

# **MAPPING IRELAND**

**(ESSAYS ON SPACE AND PLACE IN  
CONTEMPORARY IRISH POETRY)**



**NICOLETA STANCA**

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CONTEMPORARY IRISH POETRY)**

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## **DEDICATION**

This book is dedicated to friends  
who have been supporting me unconditionally for eleven years.



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## INTRODUCTION

*Mapping Ireland (Essays on Space and Place in Contemporary Irish Poetry)* will focus on spatiality and the place of postcolonial and feminist Ireland and Irish America as envisaged in contemporary poetry, illustrated by writers such as John Hewitt, John Montague, Thomas Kinsella, Michael Longley, Derek Mahon, Paul Muldoon, Tom Paulin, Eavan Boland, Ciaran Carson, Medbh McGuckian, Richard Murphy, Mary O'Malley and Eamonn Wall.

I have chosen the concept of the map for literary and cultural analysis due to its openness, versatility, polyvalence and suggestiveness and due to the presence of this trope with Irish writers in general, i.e. in expressing the sense of place:

The map is open and connectable in all its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group, or social formation. It can be drawn on a wall, conceived as a work of art, constructed as a political action or as a mediation. (Deleuze and Guattari qtd. in Tally 6)

Consequently, the writer can be seen as a mapmaker and the writing as mapmaking. Space is relational, ideal and subjective; it is a mental construction. Relying on critics such as Mikhail Bakhtin, Erich Auerbach and Georg Lukacs, Tally reaches the conclusion that through writing the author projects a map onto what seems the chaotic surrounding world, the map having the role to rescue the reader from a condition of loss and alienation, the existential homelessness or Heidegger's "not-at-home-ness" (Tally 66). Jameson equally calls cognitive mapping a way to overcome the existential alienation of modern world (Tally 67). Soja and Lynch use terms such as "imageability", "wayfinding" and "thirdspace" to represent an urban space characterized by confusion and the existential anxiety of Heidegger and Sartre (Tally 71).

To guide readers, maps tell stories: "To ask for a map is to say, "Tell me a story"" (Tuchi qtd. in Tally 46). Storytelling makes possible images of the world. Poems are maps maybe more than narratives spatial forms, in the former all the parts being present together, whereas in stories the temporal dimension being focused as well. Literary cartography is a means of giving form to the world. According to Tuchi in *Maps of Imagination*, cartographic

and literary practices overlap: selection and omission, conventions, inclusion and order, shape and the balance of intuition and intention (in Tally 50). One cannot describe a place without telling the story embedded in the place. The writer will select the particulars of a place to make the map meaningful. Certain aspects will be omitted to emphasize others, so the reader has to read between the lines the space on the map. "To trace our personal maps we move through the world with words and through words in the world" (Williams 73). Thus, re-conquering the sense of a place could be done by remapping it, whether this is local, national, post-colonial or global space.

Maps are not external to these struggles to alter power relations. The history of map use suggests that this may be so and that maps embody specific forms of power and authority. Since the Renaissance they have changed the way in which power is exercised. In colonial North America, for example, it was easy for Europeans to draw lines across the territories of Indian nations without sensing the reality of their political identity. The map allowed them to say, "This is mine; there are the boundaries." Similarly, in the innumerable wars since the sixteenth century it has been equally easy for the generals to fight battles with coloured pins and dividers rather than sensing the slaughter of the battlefield. Or again, in our own society, it is still easy for bureaucrats, developers, and "planners" to operate on the bodies of unique places without measuring the social dislocation of "progress". While the map is never the reality, in such ways it helps us to create a different reality. (Harley qtd. in Tally 26)

Map-making, in its physical sense as the manner in which a society views the world, and mapping, as a mental interpretation of the world, have also been related to colonization and empire building, which are of relevance in terms of Anglo-Irish relations and maps have been seen as at least the equal of guns and warships. Ideology and central cultural values of the native population and colonizers have come to be wrapped in the landscape of Ireland, manifested through its occupants, place names, stories and legends. Land/ landscape/ space have thus become layered and the map is only a guide, a doorway into a narrative of the nation. Thus, tracing has remained vital for the Irish people so that they may understand their world, find information on their ancestors and land histories.

The ancient Gaelic sense of mapping is connected to memory and maps were initially memorized not drawn:

this land memory involved not only a recognition of the history and landholding patterns amongst families but also knowledge over the middle and long term of how the names of places are actually changed to reflect these oscillations in kin-group power. (Smyth qtd. in Wall 24)

English map-making followed as official cartography or, in Wall's view, gave the perspective of the outsider:

the 'outsider' view of the perspective map that links Ptolemy, Mercator, Bartlett, Raven and Petty [and that] created a very different Ireland. It was this 'outsider' perspective-backed by innovative surveying instruments – that completed the mapping of plantation of Ireland in the seventeenth century. (Smyth qtd. in Wall 25)

Symbolically for the fate of the Irish people in the aftermath of the English cartographing the land, the tool used for measurement was the chain:

the laying of the chain was like a mystical rite, the agrarian equivalent of baptism or coming-of-age, which gave binding force (almost literally at the moment of survey, metaphorically forever) to the process of perambulation and which put the seal on one Irish townland after another as ready to be owned, occupied and civilized. (Smyth qtd. in Wall 26)

In a space embedded with narratives, poets have been finders and keepers, to use Seamus Heaney's terms, of layers of interweaving Irish maps, given as clues in relation the links between geography, cartography, history and literature.

The reader, in his turn, must make sense of the map through "literary geography" (Tally 8), by discovering the "spirit of the place" (D.H. Lawrence), rural and urban space (Raymond Williams, Charles Baudelaire, Michel de Certeau), postcolonial space (Edward Said), feminist and global geography. Just as literature is a means of mapping the world, the place itself represented in a literary text is full of a literary history that determines or at least influences the manner in which that place is going to be mapped and read by the future generations. For instance, Eavan Boland inherits an Ireland already "mapped" by Yeats in a masculine mode or Paul Muldoon remaps an Ireland already drawn by Heaney, Mahon and Longley, to mention only the generation of poets whose careers started in the 1960s.

In his *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923), D.H. Lawrence mentions this “spirit of the place”, intended by him to capture the character of the people living there (Tally 82), but actually being more connected with the way in which generations of readers have mapped that place. Hence, contemporary Irish poets have had to struggle with a very rich tradition of literary maps of Ireland starting from the ancient myths and folktales. In the same context of the spirit of a place, Virginia Woolf can be discussed with her essay “Literary Geography”, in which she sees readers as sentimental or scientific pilgrims in connection to the places evoked by Thackeray or Dickens, for instance (Tally 82). Therefore, John Hewitt can be considered an Ulster poet, Ciaran Carson a Belfast poet, Richard Murphy and Mary O’Malley are Western Irish, regional poets, and Eamonn Wall an Irish American, as there is this tendency to associate the landscapes evoked with the writer. Fundamentally, the spirit of the place emerges from “the writer’s literary cartography which the reader uses to give imaginative form to the actual world” (Tally 85).

Raymond Williams, in *The Country and the City* (1973), claims that literature embodies “structures of feelings” associated with places and spaces (in Tally 87). The nostalgia for a simple past, a rustic organic community, timeless rhythms, a pastoral ideal – for the countryside - opposes a shifting sense of experience, miscelleneity and randomness, a “world of strangers” (Lofland qtd. in Tally 89), of cities, in which the individual is just the “man of the crowd” of Edgar Allen Poe’s or Baudelaire’s lost and isolated urban citizen and Walter Benjamin’s *flâneur*. According to Michel de Certeau, the poet-pedestrian writes the city in “a long poem of walking” (101), the city being a reservoir of energy and offering a continuous bombardment of perceptions. There are two instance of the poet-*flâneur*’s relation to the surrounding world, both visible in Irish contemporary poets’ texts when they identify with the victims of the Troubles (Motague, Kinsella, Mahon, Longley) and when they keep their distance, tragedies being reported as events (Muldoon):

His passion and his profession are to become one flesh with the crowd. For the perfect *flâneur*, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world – such are a few of the slightest pleasures of those independent, passionate, impartial natures which the tongue can but clumsily define. [...] Thus, the lover of universal life enters into the

crowd as though it were an immense reservoir of electrical energy. Or we might liken him to a mirror as vast as the crowd itself; or to a kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness, responding to each one of its movements and reproducing the multiplicity of life and the flickering grace of all the elements of life. He is an “I” with an insatiable appetite for the “non-I” at every instant rendering and explaining it in pictures more living than life itself, which is always unstable and fugitive. (Baudelaire 9-10)

The contemporary Irish poet registers all the nuances of life in the streets of Dublin or Belfast, especially in Belfast during the Troubles.

In the window of the coffee-house there sits a convalescent, pleasurably absorbed in gazing at the crowd, and mingling, through the medium of thought, in the turmoil of thought that surrounds him. But lately returned from the valley of the shadow of death, he is rapturously breathing in all the odours and essences of life; as he has been on the brink of total oblivion, he remembers, and fervently desires to remember everything. Finally he hurls himself headlong into the midst of the throng, in pursuit of the unknown, half-glimpsed countenance that has, on an instant, bewitched him. Curiosity has become fatal, irresistible passion. (Baudelaire 7)

Identifying with the victims of violence, after returning from the “valley of the shadow of death”, the Irish poet wants to give a thorough account of such experiences.

To give himself a break from the city, the poet withdraws to the West of Ireland, with its vast seaside landscapes (in the poetry of Longley, Murphy and O'Malley). According to Eamonn Wall, contemporary Irish Western writers stand in the shadow of giants, such as Augusta Gregory, W.B. Yeats and Synge. These writers associated the precariousness of local inhabitants of the West, with creativity, anti-materialism and a spiritual dimension, in general, allowed contemporary poets to enter a dialogue with them.

The tramp or wanderer in Yeats's poems is one who knows 'the exorbitant dreams of beggary', the relation between imaginative sumptuousness and material destitution. If Augusta Gregory was impressed on her visits to Galway workhouses by the contrasts between the poverty and the splendour of their tales, Yeats could see in these deracinated figures an image of Anglo-Ireland on the skids.

So did Synge, who signed his love letters to Molly Allgood “Your Old Tramp”. (Kiberd qtd. in Wall xvi)

Since the poems discussed in this book will be seen in relation to place/space/city/countryside/suburbia/maps/journeys, it is mandatory that we look at ideas introduced by ecocritical criticism as well, especially since authors such as Murphy and O’Malley have been considered by Eamonn Wall ecopoets of the West of Ireland. “Eco” comes from “oikos” = house and the *OED* makes reference to “oecology”, which gave “ecology” (1876), as a branch of biology that deals with the relationships between living organisms and their environment. Thus, ecocriticism means the criticism of the “house” as represented in nature (Johnson, “Greening...”). Among the essential ecocritical views and conceptual representations, relevant for the understanding of the Irish landscape in contemporary poetry, we mention: John Elder’s *Imagining the Earth*, in which the theoretician considers the wholeness of the world in which poetry becomes “a manifestation of landscape, just as the ecosystem’s flora and fauna are” (in Philips 581) and we only need the skill to read this natural manuscript, if the skill has not been lost, as claimed in Montague’s poem “A Lost Tradition”; Jay Parini’s idea that the ecocritical approach marks “a reengagement [of literature] with realism, with the actual universe of rocks, trees and rivers that lies behind the wilderness of signs” (in Philips 580) – Ireland’s Western fishermen in Murphy’s poems are real not only symbols of spirituality, as in Yeats’s aestheticized approach; Donald Worster’s view that nature should be perceived as “a landscape of patches of all sizes, textures, and colours, changing continuously through time and space, responding to an unceasing barrage of perturbations” (in Philips 580), just like the Irish landscape colonized and regained, remapped and renamed – nature in relation to humans – spaces built and unbuilt, to use Lawrence Buell’s terms in *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (in Johnson 8); Serpil Opperman’s ideas related to nature’s wholeness and interconnectedness, the multidimensional characteristic of nature, gulls, the wind and rocks as eco-literary devices not mere elements of the natural framing (38-39). Though culturally constructed in literature, nature is also real and keeping a balanced approach would pay its duty to it. These may be some of the concerns of Irish (American) contemporary poets.

Greg Garrard, in his *Ecocriticism*, describes, through ecocritical lenses, the major literary loci of the environment: pastoral, wilderness, apocalypse, dwelling, animals and the Earth. Garrard’s ideas are of great importance in the context of this study in which Kinsella is concerned with



representations of wilderness; Longley, Murphy and O'Malley focus on the pastoral West of Ireland; violence and an apocalyptic vision of the city are present in both Mahon and Carson's texts; Boland and McGuckian have challenged women representations as nature and the existence of some feminine essence grounded in biological sex, in accordance with ecofeminists; contemporary Irish poets, whether male or female, have all contested a masculine (English) colonizer's conquest of the feminine (Irish) "primitive" land.

The pastoral tradition involves a contrast with the city and an idealizations of the countryside. The classical, Hellenistic influences could be traced further in literary representations through the spatial distinction of town (frenetic, corrupt, impersonal) and country (peaceful, abundant), and the temporal distinction of past (idyllic) and present (fallen); it was then that the "poetry of place" was born (Garrard 39). Raymond Williams's *The Country and the City* also draws attention to the nostalgia associated with the country, which has been traditionally a major feature of Irish place poetry. Garrard establishes three directions of the pastoral, the first two being especially applicable to Irish poetry: "the *elegy* looks back to a vanished past with a sense of nostalgia; the *idyll* celebrates a bountiful present; the *utopia* looks forward to a redeemed future" (42). Longley, for instance, a graduate of classical studies, writes in the classical style revisiting contemporary Irish events through the lens of famous stories in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

Wilderness is a term derived from the Anglo-Saxon "wildeorenen", where "deorenen" means beasts living beyond the boundaries of domesticated land (Garrard 67). Wilderness rather fits settlers' experiences, possibly traditionally the English views of Irish landscape (and people). Confronted with it, the viewer may feel fright, danger, like the English colonist, but also admiration for its vastness and overwhelming power, like the (Irish) city poet on the Western Aran Islands. Wilderness is an extremely complex concept. After Adam and Eve were chased from the pastoral Eden, their exile was in wilderness. But wilderness could be also interpreted in terms of early (Irish) monastic tradition: "to escape both persecution by Roman authorities and the temptation of the world early Christian hermits went to the deserts" (Garrard 68). Critics have also identified an otherness of wilderness in terms of its separation from civilization and the urban space, hence its appeal to Irish poets:

Wilderness is the natural, unfallen antithesis of an unnatural civilization that has lost its soul. It is a place of freedom in which we can recover our true selves we have lost to the corrupting influences

of our artificial lives. Most of all, it is the ultimate landscape of authenticity. (Cronon qtd. in Garrard 77)

Thomas Kinsella, with his examples of universal natural voracity paralleled in the society as well, shares ideas with the American “poet laureate of deep ecology”, Gary Snyder, according to whom, since our bodies are wild, our responses at critical moments are: “the heart-in-the-throat in a moment of danger, the catch of the breath”; “the wild requires that we learn the terrain, nod to all the plants and animals, ford the streams and cross the ridges, and tell a good story when we get home” (Snyder qtd. in Garrard 91-92).

Dwelling represents, according to Garrard, “long-term imbrications of humans in a landscape of memory, ancestry and death, of ritual, life and work” (117), a kind of marriage between man and place, to use a metaphor cherished by Seamus Heaney. Wendell Berry’s explanation for this close relationship between man / a community and land is also the stories of and by those people that ultimately go into the soil or, with the Irish, their souls may go into trees, bushes, inhabiting the land of the faeries:

A human community, too, must collect leaves and stories, and turn them to account. It must build soil, and build that memory of itself ... that will be its culture. These two kinds of accumulation, of local soil and local culture, are intimately related. (Berry qtd. in Garrard 124)

Places are also tightly connected to family, family home, genealogy, which ensure a passage into a source of life and identification and poetic inspiration, as expressed by Seamus Heaney in his comments related to his family house and its roots in the soil of Ulster:

The pump that marked the original descent into earth, sand, gravel, water. It centred and staked the imagination, made its foundation the foundation of the *omphalos* itself. So I find it altogether appropriate that an old superstition ratifies the hankering for the underground side of things. It is a superstition associated with the Heaney name. In Gaelic times, the family were involved with ecclesiastical affairs in the diocese of Derry, and had some kind of rights to the stewardship of a monastery site at Banagher in the north of the country. There is St. Muredach O’Henry associated with the old church at Banagher; and there is also a belief that sand lifted from the ground at Banagher has beneficent, even magical properties, if it is lifted from the site by one of the Heaney family. Throw sand that a Heaney has lifted after a man going into court, and he will win the

case. Throw it after your team as they go out on the pitch, and they will win the game. (Heaney qtd. in Tobin 260)

Unlike Heaney, who emphasizes the connection between the land and the family history and his own personality, John Montague's sense of genealogical identity is breached and traumatized:

I submit again  
to stare soberly

at my own name  
cut on a gravestone

& hear the creak  
of a ghostly fiddle

filter through  
American earth.

(“A Graveyard in Queens” in Tobin 261)

Born in Brooklyn and reared by aunts in Ireland, Montague has had to bear the separation from his parents and the parents' separation, his mother deciding to return to Garvaghey and his father remaining in America. This is the general condition that has shaped the genealogy of the modern world.

What happens to these generations of Irish immigrants? How do they relate to the issue of genealogy and place in America? Eamonn Wall's poem “The Class of 1845” gives an account of where we could place the Irish diaspora from the perspective of a New Irish immigrant:

Those who were broken  
crawled by broken ditches  
into coffin ships

In the new world  
they were known as  
filth, disease, and silence

In their motherland wise men sang:  
“brothers and sisters in New York  
send us your loot.”  
In hell's kitchen

on the lower east side  
turf-bedevelled irish  
fought against black and jew  
worked their skins away  
sent their money home.  
(in Tobin 286)

Wall's rapport with history is direct as he is himself a New Irish immigrant in America, now one of the leading poets of his generation, and he has been schooled in the Irish tradition of engaging history and challenging it. Thus, he recreates the atmosphere in the Irish American communities in the latter part of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, with the remittances sent home regularly by the immigrants, the poverty in the slums in Hell's Kitchen and Five Points, the tensions with the Blacks and the Jews once the Irish "became white".

The actual place of Ireland had changed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the landscape being increasingly industrialized and the population urbanized. The focus has fallen, consequently, on nostalgia for the rural and natural beauty as a possibility. The vales of Glendalough or the lakes of Killarney have become "cultural centres", where nature and culture are blurred, reminding one of the past.

Visiting such "natural" sites becomes like a trip to a museum that plays upon the received notion of rural Ireland as somehow more genuine than urban Ireland, triggering a self-reflexive nostalgia.  
(Frawley 137)

Nostalgia and the divide between the country and the city still mark advertising and political strategies and have been taken over by contemporary writers. According to Neil Corcoran, mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Irish poetry

made it clear how inseparable from matters of Irish history ideological representations of rural Ireland are: whether because the Famine is inscribed so deeply into the Irish landscape and psyche ... or because of the de Valeran valorization of an impossible ideal, or because in a colonial and post-colonial country, matters of the land's ownership are inevitably more fraught ... In many other post-Yeatsian poets of Irish rural life, particularly those from the North, these recognitions are also made, even in the great act of establishing Irish topographies with great imaginative definition and richness.  
(*After Yeats and Joyce* 65)