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## Contemporary Irish Women Poets

Lucy Collins

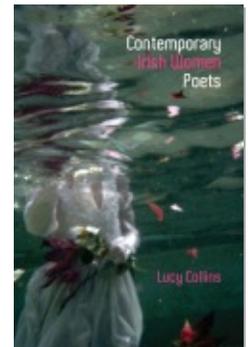
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II

## Achievements



## CHAPTER FOUR

# Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's Spaces of Memory

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin is one of the most significant poets to emerge in Ireland in the second half of the twentieth century. The relationship between past and present is important in her work, not only because memory often shapes her subject matter but also because of the uncanny ways in which temporal difference is elided, creating gaps in meaning, or places where language is used in cryptic ways.<sup>1</sup> These give rise to the formal challenges of her work: 'the world she creates in a poem has an enigmatic centre', writes Eamon Grennan, 'one sees the facts clearly enough, but the purpose and point of these clearly realised facts aren't easy to pin down'.<sup>2</sup> For Ní Chuilleanáin the overlapping territory of memory and history is often marked by silence – many of her poems are concerned with what is withheld from expression and what this means both for the individual and the community. In her work there are aspects of the private that can never become fully public: experiences or phenomena that remain resistant to observation and analysis. Her engagement with these elements creates a pattern in her work – a repeated concern with the ways in which knowledge materializes in the lives and practices of both individuals and communities. This chapter examines her poems as objects that carry the past without giving direct expression to it. In this way, Ní Chuilleanáin's oeuvre provokes us to consider how the past is mediated, and in particular how the private, unstated past relates to ideas of shared narrative.

This emphasis on privacy has important ramifications for the operation of memory in Ní Chuilleanáin's work. In particular, it draws attention to the relationship between private and shared spaces as both physical and linguistic entities. The recurrence of personal and familial memories draws attention to the question of shared narratives and their broader implications for how we might understand the past.

Psychologist Frederic Bartlett found that people recall 'not the presented [narrative] material directly, but a judgment which they made about this material when they saw it originally'.<sup>3</sup> This dynamic is applicable to some of the processes of remembering in Ní Chuilleanáin's work, where perspectives slip between a story recalled and other, more fleeting, impressions. For her the political is not judged to be outside the private sphere but is an important dimension of it – an understanding that has its roots in her family history.<sup>4</sup> Born in Cork to a literary family with a Republican lineage, Ní Chuilleanáin gained an early appreciation of the significance of the Gaelic past, especially for Munster literary history: 'History', she writes, 'has been particularly alive for me as for many Irish people. We are [...] told it is bad for us. But like others who share my linguistic background, I am aware always of the presence of the past and the strangeness, the untypical edge on the way I read history.'<sup>5</sup> This 'strangeness' seems to stem from Ireland's dual language tradition, and from the ways in which the experiences of the past are shaped by the language through which they are understood and discussed. Later in the same essay, Ní Chuilleanáin elaborates on the specificity of linguistic experience by recording her dislike of the 'blurred' boundaries that constitute 'Anglo-Irish' literature. Her wish that languages 'keep their sharp edges, their strangeness to one another'<sup>6</sup> confirms the idea that language can function as an agent of concealment, as well as one of expression.

Her concern with the intersection of narrative history and folk tradition has shaped her reflection on the relationship between individual and shared versions of the past, which in turn has problematized the function of collective memory. It acknowledges in particular the symbiotic relationship between memory and identity, as John Gillis has suggested: 'The core meaning of any individual or group identity, namely, a sense of sameness over time and space, is sustained by remembering; and what is remembered is defined by an assumed identity.'<sup>7</sup> The transition from memory into history is important in this context. According to Maurice Halbwachs, history arises when the past 'is no longer included within the sphere of thought of existing groups'.<sup>8</sup> Since group memory is focused on its own networks of meaning its construction of the past is not ruptured but smooth.<sup>9</sup> Thus it is in the formation of history that certain perspectives are subsumed and lines of memory broken. This is especially true of groups that are marginalized, either politically or socially, by the prevailing power structures, and Ní Chuilleanáin's attention to the lives of women, and to those

in religious life, shows her sensitivity to these discontinuities in the narrative of history.

She came to this position early: in her introduction to *Irish Women: Image and Achievement*, a book she edited for Arlen House in 1985, she suggested that 'the study of the Irish woman's image through history is also the study of the gap, most easily appreciated in the last couple of centuries, between that image and what many Irish women have actually experienced'.<sup>10</sup> This distinction calls attention to the dynamics of memory and history, to the differences between experience and representation and to its intellectual and ethical implications. History may seem remote from the life of the individual, which is expressed through personal recollection of experiences. Yet the contingency of memory is a key dimension to the understanding of the past, and to its simultaneous presence and absence in literature. For Ní Chuilleánáin this has been an important motivation in her creative life:

It seemed to me that it was not language or image but subject that really defined me as a poet; I wished to look at the feminine condition through the equal glass of the common language, making it my subject on my own terms. Was a female subject one which came merely from an assemblage of concerns that have been brushed into a corner labeled 'women'?<sup>11</sup>

She has disputed Eavan Boland's notion of women being 'outside history', not least, it seems, because of its metaphorical formulation: 'I think, on the other hand, that women are very much there in history. They are often there as the victims or the people being labelled or enclosed, shut away in a way for us unimaginable.'<sup>12</sup> The correlation here between physical and linguistic concealment is an important one in Ní Chuilleánáin's poetry, which often represents architectural structures – churches and convents as well as private homes – as places of both containment and revelation. The extent to which these can be the particular focus of imaginative states reveals their importance as spaces not just of memory but of possibility.<sup>13</sup> In an interview published in *Éire-Ireland* Ní Chuilleánáin speaks of the significance of 'dreams about houses which you have lived in, in which you find there's an extra room or something has changed, something remarkable has happened to it [...] I think the house and the body both come into that'.<sup>14</sup> In linking the house and the body here she strengthens the emphasis on place as formative of identity: both house and body carry layers of experience, representing time by material or sensory means. These formations allow her poems to remain distinct yet also suggest spaces of return, where past experience coexists with present knowledge. This

act of return is an important dimension of Ní Chuilleánáin's creative practice too, as images and phrases reappear to remind the reader of the ineradicable nature of memory and of its power to shape the development of thought.

### Personal Effects: Towards *The Magdalene Sermon*

The individual's relation to his or her own past, and to the shared past of their family, is used by Ní Chuilleánáin to extend and interrogate the representation of history in her work. Patricia Boyle Haberstroh has acknowledged the oblique form of this investigation, describing how Ní Chuilleánáin 'revises well-known figures and narratives, sometimes using the present, or her own personal experience, as an entrance into the past'.<sup>15</sup> In her poems domestic space and the private lives of families create the tensions from which meaning can emerge. Yet in these settings memory and meaning can be at once closely connected and strangely divergent – often it is the sense of what is unspoken or unknown that governs action in the poem, reminding the reader of the partial nature of all interpretation. For this reason, the circular shape of Boland's oeuvre and the emphasis she lays on repeated statement form no part of Ní Chuilleánáin's aesthetic, in which key tropes are layered and transformed in each new collection. For the speakers in Boland's work the need to articulate experience becomes a self-conscious one, as Guinn Batten suggests:

In the gap between Boland's view that a woman writer finds her voice by becoming her own subject and representing it faithfully, and Ní Chuilleánáin's that the woman writer finds that voice *through* the objects of her poem ... we might locate an important and ongoing theoretical debate concerning the possibility of a fully democratic community.<sup>16</sup>

Here the contextualization of memory becomes an important issue, drawing the reader outward from a stated poetic subjectivity. Batten sees Ní Chuilleánáin's desire to represent, without claiming to speak for, the experience of others as an important achievement in her work.

The textual environments that this poet creates are significant in other ways too, especially for their attention to the power of the world of physical objects to shape our understanding of present and past. This relationship is a complex one, especially in its links between the environment of the poem and its visual impact; the object therefore works on two levels, as both image and context. This is an important dimension of Ní Chuilleánáin's work given the overlapping worlds of Renaissance

scholarship and poetic craft that shape her writing. In negotiating the past through objects, the poet can create a network of signification that moves back and forth in time. The artefact, surviving from the past, becomes part of present experience: Ní Chuilleánáin shares with Boland a sense of these objects as bearers of meaning, but in the former poet's work they are used to question the notion of fixed meanings rather than to operate emblematically. Ní Chuilleánáin's treatment of memory is therefore closely linked to the specificity of individual lives as a conduit for the larger patterns of history.

This dimension is present from the poet's earliest work. *The Second Voyage*, published first in 1977, begins and ends with poems of private space: texts that conjure imaginative and intellectual processes through built structures. 'The Lady's Tower' unites water and sky: while the grey wall 'slices downward and meets / A sliding flooded stream', the thatch 'Converses with spread sky, / Heronries' (SV 11), and it is from the elevated bedroom that the imaginative transformation of the entire tower is realized. The final poem, 'A Gentleman's Bedroom', returns to the image of the 'high windowpane' as one that gives a vantage point over the surrounding scene. Yet this room is empty and its objects suggest the detached character of its sometime occupant; the large bed is matched by the masculine paraphernalia of scholarship – the 'blue volumes shelved at hand', the fountain pen and cigar box (SV 68).

This exploration of male and female experiences through differentiated spaces is intensified in *The Magdalene Sermon* (1989), a collection that marked a transition towards greater integration of personal and historical material. 'The Liturgy', placed second in the collection, records the division between the masculine performance of ritual and the as-yet-unrealized actions of the waiting females. Suggestive of the different roles of men and women within the religious life, the poem is ambiguous concerning the relationship between action and motivation. The man seems attracted by a life of words, planning to study 'the epigrams incised / On millennial plaques', yet he is marked out by the 'sacred metal' he carries and drawn into ceremonial acts. The obscurity of the ritual and its context is heightened by the use of direct statements throughout the poem: 'He has been invited ... / He stands ... / They are waiting ...' (MS 10). The clutter of the boat and the energy of the natural scene is set against the emptiness of the house in which the women remain, enclosed yet not quite shut away: 'They hear the hinges of the big door closing, / They know the length of the ceremony, they know / They have just forty minutes' (MS 10). Here the power of 'habit memory' – the

memory enacted through ritual and observance – is challenged by the intentions of the women, intentions that are still unknown to the reader at the close of the poem.<sup>17</sup>

‘MacMoransbridge’, from the same collection, is similarly suspended between past and future. Beginning with the word ‘Although’, it is a text that hinges on apparent contradictions. The sisters who stay on in the house after the death of their brother leave his will unopened, so that ‘his posthumous plan of slights and surprises’ – with all its alliterative neatness – is never enacted (*MS* 19). Written texts have no agency here: the dead man’s will remains in the drawer and his ‘diaries and letters [are] posted abroad’ (*MS* 19). A later poem, ‘The Secret’, will invoke similar documentary evidence – the books, the ‘signatures on slips of ravelled paper’ (*BS* 42) – to suggest a process of collective forgetting: ‘Instead of burning the book or getting its value / They hid it and were silent, even at home, / So that the history of that lost year / Remained for each one her own delusion’ (*BS* 42). Here both written and spoken words remain undisclosed, so that even within the confines of the family the secret is preserved. Yet the memory that kept these women isolated must in the end be superseded by action; by the selling of their land and even their bodily resources. Likewise, in ‘MacMoransbridge’, the house resounds with the activities of the women: their constant movement, the cooking, washing and reckoning of household accounts. Ironically, it is their preservation of the markers of their brother’s life – his dropped dressing gown and extinguished fire – that thwart his ability to wield power after death. The everyday objects he intended for sale are still being used with pleasure by the women themselves, while the adornments left to them remain hidden:

The tarnished silver teapot, to be sold  
 And the money given to a niece for her music-lessons,  
 Is polished and used on Sundays. The rings and pendants  
 Devised by name to each dear sister are still  
 Tucked between silk scarves in his wardrobe, where he found  
 And hid them again, the day they buried his grandmother.  
(*MS* 19)

Ní Chuilleanáin’s poems are filled with such objects – personal and domestic items that act as interpretative clues, not only for the reader, but also for the characters within these texts. As well as playing an important role in the creation of historical and cultural context, the materiality of these texts speaks of the transmission of memories through objects themselves: ‘As physical materials, artefacts provide an authentic

link to the past and as such can be reexperienced'.<sup>18</sup> Their prominence in these poems reminds us that texts themselves are artefacts to which the reader can return to reiterate and renew meaning. Throughout the work, written materials – letters, documents and books – are mixed with other household and personal belongings in ways that emphasize their continuous use and their significant presence in the poems. In 'Consolation', the wife of a dead man retrieves his personal effects, yet these tell an ambiguous story of his life: the 'codes, / Lists, cards, his multiplied signature' are suggestive of subterfuge or even espionage, and the cause of his death uncertain. The repetition of the transgressive verb 'to rifle' reinforces the apparent personal attack that the poem records yet, in spite of this impression, 'It seems little was taken' (*MS* 30). The ambiguity of this interpretation is increased by the 'repeated story' of the man's preparedness for death, a version that gains little imaginative purchase within the poem itself. Yet this serves only to emphasize the untrustworthy nature even of shared narratives and the impossibility of knowing anything with certainty. Just as the woman struggles to understand the exact circumstances of her husband's death, neither can he himself recall in detail the incident he experienced. The shifts in the poem between hospital basement and alleyway, as well as between omniscient perspectives and direct speech, suggest the limitations of memory: though its images are vivid (the man recalls seeing a 'sliver of an arch' and 'one trickling thread'), the act of remembrance is incomplete. The severance that the poem explores is thus both spatial and temporal and has a disturbing effect on the listening wife within the poem, as well as on the reader.

Though past and present often coexist in Ní Chuilleanáin's texts, there are many poems in which the relationship between these states becomes the particular focus of scrutiny. 'The Informant' again begins with an object – it describes a photograph 'Of the old woman at her kitchen table / With a window beyond (fuchsias, a henhouse, the sea)' (*MS* 36). The document of the past contains both these unspecific details and the written record of 'her name and age, her late husband's occupation'; in this it draws attention to the relationship between the general and the particular, and the levels of meaning that can be drawn from these details. A young man is listening to a recording of the woman recalling folk beliefs, but attempts to fix the past prove fraught with difficulty: the tape-recorder breaks down, 'the machine, / Gone haywire, a tearing, an electric / Tempest. Then a stitch of silence. / Something has been lost' (*MS* 36). Our mediation of the past can be destructive, resulting not in

increased understanding but in a loss of meaning. As Borbála Faragó remarks, “‘The Informant’ seems to resist interpretation which is wedded to communicative action. We cannot expose or recover what “actually happens” in this poem.’<sup>19</sup> Here a gap opens between the mysterious accounts of the supernatural realm and the reasoned questions that provoke and limit them, especially at the close of the poem where a twist of humour at once makes the uncanny experience more normal and more extraordinary for listener and reader alike:

*You find this more strange than the yearly miracle  
Of the loaf turning into a child?  
Well, that’s natural, she says,  
I often baked the bread for that myself.*

(MS 37)

Here the individual is the repository of meaning, which cannot be transferred to any other medium with ease, so that attempts to bypass the human agency are doomed to failure.

This realization of the complex relationship between the experience of the woman and the way in which the interviewer can access and present this information compels the reader to contemplate how the experience of the single individual, the poet herself, enters and shapes the work. Biographical readings of poetry by women can overdetermine meaning, but the role of the poet’s individual perspective in selecting and synthesizing material remains important. In particular, Ní Chuilleanáin’s own comments on this poem problematize decontextualized readings:

In ‘The Informant’ I was actually writing about – which I’ve never done, and I don’t usually identify with – a particular death in the north, the deaths of the soldiers who were dragged out of a car at a funeral and shot ... It seemed particularly awful ... I was writing again about ways of speaking about these things.<sup>20</sup>

This oblique perspective on an event noted for its horrific visibility is significant. Yet, like Paula Meehan, Ní Chuilleanáin is concerned with the difficulties of speaking about traumatic events, about the tenuous relationship between language and memory. Just as the traumatized subject does not directly remember the events, but exhibits the memory as sensation, so the details of the killing are displaced for the poet into an exploration of the difficulties of bearing witness to experience. This displacement is characteristic of Ní Chuilleanáin’s work. Though she rarely deals explicitly with the narrative of modern Irish history, its events can be foundational to her texts; the apparently unbreakable

chain of violence alluded to here reveals connections between past and present that demand interrogation. Her poetic practice draws attention to this necessary transition and to the important role of the individual perspective on ethical questions. 'Can I be the only one alive / Able to remember those times?' asks the speaker in the later poem 'A Witness' (*BS* 43), yet, in spite of the desire for silence, the hope that 'others' will bear the burden of memory and speech, it is the individual experience that will shape our understanding of the poetic world and make the search for objective meaning ultimately futile.

**The Book of Revelation:  
Poem as Reliquary in *The Brazen Serpent***

While 'The Informant' obliquely addresses the role of individual memory in mediating traumatic group events, other poems by Ní Chuilleánáin explore the intersection of private experience and cultural memory in more historically distant but no less resonant contexts. A poem such as 'Saint Margaret of Cortona' plays with the links between the past and language, here using the biography of the Italian saint – and her connection to Ireland as the patroness of one of Dublin's lock hospitals – as a means to explore the imaginative challenges presented by history.<sup>21</sup> The poem begins with the creation of cultural memory; the priest tells the early story of the sanctified woman, drawing attention to the importance of the name as a signifier of identity: '*She had become*, the preacher hollows his voice, / A name not to be spoken, the answer / To the witty man's loose riddle' (*BS* 24). Attention is drawn to the mouth and its imagery: the hollowed voice, the jaws, her teeth. These last physical signifiers, the slowest to decay, remain present to the congregation as a relic of the saint. Just as her life story is subject to omissions and embellishments, so the fragments of her physical body are concealed by ornamentation:

Under the flourishing canopy  
Where trios of angels mime the last trombone,  
Behind the silver commas of the shrine,  
In the mine of the altar her teeth listen and smile.

(*BS* 24).

By contrast, the words used to describe this woman are omnipresent, transformed into living entities with agency of their own: 'The names flew and multiplied; she turned / her back but the names clustered and hung' (*BS* 24). Two specific names appear clearly: that of the

saint herself, which is the title of the poem, and the italicized word *'whore'* – unspoken yet visible in the text of the poem. The trauma of memory persists here, as past violence continues to haunt the saint: 'the bloody scene: the wounds / In the body of her child's father / Tumbled in a ditch' (BS 24). This is one of two significant deaths in the poem: and the other is that of the saint herself, which does not mark the beginning of change and decay but instead a refutation of it. Language threatens to be the source of damnation, yet it is also at the root of redemption – the names clustering at her shoulder bones resemble angel's wings. The poem 'contains' the history of the saint but only partially reveals it. The tension this creates heightens the poet's exploration of how verbal and visual metaphors function to interpret the past without fully disclosing it.

'The Real Thing', also from *The Brazen Serpent*, again links Ní Chuilleanáin's representation of the female with questions of revelation. The material world once more plays an important role in the interpretative scheme but here – and in many of her poems of religious life – it has acquired the specific power of metaphor, and with it a greater weight of meaning. Within this poem the relic is a symbol of religious significance – and thus a symbol of symbolism itself – as well as being constitutive of new poetic meaning:

True stories wind and hang like this  
 Shuddering loop wreathed on a lapis lazuli  
 Frame. She says, this is the real thing.  
 She veils it again and locks up.

(BS 16)

Objects that express religious truths are enclosed to ensure their integrity but this concealment keeps them at a distance from the human subjects who would benefit from the revelation. Likewise, poetic meaning may be obscured by the materiality of the text and its particular mode of transmission. In both cases, the significance passes to the object itself rather than to its underlying meaning; it is the presence of this object that ensures the continuity of religious or literary tradition. Sister Custos – her name means guardian – is an apparently unimportant figure, yet she is the living channel between past and present meaning. In the course of the poem she is transformed from a victim of circumstance, unable to liberate herself from the constraints of her existence, to a speaking subject;<sup>22</sup> as Ní Chuilleanáin herself puts it, 'this woman, her life is not really all that great, and she is looking after a fragment, but it is real'.<sup>23</sup> The poem draws more lasting attention to what is hidden than

to what is revealed, suggesting that the 'real' is in fact what is intangible, what cannot be expressed in language. In this way, shared beliefs about the past are more smoothly disseminated than the perspective of the individual. The bones of the saints are venerated at the expense of the body of the living nun, whose experience is unrecorded and whose story remains untold:

Her history is a blank sheet,  
 Her vows a folded paper locked like a well.  
 The torn end of the serpent  
 Tilts the lace edge of the veil.  
 The real thing, the one free foot kicking  
 Under the white sheet of history.

(BS 16)

To suggest that 'the real thing' is in fact the nun herself, involves an acknowledgement of the importance of this woman's history, and a movement away from a version of the past that venerates its significant objects while leaving narratives of the marginal life untouched. Yet the seclusion of some of these lives makes the revelation sensitive – a breaching of private life intentionally chosen. Ní Chuilleánáin's oblique style indicates the delicate balance between the visible and the invisible in the material of her poems, and reminds us of its ethical implications.

For Ní Chuilleánáin, all forms of memory are relational, a characteristic highlighted by the spatial construction of temporal interactions in her poetry. The past is often examined through a heightened attention to place and, in particular, as Irene Gilsean Nordin has pointed out, to the relationship between interior and exterior spaces. This relationship provides an apt metaphor for the larger dynamics of private and public that shape Ní Chuilleánáin's deployment of memory in her work. Her marked interest in the role of women in religious life leads her to explore the relationship between the individual nun and her community by means of spatial constructs. 'The Architectural Metaphor' uses a religious building to highlight the arrangement of meaning and, in particular, to draw attention to the ways in which the worlds of the body and the spirit can overlap. Eamon Grennan has commented on the importance of architectural references in Ní Chuilleánáin's work and in this thematic context claims that 'the palpable force and solid presence of architecture itself, so reassuringly there, can stand as some form of endorsement for this intersection (and therefore continuum) between these separated worlds'.<sup>24</sup> The title of this poem draws attention to the deliberate play of meaning: the

partly ruined convent is the place from which the layers of human relationship unfold. Its quiet enclosure is ruptured thus:

Now light scatters, a door opens, laughter breaks in,  
A young girl barefoot, a man pushing her  
Backwards against the hatch –

It flies up suddenly –  
There lies the foundress, pale  
In her funeral sheets, her face turned west

Searching for the rose-window. It shows her  
What she never saw from any angle but this:

(*BS 14*)

The sudden intrusion with its sexual energy gives way with equal suddenness to the body of the nun: movement turns to stasis, life becomes death and a new angle of view – this time on the past. Revelation is powerful, but here it occurs when everyday life beyond the convent walls is made manifest, rather than with the appearance of a spiritual vision. This reversal brings a renewed acknowledgment of the distance that religious life imposes on its adherents: ‘Help is at hand / Though out of reach’ (*BS 15*). ‘The Architectural Metaphor’ is a poem full of thresholds of experience and understanding and these occur at several levels: the speaker who is hearing the history of the convent explained; the young barefoot girl in a moment of sexual anticipation; the foundress seeing her past self; the reader absorbing all of these moments. The use of tercets emphasizes the unexpected nature of the poem’s semantic progression; its uneven line lengths, syntactical digressions, shifting consonantal patterns all contribute to this effect. These thresholds of meaning are imitated also in the imagery of the poem – the changing border near which the convent was built; the wall behind which the radio whispers; the opening door admitting the young lovers; the hatch which flies up disclosing the foundress and the rose window to which her head is turned. The sheer proliferation, and permeability, of these divisions stands in marked contrast to the locked reliquaries and bricked up windows of ‘The Real Thing’. Here past and present cannot be definitively separated; memory becomes experience, rather than the other way around.

### Spaces of Mourning in *The Brazen Serpent*

Though *The Brazen Serpent*, published in 1994, features many poems in which history is the focus of attention, it is also a volume that is illuminated by events in the poet's own life, in particular by the deaths of her mother and sister. As well as including some poems that address these experiences directly, the collection as a whole considers the difficulties inherent in representing grief; how what cannot be 'spoken' may yet be expressed in meaningful ways. Here Ní Chuilleánáin traverses these difficult personal memories with particular care and subtlety, with such subtlety in fact that without some explanatory comments it would be difficult to determine the exact emotional focus of some of these poems. Here love is expressed in understated ways, as though in support of Julia Kristeva's assertion that the language of love is an allusive one.<sup>25</sup> Kristeva also suggests that feelings of love are akin to those of fear: 'fear of crossing and desire to cross the boundaries of the self'.<sup>26</sup> In this way, we begin to understand the constructed boundaries depicted elsewhere in the book – its containment of human actions and artefacts – as part of a larger investigation of emotional restraint. Ní Chuilleánáin's explorations of subjectivity deepen at this stage in her creative life, emphasizing the importance of private memory as a shaping force on her poetics.

The structure of *The Brazen Serpent* is important in drawing attention to this dynamic: it begins with the section 'Two Poems', dated 1994, before continuing with 'Poems 1989–1993', yet the opening works, though presented separately, are in many ways integrated into the prevailing concerns of the book as a whole. One of these concerns is the keeping of secrets, which Ní Chuilleánáin sees as a means to self-expression. 'Passing Over in Silence' accentuates this aspect – the woman witnesses an event of violence and abjection yet does not disclose it: 'She never told what she saw in the wood'; 'She kept the secret of the woman lying in darkness'; 'She held her peace about the man who waited' (*BS* 23). Though the poem is set within a natural landscape, it is one of containment and obscurity and these qualities are expressive of what cannot otherwise be stated in the poem. For this memory to remain private affords it an oblique power. It is unclear whether it is the trauma of the event that prevents the woman from articulating it – to describe it would force her to relive it – or whether the scene has more power for her because it remains unshared.<sup>27</sup> The discovery that the poem concerns the death of the poet's sister from a brain tumour

which is the 'hooked foot' here, at once clarifies some of its meaning and complicates the act of representation, since the explanation undermines the poem's putative silence by speaking itself and giving us glimpses of the unexplained horror. The second stanza enters a different, yet similarly enigmatic space:

*I went into the alehouse and called for a drink,  
The girl behind the bar could not speak for tears,  
The drops of beer flowed down the sides of the glass;  
She wept to think of the pierced head,  
The tears our Saviour shed.*

(BS 23)<sup>28</sup>

The idea of atonement – that of Christ for our sins and of the man for his crime – is matched by the poet's desire that grief should atone for the act of speaking the unspeakable here. Yet the grief is displaced from the woman, who is a witness to suffering, to another woman inexplicably bearing the signs of distress. The girl's grief is not only for the bodily suffering of Christ, but for his consciousness of suffering – for the emotional distress that accompanies the physical pain, making his pierced *head* significant. In this way, empathy is addressed conversely through emotional distance, and specifically through the power of imaginative language both to express, and to reflect upon, the relationship between feeling and sensation. The folktale mode offers a form of emotional displacement, allowing the text to carry the weight of personal feeling precisely because of its impersonality. These textual shifts are important to Ní Chuilleanáin in other ways too: the text resembles a sonnet yet resists the kind of closure associated with this form, both in structure (it is one line short) and in meaning (the links between the first eight lines and the remaining five are difficult to clarify without explanation). The idea that fixed form is a way of containing poetic meaning – that is, of providing an apt vehicle for meaning as well as a technique for limiting its interpretation – comes under scrutiny here. It is by overturning expectations of how forms may be used or how apparently disparate ideas may be linked that Ní Chuilleanáin both problematizes continuities in her own work and questions the notion of fixed interpretative strategies.

At least three other poems in *The Brazen Serpent* are directly concerned with processes of illness and grieving. 'That Summer', 'The Pastoral Life' and 'A Hand, A Wood' explore the lived and the remembered life as well as the act of mourning – the shared, yet individual responses of family members to the loss. Ní Chuilleanáin comments:

'A Hand, A Wood' is factual, about the physical absence of Máire from the house in Palmer's Green, the sense that every time one washed, one was washing away something of her, and every time one used up something from a jar she had labeled. The second half was written in Italy after her death and the scattering of her ashes in a little wood on our land beside our Italian house.<sup>29</sup>

'A Hand, A Wood' is thus a poem in two parts: it explores first how body and then place bear the imprints of the lost woman: 'I am prising you from under my nails' and 'the sparse / Ashes are lodged under the trees in the wood' (*BS* 46). In this way, as Mary O'Malley has shown so powerfully, both the human body and the natural landscape become repositories of the past. Everyday life is resumed reluctantly, but while the living body continues its routines, objects express the power of memory: the sister's handwriting and diary entries remain, even in the face of passing time. This disjunction is itself a painful one – it is the continuing experience of living that heightens the pain: 'I am wearing your shape / Like a light shirt of flame' where the word 'light' both lessens the violence of the sensation yet also threatens to make this pain more visible. Memory, then, can be both elided and intensified by the immediacy of experience.

Set alongside the loss of Ní Chuilleánáin's sister is that of her mother, which occurred four years later. This further emphasizes the importance of relationships among women and calls attention to the role of the passage of time in determining the shape of the book. The first of the two opening poems is 'Fireman's Lift', which is individually dated 'Parma 1963 – Dublin 1994', again an explicit acknowledgement of the intersection of past and present that occurs in this volume. Written after the death of her mother, the poem is set in Parma cathedral and explores the maternal not just through its representation in Italian painting but by depicting an experience shared between mother and daughter, the experience of looking at, and responding to, a work of art. Once again, the built environment preserves and frames the meaningful object, offering ways to establish perspectives on the created past. This kind of layered meaning is at the core of Ní Chuilleánáin's work: the past is not merely known or remembered, but re-experienced and re-contextualized by the speaking voice in the poem as well as by its readers:

I was standing beside you looking up  
 Through the big tree of the cupola  
 Where the church splits wide open to admit  
 Celestial choirs, the fall-out of brightness.

The Virgin was spiralling to heaven,  
 Hauled up in stages. Past mist and shining,  
 Teams of angelic arms were heaving,  
 Supporting, crowding her, and we stepped

Back, as the painter longed to  
 While his arm swept in the large strokes.  
 We saw the work entire

(BS, 10)

One of the most significant aspects of *The Brazen Serpent* is highlighted from the opening line of this poem: it is the emphasis on angle-of-view that draws attention to the spaces of memory and makes all acts of interpretation conditional. It is especially true in this case, as the poet seeks to recapture the occasion when she and her mother visited the Duomo in Parma and experienced first-hand Correggio's *Assumption of the Virgin*, which is among the most remarkable of Italy's artistic achievements. The art object is an important presence in Ní Chuilleanáin's work and a means by which she draws together visual influences from a range of periods and cultures in her poetry. She uses these to explore the act of looking itself and to examine the ways in which knowledge is both communicated and disrupted by this framework. This emphasis on the visual also demands that the reader should consider the spatial as well as the sequential construction of meaning and memory, scrutinize the poems for the pattern of interpretation rather than expect a logical progression towards resolution. Here her mother's closeness is recalled, but in the act of recollection the fact that her death has also made her infinitely distant is finally inescapable. Intimacy and remoteness are both present in this poem and affect the act of reading in particular ways. The observer here is the poet, but also crucially the reader, since we must assume her position first, as part of the act of reading. The poet subtly affirms this in the distinction she draws between the painter, struggling to articulate his vision while able only to see a portion of that act of creation, and she and her mother who 'saw the work entire' (BS 10).

The painting depicts a group of saints and angels that merge into a sea of faces and limbs, lifting the Virgin towards Christ in heaven. It is a work of art that draws attention to the human body and its relationship to artistic space. The painting is viewed somewhat humorously by the poet, who later described her perspective as akin to looking up the Virgin's skirts.<sup>30</sup> Commenting on her writing of the poem, Ní Chuilleanáin says, 'I could only concentrate on one aspect, the way it shows bodily effort and the body's weight.'<sup>31</sup> Here the merging of art and

architecture is vital to the poet's purpose, as the Virgin's body is part of the church's own structure – 'The back making itself a roof / The legs a bridge, the hands / A crane and a cradle' – as well as an important part of the institution's doctrine. Dillon Johnston comments that 'the painting could be said to reflect and celebrate the female body' in elevating it at the expense of a rather childlike Christ.<sup>32</sup> In doing so, it also advances the feminine side of Catholicism at the same time as it draws attention to the complexity of the relationship between the Virgin Mother and her son. As Guinn Batten has noted, bodily experience plays an important role in the function of personal memory for Ní Chuilleánáin:

Insofar as we may find, in her poems of grief for her mother, sister, and father, the balm of sweet odours surviving the lettered slab, they also enact, or engage, a bodily labour – the neck wrenched by the effort of following the body, heaved by nurses out of the room, legs and wrists cramped by the slow toil of carrying water for a dying mother from the end of the world.<sup>33</sup>

This particularity plays an important role in the merging of past and present in the poet's work, yet the sensory impact of memory does more than reveal the body as an essential conduit to past experience. It also bridges the imaginative gap between contemporary and historical representation, allowing the poet to interweave her scholarly interests in the Renaissance world with the cultural landscape of modern Ireland. This nexus of materials emphasizes the interwoven nature of the processes of remembrance and leads to a treatment of the past layered with discrete interpretative acts. By imagining *The Brazen Serpent* as a space where she actively constructs distinct and overlapping perspectives on the past, the poet reveals her increasing use of the book not just as a gathering of work but as a dynamic association of ideas and practices, offering new ways of understanding the relationship between personal and shared histories.

### Other Rooms:

#### Listening and Reading in *The Girl Who Married a Reindeer*

The interrelationship among texts has become increasingly important in Ní Chuilleánáin's work and certain poems from *The Girl Who Married the Reindeer*, though not constituting an explicit sequence, are connected through image and reference. These subtle links, threaded throughout the volume, emphasize the processes of creative return that pairings or groups of poems initiate. The volume picks up the religious resonances of *The Brazen Serpent*, with a particular emphasis on the celebration of feast days and on the performative dimension of church practices. Drawing on

earlier poems, such as 'A Midwinter Prayer' (*SV* 45–7) and 'The Liturgy' (*MS* 10), these works emphasize the power of spoken language and music in spiritual and aesthetic communication. 'The Chestnut Choir' is one poem that explores this form of expression in ways that highlight the relationship between the individual listener and the collective purpose of the performers. This relationship is first broached in the preceding poem, 'Sunday', where the speaker's intention to hear to the choir is expressed. Here a spiritual experience is privileged over social obligation, but the journey to the mountain convent marks a return to an uncertain past – though the speaker has made this journey before, she knows she will not be remembered. The process of recollection is one-sided; it is only of significance to the individual. The singular perspective remains strong in 'The Chestnut Choir': the woman breaks her journey by stopping in a bar where she encounters a small girl, 'crouched / Staring into the wood stove's flaming centre' (*GMR* 14). Female attraction to spaces of warmth and light, first the bar and within it the wood stove, again indicates the importance of containment in the quest for revelation. The woman's entry into the chapel and into 'the box pew at the back' (*GMR* 14) indicates another kind of enclosure, in which the flames witnessed earlier are realized again in musical form. The singing resonates through the stone of the wall, entering the woman's body as she leans against it and uniting her experience of the sensory world with her search for transcendence. In the silence the candle flames carry the motif of fire that links secular and religious spaces, reminding the woman that she is in transition between them. An ambiguous dynamic between singular and collective emerges in this poem: 'She knew / They were still there while she, / The wanderer, was free to be away' (*GMR* 14). At first this seems to evoke the family group of the previous poem, but it applies equally – and perhaps more powerfully – to the choristers themselves. They, like so many of the figures in Ní Chuilleanáin's poems, are rooted to place and community, marking the passage of time through their repeated practices of faith. A similar force that first impelled the woman to travel to hear the choir now prompts her to leave, though the terrain outside is unpeopled and even threatening. This reinforcement of the singular perspective suggests that meaning is created by the perceiving self; by that particular encounter with an image or sound that is the catalyst for remembrance and return.

The significance of religious experience that is located in space is confirmed elsewhere in this collection. In 'The Cloister of Bones', entry to the past is again effected through the built environment. The opening

perspective is a view from above: instead of ascending the mountain to a convent chapel, the speaker adopts the vantage point of a bell tower. This perspective allows human and natural environments to be combined: the tops of heads, cobbles, ledges and growing plants, all coincide below. Surveying this dynamic scene, the speaker searches for a cloistered space where devotion and recreation may be pursued in peace:

I am searching for a shape, a den, watching  
 For the cloistering blank of a street wall,  
 A dark reticence of windows  
 Banked over an inner court,  
 Especially rooves, arched and bouncing  
 Naves; a corseted apse,  
 And always, even if the chapel sinks  
 Deep inside, lit from a common well,  
 I search for hints of doors inside doors,  
 A built-in waiting about  
 Of thresholds and washed floors,  
 An avid presence demanding flowers and hush.

(GMR 16)

This place can be detected by reading the shapes of the buildings, the particular configurations of window and door. The space will be one concealed from the street, set between or below buildings, inhabiting another dimension – a meaning not readily available to the passer-by. This other dimension is also a space of cultural memory, where now vanished religious communities once flourished. The speaker's search for 'doors within doors' alerts us to the similarity of the places of prayer and those of poetry, which too require practised engagement and painstaking investigation. The sense of enclosure here is confirmed in echoic effects and subtle mirroring of words: 'blank' becoming 'banked', 'cloistering' moving to 'corseted'. Modernization yields subtle changes in form and language that take place within the arc of Ní Chuilleanáin's own poetic development. The architectural details of wall and court, nave and apse, return us to earlier texts yet also project the future discovery of a place where the experience of prayerful reflection as well as meaningful community can be attained. In the preceding poem, the significance of the act of building itself has been invoked. 'The Angel in the Stone' gives voice to 'the stone the builders passed over', which is now 'trampled in the causeway' where it registers the extremes of the elements. This continuing attention to the materiality of stone is an important part of the poet's investigation of how structures

are formed and made. All aspects of this material culture of family and community are subject to her investigation and constitute an enduring aspect of her art.

As these pairings of poems have shown, this collection marks a preoccupation with the relationship between secular and religious, as well as between domestic and institutional, settings. The volume also contemplates the dynamics of family and community in new ways. The poem 'In Her Other Ireland' makes its location explicit in its title and in addition gives a specifically female viewpoint from which to interpret the material of the poem. Yet even this level of certainty is problematized by the notion of 'otherness', paired as this poem is with the preceding text – 'In Her Other House' – which is printed on the opposite page. Though Ní Chuilleanáin uses personal material obliquely in her latest poetry, links between private and public concerns afford her opportunities to explore important issues through the shaping of individual perspectives. 'In Her Other House' invokes a return to the past with which the representation of the house often engages. Rather than emphasizing the passage of time, however, the poem suggests the imaginative simultaneity of past and present. To return endlessly to the past is not to render it explicable but to alert the reader to the inseparable nature of moments of intense experience. As Gaston Bachelard argues, 'we are unable to relive duration that has been destroyed [...] memories are motionless, and the more securely they are fixed in space, the sounder they are'.<sup>34</sup> 'In Her Other House' invokes this straight away; the place is 'other' from the start. The 'her' of the title becomes 'my' and the focus of the poem shifts to a dreamlike memory. The otherness in this poem seems to interrogate the very notion of home but it may indicate the immediacy of the lived and imagined past, where the vision is selective, even deliberately limited, and 'the table is spread and cleared by invisible hands' (*GMR* 20). In this home, books are the distinctive feature and supersede the domestic detail, become the nurturing centre of the household together with the fire and the meal. The imaginative power of the home is a textual one, so that the role of language in reclaiming this space is crucial: it is a house of texts, where past, present and future are there to be read as much as to be experienced. To be at home, then, is to be among written words. The poem's final lines are especially significant in this regard: 'In this house there is no need to wait for the verdict of history / And each page lies open to the version of every other' (*GMR* 20). Here chronological time is disturbed by the presence of the dead. These books seem to refute the logical progression of meaning in favour of freer interpretation, and in

doing so suggest that acts of poetic interpretation need to remain alive to the dynamic range of influences that shape the writing process.

Throughout *The Girl Who Married a Reindeer*, Ní Chuilleánáin reflects on the ways in which language gives form to the past. So it is significant that the main body of poems in this collection ends with 'Gloss / Clós / Glas', a work that explores the unearthing of word-lore and the act of translation itself, as though to prepare the way for the poems that follow in the 'Coda'. Memory, at once powerful and unstable, often finds expression through the speech act and many of Ní Chuilleánáin's poems have a clear affinity with oral narrative: poems often begin by telling stories (or at least alluding to them); they mention anecdotes and events, both past and present. Yet how these elements can be framed has always been a matter for debate. Paul Connerton's work sheds light on this problem:

Oral histories seek to give voice to what would otherwise remain voiceless even if not traceless, by reconstituting the life histories of individuals. But to think the concept of a life history is already to come to the matter with a mental set, and so it sometimes happens that the line of questioning adopted by oral historians impedes the realization of their intentions.<sup>35</sup>

So it is, that in the midst of these speech acts, Ní Chuilleánáin's poems often seem to escape to another realm, one beyond the narrative context we first encountered. Eamon Grennan argues that she is 'often inclined to [...] extend the narrative into a species of reflection, which can compound what is already difficult. For it is not a question of the narrative and the reflection existing in quite separate containers. The borders between them are laid over one another, so no division is seen'.<sup>36</sup> This complexity is an important dimension of Ní Chuilleánáin's interrogation of the transmission of history and, in particular, of her resistance to the idea of fixed forms of identity. Both her treatment of voice and of the environment in which forms of understanding emerge reveal the capacity of the poem to destabilize the act of reclamation itself.

'Gloss / Clós / Glas' explores the relationship between the sound and meaning of words so that the text itself seems conjured from the scholar's act of linguistic investigation. The first hint of this occurs when, bearing his stack of books, he 'walks across the room as stiff as a shelf'; his own body becomes the books' repository, a man-made object rather than a living organism. The scholar is charged with finding two words of opposite meaning yet almost identical; an idea suggestive of the way different semantic pathways open in a poem. 'Clós', is suggestive of both the English 'close' and the Gaelic word for enclosure. Already the

networks of linguistic and cultural connection between Ireland, England and Scotland are hinted at and these are extended in the idea of the musical note translated from one instrument to another. There follows a series of images associated with fiddle-playing – the wood; the finger depressing a string; the bow drawn across the strings – images expressing proximity but also close to one another in the texture of the poem. The sheer mobility and contingent nature of language emerge clearly here, through its zealous scholar and through its chosen imagery and the flexibility of its lines and thought-pattern:

The rags of language are streaming like weathervanes,  
 Like weeds in water they turn with the tide, as he turns  
 Back and forth the looking-glass pages, the words  
 Pouring and slippery like the silk thighs of the tomcat  
 Pouring through the slit in the fence, lightly,

(*GMR*, 46)

Though described as ‘rags’ and ‘weeds’ – words that can themselves be linked through the image of the garment – language reveals the movement of powerful forces here. The print of dictionaries, sufficiently small to require a magnifying glass, is also reflective of the world itself, even the familiar image of the cat sliding through a gap in the fence. ‘Pouring’ is a word tried twice, as though to test and confirm its precision of expression before the poem turns to conclude on the double-meaning of the last of its terms – ‘glas’ – which can be translated as both lock and green: ‘Who is that he can hear panting on the other side? / The steam of her breath is turning the locked lock green’ (*GMR* 46). The word for ‘his’ and for ‘hers’ is the same in the Irish language, so that the barrier of meaning is overcome by the exhalation, releasing the scholar from his labours and the poem into near-silence. That the poem itself is formed not from new language that may yield familiar interpretation but rather from a point of linguistic convergence that offers extended meanings expresses the subtlety of Ní Chuilleanáin’s art.

### Poems at the World’s Edge: Memory as Vertigo

The function of memory takes on new significance in the formation of the poem sequence, where the temporality of reading becomes an important dimension of interpretation. Memory also has a special purpose in cases where poems are reprinted in different locations, creating new networks of meaning in each situation. Two poems from Ní Chuilleanáin’s most recent volume, *The Sun-Fish* (2009) also appear

as part of the sequence 'Vertigo', published in *Voices at the World's Edge: Irish Poets on Skellig Michael*, a volume edited by Paddy Bushe in 2010.<sup>37</sup> The word 'Vertigo' itself invokes movement – significantly, a sensation of movement – and a unifying element across the sequence is the motion of the tides, which is both endlessly repeated and constantly changing. This tidal rhythm draws attention to the pattern of repetition and change in Ní Chuilleánáin's work as a whole, in which related memories find new forms and meanings. Here the poems help to convey at once the significance of particular observations and the duration of the experience with its changing patterns and moods. The sequence oscillates between moments when the human perspective of the journey is foremost, and those in which nature alone features, reflecting the island's isolation and its history as a monastic settlement. Formally, too, each poem's most striking features are to be found in the relationship between its shifting viewpoints and rhythmical structure. In the opening poem, 'The Litany', the most significant juxtaposition is between the visual and auditory aspect of the environment. Its quiet logic is shaped by the structure of its first stanza:

As every new day waking finds its pitch  
 Selecting a fresh angle, so the sun  
 Hangs down its veils, so the ancient verbs  
 Change their invocation and their mood.

(VWE III)

The 'pitch' of the opening line alerts us to the importance of sound; spatially, too, the poem's alternating stanza lengths reflect the ebb and flow of the sequence's tidal pattern. Though the historical significance of the island is immediately invoked in the reference to 'ancient verbs', we see that these are capable of changing with the passage of time: the 'long gap in the story' is suggestive of the narrative power of human life and history, yet the monks' habitation of the rock was brief in the context of the island's natural history. Thus the slow passage of time is essential to seeing human activity in its true proportion, and though this is an isolated place its relationship to elsewhere is considered. Just as Heaney's 'timeless waves' of Aran come from America, here the wave, receding from Skellig Michael, is 'called back to Brazil'.<sup>38</sup>

The wordless sounds of nature that form the 'litany' in this first poem acquire a more specific 'voice' in the second, but it is one that calls the subject position into question, since it is unclear whether the 'old strong voice' speaks from the historical or the personal past. That the monks should have chosen the most challenging environment for their life of

prayer is expressed through the arrival of the storm in this second poem. Here the force of the waves is recorded in the poem's insistent verbal pattern – reaching and snatching; faltering and returning; slamming and roaring. The doubling of these verbs again reinforces the ebb and flow as well as the fear and compulsion that drove the monks onward, and represents the larger dilemmas of the human state. Yet the voice could equally be that of nature itself, prompting, or uniting with, the spiritual contemplation of the monastic life.

The third poem in the sequence retreats indoors, and its four-line stanzas invoke the quietness and relative order of the shelter, compared with the preceding storm. Yet it is a reflective space in more ways than one – its light and glassy surfaces draw attention to the visual, now that the auditory bombardment has died away. In spite of this, the environment proves not an easy one to read: the glass is iced up, making objects indistinguishable. What is man-made takes on a natural aspect: the boat mimics the anatomy of the fish, the lamp compensates for the darkness of daylight hours, shedding a partial light over the timeless interior. Here the tidal rhythm is applied to language itself; speech retreats into silence, creating a powerful impression of the interiority of language. The mysterious wordless woman, appearing at the close, seems to come from outside the world of the poem. She reminds us of the unexplained figures and situations that appear frequently in Ní Chuilleanáin's work, their stories forming beneath the familiar narratives of history:

As in the five days she lay without a word,  
 Five glasses of milk huddled on a shelf,  
 Congealed, the sun of a winter afternoon  
 Breaking through curtains, piercing the shining whey.

(VWE 113)

The glasses of milk, at once opaque and translucent, are a fitting image with which to contemplate the play of light and revelation. Here they also mark time – the five speechless days of the poem's silent ending

This figure of woman – perhaps the sister whose early death has preoccupied the poet – gives way in the next poem to an evocation of the father, and the adjustment needed occurs for both speaker and reader. The ways in which memory alters human relationships is rendered in the father's fragmented representation here: he becomes the many images of his own experience. Here the relationship between language and the material world is interrogated, as it is in the next poem, 'Outdoors', which begins with a junction, and therefore a choice of direction. Yet

this station – which is both the literal train station and the station of pilgrim experience – has lost its human markers: the name of the place and the time of day are obscured by vegetation. The act of waiting described here, and the uncertainty of progress, unites both the practical and the existential dimensions of the sequence: the island is hard to reach in bad weather, and visitors have to wait onshore for conditions to improve. This poem then evokes the actual condition of waiting, as well as the state of human uncertainty – ‘Nobody thinks we’ll go on our travels again’ (*VWE* 115). However, the final poem – which is also the title poem of the sequence – introduces the pilgrim experience in a vividly observed way. In the poet’s observation of the black-clad woman and her daughters, the human engagement with this island space is fully realized. The challenge of the harsh terrain is suggestive of the difficulty of accommodating the world of objects to the world of process. The woman struggles to take off her shoes and stockings, ‘which she adds to the black bag, already encumbered / With rosary beads tangled in keys, all the stuff / She’s dragged from home’ (*VWE* 116). As the world of commodity becomes superfluous, the time frame of the poem begins to slip, and the past merges with the present. It is fear, rather than desire, that surrounds the idea of revelation at the close: the woman is terrified of heights, ‘but she does look down, and at last sees what is there, / / The dimensions, the naming. Yes. / A broad slick widening, an anachronism, / Ambiguous as a leaf floating where never / A leaf has blown’ (*VWE* 117). What is glimpsed is the void, where the religious imagery of death and resurrection gives way to a strange, and estranging, ambiguity. What is experienced is an emerging realization, a thing misplaced, appearing where it should not be. Yet this is both the physical edge of the island and the edge of human consciousness, ‘where everything pours away’. In this sequence, Ní Chuilleánáin explores the potential of the island experience to situate the past in a philosophically challenging way, deepening our engagement with familiar images and drawing us simultaneously into profound and alienating states.

Ní Chuilleánáin’s body of work represents a varied and challenging engagement with the past and one that confronts important questions about how history is mediated, for both individuals and cultures. Her emphasis on the silences of the past – what history fails to disclose – has both political and aesthetic significance: it signals the concentrated yet resistant form of the poem as an important means to explore the intellectual and emotional processes that the search for meaning necessitates. In this way, Ní Chuilleánáin’s work illuminates

the subject of poetic memory, in the complexity of its figuration of past and present and in its pivotal engagement with the materiality of language and text.

### Notes

- 1 Nicholas Allen notes ‘the collapsed distance between past and present [that] is part of her writing’s enduring difficulty’, “‘Each Page Lies Open to the Version of Every Other’: History in the Poetry of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin’, *Irish University Review* 37.1 (Spring/Summer 2007), pp. 22–35.
- 2 Eamon Grennan, ‘Real Things: The Work of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin’, *Facing the Music: Irish Poetry in the Twentieth Century* (Omaha, NE: Creighton University Press, 1999), p. 283.
- 3 Oona Frawley discusses the ramifications of Bartlett’s work for the Irish context in ‘Towards a Theory of Cultural Memory in an Irish Postcolonial Context’, in Oona Frawley (ed.), *Memory Ireland*, vol. 1, *History and Modernity*, p. 24. See also Frederic Bartlett, *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954 [1932]), p. 52.
- 4 Her father, Cormac Ó Cuilleánáin (1903–1970), was Professor of Irish at University College Cork. Her mother, Eilís Dillon (1920–1994), was from a politically active family during the War of Independence; Dillon later became an acclaimed writer for children.
- 5 Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, ‘Acts and Monuments of an Unelected Nation: The *Cailleach* Writes about the Renaissance’, *Southern Review* 31.3 (1995), p. 571.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 573.
- 7 John R. Gillis: ‘Memory and Identity: The History of a Relationship’, in John R. Gillis (ed.), *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 3.
- 8 Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, trans. Francis J. Ditter and Vida Yazdi Ditter (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1980), p. 106.
- 9 See *ibid.*, pp. 85–6.
- 10 Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, ‘Introduction’, *Irish Women: Image and Achievement* (Dublin: Arlen House, 1985), pp. 1–12.
- 11 Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, ‘Nuns: A Subject for a Woman Writer’, in Patricia Boyle Haberstroh (ed.), *My Self, My Muse: Irish Women Poets Reflect on Life and Art* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2001), p. 23.
- 12 Patricia Boyle Haberstroh, ‘Interview with Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin’, *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 20.2 (December 1994), p. 72.
- 13 Elsewhere I have developed the relationship between the representation of the house and the exploration of subjectivity. See Lucy Collins, ‘Architectural Metaphors: Representation of the House in the Poetry of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin and Vona Groarke’, in Scott Brewster and Michael Parker (eds), *Irish Literature since 1900: Diverse Voices* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), pp. 142–59.
- 14 Kevin Ray, ‘Interview with Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin’, *Éire-Ireland: A Journal of Irish Studies* 31.1–2 (Spring/Summer 1996), p. 67.
- 15 Patricia Boyle Haberstroh, *The Female Figure in Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin’s Poetry* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2013), p. 39.

- 16 Guinn Batten, 'Boland, McGuckian, Ní Chuilleánáin and the Body of the Nation', in Matthew Campbell (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 186.
- 17 Paul Connerton emphasizes the importance of habit as a means of transmitting collective memory – building in this respect on Henri Bergson's work. Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), loc. 527 [Kindle edition].
- 18 Andrew Jones, *Memory and Material Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 3.
- 19 Borbála Faragó, "'The Informant', Eiléan Ní Chuilleánáin', *Irish University Review* 39.2 (Autumn/Winter 2009), p. 301.
- 20 Ray, 'Interview with Eiléan Ní Chuilleánáin', p. 64. The event that the poet refers to took place in March 1988 when two plain-clothes British Army corporals drove, it seems accidentally, into the midst of an IRA funeral. Three days earlier there had been an attempt to kill IRA members at the funeral of the 'Gibraltar Three', in Milltown Cemetery. Reportedly, members of the crowd mistook the British Army personnel for loyalist gunmen and, fearing a repetition of the earlier incident, dragged them from their car. The initial violence was captured by television cameras at the funeral. The two soldiers were later beaten and killed by Republicans. See Bew and Gillespie, *Northern Ireland: A Chronology of the Troubles*.
- 21 Saint Margaret of Cortona (1247–1297) was an Italian saint whose reckless early life as the mistress of a wealthy man was altered by his violent death. Leaving his home she went to the Franciscan Friars in Cortona and was later admitted to the order. Lawrence Hess, 'St Margaret of Cortona', *The Catholic Encyclopaedia*, vol. 9 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910).
- 22 Irene Gilsenan Nordin, *Reading Eiléan Ní Chuilleánáin: A Contemporary Irish Poet* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2008), pp. 68–70. See also Irene Gilsenan Nordin, "'Betwixt and Between': The Body as Liminal Threshold in the Poetry of Eiléan Ní Chuilleánáin", in Irene Gilsenan Nordin (ed.), *The Body and Desire in Contemporary Irish Poetry* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006), pp. 226–43.
- 23 Patricia Boyle Haberstroh, 'Interview with Eiléan Ní Chuilleánáin', *Irish University Review* 37.1 (Spring/Summer 2007), p. 46.
- 24 Grennan, 'Real Things', p. 285. See also Dillon Johnston, "'Hundred-Pocketed Time": Ní Chuilleánáin's Baroque Spaces' and Patricia Boyle Haberstroh, 'The Architectural Metaphor in the Poetry of Eiléan Ní Chuilleánáin', both in *Irish University Review* 37.1 (Spring/Summer 2007), pp. 53–67; 84–97.
- 25 Julia Kristeva, *In the Beginning Was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), p. 1.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- 27 This uncertainty can be directly connected to the issue of traumatic memory and its somatic effects, yet it also suggests that the power can be derived from a refusal to disclose troubling events. See also 'The Secret' (*BS* 42).
- 28 The poet has elucidated the second stanza of the poem as follows: in a folk tale a man who commits a crime is told the forgiveness is impossible 'unless he can find a woman in a public house that is holier than a nun in a convent. He sees a woman weeping as she pulls a pint of beer and she tells him it is because the drops of beer running down the outside of the glass remind her of the blood of Christ running down his face. So he is forgiven after all.' Eiléan Ní Chuilleánáin, quoted in John

- Kerrigan, 'Hidden Ireland: Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin and Munster Poetry', *Critical Quarterly* 40.4 (Winter 1998), p. 93.
- 29 Quoted in Haberstroh, *The Female Figure in Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's Poetry*, p. 57.
- 30 Introduction to a reading of the poem, Trinity College Dublin, April 1999.
- 31 Ní Chuilleanáin, 'Acts and Monuments of an Unelected Nation', p. 578.
- 32 Dillon Johnston, "'Our Bodies' Eyes and Writing Hands": Secrecy and Sensuality in Ní Chuilleanáin's Baroque Art', in Anthony Bradley and Maryann Gialanella Valiulis (eds), *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Ireland* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), p. 192.
- 33 Guinn Batten, 'The World Not Dead After All': Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's Work of Revival', *Irish University Review* 37.1 (Spring/Summer 2007), p. 11.
- 34 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), p. 9.
- 35 Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), loc. 435 [Kindle edition].
- 36 Grennan, 'Real Things', p. 287.
- 37 Skellig Michael is a rocky island off the west coast of County Kerry. A Christian monastery was founded there between the sixth and the eighth centuries and the island remained in continuous habitation until the twelfth century. It is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. In 2010, Irish poet Paddy Bushe commissioned a dozen other poets to spend a night on Skellig Michael and write about the experience.
- 38 Seamus Heaney, 'Lovers on Aran', *Death of a Naturalist* (London: Faber & Faber, 1966).