

HISTORY GASPS: MYTH IN CONTEMPORARY IRISH WOMEN'S POETRY

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I

Recent years have seen a very rapid development in women's poetry in Ireland, a development which is part of a much wider one in women's writing and culture. The prevalence of poetry and the relative scarcity of prose in this movement is specific to Ireland and a significant departure from the pattern elsewhere. The strength of the tradition of women's fiction and the fragmentary nature of the tradition in poetry have tended to produce first an increasingly self-conscious feminist fiction, then an upsurge of women's poetry which attempts to re-define the poetic tradition and women's relation to it.

In Ireland there has yet to emerge an awareness of a local tradition of writing by women. The ideology of the critical canon remains rooted in the concept of the great man of letters or in a cultural politics which defines itself in terms of 'public' history. The excellent work in progress by Irish feminist historians has yet to make the impact it undoubtedly will on the way in which Irish history and culture is defined and understood and the way in which the writer of either sex interacts with that history and culture. Perhaps more importantly, there is a grave scarcity of feminist critical and theoretical work in relation to Irish women. For this reason, this discussion of myth in the work of contemporary Irish women's poetry will be related to the influential analysis of myth by Roland Barthes in his work, *Mythologies*, and to two pamphlets in the Field Day series, *Myth and Motherland* by Richard Kearney (1984) and *Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature: Modernism and Imperialism* by Frederick Jameson (1988). Some reference needs to be made to Clair Wills's application of Kristevan theory to Medbh McGuckian's work and I will also briefly draw on Eavan Boland's LIP pamphlet, *A Kind of Scar: The Woman Poet in a National Tradition*, a text which future analysis of Irish women's poetry will find difficult to ignore.

According to Richard Kearney, poetic and criminalised discourse share the capacity to subvert 'the normal edifice of discourse,' (1984: 5) Both:

refuse the current consciousness of reality by invoking *something else* which precedes or exceeds it, which remains, as it were, sub-conscious or supra-conscious. In Ireland, this 'something else' often finds its habitation and its name in *myth*. (5)

Here poetry invokes myth, but for Barthes poetry and myth are antithetical:

Poetry occupies a position which is the reverse of that of myth: myth is a semiological system which has the pretension of transcending itself into a factual system; poetry is a semiological system which has the pretension of contracting itself into an essential system. (1972: 121)

Kearney's formulation of the roles of both poetry and myth assumes that history must be 'exceeded' in order to be changed: Barthes' formulation of the roles of poetry and myth is based on the fear that the denial of history will preclude change. In analysing the function of myth in Irish women's poetry, it is important to remember that Irish (literary) history offers Irish women little except a record of exclusion and denial. It is therefore unsurprising that Irish women writers should show a marked preference for forms and material which appear to offer a way out of that history, that is for mythic forms and material. The contrary functions of myth, revolutionary and conservative, are acknowledged in and exert a pressure on the work of Eavan Boland, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, Sara Berkeley and a range of other Irish women poets.

The ambivalence in contemporary discourses about myth has parallels in contemporary discussions of the maternal. From de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* onwards, there has been a strand in feminism which has seen maternity as a conservative force, socialising and coercing women into participation in the life of the species at the expense of participation in social, political and economic life. Another, increasingly important, strand in feminism has come to see patriarchal denial and appropriation of maternal power as constitutive of women's oppression and has stressed the positive and empowering aspects of maternity, particularly of the mother-daughter relationship. (This relationship offers an alternative model to the Oedipal construction of identity to some writers.) In Irish women's writing those two strands in feminism relating to the maternal have been greatly complicated by the

Catholic ideology of the Virgin Mother and its permeation at all levels of the concept of nationhood. Clair Wills's 'The Perfect Mother: Authority in the Poetry of Medbh McGuckian' (1988) explores the way in which one Irish woman's poetry has gained and lost from the image of maternal power and the injunction on women's access to that power which characterise the composite myth of virgin-mother Ireland. Wills's essay is significant for this discussion of myth in Irish women's poetry for two reasons. Drawing on Julia Kristeva's analysis of 'the virginal maternal' (Wills 1988: 94), Wills sees McGuckian as 'inevitably ending up reconfirming the constructed definition of female authority'. (96). This reconfirmation can be read in more complex terms than defeat by a dominant ideology, however, for Wills asks:

What is it about the Catholic ideal of femininity, the virginal-maternal, which enables it to become something women are able to identify with?

She draws on Kristeva's answer to this in analysing McGuckian's ambivalence towards 'authority' as it is embodied in that Catholic ideal. Kristeva suggests that the myth of the Virgin Mother is 'a skilful balance of concessions and constraints' (Kristeva 1986: 181) which functions to ensure women's consent to the Law of the Father. The cult of Mary offers women 'a kind of substitute for effective power in the family and the city but no less authoritarian'. (170). Such an analysis has very specific advantages to offer anyone who wishes to discuss the ideology and mythology of Irish womanhood. It assumes that women are not passive consumers of myth or indeed of feminine role models. The prevalence of the myth need not be explained in terms of a mysterious compliance by women in their own oppression, but can be seen as a product of women's quite understandable desire to have access to those compensatory gratifications and privileges available to them within the dominant ideology. Such a framework is particularly useful in an Irish context where it can facilitate the substitution of analysis of many women's continued allegiance to the compensations of mythic power for despair at their complicity in their own exclusion from political and economic power. It is a framework which assumes the agency of women in myth and history and so can postulate women's active revision of their mythical historical roles.

Kristeva's work offers not only a way through, but also a way out of the culturally over-determined dilemmas of Irish women's writing. The maternal and writing are both consistently associated by Kristeva with transgression of linear history. According to Clair Wills,



For Kristeva, women's participation in history inheres in the maternal body, precisely that aspect of femininity which has been used to ally her with nature; the maternal body becomes the site where the split between the flesh and the law may be overcome. (Wills 1988: 95)

More importantly, the Kristevan concept of 'women's time', (Kristeva 1986: 187-213) particularly if allied with the concept of her story or women's history, can facilitate the creation of a critical space different from the 'historically' defined proceedings of the Irish literary tradition.

This is not to suggest that Irish women's writing does or should evade history. The important thing, as Eavan Boland makes clear in her pamphlet, *A Kind of Scar*, is to insist simultaneously on one's place in history *and* one's exclusion from history, to write understanding that one has inherited silence *and* has found a voice. For Boland, it is still a difficult and painful business to be both a woman writer and an Irish writer and yet it is imperative to lay claim to the national tradition without being subsumed into it.

This discussion of myth in Irish women's poetry will test the relevance of Kristeva's critical framework and the persistence of Boland's poetic dilemma in two very different poets; one, Sara Berkeley is young, tentative, seeking a way into her own poetic style and into poetry; the other Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, is a mature and established poet who appears to have found her own way through the literary minefield between the Irish tradition and the woman's exclusion.

II

Myth, according to Barthes, converts the historical into the natural. 'The signifier of myth' is denied its specificity, its materiality. It is transformed into the form taken by a supposedly universal and ahistorical concept (which concept may simply be that universal and ahistorical truths exist). (Barthes 1972: 117-27). Sara Berkeley's poem, 'Wish', from her most recent collection, *Home Movie Nights*, confronts the processes whereby the individuality of the specific woman is obscured until she becomes a mere signifier of the eternal feminine. 'Wish' deals with the minutiae of myth, its interpersonal operations. The 'I' of the poem recollects a relationship characterised by her assumption of a series of feminine roles, 'I as Diana, temptress'. The initial impression is nostalgic, seeming to celebrate those feminine roles:

The need maturing in my hothouse brain,
Sparked up mightily to hear you say

I was a piece with many voices,
Stepping out of my disco-dance,
Tuning out of my discordance,
Tuning slack to fit your scale,
Edging over from a tangled harmony
To feel you braid affection with my hair,
Loosening and pulling tight the thews of hair.
(Berkeley 1989: 24)

As the above passage demonstrates, however, there is a creeping sense of confinement and threat. The relationship seems to offer freedom, 'loosening', but also threatens strangulation, 'pulling tight the thews of hair'.

'A piece with many voices': the mythic feminine figure who wishes and speaks in the poem is neither whole nor one but partial, 'a piece', and multiple, with many ideas. This many voiced figure is a kind of artist, but her authority is not her own, 'needing you on all occasions'. This lack of any one, gain of more than one, self and voice is both the disability and possibility inherent in women's relation to writing according to many contemporary commentators,¹ such as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray. In 'Wish' the multiplicity of voices is accompanied by a disjunction between the woman as artist and the woman as object of her own art. The rendering of the woman into myth is identified with art, 'It was a colourful scene.' No easy distinction between a feminine object and a mythologising, masculine subject can be established, however. After all, the artist, the poet who paints the 'colourful scene', is a woman. The 'I' is feminine and the initial impulse to add mythological colour is her's, 'I came to you a dangerous red.' The poem nonetheless concludes:

I would have liked
To have shed that dangerous colour
To have come to you simply.

The movement from complicity to regret is complex. The poet is making poetry out of being made into myth and so she as poet is both object and agent of both transformations. The ability to be both subject and object, writer and written, is necessary to any writer who wishes to use the first person singular. But that perspective poses particular problems for the woman poet who is more 'properly' the object or inspiration of poetry (Homans, 1980).² 'Wish' enacts female compliance with her mythical sexual role, her place in 'the tangled harmony', but also enacts female struggle against that role, 'I fought too.' On the one hand the mythological

feminine is no more than a role, 'I as Diana', chosen, played by a feminine subject who is not defined by it. On the other hand, the wistful closing lines indicate that no other choice was available, 'I would have liked . . . To have come to you simply.' The young poet furthermore can think of no other goal for the feminine 'I' than a movement towards a (presumably masculine) 'you'.

The effect of all this ambivalence is simultaneously to confuse and separate the poetic 'I' and the mythic role. The artificiality of the latter is exposed, the fear of its inevitability made more poignant for that exposure. 'Wish' demythologises the myths it also constructs. It acknowledges their power, even their satisfactions, but it also removes them from the realm of 'Nature' to one where 'actions achieve effects' (Carter 1979: 106) and where 'my decisions' (106) are important to what 'I' am. The strength of the poem is that it also implies the limitations of that latter historical and conscious realm which is represented in the poem, not by 'I am' or 'I did', but 'I would have.'

The woman poet is also double, rebel and co-conspirator, in 'Easter 1944' in Berkeley's first collection, *Penn*. 'Wish' is concerned with the personal and poetic consequences of myth. 'Easter 1944' deals with the large and public myths of salvation and resurrection that have so often defined Western culture and deals with the twentieth century realities which threatened to overthrow Western culture's self-concept and confidence through the transformation of its mythic undercurrents into terrible facts.

The poem opens with an account of a sleep haunted by 'a thin metal engine hum'. That hum accumulates sinister associations as the poem moves toward a vision of 'five angled war-bled years'. The landscape is desolate throughout and in the final stanza the empty tomb of Easter morning is transformed from a symbol of triumphant resurrection into one of butchery and despair:

. . . you have left
The woven cloths, one piece from neck to hem
But I know the feet are in many parts
You will trail blood wherever you walk*
Be it down the tunnelled trenches of my sleep . . .
(Berkeley 1986: 26)

This war-torn landscape is paradoxically a place without History:

like stranded fish
Who stare and twitch, History gasps
The fighting air of five angled, war-bled years.

History has been vanquished by myth; as Barthes says, 'Myth deprives the object of which it speaks of all History. In it history evaporates. (Barthes 1972: 151). 'Easter 1944' on one level subscribes to this version of myth as a conservative and even totalitarian denial of history. As the 'thin, metal engine-hum' gradually emerges in context the landscape of myth is revealed as a landscape where the trains run towards Auschwitz: 'my desert's prophet sits behind a desk/Or stands erect on platforms where the crowd roars.' The dark underside of the imagery of prophet and martyr is foregrounded. A Christian myth based on sacrifice is linked by the title not only to its apotheosis in twentieth century militarism, but, more ambivalently, to its specific Irish variant. 'Easter 1944' rejects the 'terrible beauties' of 'Easter 1916', but it pays them the poetic tribute of revision. Berkeley's relation to the Yeatsian tradition can be contrasted to Eavan Boland's repudiation of its most famous phrase and the displacement of its 'hollow triumphs' by an image of 'terrible survival' in *A Kind of Scar*.

'Easter 1944' nonetheless inverts a major trope of Western literature and culture. The waste land of stanza two does not cry out for redemption. Its barrenness is linked to the emptiness of an 'heroic' culture which attempts to replace birth with re-birth, the womb with the tomb, as a new origin and origin of a new order. Water is explicitly the element of a positive femininity ('Duchess') and of the maternal ('Mother') in *Home Movie Nights*. In 'Easter 1944' history has jumped 'out of water' (1986: 26) and 'gasps' to survive. There is no simple opposition, however, between feminine and masculine, birth and death, history and myth. The landscape of 'Emily Dickinson' is strongly reminiscent of that of 'Easter 1944':

Her thoughts are an empty train, doors open,
And no-one getting in.
At times she has nodded drily at the abyss . . .
(1989: 36)

The greatest female poet 'howls' in the same desert as the prophets of destruction.

'Emily Dickinson' is an attempt by Berkeley to look back through her (literary) mothers. The young poet is establishing her descent from the dislocated but powerful female line in poetry. Her claim of kinship is wary, however:

I worry about that sound
And watch how her own nouns
jostle her now she is down . . .

Despite the anxiety, in the end 'my mind connects.' That connection can be contrasted with the 'I will not follow' of 'Easter 1944', but it must be remembered that the inheritance claimed from Dickinson is as lacking in maternal fluidity as the inheritance from Yeats which is problematically rejected.

'Easter 1944' enacts the deep ambivalence of the woman poet in relation to a masculine tradition which she inherits, but from which she is also excluded. Her repudiation of that masculine tradition is always already anticipated by its repudiation of her, always already compromised by her participation in it even as she takes up the pen to attack it. Reading 'Easter 1916' in the context of the nightmares of 1944 is an attempt by a young Irish writer to extricate herself from a Yeatsian legacy which she finds unacceptable in its implications. It is also an acknowledgement by a woman poet of her own implications as she writes in the culture she is writing to escape.

my mind connects with a bright shock.
Somewhere, a train pulls off. (Berkeley 1989: 36)

'Out of water', (1986: 26) cut off from the feminine and nurturing qualities associated with water in poems such as 'Mother' (1989: 29), 'History gasps' and life is suspended in a nightmarish landscape of slaughter and desert. Submerged in 'water', the pregnant protagonist of 'The Drowning Element' (1989: 51) finds the opposite journey just as lethal:

Coming up for air
To a place where there is always water,
Surfacing to a black place,
That colour flocking to her hair,
Her eyes, the clothes she wears.

This woman is the life-giving mother, 'there is always water,' but she is herself dying for want of access to air, to the high, dry places of 'Easter 1944' and 'Emily Dickinson'. History dies without water, she without history. The husband 'with his red liar's hand' comes back and forth, adding to the pool of her own maternity in which she is drowning,

he pours the dregs of his day
into her lap
Until he has spilled out every drop . . .

She is aware 'he is blind to the drowning element in things.' The price of her silence is his ignorance.

The sterility of this woman's world is the sterility of isolation, non-communication. The opening stanza counterpoints linguistic sterility and physical fertility:

He leans to her with his red liar's hand
Under the swelling cotton she carries the second child
No longer trusting him —
The small head movements as she sews
Mute assurance that the child grows —
Smiling, and not trusting him at all.

Assurance is mute, but even the body lies, 'Smiling and not trusting him at all.' The husband cannot find the key, 'the right word,' to unlock her mute world — 'he misunderstands, as she had known he would.' Her response is not even the wrong word. It is physical, 'She smiles, and lays one hand flat/Over the bruise.' Since his words inflict bruises they too are returned to the physical and are a kind of violence.

Unlike many of the other poems in *Penn* and *Home Movie Nights*, 'The Drowning Element' presents the extra-linguistic watery place of the maternal as a place of confinement, though also of knowledge. The woman is exiled from history and language to a body which cannot speak itself. This negative view is a necessary corrective, a reminder that the woman and the poet need air and water, Yeats and Dickinson, myth and history.

III

The watery imagery which runs through Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry is also ambivalent. It offers a limitless horizon. It threatens, not confinement, but an infinity from which there is no way home.

The Second Voyage is the title of the 1986 collection of poems from Ní Chuilleanáin's first three collections; *Acts and Monuments* (1972), *Site of Ambush* (1975) and *The Rose Geranium* (1981). The collective title draws attention to the poetry's journey out into the unsure and watery places *Penn* and *Home Movie Nights* deal with as they meet the shore of a more familiar linguistic and historical 'reality'. Berkeley's poetry is double, it keeps one foot on shore, one in the water. The more mature poet, Ní Chuilleanáin, ventures further out. In the figure of Odysseus she brings with her the civilisation of the shore. Both poets are engaged in a demythologising which is directed against the conservative, life-denying power of myth, but which also attempts to harness the power of myth to new ends.

Before progressing to an analysis of the way in which Ní Chuilleanáin combines these two projects in her work, it will be useful to look at a similar enterprise undertaken from quite a different perspective to that of the woman poet. In his 1984 Field Day pamphlet, *Myth and Motherland*, Richard Kearney acknowledges the dangers of myth, but also seeks to establish myth in an explicitly Irish context as an alternative space where a different or new history might be posited. Kearney's analysis of the negative power of myth focuses on the denial of the experience and identity of the individual woman and the valorisation of an idealised 'Mother Ireland'. His analysis of myth's liberating potential focuses on the interplay of nationalism and internationalism in literary modernism. For Kearney, as for Joyce and Ní Chuilleanáin, the mythical figure of Ulysses/Odysseus is crucial.

Kearney points out that the powerful symbolic function of 'Woman' and the economic and political powerlessness of women are inextricable. In Ireland the plentitude of the myth of 'Mother Ireland', became the symbolic compensation for the scarcity of access to historical agency. To sustain the idea of the nation the woman was put into a kind of internal exile where she was not only denied history but also the articulation of any need, desire or demand of her own. The importance of the consolatory fiction of maternal omnipotence must have been greater for the doubly alienated Irish woman than for her male counterpart, mythic power being the only bonus to be earned from shouldering the symbolic burden of nationhood. Kearney's essay does not address the woman's relation to myth outside of her function as mythic signifier. Its assumption of a sexual polarity where a masculine subject defines his relation to a feminine object is the fundamental weakness of *Myth and Motherland*.

The possession of the 'motherland' and the proper sense of identity which can only be achieved in relation to that mother is denied to the colonised people:

the identification of 'colonized' Ireland as celestial daughter or mother, represents a symbolic projection of a prohibited ~~sense~~ of self-possession. (20)

The cult of the Virgin Mother fused in Catholic nationalism with the image of Mother Ireland and, 'Woman became as sexually intangible as the ideal of national independence became politically intangible.' (20). Kearney is on the whole highly critical of this Oedipal construction of the subject's relation to both woman and nation. Yet he cannot escape it. Kearney sees Joyce as launching a

demythologising attack on 'Mother Ireland' in the figure of Molly Bloom,

Molly is for Joyce a distinctively *Irish* woman precisely because she has been freed from those clichés of Irish womanhood which would have prevented her expressing herself as she *really is*. And yet by identifying her with the open-ended mythic model of Penelope, Joyce is allowing this Irishwoman to be Everywoman. (18)

The 'real' Irish woman is given her identity by Joyce, her errant son. Joyce 'allows' Molly Bloom access to 'alternative modes of universality'. In Kearney's reading, *Ulysses* is not demythologising but remythologising. The transgressive discourse of the writer/son crosses over the prohibited territory of the mother and so earns the right to identify and name that territory, to colonise it. Mother Ireland is merely displaced into the eternal feminine. 'Penelope has the last word.' Penelope, absent from the action, her only power that of saying yes or no to a male request, is scarcely the figure with whom a 'real' Irish woman, struggling to free herself from 'the idealised myth of Irish womanhood' would choose to 'identify' herself.

Penelope is entirely absent from *The Second Voyage*. The struggle is between an ordering, naming, heroic and masculine subject and an intractable feminine ocean which will not stay still to be named, ordered, objectified. Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry blends classical, biblical and Irish myth, Odysseus, Noah and Fionn. The diversity of mythical material is united by the pervasive water imagery. The hero is continually confounded in his quest by an oceanic uncertainty which will not allow him to define any one goal or end for his journey or to be sure of his own identity. In the crucial poem, 'The Second Voyage', Ódysseus confronts not only an indifferent reality, but an extra-linguistic space:

If there was a single
Streak of decency in these waves now, they'd be ridged
Pocked and dented with the battering they've had,
And we could name them as Adam named the beasts.
Saluting a new one with dismay, or a notorious one
With admiration; they'd notice us passing
And rejoice at our shipwreck, but these
Have less character than sheep and need more patience.
(1986: 26)

Odysseus tries to name the waves, to turn them into familiar types of the scandalous female, without a 'streak of decency', 'notorious', sirens who would 'rejoice at our shipwreck'. The attempt fails. The

overlap of classical and biblical imagery, the identification of Odysseus and Adam, alerts us to the ocean's status as resistant limit to the masculine authority of the hero and the Word. The use of the sea imagery in this way is fairly frequent in women's writing and Ní Chuilleanáin's 'The Second Voyage' owes something to Woolf's *The Voyage Out*. As in Woolf's text the ocean is more than a limit. It encroaches on the certainty of the hero, erodes the land and makes alarming inroads into signification. Odysseus projects a journey inland to stabilise the boundary between the undifferentiated ocean and the named, ordered and owned land. Taking his oar with him, he will 'walk away' from the shoreline. At first he will follow the waterways upstream, 'up riverbeds/where herons parcel out the miles of streams'. The end of the ocean's influence will not be reached until he has gone far into the hills, 'through warm silent valleys'. There, finally, he will plant his oar in a gesture of conquest, setting his flag on the border between his domain and that of the ocean:

when I meet a farmer
 Bold enough to look me in the eye
 With 'where are you off to with that long
 Winnowing fan over your shoulder?'
 There I will stand still
 And I'll plant you for a gatepost or a hitching-post
 And leave you as a tidemark.

The farmer's question marks the beginning of the territory of stable signification and is appropriately ambivalent. The farmer recognises the oar as an instrument of differentiation, 'winnowing,' but he also misnames it by calling it a fan. The oar has hitherto been described in aggressively phallic terms. In line 4 it was 'rammed' between the jaws of the waves, which waves are 'ruffled', 'Crocodiling and mincing past.' The oar makes the waves 'keep their distance' (27) and is identifiable with Odysseus' 'long sword fending' off the women in 'Odysseus Meets the Ghosts of the Women'. (25). At the interface of language and ocean this phallic oar is confused with a fan. At the edge of signification sexual identity becomes blurred. Odysseus can no longer find reference points by which to steer his course and 'the profound/unfenced valleys of the ocean still held him'. (26). He is overcome by nostalgic longing for the conventional and instrumental femininity of the water-lilies, kettles, canals and 'pale swans at dark' (27) of the final stanza. In that nostalgia he himself becomes subject to the general confusion:

His face grew damp with tears that tasted
Like his own sweat or the insults of the sea. (27)

The sea is within himself.

'The Second Voyage' draws on a version of the myth of Odysseus which is already revisionist, a version that descends from Dante through Tennyson. The version spurns the domestic felicities which Odysseus longs for at the end of Ní Chuilleanáin's poem and substitutes endless struggle as the goal of the great quest. 'Consider your origin,' Ulysses tells his men in Dante's version, 'you were not made to live as brutes, but to pursue virtue and knowledge'. (*Inferno* 26). The emphasis on origin is telling: Dante refers not to physical origin, the motherland which Homer's hero sought, but to a metaphysical origin which imposes a harsh discipline of virtue and knowledge. Ulysses and his men set off through the Straits of Gibraltar into an Atlantic which to Dante must have represented the ultimate frontier of human knowledge.

Tennyson's Ulysses is much closer to Ní Chuilleanáin's. His quest is not defined directly by a desire to return to any origin, but by a desire to exceed all limitation.

this gray spirit yearning in desire
To follow knowledge like a sinking star,
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought. (1.30-33)

In 'The Second Voyage' the quest leads only to confusion, despair and a nostalgia for precisely those land-bound and limited horizons, 'spiders and frogs / . Housekeeping at the roadside,' (Ní Chuilleanáin 1986: 27) which the Ulysses of Tennyson found such a burden. The use of the Odysseus form of the name perhaps emphasises that the heroic Ulysses is also a wandering exile.

In one sense 'The Second Voyage' restores a conservative form of the myth. The pursuit of limitless horizons brings desolation, misery and the loss of all sense of direction. Despite this, however, Ní Chuilleanáin follows Dante's Ulysses beyond the Mediterranean parameters of the first voyage, into an uncharted Atlantic and over the edge of the known world.

Here Frederic Jameson's reading of the most important twentieth century revision of the Ulysses myth proves a useful adjunct to Richard Kearney's reading discussed earlier. Jameson sees Joyce's *Ulysses* as a transformation of modernism. The novel removes from the imperial centre to the colonised margin the modernist encounter between an infinity which is increasingly meaningless and a meaning which is increasingly that of aesthetic closure only.

(Jameson 1988: 15–23). In Jameson's reading, Joyce's use of the *Odyssey* is 'ec-centric' (20) confounding of the centralising force of Western culture:

It is not the meaning of the *Odyssey* which is exploited here, but rather its spatial properties. The *Odyssey* serves as a map: it is indeed, on Joyce's reading of it, the one classical narrative whose closure is that of a map of a whole complete and equally closed region of the globe, as though somehow the very episodes themselves merged back into space, and the reading of them came to be indistinguishable from map-reading. None of the other classical parallels in modern literature has this peculiar spatial dimension . . . indeed, it is as though this Third-World modernism shyly turned the imperial relationship inside out, appropriating the great imperial space of the Mediterranean in order to organize the space of the colonial city, and to turn its walks and paths into the closure of a form and of a grand cultural monument. (22–23)

'The Second Voyage' inverts the map reading Jameson describes. The form and cultural monument, the myth of heroic quest, is mapped onto the ocean, its lines are diffused into indistinguishable moving waves — 'Once at sea everything is changed'. (Ní Chuilleanáin 1986: 34). The movement is not ec-centric, but extra-territorial, even extra-terrestrial. It is a movement towards a space which, unlike Joyce's Dublin, cannot be mapped. The voyage ends in tears, but it must be undertaken by the woman writer who would find her way out from under the 'sky' that:

Lids and defines the elements
Where no unformed capricious cry
Can sound without its monument. (38)

IV

One factor emerges very clearly in the treatment of myth by Sara Berkeley and Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin. It is the absence of access to or claim upon a 'motherland'. The differences in the treatment of the water imagery are less important than the two very different women poets' need to deal with femininity in terms of an element which cannot easily be territorialised. The identity of 'Woman' with a territory claimed by a masculine power is still deeply ingrained. Both go to considerable lengths to avoid any imagery of the feminine which might be assimilated to the myth of 'Mother Ireland'.

The corollary of this is that the poetic persona in both cases is a displaced person, a consciousness adrift like Odysseus or criss-

crossed by empty and directionless trains like the dreamer in 'Easter 1944' and the poet in 'Emily Dickinson'. Sometimes in Sara Berkeley's work the poet is an exile in language itself. In 'The Girl Who Went to Live on a Wall,' (1989: 47) 'the writing of these difficult words' must be done, but it leaves 'Feelings trapped between the / Lines, speared on the i's and fluttering'. In 'Brain-burst' (1986: 14) language is sought as an escape from self-possession:

So I rhyme
To comfort; an odd wish for confidence in metre.
I tick
And soon it is no longer I who am bright,
Who cry out.

A self-sought internal exile is the place from which the poet speaks in Berkeley's work. In Ní Chuilleanáin's the poetic voice is often almost without a persona and its continuity exists in a reaching out to the ocean:

In imitation of the weed
Which, out of soft enclosing mud
As from a hand that holds a lead
Leans after the escaping flood. (1986: 38)

There is always a little nostalgia for the shore, a little wistfulness for a land where one might be at home. There is a danger that one will be lost 'In the simmering sea' where 'scribbles of weed defined/ Uncertain depth', (26) a danger that the uncertain definitions will give way to meaninglessness. But the 'scribbles of weed' offer an image of writing which is both extra-territorial and at home, in her element.