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## “The Art of the ‘Good Step’ in Colm Tóibín’s *Bad Blood: A Walk Along the Irish Border* (1987)”

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“The art of the ‘good step’  
in Colm Tóibín’s *Bad Blood: A Walk Along the Irish Border* (1987).”

Marie Mianowski

(Ed. Klaus Benesch & François Specq)

In *Wanderlust*, Rebecca Solnit emphasized how the action of walking generated a unity of the body, the soul and the landscape:

Walking [...] is the intentional act closest to the unwilled rhythms of the body, to breathing and the beating of the heart [...] Walking, ideally, is a state in which the mind, the body, and the world are aligned, as though they were three characters finally in conversation together, three notes making a chord. (Solnit 5)

In her words, the apparent paradox between intention and unwilled actions made walking a unique way to apprehend a territory, favouring active and mobile interactions capable of adapting to the various terrains or situations. The territory examined in this paper is the contested space of the Irish border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and more specifically the account given by author and journalist Colm Tóibín of a three-month journey along the border in 1986. The nature of this borderland corresponds to Homi Bhabha’s definition of ‘thirdspace’ as

a place of invention and transformational encounters, a dynamic in-between space that is imbued with the traces, relays, ambivalence, ambiguities and contradictions with the feelings and practices of both sites, to fashion something different, unexpected. (Bhabha 1994)

We will therefore focus on the ambiguities and paradoxes Tóibín invariably stumbles upon in his book and question the transformational nature of his journey, especially its capacity to welcome the unexpected. To what extent does the invisibility of the border in some places and the palpable tension in parts of the territory open out creative possibilities, as artists choose to inhabit the blurred spaces and create horizons of reconciliation and re-connection? In the light of anthropologist Tim Ingold’s work on lines and walking, we will discuss how in walking along the border Tóibín uncovered new meanings that might have been concealed or simply not been expressed in dominant discourses. Tóibín followed a specific method to walk along a violently contested space. In turn, we will follow the sometimes invisible line of the border he

uncovers in his text. Just as ‘thirdspace argues for the breakdown of binaries, and the emergence of an-Other, a third space of enunciation and political and cultural resistance’ (Moles 11), we will study how a new space of enunciation and inquiry to promote peace can emerge through walking, writing and artistic practices.

### **Tóibín’s method**

In the summer of 1986 following the Anglo-Irish Agreement signed on November 15<sup>th</sup> 1985, Wexford-born Colm Tóibín set off on a walk along the Irish Border. Although the book he later wrote was never meant to be a travel book nor a walking book, but a political one, Tóibín’s journey from Derry to Carlingford was done on foot and the first version of his book was entitled: *Walking along the Border*. We will therefore examine the key-role played by walking in his adventurous journey. The originality of the enterprise was triple. Firstly, it took place at a very special moment in Irish history, after the 1985 Agreement meant as a tool to foster peace and reconciliation Secondly, Tóibín chose a highly contested territory. In choosing to follow the border, Tóibín had decided that he was going to follow a direction, materialized on paper by a dotted, meandering line and defined by decades of violent divisions interrupted by efforts towards a yet abstract reconciliation. His journey was therefore always going to be a hectic and hazardous one, with hazy and unclear limits. The third original feature of Tóibín’s undertaking was the means of the enterprise. As Solnit poetically describes:

The rhythm of walking generates a rhythm of thinking, and the passage through a landscape echoes or stimulates the passage through a series of thoughts. This creates an odd consonance between the internal and the external passage, one that suggests that the mind is also a landscape of sorts and that walking is one way to traverse it. A new thought often seems like a feature of the landscape that was there all along, as though thinking were travelling rather than making. (Solnit 5)

Walking through the landscape meant that at some point of his experience, Tóibín was in some way going to embody this dual, contested but also sometimes invisible border. As Alan Norton showed in his 2006 analysis of the 1985 Agreement, the Agreement insisted on the notion of “level” (official level, highest level, Ministerial level). Tóibín’s walking journey meant interpreting the Agreement at the level of a man’s body, walking and thinking in the landscape. While he did not refuse the odd lift to his next destination, nor a short boat excursion, walking along the border meant changing scales in the assessment of the political

situation on the ground. He was embodying the Agreement and transforming an abstract political discourse aiming at keeping violence and sectarianism at bay, into a physical, walking experience to encounter people and understand how their lives were affected by the Agreement in the interface areas along the border. Tóibín did stumble, hesitate or even walk back. He sometimes ran or chose to halt for some time before resuming his walk, but he did walk all the way through, from Derry to Newry, and in walking he transformed a political statement into a human and even artistic experience. He experienced precisely what British anthropologist Tim Ingold described as the inseparable association of locomotion and cognition:

It is in these dextrous movements along paths of life and travel, I contend, and not in the processing of data collected from multiple sites of observation, that inhabitants' knowledge is forged. Thus locomotion and cognition are inseparable, and an account of the mind must be as much concerned with the work of the feet as with that of the head and hands. (*Being Alive* 17)

### **Walking along the border**

As K.J. Rankin explains in a paper entitled “Creation and consolidation of the Irish border”:

The course of the boundary is not explicitly described in statute but only implicitly inferred from the territorial definition of Northern Ireland as contained in the 1920 Government of Ireland Act (...) the fact that Ireland, as a relatively small island in global terms, has been split between two separate political entities and that its boundary follows no significant physical divisions, is symptomatic of a core dichotomy of political geography, concerning physical unity and political division that has engendered several corollary paradoxes. (Rankin 9)

The border is therefore a physically and geographically blurred notion, whose mapping is a huge challenge. Moreover, in 1985 the Irish Peace Process was only an optical illusion in the hazy distance. Walking along the border was therefore in itself a highly problematic action, both from a material perspective and from a political one.

As Anne Goarzin remarked in her paper on Tóibín's walk, the project was not a boy scout's challenge (“Frontières incertaines et territoires hostiles” 212). Tóibín's plan was to confront a specific space at a specific moment, in a region in which he was a total stranger. It was also a challenge from a physical point of view. Apart from the fact that the sky was most of the time grey and the rain often pouring, the distance he had to walk along was often

greater than what he had planned and he found himself very soon “immersed in self pity” (15), deciding to walk “in small doses.” (15) The recurrence of complaints as he felt “immense grief” (29) or “sheer pain” (85) illustrates the actual difficulty of the enterprise and the challenge that Tóibín brought upon himself to accomplish his mission as he felt himself no “serious walker”:

I passed an entry to the Ulster Way, a trail for serious walkers who enjoyed the great outdoors, the uphill struggle, the raw countryside, forests dripping with rain, soggy paths and adventures with wild animals. I was glad that I enjoyed none of these things, and thus kept to the road, hoping to make the town of Swanlinbar before night. (76)

Walking was sometimes a pleasure but it was above all a geographic and political test. And apart from the weather, the crucial question of maps was the first challenge. His ‘ordinary Michelin road map of Ireland’ (29) was totally inadequate and he soon found out that it was totally unreliable. The Ordnance Survey map that he procured himself later on his journey was hardly more helpful:

I now possessed an Ordnance survey map, which was even more useless than the Michelin map I had been using previously. This map had too many roads, the other one had too few. In the face of such a plethora of roads it was hard to know where to go, so I followed my nose and went in the direction I thought was north. (125)

The only map he found helpful was one provided by a friendly Welsh soldier eager to tell his memories about the Falklands war as well as to show Toibin 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. (125)

As Anne Goarzin noted in her paper on Tóibín’s walk, the question of maps was recurrently mentioned as a form of violent political expression towards the different communities (“Frontières incertaines et territoires hostiles” 213). Maps were either exhaustive or on the contrary incomplete and the symptom of what was kept hidden. Maps were therefore at the centre of all conflicts, whether individual or national, and they were the first unappealing landscape Colm Tóibín came across as he started walking. The very unintelligibility of maps created a blurred environment and was a pretext and a trigger for more violence. The only way for Tóibín to find his way in the uniformity of the landscape before him was through the

narratives of the people he met and the specific places he could stop at, whether public houses or churches. As he discovered early on, the border was sometimes an invisible limit to a stranger's eyes and one which only the inhabitants of the region could detect:

He gave me directions to get to Castleberg 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. (30)

Later when Tóibín was lost and did not know whether he was in the North or in the South, the indications he was given were even more puzzling:

'Am I in the North or the South?' I asked him.  
'Where are you going?'  
'I'm walking to Castleberg. Am I in the North or in the South?'  
'You're in the North', he said. 'That's the North there, that dip in the road. That's the South over there where you came. (31)

As Tóibín did not know he had been in the South, he checked the map but the road he was on was not visible on it. Sometimes also the border was simply impossible to cross except on foot. Following the border was therefore in itself an achievement in fact only possible on foot.

For walking along the border was nothing but a straight line: it was an unceasing and unsteady criss-crossing from the south to the north and from the north to the south which in itself inscribed in the walker's body the inexistence of such an improbable thing as a border between two communities at war. Some roads were completely run down with lack of use (66), bridges had been blown up, which complicated or ruled out any crossing of the border and any meeting with the neighbours across the bridge. The landscape Toibin discovered on his journey was one of disconnections and random criss-crossing. It mimicked the human situations whereby the ceasefire had been signed on paper whereas on the ground, when territories were trespassed upon, words ill-used and wrong alliances suspected, petrol bombs exploded and scores were settled. Peace had been rationalized virtually on paper but in reality the absurd logic of war continued to control people's lives. Tóibín soon noticed that he was actually the only one interested in walking along the border. Most people simply yearned to be able to walk across it, not along it and the religious and political issues were far beyond any notion of a geographical border. The idea of the border itself was permanently questioned, as were its line and the connections and disconnections from one side to the other. The best symbol of how absurdity was inscribed in the lives of the inhabitants of the border is

a Mr Murray's house: "the border went right through his house like a slicer through a block of cheese [...]," (88) with one half in the North and one half in the South.

And yet amid the violence criss-crossing the border, just as Toibin walked from one community to the other without knowing exactly when the change operated, traditions went on, marches and celebrations of sad anniversaries punctuated the year. While Toibin's walk progressed, his narrative also took shape. It gradually moved from being a mere description of the practical act of walking and the material existence of the border, on to a questioning of the representations of life on the border. The walker's progress and the writer's enunciation process gradually transformed themselves and became works of art inside the undecided space of the border zone.

### **Writing through landscape**

"For days on end the sky was grey. The roads were narrow. The land was soggy" (111), he wrote. And yet, as days went by, a sort of metamorphosis operated as Tóibín, walker and narrator, walked and wrote through the landscape and questioned its representations in people's everyday lives.

But what does it mean, to write through landscape? How can contemporary writers – geographers included – work to usefully inhabit or haunt a concept and a sentiment arguably predicted upon senses of loss, and of potential re-connection, as evidenced by landscape's generic literary legacy of yearning and returning; nostalgia, elegy and lament? ("Dwelling and Displacement: Tim Robinson and the question of landscape" 367)

In Tóibín's case the answer to John Wylie's question formulated in a paper on Tim Robinson and landscape, is that Tóibín wrote through landscape by walking through it. Walking along, he was the best witness as to how nature, and the sense of a nation, the political side of things and the emotional human aspects of life co-existed and connected and had contributed to building a form of borderscaping. As his stops in pubs added up to those in small hotels or in rented rooms for the night, or even in churches, Tóibín struck new relationships, lent an ear to confidences and became the receptacle of "tales" of life on the border. As a narrator and a stranger to those parts, he stood outside any ideology, simply bearing witness. As he attempted to decode the dreary and seemingly unchanging landscape around him, he struck new relationships with people and made new connections. Not only did he connect people and places together, but the landscape he constructed as he walked on became alive. Gradually, the abstract space of the cease-fire agreement became a succession of places connected together by the lives of the inhabitants. To those diachronic connections the walker and writer

gradually added up synchronic connections asking how, for all its violent history, one place could be connected to the past and thus shed a specific perspective on the present events, surprisingly endowing them with hope.

The landscape thus revealed was run through by a diversity of viewpoints themselves criss-crossing and interwoven into a pattern as opaque as the maps of the region. Two examples are particularly revealing. The first is linked to the divorce referendum and the second to the Travellers living in the border area. As Tóibín walked across the border at the beginning of the summer, one day in the South, the next in the North and sometimes in the South and in the North on the same day, the divorce referendum was about to be voted in the South. As the vote against was gathering momentum in Dublin and Tóibín discussed the issue with the people he met, this discussion on an utterly contemporary topic was set against a background in which past history prevailed in a way that gave depth to the events of the day. What he learnt about the Travellers' position also changed his point of view on the subject. Whereas on the border every topic was a pretext for violence to flare up, Tóibín met travellers whose attitude had always been to stand outside the conflict and the violence, and who in turn were violently criticized by the other inhabitants of the border for not settling on an opinion and for being always suspected of adopting the other side's point of view. At this stage of Tóibín's journey, the landscape resembled the "meshing" Tim Ingold described in his book *Being Alive*. Like the inhabitants of the towns he walked through or spent a few days in, Tóibín and the travellers were "wayfarers" whose "trails [were] intertwined" and who were part of a wider "meshwork" (Ingold, *Being Alive* 148), in which movement prevailed over the sense of containment. As he walked on, Tóibín was seized by the very movement of his journey. He embodied the paradoxes and blanks of the border area and was more and more attracted by the ways in which the inhabitants experienced those paradoxes. Alongside the criss-crossing of contemporary viewpoints and blurred perspectives, Tóibín's narrative revealed alternative ways of handling the ambiguous status of the border and the role of art in this process. As Tóibín's slow pace as a walker enabled him to witness a number of metamorphoses of his own perception of landscape, his narrative, just as his walk, was gradually transformed into a work of art. Just as Tim Robinson, a writer, mathematician and mapmaker wrote about the value of the step in *Stones of Aran*, Tóibín gradually shifts his focus from the political journey to the effects of walking on encounters:

The dolphin's world, for all its inhabitants can sense Gulf Streams of diffuse beneficences, freshening influences of rivers and perhaps a hundred other transparent gradations, is endlessly more continuous and therefore productive of unity than ours, our craggy, boggy, overgrown and overbuilt terrain, on



which every step carries us across geologies, biologies, myths, histories, politics, etcetera, and trips us with the trailing *Rosa spinosissima* of personal associations. To forget these dimensions of the step is to forgo our honour as human beings, but an awareness of them equal to the involuted complexities under foot at any given moment would be a crushing backload to have to carry. [...] So the step lies beyond a certain work of art; it would be like a reading of that work. And the writing of such a work? Impossible, for many reasons, of which the brevity of life is one. (*Stones of Aran* 20)

Tóibín's discovery is precisely linked to the gravity of his footsteps and the slow pace of his progress: a growing awareness of the synchronic value of each step he takes and of the depth of the landscape. As he walked on, he gradually ceased to view the landscape around him only as a traditional horizontal landscape of boggy soil and dreary skies. The landscape began to take on a depth of its own. The first example of this occurred like a shock when Toibin, on arriving in Lifford, discovered that there used to be a hiring fair as late as the 1930s in the town. He met people who had actually been hired every six months when they were young and he started asking questions: the landscape became alive with a history which reshuffled all of the limits and borderlines of the present, as poor people, now old, of all confessions, told their sad versions of the hiring fair at Lifford at the turn of the century. A whole past of suffering, injustice, poverty and emigration unfolded and took on a particular shape and reality, meanwhile offering a new perspective on the contemporary troubles along the border. As Tóibín walked on, his view of landscape still deepened, and his step became even more reflexive. He seemed overwhelmed by what he saw, as 4000-year old stones were presented to him:

All of the hills had been wooded when the stones were placed here first around 2000 BC. The stones were big and rugged, no attempt had been made to decorate them, embellish them, or sculpt them in any way. They were jagged stones placed in a large circle at the top of this hill. This wasn't art – this was magic (...) history locked up in stone. (25)

In this, Tóibín joins Robinson's vision in his book *Stones of Aran*, written at the same period as *Walking along the Border*, of a landscape which we can attempt to decipher, which lets itself read as a book, but of which it is impossible to write, as it encompasses both the past, the present and the future. One day, during his walk Tóibín met with his friend the painter Felim Egan who showed him around the town of Enniskillen. He also showed him his paintings, which were the result of a fruitful collaboration with the poet Seamus Heaney. New discourses on the border were thus being created out of sights behind the walls of the houses (Goarzin, "Frontières incertaines et territoires hostiles" 211). Those new discourses were the fruit of a union between Seamus Heaney's words and Egan's painting:

I thought of walking round and round a space  
Utterly empty, utterly a source  
Where the decked chestnut tree had lost its place  
In our front hedge above the wallflowers (*Bad Blood* 74)

The deserted space emptied out by the weight of violence and division had become a locus of creativity for those artists. And in the same empty space which had become a source of inspiration for both Heaney and Egan, Tóibín had placed his own footsteps and turned his walk into something beyond a work of art, to echo Robison's words, something which opened the walker and the reader's gaze onto a landscape of possibilities. Between radicalism, rationality and sheer madness, between history and contemporary creativity, Tóibín discovered in walking and writing along, how the in-between zone, the thirdspace materialized by a shifty border, was also an opportunity for creativity and even perhaps a glimmer of hope in the future.

## Conclusion

In thus walking along the Irish Border at such a difficult moment of Irish history, at a time when the border was not only a symbol of division but a cause for ever more violence, Tóibín did more than scale down an abstract agreement to the level of human lives on the terrain. In thus walking, he initiated a movement of connections, which was a step towards peace. But it was also a step forward in endowing the landscape with a meaning that went far beyond the obstacles and apparent dead-ends of the present. In doing so he was in fact a precursor. In recent years and in the wake of the 1998 Northern Ireland Peace Agreement, other walkers, writers and artists have been engaging with the landscape along the border and grappling with issues that Tóibín had initiated in his 1986 adventure. As Garrett Carr shows through his maps and exhibitions:

The Irish border is tending towards deconstruction of strong points and instead, working on the building of links [...] Perhaps we are now entering a time when the Irish border could be demarcated on a map by charting connections rather than defensive elements. ("The Map of Watchful Architecture" 9)

His maps<sup>1</sup> draw a new border, charting ancient and present-day checkpoints to emphasize the historical dimension of the border and its ongoing problematic status as a passageway between north and south. Map 2<sup>2</sup> plays artistically with the idea of landscape and perspective and with the various viewpoints one can get from those checkpoints onto the shifty border.

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<sup>1</sup> See annexes reproduced with permission by Garrett Carr ©

One of the ideas behind the project is to envision the border differently and not univocally. Walking is a movement on a human scale and walking along the Irish border has contributed and is still contributing to the peace process in knotting new connections, in “meshing” the landscape with new meanings. It is about inverting the vision, to quote Tim Ingold as he rhetorically asks: “What do walking, weaving, observing, singing, storytelling, drawing and writing have in common? The answer is that they all proceed along lines of one kind or another.” (Ingold, *Lines : A History* 14) As Tóibín showed as early as 1986, in the case of the Irish border, the Peace Process is not so much about pulling down the watchtowers and ripping off the barbed wires, but rather of stitching the gaps and “weaving” life in between.

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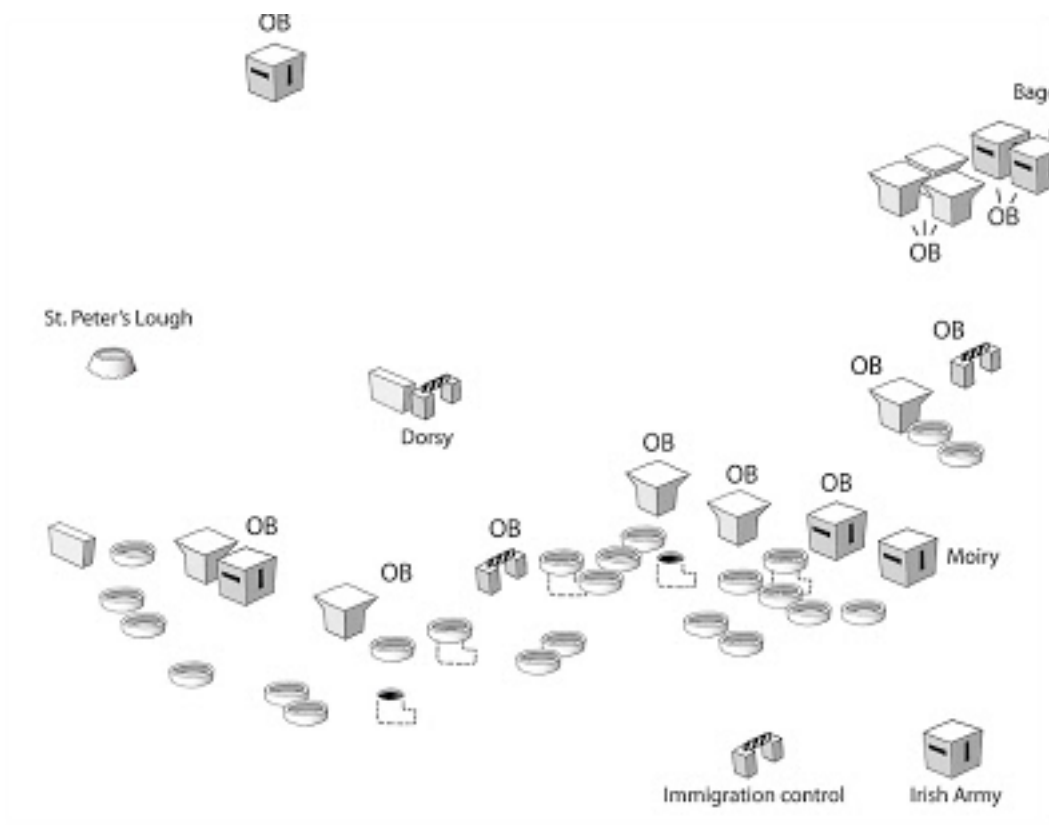
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MAP 1



MAP 2