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**A Journey through Time and Space
in Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's "A Midwinter Prayer"**

Abstract

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin often writes about journeys and quests, the focus in these poems is not on the destination but on the voyage itself. A poem called "A Midwinter Prayer," first published in the poet's 1972 collection, *Acts and Monuments*, depicts a journey that takes place not so much in space but rather in time. The poem spans not only a part of the year from Samhain to spring, but also takes the reader from pre-Christian times through the dawn of Christianity into the future of prophecies. This is achieved by an intricate system of allusions and interweaving of various subtexts that my essay aims to uncover. By mapping the references in this poem, this paper examines Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's strategic use of allusions and subtexts. The paper explores how allusions to different sources, like the Bible and old Irish literature and myth, are juxtaposed within a text. The article argues that allusions can become essential structural elements in the poet's work and they can act as governing principles for entire poems. The aim of this paper is to analyse Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's complex allusive technique in one of her poems, "A Midwinter Prayer" in a way that will be applicable in later studies of the poet's work.

Keywords

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, allusion, journey, immram, Bible, time

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin is one of the most important contemporary Irish poets. She has published eleven poetry collections to date along with a number of literary translations from Irish, Italian and Romanian. As an academic, she studied medieval and renaissance literature—an interest that has left its mark on her poetry as well. She frequently engages with historical themes and she often uses narrative tropes and patterns from various stories that have been passed down to us through generations: stories from classical mythology, folklore,

Irish legends, fairy tales and the Bible. These frequently lend underlying narrative structures to her poems, instead of appearing as shorter, more easily identifiable allusions to the original source material in various sections of her poems. She often layers narrative patterns on top of one another, mixing and matching elements, creating unique, and often surprisingly unified, blends of traditional patterns in her poems. A particularly interesting example of this technique is an earlier poem of hers, “A Midwinter Prayer” (1972/1977: 35-37). Despite its title, the poem is not a prayer; it is rather a narrative about a journey, during which the main character says a prayer. The main character, the exile who is undertaking the journey, travels not so much through space, but rather through time. Ní Chuilleanáin’s allusions to old Irish legends, medieval Irish literature, and the Bible not only provide the underlying pattern for the poem, but as allusions, they also serve as markers of time within the narrative. The carefully arranged references take the reader through cultural history from the pre-Christian times to the advent of Christianity and into the future of Christian civilisation. The reused traditional stories serve a three-fold purpose in “A Midwinter Prayer”: they give the poem its narrative structure, they mark the passage of time within the narrative of the poem, the exile’s journey; and they create a larger, mythical narrative about human history.

The poem combines several subtexts that inform the recurring imagery and structure of the poem as a whole. The two main subtexts are *immram*, a genre of medieval Irish narrative poem and the 11th chapter of the *Book of Isaiah* in the Old Testament. There are two more stories that are significant at certain sections of the poem. At the beginning, the poet evokes a tale about Fionn Mac Cumhaill, the hero of the Fenian cycle of Irish myths; then, about halfway through the poem includes an unusual rendition of the story of the birth of Christ from the New Testament (Luke 2). Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin carefully merges and combines these allusions in her poem, taking elements from each of them and transforming them to create her own uniquely coherent narrative.

“A Midwinter Prayer” was first published in Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin’s first collection, *Acts and Monuments* (1972) and was subsequently included in her 1977 collection, *The Second Voyage*. This essay examines the poem in the latter context, since both the title of the 1977 volume and the arrangement of the poems in it highlight the theme of journey and thus provide an enriching background for the analysis. Irene Gilsenan Nordin links the journey motif in Ní Chuilleanáin’s poetry to “the metaphorical journey that the speaking subject makes into language” (2006: 178). She argues that the subjects in Ní Chuilleanáin’s poems often remain in a “state of transit,” a liminal space “where the infinite possibilities of language exist as a liberating and empowering force” (2006: 192). This paper argues that the

journey motif reflects a journey through culture and that the liberating and empowering force comes instead from the wealth of traditions Ní Chuilleanáin draws from in order to shape her own poetry. It is true, however, that the people journeying in her poems rarely reach their destinations and the poems focus on the process of the journey itself. As the poet confessed in an interview: “I think I am very much a poet who draws on narrative, even if I don’t usually finish the stories that I start” (“All For You”, Youtube). The title of *The Second Voyage*, the collection, and the titular poem in it, take inspiration from a myth about Odysseus, according to which he had to take a second journey inland to appease Poseidon as Tiresias told him in a prophecy in Book XI of Homer’s *Odyssey* (1953: 138). Odysseus knows what he must achieve on his second journey in Ní Chuilleanáin’s poetic version of the story, but his memories of the sea haunt him and hold him back. Motifs from the stories connected to Odysseus–like travelling, the sea, ships, and islands—are recurring elements in many of the poems in the collection. Like Odysseus, the unnamed wanderer in “A Midwinter Prayer” also feels that his aim is out of reach. Although the same themes and motifs appear in “A Midwinter Prayer,” their source in this case is not the *Odyssey*, but a genre of old Irish narrative poem, the *immram*. While classical mythology, biblical and religious sources are Ní Chuilleanáin’s most frequently used sources of allusions, Haberstroh makes a case for the significance of Irish folklore and legends in her poetry (2013: 67-78). Since Ní Chuilleanáin also has a keen academic interest in medieval and Renaissance literatures; the striking similarities, both structural and textual, make it likely that old Irish voyage narratives served as an important inspiration for “A Midwinter Prayer.”

David Dumville defines the *immram* as a frame tale where, during a sea voyage, the hero and his companions visit a few mysterious or otherworldly islands. Here, the voyage frames the story which consists of many diverse episodes. Dumville claims that *immrama* are fundamentally of monastic origin and he contrasts these with *echtraí*, stories of pre-Christian origin that tell a hero’s journey to Fairy Land and his time there (1976: 74-75). “A Midwinter Prayer” borrows the structure of the *immram*; the wanderer sees different times and places on his journey as the heroes of *immrama* visit many different islands. The frame tale structure allows Ní Chuilleanáin to incorporate diverse elements into her poem and the different allusions and references fulfil the role of the various stops on the journey in an *immram*. There are certain elements in “A Midwinter Prayer,” nonetheless, that are more typical of *echtraí*, such as the recurring assertion that the wanderer’s voyage is a “posthumous” or “funeral journey” and the memorable description of an orchard in the fifth stanza that resembles the depictions of the Otherworld in medieval Irish literature. These features of “A

Midwinter Prayer” are best explained by linking the poem to a specific medieval Irish text, *Immram Brain*, which is classified as a composite of *immram* and *echtrae* by David Dumville (1976: 83-88).

Immram Brain narrates the journey of Bran Mac Feabhail and his companions to the mythical Island of Women, located in the realm of Eamhain, a pre-Christian concept of the Otherworld. At the beginning of the story, a mysterious woman appears to Bran and encourages him to travel westward across the sea to a magical place of beauty and peace, where there is neither sin nor death. After awakening, Bran sets out on this journey with his foster-brothers and some other companions. During the journey, they encounter Manannán, the god of the sea and visit the strange Island of Joy, where one of the men is left behind. Finally, they arrive at the Island of Women, where the fairy queen, the mysterious woman who visited Bran earlier, and her people welcome them. After spending some time there, one of the men becomes homesick and convinces Bran to take them back so they may see Ireland once more. When they approach Ireland, they speak with people on the shore and realise that they have spent hundreds of years away. The fairy queen had warned them not to set foot on dry land, but the man, who had been so homesick, does not heed the warning and jumps on shore, and at the same time his body crumbles to dust as if he had been buried for many years. At this point Bran tells the story of their journey to the people on the shore, then he leaves, never to be seen again (Meyer 1895: 2-35).

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin incorporates various concepts and elements of this old Irish poem into her own work. Some of these are common to many old Irish voyage-tales, but there are also textual similarities between *Immram Brain* and “A Midwinter Prayer.” The two most important features the contemporary poem shares with *Immram Brain* that are also characteristic of other *echtraí* and *immrama* are the role of the protagonist as a witness and the treatment of time. Bran’s story is based on a journey to mythical places during which the hero encounters things that no mortal eye has seen before. “A Midwinter Prayer” is similarly visionary in its nature, though most of what the wanderer in this poem sees may be familiar to the reader from old Irish literature or the Bible. However, the traveller in “A Midwinter Prayer” is no hero. He resembles old Bran after he has returned to the shores of Ireland and has stayed alive to bear witness. Bran, after telling his story, disappears and his later fate remains unknown. Ní Chuilleanáin’s exile seems to have returned from the afterlife to roam the earth: he takes the road on the eve of Samhain when the gates between this world and the Otherworld are opened. Elsewhere, “the road stretches like the soul’s posthumous journey”

for the exile (Ní Chuilleanáin 1977: 36). The exile is like Bran in that he is like a visitor from the realm of the dead, someone, whose task is to bear witness to all he has seen.

The other important point of comparison between the two works is their treatment of time. The island to which Bran and his companions travel is outside of time, so while they are there, they do not age. This idea of timelessness and immortality is carried over to “A Midwinter Prayer” but is transformed by Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin. The exile seems to be immortal, but he knows suffering and suffers himself, continuously longing for “a ring of welcoming islands” somewhere westward that is peaceful and without suffering (Ní Chuilleanáin 1977: 36). While Bran Mac Feabhail became a witness to confirm the existence of a paradise-like place to his people, the exile in the contemporary poem is an unwilling witness to the progress of human history and culture, one who must remain in the world and see both suffering and joy. He is the one who sees past, present, and future throughout his journey. His travel takes him through events in human history rather than places. While Bran and his companions travel from one island to the other, the exile’s journey is defined by carefully placed markers of time, both in terms of calendar dates (e.g. the eve of Samhain, the final Sunday after Pentecost, February) and mythical events such as Fionn Mac Cumhaill’s first victory and the birth of Christ. Locations, on the other hand, are never specified, except for the mysterious islands being somewhere in the west. Therefore, in *Immram Brain*, Bran travels outside of time through carefully described places, Ní Chuilleanáin’s wanderer travels not through space, but through time, and is not limited by either.

Immram Brain seems to have served as an inspiration for “A Midwinter Prayer” in more ways, as well. A few segments of the contemporary poem bear a textual resemblance to the older one. The description of an island with an orchard, where “yellow apples constantly in season / bend high branches” (Ní Chuilleanáin 1977: 35) in the fifth stanza of the poem recall the beginning of the fairy woman’s description of the realm of Eamhain in *Immram Brain* (Meyer 1895: 4, 7; stanzas 3 and 6-7). Both *Immram Brain* and “A Midwinter Prayer” include sections referencing the birth of Christ (Meyer 1895: 14; Ní Chuilleanáin 1977: 36). The same way, the description of the “new model of the world” at the end of “A Midwinter Prayer” is strikingly similar to the depictions of the Land of Women in *Immram Brain* (Ní Chuilleanáin 1977: 37; Meyer 1895: 6). However, scholars of old Irish literature have claimed that such segments may themselves be inspired by the Bible and Christian ideas. Proinsias Mac Cana argues that “the ecumenical purpose of the author of *Immram Brain* (...) was (...) to create an aesthetic rapport between the pagan concept of the Otherworld and the Christian concept of Paradise” (1976: 95). Mac Cana goes on to state that such a merger of pagan and

Christian ideas in the early Irish literature of the time was far from unique, but he argues that *Immram Brain* is special in this respect because its author conveyed the identification artistically without making explicit statement of it and without distorting the traditional view of the pagan Otherworld, while at the same time contriving to copperfasten the equation of Christian and pre-Christian by drawing a clear analogy between the Birth of the Hero myth as related to Mongán and the Incarnation of God in Christ. (1976: 95)

This technique of merging disparate traditions is very close to the way Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin incorporates elements and ideas from earlier texts into her own poem. Regardless of whether the above quoted lines of “A Midwinter Prayer” are more closely related to comparable sections of *Immram Brain* or the Bible (particularly Isaiah 11, as the paper argues later), the old Irish narrative poem has arguably served as an inspiration for Ní Chuilleanáin in creating an “aesthetic rapport” among the various references and allusions in her poem.

The comparison of “A Midwinter Prayer” and *Immram Brain* also illustrates the attitude with which Ní Chuilleanáin uses her sources. She takes certain elements and incorporates them into her poem, while she omits or changes other features of the older work. Perhaps the most striking difference is that Ní Chuilleanáin’s traveller makes his journey on foot, on dry land unlike Bran, who would die the moment his feet touched the shore. This might seem a minor difference at first, but *immrama*, by definition, describe sea voyages. However, an old man roaming the land alone is not an unprecedented motif either. This is reminiscent of the story of Oisín, the most famous poetic rendering of which was written by William Butler Yeats under the title “The Wanderings of Oisín.” Oisín, after spending three hundred years on three different otherworldly islands, returns to Ireland on the back of a magical horse. When he falls off the horse by accident, he immediately becomes an old man and later continues to wander around the land. He realizes that his fellow warriors and friends, the Fianna, are long dead and he witnesses the arrival of Christianity to Ireland, as does the exile in “A Midwinter Prayer.” Yeats presents the story in the form of a dialogue between Oisín and St. Patrick, the missionary who first spread Christianity in Ireland, and the two argue about whether the Fenian men might have a happy after-life or they are instead suffering in hell (Yeats 2008: 185-201). Not only is the exile in Ní Chuilleanáin’s poem similar to Oisín as a witness to changing times, but “the penance of Fenian men,” in the second stanza of “A Midwinter Prayer” may also be a reference to the ending of “The Wanderings of Oisín” (1977: 35). However, Oisín as the representative of the old pagan order stands in stark contrast to Patrick, who represents the Christian order. The exile in “A Midwinter Prayer,” though he prays, seems to be outside of such oppositions. He cannot

clearly be identified as either Bran or Oisín; he remains a symbolic figure. Moreover, the advent of Christianity is presented as a drastic change in “The Wanderings of Oisín;” it is depicted as a more gradual transition in Ní Chuilleanáin’s poem.

The old pagan order is represented by an allusion to another old Irish story at the beginning of “A Midwinter Prayer”. The story in question is one of the first heroic deeds of Fionn Mac Cumhaill, the hero of the Fenian cycle of Irish mythology. According to this legend, a demon named Aillén attacked the High King’s hall every year, when they were celebrating Samhain. The powerful demon put everyone to sleep with music and then burned the hall to the ground year after year. Fionn, a young warrior, vowed to defeat the demon. He succeeded and thus became the leader of a group of warriors (qtd. in: Ó hÓgáin 2006: 244). This narrative marks a significant new beginning, a turning point in the life of Fionn in the stories belonging to the Fenian cycle. Ní Chuilleanáin, however, only captures the moments of intense waiting as Fionn is expecting the arrival of the demon he must fight. Fionn does not know yet, that these moments will mark a definite change in his life. His anticipation is a counterpoint to the exile, who also appears in this first stanza, but he already sees into the future and “catches light from chapel doors” (Ní Chuilleanáin 1977: 35). Instead of following the hero’s journey, the poem traces how the pagan feast of Samhain was transformed into the Christian holiday of All Hallows’ Eve and an occasion for the remembrance of the dead. The loud feast of “fire, music and death” in the first stanza later becomes the “silent holiday”; the “well-armed demons” are transformed into the dead who lie peacefully underground. Thus, the allusion not only defines the day of the year when the narrative begins, but also clearly places the beginning of the journey to pre-Christian times in Ireland. The pagan story is, however, quickly merged with Christian references—in the way Mac Cana describes the achievement of the author of *Immram Brain*, Ní Chuilleanáin also conveys the transformation of the pagan feast into the Christian holiday “artistically without making explicit statement of it”, and without distorting the significance of either (Mac Cana 1976: 95).

The allusion to Fionn Mac Cumhaill serves several purposes in “A Midwinter Prayer”. Not only does it lend a starting point to the poem that is clearly defined in time and demonstrates the idea of an interplay between pagan and Christian traditions in the text, but also introduces other important themes. The beginning of the poem is full of images of darkness, destruction, and death. Fionn attempts to free others from the demons haunting them, but “A Midwinter Prayer” leaves him waiting in the doorway, terrified. A few lines later a priest speaks about the “Last Day, when the dead will spring / Like shrubs from quaking earth” (Ní Chuilleanáin 1977: 35). This hope is, however, still very distant: “Against

that spring, the dark night sways” (1977: 35). The time of the year indicated at the beginning of this stanza is significant: “the final Sunday after Pentecost” marks the end of the liturgical year. This is the feast of Christ, the King in the Catholic Church, which is seen as a reminder to the Second Coming of Jesus Christ and to the Last Judgement (1977: 35). While this holiday reminds believers of the end of time, it is also the last Sunday before Advent, foreshadowing the celebration of the birth of Christ. This holiday marks the turning point of the liturgical calendar and unites a fear of end, of death and hope of a new beginning. Accordingly, the exile’s vision of the orchard, where “yellow apples [are] constantly in season” (1977: 35) in the next stanza is a significant counterpoint to images of dark and death earlier in the poem. There is a constant juxtaposition of death with birth and life, of darkness with light, and of winter and the coming spring. The exile, therefore, travels not only through time from the beginning of winter to spring and from pagan times to the advent of Christianity, but also between life and death. In his “posthumous journey”, he sees both the dead awaiting resurrection and those alive fearing death and hoping for a better future to come.

As the exile continues his journey through winter, his voyage seems darker and darker: “all his life seemed like a funeral journey / And all his company a troop / Of anxious gravediggers” (Ní Chuilleanáin 1977: 36). Death and hopelessness prevail until the beginning of the next stanza: “touched by cold, the girl gave birth in a ruin” (1977: 36). The previous lines mention people preparing for a feast that is Christmas. So the poem has progressed from Samhain, the time of fear, death and demons to the birth of the Messiah; and from pagan times to the beginning of Christianity. Ní Chuilleanáin’s terse summary of this “new birth” is somewhat reminiscent of the short description in Luke 2:6-7 (NRSVCE). However, Ní Chuilleanáin’s phrasing seems to be closer to Section 26 of *Immram Brain*:

A great birth will come after ages,
That will not be in a lofty place,
The son of a woman whose mate will not be known,
He will seize the rule of the many thousands. (Meyer 1895: 14)

This, in turn, is like the matter-of-fact statement of the prophesy in Isaiah 7: “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel” (verse 14, NRSVCE). Curiously, the text of the poem never explicitly refers to Christ and there is no sign of the triumphant attitude of the old Irish poem or biblical prophesies. In fact, the allusion resembles the lines about Fionn at the beginning of “A Midwinter Prayer”. While both references evoke a story of a powerful new beginning, Ní

Chuilleanáin omits the heroic aspects by presenting Fionn as a frightened young man and by merely referring to Christ as “the growing seed” (1977: 36). Both stories are seen through the exile’s eyes, who sees that the birth of heroes does not change the fact that earthly life is full of death and suffering. The wanderer himself is now described as a despised prophet: “The exile is a wise man with a star and stable; / He is an unpeopled poet staring at a broken wall” (1977: 37). He stays an outsider to the events he witnesses, and he also remains silent about them. It is clear from the poem that his journey is far from over yet.

The image of the exile as a prophet is relevant to the final, major subtext to be discussed here, chapter 11 of the Book of Isaiah. On the one hand, certain passages of *Immram Brain* seemed to be modelled after the prophesy about the rule of the Messiah in Isaiah. Especially Sections 27 and 28 bear a close resemblance to verses 2 to 5 in Isaiah 11, but some later passages in the old Irish poem among the parts spoken by Manannán are similar, as well. However, it is not only the immram that connects “A Midwinter Prayer” to the biblical text, but there is a more direct connection between the two. Isaiah 11 starts with the verse “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots” (NRSVCE). This is possibly the source of the plant imagery that can be seen throughout Ní Chuilleanáin’s poem. In fact, the poet also uses the image of the stump of Jesse elsewhere in her poetry, most notably in a later poem entitled “Jesse” in the collection *The Girl who Married the Reindeer* (2001). While the same biblical allusion is used to discuss questions of procreation and inheritance in the later poem (Coughlan 2007: 168-171); in “A Midwinter Prayer”, the related images of seeds, branches and trees are closely connected to the poem’s treatment of time and the themes of death and birth.

The passing of time specified by various holidays runs parallel to the natural changing of seasons from the end of autumn and winter, associated with cold and death, to the coming of spring, signifying new life. The changing of seasons can be traced in the poem through the phrases related to plants. In the first few stanzas, these are associated with winter and death:

The *uprooted* love

That fed them once collapses
Into their graves like *cut flowers*.
(Ní Chuilleanáin 1977: 35)

Later, as noted before, a priest claims that “the dead will spring / Like *shrubs* from quaking earth”. At this point in the poem, this hopeful image is still overshadowed by “the dark night”. Then, in the stanza concisely describing the birth of Christ, we read that “the snow spared the growing seed” (1977: 36). In this case, the “growing seed” is Jesus himself. It should be noted

that while in Isaiah 11, the Messiah is referred to as a shoot and a branch, Ní Chuilleanáin alludes to him only as a vulnerable seed. This seed is referred to again in the last section: “The seed laid in the dead earth of December / May yet grow to a flowering tree above ground” (1977: 37). These lines are important because the “dead earth” connects the sentence to the images at the beginning of the poem, the reference to the seed reminds the reader of the section on the Nativity, but the flowering tree represents spring, new life—even the hope of a new world. The flowering tree also connects the last stanza to the exile’s vision of the orchard in the fifth stanza. The tree here could be an allusion to the Garden of Eden in Genesis (2: 8-9), but the structure of the poem makes this unlikely. According to the Bible, the Garden of Eden is lost to humanity forever, but the tree in “A Midwinter Prayer” is clearly in the future; it signifies a hope for the future. This tree is rather an allusion to the tree of life in Revelation 22: “On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations” (verse 2, NRSVCE). The tree at the end of “A Midwinter Prayer” represents life, abundance, and healing. The plant imagery forms a narrative of its own within the poem. At the beginning, the dead lie waiting in the earth as cut flowers. The birth of Christ as the growing seed brings new hope and new life to earth and this seed may grow into a flowering tree, representing resurrection. Nonetheless, this is only a future possibility in the poem.

The other important point of connection between “A Midwinter Prayer” and Isaiah 11 is the depiction of a new, better world to come. In the poem, the exile first only hears the “new model of the world” (Ní Chuilleanáin 1977: 37) being constructed, then he sees it like a prophetic vision. This paradise-like world, “where love will not be out of season or a man out of place” (1977: 37), as it has been mentioned earlier, is very similar to the Land of Women in *Immram Brain*. However, it is also likely that the description of the Otherworld in old Irish literature have deliberately been merged with the Christian concept of Paradise (Mac Cana 1976: 95). The exile’s vision in the last stanza, in spite of other resemblances, is closer to depiction of the new world in the Book of Isaiah. In the last stanza, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin creates an echo of the description of the orchard in the first part of the poem. The phrase “out of season” reminds us of the yellow apples that are “constantly in season” (Ní Chuilleanáin 1977: 35) on the islands imagined by the exile. While both the biblical text and that of the *immram* use natural imagery to describe this better world, the emphasis on blossoming flowers and trees abundant with fruit is typical of *immram* narratives and is not something that appears in the Book of Isaiah. The Old Testament text lists instead several animals living in peace together, focusing on a state of ultimate harmony and love. This is exactly the shift that

happens between the beginning and the end of “A Midwinter Prayer: in the description of the orchard, yellow apples that are always in season; finally, in the last stanza, the result is love.

The other important evidence that the otherworld described in the last stanza of the poem follows the biblical concept to be found in the poem’s particular treatment of time. If the meticulously placed references to seasons and dates in the text of the poem are traced along with the gradual shift in verb tenses, there can be no doubt that the last stanza talks about the future. Accordingly, there is an emphasis on the future tense in chapter 11 of Isaiah. Both the Old Testament text and the last stanza of “A Midwinter Prayer” describe a new world that is yet to be created. By contrast, *Immram Brain* and similar old Irish narratives present the otherworld that already exists and has always existed since the beginning of time. Indeed, the imagery of lush vegetation in these narratives is reminiscent of the biblical Garden of Eden, that has been lost forever, according to the biblical narrative. In *Immram Brain*, the Land of Women is far away in terms of space and can only be accessed by a chosen few. At the end of “A Midwinter Prayer”, the new world is removed in time, rather than space, where no one will be out of place. Similarly, Isaiah 11 describes how God “will raise a signal for the nations and will assemble the outcasts of Israel (...) from the four corners of the earth” (verse 12, NRSVCE). It is notable, that the Old Testament still promises the new world to the Lord’s chosen people, tribes of Israel, while Ní Chuilleanáin’s formulation reflects a Christian view that is based on the New Testament, where this promise is for all peoples. This is also supported by the allusion to the tree of life from the Book of Revelation that brings healing to all nations.

“A Midwinter Prayer” is a long poem that spans a great length of time and diverse themes, but the text is held together by a carefully arranged system of allusions and subtexts. Each of these plays a crucial role in shaping the structure and thematic development of the poem but neither overshadows the others. Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin performs a delicate balancing act in merging and transforming the wide range of allusions to old Irish narratives, legends and biblical texts used in this poem. Her technique of taking elements of different traditions and combining them by emphasizing similarities is unique in contemporary poetry but in fact goes back to an old tradition of early Irish literature, when “it was in itself a fairly natural and, in the circumstances of the period, perhaps even an inevitable development” (Mac Cana 1976: 95). This attitude of creating “aesthetic rapport” between diverse traditions, the format of the journey poem, the figure of the wanderer, and certain elements of the imagery in “A Midwinter Prayer” rely on the genre of old Irish *immram*, particularly the narrative poem called *Immram Brain*. More concrete allusions to a story about Fionn Mac

Cumhaill's victory over the demon and the biblical story of the nativity from the Gospel of Luke appear at crucial structural points of the poem; and even these shorter allusions serve more than one purpose in the text by defining a specific temporal setting for the relevant section of the poem and by informing the overarching themes. Finally, chapter 11 in the Book of Isaiah in the Old Testament and the allusion to the Book of Revelation in the last stanza of "A Midwinter Prayer" are used as subtexts supplying the prophetic tone, with the basic imagery and significant aspects of the conclusion of the poem signifying new life and a new beginning.

The emphatic references to time throughout the poem transform the journey—inspired by Bran Mac Feabhail's westward sea-journey through space—into one travelling through time and cultural changes. On the one hand, the exile's journey takes place from the beginning of winter, marked by various religious feasts, until early spring; at the same time, he traverses and witnesses cultural and religious changes in Ireland from pagan times to the beginning and later spread of Christianity. The changes in the people's attitude towards the Otherworld, life and death are reflected by the poem's imagery and demonstrated by the allusions used throughout the text. "A Midwinter Prayer" presents these changes as an organic, continuous process, though fraught with difficulty. The poem suggests these changes are still ongoing and ends with a hopeful image of a better, more peaceful future to come.

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