

A Poetics of the Irish Border in *Bad Blood: A Walk along the Irish Border* (1987) by Colm Tóibín and *The Rule of the Land: Walking Ireland's Border* by Garrett Carr (2017)

*Silvana N. Fernández*¹

Abstract

In the face of the unrest and uncertainty which the post-Brexit situation has brought about for the Irish Border, we intend to delve into the manner in which *Bad Blood: A Walk along the Irish Border* (1987) by Colm Tóibín and *The Rule of the Land: Walking Ireland's Border* by Garrett Carr (2017) reconfigure the modalities of the possible, the real, and the necessary (Rancière, 2020). The date Tóibín earmarks for the beginning of his real and fictional journey is 1987, at the height of the Troubles; Carr sets out on his journey almost thirty years later, in the wake of the fateful referendum that would signal the withdrawal of the UK from the EU.

It is our purpose to give an insight into the ambiguous texture of both works and the images which weave the relationship between the history of the Border and the world the writers' creations bring forth. In brief, we will engage in a manner of reading that traces both Tóibín and Carr's fictional/memorial traverses in their construction of whole topographies of conflict and encounters as well as their creation of singular topographies of fiction, poetics of the Irish Border.

Keywords: Irish Border- Poetics- Conflict- Encounters- Colm Tóibín- Garrett Carr.

¹Silvana N. Fernández (IdIHCS-Universidad Nacional de La Plata, Argentina) main areas of interest are: the representation of space in Joseph Conrad; the Other in Shakespeare; fiction by hyphenated writers in Canada. ferfer12001@yahoo.com.ar

Resumen

Ante la amenaza de caos y pavor que la coyuntura política post-Brexit traería aparejada para la paz alcanzada en el denominado Border irlandés, entiéndase el retorno de una frontera dura entre las dos Irlandas, mayores y más férreos controles, etc., nos proponemos indagar las maneras en que *Bad Blood: A Walk along the Irish Border* (1987) de Colm Tóibín y *The Rule of the Land: Walking Ireland's Border* de Garrett Carr (2017) reconfiguran las modalidades de lo posible, de lo real, y de lo necesario (Rancière, 2020). La fecha que marca para Tóibín el inicio de ese viaje real y ficcional es 1987, el punto más álgido de los Troubles; para Carr el viaje comienza tras el referendo que en 2016 signaría la salida del Reino Unido de la Unión Europea.

En este trabajo nos proponemos explorar el estatus ambiguo de ambos textos y de las imágenes que tejen la relación entre la historia de la naturaleza y el mundo que los escritores han producido. En síntesis, es nuestro objetivo ensayar una modalidad de lectura capaz de seguir ambos viajes ficcionales/memorales en su elaboración de topografías enteras de combates y encuentros y construcción de topografías de la ficción, poéticas del Border irlandés.

Palabras clave: Border irlandés- poética-conflicto – encuentros, Colm Tóibín-Garrett Carr

Introduction

When one examines the question of borders and nations in South America, the theory advanced by Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983) imposes itself. According to Anderson, the importance of the principle of *uti possidetis* on the determination of boundaries in the newly born South American nations cannot be overlooked. In this connection he holds that “‘one of the basic principles of the American revolution’ was that of *uti possidetis* by which each nation was to preserve the territorial *status quo* of 1810” (Anderson 2006: 153). The nature of the demarcation of the border of what had been former administrative units from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century was somehow “arbitrary and fortuitous” since it depended on the spatial limits of military conquest. However,

this fact didn't cancel out the development and growth the new nations experienced under the influence of geographic, political, and economic factors.

Even if the history of Ireland's Border is different from that of South American countries, in the sense that the principle of *uti possidetis jure* does not apply, both Ireland and South America, however, partake in the one fact that their borders were, in South America, to a certain extent colonially determined and, in Ireland, incontrovertibly so.

In this connection it is interesting to bring into the argument Walter Mignolo's stance with reference to the status of Ireland and the colonial matrix of power. To him, Ireland is *on a par* with other spaces "beyond Europe (or beyond the heart of Europe, as it was the colonization of Ireland)" (Mignolo 2007: 455), places which had to suffer the colonization of the racialised classes led by the European bourgeoisie.

In the face of the unrest and uncertainty which the post-Brexit situation has brought about for the Irish Border and bearing in mind the colonial matrix of power which originated it, I intend to delve into the manner in which *Bad Blood* by Tóibín and *The Rule of the Land* by Carr (2017) reconfigure the modalities of the possible, the real, and the necessary (Rancière, 2020: 8). The date Tóibín earmarks for the beginning of his real and fictional journey is 1987, at the height of the Troubles; Carr sets out on his journey almost thirty years later, in the wake of the fateful referendum that would signal the withdrawal of the UK from the EU.

At a time when the Border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland comes to be again in the spotlight, I also want to set out on a voyage, or rather a distinct manner of moving about and reading the textual space in, namely, *Bad Blood: A Walk along the Irish Border* (1987) by Colm Tóibín and *The Rule of the Land: Walking Ireland's Border* by Garrett Carr (2017). Following Jacques Rancière in *Short Voyages to the Land of the People* (1990), I pose that the engagement with the Border which both writers generate is very much in the mode of the foreigner, or the naïf who is not yet informed. In Rancière's own terms the foreigner is someone who:

persists in the curiosity of his gaze, displaces his angle of vision, reworks the first way of putting together words and images, undoes the certainties of place, and thereby reawakens the power present in each of us to become a foreigner on the map of places and paths generally known as reality (Rancière 2003: 3).

It is my purpose then to give an insight into, respectively, the ambiguous and powerful texture of both *Bad Blood: A Walk along the Irish Border* and *The Rule of the Land: Walking Ireland's Border* and the images which weave the relationship between the history of the Border and the world the writers' creations bring forth. In brief, I will engage in a manner of reading that traces both Tóibín and Carr's fictional/memorial traverses in their construction of whole topographies of conflict and encounters as well as their creation of singular topographies of fiction, a poetics of the Irish Border.

When entering Tóibín and Carr's works the questions that one cannot avoid asking conflate by force the aesthetic, and the political, the abstract space on the map and the lived experience of the people. How can writing make the Irish Border visible? How to make it visible in a way which is distinct from the historicised version of Norman castles, barbed wire, military outposts, attacks, and hatred? How, in the summer after the signing of the Anglo-Irish agreement, to make visible a place inhabited by all of that but also by real people? How to make this place visible at a time when Britain's imminent departure from the European Union was already a certainty?

In this respect, both Tóibín and Carr's texts work towards rendering visible the fact that, alongside their territorial, social, historical, and economic dimension, borders also have an aesthetic dimension. They are significant thanks to perception, and they can be made visible by means of its artistic, aesthetic configuration. Also, the changing perceptions of the Border are related to aesthetic practices by which the people relate themselves to these real and conceptual border areas in which they live and struggle, work and move, love, and die.

The journey in Tóibín's case, on foot, sought out the dark, divided towns and villages along the Border at the height of the Troubles, in a world where the thought of a truce, let alone peace, seemed, at best, ludicrous.

From the very beginning we are allowed to share in the curiosity of Tóibín's gaze, the displacement which his angle of vision effects, the refashioning of words and images to undo the sanctioned distribution of voices, places and "truths" on the map generally known as reality.

In an ostensibly toned-down key Tóibín relates how on his way to Clady, a small town right on the Border with the Republic of Ireland, he chances upon a man called Billy Flanagan, who had lost his pub The Smugglers' Inn in a recent bombing and who would soon lose his other shops to the determination of an army bent on setting up a new army checkpoint as close as possible to the bridge. That man, in his forties but already full of gloom and worries, a man for whom "[t]he compensation would never make up for what was lost" (Tóibín 1994: 22) is the one who, on being asked for directions to Castlederg, gives a response of complete disbelief. Asking that question about finding your way in the land, Tóibín reports, was as sterile as the expectation that compensation would ever make up for his losses:

He gave me directions to get to Castlederg over the mountains, warning me that I would go into the South, into the North, into the South again and back into the North. 'How will I know whether I'm in the North or the South?' I said to him. 'You won't know,' he replied, managing a gruff sort of smile' (Tóibín 1994: 22).

This displaced gaze, which cannot find its bearings on the purportedly secure demarcation of the map, is once and again being reworked and refashioned by the movement along the Border and the movement which gives shape to the writing. Checking the map to know whether he was in the South, or the North had very often proved useless and, when on the way from Lifford to Castlederg, not even the look of the landscape would be of much help. Once he asked a man standing at the door of his cottage whether it was possible, he had been going into the South and into the North again and back into the South with no landmarks whatsoever, be they signposts, checkpoints, the landscape, or the state the road was in. The answer he got was far from reassuring, "He laughed. It was possible, yes, sure, it was possible as if I had walked two miles ahead, I'd be back in the North again, but this time I would meet a checkpoint." (Tóibín 1994: 23).

Tóibín recounts that when going west from Enniskillen to Belleek along the river Erne and since he and the people who accompanied him on the boat “weren’t sure whether we were in North or the South”, they “set out to investigate which State we were in”. The task resulted in a wasted attempt to get their bearings, “[i]t seemed we were in the North when we were having our dinner, but on our way to Belleek we wandered momentarily into the South, and as we passed into the town itself, we were back in the North.” (Tóibín 1994: 47).

Where the maps are useless to pin down his whereabouts, the sight and sound of army helicopters come as inescapable proof they are in the North. This is a presence which can’t be missed either in Crossmaglen (Tóibín 1994:183), where the planes flew over a football field on their way to the base, or in Lough Derg. Tóibín adopts various subject positions when he alludes to, respectively, the players reaction, “Play on, don’t even look at it,” (182), and what the pilots might have thought when seeing from above the scuffle which broke out between two players, “The army must have wondered what the natives were doing now.” (Tóibín 1994:182). In an “almost deserted” Lough Derg (Tóibín 1994: 48) the ubiquity of air surveillance is made a point of, with “a few other pleasure boats and the odd fishing boat”, where an army helicopter “approached the boat until it was right over our heads, before moving off in search of some other prey” (Tóibín 1994: 48).

In the search for signposts to know what side of the Border the walker/writer is moving or what religion sets up boundaries between people, maps are of no or little avail. On his way to Garrison on Lough Melvin the cue that tells him he is close to the Border was the destruction on the land, “the road I was walking on began to deteriorate; the surface was in bad repair” (Tóibín 1994: 63), not the Michelin map “which did not include most of the small roads I came to.” (Tóibín 1994: 63). Likewise, on his way to Kinawley, the ravages on the land, “there was no sign that there had been a road” (87), attest to the futility of maps, “[m]y map was useless; I swore I would replace it with a detailed Ordnance Survey map as soon as I could” (Tóibín 1994: 88).

Among glances of concern and fear from people from behind windows or children mistaking Tóibín for a foot patrol, the walker/writer comes across a soldier who solves his plight with maps. Plodding on the way to a Border which always seems receding, he chances upon this Welshman

stationed in Northern Ireland who, secretly, has drawn up his own chart. The young man, formerly serving his term in Malvinas, has developed a liking for a land which, to him, strongly resemble our islands in the South Atlantic. It must have been this infatuation which drove the soldier to sketch out in surprising precision and accuracy the space he is in:

He showed me his map, making sure that none of his comrades could see what he was doing. The map was incredibly detailed, every house, every field, every road, carefully denoted and described. It would be impossible to go wrong with such a map. Different colours made everything clear. He laughed when I explained my plight with maps. I showed him my Michelin and my Ordnance Survey, and he shook his head in wonder at how out-of-date they were. His was the map I should have, he said. (Tóibín 1994: 151).

Perhaps Tóibín's writing of the Border is the kind of map one should have. Not merely a map where the inscriptions of the Hiring Fairs are still painfully alive (Tóibín 1994: 12-20), not just a map where someone in this day and age provokingly dares offer "soup"² to a Catholic (Tóibín 1994: 106, 107) but also a map where the people remember that, for example, a certain Protestant family had not come during a Plantation or Confiscation but that they had bought their land back in 1732 (Tóibín 1994: 114), a map where the only arguments a Protestant and a Catholic could have before the Kingmills Massacre in 1976 was about horses and football (189). That kind of map is the one Tóibín is charting in his writing. As he aptly puts it after a walk to Beltany Stone Circle in the Republic of Ireland:

We walked down the hill, leaving the stones to their magic, away from the reminder that there was once a time in this place when there were no Catholics or Protestants; the dim past standing there on the crown of the hill, for once a history which could do us no harm, could not teach us, inspire us, remind us, beckon us, embitter us: history locked up in stone (Tóibín 1994: 15).

² During the Famine the members of the Reformed Churches offered "soup" to Catholics in return for conversion. (Tóibín 1994: 106)

Since the end of the Troubles at the end of the 20th century, more specifically in the late 1990s, the Border, one might have mused, would have faded into insignificance. Territorially significant, but geographically irrelevant, the story of the two Irelands, North and South, seemed to have moved on from any dispute about the dividing line between them. Britain's decision to leave the EU, however, following the referendum on 23rd June 2016, put an end to that wishful thinking. After weeks and months of debate about sovereignty and immigration and regulation, 56 per cent of Northern Ireland voted to remain while 44 per cent voted to leave. Conspicuous by its absence, however, was any real discussion of the status of the Border post-Brexit. What Brexit meant for the Border, and for the communities North and South which live along it, in it, was the day and months after the ballot anyone's guess. The debate and discussion, which ought to have been due before that drastic decision was made, is now untimely raging.

Garrett Carr came into this scenario to trace what would become the only land frontier between the United Kingdom and the EU, to envision how in the aftermaths of the Good Friday Agreement (1998) and Brexit a new geopolitical notion of islandness was enabled.

To Carr, map-maker and writer, it is principally through the intimacy realised in the vivid portrayals of the people he meets and their voices that the pages in *The Rule of the Land. Walking Ireland's Border* come alive. Like the most accomplished travel writers, Carr makes good use of his five senses to apprehend the spirit of the place. But Carr also employs his non-fiction skills to convey the borderlands in an attempt to show that “[t]he line on the map offers no space to meet ... here on the ground”. He will attempt to prove that the borderline “was not just a symbol, it was also a patch of earth, a living place where things happened.” He wants to “capture the drama of two countries striking against each other”, he wants “to see the line up close”, “how the land and its people have reacted to the border and the ways in which the line is made manifest.”(Carr 2017: ch. “The Border Interpretative Centre”).

He claims that he “will see the border in a peaceful yet fragile moment”; he wants to see the line, which had previously demarked counties, and later countries, on the eve of its new birth: the place “where the United Kingdom and the European Union touch” (Carr 2017: ch. “The Border Interpretative Centre”).

Carr draws inspiration from the move initiated by artist John Byrne when, back in 2000, he opened the Border Interpretative Centre. Byrne's aim was to turn the Border into something more than a line on the map with no place to meet; he wanted "to make room here on the ground", "proving it was not just a symbol, it was also a patch of earth, a living place where things happened." (Carr 2017: ch. The Border Interpretative Centre). The postcards Byrne sent didn't feature the usual ruins of Norman or Elizabethan castles with "their bloody aspects now safely historicised" but images of the military watchtowers built by the British army, images which conveyed the troubled, contested place which the "twisty line that divides the island on the map" has been for all its existence (Carr 2017: ch. The Border Interpretative Centre). The people who came to visit the Border were very much aware of how weird what they were doing was. Carr says, "rather than driving over the line they had stopped to look at it, to take it in" (Carr 2017: ch. The Border Interpretative Centre). In the manner of Rancière's foreigner, Carr also wants to become a pioneer of sorts and visit the Border. Very much like Byrne had done before him, Carr wants "to poke at the border, get under it or look at it from original angles" (Carr 2017: ch. The Border Interpretative Centre); he wants, I hold, in a Rancierian manner to "reawaken[s] the power present in each of us to become a foreigner on the map of places and paths generally known as reality" (Rancière, 2003: 3).

Picking the Border from the sea and starting his journey by canoe, Carr is allured by "the border's first monument", Haulbowline Lighthouse. According to Carr, Haulbowline Lighthouse, built by Robert Stevenson, the writer's grandfather and founder of a lighthouse-building dynasty, stands offshore and "guards a different border than the one on the map, it holds the line between order and chaos." (Carr 2017: ch. "Lighthouses, Vikings"). Moving west, Carr and his companion encounter two other lighthouses which are lined up ahead of them. Their presence allows the writer to bind space and time together in a complex composite of Viking raids, monastic history, Enlightenment optimism, commerce and sectarian violence. These two lighthouses, built by Allan Mac Donnell on Carlingford Lough in the 19th century to allow pilots to steer clean into the canal system, have turned from being "[p]rimarily sensible technology" (Carr 2017: ch. "Lighthouses,

Vikings”) to being functional to the IRA, who used them as a marker to blow a British convoy in 1979. Carr reflects thus on the issue at hand, “[t]his was a line of sight that Allan MacDonnell did not predict. Dare to erect a tall structure on this landscape and you never know what alignments it could get drawn into. (Carr 2017: ch. “Lighthouses, Vikings”).

Carr is on the lookout for what is not on the Ordnance Survey map: footbridges, planks. passes which are “too small, no roads lead to them.” (Carr 2017: ch. “A Pass, a Chair, a Fort”). These are the things he records on the map he is drawing, things which “[n]ot many people will ever see ..., just the natives and me,” (Carr 2017: ch. “A Pass, a Chair, a Fort”). On the map that is what he sketches, in the writing he conflates his own view of the Border and its people with the locals’ view of him, how they get the measure of him, someone who is attempting “to turn the border itself into a route ... not a role to which it is naturally suited” (Carr 2017: ch. “A Pass, a Chair, a Fort”). Along this route, like a detective searching for clues, he enquires about these passageways between North and South missing from Ordnance maps and he cannot help being “struck by how linked up they are, both sides of the border.” (Carr 2017: ch. “Home, Castle, Empire”). To Carr, walking the political line, adding what is absent or unseen and writing it in involves “passing through invisible networks of families ..., their love stories, marriages, children and grandchildren.”(Carr 2017: ch. “Home, Castle, Empire”). This is precisely the tight web of kin he finds when enquiring about footbridge number seventy-one:

This is Northern Ireland here and that’s Donegal over there,’ ‘That house over the bridge belongs to a son of ours, ... He married a girl from Donegal, and we built the bridge to join the houses.

It’s not finished yet mind you,’ We are going to have it that you can step out our back door and straight onto the bridge. (Carr 2017: ch. “Home, Castle, Empire”)

To Carr, the ambiguous and problematic nature of demarcation, the awkwardness and insecurity which the divide brings about is self-evident. To his judgement, “[d]rawing a line is one way to make a state where one can belong, but a sense of belonging is often lost to borders too.” (Carr 2017: ch. “Bars”). When, for example, considering the contrived name Derry/Londonderry and what it symbolises, Carr would readily get rid of the slash, which is suggestive of partition and the frontier, and adopt the dash: Derry~Londonderry. The dash, which the Peace Bridge and “the winding course of the Foyle travelling through the city” resemble, enables and enacts a “healthy dash of flexibility”, which “throws the boundary on its side, using it to link rather than divide”(Carr 2017: ch. “Bars”).

Physically grappling with the border and creatively configuring it is exactly the experience that Colm Tóibín and Garrett Carr put into the writing of *Bad Blood. A Walk Along the Irish Border* ((1987) and *The Rule of the Land Walking Ireland's Border* (2017). In these two books they tell us what it means to simultaneously move about a place impeded by walls, barricades, and other obstacles, but also a place which for all its divisions and violence, offers shortcuts, alleys and back lanes in which the walker-writer transforms his walk into a work of art.

Tóibín and Carr, know about the Border and the two Irelands, one from Wexford, the other from Donegal. Both set out on journeys in which they not only enact a world of concepts and theories about space, politics, nations and living but also enable pathbreaking manners of looking, thinking and doing. The artistic possibilities which writing, *their* writing, affords turn the Border visible, albeit not in the manner of an ordinary map. They do not follow the line on the flat surface steadfastly because the map does not and, indeed cannot, exhaust the lived space of the Border, cannot render it to the full.

Tóibín and Carr have transformed the Irish Border into an artistic and human experience, thus making visible what the map cannot make visible. In so doing, they have offered us a poetics as well as a veritable phenomenology of the Border at two critical crossroads in time.

Bibliography

- Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London & New York: Verso, 2006). First edition: 1983.
- Carr, Garrett, *The Rule of the Land. Walking Ireland's Border* (London: Faber & Faber, 2017), Google Books, accessed Sep. 20, 2020.
- Mignolo, Walter, "Delinking. The rhetoric of modernity, the logic of coloniality and the grammar of de-coloniality", *Cultural Studies* 21: 2 3 (March/May 2007), pp. 449 514.
- Rancière, Jacques, *Short Voyages to the Land of the People*. (Trans.) James B. Swenson. (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2003). First edition in French: 1990.
- *The Politics of Aesthetics. The Distribution of the Sensible*. (Ed. & Trans.) Gabriel Rockhill. (London & New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011). First edition in French: 2004.
- "Introduction" in *The Edges of Fiction*. (Trans.) Steve Corcoran. (UK & USA: Polity Press, 2020). First edition in French: 2017, pp. 1-12.
- Tóibín, Colm, *Bad Blood. A Walk along the Irish Border* (London: Picador, 1994) First edition: 1987.