

Perceptions of Contemporary Ireland in the Poetry of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin

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Abstract: *Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin (Cork, 1942) has published various collections of poetry and presently holds a solid position among the most distinguished Irish poets. The paper discusses the work of Ní Chuilleanáin aiming at identifying aspects and references of contemporary Ireland in her poems. The main concern of the research is to analyze how Ní Chuilleanáin deals with some thematic elements such as language, identity, history, topographical and domestic space, politics and religion, rendering to the reader a special depiction of contemporary life in Ireland.*

The Irish poet, essayist, translator and editor Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, born in the city of Cork in 1942, attended University College and the National University of Ireland, receiving her Bachelor of Arts in 1962, and her Master of Arts in 1964; next, she attended Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford, and obtained her Bachelor of Literature in 1968. Nowadays, she is Senior Lecturer of English at Trinity College Dublin and member of Aosdána. In 1975, with Macdara Woods, Leland Bardwell and Pearse Hutchinson, she founded the literary review *Cyphers*, which is published up to the present day. Ní Chuilleanáin has written collections of poetry and her awards include the *Irish Times* Poetry Award, the Books Ireland Publishers' Award, the O'Shaughnessy Prize from the Irish-American Cultural Foundation, and the Patrick Kavanagh Prize, among others.

In the list of Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry books are *Acts and Monuments* (1972), *Site of Ambush* (1975), *Cork* (1977), *The Second Voyage* (1977), *The Rose Geranium* (1981), *The Magdalene Sermon* (1989), *The Brazen Serpent* (1994), *The Girl Who Married the Reindeer* (2001), *Selected Poems* (2008) and *The Sun-fish* (2009); all of them were published by The Gallery Press, Dublin, in their first edition, and also republished in the USA and in England. As for her works as a translator, she has translated Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill from Irish, Michele Ranchetti from Italian, and Ileana Melancioiu from Romanian. All these books are remarkable achievements that, in the words of Anne Fogarty, "are testament to an unremitting artistic energy and endeavour and above

all to a singular poetic voice endowed with an exacting integrity and unwavering independence of vision.” (Fogarty viii).

Ní Chuilleanáin’s poetry, as the critical reception points it, may be characterized by indirection and obliqueness, by an elusive or even unemotional style distinguished by the exploration of contrastive viewpoints and “complex indeterminacies”. In the cover of Ní Chuilleanáin is *Selected Poems* (2008), Seamus Heaney Says: “There is something second sighted, as it were, about Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin’s work, by which I don’t mean that she has any prophetic afflatus, more that her poems see things anew, in a rinsed and dreamstruck light. They are at once as plain as an anecdote told on the doorstep and as haunting as a soothsayer’s greetings.” Or, as O’Reilly (2009) states, Ní Chuilleanáin’s poems

[...] do not yield much to superficial scrutiny. There are no grand gestures indicative of anxious intellectual posturing, which is what makes them at once so enigmatic and refreshing. Indeed, it is difficult to discern a temperament behind them without careful probing. (30)

[...] Among the most stimulating aspects of Ní Chuilleanáin’s writing are its fierce interrogative intelligence and its concomitant lack of easy, predictable New Age bromides.(30)

Exploring universal concerns such as aging, identity, religion and death, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin enriches her production with a keen sense of history and the use of mythology and legend. Her intense poetry deeply absorbs the reader, pushing him into “the self-enclosed world of the poems”. Peter Sirr affirms, it is “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.” (457).

From Ní Chuilleanáin’s description of herself as a “Gaelic-speaking female papist whose direct and indirect ancestors, men and women, on both sides, were committed to detaching Ireland from the British Empire” (Ní Chuilleanáin 1995. 579), one may infer some of the most significant themes which naturally resonate in her writings: the interest in language and identity, Catholicism and religious concerns, familial and communal traditions, history and national pride. The analysis of Ní Chuilleanáin’s poetry will identify the above mentioned themes and the way they may – or may not – reflect aspects of contemporary Ireland.

History – Rereading the Past

Well-read in history, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin values the connection between past and present drawing, in several of her poems, parallels between historical events and modern situations. The poet herself comments: “History 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. We read with anger, anger forced through the narrow passages created by minority languages and small audiences” (Ní Chuilleanáin 1995. 571). This quotation reveals that this bond to history is both a private interest of Ní Chuilleanáin and a strong characteristic to be associated with Irish people.¹ This double attachment comes to be an essential key in the understanding of how history appears in Ní Chuilleanáin’s poems: as a thematic element of great strength, apt to suggest substantial revisions of contemporary political, religious and identitarian matters. As Consalvo poses: “For Ní Chuilleanáin, history is not only a journey into the past but also a key to the present: ‘we are inclined to associate certain things with the past as something vanishing, where in fact, one is constantly made aware of the fact that the past does not go away, that it is walking around the place and causing trouble at every moment.’” (17) . In Ní Chuilleanáin’s work past keeps surfacing and, through the guidance of history, can be called to confront the present; as Allen also affirms:

To make a case for history in Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin’s poetry, a case must first be made for the contemporary. The collapsed distance between past and present is part of her writing’s enduring difficulty. It is also a source of its power, the refusal to separate history from the now [...] is symbolic of a determination to rethread the past’s strands [...] In this subtle choreography of past and present, Ní Chuilleanáin sidesteps the arrangement of memory into definite forms, or what we more typically think of as history, that harmony of discordant dates that allows for representable translation between the private and public spheres. As a Renaissance scholar, trained in the trade of manuscripts, alert to the errata of the changing text, Ní Chuilleanáin seems actually aware of the history’s limits. (22)

In many poems written by Ní Chuilleanáin it is possible to identify a continuous interplay between past and present, as seen in the poem “The Real Thing” (2008); its first two stanzas introduce the setting of a convent in the present as contrasting to “miraculous” deeds set in the past:

The Book of Exits, miraculously copied
 Here in this convent by an angel’s hand,
 Stands open on a lectern, grooved
 Like the breasts of a martyred deacon.

The bishop has ordered the windows bricked up on this side
 Facing the fields beyond the city.
 Lit by the glow from the cloister yard at noon
 On Palm Sunday, Sister Custos
 Exposes her major relic, the longest
 Known fragment of the Brazen Serpent. (68)

In an atmosphere of isolation and oppression, reinforced by the bishop who “ordered the windows bricked up”, Sister Custos appears and exposes a precious relic, thus mediating the blurring boundaries between a buried past and the questionable present. The relics Sister Custos guards embody the historical and the physical as well; surrounded by icons of the past, as the shielder of them, Sister Custos becomes the symbolic element who merges remote and present times. Contrasting with the treasures of the past, she is the common or the “real” person placed in the present; with her pronounced simplicity, lack of pomp and singular and exemplary faith, she preserves history and religious dogmas:

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.
On the shelves behind her the treasures are lined.
The Episcopal seal repeats every coil,
Stamped on all closures of each reliquary
Where the labels read: *Bones*
Of Different Saints. Unknown.

Despite the fact that Sister Custos is a sort of victim of circumstances, who is but a silenced voice, her figure “emerges as one who is in a position of power to pass on the relics of history [...]. Even if her own history is unwritten, in the act of caring that she performs in the discharge of her duty, she serves as a liminal link with the past, since it is she who shows the relics and tells the tales.” (Nordin 70). The final stanza deepens the focus on Sister Custos, and the poem ends with the suggestion that she is, in fact, “the real thing”; far from being just a static voice, Sister Custos is the one who generates that discomfort of the “free foot kicking”, reminding us that she, through a life of dedication and faith, works as the true keeper of history:

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.

Commenting on “The Real Thing” in an interview to Patricia B. Haberstroth, Ní Chuilleanáin explains that “[...] what is exciting is reality. Reality is the only thing that cheers us up.” (Fogarty 46). Thus, the past, as revealed by history, is important, but the present time – what is real here and now – is more valuable insofar as it may come to represent an expurgated and positive review of the past.

Another remarkable poem to be analysed here is “Translation” (2008), read in 1993 at the reburial ceremony of the Magdalenes.² The Magdalen story was, as Fintan O’Toole states, “[...] a story of history literally disinterred. It was a haunting image of a history that remains largely unwritten, a history that in being disturbed still has the power to disturb”. (O’Toole 1994. 81). The poem “Translation” starts with the description of the place where the “sinned women” worked and proceeds to a moving account of their bodies in the present:

The soil frayed and sifted evens the score –
There are women here from every county,
Just as there were in the laundry.

[...]
Assist them now, ridges under the veil, shifting,
Searching for their parents, their names,
The edges of words grinding against nature,

In the two final stanzas the silenced women recover their voices:

[...]
Until every pocket in her skull blared with the note –
Allow us now to hear it, sharp as an infant’s cry
While the grass takes root, while the steam rises:

Washed clean of idiom . the baked crust
Of words that made my temporary name.
A parasite that grew in me . that spell
Lifted . I lie in earth sifted to dust.
Let the bunched keys I bore slacken and fall.
I rise and forget . a cloud over my time. (102)

This last stanza, which is peculiarly enigmatic, poses metapoetical hints: the poem manages to translate silence into expression. The last line of “Translation”, “I rise and forget . a cloud over my time” plays with the dubiousness that rises from the possibility of reading “my time” as the remote time when the victims were alive, or the time of contemporary events, since same victims are now resurrected and speaking.

Discussing a shocking fact of a shameful past, “Translation” questions the rights and means the Catholic Church had to punish the natural sins.³ In thematizing a historical fact, the poem, which exhumes the past and re-buries these women, (in a true act of translation, as its title suggests), is somehow seeking justice for the women incarcerated in these institutions. As Ní Chuilleanáin (2001) stated:

Women from orphanages, Magdalene homes, mother-and-baby homes – and their families – are insisting on the stories of these places – their loneliness, hardship, and not infrequent cruelty – being told. The Irish appetite for history, asserts itself again, demanding recognition for events which are supposed to be outside history. As so often in the past thirty or so years, it is clear that the politics of Catholic Ireland are centered on the personal, sexual, and familial and that the live issues of the day spring from the need to acknowledge the past. While nuns figure in the stories that are being told now, they are flanked by others, perhaps the real authority figures: priests, doctors, and policemen. In the background are the politicians and bureaucrats who decide how little would be paid, and when nothing would be paid, for the upkeep of the powerless. (29)

“Translation” dares to approach polemical issues, as religious dogma and morality prevailing over some basic human rights. It is worth to note that the conventional Irish Catholicism, with its traditional liturgical and devotional practices, radically contrasts with the norms of marketplace Celtic Tiger capitalism, seeming even incomprehensible. Thus, in this poem, a “national resurrection” is also at stake; because “Translation” calls our attention to the official and the unofficial histories, as well as to the need of reconciling the ignominious past with the present. In “Translation”, the references to Irish social history are incisive and translate the sense that it would be beneficial to Irish society to remember and try to understand, under religious, sociological and even political terms, the history of all these women confined in these institutions that existed, in an ultimate analysis, to promote society’s moral stability.

In the poems discussed above, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin exposes the darker side of some religious procedures in maintaining institutionalized oppression, questions the so called “official history”, and leads the reader to a revision of it, aiming at illuminating the contemporary moment, hence preventing us from, for example, segregating today’s outcasts. Reflecting on the importance of relics in contrast to real people’s faith, or allowing buried creatures to recover their voices, Eiléan Ni Chuilleanáin aims at the rebuilding of history under different values and perspectives.

Language – Preserving Identity

The scene of contemporary Ireland is marked by many changes that occurred in the nature of Irish society in the last decades, after the impact of industrialization and globalization, the spread of education, and the effects of mass media. They directly affected the notion of national identity; the concept of Irishness had to be reassessed to correspond to the frames and exigencies of the twenty-first century. In this new panorama, language and its connections to the identity of a nation also had to be naturally reconceptualised.

Since the Gaelic Revival and the Irish independence, the revival of the Irish language represented a significant cultural advance. But nowadays, a contemporary

problem in Ireland, which became a serious socio-political issue, is the decline in the number of Gaelic speakers⁴. It is of interest to investigate how Eileán Ní Chuilleánáin, a Gaelic speaker, approaches the question of language and of general communication in her poems.

The intense relationship she has to language comes out immediately from the reading of her biographical data: daughter of Cormac O'Chuilleánáin, a university professor of Irish, and of Eilís Dillon, a novelist who has published more than forty books; sister of the writer and translator Cormac Millar, and married to the poet Macdara Woods, Ní Chuilleánáin teaches languages and literature and is a translator of many languages - all this information evinces that the poet has a profound attachment not only to literary circles, but also knows in depth language matters and their social implications. Quinn confirms:

Language and translation is one of the most important themes of the poetry of Eiléan Ní Chuilleánáin. She knows Irish, Italian, French and Latin; when asked to produce English versions from cribs of poems by a Romanian poet, instead she learned Romanian. Such a depth of courtesy and imaginative involvement is singular in Anglophone culture, where translations by monoglot poets are routinely tolerated. The gesture is also iconic for Ní Chuilleánáin's poetry, which listens hard at the silences of history and other people's lives. (172)

However, the way language helps to establish and preserve identitarian features, comes to be a very important question in contemporary Ireland, where one sees the struggle of people from various social segments to keep Gaelic alive. The mechanisms of language appear as a significant theme in several poems such as "Studying the Language" (2008), which reproduces the structure of the English sonnet with three quatrains and a couplet, and starts with a persona's description of a group of hermits:

On Sundays I watch the hermits coming out of their holes
Into the light. Their cliff is as full as a hive.
They crowd together on warm shoulders of rock
Where the sun has been shining, their joints crackle.
They begin to talk after a while.
I listen to their accents, they are not all
From this island, not all old,
Not even, I think, all masculine. (89)

Although the hermits (symbolically, very close to the nuns) live isolated in their holes, at the same time, in a wider perspective, they are all together, sharing a collective existence and acting conjointly. Batten affirms: "Indeed, perhaps the image of community that remains most compelling in Ní Chuilleánáin's poetry is that offered in 'Studying the Language' of the 'cliff... as full as a hive' of hermits [...]". (186) Language, as the

poem depicts it, is the strongest communal element in the integration of the hermits' society. In contrast, the persona, who observes the hermits trying to grasp a communicative system, is "the foreigner" who seeks to establish some proximity with the group to feel integrated. As the poem reads:

They are so wise, they do not pretend to see me.
They drink from the scattered pools of melted snow:
I walk right by them and drink when they have done.
I can see the marks of chains around their feet.

I call this my work, these decades and stations –
Because, without these, I would be a stranger here.

If in the beginning of "Studying the Language" the persona and the hermits do not communicate; this persona reaches an understanding of their existences through the careful observation of the hermits' acts. As the couplet poses it, they end up sharing some complicity. The hermits' existence is made familiar to the reader when their acts are compared to human acts; the words "decades and stations"⁵ establish a connection to the human sphere, stabilizing and humanizing the whole experience.

Otherwise without language ("I call this my work") the persona would "be a stranger"; through language (or through literature, in a metapoetical reading) the persona manages to unveil and preserve the identity of the group. In the poem "the speaker refers to her observation of hermits coming out of their holes in the cliffs, but what initially looks like a naturalist's interest in animal life soon turns into an allegory of culture which inquires into the contradictory feelings of belonging and alienation." (Palacios 86). As a witness of a process of communication, the persona surpasses the condition of strangeness and displacement, and experiences a new feeling of being integrated to a society. Focusing on the realization of the limits of language, and reinforcing that language unites people, "Studying the Language" presents a very important perspective applicable to the problematic of language in today's Ireland.

Topographic and Domestic Spaces – Memory as Architecture

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin demonstrates a deep interest in architecture in general and, in a great number of her poems, images of houses and rooms, of façades, ruins, towers, churches, cloisters and convents are abundant.⁶ It is also frequent to find in her poems detailed depictions of natural sites, with their peculiar vegetation of mountains and rivers. The elaborated description of specific cities, with their streets, docks and outdoors spaces, are also usual, and this geography includes Irish scenes, mainly references to Dublin and Cork, as well as several references to places in France and in Italy. Ní Chuilleanáin's thematization of Irish topographic and domestic spaces contributes to the process of re-imagining Ireland, as Fintan O'Toole (1998) postulates:

The geographical Ireland, the bounded island, is a place that can be read. It can be imagined, albeit problematically, as the result of a given past, as the present form of an innate and immemorial Irishness. The second, demographic Ireland is a nation that cannot be read but must be written. And because it must be written, it could be written otherwise. Existing, as it does, imaginatively, it is always open to the possibility of being re-imagined.” (161).

The city of Cork, recurring in Ní Chuilleainain’s consciousness as a “psychic architecture”, gave the title to a collection of poems published in 1977 (illustrated by Brian Lawlor), which contains poems written about and inspired by the poet’s birthplace. In this collection, Ní Chuilleaináin reads the history and culture of Cork through its architecture, its walls, streets, lanes, buildings and monuments, and sets Cork’s contemporary economic condition in the context of the city’s history; through these poems she urges the reader to observe the city in detail, in order to discover what is the “real” Cork.

The poem “Cork” (2008), the first of the collection, makes an evocation of a space that is gradually made concrete by a description which holds a strong visual appeal:

The island, with its hooked
Clamps of bridges holding it down,
Its internal spirals
Packed, is tight as a ship
With a name in Greek or Russian on its tail:

As the river, flat and luminous
At its fullest, images the defences:
Ribbed quays and stacked rooves
Plain warehouse walls as high as churches
Insolent flights of steps, (37)

These stanzas describe a very poetic place, (leading to some reminiscences of the poet’s childhood), trying to capture parts of the city, considering that change will inevitably come after the processes of development. Social history is preserved in the following stanza, which brings an atmosphere of complacency or acceptance of the place where one lives:

Encamped within, the hurried exiles
Sheltering against the tide
A life in waiting,
Waking reach out for a door and find a banister,
Reach for a light and find their hands in water,
Their rooms all swamped by dreams.
In their angles the weeds
Flourish and fall in a week,

Their English falters and flies from them,
The floods invade them yearly.

In the sequence of poems which thematize Cork, Ní Chuilleanáin portrays the history of the city through its architectural configurations, stressing the devastating effects of growth and progress, likewise the effects of British rule; many poems also inform that Cork has suffered much over time and its buildings reflect the historical ravages of water and fire. The remnants of a city, of its historical and aesthetic past, are recovered through memory. Ní Chuilleanáin rebuilds and eternalizes the place to the readers through elaborated poetic descriptions.

In contrast to the space of the city the domestic space is examined in the poem “In Her Other House” (2008), which starts with the description of an idealized house in an atmosphere of perfection:

In my other house all the books are lined on shelves
And may be taken down in a curious mood.
The postman arrives with letters to all the family,
The table is spread and cleared by invisible hands.

It is the dead who serve us, and I see
My father’s glass and the bottle of sour stout at hand
Guarding his place (so I know it cannot be real;
[...] (97)

Here, once more, as seen in “Cork”, memory plays an important role in the reconstruction of the space, which is described in a cinematic way by the persona, whose portraiture of life in that house evokes spaces for the family secrets and stories. The function of memory is reinforced by the notion that “It is the dead who serve us”, as if past served the present. Also noteworthy in the poem is the presence/absence of the father figure for, even if the father’s place is well demarcated in the table, the observation in parenthesis reminds us that “it cannot be real”. Considering that, as the poem’s title reveals, the persona is a female character, the poem recreates the domestic atmosphere conveyed by the presence of women, and this presence/absence of the father may suggest that the male is not the center. It is, thus, a female space, where the missing male may indicate the contemporary strength of feminine presence or, even the new contemporary family in which the father lost part of his authority, if compared to past times. In this sense, the poem opens up, pointing out the contemporary roles of male and female in Irish society.

The last stanza reinforces a sense of independence, of the freedom acquired when one is not worried with the verdict of history any more:

[...]
On the shelf a letter for him flashes a wide bright stamp.

He mutters once more, *Here goes, in the name of God* –
Women's voice sound outside, he breathes deeply and quickly
And returns to talk to the fire, smiling and warming his hands –
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.

Through the depiction of a city, which recovers a topographical space as seen in “Cork”, or through the depiction of a domestic space as seen in “In Her Other House”, Eileán Ní Chuilleanáin's treatment of space is often connected to memory. It is an important element in the rebuilding and, therefore, in the preservation of those spaces. Moreover, the whole process of eternizing spaces is a solid and significant legacy to contemporary times.

Politics – The Elusiveness of Words

Raised up in a Republican family, in which many members were deeply connected to the Irish War of Independence, Eileán Ní Chuilleanáin was instilled with a strong sense of national pride. But, in spite of all this political and nationalist background, it is not usual to find overt references to political facts in her poetry; this is why the poem “The Informant” (2008) calls our attention as an uncommon piece of political theme. Created as a response to the violence of an Irish paramilitary funeral, “The Informant” establishes a very subtle connection to political problems in Ireland. In the poem, an ordinary old woman is interrogated; in the first stanza, details of her private life are revealed:

Underneath the photograph
Of the old woman at her kitchen table
With a window beyond (fuchsias, a henhouse, the sea)
Are entered: her name and age, her late husband's
occupation
(A gauger), her birthplace, not here
But in another parish, near the main road.
She is sitting with tea at her elbow
And her own fairy-cakes, baked that morning
For the young man who listens now to the tape
Of her voice changing, telling the story,
And hears himself asking,
Did you ever see it yourself?

Once, I saw it. (62)

The process of communication between interrogator/interrogated suffers interferences and its fluidity is partially lost. Here the poem exposes the fragility of a discourse when it is disturbed by external elements. In the following stanza there is a

tension between words and silence; when the interrogator listens back to the tape with the recorded information, he notes that the inquisition is filled with gaps:

Can you describe it? But the voice disappears

In a rising roar like a jet engine,

A tearing, a stitch of silence

Something has been lost;

The voice resumes

Quietly now:

 ‘The locks

Forced upward, a shift of air

Pulled over the head.

[...]

Then what happens?

 The person disappears.

[...]

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.

The surprising twist in the last stanza, when the political content shifts into a testimonial of folk information, is very provocative and establishes a confrontation between a mythical reality, and the official report of facts. Ní Chuilleanáin’s poem then shows the political as a secondary content, while what appears as the really important matter is the way information is conceived and transmitted. As Ní Chuilleanáin says in an interview:

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 death of the soldiers who were dragged out of a car at a funeral and shot – [...] It seemed particularly awful. I don’t want to put it, as many people say with what has happened in the north of Ireland, that one death was worse than another, but that one did seem particularly tragic. I was writing again about ways of speaking about these things.” (Ray 64)

Here comes a substantial feature of the way the theme is approached in this poem: by the elusiveness of the last lines, brought by the interrogated woman’s words, “The Informant” calls our attention to the elusiveness of the political discourse. In the poem, historicization fails; the inquisitor, who had the obligation to record words, misses important parts of the story (“something has been lost”) and is fooled by the very notion the woman has about facts. One eventually notes that the title of this poem is dual – “the

informant” is both a reference to the victim who died, as to the lady who is forced to retell the story. Therefore, “The Informant” reminds us of the fallacy of official discourses, of the double intentions of speakers, and of the interference of a mythological otherworld (acknowledged in the comment “you find this more strange”). In an ultimate analysis, the poem brings as its central theme the questioning of agency and political authority: if politics is shaped according to the ways of speaking, who possesses the “true” notion of facts? No doubt this question finds an impacting resonance in the field of contemporary Irish politics.

Religion – Faith and Nationalism

Religious questions connected to the universe of Roman Catholicism, are possibly the most recurring themes in Ní Chuilleanáin’s work. It is worth mentioning that her first poetry collection *Acts and Monuments* (1972), ironically borrowed the name from John Foxe’s sixteenth-century historiography of English Protestantism, also known as the *Book of Martyrs*. Another book, *The Magdalene Sermon* (1989), focuses mainly on women’s religious experiences, and this exploration into religion also appears in Ní Chuilleanáin’s collection *The Brazen Serpent* (1995).

To discuss religion in Ireland has always been delicate and polemic due to the associations the topic holds with nationalism, politics and identity. In the contemporary scene, Irish Catholicism means both nationality and religion, and “has been a matter of public identity more than of private faith, and the struggle to disentangle the two is what defines the Irish Church now.” (O’Toole 1994. 123). Ruth Fleishmann says:

In countries where peoples of different tribal origins had been politically united under colonial rule, a common religion different from that of the colonizer could provide the essential unity of culture. In Ireland, where a leading section of the nationalist movement was of Ascendancy origin, the part religion could play in the nationalist ideology was limited. Catholicism nonetheless remained a powerful source of nationalism. It was the only area where colonialism had never prevailed and the first in which colonial laws had to be repealed. As the Irish language declined, Catholicism became the main distinctive feature of the Irish as a nation. (Welch 91)

From the reading of today’s Irish newspapers, which often bring news on Church scandals, one knows that the Irish Catholic Church is now a troubled institution that suffers a severe loss of authority. Along with these specific problems which occur inside the Church, other impacting changes came up with the Celtic Tiger and Ireland’s conversion to materialist modernity as, for instance, a burgeoning interest in the Celtic spirituality. All this new religious panorama has been observed by Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, a poet concerned with the traditional conditions of religious belief and of sustainable

faith. Ní Chuilleanáin writes on faith in the middle of a crisis of bad faith that came forth from the collapse of the institutional power of Irish Catholicism since de 1980s, and which caused the disintegration of the traditional authority of the Irish Catholic Church.

The poem “St Margaret of Cortona” (Ní Chuilleanáin 2008. 72) illustrates the treatment Ní Chuilleanáin gives to some religious themes. The poem starts with a preacher who is embarrassed to pronounce the word which reveals that the saint was a prostitute:

She had become, the preacher hollows his voice,
A name not to be spoken, the answer
To the witty man’s loose riddle, what’s she
That’s neither maiden, widow nor wife?

A pause opens its jaws
In the annual panegyric,
The word *whore* prowling silent
Up and down the long aisle.

These initial stanzas touch upon the traditional “virgin-or-whore patriarchal binary”. Despite the rhetoric which typifies the masculine clerical version, the poem presents a prostitute who was converted and who has a solid understanding of herself and of her past life. The priest, embarrassed to admit his prejudice, exemplifies the usual “theological misogyny” of the clerical world. It follows the description of the saint, whose presence is still felt in an effective way:

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.

She is still here, she refuses
To be consumed. The weight of her bones
Burns down through the mountain.
Her death did not make her like this;

Saint Margaret of Cortona then appears as renegotiating the feminine “modes of agency”:

Her eyes were hollowed
By the bloody scene: the wounds
In the body of her child’s father
Tumbled in a ditch. The door was locked,
The names flew and multiplied; she turned
Her back but the names clustered and hung
Out of her shoulderbones

Like children swinging from a father's arm,
Their tucked-up feet skimming over the ground.

The poem establishes an overt meta-textual link with Irish social history: the saint is the Patroness of the Lock Hospital, Townsend Street, Dublin (her relics are kept behind the altar of a Dublin church), and its content opposes the preestablished Victorian order that condemned prostitution. Religious tradition here suggests a communal awareness as a forum that connects faith, nationalism, aesthetics, identity and politics, to correspond to the main needs of contemporary Ireland.

Conclusion

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin has an extraordinary organic view of historical, socio-political, religious and identitarian facts connected to the past and the present of Ireland. Thematic elements are interrelated: the rereading of the past as corroborated by history; the discovery and preservation of identity as supported by language; the description of topographic and domestic spaces in a process that takes memory as an architecture; the elusiveness of words in political discourses; the complexities of faith and nationalism as held by religion – all these thematic elements are interrelated, in a ceaseless conversation claim an organic analysis.

Ní Chuilleanáin writes poems which expose a hidden Ireland, which was once suffocated and modeled by the official discourses and institutions of colonial rule. In doing so, she reveals ambiguities generated in the past and leads us to an understanding of conflicts that lie at the heart of Irish culture in the twenty-first century. Her treatment of fundamental and polemic issues that characterize contemporary Ireland presents new perspectives on worn-out themes. Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry is constantly inviting the reader to reflect upon the very character of institutions and discourses, to think beyond the inherited structures of thought that establish the boundaries of social contact – her poetry compels the reader to perform a revision of these structures in the contemporary Ireland, and subsequently in the contemporary world.

Notes

- 1 Cf. O'Toole (1994. 80): "One of the strange things about Ireland's relationship to history is that everything seems to be connected. You flip over a story about a high-tech global economy and you find yourself in the nineteenth century. You scratch polished surfaces and they bleed."
- 2 In 1993, after an excavation of a Sister of Charity convent in Dublin, which had been sold to a developer, the remains of more than 150 women were found; later on, the bones of these women were cremated and buried in Glanesvin Cemetery. This episode called the attention of the world as it led to the existence of the Magdalene Laundries, institutions operated by the Roman Catholic Church where "fallen women" (prostitutes or unmarried mothers) were confined. Named after Saint Mary Magdalene (the patroness of penitent sinners), these prison-like laundries forced

women to work under slavery conditions. Around 30,000 women were admitted in these institutions, along a history of more than 150 years. In Ireland, the last Magdalene Laundry was closed only in 1996.

- 3 Another noteworthy poem which thematizes the Magdalens' story, showing the network behind the placidity of convents, is "The Architectural Metaphor" (2008).
- 4 Some reports point out that only 10% of the population in Ireland is fluent in Irish (between 10,000 to 20,000 speakers).
- 5 "Decade" is a reference to the decades of the rosary, term used in the Roman Catholic Church to describe a series of prayers, usually consisting of 15 decades of aves, each decade being preceded by a paternoster and followed by a Gloria Patri, one of the mysteries or events in the life of Christ or the Virgin Mary being recalled at each decade. The word "station" refers to the Stations of the Cross (Via Crucis).
- 6 These images often come with a technical vocabulary as, for example, in frequent listings of ecclesiastical architecture terms such as naves, apse, and chapel, among many others.

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