Architectural metaphors: representations of the house in the poetry of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin and Vona Groarke

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Feminist criticism frequently employs metaphors of space to interrogate the position of women within society and their ability to articulate that position to a wider world. The idea of ‘clearing a space’ from which to speak suggests that for women freedom of expression can only be achieved in ‘empty’ space, space that is unmarked by ideological and aesthetic convictions. Yet such emptiness is impossible, since the speaking self must be meaningfully located. Space, both public and private, is closely related to the construction of identity and to its textual representation. This chapter examines the representation of the house by two contemporary women poets, arguing that the relationship between the speaking subject and the space of dwelling – and of writing – is a complex and contingent one. By examining poems from collections by Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin and Vona Groarke published since the early 1990s, the differing responses that the established poet and the younger writer have to concepts of house and home can be developed. As a site of exploration of self, and of the relationship between self and other, the house cannot be perceived as a fixed space. Like the poem itself, the house in its accretion of layers of meaning, in its ghosts of previous inhabitants and remembered experiences, facilitates the inter-relationship of past and present. It foregrounds issues of enclosure and freedom and raises questions concerning kinship and sexual relationships. Furthermore, it opens debates on identity and belonging that are central to any consideration of the dynamic between individual and national identity, both culturally and politically. It is this relationship between house and home, between the space and its emotional constructs, that will be the particular focus of this chapter.

Ideas of belonging have considerable political and cultural importance for the Irish writer, yet they also have larger implications for the act of writing itself:

Distinctions between home and exile (or alienation) have signified, variously, distinctions between silence and speech, writing and speech, the literal and the figurative, and, ultimately, the temporal and the divine.¹

In this way the dynamics of house and home affect the relationship between the speaking (or writing) subject and language. Whether speech or writing are possible, and what form such expressions may take, are issues of particular importance for the contemporary woman poet who often negotiates the difficult relationship between subject and object in her poems. By situating the self using a voice that can be identified and located the woman may gain power both through the act of self-articulation and through the assumption of a recognisable identity. Yet at the same time she surrenders the freedom of movement and self-definition that accompanies imaginative representations. The relationship between the speaker and the material world of the poem often reflects the contingent nature of 'home' for these poets: one interpretation sees the house as a space of security and sheltered intimacy; another, as a place of disenfranchisement for women. This double perspective problematises the act of representation, since it positions the home as both *of* the world and a shelter *from* the world (my italics). Gaston Bachelard argues that the house is experienced 'in its reality and in its virtuality',² which is significant here. For Irish women poets the house represents a material site, where their own roles as women can be explored, and an imaginative one, allowing them to structure the psychological explorations in their poems.

In the Ireland of the 1990s attitudes towards traditional social structures and roles underwent considerable change. At the beginning of the decade Mary Robinson was elected the Republic of Ireland's first female president and her liberal pluralist perspective, together with a committed attachment to human rights reform and feminist causes, reflected the forward-looking attitudes of a younger generation. This was a decade during which long-running debates on divorce and abortion paved the way for new legislation that weakened the influence of the Catholic Church on matters of state and offered women more control over their private lives.³ This change marked a radical shift in how younger women especially perceived and represented their sexual identities and their domestic commitments. For an older generation these issues were still marked by difficult negotiations and ambiguous feelings; for those born from the late 1960s onward unquestioned personal independence

was often the norm. As a result of this accelerated transition, much of what made Ireland 'home' had begun to change, though for those who had left Ireland to live and work abroad during the 1980s and 1990s the country often remained fixed in the past. Discussing writing of the diaspora, Justin Quinn asks 'What is the sell-by date of the "Ireland" that is being exported? One year? Or twenty? When does it stop being a true picture of the country or region the poet comes from?'⁴ For many Irish women poets, engagement with a changing Ireland meant rethinking the nature of their private and public selves. This is less true of poets emerging now, such as Leontia Flynn and Leanne O'Sullivan, whose negotiations of self are not restricted by these particular cultural dilemmas. At the beginning of the twenty-first century the house may enclose not a clearly defined unitary family but a series of relationships, some lasting, some transitory. Through the image of the house the poet may explore a concept of belonging necessarily altered – and further alterable – by the disintegration of traditions and by social mobility.

Ideas and ideals of the home have been central to nation-building in Ireland throughout the twentieth century, and are implicated in complex debates on origins and on belonging both north and south of the border. In the Republic the traditional primacy of the family both legislatively and socially had imbued the concept of home with a moral significance – through this ordering of human behaviour and relationships, a larger social order could be maintained. The operation of community could be seen in microcosm in the home and in its mediation of crucial forms of personal relationship. Thus Irish women experienced the house both practically and symbolically, much as the larger idea of home/land could be set against the actual experience and emotional construct of exile. Such ideas of home are necessarily inflected by problems of definition: borders become important in clarifying the difference between self and other, between those who belong and those who are excluded. Politically, these are linked to nationalist and revisionist debates on the meaning of Irish identity, but by the 1990s these positions had extended in scope and complexity:

An Ireland without frontiers is obviously an Ireland without borders. This does not, however, entail a 'united Ireland' in the traditional sense of the term. For the Nation-States of Britain and Ireland, which constitute the very basis for the opposing claims of nationalist and unionist ideologies, would be superseded by a European constellation of regions.⁵

The extent to which the European context would alter this dynamic is far from simple but the dramatic expansion of identity to include what was once outside its bounds is a feature of the newly cosmopolitan Ireland

that has implications for the experience of the individual. It is a development that creates complex emotional responses to identity as well as new readings of community. A sense of place remains strong among Irish women poets, in spite of the changing nature of the relationship between the individual and both cultural and domestic space. In confronting this relationship these poets use differing strategies to investigate singular and collective positions, from Eavan Boland's use of a landscape marked by history in 'My Country in Darkness'⁶ to Sinéad Morrissey's account of traversing a divided Belfast by taxi in 'Thoughts in a Black Taxi'.⁷ Just as the experience of the individual opens a larger debate on identity, so the house is associated not only with the interior space but with a greater relationship to place that is intensified by historical and political factors, which may include consideration of gender and class, geographical location and religious affiliation. Each representation must thus be placed in its cultural moment, yet must also be seen as part of the individual poet's development.

Heidegger viewed the home as an important site of spiritual unity between people and things: 'dwelling itself is always a staying with things'.⁸ The significance of things and of their contextual implications in Heidegger's work bears an interesting relation to the centrality of specific cultural factors for many of these poets. The house as both an actual and symbolic space began to resonate in different ways, depending both on social circumstances and on attitudes towards the newly contingent nature of belonging. Such distinctions find particular expression in the work of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, one of the finest and most complex poets to emerge in Ireland in the late twentieth century.⁹ She is not prolific and the careful progress of her work over almost four decades, together with the subtleties of the poems themselves, are indicative of the reflective quality of her process. Her poetry affirms the strength of her emotional connection to place and her understanding of the subtle tensions between different locations and cultures, between exile and belonging. 'For me, exile was the definition of isolation', she has said in interview; yet her concepts of 'home' invoke complex attitudes towards the relationship between the individual and the group.¹⁰ Her interest in religious communities can seem at odds with an increasingly secularised Ireland, yet it investigates historical realities that have had a significant shaping force on contemporary society. It foregrounds the intersection between lived experience and spiritual meaning, as well as exploring the ways in which tradition can be maintained and examined. In spite of its complexity, her poetry is never wilfully abstract but instead finds significance in the connections between experience and ideas:

Ní Chuilleánáin's poetry shows a strong interest in questions of an existential dimension, where the speaking subject is seen as an embodied subject, firmly situated at the point where the mind is inseparable from our bodily, physical nature and the poetic voice gives utterance to the interconnectedness of the physical and spiritual dimensions of human existence.¹¹

This level of interconnectedness has a further effect on the speaking subject in her poems. Ní Chuilleánáin establishes a voice that neither articulates an unequivocally singular experience, nor lays claim to a coherent shared narrative, but instead negotiates the shifting ground between these extremes.¹² From her earliest work the qualified nature of personal experience and observation has been important; one of the hallmarks of her poetry is its attention to what is only partially, or fleetingly, seen. Thus the house or home is not a space of assurance but one of tentative exploration. Her representation of Cork, the place of her birth and upbringing, emphasises the idea of 'home' as one that does not necessarily yield readily to either speaker or reader: 'Just visible, a glass window, / Blackness beyond / Half veiled by a net curtain'.¹³ This fleeting glimpse is a refutation of expected ideas of significance; instead place becomes an act of observation and a state of mind. Ní Chuilleánáin neither sentimentalises the city of her birth nor attempts to trace a secure domesticity. The periods of time she has spent abroad and her attachment to other cultures accords with the experience of many of her generation for whom a return to the home place can never be a simple one. This new mobility, both within Ireland and beyond its borders, alters ideas of belonging, often substituting an anonymous or rootless existence for an identifiable role in the community. Ní Chuilleánáin investigates this nuanced relationship between space and meaning by combining personal and cultural awareness in subtle ways.

A number of Ní Chuilleánáin's early poems, such as 'The Lady's Tower', negotiate the relationship between nature and human habitation: 'my thatch / Converses with spread sky, / Heronries'.¹⁴ It is a dynamic that is reminiscent of Heidegger's fourfold: "on the earth" already means "under the sky." Both of these *also* mean "remaining before the divinities" and include a "belonging to men's being with one another".¹⁵ These ways of placing the self, of asking what it means to exist, become more complex in the poetry of the 1990s, where the origins of the poet's images and ideas are harder to trace. In 'A Glass House' from *The Brazen Serpent* (1994) Ní Chuilleánáin again explores these perspectives, showing the solid structure of the house becoming transparent and giving way to a watery scheme:

In the clear salty pool
 Open to the tides, I am sinking

 Past open globes of eyes.
 I can see where the sandy floor
 Brushes away; a cloud floats
 Puffed into the shape of myself¹⁶

The pool is open to the tides, suggesting an enclosed space that is affected by magnetic forces. The relationship between the house and its surroundings is intensified by this transparency while the nature of concealment and visibility is highlighted, especially by the speaker's ability to see into previously hidden spaces. The speaker is open to the gaze of others and can herself engage in observation: the cloud of sand disturbed from beneath may also be the floating cloud of the unsettled day. This reflection upward and downward causes the sense of structure and fluidity to merge and disturbs our spatial sense of reading, so that the location of meaning here is always relational. It also contradicts any assumption that the house as an object must be fixed and contextualised. The final image of the poem, the crate of racing pigeons, conjures with ideas of displacement from home and the possibility of return there. The concept of home itself, whether it may indeed be recoverable, is interrogated in this way. This problem is finally connected to language, and to the difficulties that beset interpretation, since language is not always 'clear' but may be 'clouded' by its own forms and conventions, as well as by cultural accretions: 'It is language that tells us about the essence of a thing, provided that we respect language's own essence.'¹⁷ Here the poet implies that we may be required to move into another realm, to travel some distance, in order to interpret words meaningfully.

Vona Groarke's first collection, *Shale*, also published in 1994, is prefaced by a quotation from Elizabeth Bishop's 'The Riverman': 'I waded into the river / and suddenly a door / in the water opened inward'.¹⁸ Some of Bishop's ambiguous treatment of the movement between water and land, between different states of being, informs this book. The first five poems engage directly with bodies of water: the fourth of these, 'Sunday's Well', explores the relationship between individual identity and domestic space in ways that also disturb the clear establishing of boundaries. The poem opens with an apparent disruption of logical space: the open skylight admits the river – more probably the sound of the river – into the space of the room and the poem. Paradoxically, the river contains the *silence* of the city. This relationship between sound and silence becomes important, not only in the delicate contest that is

established between these but in the reminder that this, in many ways, is the stuff of which poetry itself is made. This poem resonates with mental disturbance; the dispersal of the self that results is metaphorically represented through the fear of being engulfed by water, yet it is not the speaking self but her books and letters, her texts, that risk this dispersal:

What will happen when morning has come
and my books and letters are washed up in the park?
Who will find my clothes and take them home?
How will I ever know my life again?¹⁹

The second part of the poem shifts perspective: the speaker becomes a dreamer who imagines the body of a woman ‘washed up in the park’. Now her separation from meaningful objects – ‘a row of books, / a lover’s photograph’ – renders her unidentifiable. The poem’s title, though it names an area of Cork City, manages also to invoke a lonely descent into watery oblivion. Yet this could also be the wellspring of life, suggestive of the idea that language itself can be renewed. Set against the slippage into anonymity and death is the ordered space of the room, an enduring image at the close of the poem.

The loss of self and the uncertainty of its renewal is a preoccupation of many women poets. Traditional roles of wife and mother and their conflict with artistic aspiration can account for some of this concern. Yet the rapid pace of change in late twentieth-century Ireland which offered new freedoms to women also brought challenges: choices that were difficult to reconcile; values that contradicted existing ways of living. This situation accords with the sense of hesitation or disruption of continuity that many women poets express both thematically in individual poems and in the shape of their writing lives.²⁰ These tendencies become integral to the act of poetic interpretation itself: while textual strategies may be apprehended cumulatively by the reader through lengthy engagement with an individual poet’s work, there is often a sense that new and varied perspectives are essential to recent writing projects, since social and aesthetic change is wrought by means of shifts in space and time that must find analogues in the act of poetic representation. The sense of being between places and states often occurs in the work of these two poets. For Ní Chuilleanáin this may be marked by perspectives shifting to yield new insights into the relationship between self and world. A dynamic and sometimes uneasy relationship between inner and outer is also a hallmark of Vona Groarke’s representation of the house in her work. It was such a predominant trope in *Shale* that her second collection, *Other People’s Houses* (1999), used it as a unifying device.

Her approach has both flexibility and range, though, and moves easily from childhood memories, through historical reflections to consider ideas of subjectivity and relation to others. 'Outdoors' interrogates the last of these subjects, drawing attention to the passage of time in the formation of knowledge of self and other. The speaker in the poem articulates the shared experience of waiting for night to fall, of waiting for the moment 'when we might call it a day / and settle for the night'.²¹ Putting on the interior light becomes an act of separation of outer and inner, yet also one in which the spaces are merged. In this case the window reveals a reflection not just of the speaker, but of her partner. He is simultaneously in the same space as her 'where we can draw the curtain and talk of tomorrow' and also 'confronting [her] from the garden'. Even affirmations of commitment and love are shadowed by separateness, so that the house itself loses its fixity of structure. Through the power of reflection and the strong tension between inside and outside, between finite and infinite space, it drifts outwards beyond its own boundaries – 'our kitchen at sea on the lawn . . . / . . . our faces marooned in stars'.

The extent to which the house can be the particular focus of imaginative states reveals its importance not just as a space of memory but of possibility – it does not just anchor the woman in a recognisable context but allows her a framework for speculative enquiry. The issue of imaginative recognition surfaces in poems by many contemporary Irish women, and could be argued to be an important aspect of any poetic impulse: the extent to which the world of the poem can be both transformed and familiar at the same time. Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill renders this in her combination of ancient and modern contexts; Caitríona O'Reilly in her dream-like engagement with the natural world. In theorising place and identity, house and body are often metaphorically connected:

The house and the body are intimately linked. The house is an extension of the person; like an extra skin, carapace or second layer of clothes, it serves as much to reveal and display as it does to hide and protect . . . Moving in ordered space, the body 'reads' the house which serves as a mnemonic for the embodied person. Through habit and inhabiting, each person builds up a practical mastery of the fundamental schemes of their culture.²²

This 'ordered space', which is also the space of the poem, is often disturbed by contemporary women poets, for whom a more complex interrogation of the domestic is required. That this can be done in the language of dreams, as Ní Chuilleanáin herself has remarked, signifies

the creative importance of this act of re-imagining as well as its fundamentally allusive quality.

'The Dream House', another poem from *Other People's Houses* (1999), explores this act of transformation in the trajectory of the work itself. Here the speaker's relationship with the house alters as the rational co-ordinates that define it inexplicably change. The opening stanza is the most regular in rhythm and rhyme, in keeping with the order of the rooms, 'all civility and grace'. The stillness of the place and its imperiousness to human interference – 'nothing stirs for any move of mine' – reflects its quality as a form of historical artefact, rather than an inhabited space. The speaker is, paradoxically, silent and compelled to be so, permitted only to follow the guide and listen to his commentary: 'I am following my guide, as I must do, / in silence, while he talks me through the plan'.²³ Her failure to recognise the house only changes when it becomes less orderly and when its human dimension begins to be expressed through the twin images of the family portraits and the mirror reflecting the speaker herself. Groarke's handling of this kind of trope is deft. It is suggestive both of the ways in which the house has integrated her presence among its own forms and of how it has become a metaphor for her own tentative self-exploration. Just as the 'mood of certainty' falters, so does the rhythm of the poem, becoming more uneven and giving the repeated impression of a sudden halting of movement. The process by which the speaker 'begin[s] to see for [her]self' can be identified when the house becomes 'readable' by her and is seen as a place she could inhabit, containing clothes that she might wear and books she might read. The poem concludes:

The house is all beyond me; the room recedes.
I begin to lose the sense of what I saw.
In all this detail, one apparent flaw:
my unlost earring crumpled on the sheets. (p. 25)

The dream-world of the house can express processes of recognition and understanding at the same time as it can represent what is rationally impossible – that her earring can be simultaneously worn by her and lying on the bed. The warping of time that this suggests draws the uncanny into the poem and complicates readings of it that might equate the dream with a mildly distorted memory. Here the boundaries between the house and the body become unstable: the curtains are the colour of the speaker's eyes '[i]n certain light' and the earring, expressive of sexuality, is found on the bed describing the sheets' own crumpled state. In the dream the movement is towards the private spaces and also towards the intuitive and experiential, as the guide's presence becomes

shadowy and his knowledge less necessary. The house too, though initially a place of order and permanence, is ultimately no more than glimpsed, becoming a vivid yet transient imaginative space at the close.

For Groarke the home is the place where human emotions and memories can be negotiated with both directness and subtlety. In the title poem 'Other People's Houses' the space of relationship is deconstructed by the passage of time so that the shape of the house – and of the poem itself – is radically altered: 'There's been a fire and the roof's caved in'; 'The ceiling of the sitting room is upended / on the floor' (p. 52). Whereas 'The Empty House' depicts the place taking on a life of its own – 'When we are gone, the house will close over us / as though we'd been swimmers in an unmoved sea' (p. 51) – in 'Other People's Houses' the home bereft of human energy cannot stand. Yet ultimately both poems trace the relationship between dynamic emotional states and fixed space. The speaker acknowledges her creative development, referring to the 'flowery poems' she wrote formerly, and we are reminded that this is not just a personal past for the speaker, but a means by which she can chart her changing awareness through language. This engagement with the shifting spaces of memory and imagination seems deliberate; the speaker 'walked to a house' where she and her lover once lived, as though in an act of deliberate reclamation. Her initial reflections give way to an inventory of objects – sofa, radio, mattress – asserting the meaningful nature of what is lost and the possibilities for transcending such feelings.²⁴ So here there is both a wistfulness concerning this lost connection and a recognition that it represented a phase of transition, a time spent in 'other people's houses' as a kind of preparation for having a 'stake in a place of our own / which keeps us steady and tied'

halfway between the In- and the Outdoors,
where one time, looking two ways at once,
I saw you stranded in both and thought

I would throw in my lot with yours.²⁵

This is a form of the image that also provides the core to the poem 'Outdoors' and it is an acknowledgement of the contingent nature of love and intimacy, the extent to which they represent slow and fruitful transitions for the human individual.

The act of pausing 'between the In- and the Outdoors' has earlier found expression in Ní Chuilleánáin's work. Poems such as 'The Hill Town' and 'MacMoransbridge' from *The Magdalene Sermon* (1989) use this form of spatial representation to explore complex family dynamics, established over long periods of time. Where Groarke's work often deals

with the past crystallised into a memorable image or encounter, Ní Chuilleánáin's involves slower, more painstaking evolutions and juxtapositions difficult to reconcile without further clarification. Often the boundaries between spaces are themselves hard to detect, or seem to be undone by the force of past or present circumstances. 'The Party Wall' from *The Brazen Serpent* (1994) explores how the historical division of land brought to the speaker's attention by an uncanny happening – the arrival of a drift of 'stiff white feathers' in the garden: 'We were not shocked at all until the next day / When the aerial photographs were published / Showing the house that backed against ours / . . . / Visited the same'.²⁶ Many of Ní Chuilleánáin's poems contain strange or inexplicable phenomena and here this involves a re-interpretation of the space of ownership. The security of the house with its 'tall iron gates' and 'fancy grilles' is threatened in the most unexpected of ways, by a visitation that seems partly natural and partly divine. Indirectly, the questions of land ownership so prominent in Irish history emerge in the present, in the aunt's story 'About all the trouble over building the party wall' (p. 40). Yet the division here is also of the self, as the tenants in the adjoining house 'had my grandfather's name'. By centring this exploration on personal property, Ní Chuilleánáin concerns herself with the local effects of larger historical questions and in particular of the ways in which the individual is brought to awareness.

For Vona Groarke such spatial divisions are also placed in a specifically familial frame, though one that has a more clearly recognisable context. In particular she uses interior or domestic space as a means of investigating the relationship of self to others and of exploring where the individual can fit in the social arrangements of the world. 'Oranges', from *Flight* (2002), is a poem that engages directly with the representation of boundaries: here the poem itself enacts the uneasy emotional drifts in lines that part in the centre and shift to each side.

Say you approach
home from work
The light is on
and the blind

your house in winter
or in from the shops.
in your living room
still up.²⁷

The separateness that enables the speaker to look at her family from a distance, yet closely, also creates apparently contradictory feelings of belonging and being excluded. These feelings, rather than being simultaneous, may indeed be separated as one moment is from the next; much of Groarke's poetry thrives on this kind of hesitation between emotional states and it is one of the aspects that makes the dialectic between her

poetry and that of other women so fruitful. As in the poem 'Outdoors', dusk provides the temporal frame ideally suited to this exploration. Here, in the movement between day and night, between light and darkness, it is the brilliance of the lived life that is important: 'Your life shines without you. / The keys blaze in your palm' (p. 26). This illumination is an important aspect of the act of observation itself, where the thing observed gains special meaning in the process. It is particularly apt given the evocative power of Groarke's work and the watchfulness of her poetic persona. Yet the poem ends in hesitation, as its structure has suggested all along, and the emotional resonance returns to the speaker herself.

To be a distinct observer of the family home foregrounds individuality and permits the speaker to explore a connection to others as well as to represent a unique perspective. The speaker in Ní Chuilleánáin's 'Sunday' from her 2001 collection *The Girl Who Married the Reindeer* reflects the home life of others – the chaos of romping children and preoccupied parents – as an inevitability: 'I can't go there, but I know just how it will be'.²⁸ Here the 'but' might almost read 'because', since the speaker has witnessed this scene before and seems repelled by the disconnected energy expressed in it. The lack of boundaries evident in the children's movement and the merging of the spaces of house and garden show Ní Chuilleánáin handling this dynamic in different ways to Groarke. The speaker here is impelled neither to engage with such a relationship, nor to probe its implications through the act of writing itself. Meaning, it seems, is elsewhere and the weight of the poem's significance lies in its last stanza: 'I have to hear the chestnut choir' (p. 13). She will spend this particular Sunday in autumn in an isolated place with strangers:

They won't remember

me there,
But all the same, this autumn,
I am going to hear the office they sing on that Sunday
At vespers, before the longest vigil of the year. (p. 13)

The momentum of her intention is cleverly enhanced by the subsequent poem 'The Chestnut Choir' in which the journey to the convent and the experience of hearing the singing finds expression. Often Ní Chuilleánáin's poems enact such disengagement and re-engagement and demand similar processes from the reader. It is at this stage in her career that the tenuous, drifting nature of human connection seems most fully acknowledged and the use of the house as a means of engaging imaginatively with difficult forms of relationship becomes most pronounced.

Many of the debates concerning the representation of home involve the tensions between finding an existing space and creating a new one. Early in her writing career Ní Chuilleánáin engaged perceptively with this theme in her portrayal of Odysseus, who, in 'The Second Voyage', abandons the dangers of the journey in favour of a place in which he can create a home. As the poem progresses it becomes clear that what he longs for is *his* home, a place of memory rather than imagination, and the difficulty of repossessing the past becomes the poem's subtle theme. Though Ní Chuilleánáin uses personal material obliquely in her latest poetry, links between private and public concerns afford her opportunities to explore important cultural issues through the shaping of individual perspectives. 'In Her Other House', also from *The Girl Who Married the Reindeer*, invokes a return to childhood with which the representation of the house often engages. Rather than emphasising the passage of time, the poem suggests the imaginative simultaneity of past and present. To return endlessly to the past is not to render that past explicable but to alert the reader to the inseparable nature of moments of intense experience: as Bachelard argues, 'we are unable to relive duration that has been destroyed . . . memories are motionless, and the more securely they are fixed in space, the sounder they are'.²⁹ Many women poets problematise the nature of memory by exploring the unfixed nature of all positions. For a poet like Medbh McGuckian the past becomes a site of personal and cultural recollection, of imaginative creation and textual engagement. The contextual shifts observable in her work refute the possibility of being fixed in space, testing the reader's ability to locate the self meaningfully. Ní Chuilleánáin's work enacts a more gradual movement, while also challenging the notion of a singular perspective. The poem 'In Her Other House' invokes this straight away; the place is 'other' from the start. The 'her' of the title becomes 'my' and the focus of the poem shifts to a dreamlike memory. The otherness in this poem seems to interrogate the very notion of home but it may indicate the immediacy of the lived and imagined past, where the vision is selective, even deliberately limited and '[t]he table is spread and cleared by invisible hands'.³⁰ In this home books are the distinctive feature and supersede the domestic detail, becoming the nurturing centre of the household together with the fire and the meal. The imaginative power of the home is a textual one, so that the role of language in reclaiming this space is crucial: it is a house of books and letters, where past, present and future are there to be read, as much as to be experienced. Again Ní Chuilleánáin resists simple domesticity, engaging instead with the act of representation itself. Reclaiming this past involves present creativity: to be at home is to be among written words.

The poem's final lines are especially significant in this regard: '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' (p. 20). Here chronological time is disturbed by the presence of the dead. These books seem to refute the logical progression of meaning in favour of a freer engagement, and in doing so suggest that acts of poetic interpretation need to remain alive to the dynamic range of influences that shape the writing process.

The inter-relationship of texts, especially within a single volume, is clearly becoming increasingly important to Ní Chuilleánáin. As well as providing a memorable image in this poem, the idea of one page lying 'open to the version of every other' also illuminates the sequencing of poems in the collection. Again the relation of one poem to the next is important: on the opposite page to 'In Her Other House' lies 'In Her Other Ireland' which makes its location explicit in its title and in addition gives a specifically female viewpoint from which to interpret the material of the poem. Yet even this level of certainty is problematised by the notion of 'otherness' that is so explicitly addressed, and the links between the poems suggest that each cannot be seen simply as a self-contained unit. 'In Her Other Ireland' moves outward from the personal dimension of the preceding poem, yet retains both the experiential quality and the slightly distanced perspective that is so characteristic of this poet's work. Here the desolate nature of the landscape can be read both literally and metaphorically, so that it evokes a sensory experience for the reader at the same time as it speaks of the inevitability of hardship and struggle. Ní Chuilleánáin is always acutely aware of the settings and surroundings of the house: from such early poems as 'The Lady's Tower' this concern has been evident and the built environment of her more recent poems is also culturally contextualised. Often the building may be a church or convent rather than a house. Throughout Ní Chuilleánáin's work, religious institutions are seen to offer the security and support more usually associated with the family home and her sense of the religious community is one of female opportunity rather than limitation. 'In Her Other Ireland' sees the austerity of religious life bizarrely placed alongside (or within) the world of the seaside fairground, creating two opposing time-frames, both under siege by the same strong winds.³¹

The mistress of novices has sent all the novices
Upstairs into the choir to practise
The service for deliverance from storms and thunder.
Their light dapples the sharkskin windows,
The harmonium pants uphill,
The storm plucks riffs on the high tower.³²

The retreat upstairs is one that both protects and exposes the novices in the face of the coming storm, yet they only 'practise' the service, postponing the fullest test of the power of prayer. Both high tower and merry-go-round – opposing structures of spiritual and material, of safety and carefree leisure – are subject to the elements. In this small seaside town the sand blows onto the streets and the flagstones are wet: here the boundaries cannot be secured, neither can the space be abandoned – there is '[n]owhere to go when the wind blows'.

The problematic dynamic of staying or leaving has inflected Ireland's political and social history in different ways. Accompanying the pattern of invasion that has shaped the country's history is the question of settlement – whether the land and its people offer a hospitable space for the outsider. To inhabit involves a level of acceptance of the existing cultural space: '[t]o dwell, to be set at peace, means to remain at peace within the free, the preserve, the free sphere that safeguards each thing in its essence'.³³ The strange, undomesticated environment of 'In Her Other Ireland' offers a new perspective on the experiential nature of geography, and invites reflection on what it is to fully inhabit a space. The ruined or abandoned house is a significant trope in Irish cultural representation because of the prevalence of acts of dispossession in Ireland's history. Vona Groarke has already enacted a return to a former home; Ní Chuilleanáin for her part rewrites the famous Irish-language poem 'Kilcash' in a coda to *The Girl Who Married a Reindeer* and in doing so makes such an act of return one of historical and poetic significance. The dynamic of loss and renewal that 'Kilcash' traces has particular resonance for Ní Chuilleanáin's own pursuit of such themes in her work; more importantly it can be linked to the Irish language itself. 'No word of Kilcash nor its household, / Their bell is silenced now'³⁴ marks the fame and social significance of the place once but also shows how it is quelled by colonial rule. The wish for the house to be 'built up anew' gains in potency by being repeatedly expressed; yet that expression is in English, an irony in the historic scheme as a whole: 'And from now to the end of the story / May it never again be laid low' (p. 52). Ní Chuilleanáin herself grew up in a household where both Irish and English were spoken, as well as a smattering of other languages, but she has chosen to write exclusively in English. The presence of other languages is significant in freeing her from the constraints of a single tradition, though: 'I feel now that I write English rather as if it were a foreign language into which I am constantly translating.'³⁵

The revival of the house as an emblem of cultural survival reveals its potential as a repository of emotional meaning, especially in connection with forms of self-determination in language. In the private

context, the house also provides an essential creative space within which to think and write. For a poet orientated towards home and family it is inevitable that Vona Groarke should explore the home as a specifically creative space. In her most recent collection *Juniper Street* (2006) she includes a poem 'The Annotated House' in which the space is demarcated by the process and technical elements of writing. If the house has been a particular inspiration to Groarke, it also brings creative expectations: 'The window is flush with words, but my page / hangs limp as the snow cloud slouching over / Carlo's house'.³⁶ It is the form of the house that engages her; first its boundaries – window, sill and porch screen; next its internal structure – stairs, basement, the hall, the kitchen. In this scheme every object indicates language, so that the movement through the house becomes the trajectory of the line and the missed beat a physical stumble:

The treads and risers
of every line return me to a carpet scheming
with print. One wrong foot, and there's
no telling what month heaped in the basement –
like laundry thinned by colour – will reveal. (p. 55)

The matter of the house itself becomes a reproach to tentative creativity yet its representation is evidence that these hesitations have been overcome. The poem depends on this extended metaphor and on the potential wordplay that comes with it: every term is mined for its linguistic connotations and form is of the utmost importance. Nature, in all its dynamic formlessness, causes most trouble in this process, from the first slouching clouds to the tangle of branches and drifting smoke of the final stanza. Yet it is the tension between the natural and the man-made, between 'getting on' and having 'nowhere to go from here' that is productive of the poem itself and important in establishing its meanings. At the core of the poem is the act of creative inhabiting; the human sensibility capable of observing and naming this space. This is, after all, an 'annotated house', where the initial structure is expanded and clarified through interaction with the thinking mind.

The significance of the house for these two poets is both a cultural and a creative one. Its role in the interrogation of definitions of home and belonging allow the personal and the political to be linked in subtle and complex ways. Perhaps most important of all are the issues it raises about the nature of representation itself, about poetic composition as a structured and contextualised process. Both Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin and Vona Groarke explore important dimensions of their observing and writing selves by means of this fascinating matrix of images.

Notes

- 1 J.D. Law, 'Joyce's "Delicate Siamese" Equation: The Dialectic of Home in *Ulysses*', *PMLA*, 102: 2 (March 1987), p. 197.
- 2 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. M. Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), p. 5.
- 3 Divorce legislation in Ireland was prohibited by the Constitution of 1937. A referendum seeking to amend this position was decisively defeated in 1986, but in 1995 a narrow majority voted to permit divorce for couples that had lived apart for four years. The Constitution's prohibition on abortion was challenged by referendum in 1983 but, while the amendment was enacted, the absence of appropriate regulations has made the practical effects limited. The debate came to prominence again in 1992 when the Supreme Court overturned a High Court decision banning an under-age rape victim from travelling abroad to procure an abortion.
- 4 Justin Quinn, Introduction to *Metre* 3 (autumn 1997), pp. 5–6, p. 6.
- 5 Richard Kearney (ed.), *Across the Frontiers: Ireland in the 1990s* (Dublin: Merlin, 1988), p. 18.
- 6 Eavan Boland, *The Lost Land* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1998), p. 13.
- 7 Sinéad Morrissey, *There Was Fire in Vancouver* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1996), pp. 19–20.
- 8 Martin Heidegger, 'Building Dwelling Thinking', in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 353.
- 9 Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin was born in Cork City in 1942 to an intellectual family with a Republican lineage. Educated at University College Cork and at Oxford, she is a Fellow of Trinity College Dublin. Her first collection, *Acts and Monuments*, was published in 1972. This was followed by *Site of Ambush* (Dublin: Gallery Press, 1975), *The Second Voyage* (Dublin: Gallery Press, [1977] 1986), *The Rose Geranium* (Dublin: Gallery Press, 1981), *The Magdalene Sermon* (Dublin: Gallery Press, 1989), *The Brazen Serpent* (Dublin: Gallery Press, 1994) and *The Girl who Married a Reindeer* (Dublin: Gallery Press, 2001). She is one of the founding editors of the literary magazine *Cyphers*.
- 10 Leslie Williams, 'Interview with Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin', in *Representing Ireland: Gender, Class, Nationality*, ed. Susan Shaw (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1997), p. 32.
- 11 Irene Gilsenan Nordin, '"Betwixt and Between": The Body as Liminal Threshold in the Poetry of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin', in *Metaphors of the Body and Desire in Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed. Irene Gilsenan-Nordin (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006) pp. 224–42, p. 225.
- 12 Guinn Batten, 'Boland, McGuckian, Ní Chuilleanáin and the Body of the Nation', in *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed. Matthew Campbell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 186.
- 13 Ní Chuilleanáin, *The Rose Geranium*, p. 14.
- 14 Ní Chuilleanáin, *The Second Voyage*, p. 1. Originally from *Site of Ambush* (1975), this was chosen as the opening poem for *The Second*

- Voyage (1986). Patricia Haberstroh argues that it is a riposte to the intellectual, masculine environment of Yeats's Thoor Ballylee and compares it to the austere environment of 'A Gentleman's Bedroom', the last poem in *The Second Voyage*.
- 15 Heidegger, p. 351.
 - 16 Ní Chuilleanáin, *The Brazen Serpent*, p. 21.
 - 17 Heidegger, p. 348.
 - 18 Vona Groarke was born in Edgeworthstown in 1964 and was educated at Trinity College Dublin. Her first collection, *Shale*, was published by Gallery Press in 1994 and won the Brendan Behan Memorial Award the following year. Subsequent volumes are: *Other People's Houses* (Dublin: Gallery Press, 1999), *Flight* (Dublin: Gallery Press, 2002) and *Juniper Street* (Dublin: Gallery Press, 2006). She was shortlisted for the Forward Prize in 2002. She lives in North Carolina where she teaches at Wake Forest University.
 - 19 Groarke, *Shale*, p. 15.
 - 20 Poets such as Eavan Boland, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and Mary O'Malley use aspects of the past to illuminate the roles of women in contemporary Ireland. Patterns of publishing are also significant: some women poets publish no poems for long periods; others only begin to publish late in life.
 - 21 Groarke, *Other People's Houses*, p. 54.
 - 22 Janet Carsten, and Stephen Hugh-Jones (eds), *About the House: Levi-Strauss and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 2.
 - 23 Groarke, *Other People's Houses*, p. 24.
 - 24 It is interesting to consider Heidegger's linking of object and human purpose in this regard. The things that Groarke recalls are objects of use, and as such they evoke experiences. The idea that objects refer to one another, thus constituting a realm of significance, also fits with Groarke's imaginative recovery of the interior of her former house. See M. Inwood, *Heidegger: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 35–6.
 - 25 Groarke, *Other People's Houses*, pp. 52–3.
 - 26 Ní Chuilleanáin, *The Brazen Serpent*, p. 40.
 - 27 Groarke, *Flight*, p. 26.
 - 28 Ní Chuilleanáin, *The Girl who Married a Reindeer*, p. 13.
 - 29 Bachelard, p. 9.
 - 30 Ní Chuilleanáin, *The Girl who Married a Reindeer*, p. 20.
 - 31 Persistent clerical scandals emerged in Ireland in the 1990s with allegations of physical and sexual abuse undermining respect for those in the religious life. These difficulties, together with an increasing sense of the anachronistic nature of religious orders, inflects Ní Chuilleanáin's treatment of this material.
 - 32 Ní Chuilleanáin, *The Girl who Married a Reindeer*, p. 21.
 - 33 Heidegger, p. 351.
 - 34 Ní Chuilleanáin, *The Girl who Married a Reindeer*, p. 51.
 - 35 Williams, 'Interview with Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin', p. 31.
 - 36 Groarke, *Juniper Street*, p. 55.