

“But in what country have we been?” Observations of the Border in Contemporary Irish Poetry

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State borders may be perceived in very different ways. In successful cases of statebuilding, as the state becomes institutionalized and legitimated, its borders become accepted parts of everyday life, appearing as normal, even inevitable bounds of national identity, the frame of understanding of state and civic life, and the limits of community formation (Lustick, 1993: 41–46). [...] Borders may also be resisted, bypassed, ignored or subverted. They may be perceived not as facts of life, but as alien intrusions on ordinary interaction, introducing foreign powers and actors into civic life. In such cases, national identity overflows state boundaries and civic life cross-cuts them. (Todd 2)

The complexity of the nature of the concept of the border is summed up in a concise manner in the above quotation. This summary, however, offers a neat categorisation of the possible reactions to the border – perhaps even too neat for certain contexts. The example of the island of Ireland demonstrates the possibility of the simultaneous presence of several of these perceptions, and this is also reflected in the poetic approaches to the concept of the border in contemporary Irish literature.

Attention has been called to the fact of the rather strange situation of a border which does not conform to significant physical divisions on a relatively small island (cf. Rankin 2). The border separating the Republic of Ireland from Northern Ireland is a dividing line from the point of view of political formations and also in terms of the ‘official’ versions of reality. The simple-looking political dimension is complicated by the specific location and origin of the line: as the interpretation of the act of partition itself is different on the two sides of the border, consequently the concept of the border is different as well. The temporary or permanent nature of the line has long divided the population of the island yet this division does not fully coincide with the geographical one. The different approaches to the temporal aspect of the political border are rooted in those different versions of reality: traditional Republican aspirations regard it as only a temporary inconvenience in the way of a united Ireland whereas traditional Unionist belief considers it as permanent and nearly sacred.

The notion of the border involves figurative possibilities as well. A line or zone separating two distinct unities can easily be broadened into an experience

situated at the face of confrontation between two different worlds with the concurrent state of anxiety. Questions regarding the existence of the border by those living in its vicinity in a rural area indicate a different approach: the practical dimension very often takes no notice of the border since it does not seem to affect the life of these people – the political aspect of life is reduced to a virtually unnoticed magnitude when everyday practical matters are concerned such as health care or postal services. The experience that the border may be crossed unnoticed in several places on several occasions implies the arbitrariness of the category yet this very arbitrariness is the source of the fascination and anxiety which can be experienced in the border zone.

The border dividing the island into two units comes to be addressed in the work of Catholic poets from the North. They principally regard the border as a physical location though with a definite temporal dimension – it is the border at the time of conflict. This allows the border to acquire further figurative dimensions in addition to its usual one of division, which results in a spectrum of reactions ranging from acceptance to subversion. The question, often considered especially relevant in the Irish context, whether the border actually divides people or rather unites them does not receive an answer; it is the location itself that haunts the imagination of the poets, and the variety of responses indicates the possibility of the simultaneous validity of both answers.

The complex background of John Montague, born in Brooklyn, raised in the North and educated in Dublin, does not lack the experience of the border either. Frequent crossings of the border render it a familiar enough concept, yet this does not rule out the possibility of anxiety in the vicinity of the location. On occasion historical bitterness compels Montague to assert the absolute irrelevance of the border as he contemplates his ‘native’ County Tyrone as a land “betrayed by both South and North” (Montague 41), yet this statement at the same time gives a permanent significance to the border as it is the physical manifestation of partition, the final cause for the feeling of betrayal.

The laconic title of Montague’s poem “Border” offers no commentary on the category of the border; it simply employs the concept and turns it into a trope. The poem is a part of a longer sequence composed after the death of the poet’s mother, and it captures the moment of border crossing, a part of the actual journey from the South to the North, with a generalising conclusion which opens the poem towards the figurative direction. The opening lines of the poem, “That wavering needle / pointing always North” (Montague 154), pursue a double purpose: on one level it is the simple rephrasing of a geographical fact which serves as the basis of orientation in space, on another it locates the persona in an inescapable relation with his place of birth, in a way also functioning as a means of orientation.

The persona of Montague’s poem traces the event of border crossing as an intimately familiar experience since childhood holidays provide a concrete set of memories in relation to it. The present experience, however, is different on several levels: the direction is reversed as this time he heads North, thus the

implications of a darker and starker destination heighten the tension, and the adult perspective on a conflict-ridden present world is more readily focused on landmarks of a less comforting type – the route is marked by “sand-bagged / barracks” (ibid), a “half-bombed bridge” (ibid) and “potholed roads” (ibid). All these introduce a world of alternative realities, manifesting in post boxes of red and green colours, British patrols and *gardai*, signs in English and Irish, “both bullet-pierced” (ibid). The destination is not any less consoling either – it is

that shadowy territory
where motives fail, where
love fights against death,
good falters before evil. (ibid)

This might as well be any place as the rather universal details indicate, and at the same time it offers a verdict on the place itself, giving a declaration of its second-rate importance in the face of fundamental categories of existence. The wider context of the poem situates this instance of border crossing as part of a visit to the ill mother of the speaker, yet the journey is a recollected one, so the metaphorical dimension of the visit takes over from the literal one, and the rather troubled personal relationship between the poet and his mother launches the poem on a figurative course, as an attempt of reconciliation, of a crossing of another border of another kind.

Though the border as a physical location is principally evoked for a figurative journey, the description works well on the literal level too. The details mentioned capture the atmosphere of the place as well as of the time; it is not only the border between the Republic and the North in a general dimension but the border at the time of the Troubles. The atrocities evoked by the landmarks render the concept of the border even more complex, turning the region into a real frontier zone with the suggestion that it is not only two different political formations which meet there but more profound divisions may be encountered in the face of which the political dimension will appear only secondary or even less in terms of importance.

In another poem, “Border Lake” the border is simply a point of reference in locating the scene. The poem begins with an almost banal statement of the relation between northward movement and a decline in temperature: “The farther North you travel, the colder it gets” (Montague 153). Still, the confidential personal pronoun insists on a possible figurative dimension, turning the climatic relation into a marker of the general hostility of life in a certain location. The example offered is a “border county of which no one speaks” (ibid), with its bleak capital town almost dead after the end of a fair: “The only beauty nearby is a small glacial lake / sheltering between drumlin moons of mountains” (ibid). The fact of locating beauty outside the human settlement depersonalises and dehumanises the place, and the glacial origin of the lake suggests cold beauty only. The only living beings glimpsed at are a “solitary pair

of swans who haunt the lake” (ibid), indicating the near-void quality of this world.

The nameless county is that of the poet, yet its namelessness raises a number of thoughts. It is either too trivial to identify the county by its proper geographical marker or it indicates the fate of the place: that it has been forgotten, as its location would suggest, by both sides of the border, and as a result it becomes the border proper, a land of no one, a purely symbolic place which can only be travelled through but not inhabited and possessed. Even the glacial landforms support this latter idea since the principal agent of the formation of the landscape, ice, did its work and withdrew to leave an altered world behind.

A later sequence entitled “Border Sick Call” marks a return to the haunted world of the border. The poem gives an account “of a journey in winter along the Fermanagh-Donegal border” (Montague 345), according to the dedication, and of a special one indeed: the poet accompanies his physician brother on a sick call into a special territory, that of the border region. The rather harsh winter setting provides a chilling mood for the journey which is already a peculiar one due to the location; the short winter afternoon with its quickly receding light transforms the border region into an even more haunted and haunting place, a world forgotten by both countries, and the border becomes an apropos of the frontier between life and death while it loses its significance as a political category.

The point of departure is a haunting landmark, a “Customs Post that has twice / leaped into the air” (Montague 346). This creates the image of a world with no solid point of reference, one where it is a precondition to life to accept “*the impossible as normal, / lunacy made local, / surrealism made risk*” (ibid; italics in the original). The setting is thus one where normal categories of observation will be suspended, and the very concept of the border will come under attack. The frozen environment does not provide ideal conditions for a journey, and the concealment or erasure of landscape elements dislocates the importance of divisions usually considered important in the border region – an observation rather unusual for the speaker but fairly commonplace for the local inhabitant, as the comment of the first patient visited indicates:

‘Border, did you say,
how many miles to the border?
Sure we don’t know where it starts
or ends up here, except we’re lost
unless the doctor or postman finds us. (Montague 350)

Despite the recent political turmoil the border region is not a place which receives special attention; the only ‘explorers’ of this world are the common figures of the doctor and the postman, both responsible, though in different ways, for keeping the border people alive.

The past glitters in the shallow light of nostalgia for a brief moment as the border is seen as an opportunity for making a living – out of smuggling cattle across the border, with the implication of the mythic cattle raids of ancient Ireland. The wartime prosperity, however, is gone and not even this “auld religious thing” (Montague 351), the present conflict, can revive it; yet the commentary of the patient cuts deeper than perhaps intended: “Have you ever noticed, cows have no religion?” (ibid) The secondary nature of otherwise definitive differences is amply demonstrated in this ironic remark, and the host’s generous offer of a “small prescription bottle of colourless poteen” (ibid) functions as the most telling proof of the only significant relation which is between people, without any further qualification.

The return from this location offers a minor epiphany for the speaker: he notices a small boat on the lake not glimpsed at earlier. The drink initiates a confession from the doctor: he is the one to translate the border into an overtly figurative concept – “the real border is not between / countries, but between life and death” (Montague 353). The vivid memory of the first death witnessed by the doctor is recalled; though the section is in brackets, it still gives an accurate picture of that border crossing, and the story itself implies that there is a very thin line dividing life from death, especially in such quarters as the present location.

The visit ends in darkness, and the return to the main road appears as an escape from a strange world “adrift from humankind” (Montague 357). With the physical border turned into metaphorical the persona formulates weighty questions of particular origin but of general significance: “Will a stubborn devotion suffice, / sustained by an ideal of service? / Will dogged goodwill solve anything?” (ibid) The struggle between life and death unfolds in any other location as well yet the poet’s choice of placing it in such a setting seems to deflate the category of the political border and makes it irrelevant on the level of the experience itself. The final question of the poem reinforces this idea: “The customs officials wave us past again. // But in what country have we been?” (ibid) The question is printed as a separate unit, and its isolation reflects the confusion of the speaker. The direction of the border crossing was not specified at the beginning of the poem either and this piece of information remains a secret at the end as well, building towards the idea that the sole function of the border is to act as a reminder of separation – of the two fundamental worlds and perhaps not that of people.

Paul Muldoon’s attitude towards the border as a concept partly reflects another conviction, that of the destabilisation of experience. The event of border crossing initiates the rather uncomfortable feeling of the loss of stability, of entering a land of conflicting interpretations of the ‘same’ reality. From a closer perspective the border itself becomes an actual divide – and the literalisation of the metaphor yields a rather absurd situation, thus the very concept comes to be subverted. While in John Montague’s experience the border may lose its significance, in a crucial moment for Muldoon the border comes alive to impose

its importance on a phenomenon of the physical environment, however absurd that instance may appear.

The crossing of the border facilitates an experience which can be simultaneously seen as profound and revelatory as well as trivial. “Good Friday, 1971. Driving Westward” is the record of a westward journey which necessarily involves the crossing of the border. The beginning of the journey is in Northern Ireland and its last mentioned point is Gaoth Dobhair in the Republic; the intended destination, if any, however, is not specified. The speaker races against the sun and appears to arrive at every place synchronously with it, as if it were possible to stop time. The early morning hour finds the country in a slumberous state, though the cattle are already out and lorries have delivered their loads; most people, however, are still caught between sleep and being awake. The speaker acquires a companion as well, a girl picked up and given a lift “out of love” (Muldoon 1973, 23), and the border is crossed into the “grey flesh of Donegal” (Muldoon 1973, 24). As the road is tricky and winding, it is not difficult for the speaker to lose control of the car for a short time, and they hit something on the road. The meaning of this, however, is different for the two people: “she thought we hit something big / But I had seen nothing, perhaps a stick” (ibid). In the rest of the poem, as in the day perhaps, this difference of opinion separates them, ruining the day and its memory altogether as a result.

The literary precedent for the poem, as Tim Kendall notes, is John Donne’s work “Good Friday, 1613. Riding Westward” (cf. Kendall 29-30). The more secular present, however, significantly rewrites the poem, and there is a substantial presence of local colour too. The Good Friday evocation of the death of Christ is reduced to an accident even whose memory is recalled differently, and which appears to be a fairly trivial one anyway. The girl’s behaviour, however, displays an extraordinary amount of guilt, which is considered by Kendall a critique of religious guilt, regarding it as mainly pointless (Kendall 30). As the itinerary is a westward one, it involves the crossing of the border as well; there is not much change observable in either the landscape or the places, apart from the accident itself which happens in the ‘other’ country. The crossing itself, however, suggests the potential loss of the feeling of safety and something of this expectation is justified as the accident leads to a difference of opinion and the revelation of the girl’s sense of guilt with the ultimate verdict of the speaker, alongside the prospect of the impossibility of reconciliation.

The poem “The Boundary Commission” involves no journey; it evokes a strange place instead with an extraordinary dimension. The body in the title is only implicitly conjured up, through its absurd decision to draw the border “Down the middle of the street” (Muldoon 2001, 80) of a village. The division separates “butcher and baker” into “different states” (ibid), providing not only a grotesque situation but an unmanageable one at the same time, which creates an image at once surrealistic and absurd yet, unfortunately, not exclusively imaginary. The border for a brief spell acquires actual dividing powers:

a shower of rain

Had stopped so clearly across Golightly's lane
 It might have been a wall of glass
 That had toppled over. (ibid)

This revelatory moment takes the character in the poem unawares, freezing him on the spot with a paralysing dilemma: "He stood there, for ages, / To wonder which side, if any, he should be on." (ibid)

The poem investigates the questions of division and belonging, with an eye on the rather arbitrary nature of such categories. The border in this case is a purely human construct, defined and decided by the boundary commission. Borders may be natural ones too though in many cases they have nothing to do with the physical environment – human decisions are superimposed on an indifferent landscape. The village, however, is a human construct; that the border ignores this is in itself an absurd phenomenon. The border is *there*, though, separating people of the same village into different states, and a situation of this kind immediately recalls Northern Ireland with its internal division and the whole island with the internal border on it too. In a divided world the acknowledgement of allegiances is (or at least seems) necessary, and the figure's hesitation suggests that taking sides is anything but a simple question, if it is a question at all.

The border zone is thus a strange place of strange events and encounters with strange characters and the impression is that of another world altogether where normal categories come to be suspended. In the vision of poets the most shocking observations of this world belong to the local people themselves: the inhabitants of the border zone, regardless of their position and affiliation, often recognise an inherent element of absurdity both in the location and in the concept of the border. This absurdity amounts to total irrelevance in some cases as even the locals themselves do not know the exact whereabouts of the border, whereas in other cases the absurdity of the idea of division itself is demonstrated. Whatever approach is pursued, the border is noticed and interpreted, which corresponds to the scholarly observation that "[f]or much of its history the Irish border has been peculiarly resistant to dispassionate analysis" (Coakley and O'Dowd 4).

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