

**"WATCH ME WHEREVER I GO":
AMBIVALENCE AND MISDIRECTION IN EILÉAN NÍ CHUILLEANÁIN'S
POETRY¹**

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"You are reaching me in translation," says Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin in her poem "A Posting" (*Brazen Serpent* 45). This is simultaneously a warning to, and a sheltering of, the reader. Although the real "me" remains hidden in translation, a metaphorical "reaching" is accomplished. This playful teasing of the reader is characteristic of Ní Chuilleanáin's work. Spatial and psychic distances are created to be overcome and transcended, merely to be rebuilt. Ní Chuilleanáin's preferred linguistic tool to achieve this effect is silence – not just silence which signals the "unsaid" in a poem, but also silence which is intricately written into language. As the "unseen joints of the text" (Iser 183), blanks play a crucial role both in the writing and the reading processes. Poetry in particular, given its spatial dimensions, can host various manifestations of blanks. However, beyond the visual and grammatical gaps, the poems of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin simultaneously intensify and broaden the significance of silence as the compositional tool that drives her poetry. Ní Chuilleanáin creates and recreates silences by populating her work with silent figures and figures of silence. This essay offers an exploration of Ní Chuilleanáin's silence and hidden locale as sites of creative constructions.

Hidden Pianissimo – Silence as Creative Impulse

Both keeping back information and disclosing blanks play crucial parts in problematising interactive expectations between writer and reader. By disrupting patterns of communication Ní Chuilleanáin draws attention to the problem of communication itself and its ethical implications.

Ní Chuilleanáin's "The Informant" offers an interesting example in this regard. The poem's two protagonists – the old woman and the young man – both contribute in their own way to creating the silence which carries with it the ultimate locus of "meaning." The first stanza opens with a roundabout description of the old woman and the observing man:

Underneath the photograph
Of the old woman at her kitchen table
With a window beyond (fuchsias, a henhouse, the sea)

1 An extended version of this article appeared in the *Irish University Review* 37.1 (2007): 68-83.

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. (*Magdalene Sermon* 36)

Ní Chuilleanáin's misdirection is particularly evident here: the old woman's position is consistently associated with words like "underneath," "beyond," "not here," "another parish," "near." In other words, the focus of our gaze slips off its target and the woman is only allowed to appear in peripheral vision. This is further emphasised by the fact that she is on a photograph, and by looking at her the reader follows the gaze of the on-looking young man. It is in fact only the young man who "physically" appears in this stanza, listening to the tape he prepared earlier – which, of course, means that he is also removed from the location where his presence was of significance. Thus, both protagonists are simultaneously absent and present: we hear the woman's voice, see her on a photograph, and we see the man silently listening to the tape. No direct visuals and no direct communication. Despite first appearances, the image presented in the first stanza is still and quiet. It is into this silence that the man's first question erupts: "*Did you ever see it yourself?*" (36). This request for visual confirmation – of what we do not know – is met with an affirmative "once, I saw it." This enigmatic "it" is repeated three times and yet it remains veiled and hidden. The next question asked by the young man "*can you describe it?*" is followed by the tape-recorder's answer:

... But the sound
 Takes off like a jet engine, the machine
 Gone haywire, a tearing, an electric
 Tempest. Then a stitch of silence.
 Something has been lost. (36)

Significantly, the retelling or describing of "it" converges in the "stitch of silence" and is forbidden to surface. The information is *not* passed on. However, a quieter voice resumes the storytelling about a man who disappears slowly – at first only bodily, with his "child's voice" lingering behind, and then completely. And then, the concluding stanza has another surprise in store. The interviewing young man asks something out of sync with his bland, factual questioning in his quest for facts and truths. He becomes interested in what the woman thinks, rather than what she knows, and asks: "*You find this more strange than the yearly miracle / Of the loaf turning into a child?*" With this question he seems to acknowledge the existence, or the validity of, a mythological otherworld occupying the old woman's life. This question is in stark contrast with the sceptical "*Did you ever see it yourself?*" of the first stanza and implies a subtle change in attitude. Interestingly, now the tape does not buckle up and the old woman's answer is there for all to hear: "well, that's natural, she says, / I often baked the bread for that myself" (37). It seems that this answer has been there all

along: her freshly baked fairy cakes are already there in the first stanza, in the photograph. The interview is just a detour. However, the poem remains fundamentally enigmatic. Who is the informant? Is it the old woman who gives the interview and with that gives away some of her fairy-world? Or is it the young man who prepares the tape? Or is it the tape-recorder itself which gives the most important piece of information by keeping silent? Or is it the "man" in the old woman's story who "speaks in a child's voice" and disappears? Or is it the poet, who creates all this confusion and misinformation? And, even more significantly, what is the information? Is it something the man said in his child's voice, or something the old woman said or the thing that the tape-recorder kept silent? Or is it something the young man came to understand? The mysterious information and its source remain hidden from the reader throughout the poem. The point of reference slips out of focus. Critical works on this poem do not fully clarify these questions. Paul Scott Stanfield reaches the following conclusion:

The answer [of the old woman in the last stanza] assimilates the pagan to the Christian, combining ancient magic with the mysteries of the Incarnation and of the mass, and locates the synthesis within the female realm of home and hearth. Just that quietly Ní Chuilleanáin gives us a homely but awe-inspiring vision of the female sacred. (107-8)

However, within the frame of reference of the "homely, awe-inspiring vision of the female sacred," the man with the child's voice is difficult to place. If this poem is a celebration of a feminine folklore, the presence of the two men seems to be somewhat problematic. Ní Chuilleanáin herself comments on the gender issue of "The Informant":

There is one [poem] about the informant which is not about any particularized folk image but about the woman who actually transmits folk information. And I suppose I was really commenting on the way in which there is a kind of interaction between the people who are seen as possessing the folk wisdom, who are the women, and the men who come and interview them, ask questions, and reduce what they have to say to manageable form for some kind of activity. (Haberstroh 64)

Ní Chuilleanáin places the emphasis on the interaction between the young man and the old woman, and on the manipulation of gathered information, rather than on a presumed revelation of hidden feminine wisdom. Lucy Collins sees the question of agency as the central issue of the poem. In her illuminating essay she argues that the informer represents a form of authority which is different from the political. Commenting on the last lines of the poem, she says: "Here the individual is the repository of valuable knowledge, which cannot be transferred to any other medium with ease: attempts to bypass the human agency here are doomed to failure, so that the individual becomes a crucial conduit between different worlds" (179). This emphasis on individual agency can prove helpful in unravelling the poem, so far as it suggests that the most significant issue is the possession of knowledge rather than its transmission. However, another comment by Ní Chuilleanáin further complicates the depiction of the central focus of the poem:

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 – Medbh McGuckian wrote about those too. 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)

The concept of violence introduces a new dimension and is vital to the poem's understanding. All three characters are subjected to symbolic violence: the old woman is robbed of her true identity through representation, the young man's tape-recorder breaks down, and the man of the recounted story is taken away by fairies presumably. And it is precisely these acts of aggression which remain untold and hidden in the prevalent silence of the poem. When the tape-recorder breaks down, it fails to describe what actually happens in the old woman's story, depicting instead an "electric tempest" which culminates in silence. This "stitch of silence" is the secret revelation of the real "way of speaking about these things" mentioned by Ní Chuilleanáin. In other words, Ní Chuilleanáin's refusal to establish a fixed, identifiable narrative in a seemingly plot-driven poem is indicative of her continuing desire to express in silence what language fails to deliver. "The Informant," therefore, yields meaning when it is sought in the unsaid and the hidden, in the allusive gaps of meaning symbolised by the mechanical rupture of the old woman's voice.

I opened this essay by quoting from "A Posting" and pointed out how Ní Chuilleanáin uses silence as a tool of simultaneous misdirection and seduction. The language of this poem, disguised in "translation" and immaterialised as a "voice with no taste or weight," pulls the reader into the eerie landscape of the imagination, where our view is obscured and the desired clarity of meaning is likened to "a light struggling to climb around / the bruised edges of a cloud" (*Brazen Serpent* 45). The second part of "A Posting" charts the journey of the wandering mind in search of something concrete, tangible, or at least nameable. However, as we read on,

At the sound of the voice the sea is gone
 The beach a rock-salty rainbow
 The flat bay a sudden gulf, even crabs
 Shuffled out of sight, even the word
 Brushed out that would name the starshaped
 Creature that clings to a rock shaped like a skull. (45)

The poetic voice creates silence and disguise, and the reader's attempt to comprehend and analyse fundamentally fails as the images slip out of focus. The subject not only evades the poetic gaze but further frustrates it by its own, inherent vagueness and plurality. Like into a black hole, the images collapse and dissolve, and the process of reading prompts void and silence.

John Cage's famous piece 4' 33", otherwise known as "Silence," offers a suitable illustration. In 1952, a tuxedoed performer got up on a stage, sat at a grand piano, opened the lid, occasionally turned some music pages, but otherwise sat as quietly as possible for 4 minutes and 33 seconds, then rose, bowed, and left. The point is that "Silence" is not silent at all. While the performer makes as little sound as possi-

ble, Cage breaks traditional boundaries by shifting attention from the stage to the audience and even beyond the concert hall. As Peter Gutmann describes it:

You soon become aware of a huge amount of sound, ranging from the mundane to the profound, from the expected to the surprising, from the intimate to the cosmic – shifting in seats, riffling programs to see what in the world is going on, breathing, the air conditioning, a creaking door, passing traffic, an airplane ringing in your ears, a recaptured memory. This is a deeply personal music, which each witness creates to his/her own reactions to life. Concerts and records standardize our responses, but no two people will ever hear 4'33' the same way. It's the ultimate sing-along: the audience (and the world) becomes the performer.

Silence therefore is fundamentally unattainable – a point acknowledged by Cage himself, who said "try as we may to make silence, we cannot." The visual imagery of "A Posting" reinforces this idea, as the silent landscape escapes visualisation and naming. The language of silence in this poem is an ever failing approximation. As Simon Critchley puts it in relation to Beckett's work: "If language is a medium that no longer satisfies us, then there is no resource outside of language to which we might turn for support" (154). It seems therefore, that language, like the strange "star-shaped creature," clings to our minds, and our readerly performance guarantees the failure of authorial silence. Even if what the author allows us to see is only a "rock shaped like a skull," like Hamlet, we also attribute language to it and say: "that skull had a tongue in it and could sing once" (Act V, Scene 1).

"Alcove in the Wind" – Spatial Misdirection and the Imagination

Ní Chuilleánáin's poetry offers a rich portmanteau of sacred and secular spaces that assist in the creation of her peculiar silent language. Several of the places depicted in the poems are transitory – left behind, approached, or approximated – while others are mere imaginary fragments and memories. Ní Chuilleánáin's poetic technique of guiding the reader through illusionary spaces, in my belief, offers a direct insight into the workings of her compositional process. While our visual senses are distracted by her architectural and geographical imagery, the poem writes itself into our deeper consciousness, where, by sharing in the poem's silence, we gain (some) access into the rich symbolism of Ní Chuilleánáin's work. This section looks at a few poems that demonstrate the poet's characteristic spatial misdirection, either through geographical or architectural symbolism.

"Daniel Grose" (*Brazen Serpent* 34) is a poem which figures the ruin of an abbey and its representation as a drawing. The process of the building's ruination is associated with a symbolic birthing of its own depiction:

The breach widens at every push,
The copingstone falls
To shatter the paved floor.
Then silence for three centuries
While a taste for ruins develops.

The following stanza traces the artist's (i.e. Daniel Grose's²) creative process as he is "training his eyes / on the upright of the tower" to draw the scene. What becomes apparent is again a lack, in this case a lack of human presence:

Where is the human figure
He needs to show the scale
And all the time that's passed
And how different things are now?

But this desired human presence is very much qualified by the gaze of the male artist creating the scene. The following three negatives – "no crowds engaged in rape or killing, / no marshalling of boy soldiers / no cutting the hair of novices " – recall military imagery familiar to the imagination of Lieutenant Grose. However, the evoked femininity of the ruin (in its birthing imagery of the first stanza) forbids the representation of such masculine presence. Instead, the artist draws an old woman:

The old woman by the oak tree
Can be pressed into service
To occupy the foreground.
Her feet are warmed by drifting leaves.

Yet, the old woman does not bend into service but retains an authority which reaches beyond the confines of Grose's visual representation:

He stands too far away
To hear what she is saying,
How she routinely measures
The verse called the midwife's curse
On all that catches her eye, naming
The scholar's index finger, the piper's hunch,
The squint, the rub, the itch of every trade.

Guinn Batten convincingly argues that the woman, the mysterious *cailleach*, is empowered precisely because she is "at least twice removed from a speaker who is watching her through his instruments of measure [...] through which he fails either to see or to hear her" (185). In the same way, Dillon Johnston also sees the woman as a representation of agency and authority: "The *cailleach* represents the poet herself as the return of the repressed, a baroque *extravagance*, who, literally, 'takes us beyond' the framed or bound space of engraving, aside from the geometrical perspective, beyond spatial into poetic measure and, thereby, into unrepresentable time" (202).

Convincingly, both Batten and Johnston give importance to the individual agency of the mythological *cailleach*-figure of the old woman, emphasising her power as speaking subject. Batten also offers a compelling comparison between the feminised body of the ruin and that of the old woman. She notes:

Finally in this poem the body of the woman persists as an irreducible remainder of the Enlightenment perspective that would represent the landscape as map or as art. Pre-

² Author and illustrator of *Antiquities of Ireland* (1792).

cisely in doing so, she prevents the surveyor from obtaining a unified perspective, further shattering both landscape and woman into the part objects of science and of art. A reminder, stuck in the opened gap between subject and object, male and female, colonist and coloniser, of what the masterful perspective does not enclose in its grasp of totality, the body therefore serves precisely as the "breach" that will produce an alternative to representation itself. It offers its own perspective on what and whom history, and community, hurts. (186)

The poetry's symbolism (connecting the "push" of the ruin to the "midwife's curse" of the old woman) also supports this argument. However, arguably, it is less in the physical that this connection is played out than in the spatial misdirection employed by Ní Chuilleanáin. The purpose of the presence of the military surveyor is precisely to highlight this. It is his (mis)directed gaze and failed understanding which creates the strongest bond between the ruin and the woman. The readers of the poem are forced to follow his efforts in representation – as "he needs to show," so do we have to see. However, the image of the old woman remains twice removed and distant, strikingly similar to the old woman in the photograph of "The Informant." Indeed, in "Daniel Grose" it is also the possession of knowledge, as opposed to its transmission, that is emphasised. In other words, the positive affirmation of a feminine authority and agency remains filtered through failed representation and misplacement. What ultimately "speaks" in "Daniel Grose," as in "The Informant," is the secret, out-of-place silence of Ní Chuilleanáin's poetic representation.

"The House Remembered," from her earlier volume *The Second Voyage*, offers a visualisation from the point of view of the speaking subject's memory. There is no intermediary or artistic representation in the way: the reader sees directly through the eyes of the poetic subject. However, the concept of space is influenced by temporal distortions as subjective memory directs and misdirects the readerly gaze. The conceptual house therefore remains fluid, changeable, and unsettled, despite the first line's claim to the contrary:

The house persists, the permanent
Scaffolding while the stones move round.
Convolvulus winds the banisters, sucks them down;
We found an icicle under the stairs
Tall as a church candle;
It refused to answer questions
But proved its point by freezing hard. (55)

As the point of reference shifts between the outside and the inside, the inanimate objects are also displaced and given agency. The house is taken over by bindweed and ice, symbolically affirming time's effect on the poetic vision. The building seems hostile and inaccessible – a memory resisting disclosure. However, by the second stanza there is a subtle transformation, when

The house changes, the stones
Choking in dry lichen stupidly spreading
Abusing the doorposts, frost on the glass.

It is almost as if the house remembered was struggling to come to life again, and indeed the following lines see the appearance of "human" imagery:

Nothing stays still, the house is still the same
But the breast over the sink turned into a tap
And coming through the door all fathers look the same. (55)

The maternal breast and the "fathers" coming through the door position the house within a highly individualised temporal context. However, the parental heritage is generalised and misplaced: the breast is there for everybody (on tap) and the distinctiveness of the father is lost. Sheila C. Conboy offers a more straightforward – and markedly different – interpretation of the image of the house:

The house actually becomes a metaphor for the mother, whose permanent presence similarly allows a child the safe space in which to imagine. Yet Ní Chuilleanáin admits that such stability is an ideal, for just as the mythically powerful pre-oedipal mother must ultimately disappoint the daughter, so too the house one grew up in must eventually move from sacred to secular – "the breast over the sink has turned into a tap." Ní Chuilleanáin portrays the mind grasping the real and the ideal simultaneously: "The stairs and windows waiver but the house stands up." Thus, she intimates that poetic imagination allows her combined images of house and mother to "stand up" in spite of their difference in reality. (Conboy 66)

"The House Remembered" is not a house characterised by succinct details of childhood reminiscence. Rather, it is a representation of the enticing but inaccessible conceptualisation of memory, which is intricately and irreversibly coupled with forgetting. The desire to access the past is mocked by the conclusion of the poem, where the house again and again gives way to new interpretative possibilities: "The stairs and windows waver but the house stands up; / Peeling away the walls another set shows through" (55). Finally, the speaker gives in to the emotional burden of forgetting to remember and only remembers to forget: "I can't remember, it all happened too recently. / But somebody was born in every room." However, no information is disclosed about the people who were born in the house, and so they remain identified by it. Thus, the house remembered is also the house forgotten, and Ní Chuilleanáin yet again calls attention to knowledge which is stored but not given away. The reader's gaze has followed the visual representation of a building, but rather than seeing it clearly, has been rewarded with hearing the silence of the unsaid.

Ní Chuilleanáin's rich architectural imagery offers a wide range of possibilities for discussing spatial misdirection. Poems like "Fireman's Lift" (10), "The Architectural Metaphor" (14), and "The Glass House" (21), to mention only a few examples from *The Brazen Serpent*, direct the reader's attention inwards, into the silent interiors of buildings and their representation. In poems where the gaze remains "outdoors," the geography of the landscape takes over the role of architecture, calling attention to the peculiar deposits of stored knowledge. Whether inside or outside, Ní Chuilleanáin's cryptic spaces invoke ambivalence and misdirection, confirming the poet's strategy of generating meaning within the silent liminal.

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