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Between Here and There: Lyricism and Zen in Sinéad Morrissey's Japanese Poems

Abstract: This article is devoted to the second section of Sinéad Morrissey's *Between Here and There* (2002), which gathers poems written during the Irish writer's two-year stay in Japan. The title of the collection alludes to the poet's position, poised between her discovery of Japanese Zen culture and the Western lyrical tradition she was steeped in during her youth in Ireland. In the light of seminal essays on lyricism (J.-M. Maulpoix, J.-C. Pinson, M. Ueda, P. Volsik) and a selection of inquiries into the spirit of Zen (R. H. Blyth, N. W. Ross, D. T. Suzuki, C. Jung, J. Pigeot), our aim is to explore the interactions fostered between both traditions, and the way in which their collusion generates a unique body of poems, as "two worlds split open to each other, stars spilling from each" ("Pearl"). Between attachment and impersonality, Sinéad Morrissey's Japan sequence cultivates the art of in-betweenness while advocating, in the poet's own words, "the tolerance of transitions".

Keywords: Sinéad Morrissey, Japan, Japanese poetry, lyricism, *mono-zukushi*, Zen, *Satori*, impersonality, in-betweenness.

Résumé : *Cette étude est dédiée à la seconde section de* Between Here and There *(2002), qui réunit des poèmes composés au cours des deux années durant lesquelles Sinéad Morrissey séjourna au Japon. Le titre du recueil fait allusion à la position qui fut celle de la poétesse, partagée entre sa découverte de la culture et de la spiritualité japonaises et la tradition lyrique dans laquelle elle avait jusqu'alors baigné. À la lumière d'essais fondateurs sur le lyrisme (J.-M. Maulpoix, J.-C. Pinson, M. Ueda, P. Volsik) et d'une sélection d'écrits visant à cerner l'esprit du Zen (R. H. Blyth, N. W. Ross, D. T. Suzuki, C. Jung, J. Pigeot), cet article a pour objectif d'explorer les relations complexes instaurées entre ces deux traditions et la manière dont leur rencontre génère un corpus de poèmes dans lesquels « deux mondes s'ouvrent l'un à l'autre, chacun semant une pluie d'étoiles » ("Pearl"). Entre attachement et impersonnalité, les poèmes japonais de Sinéad Morrissey épousent l'art de l'entre-deux tout en promouvant « la tolérance des transitions ».*

Mots clés : Sinéad Morrissey, Japon, poésie japonaise, lyrisme, mono-zukushi*, Zen,* Satori*, impersonnalité, entre-deux.*

In 2007, fifty years after the opening of diplomatic relations between Ireland and Japan, Irene De Angelis and Joseph Woods published *Our Shared Japan: An Anthology of Contemporary Irish Poems* representing "responses to the subject and influence of Japan as it has developed over the past half century" [1].

1. *Our Shared Japan: An Anthology of Contemporary Irish Poems*, Irene De Angelis, Joseph Woods (eds.), Dublin, Dedalus, 2007, p. xv.

The editors' purpose was to show how the latter "ha[d] created a new poetic wor-*l*-d, or […] shaped 'Japan(s) of the mind'"[2]. Along texts written by Derek Mahon, Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, Ciaran Carson, Paul Durcan and Andrew Fitzsimons, to name but a few, the volume includes four of the poems that were composed by Sinéad Morrissey during the two-year stay that she made in the Far East, and published in a volume entitled *Between Here and There*[3]. In this liminal collection[4], the Japanese sequence is preceded by texts written a decade later, once the poet had returned to Belfast via America and New Zealand. A reckless reading of the title might thus prompt the reader to equate "Here" with Belfast and "There" with Japan; yet such an interpretation would be reductive, considering the complexity of Morrissey's poetic project.

The fourteen texts gathered in the Japan sequence are enigmatic poems of disorientation fused with love poems, and completed by the quintessential "Pearl". One poem is singled out at the opening of *Between Here and There*; untitled, printed in italics, it can be read as a prelude: "My voice slipped overboard and made it ashore / the day I fished on the Sea of Japan". This short, first-person poem alludes to the metaphorical journey and expected return of the speaker's voice:

> Sometimes I picture its lonely sojourn
> along the coast of Honshu, facing the Chinese frontier.
> And then I'll picture its return –
>
> eager, weather-worn, homesick, confessional,
> burdened with presents from being away
> and bringing me everything under the sun. (p. 9)

Dedicated to the subject's "slipping" and "returning" voice – a hint at the writer's block the poet went through after falling sick in Japan – these lines point to the lyrical essence of the collection. Indeed, as the subject is temporarily severed from her voice, they emphasise the importance of an individual, "confessional" voice, associated with personal experience and subjective expression. The adjectives "eager" and "homesick" point at emotional intensity – "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings", in Wordsworth's terms[5]. The verse is endowed with a musical quality which is also constitutive of lyrical poetry, as French expert Jean-Michel Maulpoix points out:

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2. *Our Shared Japan*…, p. xvii.
3. Sinéad Morrissey, *Between Here and There*, Manchester, Carcanet, 2002 (page numbers between brackets refer to this collection).
4. *Between Here and There* was released between *There Was Fire in Vancouver* and *The State of the Prisons*, published by Carcanet in 1996 and 2005.
5. William Wordsworth, Preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, W. J. B. Owen, Jane Worthington Smyser (eds.), Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1974, vol. I, p. 126.

> One should perceive lyricism as the expression of a singular subject who tends to transform, and even sublimate, the contents of his or her experience and emotional life into melodious, rhythmical speech modeled on music[6].

Lyricism relies on what fellow poet and essayist Jean-Claude Pinson calls "the desire to transmute circumstance and emotion into song"[7], as well as what Maulpoix terms "the eager promotion of the subject"[8]. Sinéad Morrissey prompts the reader to apprehend her poetry in such a way: in an interview with Declan Meade, she declares: "I try to write, not so much about […] other places, but about my experience of being there"[9]. She contrasts her standpoint in *Between Here and There* (2002), which brings the lyric subject close to the autobiographical one, with her position in *The State of the Prisons* (2005), which she defines as "putting [one] self completely away in a drawer"[10] – a testimony as to the evolution of her poetic experience initiated by the Japan sequence.

In *Between Here and There*, Morrissey's poetry displays several quintessential features of the Western lyrical tradition. As Jean-Michel Maulpoix observes, "lyricism in its romantic acceptation privileges inspired individual expression"[11]. Asked about her writing process in the Japan sequence, Sinéad Morrissey answers: "It was much more inspiration-driven. I would get the first lines and I would just start writing. It would be more a matter of listening and then the poem would just flow onto the page […] and the voice would be very, very clear"[12]. The notion of flow is frequently associated with lyricism. "There are at least two ways of laying stress on the medium", Jean-Claude Pinson observes:

> In the wake of Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés*…, one may prefer stasis, halting upon words […]. Or one may favour flow, movement, circulation, the swift delivery of the sentence. Such writing defines the lyrical treatment of the language. […] It gives precedence to the energy of verbal flow over the gravitation force of words[13].

This is what Sinéad Morrissey's poetry promotes, especially in "Goldfish" which opens the Japanese sequence. The writer acknowledges that Japan deeply

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6. Jean-Michel Maulpoix, "Le lyrisme, histoire, formes et thématique…", on line: http://www.maulpoix.net/lelyrisme.htm (all translations from French are by the author). Together with Jean-Claude Pinson's *Habiter en poète*, Jean-Michel Maulpoix's essays provide inspiring insight into the essence of lyricism; in the frame of this article, their theories will be completed by Makoto Ueda's insightful studies on lyricism in Japanese poetry and Paul Volsik's article on neo-lyricism published in 2007 in *Études anglaises* ("'Somewhere between the Presbyterian and the Tao' (Kathleen Jamie): Contemporary Scottish Poetry", *Études anglaises*, vol. 60, no. 3, 2007, p. 346-360).
7. Jean-Claude Pinson, *Habiter en poète*, Seyssel, Champ Vallon, 1995, p. 68.
8. Jean-Michel Maulpoix, *La voix d'Orphée*, Paris, J. Corti, 1989, p. 58.
9. "Interview: Sinéad Morrissey", *The Stinging Fly*, no. 14, winter 2002-2003, p. 4, on line: https://stingingfly.org/2002/11/01/interview-sinead-morrissey.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Jean-Michel Maulpoix, *La voix d'Orphée*, p. 24.
12. "Interview: Sinéad Morrissey", p. 3.
13. Jean-Claude Pinson, *Habiter en poète*, p. 216.

influenced her poetry: "When I went to live in Japan my writing changed immediately and profoundly. My line became much longer, the imagery more surreal. The poetry became a great deal more ambitious"[14]. She perceives that "[t]here's more energy in the Japanese poems. It's like the voice became more flexible in order to talk about a wider variety of things"[15]. This study intends to explore the far-reaching influence that Japanese culture, poetics, philosophy and spirituality had on the poet's work at that precise moment in her creative trajectory[16]. Initially reading her Japan sequence as lyrical poems of disorientation and uncertainty, it will assess the aesthetic impact that Japanese poetry had upon her art, before tracing the influence of Zen Buddhism, which frees Morrissey's lyricism from the "metaphysics of subjectivity"[17], and enables the reader to reach beyond the duality of "here" and "there".

Between Here and There: disorientation and uncertainty

Sinéad Morrissey's Japanese poems may firstly be read as the lyrical account of a personal experience of cultural disorientation. The "I" in the poems is both the subject – who lives through the experience as a privileged eye-witness –, and the speaker – who voices her responses to new places, landscapes, institutions, rituals, ways of living, language and writing. The "you" summoned in most of the poems refers either to the subject's lover ("Goldfish", "Before and After", "Night Drive in Four Metaphors", "Spring Festival"), her mother ("Pearl"), an impersonal addressee ("Summer Festival"), or a Buddhist monk ("Between Here and There", "Nagasawa in Training"). Sinéad Morrissey explains to Declan Meade that the discoveries which she made in Japan stimulated her creativity, while keeping her aware of the ethical implication of writing about a culture worlds apart from her own: "There are all these issues about the extent to which you have a right to write about these other places […]. There's a lot in the Japanese sequence about the isolation and disorientation of being in a culture that is not your own"[18].

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14. Sinéad Morrissey, personal interview with Irene De Angelis, quoted in the article "Sinéad Morrissey: Between Northern Ireland and Japan", *Journal of Irish Studies*, vol. 20, 2005, on line: http://www.carcanet.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?showdoc=449;doctype=review. This article was later included in the last chapter of Irene De Angelis's monograph *The Japanese Effect in Contemporary Irish Poetry*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p. 146-152; it is most helpful to grasp the cultural backcloth of Morrissey's Japan poems.
15. "Interview: Sinéad Morrissey", p. 4.
16. *The State of the Prisons* (2005) was followed by *Through the Square Window* (2009), *Parallax* (2013), *On Balance* (2017), all published by Carcanet. Analyzing the influence of the Japan sequence on these collections goes beyond the scope of our study; however, it is interesting to note that seven of the Japanese poems were included in *Found Architecture: Selected Poems*, Manchester, Carcanet, 2020.
17. Jean-Claude Pinson, *Habiter en poète*, p. 73.
18. "Interview: Sinéad Morrissey", p. 4.

Japan features prominently in these poems, as the writer evokes cityscapes and countryscapes, includes elements traditionally associated with the Japanese art of living, and integrates Buddhist imagery, like the Holy Stag in "To Imagine an Alphabet". In some poems, especially in "Before and After", encountering a new way of life and different modes of being generates feelings of wonder and gratefulness. However, beyond the exhilaration of discovering a new culture, there also lies a sense of disorientation and uncertainty, as the title poem highlights. "Between Here and There" is devoted to four specific aspects of Japanese culture: the stone babies in Kyoto temples with aprons tied to their necks, that represent unborn infants; a graveyard for miscarriages under Ikeda Mountain, where the poet discovers "a basin of stone bodies in two parts"; a gigantic bronze statue of the Daibutsu, Japan's greatest Buddha, "one hand raised as a stop sign to evil. / The other […] flat, flat with comfort and promise"; and an atheist Buddhist monk called Nagasawa, who specialises in funerals, "as the man who can chant any you-name-it soul / between here and Ogaki to paradise" (p. 46). This poem, which questions Japanese rituals in their relation to life, death and mourning, is fraught with uncertainty: "No one seems to know the reason why aprons / are tied to the necks of babies in temples", the speaker wonders. In the second stanza, the weird basin filled with stone bodies yields no answer, while in the third, the Great Buddha's invitation sounds paradoxical: "*Fall with me*, he says, *and you'll be raised to the heights / of the roof of the biggest building in the world*" (p. 46).

Discussing Buddhist rituals, Morrissey explains that she was fascinated by the prominence of form: "[…] it seemed to me that form was prioritised over content, in lots of different aspects of life, which is the opposite of the West"[19]. A sense of estrangement pervades the sequence devoted to Japanese festivals, in which the speaker's sense of wonder mingles with awe; the first poem is devoted to Ogaki Festival, the other four to Season Festivals (starting with Spring and ending with Winter, as the Japanese literary tradition requires). The atmosphere is surreal, almost nightmarish. In "Ogaki Festival", the subject is drunk and despairing; the surrounding world is distorted. Her students "have the face of leaves, / pressed, drained, similar, falling into a winter future" (p. 48). The subsequent poems deal with sex, procreation, birth and gender: "Spring Festival" and "Summer Festival" evoke the subject's bewilderment and unease at the crudity of Japanese fecundity rites: "What do you think when you see a mâché vagina being / rammed with a penis as broad as a battering ram / so that children disguised as elements shriek with joy?" (p. 50).

Alongside ancestral rituals, the poet also questions certain aspects of Japanese modernity. In "February", her sense of estrangement gives way to anger, as she denounces the environmental degradation caused by urban spreading:

19. Sinéad Morrissey, quoted in Irene De Angelis, "Sinéad Morrissey: Between Northern Ireland and Japan".

> The new exit from the station to the south
> makes Nagoya spread, calls it out further than one city's insatiable mouth
> could dream. Factories chew through a mountain beyond my window
> and each time I look at it it's less. (p. 56)

The poet nostalgically contrasts past images of Japan, "photographs of women in an amber light stopped dead in their / surprise at being captured as the image of time" (p. 56) and modernity. She singles out surviving cherry-trees – "like veterans / left standing here and there in pools of shade" (p. 56) – as hallmarks of a dying era. She seems to be profoundly attracted to Japanese tradition. In "To Encourage the Study of Kanji" and "To Imagine an Alphabet", she voices her fascination for Japanese writing as much as her helplessness at mastering it. The Japanese character system combines Chinese *kanji* and Japanese *kana*, thus using letters from three different scripts: *kanji*, *katakana* and *hiragana*[20]. "To Encourage the Study of Kanji" deals with *kanji* calligraphy; while enhancing the imaginative and artistic potential of sinograms, the poem pinpoints their abstruseness to the Western mind:

> I've been inside these letters it seems for years, I've drawn them
> on paper, palms, steamed mirrors and the side of my face
> in my sleep, I've waded in sliced lines and crossed boxes.
>
> They stay, stars in the new-moon sky,
> as dead as the names of untraceable constellations.
> Intricate, aloof, lonely, abstracted, (p. 53)

"To Imagine an Alphabet" cryptically recounts the poet's thwarted attempts at learning *kanji* and ponders the relation between picture and meaning, sign and language. The first part goes back to the ancient Chinese system of pictograms, "the soft black strokes / Of a Chinese brush / Diminishing the fatness / Of original things" (p. 54). The first three stanzas draw on ideas of disembodiment and death: "animal legs and human legs are emptied of flesh and blood"; trees in winter are "drained facts"; ants and lakes are "flattened" into patterns; stories are reduced to "skeletons". The subject learns how to write "Mountain", "Fire", "Ice" and "Water", but stops short at "Tree", the corresponding character seeming to be drained of life: "Problem is Tree in a Box / I hear moaning and see constriction in a picture the colour is cinnamon the taste is chalk" (p. 54). The ancient system complexifies, as intellect and emotion supersede direct representation, and as feelings and ideas become enmeshed into writing. The speaker thus decides to transform existing pictograms and create her own: "I make my moon round my forest has branches

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20. While *kanji* mainly includes pictograms, symbolograms and ideograms, *kana* consists of syllables written in the Japanese phonetic alphabet. Makoto Ueda describes *kanji* as "ideogrammic and dignified", *katakana* as "angular and seemingly artless", and *hiragana as* "cursive and graceful" (Makoto Ueda, "Japanese Poetics", in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, Alex Preminger, Terry V. F. Brogan (eds.), Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1993, p. 663).

my people are walking with arms and a head" (p. 55). In the last stanza, writing becomes hectic, yet the speaker's hopelessness is relieved by the vision of the Holy Stag bearing the flaming heart of compassion:

> I see lamentation as five falling stars,
> Grief abroad and walking,
> And a terrible stag, flames shooting from his heart, as he prepares to walk and preach. (p. 55)

In her study of Morrissey's Japan sequence, Irene De Angelis asserts that "To Imagine an Alphabet" voices Morrissey's belief that Japanese culture is untranslatable[21]. However, such an interpretation sounds too dualistic to us. Indeed, as the title of the collection indicates, the poet is not opposing East and West: she is standing between them and possibly trying to bridge them, as the next section intends to demonstrate.

The influence of Japanese poetry

Lyricism is not exclusive to Western poetry: in his introduction to Japanese poetics, Makoto Ueda states that "the most important feature of Japanese poetry derives from its definition out of lyricism augmented by a certain kind of history"[22]. In this respect, Ki no Tsurayuki's preface to the *Kokinshu* has been amply quoted:

> The poetry of Japan takes the human heart as seed and flourishes in the countless leaves of words. Because human beings possess interests of so many kinds, it is in poetry that they give expression to the meditations of their hearts in terms of the sights appearing before their eyes and the sounds coming to their ears[23].

Japanese poetry traditionally spans three main periods: early Japanese lyrics, up to 685; the classical era[24] (685-1867) marked by the growth of Zen-influenced *renga* and *haika* and the development of *haiku*; and the modern period. Classical poetry is known for its rigorously codified aesthetics: its set forms[25], its imperatives of brevity and sobriety, its highly conventional subject-matters and diction, and its imposed associations. In his discussion of Japanese influences on Irish poets, Seamus

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21. The critic affirms that the poet is "aware of the huge cultural gap which separates Japan and the West, and knows that she does not belong 'There' (Ogaki), but 'Here' (Belfast). […] The keywords she offers for an understanding of Japanese culture are 'tolerance of opposites'" (Irene De Angelis, "Sinéad Morrissey: Between Northern Ireland and Japan").
22. Makoto Ueda, "Japanese Poetics", in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, p. 655.
23. Ki no Tsurayuki, preface to the *Kokinshu*, quoted by Makoto Ueda, "Japanese Poetics", p. 655. The *Kokinshū*, or *Kokin wakashū*, is a *waka* imperial anthology from the beginning of the 10th century. Ki no Tsurayuki was one of its four compilers.
24. The classical period comprises the *waka* / *tanka* period (685-1350) and the period of "linked poetry" (1350-1867).
25. For instance, the *waka* is composed of five lines and thirty-one syllables (5-7-5-7-7).

Heaney suggests that these rules and requirements endow Japanese writing with "a reticence and a precision", "a devotion […] to formal concision" and "a sense of inner rule"[26]. From 1868 on, Japanese poetry starts to respond to poetic movements from other parts of the world: under the influence of Western literature, the new forms of *kindaishi* develop alongside the classical *waka* and *haiku*, and themes, tone and imagery diversify. At first reading, Sinéad Morrissey's poems are closer to *jiyushi* (free style poetry written in modern Japanese) than to *waka* or *haiku*. Yet, even if the formal influence of classical poetry is discreet in her poems, it is thematically and aesthetically pregnant in her Japan sequence.

These poems draw both on the traditional subjects of Japanese poetry (seasons, festivals, travels, nature and love) and on classical imagery (stars and moon, fire, water, wind, stone, rain, mountains, lakes, trees, rice fields, goldfish, stag, cherry blossoms…), even if the poet does not comply with conventional rules of association. Ignoring formal patterns and codes, Sinéad Morrissey privileges the freedom of flow. In order to do so, she resorts to a classical technique called *mono-zukushi*, the art of literary enumeration. In "Listes d'ici et de là-bas"[27], Jacqueline Pigeot signals two forms of *mono-zukushi*: the "integrated" list and the "heterogeneous" list, which she calls "*liste éclatée*", an apparently arbitrary, disconnected list, which nevertheless groups items endowed with inner coherence; as an illustration, she mentions Sei Shōnagon's "list of tumultuous things"[28]. Most of the poems of the Japan sequence, especially the first and the last, espouse this aesthetics. In the opening lines of "Pearl", the speaker states: "Mother, I made a list of what I think has hit me like the brick / you tossed towards the sky when you were seven" (p. 57). Yet the list that follows is not the one that was expected:

> when the brick came down, it took you further than the floor –
> further than your street's name, your knitted rabbit jumper,
> your wanderlust, your mother's censure, your invisible twin, Charlotte (who suggested it),
> further even than your textbook view of heaven, or the spiders' webs that laced the yard
> like illuminated Ferris Wheels in the fairs you ran away to in your sleep. (p. 57)

The list heralded in the opening line is released at the beginning of the third stanza: "An aeroplane thrown by lightning, a love affair, a woman with Greek hair, a crab's personality, / an alphabet, a barricaded nation, the spirit of correction, two years at sea" (p. 57). However disconnected these items may seem, the inner coherence of the list is disclosed in the following line: "These are the things that

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26. Seamus Heaney, quoted in Mitsuko Ohno, "Hokusai, Basho, Zen and More – Japanese Influences on Irish Poets", *Journal of Irish Studies*, vol. 17, 2002, *Japan and Ireland*, p. 21. In this article, Mitsuko Ohno interviews nine Irish writers (among whom Eavan Boland, Ciaran Carson, Paul Muldoon, Cathal Ó Searcaigh and Joseph Woods) on the influence of Japan on their work.
27. Jacqueline Pigeot, "Listes d'ici et de là-bas", in *Questions de poétique japonaise*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 1997, p. 61.
28. Sei Shōnagon (c. 966-c. 1025) was a court poet who served the Empress Sadako as a lady-in-waiting. Her *Pillow Book* is composed of her observations, and of categories in which she listed people, events and objects.

bring me to this country". Its heterogeneity – or tumultuousness – conveys the speaker's confusion and helplessness, as opposed to the moment of awareness experienced by her mother.

Less overtly, "Goldfish" also hinges on the *mono-zukushi* technique. In the central stanzas, the speaker draws a striking portrait of Japan in two long, flowing, reckless sentences. She lists "the gate to the Nangu Shrine", "the gardens full of pumpkin seeds in the ground and wild red flowers over them", "the JR crates on the night trains that passed through stations and seemed endless", "a transvestite taxi driver set apart on the street / a lost person flowers by the pavement", "music as pulled elastic bands drums as the footprints of exacting gods" (p. 43). In a dizzying movement, reality is deconstructed, the better to prompt the reader into a new perception of "reality". As Jacqueline Pigeot points out, such blurring and merging of planes is characteristic of Japanese poetry. She observes that while Western classical poetry likes to signal the move from one plane of meaning or reality to another through a series of shifters ("like", "as", "just as"), in Japanese classical poetry everything is made to confuse these planes[29]. The outcome is what she calls the "poetic list":

> The Japanese tradition has perfected […] the poetic list, that rearranges the world into an assembling of lines, movements and colours. It has also turned it into some sort of dizzying machine: under the reader's bemused eyes, fragments from different realms unreel, reality has been dismantled […]. The game finally consists in offering some unstable combination, always on the verge of breaking up, and maintained only by the lister's virtuosity[30].

A similar process of deconstruction and transient reconstruction operates in "Night Drive in Four Metaphors", which is also based on the *mono-zukushi* technique: driving through Japan at night in the back seat of a taxi, the speaker sees rice fields and roads, the smoke from factories, shirts hung out on the balconies of the flats of Brazilian factory workers, and the face of her lover sitting beside her. Yet, the items of the list undergo an imaginary metamorphosis as they are turned into four metaphors inspired by the system of *kanji*: the roads become "straight as the line through the *kanji* for 'centre'" 中, reminiscent of "[*t*]*he eye of an animal skewered and shown on its side*". In the second stanza, the fallen moon lying "on its back under the shadow of its circle" conjures the *kanji* signs for "home" 宅 and "stone" 石. In the next stanza, the Brazilian workers' shirts turn into sails, the buildings into ships, and in the last lines of the poem, the speaker imagines that the night-sky above the car roof has sundered, as "[*t*]*wo worlds split open to each other, stars spilling from each*" (p. 45). According to Lucy Collins, this poem "uses the form of the pictogram as an organizing principle for unfamiliar landscapes and experiences. This process […] examines how form is used to create meaning"[31].

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29. Jacqueline Pigeot, "La liste éclatée", in *Questions de poétique japonaise*, p. 93.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 107.
31. Lucy Collins, *Contemporary Irish Women Poets: Memory and Estrangement*, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2015, p. 67.

"Goldfish", "Pearl", and "Night Drive in Four Metaphors" adopt the aesthetics of allusion characteristic of Japanese poetry, which was to leave its mark on Sinéad Morrissey's later work. As Jacqueline Pigot explains, "the poet must let the reader conceive, prompt him to imagine, invite him to take part in the mysterious alchemy of resonances"[32]. These poems are also inspired by the *omokage* technique – "the image conceived by memory or dream, the imagined image […] an immaterial vision, born from a deep aspiration of the soul"[33]. In *Zen in English Literature and Oriental Classics*, Robert H. Blyth draws a distinction between metaphor and simile: stating that "the simile is an approach towards and the metaphor a consummation of identity", he conceives the latter as "a figure of apprehension, a form of enlightened perception"[34]. This is the crux of Sinéad Morrissey's Japanese sequence, which draws on the spirit of Zen to offer a new vision of Japan and of reality.

The spirit of Zen

"In Zen are found systematized, or rather crystallized, all the philosophy, religion, and life itself of the Far Eastern people, especially of the Japanese"[35], Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki states in his *Introduction to Zen Buddhism*. Yet Zen is neither a philosophy nor a religion. As Suzuki suggests, it should rather be conceived as "a quickening spiritual force". Although unconcerned with letters or sutras, Zen stands in a privileged relation to poetry. It "naturally finds its readiest expression in poetry […] because it has more affinity with feeling than with intellect; its poetic predilection is inevitable"[36]. Reciprocally, Japanese poetry is profoundly infused with Zen, which presided over the development of *haiku*. As Nancy Wilson Ross remarks, "the stripped, evocative haiku […] owes much of its spirit to Zen influence"[37].

The purpose of Zen is to discipline the mind, "to make it its own master, through an insight into its proper nature"[38]. Suzuki further explains that the discipline of Zen "consists in opening the mental eye in order to look into the very reason of existence"[39]. Zen aims at acquiring a different viewpoint, "from which the world can be surveyed in its wholeness and life comprehended inwardly"[40]. The issue of perception is thus quintessential; it culminates in *Satori*, a singular, transcendental experience of vision or awareness. Carl Jung thus observes: "[…] there is the question

32. Jacqueline Pigeot, "La caille et le pluvier: l'imagination en poésie à l'époque *Shinkokin-shû*", in *Questions de poétique japonaise*, p. 50.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 42.
34. Robert H. Blyth, *Zen in English Literature and Oriental Classics* [1942], Tokyo, Hokuseido, 1996, p. 154.
35. Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, New York, Grove Press, 1964, p. 7.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 87.
37. Nancy Wilson Ross, *The World of Zen*, London, Collins, 1962, p. 112.
38. Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, p. 87.
39. *Ibid.*
40. *Ibid.*

of a central perception of unsurpassed singularity. This strange perception is called *Satori* and may be translated as 'Enlightenment'"[41]. Suzuki defines this experience as "intuitive looking-into, in contradiction to intellectual or logical understanding. It means the unfolding of a new world hitherto unperceived in the confusion of a dualistic mind", as "a third eye opens to see in the inmost secret of things"[42].

Sinéad Morrissey's Japan poems seem to be prompted by such a pursuit. Although she openly questions Buddhist precepts and rituals in "Nagasawa in Training" (in which she equates the monk's quest for nothingness with a denial of the forces of life and with nihilism), some of her poems are endowed with unintellectual and irrational qualities of vision inspired by Zen. In "Goldfish", the poet mentions Zen masters and the philosophers who "want[ed] to go / to the place where closing eyes is to see" (p. 43). This line becomes the leitmotiv of the poem. In the second stanza, the speaker recalls: "I understood the day I closed my eyes in Gifu City. / […] I saw what I would never have seen" (p. 43). A moment of heightened perception follows, in which things are deprived of their materiality:

> [I] saw what I had seen the gate to the Nangu
> Shrine by the Shinkansen stood straddled before my head and I
> held out my hands to touch it and felt changed air it wasn't
> there […] (p. 43)

This experience leads to an onrush of flowing images, "night trains that passed through stations and seemed endless and running / on purpose on time's heels on sheer will to cross Honshu one end / to the other […]", "a transvestite taxi driver set apart on the street / a lost person flowers by the pavement pavements for the blind […]". In the last lines of the poem, this moment of vision gives way to a descending centripetal movement, "always one storey down Zen masters attaining one storey down" (p. 43). Yet the subject's journey may also appear as a reduced version – possibly ironic, as the pun on "storey" might suggest – of Zen masters' accomplishments, since her resting place does not lie in her own self but in her lover's: "falling into you, story by story, coming to rest in the place where closing eyes is to see" (p. 43).

"*Satori* is the sudden flashing into consciousness of a new truth hitherto undreamed of"[43], Suzuki explains. It seems that the second section of "Pearl" can be read in connection with such a spiritual experience, although the speaker does not experience it herself but only expresses her longing for it. In a dreamlike mode, she recounts the episode when, at the age of seven, her mother was hit by a brick that she had thrown into the air. In the poem, the shock plunges her into a state of modified consciousness, taking her "further than the floor", "further than [her] street's name", "further even than [her] textbook view of heaven" (p. 57), and opening up her perceptions of space and time. This epiphanic experience has

41. Carl Jung, foreword to Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, p. ix.
42. Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, p. 32.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 58.

the same aquatic qualities as the moment of enlightened perception evoked in "Goldfish"[44]. Within ten captivating lines, water is associated with a dissolution of the limits of body, space and time, and with an unfettered freedom of movement: "It made the day a room. And you were in it, above another room. And then you weren't. / You saw the room through water. Then from underneath. Then as laughter" (p. 57). This exhilarating moment of liberation gives way to a process of expansion, opening up the subject's perception of time:

> And you were a king's daughter, a king whose grandfathers you somehow knew
> and when you turned, your own great grandchildren swam into view, complaining and distressed. Time stretched like falling honey
> and you were everywhere, without a body, watching the ends of vision dissolve
> in expanding lines of blood. (p. 57)

Summoned by her bleeding wound, she comes back with extraordinary knowledge and understanding – amazing information that the rational doctor is not willing to welcome. This short, sudden experience has a lot in common with *Satori*. As Suzuki observes, "in Zen there must be […] a general mental upheaval […]; there must be the awakening of a new sense which will review the old things from a hitherto undreamed-of angle of observation"; one is to "turn up the whole piece of brocade and to examine it from the other side"[45]. Such upheaval and reversal are staged in the central stanza of Morrissey's "Pearl", opening up onto what Irish poet Cathal Ó Searcaigh calls "the ability to see into the innerness and the hiddenness of things; the mystery at the centre of the commonplace"[46]. Yet, in the penultimate stanza of "Pearl", this privileged moment of vision contrasts with the speaker's lack of awareness, as she finds herself caught in the confusion, hopelessness and uncertainty of her own life:

> These are the things that bring me to this country, and just like then
> whole days dissolve to distance. And time is simmering liquid. And space is gelatin.
> I hear my father's anger ringing and see the past and future flattened
> to landscapes of familiar failure. And faces haunt the mirror. And questions watch
> [me. (p. 57)

The closing lines of the poem can be read as an aspiration to share in her mother's experience of enlightenment and awareness: "There are treasures in the sea. You told me of the pearl you smuggled from the underwater / dynasty of kings and queens. I want to see it, finger it, believe it, be amazed" (p. 58). "Pearl" blurs the frontiers between dream and reality, rational and irrational, personal and impersonal. In its treatment of the self, this poem is emblematic of the influence

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44. In this poem, the philosophers yearn for "gold underwater to tell them what waited / in another element like breathing water"; the flash of gold on the belly of the fish "meant it carried its message for the element below it" (p. 43).
45. Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, p. 66.
46. Cathal Ó Searcaigh, quoted in Mitsuko Ohno, "Hokusai, Basho, Zen and More…", p. 26.

of Zen[47] on the Japan sequence, especially when compared with the body of Morrissey's former collection *There Was Fire in Vancouver*, which gathers texts that are lyrical in the classical, romantic acceptation of the word. It is impossible to affirm that when writing the Japan sequence the poet had attained the state of impersonality, or selflessness, which lies at the core of Zen. In fact, emotion is perceptible in "Pearl" – as in most of the Japanese poems –, but it is only hinted at. As John Gould Fletcher observes, whereas, as a rule, "the Japanese poet is content to suggest an object and leave the resulting emotion for the reader to complete in his own mind, the Western poet states the emotion, along with the object or objects that provoked it"[48].

Sinéad Morrissey's poems do not *state* emotions, and the sensitive, lyrical "I" is kept at a distance. In her Japan sequence, and in her further work, the poet seems to follow the Zen precept of "Living – not emoting", that invites us to focus on the action of living rather than on the "liver"[49]. In this Zen-inspired movement away from personality, Morrissey cultivates a form of non-subjective lyricism, an impulse that participates to what Paul Volsik defines as "neo-lyricism":

> […] a form of lyricism where what is at stake is what [Kathleen] Jamie calls "attention", where the focus is perhaps neither on the attending "I" nor the attended object but in something constructed in the space between – what [John] Burnside describes when he says "the lyrical impulse begins at the point of self-forgetting"[50].

From *Between Here and There* on, Sinéad Morrissey's poetic work testifies to a sustained and perceptive quality of attention, initially fueled by the disorientation and uncertainty that she experienced in Japan. In this respect, she becomes part of a wider poetic movement, which Paul Volsik analyses in an essay entitled "Somewhere between the Presbyterian and the Tao":

> This quality of attention to something that is radically other, […] is characteristic of certain contemporary Irish poets, notably Heaney, Longley and Mahon. […] It is an experience that is strikingly unpostmodern or modernist in its desire to render unironically the experience of some sort of a mysterious but essentially unified or unifying or reunified experience of reality, a priority which it inherits from certain traditional forms of the lyric – the value attached to the manifestation of the mysterious, the attention paid to

47. Robert H. Blyth observes that there are four kinds of poetry: 1) the object treated objectively; 2) the object treated subjectively; 3) the subject (i.e. the poet himself as theme) treated objectively; 4) the subject treated subjectively. "Zen of course takes the attitudes of 1 and 3", Blyth states, "although 'subjective' and 'objective' is a false distinction, and we must never forget this fact as we make it" (Robert H. Blyth, *Zen in English Literature and Oriental Classics*, p. 72).
48. John Gould Fletcher, quoted in William J. Higginson, *The Haiku Handbook*, Tokyo, Kodansha, 1985, p. 248.
49. William J. Higginson, *The Haiku Handbook*, p. 221.
50. Paul Volsik, "'Somewhere between the Presbyterian and the Tao'…", p. 355. The quotation is from *Strong Words: Modern Poets on Modern Poetry*, W. N. Herbert, Matthew Hollis (eds.), Tarset, Bloodaxe, 1994, p. 260.

a complex movement of fascination and withdrawal – all resulting in an ambiguous sense of presence and absence[51].

Nothing is stated or fixed in Sinéad Morrissey's Japanese and post-Japan poems, that oscillate between concreteness and mystery, blindness and vision, fragility and strength. When asked what lies between Here and There, the poet answers: "Nothing. It's being in-between that counts. It's tolerance of transitions"[52]. The concept of in-betweenness (or *ma*) that lies at the core of Zen seems to be the key to Morrissey's Japan sequence as well as a source of inspiration for her poetry to come. The poet invites her readers to reach beyond the dualism of places, cultures and religions in order to attain a finer perception of life and reality, and be driven towards a heart of light[53] in a Zen-inspired, *ma*-related movement towards emptiness, nothingness, and silence – a move initiated in the last lines of "Restoration"[54], that herald Sinéad Morrissey's poetic journey beyond Here and There:

Let there be light in this world
Of nothing let it come from
Nothing let it speak nothing
Let it go everywhere

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51. Paul Volsik, "'Somewhere between the Presbyterian and the Tao'…", p. 352.
52. Sinéad Morrissey, quoted in Irene De Angelis, "Sinéad Morrissey: Between Northern Ireland and Japan".
53. "It is the driving towards, accepting to be driven towards a certain 'heart of darkness' or inversely […] towards a certain 'heart of light' that is one of the potential strengths of the neo-lyrical tradition" (Paul Volsik, "Somewhere between the Presbyterian and the Tao…", p. 354).
54. Sinéad Morrissey, "Restoration 2. Juist, 1991", in *There Was Fire in Vancouver*, Manchester, Carcanet, 1996, p. 59-60.