



Experiencing and Representing Irish Contemporary Landscapes in Literature and the Arts

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The study of landscape is by essence cross-disciplinary for, as John Wylie's opening statement to his book *Landscape* clearly expresses, landscape is tension: 'a tension between proximity and distance, body and mind, sensuous immersion and detached observation' (Wylie, 2007, p. 1). This outlining of a first set of tensions within landscape soon moves onto a wider tension 'between observation and inhabitation' (Wylie, 2007, p. 5). As the critical literature on landscape published in recent years clearly shows, considerations on landscape soon call in further definitions of the correlated notions of space and place. In the introduction to his book, *Writing Home, Poetry and Place in Northern Ireland 1968-2008*, Elmer Kennedy-Andrews distinguishes the two from a geographical point of view: 'space is abstract, featureless, indefinite; place is lived space, and carries connotations of familiarity, stability, attachment, nostalgia and homeliness' (Kennedy-Andrews, 2008, p. 1). This definition usefully clarifies those two notions one in relation to the other. But how are we to understand landscape in relation to place and space? In her book on nostalgia in twentieth-century Irish literature, Oona Frawley refers to the meaning of the word 'landscape' as found in the Oxford English Dictionary, which, she explains, 'denotes a tract of land, of whatever extent, which is apprehended *visually* but not, necessarily, *pictorially*. The nearest is probably 'terrain', but in practice the uses to which this word can be put are very limited' (Frawley, 2005, footnote 1, p. 159). Landscape engages with the land, but it also engages a viewer. Because the onlooker adopts a certain point of view, landscape entails perspective and thus a vanishing point in space. The study of landscape therefore implies a critical perspective from a specific position

on a land at a particular moment in time. In other words, landscape materializes space by implicitly introducing a viewer and a gaze, while it abstracts place by adjoining a critical point of view to it. Landscape therefore materializes all three types of spaces defined by Edward Soja in *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-imagined Places*, the material dimension of space (first space), the imaginary and ideological dimension of space (second space) and space as experienced and lived in (third space) (Soja, 1996). Landscape would then be the vertical axis of this approach of space: a subjective perspective on the materiality of a given space at a certain moment of experience in time. In *Postmodern Geographies*, and in the wake of Michel Foucault and Henri Lefebvre (Lefebvre, 1996), Edward Soja criticizes the fact that for too long, time and history have shaped reality. But Soja does not altogether reject historicism. His aim, he writes, was ‘to open up and explore a critical viewpoint that pointedly flows from the resonant interplay of temporal succession and spatial simultaneity’ (Soja, 1989, p. 3). As the following chapters show, and to quote Gerry Smyth: ‘this book does not represent an attempt to reverse the methodological polarities which have structured analyses of Irish life during the modern period’ (Smyth, 2001, p. 22). It proposes new views on contemporary Irish landscape. Gerry Smyth’s argument in *Space and the Irish Cultural Imagination* is ‘not so much [the case] that concern for history has been lost, but rather that under pressure from a combination of factors, issues of space have more or less organically re-emerged alongside the temporal considerations which so successfully dominated the Irish critical and cultural imagination for so long’ (Smyth, 2001, p. 22). The present book argues that the study of landscape offers an enlightening perspective on what Soja called ‘the interplay of temporal succession and spatial simultaneity’ (Soja, 1989, p. 3). The tension inherent to the word ‘landscape’ itself, between the materiality of the land and the critical abstract distance implicit in the suffix ‘-scape’, which in turn refers to the visual and subjective representation of a specific place, is a way of apprehending space and time outside

any hierarchic categorization. Whereas Oona Frawley's book on the Irish pastoral and nostalgia demonstrated 'the significance and, indeed, usefulness of nostalgia for Irish culture', the present study hopes to pinpoint how landscape can be used to promote certain myths or ideologies and how in turn myths are kept alive in landscape across the centuries. Gerry Smyth's statement about Simon Schama's book *Landscape and Memory* might also be said to befit the present volume: '*Landscape and Memory* is predicated on the belief that the core myths which inform the human imagination of nature maybe discovered throughout the modern world' (Smyth, 2001, p. 9). In the following essays, the word 'myth' should be understood as Ashis Nandys does, quoted in David Lloyd's *Irish Times*: 'not as the mystified relation of superstitious cultures to an irrational cosmos, but as a form of thinking that remains interpretively open to both the past and the present' (Lloyd, 2008, p. 4). About ruins and myth, David Lloyd makes a very enlightening point:

Ruins are subject to the paradox of myth. Detached from a given moment of the past, they float free into relation with the present, fragments of an archaic past that continue to work in and on the present. (Lloyd, 2008, p. 15)

Lloyd links ruins and myth in stressing the 'relationality' of ruins in the present (Lloyd, 2008, p. 16), how they live in and with the present:

Myth is that element of the meaning of the past that finds significance still in the present, if only, not solely or always, by representing the dimension of loss' (Lloyd, 2008, p. 16).

Lloyd's words pinpoint the way time is understood in the present study, as time should not be seen as proceeding from the linear course of history and the recourse to myth is not a reference to an ideal utopia. In focusing on contemporary Irish landscapes, either literary, artistic and fictitious landscapes, or politically and economically-driven landscape practices, this book proposes a fresh perspective on the way myths have contributed to the formation of

those landscapes through a process which Lloyd calls 'accretion' (Lloyd, 2008, p. 15). The somewhat hackneyed image of landscape as palimpsest used to describe the folds of time that have come to aggregate and shape a landscape seem too static to render the transformative effect of myth, as it ceaselessly transforms the present and informs the past. Just as Seamus Heaney's poems were inspired by the preserving quality of bogs, and his words revived the century-old dead bodies found in the bogs, apparently long-dead myths still fuel, not only literary and artistic creations, but everyday landscape practices. In his book *Stones of Aran – Pilgrimage*, Tim Robinson begins his narrative about the islands with a first chapter entitled: "Timescape with signpost" (Robinson, 1985, p. 5). The very first sentence associates the beginning of 'Time' with 'the horizon of the visible universe' (Robinson, 1985, p. 5), thus linking time with visible space and therefore already including the viewer, or as J. Hillis Miller writes in *Topographies*: the 'figure in the landscape' (Miller, 1995, p. 4). What is relevant to the object of this book is the inseparable nature of Tim Robinson's personal experience of place with the 'spans of time and space' (Robinson, 1995, p. 5). Thus, opening a book on the experience of mapping the isles of Aran, he gives a very precise definition of landscape, which readily connects with the idea of landscape behind the following essays: 'my writing and your reading, that arise like an inwardly directed signpost at one particular little crossroads of reality, the coincidence of a period of my life with a spell of Aran's existence' (Robinson, 1985, p. 5). Just as David Lloyd finds myth in ruins, Tim Robinson finds myth in rocks: 'The detailed history of that sea (...) is preserved in the variations of the rock-layers themselves, and through its influence on the land-forms carved out of those rocks, with which human developments have had to come to terms, impresses a characteristic series of textures – the grounds of this book- on one's experience of the islands today' (Robinson, 1985, p. 7).

The present book on Irish contemporary landscapes is a quest for layers and textures in the contemporary landscapes of Ireland and in their artistic representations, whether fictional or visual. It argues that the experience of humans with place is preserved in landscape, mingled with the details of history and the power of myth. It further argues that contemporary landscape practices, from landscape planning to landscape designing, are imbued with myth, even when their initial grounding is economic, financial or political. Just as the myth of loss – loss of nature, loss of language, loss of place or displacement and exile - are at the root of many cultural, but also political and economical statements, the myth of unity but also the myth of belonging – to Europe and further, to the concert of nations- and more recently the myth of globalization and its twin, the myth of speed, have in turn contributed to creating new landscapes and new ruins. What myths, for example, and what landscapes do the ruins of unfinished buildings create as leftovers of the construction boom? In the recent context of the financial crisis, since 2008, Ireland is once again being reunited with the all-too familiar circumstances of economic crisis and restraints. What consequences will this have on the landscape? Is it a new contemporary variation of the theme of loss and exile? To what extent can literary and other artistic creations relate to actual landscape planning and landscape practices?

This book proposes to address those questions in three sections. The contributors of the following chapters come from a variety of backgrounds and disciplines, which illustrates the interdisciplinarity Gerry Smyth calls for in the preface to *Space and the Irish Cultural Imagination* (Smyth, 2001, p. xvii). Just as landscape is best approached with cross-disciplinary critical tools, we hope that the crossbreeding which will ensue from this work will successfully reflect the tensions at the heart of landscape. The approach is not chronological, for the aim of the book is not to review the links between landscape and myth over the course of time, but rather, to study how contemporary landscapes and their

representations are informed by myth and in turn create new myths.

The first section thus engages with the representations of Ireland in ancient and medieval literature and questions how these first landscapes laid the foundations for the development of the myth of loss. It deals with the implications of Ireland's geographical position as an island in the West of Europe, which was for many centuries the most remote part of the known world, and it considers the historical circumstances of the birth of the first Irish landscape, pointing out the atopicity of Ierne island in the Hellenistic and late epic. Laury-Nuria André's chapter questions why an island like Ierne, noted for its atopicity, which guaranteed its status as an interface in the geographical area of the Western world, should receive the addition of a third insular term, purely mythological, even though a 'twin', Albion, had already doubled it. Epic space is therefore the aesthetic and cultural grounding of the mythical landscape of Ireland.

The plastic treatment of the insular landscape through the play on stereotypes is also perceived in later medieval writings, at a time when the aim was to have a medieval reinterpretation and reconstruction of the Irish landscape as it was known and perceived by the poets and redactors in the early Middle Ages. As Denis Hamon shows, the 'Dindshenchas' clearly fit into the larger frame of the 'Senchas' and the pseudo-historical framework defined throughout the centuries of literary production. The Irish exegetes composed a series of texts in which they could anchor their society's identity while Christianity replaced paganism.

To quote Oona Frawley in *Irish Pastoral*: 'the tradition that the authors of these works were so conscious of is eventually inherited by the literature of the Revival, whose authors, in turn, after inhabiting the tradition, themselves pass it on' (Frawley, 2005, p. 2). Oona Frawley goes on to argue that 'this engagement with a literary tradition is inevitably evolutionary' (Frawley, 2005, p. 2) and that Irish literature, in wishing to preserve both general nature and

specific place also commemorates the physical landscape, but that very often, ‘such commemoration also memorializes loss’ (Frawley, 2005, p.2). Indeed the first part of the present book then engages with the notion of loss. Fionn Bennett shows how loss becomes a myth through language and glossopoetic and in what way it becomes a common creed within the Irish diaspora, while James McCabe reflects on how the linguistic expression of loss is a means of building a community outside the borders of Ireland. More specifically, Fionn Bennett questions the myth of loss present as early as the first representations of the Irish landscape as a possible linguistic and poetic reterritorialization, and at the same time an actual ‘deterritorialization’, after Gilles Deleuze’s definition in *Kafka, Toward a Minor Literature*. In some ways, the non-violent process of acculturation between Irish and Latin, Celtic druidism and Christianity was brought to a violent completion between Irish and English in more recent centuries.

The first half of the first section therefore aims at showing the birth of fundamental myths in the making of the Irish landscape and how they are reflected in language. The second half undertakes to pinpoint how contemporary literature draws from the ancient myths of loss and seascapes, while creating new ones, adapted to contemporary issues of local and global, urban violence, partition and division and new forms of atopicity. Contemporary literature constructs new landscapes in order to sublimate violence and division, political and cultural stagnation or escape the weight of history. As Joanna Kruckowska analyzes, seascapes, and in particular Irish seascapes, still nourish the imagination of both Greek and Irish poets, while Nessa Cronin establishes close links between the ‘Dindshenchas’ tradition and the contemporary topographical tradition, pointing at the paradox of today’s literature being widely urban. Stephanie Schwerter and Fiona McCann present variations of myth in the contemporary violent urban context of Northern Ireland. Stephanie Schwerter engages with the myth of division and partition in comparing Belfast with the other divided cities of Berlin

and Beyrouth, Fiona McCann focuses on urban landscapes of violence from Derry to Dublin. Sylvie Mikowski's chapter, the last in this first section, echoes with the first chapter on the representation of Ierne island, as it describes a new form of atopicity. Weaving the theme of the sense of loss in the Irish diaspora, Colum McCann's poetics of space, designed to picture landscapes in movement, work as a new myth and are presented as a way for our contemporary Western civilization to defend itself against the ever-increasing threat of utter destruction. The first section of the book therefore emphasizes the resurgence in contemporary literature of ancient myths and modes of representation, while arguing that these myths in turn foster new myths and new ways of representing contemporary landscapes.

The second section of the book deals with the way contemporary landscape practices engage with two of the main myths which run through Irish landscape representations: the myth of unity and the myth of joining in the rest of the world as equals. The first half challenges the landscape of borders, what David Lloyd describes, quoting Edward Soja, as 'a space of radical openness, a zone of crossing, alterity, opposition, symbiosis, fissure, suture, permanent exile, a way of life, a mode of expression, a broken line, a political aesthetic, a performance laboratory, a community of resistance' (Lloyd, 2008, p. 133). Matthew Staunton explores the construction of textual, pictorial and metaphorical landscapes in early Sinn Féin propaganda and Philippe Cauvet focuses on the case of Irish nationalism and how it used the national insular landscape of Ireland in the debate over the question of partition, while Cathal McCall grapples more directly with the question of 'borderscaping' and the creation of cultural landscapes dominated by power relations. Eventually, Marie-Claire Considère-Charon delves into the question of rural development and cross-border planning. All four chapters illustrate the ambivalent status of the border as a place of contradictions and oppositions, which sometimes transform it into a non-space.

The second half of the second section is a reflection on the myth of globalization, which corresponds less to a specific space than to a specific moment in recent history, when Ireland suddenly ceased to be poor. But as Jackie Whelan (et al.) shows, the question of globalization soon joins the realm of myth, as it hinges around such questions as global politics and standardisation of practices and language as Ireland joins the EU. It also raises the questions of the consequences of the housing market bubble and the myth of land owning in Irish collective identity and what consequences housing speculation has had on landscape planning, urban development, urban sprawl and the standardisation of habitat. Architect Gerry Cahill goes beyond the myth of the lime-white cottage in questioning what the anarchic building and the absence of proper landscape planning tell us of the way the Irish people relate to their landscape, and of the myth behind it. In other words, to what extent do the changes in the Irish landscape over the last two decades target the more and more pregnant role of speed as a new contemporary and post-modern myth? Neither Soja nor Lefebvre mention the theme of speed, which, although not specific to Ireland, seems fundamental to understand yet another complex way in which space and time meet in a conflicting manner in the Irish context. Paul Virilio's concept of 'dromodology' is in this respect, very relevant. In *A Landscape of Events*, Paul Virilio explains how speed has replaced the former fear of the future by the fear of the past:

To observe this sudden unfolding of time, in which not only history is accelerating, as before, but also its *reality*, we need to adopt the perspective of Sirius and step back, get our distance, to avoid the contemporary myopia of the media age'.

(Virilio, 2001, p. x)

Speed would therefore be a mythic interpretation of post-capitalism and its consequence, the annihilation of landscape, to the benefit of an abstract, standardized and dehumanized space. On the other hand, as Chief Executive of the Heritage Council of Ireland, Michael Starrett's

Commentaire: Juste une petite remarque: comme tu utilises l'orthographe -ize la plupart du temps, peut-être devrais-tu orthographier 'standardization' de cette manière également?

purpose is to organize landscape planning locally. He addresses the myth of the local versus the global beginning with the observation that the Irish landscape has been the stage on which the economic boom was played and went bust. He presents the work of the Heritage Council in the past decade or so and demonstrates the close relations between heritage and landscape, emphasizing the crucial role of history and heritage in landscape planning and the need for local initiatives to balance larger economic and political issues. While 'borderscaping' requires time and patience for people to mature and for wounds to heal, recent examples of how globalization has transformed the Irish landscape have shown the dire consequences of relinquishing to the myth of standardization, rationalization and high-speed communication and information. In the closing chapter of this second section Karen Ray presents recent initiatives to give more power to people on a local and smaller scale, with a case study of the Metropolitan Cork Green Belt after the Planning and Development Act 2000. She explains the synergies and tensions between strategic and local understandings of landscape value.

Commentaire: Je ne suis pas sûre de bien comprendre cette phrase. Est-ce que tu veux dire 'relinquishing the myth of standardization etc.' ou 'giving in to the myth of etc.'? (Sorry - it's probably just me!)

The fundamental role played by local projects in landscape planning is further discussed in the last section of the book, which links landscape and contemporary art. Catherine Grout questions the positioning of the viewer and the relations between representation and experience, reality and fiction in Willie Doherty's work and Yvonne Scott argues that contemporary art has moved away from romantic nationalistic or nostalgic idylls of the Irish landscape and that contemporary works by such significant Irish artists as Willie Doherty, Paul Seawright, Tom Molloy, Stephen Loughman, David Farrell, Elizabeth Magill, Marton Healy and Gary Coyle for example, offer an alternative aesthetic. On the one hand contemporary art conflates the traditional polarity of wilderness and urbanism at either end of the landscape spectrum, but more particularly, it returns to the homology of people with environment interpreted as unkempt, threatening, barbaric, and unknowable as a means of

exploring darker impulses and conditions.

On the other hand, a certain number of artistic incentives have been designed to try and connect the people who live in a specific space, whether urban or peripheral to their landscape and build a sense of place in that specific landscape. Paula Murphy explains that such is the case of sculpture, which involves some form of active participation, even if only by the way in which the works are accessed. Such examples are particularly acute in Belfast where the question of landscape, the way places are viewed, perceived and lived in, is fundamental, as H       Hamalfa points out. Visual art is a powerful tool to relate the inhabitants of a divided space to the landscape, construct a common sense of place and build up peace. As Emile-Jean Dumay explains, Dermot Bolger's use of drama in the peripheral areas around Dublin is also a telling example of the way art contributes to loosen the tension between social landscapes and a sense of place, and limit the social constraints imposed on people by a certain type of urban planning and design. Physically grappling with urban landscapes is exactly the experience that choreographer Catherine Crochet and director Christian Giritat have had as performing artists-in-residence in Belfast. In the last chapter of the book they tell what it means to move about the landscape and view it at the pace of walking, and from the point of view of the wanderer, impeded by walls, barricades and other obstacles or on the contrary, moving about step after step in a landscape, which, for all its divisions and violence, offers alleys and back lanes in which the artist performer transforms his walk into a work of art. As Tim Robinson writes: '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' (Robinson, 1985, p. 20).

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