

An Introduction to Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin.

Frances Rocks

“A poem communicates without being understood.”

T.S. Eliot.

Ní Chuilleanáin, Irish poet, translator, editor was born in Cork, the daughter of a children’s author and university professor who fought in the Irish War of Independence. In the 1992 Citation for the O’ Shaughnessy Award of the Irish-American Cultural Institute, this poet was described as employing “a poetic point of view that is displaced, unspecified and often enigmatic.” “Her poetry resonates with ancient rites and presences from a spiritual otherworld.” These are “potent poems” with a dense captivating sound”. She leads us into “altered landscapes. Each poem is a world complete, often they move between worlds.”

She has commented, “The question I ask myself constantly is ‘is this real? Do I really believe this do I really feel this?’ but that is a question I cannot answer except by trying again in a poem.” This beguiling poet opens many doors into multiple worlds. She has said, “in order for the poem to get written, something has to happen.” In the poem, “On lacking the Killer Instinct”, there is a transubstantiation of the autobiographical.

“I have a story my father told me about running away from the Black and Tans when he was, I suppose, about twenty or twenty one. He had to shave off his beard on the train back to cork because he couldn’t face his mother. He had described to me what it felt like running away from his lorry and he ran into a house and the lorry came and pulled up alongside the house. He had bolted into the kitchen and he saw a towel and put it up to his face and looked as bleary-eyed as he could. And they looked around the kitchen and those there said they hadn’t seen anything and the lorry went on. He said he never felt so well in his life as when he was running, so I’ve been trying to put that into a poem.”

On Lacking the Killer Instinct

One hare, absorbed, sitting still,
Right in the grassy middle of the track,
I met when I fled up into the hills, that time
My father was dying in a hospital –
I see her suddenly again, borne back 5
By the morning paper’s prize photograph:
Two greyhounds tumbling over, absurdly gross,
While the hare shoots off to the left, her bright eye
Full not only of speed and fear
But surely in the moment a glad power, 10

Like my father’s, running from a lorry-load of soldiers
In nineteen twenty-one, nineteen years old, never
Such gladness, he said, cornering in the narrow road
Between high hedges, in summer dusk.

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The hare 15
Like him should never have been coursed,
But, clever, she gets off; another day
She'll fool the stupid dogs, double back
On her own scent, downhill, and choose her time
To spring away out of the frame, all while 20
The pack is labouring up.
The lorry was growling
And he was clever, he saw a house
And risked an open kitchen door. The soldiers
Found six people in a country kitchen, one 25
Drying his face, dazed-looking, the towel
Half covering his face. The lorry left,
The people let him sleep there, he came out
Into a blissful dawn. Should he have chanced that door?
If the sheltering house had been burned down, what good 30
Could all his bright running have done
For those that harboured him?
And I should not
Have run away, but I went back to the city
Next morning, washed in brown bog water, 35
And I thought about the hare, in her hour of ease.



‘While the hare shoots off to the left’

“I was trying to connect that with memories of his final illness.”

“Fireman’s Lift” was written when her mother was dying. “I write poems that mean a lot to me,” she explains. “What I am trying to do is to suggest, to phrase, to find a way to make it possible for somebody to pick up certain suggestions and to give things like visual clues, colours, light and darkness. Those will come together for the person, even if they don’t necessarily know the background. They might not be seeing what I am seeing.”

Her “cheering-up poem”, “Fireman’s Lift” was written because “I absolutely knew that she would want me to write a poem about her dying. The cathedral in the poem is in Parma, which has a big Correggio ‘Assumption’, and I went there with my parents...but she didn’t like it. It was a Romanesque church and they put this Renaissance dome on top of it. I’ve always thought of the extravagance in that kind of art.”

Fireman’s Lift

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, 5
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. 10
We saw the work entire, and how light

Melted and faded bodies so that
Loose feet and elbows and staring eyes
Floated in the wide stone petticoat
Clear and free as weeds. 15

This is what love sees, that angle:
The crick in the branch loaded with fruit,
A jaw defining itself, a shoulder yoked,

The back making itself a roof
The legs a bridge, the hands 20
A crane and a cradle.

Their heads bowed over to reflect on her
Fair face and hair so like their own
As she passed through their hands. We saw them
Lifting her, the pillars of their arms 25

(Her face a capital leaning into an arch)
As the muscles clung and shifted
For a final purchase together
Under her weight as she came to the edge of the cloud.

Parma 1963-Dublin 1994

GLOSSARY

Fireman's Lift: The term refers to a technique commonly used by emergency service workers to carry someone to safety by placing the carried person across the shoulders of the carrier.

The Assumption of the Virgin: Roman Catholic Church teaching states that the Virgin Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed (or elevated) body and soul into heavenly glory.

Antonio Allegri da Correggio (1489 –1534), usually known as Correggio, was the foremost painter of the Parma school of the Italian Renaissance. One of his best-known works, *The Assumption of the Virgin*, is a fresco which decorates the dome of the Duomo (Cathedral) of Parma, in Northern Italy.



'spiralling to heaven'

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She describes the scene depicted in Correggio's masterpiece-focusing on the struggle of the angels to lift Mary into the heavens, and the awkwardness and wonder of being pushed in such a similar manner to birth. The dome participates gymnastically in the assumption of the Virgin. Here is the spiralling, ascending interaction of art and architecture, a vortex of torsos, faces, legs and arms lifting the Virgin to heaven and a waiting Christ in the dome. Ní Chuilleanáin said she found herself compelled to write about this. "I could only concentrate on one aspect, the way it shows bodily effort and the body's weight." Enjambed lines, alliterative pauses, internal rhyme imitate this energetic, collective heaving of Mary, this is the "firemen's lift" of teams of angelic arms, truly "un bel composto".

Her upbringing on the UCC campus instilled in her an appreciation of art and architecture. She is not a poet located in a particular tradition, as Heaney was in Kavanagh's. She takes us line by line into deeper water until we no longer touch bottom. Her poetry resists containment, within the literal or physical or domestic as she wanders beyond borders and margins and walls and structures. She represents such traversing of thresholds and boundaries in relation to architecture. She encourages us never to pass a laneway or flight of stairs without investigating what secrets it might conceal, what historical or human curiosity might be within.

Street

He fell in love with the butcher's daughter
When he saw her passing by in her white trousers
Dangling a knife on a ring at her belt.
He stared at the dark shining drops on the paving-stones.

One day he followed her 5
Down the slanting lane at the back of the shambles.
A door stood half-open
And the stairs were brushed and clean,
Her shoes paired on the bottom step,
Each tread marked with the red crescent 10
Her bare heels left, fading to faintest at the top.



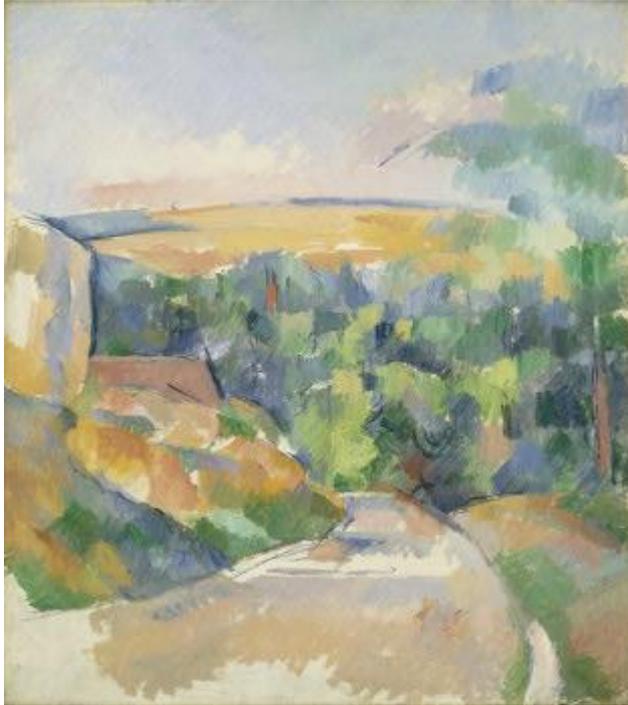
'And the stairs were brushed and clean'

She presents us with images of seas, rivers, trance-like passages, pin-sharp, acutely sensitive to the world, she hypnotises with the intensity of her unwavering gaze.

“Odysseus rested on his oar and saw
The ruffled foreheads of the waves
Crocodiling and mincing past: he rammed
The oar between their jaws and looked down
In the simmering sea where scribbles of weed defined
Uncertain depth...”

We, too, like Odysseus, can easily become out of our depth as we look at her poetry. Yet we are enabled to see, through her steady gaze, the peevish Greek hero, who glories in his masculinity, unable to conquer the ocean waves which don't possess “a single/ Streak of decency”.

Description is her strength, images flex and crack with revelatory energy. She views the everyday in a way that is her own, instantly recognisable. In her poem, “The Bend in the Road”, we encounter clear uncluttered lines and a deceptive simplicity.



‘This is the place’

The Bend in the Road

This is the place where the child
Felt sick in the car and they pulled over
And waited in the shadow of a house.
A tall tree like a cat’s tail waited too.
They opened the windows and breathed 5
Easily, while nothing moved. Then he was better.

Over twelve years it has become the place
Where you were sick one day on the way to the lake.
You are taller now than us.
The tree is taller, the house is quite covered in 10
With green creeper, and the bend
In the road is as silent as ever it was on that day.

Piled high, wrapped lightly, like the one cumulus cloud
In a perfect sky, softly packed like the air,
Is all that went on in those years, the absences, 15
The faces never long absent from thought,
The bodies alive then and the airy space they took up
When we saw them wrapped and sealed by sickness
Guessing the piled weight of sleep
We knew they could not carry for long; 20
This is the place of their presence: in the tree, in the air.

Isolated moments are held in the poet's ordering gaze. Her poetry depends on relentless clarity, she illuminates ephemeral moments of perception in exact description. The intensity of her focus pushes the reader into the self-enclosed worlds of her poems.

It is for you, the dry fragrance of tea-chests
The tins shining in ranks, the ten-pound jars
Rich with shrivelled fruit .

“All for You”

Many of her relatives took the veil. In this poem her language is supple and acute enough to undertake its most difficult subject – how we perceive and understand the world.

“I have been rereading ‘The Brazen Serpent’ lately. The book begins with a biblical quote about god asking Moses to make a brass serpent and to set it on a pole so that anyone who is bitten will look at this serpent and be saved.” She employs religious imagery and themes and her stately, measured poems unfold in their own time, making very little concession to the reader.

The great staircase of the hall slouches back,
Sprawling between wide wings. It is for you.
As the steps wind and warp
Among the vaults, their thick ribs part; the doors
Of guardroom, chapel, storeroom
Swing wide and the breath of ovens
Flows out, the rage of brushwood,
The roots torn out and butchered.

On the marriage of her son she wrote this lyric ode.

To Niall Woods and Xenya Ostrovskaja, married in Dublin on 9 September 2009

When you look out across the fields
And you both see the same star
Pitching its tent on the point of the steeple –
That is the time to set out on your journey,
With half a loaf and your mother's blessing. 5

Leave behind the places that you knew:
All that you leave behind you will find once more,
You will find it in the stories;
The sleeping beauty in her high tower
With her talking cat asleep 10
Solid beside her feet – you will see her again.

When the cat wakes up he will speak in Irish and Russian
And every night he will tell you a different tale
About the firebird that stole the golden apples,
Gone every morning out of the emperor's garden, 15
And about the King of Ireland's Son and the Enchanter's Daughter.

The story the cat does not know is the Book of Ruth
And I have no time to tell you how she fared
When she went out at night and she was afraid,
In the beginning of the barley harvest,
Or how she trusted to strangers and stood by her word:
You will have to trust me, she lived happy ever after.

20



'the firebird that stole the golden apples'

The criticism voiced about this poet is that her style is distant, her meaning elusive, that her poems are unemotional, that she does not write in an intimate, personal voice but her third person narrative lends her poems more power by presenting contrasting viewpoints which are not limited to one perspective. They convey universal concerns about change, aging and death. They explore at the same time the nature of one's own identity and search for self. Her use of mythology, legend and folklore contribute to the sense of shared experience. Why is the epithalamium's oblique, non-confessional perspective used here?

This impressionistic poet through startling imagery, captivating sounds and profound silences shifts realms between the real and the underworld. She unsettles her reader who experiences her poem as if watching a photograph slowly developing. Dramatic poems of waiting, such as “Street”, are incident rich, yet told quietly.

He fell in love with the butcher’s daughter
When he saw her passing by in her white trousers
Dangling a knife on a ring at her belt.
He stared at the dark shining drops on the paving-stones.

She connects past and present in ways that never cease to fascinate.

“Following”

So she follows the trail of her father’s coat through the fair
Shouldering past beasts packed solid as books...

The dead corpse risen from the wakehouse
Gliding before her in a white habit...

She comes to where he is seated
With whiskey poured in two glasses
In a library where the light is clean,
His clothes all finely laundered,
Ironsed facings and linings.

She shows how the most basic legends - family stories – fragment and alter in each individual’s memory. She explores the persistence of memory in a highly distinctive style. Oblique, yet concrete, boundaries and transitions are central concerns. Tis quite, introspective, enigmatic poet writes poems which elude categories, which invite, yet challenge the reader. She poses questions, yet often chooses to leave them unanswered and unresolved, allowing them to resonate meaningfully past the poem’s actual end.

“There is something second-sighted about Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin’s work. Her poems see things anew in a rinsed and dream-struck light. They are a force plain as an anecdote told on the doorstep and as haunting as a soothsayer’s greeting.”

Seamus Heaney

Q. “Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin is a truly original poet who leads us into altered landscapes and enhances our understanding of the world around us.” To what extent would you agree with this statement? In your response refer to the poems on your course.

Indicative material:

- fragmented narrative, innovative narrative blending
- collapse of time and place
- Dispassionate, detached tone of storyteller
- Biblical, historical and mythical references
- layered and interwoven nuances challenge the reader
- uncovers hidden dramas
- artistic, architectural references
- recurring optimistic themes of life and rebirth
- use of the continuous past, etc..

Sample Answer

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin’s poem, “Translation”, provides an accessible platform for voices from the margin. The title stresses the importance to communicate decades of silence into meaningful expression on behalf of the Magdalen laundry inmates. She uncovers the hidden drama. This poem was recited at the reburial of those forgotten women in Glasnevin. She brought me to the graveside through her unnerving detail, “soil frayed and sifted evens the score.” Here is the stark reality of the communal grave and the horrifying injustice perpetrated on these women under the rule of an oppressive Catholic Ireland. Through layered nuances the reader is invited to consider. The symbol of gaoler and gaoler are vividly caught in the alliterative phrase, “the bunched key I bore”. The hard explosive “b” underscores the harsh, inhumane regime of these institutions. Alliteration is also effectively used in the lines, “White light blinded and bleached out/ The high relief of a glance.” Any human interaction which might soften these women’s lines was obliterated. The assonance of the broad vowel “a” effectively shows the loosening of authority’s grip on these women, the keys now “slacken and fall”. Contrast shows the youthful spirit of the incarcerated women in the midst of their harsh environment. Their essence is captured in the lively verbs, “where steam danced/ Around stone drains and giggled and slipped across the water.” But the poet also challenged me to consider the nuns as victims also of this repressive regime. The nun’s identity was removed, “the baked crust/Of words that made my temporary name”. Her conflict is detailed, “every pocket in her skull blared with the note” as she heard the child’s cry. I wondered about her exploitation. She felt a “parasite that grew in me”. Was this the power she wielded over the inmates? The poet allowed me to hear the voices from the institution, those of the young women and those in authority. At the grave the “grass takes root”. The “steam”, the voices from these laundries call out. The poet’s blended landscapes and layers of nuances enabled me to understand the dangers of unquestioning obedience to strict authoritarianism

Sample Leaving Cert Questions

1. “Ní Chuilleanáin’s beguiling poems emerge from an intense but insightful imagination,” Do you agree with this assessment of her poetry? Write a response, supporting your points with reference to her poems on your course.
2. “Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin’s subject matter can be challenging at times, but her writing style is always impressive.” Write a response to this view, supporting the points you make with suitable reference to the poetry on your course.

SAMPLE PLAN Q1.

INTRO: Ní Chuilleanáin’s innovative treatment of a broad thematic range – Irish history, myth, transience, memory, relationships, loss, religious life, the dispossessed, etc.

POINT 1: “Fireman’s Lift” – compelling treatment of her mother’s death. Importance of dramatic setting, as a context for personal experiences/memories. Poet’s sympathetic tone, atmospheric detail, artistic references.

POINT 2: “Following” – collapse of time, interwoven narrative, continuous past. (Vividly realised journey of girl through hurly burly of Irish fair day slips to ‘shivering bog’ and reference to Pharaoh’s decree to drown first born boys to stem growth of Israelite population, move to vision of utopia, image of book holding memories which live again through the power of relics, ‘The crushed flowers’.)

POINT 3: Dispassionate, detached tone of storyteller – “Death and Engines”, “Kilcash”. Underlying sense of the poet’s compassion. Interlinked narrative threads entice the reader.

ETC.

CONCLUSION: Poetry can challenge /excite responses. Poet’s mesmerizing exploration of universal themes invites readers to unravel the secrets of her work.