

The Map of the World

La mappa del mondo

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin

Translated and introduced by Conci Mazzullo



Mapping Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's Etceteras

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Abstract:

This introduction deals with the idea of mapping Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's latest collection of poems *The Map of the World* (2023). Inspired by Umberto Eco's *The Infinity of Lists* (2009), it combines two analytic approaches of mapping her poems, focusing on both definite synchronic maps and limitless Etceteras.

Keywords: Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, Etceteras, Irish Poetry, Mapping, *The Map of the World*

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's latest collection, *The Map of the World*¹, shortlisted for the 2023 T.S. Eliot Prize (2023), stands out for its height, its synchronic and diachronic strength, and its incisiveness; its impact can be compared to that of the powerful 2020 *Collected Poems*, a vast anthology including poems from *Acts and Monuments* (1972) to 2020.

The idea of the map has often run through the poetic vein of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin. To better illustrate and interpret the way it has worked so far, I will borrow Umberto Eco's thesis from 2009's *The Infinity of Lists*². Eco refers to two kinds of representations of possible worlds in Homer's Iliad. The first is a description of the shield of Achilles forged by the god Hephaestus for him, after his original shield was taken by Hector. There was shown "the whole of the cosmos (from the stars in the sky to the sheep in the fields)" (Beard 2009) contained within the solid, firm frame of the shield. In the second, "there is that open-ended list of military forces, [...] of the poem, with all its indeterminacy and allusions to infinity, euphemistically known as 'The Catalogue of Ships' [...] dominated by a 350-line list of the various Greek forces that made up the 'coalition of the willing' in the invasion of Troy" (*ibidem*). Eco clearly shows which style of

¹ Short-listed for the T.S. Eliot Prize 2023, the collection is "among the 10-strong books of poems for the prestigious award" (Iorizzo 2023).

² Umberto Eco's book was produced in collaboration with the Louvre while he was writer in residence there.

presentation he prefers: the infinite list. Eco's enthusiasm for the sheer abundance of meaning and the uncontrollable excess that supports the second representation, projects endless lists of chiefs and leaders, ending with immense promising Etceteras.

And it is impossible to ignore the fact that Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin makes use of both, the shield of Achilles, nailing down complete definite scenes, (stories, also in memory of artists, poets, family members) and, hypertexts, capturing historical events, highlighting personal memories and memories of the collective through maps of indefinite times and places, and Etceteras.

Her poems are both powerfully synchronic and diachronic in the poet's attempt to capture the essence of life, art, culture, history, geography, language, languages, translations, journeys, etcetera, as in the medieval Summae. Her hypertexts are overwhelming, 'fascinated' by her reading and interpretation of endless places and images that, despite their infinite number, point to her unique poetic world.

At first, you may get lost as she follows maps through her new collection, but later you'll find them as subtexts that will eventually lead you to discover your inner worlds. Following her journey, the maps may disappear at times, but by following them, you can trace infinite worlds like Calvino's Kan's dreams in *Invisible Cities* (Calvino 1974), and end up tracking down limitless trajectories of places, people, visions, visionary realities, untold stories, portraits, historical events, sensations, colours, mysteries and Etceteras!

I once asked her what relationship she had with maps and if she was fascinated by them. I certainly knew she loved them because they meant travelling; I also wanted to know if she had a globe in her house, and if she loved geography, and I was not surprised by her reply: "I hated geography as it was very badly taught, loved maps because they made it possible to understand history and then discovered geography again. Also travel of course [...] Yes, we had a globe. In 1950 it was covered in red for the British empire. Apart from the red-spattered globe I think the influential map in my childhood was the one of the tuppenny stamp. The British were furious that it showed the whole island"³.

The fascination of mirabilia, the vertigo of limitless as in Astolfo's world in Ariosto (Bead 2009) can be traced through Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's macrotext and her new collection. Maria Johnston defines her poetry in *The Map of the World* as an art of memory, metaphor and metamorphosis, travelling through the Earthly and the Cosmic (Johnston 2023). Furthermore *Voices at the Edge, Irish Poets on Skellig Michael* (Bushe 2010) certainly carries an important testimony to maps in "Indoors", one of a series of six poems that begin and end with two texts both called: "Vertigo" (1. *The Litany*, 2. *The Storm*, 3. *Indoors*, 4. *Direction*, 5. *Outdoors*, 6. *Vertigo*, 111-117):

The map of a language
Spilling across a border. (113)

According to Marie Heaney, "Skellig Michael [is] a natural magnet for writers" (Heaney 2010, 11), and "This otherworldly place inevitably brings most of the poets to reflect on the fundamentals of human existence: time and eternity, the past and the future [...] Some are ambushed by memories [...] Others have experiences that border on the visionary" (12). And so it was for Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin who climbed the stairs carved by the monks and anchorites, with other poets on an artistic venture, and felt the *vertigo* of being there. In 2009 a group of poets and a photographer were invited to enjoy the island for some days exploring its unique fascination of "genius loci" and inspiring them to write poems, captured by the wilderness of a

³ From a conversation with Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin.

high rock lashed by the wind and sea. Here the map expands through her creative imagination and overflows boundaries. As Jerry Brotton writes: “A map is a way of projecting [man] in the environment, and therefore it is more a symbol of [his] own existence rather than a tool for orienting [himself]” (Brotton 2015, 7, my translation). Maps are also a “graphic representations that facilitate a spatial understanding of things, concepts, conditions, processes, or events in the human world”(19).

Thanks to these definitions Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin’s poem “St. Brigid’s Well” fits well with man’s projection in the environment as she actually searches for the Saint’s wells. The poem was commissioned for “St. Brigid’s Well, Lá Fhéile Bríde” an event held at Hamilton Gallery in Sligo in 2022 that sponsored a project of 101 women artists who were inspired in different ways by lines in Ní Chuilleanáin’s poem to create paintings, culminating in a final exhibition in Sligo and the publication of a catalogue prefaced by the poet herself (Hamilton Gallery 2022). The same exhibition was shown at Nanchizi Art Museum in Beijing⁴ on 1st February 2024 to celebrate St. Brigid and Irish women, with Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin as guest of honour and *primo motore immobile* of the whole project. In the “Introduction” to the Catalogue, Ní Chuilleanáin writes: “[...] I was looking for more signs of her presence, and for the people to whom the holy well had meaning”. The poet, doing her research, going through the map of the wells, remarks: “but I could not have anticipated how many surprises and mysteries I would encounter in the space of two days wandering around [...] Stories, phrases, conversations overheard. In the poem I wrote I couldn’t cram all those details inside its boundaries. [They] are welling up out of history” (Hamilton Gallery 2022).

And the poem reads:

[...]
 If I wanted a map that would just show the wells,
 the culverted streams, the short cuts, they came,
 they congregated, they insisted,
 [...]
 I heard the mill stream splashing downhill,

and here the map is pointing to:

[...]
 the excess of water, the excess of all the stories
 I might have heard, as I searched for St. Brigid’s well.

Through the power of water Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin evokes “the perfect image of what cannot be represented [...] only made visible by its contexts: its courses and wells [...] Water is like everything and nothing and the triumph of the image maker is to capture and reveal it (*ibidem*).

There are other maps in her poetry, however, all leading to *The Map of the World*. In her previous collection, *The Mother House* (2019), maps are to be found in “A Map of Convents

⁴ The exhibition is now on at the Nanchizi Art Museum in Beijing, China, courtesy of Ireland’s Ambassador to China Ann Derwin and the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs.

‘Cove Lane’ ” revealing Nano Nagle’s⁵ dream of secretly setting up a convent in Cork during Penal Laws⁶ challenging the British establishment:

Here is the map with the underground streams,
 [...] the walled islands,
 and the fine gardens. There was another map,
 of a different place, in her head; she told nobody.
 [...]
 The map of the city never showed
 those children swiftly assembling
 into a parliament of girls and boys. (14)

Amazingly, today Nano Nagle’s map needs a real map of the world to trace all the settlements of the Presentation Sisters across the continents, from Europe, America, Africa, Asia to New Zealand.

By mapping the poet’s maps, within her macrotext, we finally get to “The Blood Map” which reveals her grief as she struggles against the hardship she experienced during Ní Chuilleánáin’s husband⁷ serious unexpected health misadventures, allowing an interminable chain of places, like rosary beads, to follow the stages of his pilgrimage through various hospitals:

The map in my head is coloured with the places
 where they took your blood, Ostia,
 [...]
 In Madonna Alta
 they sucked three red tubes out of your arm;
 in Castiglione Fosco they rewrote the prescription
 [...]
 in Terontola
 we took an hour’s break (Ní Chuilleánáin 2020, 364),

finally leading to a useless solution.

In the new collection, *The Map of the World* (2023), seven maps, out of thirty-five poems, interspersed throughout the text, brim to the surface, as in “Air: The Map of the World”, both in the title and in the poem itself:

The map had told us already what would happen to the peoples of the west —

⁵ Honora Nagle (c.1718-1784), known as Nano Nagle, was the founder of the Presentation Sisters. She was declared venerable in 2013 by Pope Francis.

⁶ Penal Laws did not allow education for Catholics in Ireland, and as “operating a Catholic School could result in three months imprisonment, Nano had to work in secret. She began by opening a school for young girls next to the actual site at Nano Nagle Place in the early 1750s. This girls’ school focused on reading, writing, Catechism (Catholic religious instruction) and needlework”, <<https://nanonagleplace.ie/the-story-of-nano-nagle/>> (05/2024).

⁷ Macdara Woods (1942-2018), poet and founder-editor of *Cyphers*, a journal of Irish and international poetry. In 1986 he was elected as member of Aosdána, an organization that “over its 40years has honoured artists whose work has made an outstanding contribution to the creative arts in Ireland”, <<http://aosdana.artscouncil.ie/general/the-arts-council-announces-aosdana-beginnings-by-mark-duncan/>> (05/2024).

opening up horizons of migration, journeys beyond the unknown, to England and America nourishing the sense of grief and loss:

[...] *they don't come back from America,
they comes back from England, not America, they never comes back* — (13)

Another interesting, cathartic surface map finds its way into the multiple narrative of “Echo is dumb”. It unfolds uncharted spaces where Eiléan feels Macdará’s absence as she moves through history, “the century of war and the climb towards peace” (18), Andrew Marvell’s politics and poetry, and her memories guided by a map:

[...] I remember, when the map led us
to La Verna, we came,
climbing through the slim tree-trunks
and the tailor was there, a pilgrim
where St Francis came searching for peace. (19)

Maps also appear in the poem “The Conversation” dedicated to her friend Philip Casey:

[...] To reach it again, though,
you have to pause. The map is crumpled up,
East Arran Street hidden between the folds
where nobody searches now. (20)

These lines show the forgotten map of his address, despite his great popularity in generously running a digital platform “as founder and editor of the website Irish Writers Online, providing biographical details of Irish writers” (Doyle 2018) and of his colleague poets thanks to his indefatigable will. But Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin is eager to capture more of his nature. Her lines

[...] I want a likeness
taken somewhere on his travels
[...] but the years he gave away to the big conversation
afford his best presence, a voice
that speaks, that knows its right to a hearing

exalt and well complement her devoted obituary on the *Irish Times*: “Stories of him dancing on his prosthetic leg in Sicily, tales of his travels in Germany and Spain, remind me of what a thirst he had [...] still writing poetry and fiction with aplomb, still exploring ways of putting technology at the service of the literary community [...] But poetry was really at the heart of his writing life.” (Ní Chuilleanáin in Doyle 2018).

By following her maps, we also land on “Seasons of the Lemon House” and welcome her concern for lemon trees and unexpected climate behaviour:

[...] Now on the edge, where the climate shifts.
Spreading across the map, the lemon trees are safe (Ní Chuilleanáin 2023, 29),

while in “Instructions to an Architect” we share the sense of freedom felt in an imaginary cave hidden under a quilt:

[...]
 The child knew her bunk was all the space she needed,
 her quilt a cave, her map of freedom. (30)

So far, maps have surfaced through her poems, mentioned as nouns to mark their presence, thus showing cameos and synchronic definite images and examples of realities that are easy to pin down. But there are other maps to be tracked down, and they can only be reached following her endless wanderings. Through *Etceteras*, tracing subterranean streams that surface and drawing other substantial maps, Ní Chuilleanáin’s pursuit will traverse maps of colour and art, historical maps, memory maps, other poets’ maps, and cosmic maps. And in fact, a hidden map of the new collection is unexpectedly revealed in Nano Reid’s painting “Horse at the Gate”⁸, depicted on the front cover with its soft and delicate tones. It belongs to one of the most important maps, the map of colours, pointing to the well-known painter who challenged catholic morality with the picture of a man with an orange stuck in his groin, that she eventually had to overpaint to appease public modesty. And the poet comments:

[...]
 We could not capture the painter’s
 leaf-thin imaginings:
 the young man with an orange
 stuffed in his groin — she painted
 over that nude vision,
 [...]
 In which brown overcoat?
 Is that him, hesitating
 hunched in the rainy twilight? (23);

here the orange and the nude colour of the naked skin sway and mix. But the map of colours and Art projects also into “A Shadow in Her Notebook” referring to the well-known stained glass artist Helen Moloney⁹, whose strong and contrasting colours overlap, issuing vibrant sensations:

She sent a ten-pound note to the Poor Clares
 and imagined them in their brown habits,
 [...]
 They sent her a fish, swimming
 [...]

⁸ Nano Reid (1900-1981) was an Irish modernist painter. “She was best known for presenting typically ‘Irish’ subject matter in an idiosyncratic, abstract style”, <<https://thebridgetcd.com/2018/05/28/nano-reid-artist-profile/>> (05/2024).

⁹ Helen Moloney (1926-2011) was a modernist Irish stained glass artist known for her work with architect Liam McCormick in 1960s and 1970s. “Moloney’s simple but bold designs, stylised and often semi-abstract, harmonised with the modernism of McCormick’s architecture, and her preference for strong primary colours complemented his customarily white surfaces”, <<https://www.dib.ie/biography/moloney-helen-a9896>> (05/2024). Her works can be admired in a number of churches, in particular in St Michael’s Church Creeslough, Donegal.

in the dark water. They sent her a lion, then a star.
 [...] The lion raised his paw,
 coloured like the sun, glowing now

against a glass curtain, such a blue
 it seemed a kind of night. The darkened interior
 sucked in colours.
 [...] *But could it not be clear glass?*
 No.
 [...] the woman
 dressed in brown,
 [...] they gathered around her clean white page, demanding
 indigo glass (16)

If in “A Shadow of Her Notebook” the dense colours of the stained glass saturate darkness, in “Instructions to an Architect”, architectural metaphors are evoked through Petrarca’s poem: “Rotta è l’alta Colonna”, in which he mourns Laura, the love of his life and a friend. Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin says: “[...] make sure that the high window frames a chosen scene, a tall distant pillar [...] suddenly split, fractured from the inside”, next to the crashing giants defeated by the gods in Palazzo Te, near Mantua.¹⁰

Ní Chuilleanáin’s words:

[...]
 In a closed room of giants, I saw a tense fellow
 who from the beginning needed more space, yet
 pushed up his burden of stacked storeys
 and only slowly forced to his knees
 [...]

The “Room of Giants” is perfectly in keeping with and Ní Chuilleanáin’s and Giulio Romano’s aim of breaking down architectural boundaries to free them from spatial edges concealing the shifts from horizontal to vertical planes, smoothing out the corners of the walls, and throwing the viewer inside it.

But what I found more subtle, intimate and personal was the “map of hair” that resonates “Muriel Gifford After Her Fever” and “In Ostia, August 2020” (Ní Chuilleanáin 2023, 26, 33) which traces a map of the poet’s latest memories through a map of her hair, and “The Ash-tree at My Window” (28) which defines her relationship with her new self after Macdara’s death.

The first poem lives through the parallelism of combing, brushing and caring for the hair of Muriel Gifford and Ní Chuilleanáin’s hair after a fever and Covid:

[...]
 is it called *fever?* the weariness
 that comes after fever, even too weak to brush my hair?
 [...] The long strand of memory twisted and blended

¹⁰ Palazzo Te, is one of the most beautiful Renaissance villas in Italy. It was designed by Giulio Romano (1525-1535) for Federico II Gonzaga.

[...]
 In those days they cut your hair off if you'd had had a fever,
 but Muriel's hair was lovely,
 her husband prevented them cutting,
 he sat beside her [...]

carefully combing [...]
 stroking every long hair free
 [...]
 When I finish my hair I'm too weak to begin the day
 putting on your heavy carved ring,

And here the poet's memory entwines Irish revolutionary past with MacDonagh and his wife evoking historical events when both of them were

[...]
 swept
 away, as they were swept
 by the firing squad and the stifling, coiling wave. (26)

"In Ostia, August 2020", the poet recalls her first night in Italy after the Covid pandemics and the loss of her husband:

My first night in Italy since the whole world changed –
 [...]
 but also, as before, they think I am German –
 because of my hair? Because I'm old and travelling alone?
 There is food, and a glass, and I am alone. (33)

Similarly, in "The Ash-tree at My Window", the poet, reflecting on her own physical and mental state, dwells on feelings of loneliness:

[...]
 For five years no one has lived beside me,
 my bones are bare, my spine is a tree stem
 threatened with dieback.

My room on the top floor is a green cage,
 Spring is here and the ash tree is flowing
 up to the window,
 [...]
 The bare ideogram announcing *Tree*
 changes annually to a flourish
 of intimate leaves,

[...] Please,
 hide me in summer. (28)

As Ní Chuilleánáin has often stated, Dante has always been her main source of inspiration and she has often reread the *Comedy*, most recently during the Covid pandemics. In “The Universe in 1300” three stanzas pursue the three Cantos of *Hell*, *Purgatory* and *Paradise*:

I never fitted in that windy place –
but neither did they. A face, a runner
one instant in a frame, a body stuffed
half underground, they twisted
in search of rest like ancients in their beds,

Here she refers to Canto XIX of *Inferno*, where the Simoniacs are punished by being half buried, head down. These are clerics, even bishops and popes, who, speculating on the administration of the sacraments, despised the power of the grace received. The sacraments, powerful signs and places of divine grace, such as baptism and baptismal font, act as symbols and places where the Simoniacs find their punishment. There is also reference to Brunetto Latini¹¹ as the runner figure. The second stanza of the poem, “The Circle of the Prodigals”, on the other hand, is linked to Canto XIX of the *Purgatorio*, in which the sinners remember what they did to be punished:

[...]
I spent the legacy they earned,
those ancestors that served their time
in the convent and the internment camp
refining the skills they'd studied
in homes of modest, anxious labour, of long hours
gazing at the accounts, bare bedrooms.

I spent it all on the followers of love not war
who knew where the keys of intoxication were buried;
they dealt in bribes, their lives, their bodies, currency. (14)

The third and last stanza includes a fascinating reference to a hypothetical solar eclipse, as we find in the final verses of Canto XXV of *Paradiso*, where Dante feels blinded as if he were looking at the sun when he looks at the divine light of Saint John. However, what makes Eiléan Ní Chuilleánáin's poem even more compelling, however, is that the poet relates Dante's episode to a real-life solar eclipse that she experienced with some friends:

[...]
We sat on the day of the solar eclipse.
It grew a little dark, the birds interrupted their song,
the boy ran for a shaving glass and a sheet.
We watched the moving star so far away
in the dark depth of the house. [...]. (15)

As a conclusion I would like to share the strong sense of vertigo the poet certainly felt on Skellig Michael which led her to ponder, as often, on some of her most compelling Etceteras:

¹¹ Brunetto Latini (c.1220-1294 or 1295) was Dante's teacher.

6. *The Litany*

[...]
 Steady though the long gap in the story
 [...]
 The soaking tears of centuries drill down
 Low passages in between the stones,
 [...]
 The wave can pause no longer, called back to Brazil. (Ní Chuilleanáin in Bushe 2010, 111),

and also led her to ask recurring questions through the rising and falling of waves:

2. *The Storm*

[...]
And where is truth under the slamming and roaring,
 [...]
Where is pity now? (112)

The quoted lines give us a strong direction to the reading of *The Map of The World*, a text which guides us through places, historical events, art, architecture, literary works, imagination, sensations, reflections, and portraits perceivable as infinite lists, letting us embark on a journey of limitless Etceteras and Etceteras.

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