

EILÉAN NÍ CHUILLEANÁIN'S 'OLD ROADS' AS A CHRONOTOPIC METAPHOR

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Abstract: With Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of the chronotope – “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” – as theoretical background, this article examines Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin poem “Old Roads” with a view to showing how the imagery of the road and its expansions in the poem, with their symbolic, cultural and Irish associations, gradually become chronotopic metaphors for “the course of a life”. Simultaneously, as these chronotopic images are impregnated by the poet's sensibility, the poem also becomes paradigmatic of Benedetto Croce's doctrine of poetry, as it embodies the two constant and necessary elements that make one consider it a poem: a complex of images and a feeling that animates it.

Keywords: Irish poetry. Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin. Chronotope.

'VELHAS ESTRADAS', DE EILÉAN NÍ CHUILLEANÁIN, COMO METÁFORA CRONOTÓPICA

Resumo: Tendo como embasamento teórico as conceituações de Mikhail Bakhtin sobre o cronotopo – “a interligação fundamental das relações temporais e espaciais, artisticamente assimiladas em literatura” – este artigo discute o poema “Velhas Estradas”, de Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, a fim de verificar como a imagem da estrada e seus desdobramentos no poema, com suas associações simbólicas, culturais e irlandesas, tornam-se gradualmente metáforas cronotópicas para “o caminho da vida”. Simultaneamente, como essas imagens cronotópicas estão impregnadas pela sensibilidade da poeta, o poema também se torna paradigmático da doutrina de poesia de Benedetto Croce, ao incorporar os dois elementos, sempre presentes e necessários, que nos fazem considerá-lo um poema: “um complexo de imagens e um sentimento que o anima”.

Palavras-chave: Poesia irlandesa. Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin. Cronotopo.

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Definitions of poetry always come to mind when one is dealing with poems as instances of verbal art. Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's "Old Roads", published in *Sites of Ambush* (1975) and reprinted in *Selected Poems* (2009), reminded me specifically of Benedetto Croce's opening words in *Aesthetica in nuce*: "Se si prende a considerare qualsiasi poesia per determinare che cosa la faccia giudicar tale, si discernono alla prima, costanti e necessari, due elementi: **un complesso d'immagini e un sentimento che lo anima**" (CROCE, citado em BOSI, 2003, p. 7, emphasis added).

These two constant and necessary elements that strike us at first sight, according to Croce – a complex of images and a feeling that gives it life – impress us with the simplicity and force they transmit. Both elements are also present in Ezra Pound's definition of image: "an 'Image' is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time" (POUND, 1968, p. 4).

Starting from these presuppositions, the aim of this work is to examine Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's poem "Old Roads" (NÍ CHUILLEANÁIN, 2009, p. 33) in order to find out, by way of Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the *chronotope* – "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (BAKHTIN, 1983, p. 84) – how her use of the imagery of the road and its developments in the poem as a *chronotopic* metaphor leads us to reflect on the deeper meanings hidden in it, as it embodies Croce's doctrine.

Although the concept of the *chronotope* is applied by Bakhtin "to define the distinctiveness of the novel by means of its history, using differing ratios of time-space projection as the unit for charting changes" (BAKHTIN, 1983, p. xxxiii), as the title of his essay already conveys – "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" (BAKHTIN, 1983, p. 84) – his definition of the term allows one to attempt to apply it to poetry. Even if poetry does not need to be inserted in a specific historical time and place, it nevertheless often contains time and place, as the very title of Ní Chuilleanáin's poem, "Old Roads", implies. This openness is further confirmed in Bakhtin's "Concluding Remarks" to this essay: "Art and literature are shot through with *chronotopic values* of varying degree and scope. Each motif, each separate aspect of artistic work bears value" (BAKHTIN, 1983, p. 243). Thus, even if the significance of the *chronotopes* discussed

throughout his essay is “their meaning for narrative”, for “they are the organizing centers for the fundamental narrative events of the novel” (p. 250), Bakhtin acknowledges that “(...) any and every literary image is chronotopic. Language, as a treasure-house of images, is fundamentally chronotopic” (BAKHTIN, 1983, p. 251).

For this reason, even if the author “does his observing from his own unresolved and still evolving contemporaneity, in all its complexity and fullness, insofar as he himself is located as it were tangentially to the reality he describes” (BAKHTIN, 1983, p. 255), Bakhtin concludes that

Science, art and literature also involve *semantic* elements that are not subject to temporal and spatial determinations. (...) But meanings exist not only in abstract cognition, they exist in artistic thought as well. (...) whatever these meanings turn out to be, in order to enter our experience (which is social experience) they must take on the *form of a sign* that is audible and visible for us (a hieroglyph, a mathematical formula, a verbal or linguistic expression, a sketch, etc.). Without such temporal-spatial expression even abstract thought is impossible. Consequently, every entry into the sphere of meanings is accomplished only through the gates of the chronotope. (BAKHTIN, 1983 p. 257- 8)

Turning now to “Old roads”, as “the *form of a sign* that is audible and visible for us”, the poem itself, at the graphological level, is composed of three free-verse strophes with 8, 7 and 4 lines respectively. Moreover, as several of the sentences in the poem are run-on lines, the syntactic units of each overflowing from one line into the next, they visually corroborate the meanderings of the old roads:

Old Roads

1. Missing from the map, the abandoned roads
2. Reach across the mountain, threading into
3. Clefts and valleys, shuffle between thick
4. Hedges of flowery thorn.
5. The grass flows into tracks of wheels,
6. Mowed evenly by the careful sheep;

- 7.Drenched, it guards the gaps of silence
- 8.Only trampled on the pattern day.

- 9.And if, an odd time, late
- 10.At night, a cart passes
- 11.Splashing in a burst stream, crunching bones,
- 12.The wavering candle hung by the shaft
- 13.Slaps light against a single gable
- 14.Catches a flat tombstone
- 15.Shaking a nervous beam as the hare passes.

- 16.Their arthritic fingers
- 17.Their stiffening grasp cannot
- 18.Hold long on the hillside –
- 19.Slowly the old roads lose their grip.

The chronotopic image contained in the title already leads us into the etymology of the noun “road”: from AS *ridan*, to ride , it means “a way made for traveling between places, especially distant places by automobile, horseback, etc.; a highway”(WEBSTER, 1979, p. 1566); the direction which one takes to get to a place. Its symbolic values of life, progress, adventure, experience (de VRIES, 1976, p. 387-8) are thus immediately colored by the descriptive adjective “old”, with its suggestions of having lived, or been in existence, or having been used for a long time; belonging to a past time; long known or familiar. The polyvalence of the title thus takes us to Bakhtin’s considerations about the chronotopic value of the “road”, in his discussion of its presence in the novel:

The chronotope of the road is both a point of **new departures** and a place for **events** to find their denouement. **Time**, as it were fuses together with **space** and flows in it (forming the road); this is the source of the rich metaphorical **expansion** on the image of the road as a **course**: “the course of a life, “to set out on a new course”, “the course of history” and so on; varied and multi-leveled are the ways in which road is turned into a **metaphor**, but its fundamental pivot is the **flow of time**.(1983, p.243-4) (emphasis added)

Bakhtin's remarks about the "rich metaphorical expansion on the image of the road as a course" allow us to add to the "old roads" the symbolic values of "earth" as the soil on which these roads were built – the Great Mother and the great end of material life, the great sepulchre, the sustainer of material life, cyclic existence as a symbol of man's life: birth, maturity, decay, death (de VRIES, 1976, p. 155) – for these significant expansions are already latent in the symbolism of the road, as we have seen above. The assonantal effects in "old roads", substantiating Jakobson's claim that "words similar in sound are bound together in meaning"(JAKOBSON, 1971, p. 371), seem to confirm the intimate relationship between time and place established in the title, a chronotope that will be developed throughout the poem.

Let us take a closer look at lines 1-4 of the first strophe:

1. Missing from the map, the abandoned roads
2. Reach across the mountain, threading into
3. Clefts and valleys, shuffle between thick
4. Hedges of flowery thorn.

The first statement, "Missing from the map," already points to the fact that these roads are not even included on a map, suggesting their lack of topical importance. This feeling of omission, of absence, is further intensified by the alliteration missing/map. "Missing from the map", by preceding the subject "the abandoned roads", thus highlights still further the lack of importance these old roads seem to have, for "to abandon" denotes leaving a place, not intending to come back, adding a time dimension that is not present in "missing from the map". The descriptive adjective "abandoned" thus adds the poet's feeling (in the sense used by Croce) towards the roads, which have probably become "mapless" as a result of being abandoned. The repetition of the letters a/d/o in "abandoned", in their turn, visually leads us to the letters of the word "roads" and "old", increasing the relationship in sound and meaning between the two words of the title.

This run-on line leads us into the first segment of the second line of the poem, "Reach across the mountain," thereby bringing the main verb into prominence, with the suggestion that these roads are still alive. "Reach",

denoting “to extend, to go, to pass”, but also reminding us of hands as in “to try to get by stretching out a hand”, adds a human quality to the roads, which will be further developed later on. The alliteration roads/reach plus the fact that the strong accent on “reach” is followed by iambic feet in “across the mountain”, further increases the prominence of the verb. The preposition “across”, in its turn – from one side to the other, on the other side of – also denotes the extent or length these old roads seem to have, besides overcoming obstacles such as the concreteness of “mountain”.

By being crossed by the old roads, the mountain embodies another chronotope: not simply the meeting place of the roads (built by man) with a mountain (a natural feature), but also, by extension, the potential meeting-place of people on their way up or down a mountain.

The different symbolisms stemming from the various implications of the mountain’s component elements – such as height (ascent to the realm of the spirit), verticality (linked with the world-axis, and, anatomically, with the spinal column), mass (as an expression of being) and shape (seen from above it corresponds to the inverted tree, thereby expressing multiplicity, materialization) (CIRLOT, 1971, p. 219), to which one can add its being the home of giants, dwarfs, or fairies (related to the Celtic fairy-hills), peace and freedom (de VRIES, 1976, p. 330) – enrich the meaning these encounters of people either with nature or with other people can have, pointing to the mountain’s changing functions. As we will see, all these associations will increase the impact of this new chronotope throughout the poem, besides stressing again the human quality the landscape seems to have, as the mountain is also linked to the spinal column and thus something alive. As Bakhtin stresses (in relation to the novel), “the road is always one that passes through *familiar territory*, and not through some exotic alien world” (BAKHTIN, 1983, p. 245), which confirms Ní Chuilleanáin’s relation to her homeland, Ireland.

The next run-on segment (lines 2-3) “threading into /Clefts and valleys” describes the movement of these old roads, again adding a human quality to them, for if “thread”, as a noun, reminds us of yarn and is thus iconic of the shape of a road, the gerund “threading” – “to make one’s way through, especially where it is difficult or dangerous to pass” – suggests the effort the roads need to make, in order to advance through difficult

places, such as clefts and valleys. The expression “the thread of life” also foreshadows the semantic implications that “road” will acquire as “the course of a life”.

If the cleft is an opening made by a sharp blow, crack or cut, especially in the ground or in a rock, and thus part of the road chronotope, the valley – as the stretch of land lying between hills and mountains – is contrastingly a very large chronotope. Within the symbolism of landscapes, the valley, because it is low-lying, is considered to lie at the level of the sea, and thus represents a neutral zone suitable for the development of all creation and for all material progress in the world of manifestation. Its characteristic fertility stands in contrast to the nature of the desert, the ocean, and the mountain. In short, the valley is symbolic of life itself (CIRLOT, 1971, p. 358). These various symbolic meanings of the valley, enriching the visual impact of the image, also take us back to the symbolism of earth, as the beginning and end of life. In addition, the triangular shape of the valley, with the apex pointing downwards, serves as a complement to the triangular shape of the mountain with the apex pointing upwards. As Chevalier and Gheerbrant state,

la vallée est vide et ouverte par le haut, donc réceptive aux influences célestes; la vallée est un creux, un canal, vers lequel convergent nécessairement les eaux venues des hauteurs qui l'entourent. (...) La vallée est le complément symbolique de la montagne comme le yin celui du yang (...) tout le symbolisme de la vallée réside dans cette union féconde des forces contraires, dans la synthèse des opposés au cœur d'une personnalité intégrée.
(CHEVALIER et GHEERBRANT, 1969, p. 358-9. vol. IV)

Metonymically related to the mountain and the valley and hence to their symbolism, the old roads now continue to “shuffle between thick/ Hedges of flowery thorn” (lines 3-4). The verb shuffle – to walk or dance without raising the feet properly; drag them on the ground, suggesting difficulty or awkwardness in moving along – also reminds us of the roads, with their sinuosities, trying to find their way among the “thick/ Hedges of flowery thorn”. These fences or rows of “flowery thorn”, besides implying a barrier round a garden or field, their great diameter or depth contributing to keeping the place hidden, are significantly symbolic of privacy and secrecy

(de VRIES, 1976, p. 245). The flowery thorn – any tree or plant that has thorns on it, especially the hawthorn – in its turn, confirming its power to hurt with its sharp points, is nevertheless blossoming, thereby transforming the hedge into a colorful and beautiful springtime image. This image again adds the dimension of time to the meanderings of the road within this secluded place, as it reminds us of the change of seasons.

If lines 1-4 described the efforts and the movements of the abandoned roads across the landscape, lines 5-8 describe the effects of the interference of nature, animals and man on these old roads, as

- 5.The grass flows into tracks of wheels,
- 6.Mowed evenly by the careful sheep;
- 7.Drenched, it guards the gaps of silence
- 8.Only trampled on the pattern day.

The image of the “grass” – as the wild, green low-growing plants whose blades and stalks are eaten by horses, sheep and cattle – flowing “into tracks of wheels”, suggests the power of nature to regain its dominance over the land, while the image of the “tracks of wheels” reminds us that these roads are seldom used by man, for the tracks are “Mowed evenly by the careful sheep.” The symbolic references of the grass – humble usefulness, submission, evanescence, weed (de VRIES ,1976, p.223) – plus those of the sheep – spring, gentleness – serve to enrich the poet’s vision of nature in contact with man, either under his dominance or regaining its temporary ascendancy over him.

The assonantal effects in wheels/evenly/sheep and grass/tracks/careful bind the images of “wheels” – related to the actions of men in their carts passing along the roads – to the image of the “sheep” – carefully mowing the grass as they eat the blades and stalks – both again chronotopic images, in which place and time are in constant interaction with animals and men.

Lines 7-8 – “Drenched, it guards the gaps of silence/Only trampled on the pattern day.” – continue the description of the grass growing on the roads, as “drenched” – made thoroughly wet. This again suggests the action of nature on the grass, now impregnated with rainwater, as if rain, symbolic

of fertility and purification (de VRIES 379-80) is playing its part in keeping the grass alive for the animals to graze on. At the same time, by being drenched, the grass “guards the gaps of silence/ Only trampled on the pattern day”, thus protecting the gorges between the mountains, through which the roads pass, from being disturbed. For silence – the absence of sound, stillness – with its symbolic implications of an essential quality in charms (de VRIES, 1976, p. 424) and as “*un prélude d’ouverture à la révélation*” (CHEVALIER et GHEERBRANT, 1969, p. 205), again implies the power of nature, the drenched grass keeping the mountains in their sacred silence so that man can enjoy the revelation of nature undisturbed by the sound of traffic.

This silence is only broken when “trampled on the pattern day” – that is, trodden down with the feet on the day on which “in Ireland, a feast or merrymaking in honor of a patron saint” (WEBSTER, 1979, p. 1315) takes place. Another reference to the poet’s cultural and religious background is thereby added, confirming once more Bakhtin’s assertion that “the road is always one that passes through *familiar territory*”. Besides being a run-on line, line 7 to 8 also presents alliterative effects in guards/gaps and drenched/day as well as assonantal effects in trampled/pattern, further binding these lines in sound and meaning.

The second strophe continues the description of the old roads and the actions that occasionally take place on them, as the run-on lines visually confirm, creating new chronotopes:

- 9.And if, an odd time, late
- 10.At night, a cart passes
- 11.Splashing in a burst stream, crunching bones,
- 12.The wavering candle hung by the shaft
- 13.Slaps light against a single gable
- 14.Catches a flat tombstone
- 15.Shaking a nervous beam as the hare passes.

The conditional clause in line 9, expressing a supposition which is simultaneously “odd”, strange, not ordinary – that a cart can occasionally pass, late at night – confirms the remoteness of these abandoned roads.

For the cart – this vehicle with two wheels pulled by one or more horses, used for carrying loads on farms, and thus with its wheels imprinted on these roads – besides reminding us that we are in the country, reinforces the “antiquity” of these dirt roads. The three pauses in the punctuation produced by the commas emphasize the improbability of this event through the halting rhythm they give to our reading, in contrast with the flowing rhythm of the next run-on line, “a cart passes/Splashing in a burst stream” (lines 10-11).

The description of the cart’s wheels “Splashing in a burst stream, crunching bones” (line 11) not only suggests movement but also reminds us again of man’s effect on nature, as the wheels, by striking the drenched grass, cause the mud to fly about. The onomatopoeic sounds of “splashing” contribute to our potentially hearing this action, while the echoing of the voiceless /s/ in splashing/burst/stream as well as the repetition of the consonant cluster rst/str/ in burst/stream further binds these words in sound and meaning.

By “crunching bones”, with their suggestion of the wheels passing over the bones of dead animals on the roads, corroborated by the onomatopoeic sounds in “crunching”, the cart again stresses the impact of the weight of these wheels on nature, as they destroy the remnants of life in it.

The darkness of this late night scene is nevertheless broken in line 12 by “The wavering candle hung by the shaft” (one of the two poles between which a horse is placed when pulling a vehicle), a line which follows the onomatopoeic splashing and crunching of the preceding one with an image of flashes of light, as the candle wavers along with the movement of the cart. The flickering movement of the candle, however, is not enough to illuminate the whole scene. For if the candle is symbolic of individual light and transitoriness (de VRIES, 1976, p. 79-80), its oscillation seems to confirm the briefness of the images lit up, as the candle suddenly “Slaps light against a single gable” (line 13). The chronotopic image of the “single gable”, suggesting again the loneliness of the place which is only broken by “a single gable” and thus a metonymic image for a single house, is simultaneously a “minor chronotope” (BAKHITIN, 1983, p. 252) included within the larger chronotopes of the road and of the landscape. It adds a specific temporal element to the ancientness of the roads, by its relation to man as the builder of houses. The line is also phonologically enriched by the

repetition of the liquid /l/ in slaps/light/single/gable, as well as the plosive /g/ in against/single/gable, drawing together again sound and sense.

The function of the lit candle continues in lines 14-15, as it now “Catches a flat tombstone/ Shaking a nervous beam as the hare passes”, suggesting that, in the same way that there is human life along the road in the metonymic image of the gable, there is also death, as a sequence to life, in the image of the flat tombstone. The finality of death is reinforced by the flatness of the tombstone, implying that it has fallen or been knocked down, for a tombstone, usually with an engraved inscription, is erected over a grave to preserve the memory of the deceased. In this case, its flatness implies that even this last concrete remnant of a deceased person can be destroyed, as there is nobody there to erect it again. Thus, the chronotopic symbolism of the road as metaphoric of the road of life gradually takes shape, further corroborated by the symbolism of earth as the cyclic existence of man, as mentioned above.

Line 15 – “Shaking a nervous beam as the hare passes” – continues and completes the action of the wavering candle – from slapping to catching to shaking – as it now illuminates the passing hare. As the verb “shake” implies tremble, vibrate, jolt or wave, it prepares us for the qualifier “nervous”, which thus attaches a human quality of restlessness or agitation to the candle, as if it is surprised to catch a glimpse of an animal running across or beside the road. The clause “as the hare passes”, besides adding an image of movement to the foregoing images of stability and immobility in the gable and tombstone, also contrasts the image of death in the tombstone with an image of life, as the hare is symbolic of life, fertility, resurrection (de VRIES, 1976, p. 238), besides also being symbolic of fleetness (CIRLOT, 1971, p.139). The contrasts of death vs life and immobility vs fleetness in “tombstone” and “hare” also present an interesting feature: the hare is to be found on many Gothic sepulchres as an emblem of diligent service (CIRLOT, 1971, p.139), and thus could be related, even if indirectly, to Irish cultural traditions. Assonantal effects in /splashing/candle/ shaft/ slaps/ catches/ flat /hare /passes/, even if unobtrusive, together with the gerund ending in /splashing/crunching/wavering/shaking/ bind the whole strophe again, phonologically.

The last strophe brings us back to the first four lines of the poem – describing the movements and efforts of the abandoned roads to reach across mountains, clefts and valleys – as it now comments on how the effects of time and of misuse have transformed them:

- 16.Their arthritic fingers
- 17.Their stiffening grasp cannot
- 18.Hold long on the hillside –
- 19.Slowly the old roads lose their grip

By visually identifying the meanderings of the road with “arthritic fingers” (line 16), by means of the isomorphism between them, the image again adds a human quality to the road chronotope – for the number 5 corresponds with man, counting his 5 extremities: head, arms, legs (de VRIES, p. 184). However, the image also stresses that this extremity of the human body is sick, for the fingers are “arthritic”, and this inflammation of the joints has made them lose their power, for “Their stiffening grasp cannot/ Hold long on the hillside” (lines 17-18). “Stiffening grasp”, with its connotations of not flexible, rigid, unbending, removes from “grasp” its power to hold firmly, to grip, to control and thus to dominate the landscape.

By losing their hold on the hillside, they also gradually lose their contact with the symbolism of the hillside and thus with elements from Irish mythology and history: for the hillside shares the height-symbolism of the Mountain as a place of worship, of meditation, fertility, related to the winds and to eternity, besides being an ancient burial-site of Irish kings and queens (de VRIES, 1976, p. 252). The expression “as old as the hills” with its chronotopic flavor, although not cited in the poem, adds a melancholic aura to the image of the hills, as the old roads that cross them will gradually become effaced, as they have already been effaced from maps.

The last line of the poem – “Slowly the old roads lose their grip” – besides attenuating the power of the verbs in the first four lines, for reaching, threading and shuffling will gradually lose their movements and thus their mastery over nature, it also anthropomorphises once more the chronotope of the road, as the noun “grip”, denoting firm hold but also a

way of clasping hands, identifies the roads with hands and thus, metonymically, with human beings.

In this manner, the different chronotopic images in the poem “reached” by the roads (the master chronotope) – from the larger images such as the mountain and valleys to such minor ones as the clefts, hedges, tracks of wheels, gables, and tombstones – “have been shot through with *chronotopic values* of varying degree and scope” for “language, as a treasure-house of images, is fundamentally chronotopic”, as Bakhtin has argued above. By the fact that this “treasure-house” of language is also full of symbolic, cultural and Irish associations, these were presented as a complement to the “complex of images” and to the poet’s “feeling that animates it”, thereby extending and enriching the chronotopic values of the images with additional nuances of meaning, “for significant indefiniteness is the mark of symbols” (de VRIES, 1974, p. iii).

Peter Sirr, discussing the power of Ní Chuilleanáin’s work to engage the reader deeply despite the poet’s seeming detachment, has characterized her work as “a poetry where isolated moments are held in the poet’s ordering gaze, a poetry that depends on the relentless clarity and attentiveness of that gaze and the details it illuminates rather than on the central government of an overt poetic personality.” It is the intensity of Ní Chuilleanáin’s focus, he asserts, that “pushes the reader into the self-enclosed world of the poems.” (SIRR, 2015).

These comments take us back again to Croce’s doctrine, for Ní Chuilleanáin’s “ordering gaze” and the complex of images – “the details” – that she illuminates and animates with her feelings confirm that verbal art and reality conjoin in the “self-enclosed world” of the poem, to present the “old roads” as a metaphorical chronotope for the road of life, natural and human life, constantly changing with the flow of time.

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