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History and Memory in Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's "Autun" – An Irish Poet in Burgundy

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Abstract

Starting from memories of a trip through Burgundy, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin focuses on the figure of Lazarus, and his strong connection to Autun – the historic town which inspires the title of her poem. Through her words, Lazarus becomes a thread interweaving history and memory, both to celebrate a poet's craft and to produce a work of art through a process involving life and death, birth and rebirth or resurrection.

Keywords: Poetry; history and memory; Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin

Résumé

C'est la figure de Lazare que choisit Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin comme point de départ de son poème « Autun », dont le titre évoque le souvenir d'un passage dans cette petite ville de Bourgogne au riche passé historique. Histoire et mémoire tissent une trame mêlant vie et mort, naissance et renaissance ou résurrection, aboutissant finalement à une œuvre d'art.

Mots clés: Poésie; histoire et mémoire; Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin

In 2001, a collection of poems by Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin came out, published by Gallery Books. It is entitled *The Girl who Married the Reindeer*¹ and, among the many titles, two stood out at once when I first opened the book, and still stand out now because they refer to place names in this country. They are "Crossing the Loire" (p. 34-35) and "Autun" (p. 32-33). The Loire, and particularly the Loire valley, is well known, but what about Autun? It is, after all, only a small market town of 16,500 inhabitants in the Morvan area. And yet it boasts a very ancient history, over two thousand years old, since it was founded by the Roman emperor Augustus in the last century B.C., and a huge amphitheatre and a temple are still there to be seen. It is also steeped in the Romanesque tradition,

1. Ní Chuilleanáin, Eiléan, *The Girl who Married the Reindeer*, Oldcastle (Co. Meath, Ireland), The Gallery Press, 2001. All future references to pages or lines in the body of the text will refer to this edition.

with a cathedral, built in the 12th century, and a statuary, also dating back to the 12th century.

Therefore, simply with the title of her poem, the Irish poet makes an immediate connection with history, setting the lines of her poem within the strong historic tradition of the place. At the same time, the poem starts with reminiscence, memories of that particular trip to and from Autun, which is the starting point for the poem. History and memory soon appear deeply intertwined in the poem "Autun". The historical tradition of the French town, combined with the Irish poet's memory and craft lead to the creation of a work of art. The memories evoked in the first stanza, against the historical background to the town, act as an introduction to the main themes, which will then be developed in the other stanzas: death, through a musical motif, in the second and fourth stanzas; death and rebirth or resurrection, through a biblical motif, in the third and fourth stanzas. What is more, there is not just one voice but a multiplicity of voices, since "I" ("I drove away", line 1) becomes "we" ("we have travelled", line 6) and then "I" again ("was I taken apart", line 15), and also "she" ("She fills the ground", line 30).

■ Death

The very first line of the poem sets the tone and immediately draws the reader's attention to both history and memory. It reads "As I drove away from the sepulchre of Lazarus". Alongside the Roman remains in Autun, there is a cathedral called Cathédrale Saint Lazare. What is more, the museum, or Musée Rolin, houses a collection of Romanesque statues, including "Le Tombeau de Saint Lazare" or the sepulchre of Lazarus. The historical significance of the place is linked with the memories of a trip through Burgundy and, if the historical tradition of the town is awe-inspiring, the memories of that day are quite mundane – a car, with the radio on, and the simple landscape of the countryside, with cows sheltering under some trees. The scene seems suffused with peace and tranquility, and yet a number of elements disturb the apparent calm and point to a double thread which will be woven through the fabric of the poem – death, with "the sepulchre" (line 1), the cows which "looked sadly out" (line 2) and "voices drowning" (line 4) the tune on the radio; but there is also life, with the rhythm of Chopin's "Grande Polonaise" (line 5), life fighting against the forces of annihilation present in the memories of that day.

In the second stanza, the musical motif is superimposed on the theme of death, death seen as a universal condition with the words "remember us" (line 6). Countless pilgrims have followed the same path – "we have travelled as far as Lazarus to Autun" (lines 6-7) – which refers to the same journey through

life towards the ineluctable ending, death ("dead and in the grave", line 8). The vibrant music associated with the memories of that trip through Burgundy is lost in the history of the countless deaths occurring over centuries ("dead and in the grave/many times", lines 8-9). The "Grande Polonaise" has been muted by the voices of the dead: they have had "no music" (line 10). Death has annihilated the triumphant rhythm of Chopin's tune and turned it into a requiem song. It has become a sort of ghost music, linked to the ancient history of humanity and also paralyzing the memories of that day. It is a "skeleton tune" (line 10) played by "bones" and "knuckles" (line 11), in a way that is compared to the heaviness of a "headstone" (line 14). Music has lost out, it has become the ghost of its former self since only the bones can play the tune.

And yet the poem ends on a more lively musical note, with "I stammer out music that echoes like hammers" (line 33). The person has changed – it is no longer "we" but "I" – and the tense has changed too, from the perfect to the present. What was a sort of endless repetition of the same fate – "dead and in the grave/many times now" (lines 8-9) – has turned into a solitary action, a unique artistic declaration. It is tentative at first ("I stammer") but strong and determined ("like hammers"), and deeply creative since the music "echoes", instead of being "drowned" as in the first stanza. The "other voices" (line 4), those of countless dead people since the dawn of history, are a collective memory for the poet. They have kept the tune ("the pause and then the long low note/the second and third fingers of the left hand", lines 12-13) only to pass it on forever. The poet becomes the recipient, and the music she inherits she then turns into her own, and the reader has witnessed the birth of a piece of poetry.

Death and rebirth or resurrection

In the third and fourth stanzas, death and birth, or rebirth, are combined through the other set of images, which is biblical, and clearly related to the trip through Burgundy, and to the sepulchre of Lazarus and also to a painting in the museum in Autun, called Nativity. Death is seen again through the collective memories of countless dead people in the history of humanity, suggested by "how often" (line 15), "how often" (line 19), "for decades" (line 17), but also through a first person – "I", "my shoulders" (line 17), "my hair" (line 18), "my flesh" (line 20) – who becomes another Jesus Christ or another Lazarus. The history of Christianity is part of her inheritance and she shares in the human condition through the symbolic biblical figures. Like Christ, she is 'taken apart,/the ribs opened like a liquor press' (lines 15-16). Like Christ and Lazarus, she is put into grave clothes and kept in a tomb: "reconstructed/wrapped... rolled up and put away" (lines 19-20). Just like the "skeleton tune" (line 10) of the second stanza,

associated with a “headstone” (line 14), the “flesh” (line 20) is part of the dying process and its finality. The tomb is “for ever” (line 22).

And yet, death is not the only presence, and a new element is introduced in what is suggested about the hair: “my hair flying, at large like a comet” (line 18). Beyond the finality of death, there is a form of movement, of activity, if not life, that will not rest still. The memory of Jesus and Lazarus, and of all the dead who have been buried through the centuries, stays alive and is passed on again and again. And it is this very memory which can be reborn through poetry. Just like Christ and Lazarus, the poet rises from the dead and a new condition is made possible. The solemn history of the French town, allied to the wistful memories of that day, has led to a production that goes far beyond the traditional dichotomy between life and death or death and life.

What had been shared, death, the common fate in the history of humanity, has now been transcended and turned into a victory over death, with “my risings” (line 23) or “I arise” (line 25) in the fourth stanza. It is a form of resurrection which, in fact, has more to do with birth than rebirth as it is associated with the birth of a child: “in the steam” (line 24), “I arise like the infant/that dances out of the womb” (lines 25-26). The grave clothes have been dispersed. They are the “ranked and shaken banners” (line 31) of the last few lines, and resurrection has been replaced by nativity, one of the paintings in the museum in Autun. When the poet rises from the dead, from the memory of all the dead, there is creation, jubilation in the creative process: “bursting with script,/ the copious long lines” (lines 27-28). Like Lazarus, she has triumphed over the burden of death. Like Christ in the religious tradition, she creates a new world through birth, death and rebirth. Poetry rises from death and life, from what the poet calls “the scrolls of her nativity” (line 32), and it becomes a distant object, with the mixture of “she” – “she fills the ground and the sky” (line 30) – and “I” – “I stammer out music” (line 33) – at the end of the poem. Through the pangs of history and memory, a work of art has been released, which belongs to both the poet and the world.

In the poem “Autun”, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin reveals what, to her, is at the heart of poetry writing. Both history and memory are part of the process and closely connected. History is the past of humanity, with ancient figures cast in stone, as in the town called Autun. Memory is part of personal experience, like the trip through Burgundy, and it triggers the collective memory conjured up by the stone figures. History and memory are woven into the very fabric of poetry, and this particular poem, “Autun”, sounds like a hymn to poetic craft.