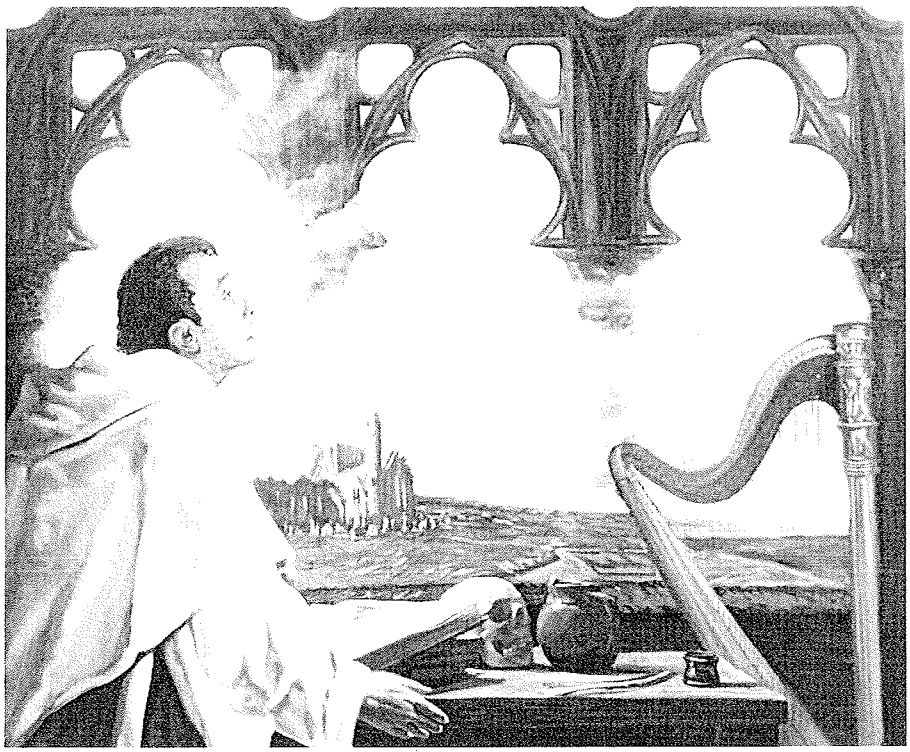
IRISH LANDSCAPES



José Francisco Fernández Sánchez
M.ª Elena Jaime de Pablos (Eds.)

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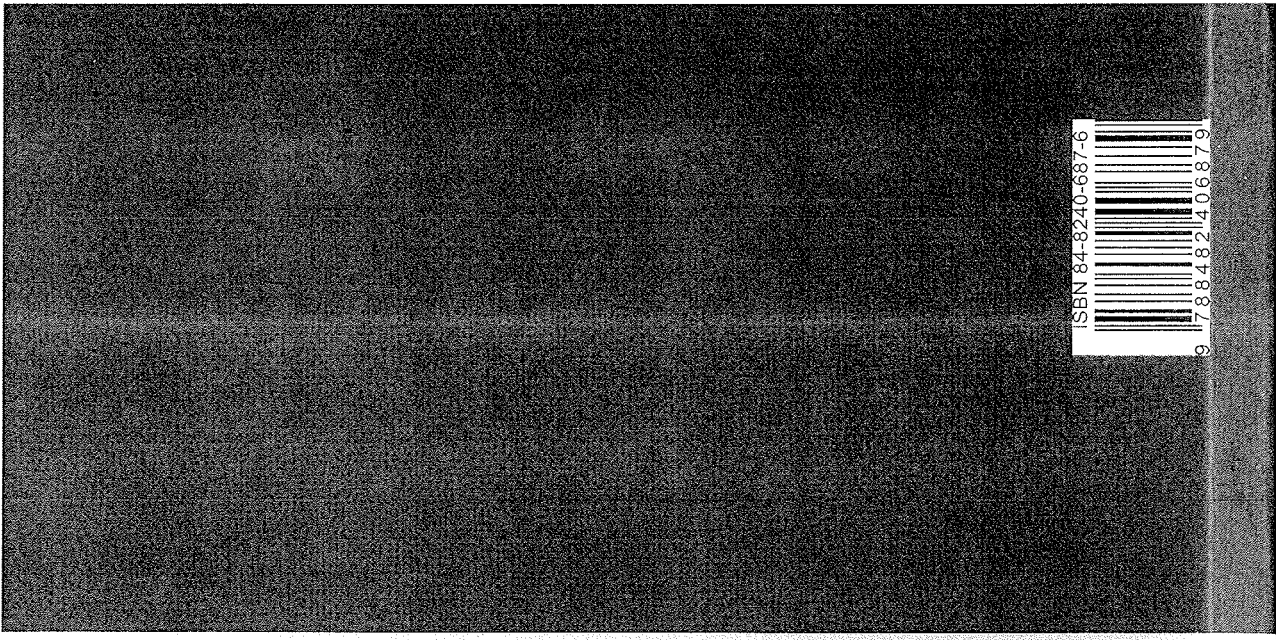

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SENSES AND PLACES IN THE PLAYS OF MARINA CARR

María del Mar González Chacón
University of Oviedo

Reading Carr's plays one feels that senses and places are doomed to be interlaced. One feels paralysed witnessing The Mai's, or Portia's, mostly Dinah and Sorrel's inability to abandon a set of dwellings that have become their prisons. At the same time, one, without knowing exactly the reason, understands their motionless attitude and cannot avoid finding beauty in Carr's cherished spots.

The ancestral relationship between man and nature (landscapes) has been explored by those authors that Carr considers Apollo's favourites:

> There are the royal writers and then there are the rest of us who write. The royal writers –their ink is supplied from the blue veins of God, from the lyre strings of Orpheus, from the well spring of another world. The rest of us are not aware of that inkwell or are dimly aware or are struggling very hard to hear those sounds. (Carr 1998: 190)

The narration of that magic bond owes much to Ovid's *Metamorphoses.* Ovid's landscapes had streams with divine powers. We, as readers, witness some of the most beautiful, painful and painless, assimilations that echo an ancient, sacred link. Sometimes these metamorphoses saved them, although this act of divine redemption meant at the same time the loss of the human condition: in Book I Phoebus (Apollo) pursues Daphne. The nymph, who hated "the wedding torch as if it smacked of crime" (Ovid I. 483) flees driven by fear and ends up becoming the laurel bough as "thin bark closed over her breast, her hair turned into leaves, her arms into branches, her feet so swift a moment ago stuck fast in slow-growing roots, her face was lost in the canopy" (I. 550-552). In Book IV Juno transforms the Theban women into birds, and at the same time Cadmus and Harmonia become serpents. Book V tells us about Typhoeus "issued forth from his abode in the depths of the earth" (V. 315) while

> Cyane melted into those waters whose great goddess she had previously been. You might see her limbs becoming softened, her bones seeming pliant, her nails

> losing their hardness. First of all the slenderest parts dissolve: her dusky hair, her fingers and toes, her feet and ankles (since it is no great transformation from fragile limbs to cool waters). Next her breast and back, shoulders and flanks slip away, vanishing into tenuous streams. At last the water runs in her ruined veins, and nothing remains that you could touch. (V. 427-440)

In Book VI the courageous Niobe's is punished and transformed into a rock:

> The breeze stirs not a hair, the colour of her cheeks is bloodless, and her eyes are fixed motionless in her sad face: nothing in that likeness is alive. Inwardly her tongue is frozen to the solid roof of her mouth, and her veins cease their power to throb. Her neck cannot bend, nor her arms recall their movement, nor her feet lead her anywhere. Inside, her body is stone. Yet she weeps, and, enclosed in a powerful whirlwind, she is snatched away to her own country: there set on a mountain top, she wears away, and even now tears flow from the marble. (VI. 310-312)

Places have always been a key element when it comes to shaping one's identity. In order to preserve the memory of those places and events we use narration. In the early stages of Irish literature, places constituted an object of inspiration. The genre of Dindsheanchas, or lore of prominent places, underlines the early Irish keenness on such question. This urgency to define one's identity in terms of places, and thus, of mapping our minds, owes much to a history of invasions, seizure of lands and partition. A society which still nowadays, not only in literature, forges its identity in terms of the demarcation of the spaces. The murals that we find in the streets of Ireland evoke images. These images located on the walls become objects. For Neil Jarman this interaction makes of them, not only art, but artefacts. Murals give significance, they mark and limit a geographical space, and at the same that space we have just defined, in a reciprocal act, enhances murals with its history. Thus, when we interpret a mural, we are at the same time creating a new place.

The sense of place is implied by the readings of contemporary Apollo's sons. Seamus Heaney defines the sense of place in terms of physical landscapes that mark, and are marked by, the landscapes of our minds. The landscapes of Carr's characters are imbued by the memories, feelings, stories that each of them poses on them. There is something intrinsic to Irish writers and the characters they build. They share an obsessive affection and hatred towards the places they inhabit. In her article "Séan O'Faolain and Brian Friel: Two Different Responses to Irishness and Sense of Place" Simona Ferro (2002) notices how O'Faolain had to leave his native country in order to preserve his intellectual activity. What is it that made him conclude that he had to be absent in order to remain faithful to his native land? On the other hand, Brian Friel blended the two places that were significant for him, Derry and Glenties, and fused all their characteristics in the imagined Ballybeg. For him the very concept of home is unattainable due to what he calls transitus, the repetitive act of leaving, and returning to, a place.

In this paper I will explore how, in Carr's plays, places are evoked becoming one more character, maybe the one whose presence is most all-embracing and frightening at the same time, and, as such, exerts a great influence on the "other characters'" dramatic development. If one has never been in Ireland, as it is my case, and instead of that feels an attraction to its culture, society and history, and uses literature as a means of entering all those worlds, Irish landscapes become part of your mental map and end up shaping your own identity. Man and landscape help each other as this is also

> a reciprocal relationship, insofar as place does not exist *per se* , but it becomes such only when we extract it out of undifferentiated spaces endowing it with a particular meaning for, and by, human sociability and identity. In other words, place defines us and we define place. (Ferro 2002: 1)

When reading Carr's plays you share her landscapes; in those private and intimate instances between you and the writer, you are allowed to trace back her private favourite spots, to comprehend what is the quality that enhanced the places where she locates The Mai, Portia or Hester, with a sacred, mythic, overwhelming presence that wraps them, that uses them for a determinate purpose: Carr's places seem to have recovered the powers that nature had in Ovid's writings, they become gods that capriciously use their lives to create a (hi)story to be attached to.

In *The Dazzling Dark New Irish Plays* Marina Carr writes the afterword for *Portia Coughlan*; there the author explains her relationship to the landscapes of her childhood. She is assisted by her memories in her evocation of Gortnamona, a place "famous for having hanged the last woman to be hanged in Ireland" –Annie Walsh was hanged in 1925 for the murder of her husband– and Banagher, where "Charlotte Brontë spent her honeymoon". Carr attaches a memory to the choice of such places. She presents us with the story of Portia, who lives in the Belmont Valley in the Midlands, maybe the Belmont where Shakespeare's Portia lived, a reference she always remembered: the first Shakespearean lines she learnt by heart at twelve in the Sacred Heart School in Tullamore were from *The Merchant of Venice.*

Portia, who was also richly left, had already decided the place to stay during her youth, she was going to college, but "Daddy says no, marry Raphael" (Carr 1999: 199). Due to this initial usurpation of her spaces, she ended up "stuck here for all eternity" (200) announcing us that she has "to get out" (200) because sometimes she "can't breath any more" (207). Her home does not constitute a space of her own at all. It is continuously invaded by undesired relatives that have become the reminders of her isolation. Marianne, her mother appears for the first time entering the house in such an abrupt way that Portia reproaches her: "ya never learnt, Mother, to allow a person space and quiet" (209).

Stacia, Portia's best friend, advises her to leave that atmosphere. Portia absolutely refuses to try to escape since her mind would be once and again "turnin' on the Belmont River" (207). That is Portia's sanctuary and shelter. Portia spends most of her time by the banks of the gloomy Belmont River, because "I've always come here and I reckon I'll be comin' here long

after I'm gone. I'll lie here when I'm a ghost" (203). Portia's bond with the river has much to do with the story of her dead twin brother, Gabriel was drowned there, and he took with him the only soul that God had given them to share. Gabriel's death did nothing but make him be more present than ever. He seems to have blended with the landscapes of Belmont, and nature mourns over his loss. To put it in Portia's words:

> there's not a corner of any of your forty fields that don't remind me of Gabriel. His name is in the mouths of the starlin's that swoops over Belmont hill, the cows bellow for him from the barn on frosty winter nights. The very river tells me that once he was here and now he's gone. (213-214)

As in many of Carr's plays, the Belmont River reveals, early in the play, its dramatic presence as another character. Fintan, Portia's lover, tells its story; the story of a river god, Bel, and a witch. She was impaled by the people of the village, and the god "came down the Belmont Valley and taken her away from here and the river was born" (219). At that stage we start finding similarities with Portia's case: she could well be the woman rejected by the society, and the god Bel recalls the watery spirit of Gabriel who returns from the other world to her rescue, to take her to "just anywhere that's not here" (225).

The Mai has also her favourite place. The stage is presided by "a room with a huge bay window. Sounds of swans and geese" (107). She lives by the Owl Lake, and there she has built her house, a space to keep by her side an errant husband, four children, and the rest of her family. Robert has been wandering here and there, when he finally returns to his home where his daughter Millie reproaches him: "we were here all the time" (109). The Mai has been trying to weave "the magic thread that would stitch [them] together again" (111). She becomes the central character, her house being the physical space where the rest of the characters meet once and again in search of their identity and roots. All of them, with their love towards her, their necessity of her existence, of her permanence in the centre, do nothing but isolate her, unconsciously absorbing her energy and coercing her movement till her imprisonment. The lack of a sense of place of their own makes them turn to her each time they need a place to redeem their sense of loss. The lack of well-defined roots in some of the characters distorts and undermines the Mai's apparent strength; Grandma Fraochlán was the daughter of a native and a Spanish or Moroccan sailor "Whoever he was, he left Grandma Fraochlán his dark skin and a yearning for all that was exotic and unattainable"(116) and that quality torments both Grandma and The Mai, as the latter becomes the listener of the former stories: unconnected, uprooted digressions with her ghosts, the Sultan of Spain, the nine-fingered fisherman.

The Mai's favourite landscape is the lake. There seems to be a quality in water that attracts Carr's interest. When I read one of Carr's most beautiful essays for me, "Dealing with the Dead", looking for evidence to find out some clues which could lead me to the reconstruction of her literary imagery, I was deeply moved by its lines. There Carr recalls a story she heard or read, about Shelley: his dead drowned body could be identified thanks to a copy of *Lamia*, Keats' last collection of poems, found on him. Moreover Carr tells us about Keats' last days:

> Then there is Keats' pronouncement that any life of note has the quality of an allegory. There is the line from King Lear which haunted him: "Can you hear the sea?" A very simple line that doesn't resonate much when out of context, but takes on a curious poignancy in the context of the dying Keats who asked his doctor wearily: "How long is this pothumous life of mine to last?", especially when you remember he was only twenty five. And it takes on the proportions of tragedy when you consider the epitaph he insisted on for his tombstone: "Here lies one whose name was writ in water". (Carr, 1998, 193)

The water, giver of life, of purification, had introduced the Mai once into life, and now takes her away to the landscapes of her mind, to the stories of her places. The landscapes, and the stories about them, acquire power, claim their right to exist. Just in the middle of the play we hear the voice of the landscapes as if announcing us that they are going to make real the legend attached to them, demanding a sacrifice, in an operation which would transform a space into a place. The legend of Owl Lake, the dindsheancha, presents us with the story of Coillte, the daughter of the mountain god, who fell in love with Bláth. When he leaves her he falls in the hands of a witch:

> Coillte followed him and found him ensconsed in the dark witch's lair. He would not speak to her, look at her, touch her, and heartbroken Coillte lay down outside the dark witch's lair and cried a lake of tears that stretched for miles around. One night, seizing a long-awaited opportunity, the dark witch pushed Coillte into her lake of tears. When spring came round again Bláth was released from the dark witch's spell and he went in search of Coillte, only to be told that she had dissolved. Sam Brady told me that when the geese are restless or the swans suddenly take flight, it's because they hear Bláth's pipes among the reeds, still playing for Coillte. (Carr 1999:147)

Could Coillte stand for the Mai's ancestor, and Bláth the musician for Robert's? Are landscapes again claiming their sacrifice?

The Mai has always been in her home, in her right place. Hers is a family where women have traditionally stayed at home while their husbands wandered around the world in search of something which is never fully explained or justified. Grandma Fraochlán, her daughter Ellen, and her granddaughter –the Mai– have been abandoned by their respective husbands. Robert, the Mai's husband, and also his father, have felt the necessity of leaving their homes, but at the same time, Robert feels the urgency of returning to the Mai's side.

Grandma is named after a place, she was born on Inis Fraochlain; maybe from that very moment she was indebted to that place. However she does not remain faithful to that space, and she is all the time evoking distant landscapes in her stories. She represents the exotic view of the places, she, Beck, who has dared to leave her home, and the window that looks at the lake, are the Mai's means of observing other worlds. However, Grandma, Robert and Beck,

are condemned by their family. Their apparent affective neutrality and determination to escape, either in a physical or a mental way, is out of place, and collides with the other characters continuous withdrawal. In the meanwhile, the Mai is trapped in an "in-between space [...] poised on the threshold between an inner security never experienced and an outer freedom never fully within reach" (Roche 1995: 143).

In *On Raftery's Hill* we have a different kind of landscape, it is not one that demands, but one that shares Dinah and Sorrel's pain. Landscapes in thr Raftery's farm are, as the corrupt characters, rotten, with blood and corpses of dead animals. Observing in detail the dramatic relationships between the characters I noticed how their spaces cannot be separated. Repetitive inbreeding relationships coerce this –Sorrel Raftery, a young girl who is about to be married, is raped by her father. Her sister turns out to be her mother at the same time. Her grandmother, who seems to be her great-grandmother, might also have been raped by her father. Thus, the imprisonment of self takes place, and dangers, as in many of Carr's plays, do not come from outside, but from your nearest people. The family household far from being a safe environment becomes the most dangerous and claustrophobic space to stay. By raping her daughters Red Raftery is occupying their bodies and marking them, again, with a tragic sense of withdrawal which denies them any possibility of escaping.The Raftery's story echoes Ireland's history of usurpation, a land violated once and again. Again we have the characters that live in the landscapes of their mind, Shalome dreams all the time of India, and those that search for a separate physical spot –Sorrel's attempt to marry Dara will be miscarried and she finally chooses to stay at home, her right place? Landscapes are not so generous in this case, they do not provide young and innocent nymph Sorrel with a refuge, they do not dissolve her body so that it is not usurped by the hideous father.

Carr's landscapes are inspirational landscapes, the do not just remain there without affecting us but they exert a power that "derives both from the nature of that which is taken in and from the nature of the lives –our very own– into which it flows" (Malpas 2002: 1). Landscapes are, as Heaney remarks both "humanized and humanising" (Heaney 1984: 145). The landscapes that most inspire us are the landscapes that flow most directly into our lives. Throughout history we have acquired a debt with landscapes, our bond with them is unbreakable, sacred. Maybe this is the quality that Irish landscapes, any landscape of one's mind share. They allow us to exist, they provide us with a sense of place, but they also claim their right to recover the powers they had in Ovidio's *Metamorphoses*, the power of acting on people, of blending with them till men and nature become sense and place.

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