

an equivocal presence

of memory and the ordinary

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irish fairy rath

“...to encounter truth is to be caught up in a process that changes us. Truth is not something we stand apart from and gaze upon unaffected”

Lauren Swayne-Barthold, *Rethinking Truth: The Relevance of Philosophical Hermeneutics for Christianity*

“Perceiving is as much about acting on the environment as it is about receiving signals from it.”

Antonio Damasio, *Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain*

To speak of context, most particularly in relation to the ‘ordinary’ or the everyday, is to embroil oneself in a discussion of the nature of perception and understanding. For context is not simply the physical reality of a place but is equally the contextual field of associations, held in our memory, which are evoked by an event, place or person. The complex web of associations contained within this mental landscape influences how we see the physical, in truth constraining what we are actually able to perceive and, beyond this, the varied meanings this experience will have for each of us.

Why would this be especially relevant to any investigation of the complexity of the ordinary? It is the very ubiquity of presence, and thus stability of the contextual landscape of associations and memories, which enables us to overlook the particularity and poignancy of the common. How then to reveal the complexity of the commonplace, to imbue particularity into the not very particular? One means is to extend its imaginative context, that is the range of associations one intuitively experiences when engaging with the object. But to achieve this one must forgo the desire for clarity, singularity or intelligibility that work against the expansion of the imaginative context.

Let us consider for instance the ubiquitous fairy fort, or rath as the Irish would have it, littered in the tens of thousands across the Irish landscape. Now understood as defensive fortifications dating from 400-1000 AD, at least by academics, this very ordinary construction acquired an affiliation with the fairies, more properly referred to in Irish as the Tuatha dé Danaan, the people of the other world, in the medieval period. An association so enduring that it survives in contemporary Irish culture and compelling enough to ensure the continued presence of these artefacts. The fairy myths are in truth a mutation of the much older Celtic lore of the dead, more properly associated with cairns, translated to the neglected and overgrown rath when their former use had fallen from common memory. A forgetfulness that enabled its presence to become sufficiently equivocal to precipitate unlikely associations, to enable a more active imaginative engagement through conjecture. A process that likely saved both rath and historic religious beliefs from complete extinction and transformed the ordinary into the extraordinary.

But perhaps this seems too exotic a case to sufficiently prove the value of the equivocal in the revelation of the ordinary? Standing defiantly apart from its suburban neighbours, askew from the rigour of road systems and plot lines, choosing instead land-form as its guiding geometry, the house below establishes its prior presence, its right to this place. Yet the Doherty House in County Derry has only recently been completed by de Paor Architects, the newest addition to a developed suburb. The steadfast foursquare form with its Georgian scale apertures recalls the stately Irish country houses of another century. Yet does not, as the tautness of glazing to the plain grey render, an overtly shallow roof profile and the even more improbable depth of lintel speak of modern construction methods, not explicitly to be sure, yet nevertheless present. Overlay this with the replication of an identical façade in every orientation denying, in its insistence, even a common door and the figure develops an equivocal presence, which deflects any simple interpretation. The explicit undermining of half recalled images through modern construction methods compels an imaginative form of engagement in an attempt to reconcile its ambiguity, an engagement which raises ones awareness of the place both culturally and physically.

Two apparently disparate examples yet both linked through their power to evoke unlikely associations, which inspire and engage the imagination of the viewer, to reveal truths regarding a wider context, yet relevant to the making of place based architecture. A context described by a landscape of memory, aided by a certain amount of forgetfulness, of associations and imaginative conjectures which are critical to an active engagement with the inherent complexity of the ordinary.



doherty residence, derry co.