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The Turn to the Map: Cartographic Fictions in Irish Culture

The “Responding Today” section of this exhibition gathers together a series of creative replies to an older tradition of landscape art. While the rich variety of works on display cannot be reduced to any simple critical formula, they demonstrate a shared desire to renegotiate the relationship between artist and land. In particular, contemporary Irish artists have sought to escape the self-consciously painterly connotations of “landscape”. [?] Herbert’s photographs and Dorothy Cross’s video installations represent the land but reject landscape, understood as the formalised aesthetic codes that dictated how nineteenth-century artists perceived their surroundings. Where painting is still the preferred medium, the images often reject or distort the panoramic vistas of the older canvasses, offering instead a close-up focus on soil, rocks, moss, weeds, water.

In the “Mapping section” of the exhibition we find one of the most intimate instances of such an image. Deidre O’Mahony’s “Surface” (2 and 3) paintings are the product of a “direct” encounter with the environment around Ballinglen in County Mayo. In a statement describing her methods, O’Mahony recounts how in Ballinglen she reversed the conventional artistic journey: rather than bringing memories of a place back to the studio, she took her materials to the site she wished to represent, thus “allowing the place to direct the structure of the work”. She utilises elements from the environment as inspiration, material and method; dipping her paintings into cuts in the bogs and pressing algae from local pools between sheets of paper so that the “trace” it laid down could shape and direct the resulting image. The “Surface” paintings borrow “the intense green”

of the algae and layer it “with passages of fine areas of dense brushmarks”. Two related pieces by O’Mahony, “Céide” (1-2), have imprinted on their surface “maps of the prehistoric settlements of the Céide fields” (O’Mahony).

It may seem that in seeking to find new ways in which to structure images of land that O’Mahony is shaking off the tyranny of maps and other systems that intervene between a place and its representation. Yet, as this last example shows, maps can provide enabling escape routes as well as confining images. Indeed it could be argued that O’Mahony’s methods themselves constitute a kind of mapping: like a cartographer, she conceives of a site within a system and works to convey a precise, accurate and textured sense of that place on what is, finally, a flat surface.

Catherine Nash, curator of a recent exhibition called of Irish art and herself a geographer, has contrasted what we might call map art to landscape art. Because maps “highlight relationships of power”, Nash suggests, they occupy a less romanticised relationship to territory than “landscape”, “with its iconography of cottages, cloud skies and hills” (Nash, “Introduction” 6). While the evidence of this exhibition indicates just how much can still be made of cottages, cloudy skies and hills, I propose in my essay to follow through Nash’s sense of map images as innovative and perhaps oppositional, and to ask what the image of the map signifies in contemporary Irish culture.

Turn Away

The first recognisably modern maps of Ireland have their origin in colonial conquest, a direct product of Britain’s need to survey, know and thus control its first colony. Given

this history, why have so many Irish writers and artists turned to the map as metaphor, or chosen to thematize cartography in a variety of cultural practices? The interest in maps shown by Irish painters, sculptors, poets, dramatists and novelists has never been stronger. What is the nature of this enduring cultural curiosity in maps and the meanings they generate?

It is helpful here to revisit the history of Irish cartography and to consider some of the older maps shown as part of the exhibition. Fascinating as the medieval topographies are, my concern is chiefly with late seventeenth and eighteenth century maps and the beginnings of modern Irish cartography. Modern mapping is rooted in the conflicts that convulsed seventeenth-century Ireland. Oliver Cromwell's Irish campaign ended in defeat and dispossession for the Gaelic nobility, and to facilitate the forfeiture and reassignment of their lands proper surveys and maps were needed. This task fell to William Petty, noted political economist and scientist, and Physician General in Cromwell's army. His extensive "Down Survey" (1654-9), as it was known, not only provided the practical underpinnings for the Cromwellian confiscations and later Protestant or "new English" settlement, it also formed the basis of a new all-Ireland map and atlas.

It is tempting to read Petty's cartographic achievements in terms of Benedict Anderson's influential account of colonialism and nationalism. Anderson argues that maps, like censuses and museums, are classificatory systems that operate as technologies of colonial control (Anderson 163-4). J. B. Harley, however, the leading theorist of cartography, would have us remember that maps are "thick texts" (Harley 52). Maps "speak", Harley argues, and thus may be analysed for their discursive strategies. Reading

the texts of Petty's maps is rewarding in itself and also provides some hints as to the rich ambiguity of maps in our contemporary moment.

The map of Mayo on display here is taken from the 1732 (second) edition of William Petty's innovative atlas, Hiberniae Delineateo, first published in 1685. Essentially a "book of national, provincial and county maps", Hiberniae Delineateo was "conventional" in design and execution but startlingly modern in envisaging counties (rather than, say, individual estates) as the primary administrative unit (Andrews, Shapes of Ireland 130, 140). The maps were not entirely accurate or consistent: Achill Island, for instance, is present on this map of Mayo but missing from the larger Connaught map.

Some of what is missing yields meaning in itself. Petty's engravers did not adopt the normal practice of spreading what little information was known across the spaces mapped but rather "always left a sharp edge between densely packed detail and empty space" (Andrews, Shapes of Ireland 136). These empty spaces invite interpretation. A sense of what is missing from Petty's map may be gleaned by contrasting it with the seventeenth-century Mayo map on display here also. This features family names of the Gaelic nobility as markers of territory (Costello, Morris), whereas Petty's atlas, essentially a map of a new political order, eliminates such information. Based on the "Down Survey" and thus the post-Cromwellian land forfeitures in which eighty percent of land in Mayo had been lost to Cromwell's soldiers and undertakers, it is possible to understand the Hiberniae Delineateo as "an atlas of Catholic Ireland" (Andrews, Shapes of Ireland 147). To do so however, is to read the map for what it does not say. The force of such readings helped to turn colonial control into nationalist resistance.

Anderson describes an incipient nationalist consciousness that would come to organise itself around what he calls the “logo-map”, or the map that is devoid of “explanatory glosses” but invested with symbolic meaning: the map as “infinitely reproducible” “pure sign”: “Instantly recognizable, everywhere visible, the logo-map penetrated deep into the popular imagination, forming a powerful emblem for anti-colonial nationalisms being born” (Anderson 175).

The idea of the logo map allows us to trace a move from maps such as Petty’s to the representation of cartography in contemporary art and culture. In Rita Duffy’s painting, “The Hound of Ulster” (1996), a map forms the backdrop to a clutter of symbols. Bearing only the names of provinces (Ulster, Leinster, an abbreviated Connaught), this is Anderson’s logo-map as seen by a Northern Irish artist undoubtedly aware of the demands partition has placed on the cartographical imagination. The map here seems to lean away from the viewer, pictured from above as in the “bird’s eye” convention of modern cartography. The dog however stares directly out of the painting, creating a disorienting mix of perspectives and scales. At the level of symbol, the painting also causes confusion: the “hound” of the title surely ought to read “hand”, the china dog represented belongs to the parlour, and a trapeze artist straight from the circus balances precariously above Lough Neagh. Does the painting perhaps figure delicate political balancing acts? The role of the bodily and the domestic in national conflicts? Or are such readings too obvious? The power of Duffy’s painting lies in its spatial and metaphoric disorder, with the map finally figuring a certain opacity or refusal to conform to any straightforwardly symbolic reading.

As a symbol of colonial authority, maps form part of the contested cultural space of twentieth- and twenty-first-century Ireland, both sides of the border. Duffy's attempt to question the symbolic power of cartography echoes the work of Kathy Prendergast, whose drawings, sculptures and reworked objects present perhaps the most sustained artistic engagement with cartography in contemporary culture.

Catherine Nash has described Prendergast's "critical, ironic and sometimes humorous approach to traditional Irish landscape art" (Nash, "Remapping the Body/Land" 230). Her 1983 "Body Map" series adopted the techniques of engraving and draughtsmanship to produce beautifully detailed surveys that treated bodies as if they were landscape. Later three dimensional work like "Land" (1991) moved closer still to cartography. A canvas tent in the shape of a miniature mountain and painted to as to imitate relief markings on maps, the piece matched place to representation. In Nash's brilliant description of the work, "Land" makes it look as if the map's flat surface has been "given volume and height" (Nash, "Remapping the Body/Land" 241). Across her career to date, Kathy Prendergast seems to be coming to inhabit more fully the world of cartography, getting under the skin of its techniques. Some of her most recently exhibited work is entirely absorbed by the world of maps and the meanings they generate, as in the reworked atlas and compass pictured here.

Turn Again

The postcolonial critic Edward Said has suggested that Irish writing shares with the cultures of other colonised countries a "cartographic impulse" (Said 79), a desire to

reclaim land and territory that extends beyond a transfer of titles and deeds into the realm of representation, metaphor and cultural identity.

There is of course, as Said suggests, ample evidence within Irish culture of texts that seek to undo the effects of dispossession or to reclaim psychic territory. But alongside this psychologised sense of territorial, relying as it does on a very loosely defined idea of land, there also exists a drier and more theoretical interest in the abstract rendering of lived space. Tracing this latter interest through a selection of recent Irish texts, as I propose to do here, serves to focus attention on the map itself as the object of interest. It should be possible to see how, in recent Irish art and literature, maps are embedded within structures of subjectivity as well as within what Benedict Anderson calls the “grammar” of colonialism (Anderson 163). They belong, as the following instance should serve to show, to a history that has been experienced at the level of bodies as well as land.

In 1994 Eavan Boland published a poem proposing “That the Science of Cartography is Limited”, part of her collection In a Time of Violence. The coolly objective title of the poem imitates the scientific objectivity thought to characterise cartography. Its opening lines continue with the steady pace of a geometric proposition:

— and not simply by the fact that this shading of forest
cannot show the fragrance of balsam,
in the gloom of cypresses
is what I wish to prove.

(Boland, In a Time of Violence 174)

In the following stanzas the poem breaks out of this frame to become a lyric evocation of memory: the poet, young and in love is travelling west:

When you and I were first in love we drove
to the borders of Connacht
and entered a wood there.

(Boland, In a Time of Violence 174)

As is so often in Irish cultural history, the poet's experience of the west coast transmutes into a troubling encounter with her country's past. The landscape is a text that is glossed and explicated for her by her lover, who seeks to show her the meanings of a rocky, ivy covered pathway that ends suddenly: "Look down, you said: this was once a famine road" (Boland, In a Time of Violence 174).

A vertiginous descent into history commences, and in another shift of register the tone becomes that of the history lesson: dates, facts, cautiously voiced interpretation. The incomplete road stands in here for the hunger and death experienced in 1847, the worst year of the Great Famine, when relief projects like road building were supposed to assist the starving Irish. The memory of this bodily pain is in turn used to indict maps and the lyric voice proclaims a passionate rejection of the cold science of cartography:

and when I take down
the map of this island, it is never so

I can say here is
the masterful, the apt rendering of

the spherical as flat, nor
an ingenious design which persuades a curve
into a plane,
but to tell myself again that

the line which says woodland and cries hunger
and gives out among sweet pines and cypress,
and finds no horizon

will not be there.
(Boland, In a Time of Violence 175)

Boland's poem establishes a powerfully negative view of cartography. It presents a set of oppositions that serve to align the map with colonial authority and not with those oppressed by it, with surface rather than depth and with inert official codes not movement or flux. The poet's own body, looking down and leaning away, is the vector for the force of memory that challenges the map.

The most obvious antecedent for the poem's deeply felt resentment of cartography is found in Brian Friel's 1980 play Translations, which finds in the history of

the Ordnance Survey of Ireland an enabling metaphor for contemporary conditions in Northern Ireland. The play associates cartography with oppression and the violent imposition of alien codes. As a historical drama, Translations is rife with anachronistic knowledge of the political future. On stage, characters who dwell in the 1830s are seen to anticipate the arrival of famine in the 1840s and to encounter, more controversially, armed British officers whose later role in Northern Ireland the play adumbrates. Translations thus displays an unabashed sense of its own location in the Ireland of 1980 and Friel later commented that he could see no harm in “the tiny bruises” that his play “inflicted on history” (Friel, “Translations and A Paper Landscape”, 123).

The context for this last observation is a dialogue with J. H. Andrews, the distinguished historian of Irish cartography, on whose 1975 history of the Ordnance Survey Friel drew. Andrews responded to the play first with cautious admiration and later with scholarly puzzlement, noting with some alarm in the early 1990s that “many people do accept Brian Friel’s account of the Ordnance Survey as historically plausible” (Andrews, “Notes” 93). Andrews has detailed Friel’s slipshod use of cartographic detail, but for my purposes here what is perhaps most significant is that in Translations mapping happens off stage. A stray mention of a theodolite aside, the play is concerned with cartography as metaphor, not as practice. Thus while on the one hand Translations may be said to have inaugurated the kind of cultural interest in cartography that this essay identifies, on the other the play more properly belongs to what Said would call the “new territoriality” of anti-imperialism, with its “assertions, recoveries, and identifications” (Said 79).

Yet cartography clearly is part of Translations' contentious claims on public attention, and alerts us here to a dynamic sense of contest around maps and map metaphors. With this in mind it is tempting to return to Boland and to reread her inscription of cartography, this time against the grain. In the image of the poet taking down the map and scrutinising its contours can be found an arresting focus on map as material object. Interrogating her imagined text for what it does not say, Boland produces an image that conveys both emptiness and a terrible clarity: "the line which says woodland and cries hunger". Here a cartographic marking "says" and "cries" even as its inadequacy is revealed. Accordingly, I would suggest that one value attached to cartography in contemporary culture is its potential to inscribe absence. In Boland's case this is surely related to her sense of the missing place of the woman poet in the national tradition, an absence so powerfully figured in the collection just before this one, Outside History.¹ In her poem, as in Friel's play, the turn to the map matters as much as the dissatisfied turn away.

Wrap it Up

This essay has dealt with the map as symbol in contemporary Irish culture, especially with attempts to evade its iconic power. Yet there also exists an awareness of the frailty of the map, even in contexts where its connection with surveillance and control seem strongest. Ciaran Carson's poem/prose collection Belfast Confetti (1989) translates lived city space into cartographic codes. The collection depicts a Belfast that exists as an unreliable map of itself ("the city is a map of the city"), with the opening poem in that

collection, “Turn Again”, setting out its wares in the shape of a map that is both tangibly material yet fragile and insubstantial: “The linen backing is falling apart — The Falls Road hangs by a thread” (Carson). As in Paul Muldoon’s poem “Christo’s”, the country is “under wraps”, “‘like, as I said, one of your man’s landscapes’ / ‘Your man’s? You don’t mean Christo’s?’” (Muldoon 118). Ireland here is secret yet seen, its status as art object conferred by its outline shape. Muldoon’s image relates the Ireland enfolded within his text to the “wrappings” of the Bulgarian artist Chriso and his wife Jeanne-Claude, whose many achievements include a wrapped German Reichstag as well as several Pacific islands entirely covered in fabric. Land meets landscape.

No one treatment of mapping (artistic, literary, critical, historical) can exhaust its cultural potential. Eavan Boland’s evocation of a remote road that ends suddenly because weak and hungry people have died while making it retains a power beyond my analysis. In the context of this exhibition, Boland’s image can itself be seen to turn towards and open up a reading of Brian Tolle’s design for a famine memorial to be placed in Battery Park, New York City. Tolle’s memorial transports the hungry acre of Irish mythology to a city park, where it is to sit as a kind of living cross section taken from the land that inspired it. Elevated on and cantilevered over a broad platform of simulated geological strata, the “field” projects over layered textual testimonies to the famine.

The site’s sharp edges and sudden ending are strangely reminiscent of the famine roads elegised by Boland. The memorial was inspired, according to the artist, by a trip to the west of Ireland and the sight of “the abruptness of the island’s edge as it meets the sea” (Anon). A similar fascination with Ireland’s edges is found in recent Irish writing. In Anne Enright’s What Are You Like?, for instance, a man who is haunted by memories of

a child he has given away dreams of undertaking a journey round the circumference of the island, encountering its extreme limits and describing (in both a literary and a geographical sense) its shape: “He worried about piers. Should he travel the length of them, going up the near side and coming back by the far?” (Enright 10). This desire for cartographic precision stands in sharp contrast to the unmapped emotional spaces that the novel tries to chart: adoption, childlessness, sexual loneliness, a country “where people did the most appalling things, and shut their mouths, and stayed put” (Enright 222). The dream journeys around the island with which the novel opens map cultural dispossession in the sense described by Said, but the losses recounted are of the most intimate kind.

What Are You Like? shares with Belfast Confetti and with “Christo’s” a sense that a place can be a map of itself, and with the contemporary artists gathered here a suspicion of representational codes that seem to block off access to place itself in its raw immediacy. To this extent, the map is only one of a series of ways of renegotiating the relationship between the subject and space. In Ireland however, in spite of (because of?) its troubled history, mapping retains a special ability to arouse creative energies and provoke quarrels.

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¹ Reading "That The Science Of Cartography Is Limited" alongside a poem from the earlier collection would allow a fuller understanding of the connections here. In "The Making Of An Irish Goddess" the poet registers her knowledge of the trauma of famine and seeks to record in her own body "an accurate inscription / of that agony" (Boland, Outside History 32).