary and historical research. Each chapter lays important groundwork for the sections to come. Throughout the book, the Irish Literary Revival and its impact on the broader discourse on Irishness receive significant attention. Heidegger's concept of "dwelling" serves as a guiding thread throughout, highlighting the fact that we have lost our basic relationship to the environment. Dwelling, Shokouhi demonstrates, is an elusive and multifaceted concept – in the Irish context, it is often characterised by a sense of loss or incompleteness.

Chapter 1 focuses on Irish forests. Shokouhi regards forests both as cultural landmarks and as material entities. The beginning of the chapter details the impact of imperialism on Irish woodlands: Shokouhi examines the historical records to show that there was indeed a link between colonisation and deforestation. She also demonstrates that the advent of Christianity led to the gradual erosion of the pagan reverence for trees and woodlands. Relying on Heidegger's concepts of *Herausfordern* and "dwelling," the author examines quotations from various historical and literary sources. These include the writings of Gerald of Wales, fragments of sixth-century poetry, and a late sixteenth-century poem by Laoiseach Mac an Bhaird; Shokouhi's analysis of these sources sheds light on these writers' contrasting perceptions of the forest as a site of dwelling.

Chapter 2 offers an exploration of W.B. Yeats's poetry. Shokouhi provides a chronological account of the evolution of his work – most notably, she focuses on the importance of nostalgia and of the notion of belonging in his poetry. Her analysis of the Anglo-Irish "Big House" as a motif is particularly insightful. As the author demonstrates, though the Big House tended to be regarded as the emblem of absentee landlordism and aristocratic extravagance, it also came to be a symbol of "dwelling" in Yeats' writing.

In Chapter 3, Shokouhi directs her attention to the agrarian countryside, contrasting it with the romanticised idea of wilderness that tends to be associated with the West. This chapter begins with a meticulous historical account of agricultural practices in Ireland. The author then outlines some of the reasons behind the inefficient implementation of environmental policy in the past decades. Shokouhi examines the various ways the Irish landscape was effectively mythicised during the Irish Literary Revival. She discusses depictions of the rural farming class in the work of writers such as Yeats, Maria Edgeworth, Lady Morgan and William Carleton. Central to Shokouhi's analysis is Yeats's portrayal of the "peasant bard" – based on a romanticised idea of rural life, this image of the Irish "peasant" became an emblem of Irish cultural identity in Yeats' work.

Chapter 4 shifts the focus away from the Literary Revival to examine Patrick Kavanagh's poetry. As Shokouhi demonstrates, Kavanagh's engagement with nature was more individual, and, in more ways than one, more nuanced than the revivalists'. Through a series of close readings, the author analyses Kavanagh's poetics, which can largely be regarded as anti-pastoral. His late poetry is characterised by a deeply personal, socially conscious, and sometimes pessimistic attachment to the Irish countryside. The author compares Kavanagh's perspective with Yeats' view of the country: Kavanagh subverts the idealised image of the Irish peasant and depicts the rural farming community as a complex, multifaceted group.

Chapter 5 begins with a re-examination of early ecocritical discourse. In the 1990s, scholars engaging in ecocriticism paid little attention to the urban environment, choosing instead to focus on rural landscapes. Shokouhi makes a convincing case for the inclusion of the city in ecocritical discourse. She examines the significance of Dublin as a symbol for social and cultural dynamics in Irish literature, and stresses that the city has rarely been looked at through an ecocritical lens. Drawing on the Baudelairian figure of the *flâneur*, the author emphasises how relevant urban spaces are to our sense of "dwelling." This idea challenges the revivalist narrative according to which Irish attachment to place is rooted solely in rural landscapes.

Chapter 6 focuses on Patrick Kavanagh's poems set in Dublin. Building upon Chapter 5, in which Shokouhi introduced the concept of *flânerie*, this chapter highlights the significance of the act of walking in Kavanagh's poetry. The author argues that, in Kavanagh's work, the transition from rural landscapes to urban cityscapes reflects the growing importance of the city as a symbol of Irish life. His poetics of the city, Shokouhi shows, are marked by a sense of movement and flow.

Lastly, Chapter 7 delves into Louis MacNeice's Belfast poems to highlight the city's pivotal role in the development of an urban attachment to place in Irish literature. Shokouhi focuses on the aesthetics of fluidity and instability that are part and parcel of the poet's urban experience. She offers a thoughtful analysis of trains as a motif in MacNeice's poetry – trains, she argues, act as symbols for a shifting, unmoored sense of place, and stand in sharp contrast to the sense of stability and permanence revivalist narratives attributed to the countryside. By including elements of Burke's sublime in his depiction of urban life, MacNeice portrayed the city as an ambivalent environment.

All in all, Shokouhi adeptly navigates the intersecting roles of place and revivalist narratives in the construction of Irish national identity. Her volume offers a rich tapestry of perspectives on the complex relationship between Irishness and the Irish land: the analysis greatly benefits from the author's

chronological approach. Shokouhi never loses sight of Heidegger's concept of "dwelling," which helps her interrogate the disconnection between humanity and the environment.

From Landscapes to Cityscapes blends historical analysis and literary scholarship to offer valuable insights into the evolving role of place in the Irish literary tradition. The poems the author focuses on can be regarded as tentative, exploratory gestures toward a sense of belonging; this is particularly evident in the portrayal of urban spaces and the figure of the *flâneur*, which Shokouhi explores in the last three chapters.

This book will be particularly useful to scholars interested in how ecocriticism has been approached in the Irish context so far: Shokouhi's volume builds on the work of major ecocritical voices in the field of Irish studies, while also offering many of its own new perspectives.

Camille d'Alençon-Pinettes

Université Rennes 2