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Meeting through/in Languages Q&A with Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin about *The Mother House*

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Abstract:

The interview was conducted on the occasion of Conci Mazzullo's translation of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry collection *The Mother House* (The Gallery Press, 2019), which is published in this issue of *Studi irlandesi*. The conversation was inspired by cultural and linguistic complicity, and it touches on Ní Chuilleanáin's interest in courageous nuns in convents, personal experiences tied to great losses, and significant events in Irish History.

Keywords: Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, Interview, Languages, *The Mother House*

This interview developed in different moments, starting in September 2021 while I was in Tavernelle, near Perugia, for the Festival "Riflessi DiVersi"¹, invited by Eiléan, to read some of my translations from *The Mother House*², which has won "The Irish Times Poetry Now Award", 2020.

In that occasion I started asking questions about the poems I had just translated enquiring about its sources of inspiration and Eiléan and I finally ended up recalling and commenting on deeply interesting cultural and historical issues and on her personal experiences.

¹ "Riflessi Diversi – I poeti irlandesi ci raccontano - 2021", is an event, organized every year by Fernando Trilli in Magione and in Perugia at the University for Foreigners, where Irish and Italian poets and translators read their works.

² Ní Chuilleanáin (2019b), The excerpts from the poems included in *The Mother House* and in Ní Chuilleanáin's other collections appear by kind permission of the author and The Gallery Press (<www.gallerypress.com>).

*CM: I'd like to start with a very interesting lecture you delivered as poet-critic at Queen's University, Belfast on the 28th March 2019, which was published in *Instead of a Shrine*³. In this essay you referred to the poetry of 17th century England and analysed poems connected with death ceremonies. Why did you make the parallelism between poetry and ritual so relevant?*

ENC: Because after my husband MacDara's⁴ death some people quoted the poem by Henry King⁵ and I was very struck by this in their letters of sympathy. I have always been interested in external rituals.

CM: The same happened to Joyce who was fascinated by the Catholic church rituals and, when in Rome, he would go to the Vatican or other churches to see the priests' performances as if he were audience in a theatre.

ENC: Also for my research on the History of Reformation, people would attack priests making a cross at Baptism, some would protest, while others would look for a clergyman who did that. But rituals are social phenomena as well. For example, in Italy, when crossing a door, if you have to cross a threshold you would say: 'Permesso', not in Ireland. The nuns in my school would take a shortcut to go through the chapel, but would always genuflect in front of the altar. They used to wear very long skirts which came down to the ground, but they would tuck them up while teaching, while working, showing their grey petticoats. While instead when they went to pray, or had to meet the bishop in the parlour, they would, very unobtrusively, let them down.

CM: Did they do this to be more proper?

ENC: They were proper all the time, that was appropriate for work. Yet rituals are not only connected with religion, Universities have their rituals, states have their own. Ritual is a way of qualifying space.

*CM: I read an interesting review of *The Brazen Serpent*⁶, where the interviewer Lucy McDiarmid, pointed out that women had managed to create alternative rituals coming from women's folk tradition. She says that 'mysteriously resonant women appear as sacramental as their gestures' Where does your female sensitivity insert in this consonance between poetry and feminine rituals?*

ENC: I think McDiarmid referred to fairies. I suppose women had their own typical rituals.

*CM: Your essay about Pearse Hutchinson⁷ is vibrant, lively and touching. I found it particularly revealing when you referred to him as somebody who would not totally master several languages. He was so curious to capture the different nuances of meaning turning his initial non awareness into a challenge to discover new cultural realities, I felt that both of us have pursued the same route while talking to each other not sharing a mother tongue, in Italian or English. This perception would have always got to extremes when the two of us analysed stylistic or linguistic choices and discussed about translating your poems and pinning down the most suitable right terms. When I decided to translate the complete text of *The Mother House* and got a copy, I immediately felt connected with it when I*

³ Ní Chuilleanáin (2019d).

⁴ MacDara Woods (1942-2018), was an Irish poet, one of the most prominent of his generation, cofounder of the literary magazine *Cyphers*, and a member of Aosdana, the Irish Arts Council's affiliation recognising outstanding contribution to the arts in Ireland. He is the author of 20 collections of poetry. With his wife Eiléan he lived part of the year in Umbria.

⁵ King (1919 [1912]).

⁶ McDiarmid (1996). Ní Chuilleanáin (2019c)

⁷ Ní Chuilleanáin (2019e, 1-20).

saw the photo of the sculpture on the front cover, I recognized the papier maché “Giotto’s Circle” by the sculptor Janet Mullarney⁸ whose work we admired at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin.

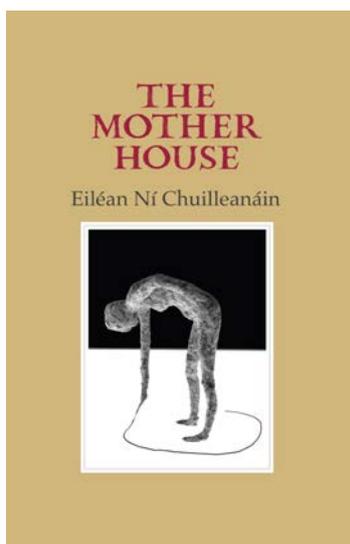


Figure 1 – Cover of *The Mother House* (2019), with Janet Mullarney’s “Giotto’s Circle”
Reproduced by kind permission of The Gallery Press, <www.gallerypress.com>

CM: Why did you choose this image to illustrate the Irish edition of The Mother House?

ENC: Janet’s sculpture ... I liked the image of a woman focused on her activity. She doesn’t ask to be looked at.

CM: She defies what is considered the feminine canon that for centuries had women as object for portraits and nudes. Why are you so fascinated by religious women in convents?

ENC: Because I had three aunts who were nuns, and once I eavesdropped on them telling in French about their experience during the Second World War in Scotland, France and Belgium when they worked to support people in distress or wounded. Two aunts worked in hospitals; it was their normal work. And I saw in them strong, powerful women willing to cooperate.

CM: You once told me about your impressions when you first went to Naples with your family and you were a child. What did you feel then?

ENC: In 1955 when we first went to Naples I was impressed by naked children, destroyed houses and by grandiose churches still standing because I was used to Irish churches built before 1800, which were destroyed and abandoned. Because of Penal Laws⁹ Catholic people couldn’t

⁸ Janet Mullarney (1952-2020), sculptor. She studied in Florence and was known for “incorporating an extensive range of materials including bronze, wood, plaster, foam, cloth, glass and wax, her dynamic sculptural works reference religious iconography, art history and human relationships” <<https://imma.ie/collection/alpha-and-omega/>> (05/2022).

⁹ The Irish Confederate Wars resulted in much destruction of church property. Irish Catholics were severely persecuted under Oliver Cromwell. The introduction of the Penal Laws (17th and 18th century) forbade the practice of Roman Catholicism, (xvii-xviii century), and as a result priests and bishops had to hide or escape.

meet to pray or go to Mass; everything had to be done in hidden places in the mountains – the so called “Mass rocks” were used as altars – or in private houses.

CM: In fact, in your poems “An Imperfect Enclosure for Nano Nagle¹⁰ (1718-1784)” and “A Map of Convents” you are telling about Nano Nagle building up a convent in Cork. Why did you send me to take pictures of Nano Nagle’s convent? Why did you put “An Imperfect Enclosure” just at the beginning of the collection of poems?

ENC: This was the collection where I thought I would finally have my say about convents so I put this poem first.

CM: In the same poem you hint at what Protestants could think about her what do you think, do you agree with it? What menace could women gathering to pray pose? “The house she built first, giving /on the street – could she close up /doors and windows on that side? It would be noticed as a convent”.

ENC: Nano Nagle’s convent seems to me a turning point in the history of Ireland and of Cork city. And I am fascinated by the seedy parts of the city after growing up in the College. The threat was because the nuns had been educated in France, Catholic education being forbidden in Ireland.



Figure 2 – Photo taken in the cemetery of the Convent of Nano Nagle in Cork. Photo by Conci Mazzullo

¹⁰ Nano Nagle (1718-1784) devoted her life to the poor people and uneducated children of Cork. She founded seven schools and an almshouse for poor women and the Order of the Presentation Sisters. She was a very courageous woman, and did all this under the Penal Laws, when opening a Catholic School could lead her to three months imprisonment.

CM: *In The Mother House there is a lot of sorrow mixed with daily realities connected with your personal experience as for example in “Hofstetter’s Serenade”¹¹ and “The Morandi Bridge”¹², how can you blend daily life, serene images and language with really desperate moments of your life?*

ENC: But I don’t think the images in “The Morandi Bridge” or “The Unreconcile” are serene at all.

CM: *As I have previously said in Studi irlandesi A Journal of Irish Studies 2020¹³, the first poem is related to your sister’s death and to the legacy of the thread of ‘pure sound’ music she left you, while the second poem refers to your husband’s loss. What did you feel and think when you heard that the Morandi Bridge had collapsed?*

ENC: I felt that I wanted to tell MacDara about this awful news without realizing he had died three months before.

CM: *In the poem you are reminiscing “you and I drove along slowly [...] behind a small Fiat, packed and weighed down /with people, cake and flowers for a mother-in-law / that made a Sunday lunch” and you added something related to geology, what did you hope?*

ENC: As I said in the poem I hoped that “the stone of the world / could carry language”.

CM: *Is “Allow Plenty of Time”, related to Macdara’s illness?*

ENC: Yes, while he was in hospital I would dash from class to him. After he died, I felt all my energy drained, I kept saying to myself why I was so anxious about trifling things?

CM: *I gave my interpretation about it. By doing so you wouldn’t think of your great sorrow and loss while you were experiencing it. After forty-eight years together it was a self-help way of behaving to try to fill the void, so as not to think of the abysmal loss.*

What about the poem “The Unreconcile”? As we were commenting on the lexical choice of “goccia” in my translation of the final stanza, you pointed out that it was connected with “Andromaca’s tears, the little river she invented” and the painful “men and women [who are] crying in underground hospital car parks [while] no river and no rain can wash any of this away”.

Why did you choose “The Unreconcile” among those I had to read in Perugia? Is there any connection with your hospital life during Macdara’s final moments?

ENC: Yes, there is, but there’s also reference to my sister’s illness, “A woman in London queuing in Outpatients [...]” is her.

CM: *You once said to me that you don’t feel like writing on pandemics, that you can’t write poems on demand after something dreadful happened. How did you go through the period of the pandemics?*

¹¹ See <<https://oajournals.fupress.net/index.php/bsfm-sijis/article/view/11771>> (05/2022).

¹² The Morandi Bridge in Genoa, officially Polcevera Viaduct, a concrete bridge built between 1963 and 1967, along the A10 motorway, was called Morandi Bridge after Roberto Morandi its designer. It collapsed during a rainstorm in August 2018: 43 people died and 600 were left homeless. The new bridge was designed by the internationally renowned architect Renzo Piano and was inaugurated in June 2019.

¹³ See Mazzullo 2020, 309-311.

ENC: My son Niall went shopping for me and brought me food and necessary stuff for living and every Wednesday he would come to eat a pizza with me and keep me company. And I reread the *Comedy*.

CM: Why did you choose to approach Dante again? Was it dictated by academic engagements or intimate necessity?

ENC: As you know Dante is my favourite poet. Academic engagements have kept me close to Dante because of teaching the literature of the English Renaissance, but with poetry it is always the feeling that leads me to the allusion.

CM: You probably don't remember but my graduate student recorded you reading your poems inspired by the Comedy on Dantedì at the Istituto Italiano di Cultura, in Dublin, 25 March 2021. My students at university were fascinated by the souls trying to get on the boat, and by the whirlwind and the airs of Love in Paolo and Francesca solemnly remembered in the poem "For James Connolly". Why did you choose those Dante references connected with water and air for your lines?

ENC: The answer to both of those questions is almost the same. I cannot hope to reproduce the effect of Dante's Italian, but he is a poet of such astonishing imagery that the images are held in my mind somewhere very close to the surface. So when I reach for a way to express something that has not quite found a shape it is often something from Dante that comes to mind. A motive in relation to the Connolly poem is also that Connolly spoke Italian, he learned it in America so as to be able to reach the Italian workers in New Jersey when working as a Union organizer. Dante is like Atlas holding up the sky, a sky so populated with complex mechanisms of meaning, like constellations.

CM: I've always known that Dante deeply touched you. Who are the other poets inspiring you?

ENC: Kavafis and Yeats from whom I learnt a lot about rhythm and language. The real inspiration comes from the poets I read when I was young: Charles Baudelaire, Elizabeth Bishop, Donne, Spenser, Milton, Sidney, Eibhlín Dhubh Ní Chonaill.

CM: I'm sure that all the cofounders of Cyphers, Pearse Hutchinson, MacDara Woods, Leland Bardwell were your travel companions throughout your poetic career, What did each of them leave you to make yours?

ENC: I lived so long in the company of my fellow editors that I think I must have absorbed everything I was capable of. I am not conscious of a legacy of poetry but can hear their voices when I try to judge a poem.

CM: I share your feeling and I am pretty sure that they read and criticised your poems. Were there other critics who you liked commenting on your lines?

ENC: Seamus Heaney who once said "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"¹⁴.

¹⁴ See the Gallery Press website page on Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's collection *The Girl Who Married the Reindeer* (2001) <<https://gallerypress.com/product/the-girl-who-married-the-reindeer-eilean-ni-chuilleanain/>> (05/2022).

CM: Which of your poems did Seamus Heaney like best?

ENC: Well, there is an interesting experience we shared. He chose two poems of mine for an anthology published by Poetry Ireland in 1999. We were also invited to a poetry reading and I wasn't particularly happy about "The Horses of Meaning"¹⁵, but he liked it and said not to change anything.

CM: Where does your idea of being a poet come from?

ENC: Because I wanted to experience rivalry with my mother who was a writer of prose and earned a living out of it. I wanted to try something more difficult which did not guarantee money. In a certain way I disappointed both my parents who expected me to become a novelist. But it was probably because of my mother who tuned my ears to poetry as she often read poems to us children.

CM: In *The Mother House* there is a poem which really struck me deeply "A Room Full of Seicento Frames". How come you came up with this graphic image of empty frames?

ENC: I saw an interesting exhibition on the 1st April, Fool's Day 2015 in London at the National Gallery called *Frames in Focus: Sansovino Frames* showing 30 early baroque frames of the Florentine architect and sculptor Sansovino. I was so fascinated by the hallmark of the Sansovino's curling scroll motif, his branches of grapes and cherubs or full rams' heads and bare breasted woman that I gave life to them in this poem.

CM: By the way in this poem you also focus on the missing scene from the frames: "The scenes were all missing, though the guarded ovals [that] / bleed and reek.." were depicted when painters were advised "o observe executions, to capture / the reality, to get it right". Where did you get this cruel, realistic images of artists having to assist to these execrable performances?

ENC: While I was doing my research on Counter-Reform I came across a very interesting book written by Gabriele Paleotti *Discourse on Sacred and Profane Images, 1582* and he suggested that artists should observe executions and also frequent slaughterhouses.

CM: Have you got plans for this year?

ENC: I want to celebrate Leland Bardwell's¹⁶ centenary, the 100th anniversary of her birth, and write the introduction to the edition of her *Collected Poems*.

CM: In *The Mother House* there is a vibrant powerful poem called "Raging Foam for Leland Bardwell (feb.1922-June 2016)", dedicated to her reckless brilliant adventurous life as a poet and mother. Why did you refer to the sea, which has always been your leitmotif in other poems as in "Seaweed", to celebrate her? The second stanza strikes as affectionate and revealing when you say: "The foam breaks and withdraws. /It's a scatter of moments remembered, /my life, her life; and I

¹⁵ In *The Girl Who Married the Reindeer*, (2019a).

¹⁶ Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin and Brian Leyden on Leland Bardwell, in *Books for Breakfast 47: Leland Bardwell at 100* <https://www.buzzsprout.com/1162427/10513176?fbclid=IwAR14HoCHU_fYeYauelpcQ1rEzLOQuXS7Y-Hllu5_LJGKUbnV0ipZj4Q8w6nQ> (05/2022).

gather them all up, /old scenes that are broken rumours /thrown high by the waves' or in 'and looking down now in the profound/bay of memory, trying to guess how deep, / I see her [...] to read in a clear /Ladylike voice, the night Patrick Kavanagh died [...]'.

ENC: The sea... when I started seriously writing poetry I was in love with a marine biologist and he was in love with the sea. It has left its mark.

CM: Thanks, lovely talking to you!

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Writings

