A SENSE OF WHERE WE ARE

Imagining Paris: Exile, Writing, and American Identity *by J. Gerald Kennedy. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993. 269 pp. $17.*

Reviewed by Terrence Doody

Though I have lived in Houston for more than half my life, I still don't feel comfortably in place here. If I disliked the city, this would make perfect sense. But because there are things about Houston that I like a lot, this feeling of dislocation has long puzzled me. It's made me think hard about how it is that we come to establish a sense of place, a sense of being where we are.

Reading Proust has given me one way to think about how I deal with my past and present, my sense of where I was and where I am; Eavan Boland's *Object Lessons* gave me another. However, J. Gerald Kennedy's *Imagining Paris* has perhaps done the most to focus my ideas about why I react to Houston as I do, and it has done that by giving me an argument to oppose.

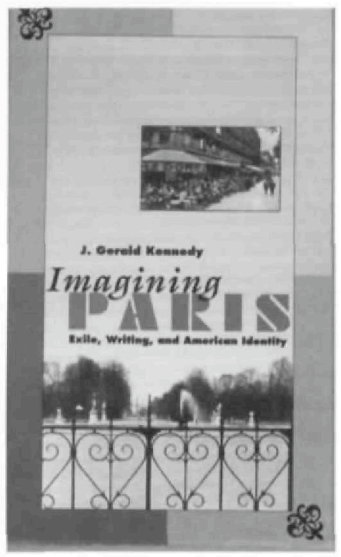
In *Imagining Paris*, Kennedy examines the ways Paris appears in the works of Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Gertrude Stein, Henry Miller, and Djuna Barnes. Stein lived in Paris for 30 years without mentioning it in her work until *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. For Stein, Paris was the art scene of the School of Paris and her stage for claiming that, with her friend Picasso, she was one of the founding geniuses of modernism. *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (really Stein's own autobiography and bid for fame) is a book of inventions and omissions — it omits that Joyce and Proust were also in Paris inventing modernism — but Stein's tics suggest the kind of freedom Paris has meant to many artists and Americans in search of their destiny.

The freedom Stein found, however, was not there for Fitzgerald's characters. In *Tender Is the Night*, Paris does not hold for Dick Diver the magic that New York held for Nick and Gatsby. The alienation that characterizes the post-World War I era and modernism's point of view is in Fitzgerald's book endless, anxious wandering, and Kennedy reminds us of how much violence Fitzgerald's novels contain. Much more, in fact, than the few fights in Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, which casts the City of Light in biblical darkness. Kennedy's treatment of place in Hemingway is different again and one of his book's strengths. With a street guide in one hand and the novel in the other, he follows Jake Barnes step-by-step through Paris, explicating for us exactly what Hemingway's style excludes: Jake's affect and any interpretation of what these places mean to him. I found Kennedy's account unexpectedly moving, a new way to read a book that had become old.

But close reading, even of such high quality, isn't enough anymore, and Kennedy's subtitle, "Exile, Writing, and American Identity," suggests his effort to widen his compass. Like many recent literary titles, however, Kennedy's is not quite true: his is less a book about imagining place than describing it. Not all five writers he examines felt exiled, and they don't exhaust the varieties of American identity particular even to modernism. But Kennedy feels it necessary to make his claim in order to develop a theory of place. He wants to abstract these writers' versions of Paris from narrative time in order to propose that place itself has no intrinsic meaning, and is subject to the many interpretations that are symbolic of the writers' psychology.

This is an extreme position, which even Kennedy questions when he writes, "But this ... leads us back to an earlier, more basic question: what is a place? Does place exist 'out there' in a purely objective form susceptible to empirical analysis, or does it lie within the human mind, as a set of internalized images always already contained and determined by language?" Because it overstates both sides of the question, this passage asks for some distinctions. So, I would like to start making some — between space and places, between our active and passive experience of places, our verbal and sensory experiences — and insist that the element of time — when in your life you experience a place — can't be excluded. Kennedy loses too much when he limits our sense of place to its verbal record, and tries to reduce the physical world to language merely.

First of all, it seems to me that Kennedy is really talking about space, not place. Space is timeless and ideal, a conceptual realm in which relationships are perceived or made. Space exists between things and is arranged by the meanings we project. Places have names and contain things, which are already there before we are. Kennedy's five writers prove that point: They went to Paris because Paris contains things London and Rome do not. It contains cafés and



the freedom of *la vie Bohême*, a tradition of sophisticated luxury, a cultural "spaciousness" that neither the Vatican nor the Tower of London holds. Moreover, they chose Paris as adults, conscious of its *difference* to them as writers. So, they provide a very narrow model of place's nature.

For places are experiences too — experiences before they are interpreted or become the idea of themselves — and what we experience of places often goes on beneath the full notice of consciousness. What the light is like, the breeze, sounds and textures — we can experience all of these, without speaking them out loud, as motive enough to return somewhere on the way to work or on our evening walk. In cities I like, I feel another layer palpable on the surface of my skin, which means nothing other than that response to place is also sensory and kinetic. The French painters who responded to Paris decades before the Lost Generation arrived did so, I'm sure, without the lenses of what Kennedy calls "internalized images ... already ... determined by language."

Kennedy surveys many other theories of place, from those of academic geographers to Gaston Bachelard's in *The Poetics of Space*, and he quotes Proust, who has described better than anyone how we experience places, what they can mean, and how that meaning changes. In a passage Kennedy doesn't quote, Proust writes of his childhood place, "But it is pre-eminently as the deepest layer of my mental soil, as the firm ground on which I still stand, that I regard the Méséglise and Guermantes ways. It is because I believed in things and in people while I walked along those paths that the things and the people they made known to me are the only ones that I still take seriously and that still bring me joy. Whether it is because the faith which creates has ceased to exist in me, or reality takes shape in the memory alone, the flowers that people show me nowadays for the first time never seem to me to be true flowers."

The faith Proust cites here is closer to everything we mean by imagination than it is to anything Kennedy means by the writing he examines, for his writers do not write of being formed by an experience of place that they then form the meaning of. And we can measure the depthlessness of their descriptions by comparing them to the Irish poet Eavan Boland's in her memoir *Object Lessons*.

Boland is unbearably poignant in describing her desire for the Proustian experience she didn't have. When she was five, her father, a diplomat, was posted to London and New York. Boland didn't return to Dublin until she was 14 and old enough to know what she had missed.

"I returned to find that my vocabulary of belonging was missing," she writes. "The street names, the meeting places ... I had never known them. I had lost not only a place but the past that goes with it and, with it, the clue from which to construct a present self."

"As I learned these things, the last unwanted gift of exile came to me," she continues. "I began to watch places with an interest so exact it might have been memory. ... I could imagine myself there, a child of nine, buying peppermints and walking back down by the canal ... a house I entered which I wanted not just to appreciate but to remember. ... I had been 11 here. ... I had been six."

But it can't be done like this: places described from a conscious distance are not like the places we first experience as ourselves, which are there before we are and give us our ground and boundaries. Whether we name this primary experience faith, imagination, or memory, it is not the kind of experience Kennedy examines in *Imagining Paris*.

It is, however, the kind of experience Hemingway himself had in Paris. Jake can't imagine himself in the City of Lights, but Hemingway could, as he told us in *A Moveable Feast*. He was much happier than Jake ever was because he took what Paris had to give him: the cafés to write in, the Cezannes, the weather and wine, even Gertrude Stein's advice. In Paris, he could imagine himself a writer. And he didn't have to flee to Spain to go fishing; he knew if he wanted to, he could fish in the Seine.

I think about this as I drive north up the West Loop and get to the rise over the intersection with U.S. 59. I am still somewhat dislocated, but beside me my 12-year-old daughter tells me she loves Houston, loves the way it looks from this perspective. She is starting to imagine herself in place; she will always feel herself here. And she tells me she doesn't understand why I can't. ■

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