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Poetry as endurance : Caitriona O'Reilly' Geis

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Abstract

The article focuses on O'Reilly's *Geis* (2015), exploring the notion of poetry as a force of endurance of life's traumas. The volume is shown to display a tense balance between celebrations of life and a constant awareness of death as well as between displays of language's expressive capacity and the recurrent realisations of the ineffable nature of the world. This vacillation, in turn, takes on a critical potential, as her poems investigate the situation of a traumatised psyche and the ends of art, all the while being alert to the question of what enables the (poetic) voice to speak out. In the course of my reading, O'Reilly's insistent ambiguities are mapped out against the classical writings of Jacques Derrida, whose challenge to the metaphysics of presence, truth, speech and coherence helps trace O'Reilly's investment in the perception of poetry as springing from no source but nevertheless representing a vital force of endurance, life and resilience.

Key words

Contemporary Irish poetry; Caitríona O'Reilly; Jacques Derrida; trauma; endurance

Caitríona O'Reilly's poetry, like few others', traverses vast swathes of imaginary material in brief, compact lyrics that, nonetheless, exude an air of mastery over the difficult material they approach. Her debut, *The Nowhere Birds* (2001), was noted by critics for its "occasional sheer beauty as well as [...] wild disconcertions" (Naiden 2003: 154) and "impersonal, indeed intellectual, variety" (Holdridge 2002: 377). On the other hand, the following collection, *The Sea Cabinet* (2006), was described as "an exploration of disturbance and alienation; whose strikingly ornate, often historically-derived imagery generates a sense of coalescence, of the irresistible thickening-up of experience" (Sampson 2006). With *Geis* (2015), O'Reilly has further developed her formal artistry and deepened her psychological insights, as Lucy Collins has observed: "Somewhere in the formal mastery of these poems [in *Geis*] is the awareness of their own fragility, of the need for art to take risks in its navigation of reality and imagination" (Collins). The collection maintains throughout a precarious balance between an ostensibly unfazed poise and a slippage towards uncontrollable chaos, between celebrations of life and a constant awareness of death, and finally between displays of language's expressive capacity and the recurrent realisations of the ineffable nature of the world. This vacillation, in turn, takes on a critical potential, as her poems investigate the situation of a traumatised psyche and the ends of art, all the while being alert to the question of what enables the (poetic) voice to speak out. In the process, O'Reilly undermines discourses, whether ideological, political or metaphysical, that aim to ensure the preservation of hegemonic viewpoints.

This negotiation of imaginary paths through a psyche and its ongoing engagement with the material world is formally played out within the limits of the lyric rather than the long poem, which has typically been employed for all manner of meandering meditations on life across its various embodiments. One thinks here of contemporary poets like, for instance, John Ashbery, whose *Flow Chart* (1991) “is meant to represent ‘flow’” (Ross 2017: 94) of life, as the poem at one point puts it, “in a senseless direction toward yourself” (Ashbery 1991: 109). In a similar way, O’Reilly also engages the flow of life but unlike Ashbery, she tends to compress her material so that the lyric sends imagination reeling, as it abruptly subverts conclusions it seems to have been working towards. In this sense, she continues the tradition of Emily Dickinson, on whose work (among others) O’Reilly wrote in her PhD dissertation; Dickinson’s “fusion of sensibility and thought” (Tate 1932: 218), to use a rather dated, if still useful, point by Allen Tate, represents the kind of elusive compression of the intellectual, emotional and imagistic material that O’Reilly has come to excel in. Therefore in the present article, I will explore O’Reilly’s insistent ambiguities to show a restitutive potential they evoke. The discussion will be mapped out against the classic writings of Jacques Derrida from the 1960s and 70s, for it is Derrida’s challenge to the metaphysics of presence built on notions of truth, speech and coherence that helps trace O’Reilly’s investment in the perception of poetry as springing from no source but nevertheless representing a vital force of endurance, life and resilience.

In the opening poem of *Geis*, “Ovum,” the speaker evokes the process of insemination, which from the outset suggests that so miniscule a cell may indeed elude conceptualisation, for “You’d take it for zero, or nothing” (2015: 11). In one fell swoop the order of mathematics and metaphysics are undermined by biology, which is implied to partake of the ineffable. After the initial surprise at how minute the ovum seems, the subsequent lines make a quick connection between the egg cell and language, as it is compared to “the spotless oval your lips make saying it.” The act of utterance creates a link between the material object and the linguistic sign, as a result suggesting that what mathematics and metaphysics have difficulty expressing lies within the capacity of words: “the meat / of the word made orotund and Latinate.” This line opens up a series of associations:

It’s like putting your mouth to the smooth
breast of the ocarina, from *oca*, the goose,
[...]
Unless you seal the gap, it’s left, they’ll fall
out, those other o-words [...]
from *oblation* and *obloquy* to *oxlip* and *ozone*
and that sneaky Trojan *obol*,
[...]
from the spiky Greek of *obelus*[.] (2015: 11)

The materiality of the ovum is here overlain with linguistic undertones, which point to increasingly wider historical concepts that imply a male dominance over

the development of Western civilisation: from “*oblation*,” indicative of religion, to “*ozone*,” suggestive of the environmental crisis of the Anthropocene.

As regards the classical references, on the one hand, the Trojan “*obol*” in the context of a poem that focuses on the act of conception conjures Yeats’s “*Leda and the Swan*,” in which the divine rape of Zeus on Leda “engenders there / The broken wall, the burning roof and tower / And Agamemnon dead” (1996: 214). While Yeats celebrates the event whose wider significance overshadows the violent assault, seeing the rape as an epoch-changing moment, O’Reilly regards the obelus as “the death-mark, dagger and crucifix.” Originally obelus “indicat[ed] corruption in the word [in a non-papyrus text] following the obelus” (Dickey 2007: 134) and so in the poem, the series of associations that are presented as inherent in the ovum by dint of the letter “o” at the head is undermined by the very term that in the sequence is provided as foundational. “*Obelus*” implies that the logic of comparison between the ovum and the other words is a corruption. Life, the poem suggests, is not synonymous with male violence, whether sexual, religious or military. And yet, the conclusion of “*Ovum*” admits that despite the fact it is an intellectual imposition, it is the masculine that dominates imagination, as the “o” in ovum, once apparently spoken by a man (the “you” in the poem), reminds the speaker of “that double o in spermatozoon, / which enters by its own locomotion – / the flagellum, its tiny whip and scourge” (2015: 11). In effect, Yeats’s violence of conception seems to be the poem’s conclusion, as O’Reilly’s speaker evokes the spermatozoon’s forceful insertion. This is further corroborated by the last line, which alludes to Christopher Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine the Great* (1587), whose eponymous hero regularly refers to himself as “Scourge of God,” with a particularly vivid image coming in Act IV of Part II, in which the stage direction has the warlord sit atop a chariot pulled by the kings he had defeated, “*in his right hand a whip with which he scourgeth them*” (Marlowe 2000: IV.iii, 132, ll. 2-3). As an epitome of masculine strength and impetuosity, Marlowe’s hero figures in O’Reilly’s poem as a representation of both indomitable violence and the urge to subjugate others, which adds the context of colonial oppression to the male narratives that the poem has already implied.

“*Ovum*” maps out a narrative of oppression and dominance onto conception, revealing language as an agent of male imposition. In this sense, the poem denounces the phallogocentric idea of the origin of language that Derrida discusses first in *Of Grammatology* (1967, Eng. 1976) but returns to throughout his later writing as well. In the conclusion of the chapter entitled “...That Dangerous Supplement...,” he argues that “representation in the abyss of presence is not an accident of presence; the desire of presence is, on the contrary, born from the abyss (the indefinite multiplication) of representation, from the representation of representation, etc. The supplement itself is quite exorbitant, in every sense of the word” (1976: 163). Derrida uses the passive form of the verb “born” to speak of the metaphysical concept of presence that is forever deferred by “the abyss of representation.” As Elissa Marder has recently shown, “Birth is the name that Derrida gives for the desire for presence that only comes into being through the vertiginous ruin of representation. As a structural necessity for that which drives presence to be born out of the abyss of representation, birth is an exorbitant

supplement of supplementarity. Moreover, this promise of presence only comes into being retroactively” (2018: 16). Thus birth signals phantasms of the phallogocentric tradition, from presence and truth all the way to the idea of mother and its concomitant notion of society. Derrida points out that “the natural woman (nature, mother, or if one wishes, sister), is a represented or a signified replaced and supplanted, in desire, that is to say in social passion, beyond need” (1976: 266). This cluster of meanings of the female figure is repressed in favour of a unified presence that the mother apparently embodies. In “Ovum,” the speaker comes to consider the moment of insemination in the precise instant when she identifies the words with speech: “now that you say it” the “o” becomes “that double o in spermatozoon,” thus indicating a similar moment to Derrida of the male desire for a unity of meaning intrinsic to speech (understood as decreeing or proclaiming) forced on a biological process as well as on woman as a figure cast in a set of presuppositions, “each of the myths built up around the subject of woman [...] intended to sum her up *in toto*” (de Beauvoir 1953: 286), as Simone de Beauvoir puts it in her classic *The Second Sex* (1949, Eng. 1952). Derrida, however, goes on to claim that “[supplement] is the element of culture itself, the undeclared origin of passion, of society, of languages: the first supplementarity which permits the substitution in general of a signifier for the signified, of signifiers for other signifiers, which subsequently makes for a discourse on the difference between words and things,” a process that he deems “So dangerous [...] that one can only show it indirectly, by means of the examples of certain effects derived from it” (1976: 266). Among those effects, O’Reilly’s poem suggests, is the arrival of such repressive regimes as religion and male-dominated feudal state of the likes of Tamburlaine. By contrast, the acts of conception and birth open themselves up to the process of supplementarity as the speaker moves across levels of representation, from microscopic to macro-cultural. What is here suggested is that the actual ovum eludes expression, that it is “nothing” the very possibility of which controverts the idea of presence, shot through with emptiness as the poem suggests it is.

This implication of nothingness as a point of ineffability at the heart of things returns in “Snow.” The lyric, similarly to “Ovum,” is a dense construct that tackles head on a long tradition of evocations of snow in Irish literature, from Joyce’s “The Dead,” through Louis MacNeice’s “Snow” and Paul Muldoon’s playful engagement with the motif and MacNeice’s own poem in “History.” But O’Reilly’s poem circles still beyond Ireland, alluding to Wallace Stevens’s “The Snow Man” and the Bible. It starts paradoxically: “What is it to talk about silence?” (2015: 32), thus returning to the theme of nothingness as locus of the inexpressible. The speaker sees herself immersed in silence, “When I look up from my table / it will still be there’ after the night when it ‘hur[ied] to congregate / in the cone cast by the street lamp” (2015: 32). The suggestion here is of a decaying relationship, much like that of Gabriel and Greta Conroy in “The Dead,” to whose ending (“he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead” [Joyce 2001: 160]) the poem’s title makes an allusion; but also the image of the street lamp is underlain with a scene from Joyce’s short story:

The morning was still dark. A dull, yellow light brooded over the houses and the river; and the sky seemed to be descending. It was slushy underfoot; and only streaks and patches of snow lay on the roofs, on the parapets of the quay and on the area railings. The lamps were still burning redly in the murky air and, across the river, the palace of the Four Courts stood out menacingly against the heavy sky. (2001: 153)

This passage comes right after Gabriel and Gretta have left the party for the hotel, the scene of Gretta's revelation of her early love for Michael Furey. "Snow" changes the light from yellow to "bruise-blue" and the setting from the street to the garden covered in "the frozen cobwebs" but then shifts once more to a walk in the park, where "we blundered" (2015: 32), the "we" here suggestive of a couple as sequestered as the Conroys. As they walk, the speaker considers "the quiet, / in spite of its exclamatory outline / on bare trees, // down the great hushed halls of white" (2015: 32). The mutual coldness of the speaker and her partner is thus mirrored by the unresponsive landscape which shares its quality with Stevens's wintry realm that his speaker tries to "regard": "the frost and the boughs / Of the pine-trees crusted with snow' and 'the junipers shagged with ice, / The spruces rough in the distant glitter / Of the January sun." The poem ends with its famous assertion that "the listener, who listens in the snow, / And, nothing himself, beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is" (Stevens 1982: 10), which reverberates in O'Reilly's "Snow." In Stevens, the concluding line is as paradoxical as trying to "talk about silence," for the poem suggests that, as Beverly Maeder points out:

[E]ven "nothing" is a something for the verb "is" to state existence about. However, even this cannot be affirmed, for the final "nothing that is" potentially (and simultaneously) could be a shorthand for "the nothing that is there" - "there" forming a locative expression for that particular place of wind and leaves, beheld by that particular observer, and self-referentially "there" in this particular poem's preceding words. So in its undecidability, Stevens' poem seems to question the stability, solidity, and reference of existential statements even while it seems to be saying that something "is." (2007: 161)

Similarly, O'Reilly's speaker muses over the correspondence between words, the world and the self's response to it: "Are there words for what I felt / in the faceted garden? *Motes, corpuscles, animalcules*" (2015: 32). The subsequent imagery of the miniscule suggests that moving across scales could offer some answers but this is set against an evocation of "relief to feel it touch me / with its meaning, / its vast multitudinous silence, / again and again" (2015: 33). The referent of "it" is ambiguous and might be "the quietness," "what I felt," or "snow" itself, which increases the elusiveness of the poem's language. Like the final line in "The Snow Man," the transition from "*Motes, corpuscles, animalcules*" to "multitudinous silence" reveals an instability of language, which can only operate by means of repetition: "again and again."

The silence of snow is thus made an inherent feature of language, which functions in the continuous series of repetitions that undermine the notions of truth and presence, as the speaker cannot know, regardless how microscopic the level of her investigation, “what I felt.” For Derrida, the notion of silence, as a characteristic phenomenon of speech, has crucial significance in that it is the replacement (silent in French) of the letter “a” with “e” in his *différance* that inaugurates the exploration of writing. In “Différance,” he states that “even if one seeks to pass over such an infraction in silence [*a* instead of *e*], the interest that one takes in it can be recognized and situated in advance as prescribed by the mute irony, the inaudible misplacement, of this literal permutation” (1982: 3). Derrida’s ensuing discussion of how writing instantiates itself as continuous deferral and difference is replete with claims that “the *a* of *différance* [...] is not heard; it remains silent, secret and discreet as a tomb” (1982: 4). The silence with which Derrida’s discussion begins underlies O’Reilly’s poem, as it sends the “vast multitudinous silence” reverberating with meanings that result in repetition that defers the answer to the speaker’s question, “Are there words for what I felt[?]” Addressing a “you” (apparently a younger version of the speaker) in “Clotho,” the speaker denounces her constant enquiry into what life is with a similar insight:

And always there was something there you could not reach:
it flickered below the surface of the marble
like a candle behind a grimed window,
mocking your eager questions like an echo. (2015: 47)

The figure of the echo implies here a repetition of voice that provides no answer to the questionings, except an ongoing exploration that ceases only at the moment when thought is distracted.

The ending of “Clotho” returns to “The Snow Man,” as it undermines the possibility of unveiling “Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is” but O’Reilly alludes also to Yeats’s “Man and the Echo,” in which the poet’s queries about his own life are met and mocked by the indomitable voice echoing from the “cleft that’s christened Alt” (1996: 345). Seamus Heaney noted that “the situation of the man in ‘The Man and the Echo’ is that of somebody *in extremis*, somebody who wants to make his soul, to bring himself to wholeness, to bring his mind and being into congruence with the divine mind and being” but “what the echo communicates, of course, is the man’s own most extreme and exhausted recognitions. The echo marks the limits of the mind’s operations even as it calls the mind forth to its utmost exertions,” which despite the poet’s nearing death “is [...] vital and undaunted” (Heaney 1993: 96). As in his other late poems, Yeats sings the louder “For every tatter in [his] mortal dress” (1996: 193), a gesture that O’Reilly puts down in the final two lines of “Clotho” that rhyme “window” with “echo,” thus formally evoking the kind of mirroring effect created by the image of “a candle behind a grimed window.” What the “you” sees is also what she hears: a reflection of her own investment in the exploration, which remains elusive and “mock[s] your eager questioning.” This self-reflection that leads to no central, divine insight into the nature of life follows the logic that Derrida discovers in his

reading of Mallarmé, in which he observes the doubling, mirroring effect of the “fold”: “Every determinate fold unfolds the figure of another (from the leaf to the sheet, from the sheet to the shroud, from the bed to the book, from linen to the velum, from the wing to the fan, from the veil to the dancer, to the plumes, to the leaflet, etc.) and of the re-mark of this fold-upon-itself of writing” (1981: 270). For Derrida, such folding–unfolding constitutes the supplementarity of the text, without which “there would be no text” and so “no literature” (Derrida 1981: 270). In view of this claim, “Clotho” evokes a repudiation of “you”’s questionings, her artistic desire “to haul life from matter” (2015: 47), which are aimed at uncovering the core of existence, a goal reconcilable neither with life nor with literature. Instead, what the poem affirms is the perpetual process of folding and unfolding, resembling a less grand version of Yeats’s undaunted pursuit of poetry in face of incipient death. Whether commenting on Mallarmé, Edmond Jabes or Paul Celan, Derrida discovers in poetry a “spectral errancy of words” so that “what is called poetry or literature, art itself [...] in other words, a certain experience of language, of the mark, or of the trait *as such* – is perhaps only an intense familiarity with the ineluctable originarity of the spectre” (Derrida 1994: 58, emphasis in original). O’Reilly’s silence and her evocations of nothingness are figures of just such a spectrality that “ineluctably” shrouds origin as it also inaugurates writing and its most intense form: poetry.

O’Reilly puts this spectral aspect of writing to the test in the titular series of eight lyrics that focus on a tormented psyche, glimpses of which are also visible across the entire collection in poems like “Empty House” or “The Servant Question.” As O’Reilly herself explains in an interview, the sequence “describes a time of personal trauma and the fallout from that” (O’Reilly). The epigraph to “Geis,” The cry of Marlowe’s Faustus “*Why this hell, nor am I out if it,*” introduces the theme of being sequestered that the first lyric, “Our Lady of the Dry Tree,” ascribes to “this love I imagined,” here deemed “a sickness” (2015: 23). The imagery of deadness, associated with “writing stone” and “a skeleton grid of branches,” overwhelms the speaker who initially fashions herself a lively bird, “a feathered storm, / in a drench of illumined leaves.” The poem then collapses in on itself, as the speaker suggests that the stony cage is “hung / with signs of my devising,” thus transferring the guilt for her condition onto herself, as she self-culpably claims that “Love was never there” (2015: 23). The shift from an expanse of the air that she imagined herself “descending” to a cramped space of the last stanza suggests an internalisation of guilt and pain, which leads to the nightmarish vision of “Night Sweat.” In the poem, the speaker continues her descent but instead of an implication of freedom, now she is plummeting to destruction, becoming “a night-flying pilot in his little plane” (2015: 24). The plunge leads into the “medieval” hell of “pointed flames out of Bosch” which “scorch me hotter / than any bitch burned by history.” Her feeling of guilt is met with punishment that she seems to be resigned to, as she sees herself on a macro scale of suffering being burnt by history, as though her trespasses offended nobody in particular but were crimes against life and civilisation themselves. This self-torturing attitude recurs throughout the volume; in “Winter Suicides,” which follows “Geis,” the speaker mournfully describes “the darkness” into which suicide victims fell, who

“To themselves [...] were the least kind” and “unable to believe // the frequencies of light concerned them” (2015: 31). The same self-loathing characterises the speaker of “Geis,” for whom the nightmare vision ends in an image suggestive of Bosch’s *The Garden of Earthly Delights*:

Now I am straddled by a great night bird,
a muscular talon to each hip bone.
How I struggle to bear him up:
his soaked wings hover. (2015: 24)

The context of “Leda and the Swan” returns, as the speaker sees herself helpless in the talons of the bird, itself a creature of bestial potency straight out of William Blake as well as Yeats. However, unlike Leda who cannot but succumb to the divine assault, the speaker finds herself supporting the “great night bird,” as if otherwise he were to fail, his hovering a mere fancy.

Exuding an oneiric aura, the first two poems suggest a mental breakdown, which in “Leaven” brings the speaker to a mental hospital where she sees “An old lady wander[ing] the ward, / a lost comet” (2015: 25). The poem once more refashions bird imagery to refer to “the ghost of a bird” that will depart from the woman “through her wrinkled mouth” (2015: 25). Here birds come to signify both innocence and fragility as well nightmarish punishment, introducing the notion of equivocality that the last poem in *Geis* will further explore. For the time being, the speaker focuses on the ailing lady and her bodily and mental decay as she slowly succumbs to oblivion. In “Isolate but Preserve,” the speaker evokes seclusion and the trauma of absurd self-inculpation other inmates are afflicted by:

I’d listened too long
to the boy on the closed ward
charge the doors with his head,
the girl whose thoughts
had caused her cousin’s cancer.
There were dead baby dreams.
There was no one. (2015: 28)

This may be one of the most direct image of the agonies that people are fraught with. The ending, while suggestive of freedom (“*writhe free*”) is a poignant conclusion – the physical collapse the poem opened with results in a death. From the realistic vistas of “Isolate but Preserve,” the sequence makes a transition to “Riddle” that seeks to express in abstract terms the agonies of mental breakdown, “a purple knot of violence in the head” (2015: 29). These harrowing glimpses into the anguished lives that the speaker witnesses coalesce around her and are fused in “Geis,” in which she is brought back into the spotlight. Reminiscent of “Isolate but Preserve,” her painful seclusion, which “is in / the nature of a house” (2015: 26), leads to an aporetic image indicating a twofold role of silence: “The wound of the mouth closes. // To perish its roots / a radiant stone is placed on the tongue” (2015: 26). On the one hand, the closure of the wound implies heal-

ing which can finally alleviate the speaker's excruciating condition; on the other, however, the ending suggests that this healing leads to the death of language. In this context, the "radiant stone" represents the light of healing and the singeing heat earlier in the poem evoked by "hot coals" that the speaker "would sooner [...] swallow" than go on living between the "smooth white walls" (2015: 26). The dual context of remedy and demise meets in the image of silence, for the sealing of "The wound of the mouth" as well as "perish[ing] [the tongue's] roots" both imply a severance of voice. Thus the tormented psyche, which prefers physical suffering as a means to releasing pent-up anxieties to the "Containment" she is forced into, is brought to an aporetic point; she must remain silent of what she can no longer be silent if she is to survive but also she must remain silent if she wishes to alleviate her agony.

This paradoxical knot of healing and dying inherent in the last image of "Geis" becomes a *pharmakon*, a remedy that is also a poison. Derrida glosses the word *pharmakon* in Plato's *Phaedrus* by noting that it contains, depending on the context in which it is deployed, two mutually exclusive meanings that are poised to elude translation (and so a complete exegesis). Plato's system, as Derrida shows using a number of Platonic dialogues, is designed to exclude such ambiguity by proscribing its very locus: writing. However, due to the fact that Plato commits his thoughts to writing, his prohibition fails to conform to unitary logic. For Plato, writing is detrimental to thinking "insofar as it sows 'forgetfulness in the soul'" (Derrida 1981: 105), as Derrida argues, and yet that same writing is a compulsory part of the process of thinking, of the movement of thought. As a result, "even though writing is external to (internal) memory, [...] it affects memory and hypnotizes it in its very inside" so that "Plato maintains *both* the exteriority of writing *and* its power of maleficent penetration, its ability to affect or infect what lies deepest inside" (1981: 110). Writing thus unfolds simultaneously beyond the singularity of its particular use and also in its actual implementation. It is both outside and inside context, the ambiguity of this position allowing it to approximate meaning and elude any single one meaning at the same time. This movement between exteriority and interiority of writing is thus both remedy, as it ensures a recuperation of meaning, and poison, as it undermines meaning at each turn. In "Geis," the knot of healing-destroying may be irresolvable but what this *pharmakon*-riddled sequence reveals is the continuity of writing where speech can no longer persist. The tongue may be sealed shut but the pen continues; as the subsequent poem puts it, returning to the idea of the letter "O" (the title of the fifth lyric in the sequence), "'O' // is getting the cramped brain / to release its grip, // is prising open its fingers" (2015: 27). The new day brings a release, which is both a temporarily sedated agony ("the drug is almost love / as the day is almost blue") and an actual amelioration ("pain departs like a ship"), which is emphasised in another invocation of ineffable nothingness: "Stiff petals, wet wrinkled wings // coil around nothing / like the foetus its long past" (2015: 27). The self is anaesthetised until it becomes numb "as the river [that] splits itself on a stone," however, writing will not cease, as the last line "in greenness continues" vaguely suggests resilience.

The last poem in the sequence, "Jonah," reining in the context of rebirth and return after the biblical Jonah, is an entirely *pharmakon*-ic performance of rem-

edy and poison intrinsic to writing. The speaker shows signs of recovery but her condition now is one of puzzlement at the world that she sees as communicating something to her: “What is rumoured by the movement of these branches?” (2015: 30). In response to it, all she can do is to accept life in all its ambiguity, for “To refuse is not to live,” a summons that is followed by a quote from Jonah 2:5: “*The waters compassed me about, even to the soul: the depth / closed me round about, the weeds were wrapped about my head.*” The former biblical imagery of the hurtful tongue, which refers to the frequent use of the tongue in “The Book of Proverbs,” is now replaced by a redemptive context. The apparent recovery, shown through the biblical imagery of pilgrimage “to the roots of the mountain” (2015: 30), is, however, only possible in an evocation of ambiguity: “The world has eaten us the way the world must.” Instead of the whale, it is now the entire world that has devoured the fragile psyche of the speaker, and unlike Jonah, she and her “Brothers” in suffering can hardly hope they will ever be spat back into total recovery, as the use of the present perfect tense indicates. The transformative recuperation that the sequence thematises follows the path of collapse which is then remedied by the realisation that health and illness partake of each other. What allows life to continue is thus not the promise of total recovery from the anxieties the world inflicts on a psyche but an ability to persevere through those anxieties, as writing does, which sets itself in the shady sphere of *pharmakon* where good and bad are inextricably intertwined.

The closing poem of *Geis*, “Komorebi,” which O’Reilly glosses in the “Notes” at the end of the volume as “a Japanese word which is used to describe the effect of sunlight filtering through the branches and leaves of trees” and adds that “it has no exact English translation” (2015: 63), evokes a joyous admiration for light and life, both representing glimpses of the absolute. In the poem the *geis*, which signifies a prohibition or injunction of a preternatural sanction widely evoked in early medieval Irish saga-literature, seems to be lifted, as the speaker shakes off the psychological burdens that she, speaking out in various guises, has strained under throughout the volume. O’Reilly traces a relation between “the notion of a person being controlled by certain supernatural prohibitions or compulsions (spells, really)” and “blocks our compulsions in the personality, our self-limiting behaviours, our irrationalism” (O’Reilly), thereby stressing the psychological relief that the volume works towards. And yet, between the two words, the Japanese “komorebi” and the Irish “geis,” the freedom that the speaker comes finally to enjoy is underlain by the logic that has here been explored by reference to Derrida’s notions of birth, supplementarity, fold and *pharmakon*.

The opening stanza stiches together reality and language in a more expansive take on the theme first signaled in “Ovum”: “Between the world and the word / are three small shapes, / the signs for ‘tree,’ ‘escape’ and ‘sun’” (2015: 61). It is in this in-between zone that “I watch how the light leaks through them.” The shapes seem to belong to the Japanese Kanji script that is represented by ideograms. Though he meant the Chinese language, Pound classically extolled ideograms as medium for poetry due to the fact that “Chinese notation [...] is based upon a vivid shorthand picture of the operations of nature” (2005: 101). Although O’Reilly is skeptical of such a unity (aware of the Poundian definition as she no doubt is),

implying instead that while the ideograms mediate between language and reality, they do not exhaust their potential in the process, she nonetheless finds solace in them. The world and the word here seem to represent the ineffable material reality, all that in “Clotho” “flickered below the surface of the marble” to which neither art nor language have access, and the Platonic idea, which, according to Derrida’s reading, debar the ambiguities of writing so that no sign, of whatever language, can capture it. Still, it is in this medial zone of writing that O’Reilly’s speaker revels: “I love how [the light] exults, like any escapee, / on the lake in slow reflective waves.” The poem and the entire volume end with a redemptive image, as the speaker comes to “exult” “in the cormorant extending his wet wings to [the light] // in a messianic gesture, as if dazzled to absolute / by the word and the world’s beauty” (2015: 61). It appears that after the gruelling healing which the previous poems have evoked, the speaker finds joy and near-divine experience in nature conjoined with language. Tempting though it is to read “Komorebi” as symbolising redemption and complete recovery, the poem insists on the use of the conditional (“as if”) and stresses that the progress of light “ascending the birch trunks” goes on “according to some unknown frequency,” thus returning to the realm of ambiguity. The world is the locus of the ineffable and language is how this ineffable is made resonant with meaning, so that the scene signifies nothing outside the mediation of the signs, whether of English, Japanese or indeed Irish. What the poem underlines is then the speaker’s realisation of any language’s inherently equivocal placement between two unattainable limits: extralinguistic reality on the one hand and the ideal language (Platonic as much as Poundian) on the other. The epiphany that she observes in the final stanzas is thus the revelation of the always already conditional act of writing and reading (here implied to share the supplementary character) that folds and unfolds endlessly.

In “Komorebi” but also throughout *Geis*, O’Reilly links the ongoing process of writing, its meandering between cure and poison, to resilience that allows the speaker of these poems to endure the psychic trauma of prohibitions and injunctions. What the “geasa” (plural of “geis”) manifesting in her collection are therefore confronted with is the elusive force of writing, of poetry’s “spectral errancy,” which prises open the ossified structures of the social and symbolic order. The redemptive gesture in “Komorebi” brings freedom to the speaker, who knows the constrained, ambiguous nature of this freedom, aware that it comes as a *pharmakon*, which may now be cure, now poison. The silence, the ineffable nothingness, from which the poetic voice emanates is no safe haven but it is a force of survival in a world that “enfolds its being and will not yield” (2015: 56).

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