

Joking with the Critically Serious: Medbh McGuckian's Comic Oeuvre

Moynagh Sullivan

Introduction

Much attention has been paid to the presence of the unconscious in McGuckian's work and to the dreamlike quality of her poetics,¹ but she is rarely, if ever, discussed as a comic writer. There is, however, a comedic, playful quality to her work which cannot be satisfactorily accounted for by any of the comic categories usually applied in literary analysis. Given the emphasis on the unconscious characteristics of her work, it appears fitting to look to theories of the same in search of a comic model with which to read her poetry. The primary processes of the unconscious are made manifest not only in dreams, but also in jokes — Freud contended that its operations are 'exemplified in dreams and the joke structure'.² If a joke is 'the contribution made to the comic by the unconscious,'³ then an exploration of the quality of the comic in her work can proceed along the lines of the joke-mechanism.

Freud's model of the joke-mechanism has been favoured by a number of commentators over the 'neurotic model' as a model for aesthetic analysis. In *Psychoanalytic Aesthetics: the British School*, Nicola Glover remarks that Freud's analysis of the structure of the joke mechanism can be considered 'an embryonic aesthetic, an alternative to his pathographic account' and goes on to quote Freud: 'te [the] first example of an application of the analytic mode of thought to the problems of aesthetics was contained in my book on jokes'.⁴ Glover argues that it is more useful as a starting point for the development of an aesthetic than the 'pathographic account' because it does not depend on the psychoanalytical interpretation of *content*, and on biographical detail, which can be a limited and often intrusive activity, but rather on the form of aesthetic processes. In this article I would like to suggest that readings which privilege McGuckian's aesthetic as postmodern⁵ or as that of *écriture féminine*,⁶ or indeed as 'nonsense', are actually seduced away from the joke in her work by its employment of dream-work displacement, precisely because the form of her aesthetic is that of the joke-mechanism.

Jokes

Jokers establish themselves as masters of discourse by marking their transgression of symbolic law and thus re-instate it. This procedure is described by Susan Purdie below:

Joking paradigmatically involves a discursive exchange whose distinctive operation involves the marked transgression of the symbolic law and whose effect is thereby to constitute jokers as 'masters' of discourse: as those able to break and keep the basic rule of language, and consequently in controlling possession of full human subjectivity⁷

Purdie suggests that both poetic language and jokes manifest themselves in similar ways — both exhibit 'an unusual attention to signifiers' and depend on a process of 'excess signification', which permits 'release from the rule that signifiers must attach 'in ratio' to signified — the obverse of the stipulation that signifiers must extend one at a time across commensurate signifying spaces'.⁸

Purdie accepts the premise that Freud's analysis of the joke-mechanism is a valid basis for the analysis of all aesthetic processes, but distinguishes between a poetic and a joking aesthetic proper, by suggesting that poetic discourse does not transgress symbolic law, because it performs recognisable symbolic functions. She argues that 'what is poetic but not funny constitutes a discourse where excess language is agreed to be (anomalously) a proper signification through its recuperation to some sort of special 'truth' assumed to lie beyond 'ordinary' language; and so symbolic operation is reinstated because the violation is not really taken as a violation'. Joking, in contrast, does involve a transgression of symbolic law and, 'as distinct from either poetic or phantasing discourses, always includes some marked transgression of the symbolic law — so that it fully breaches and fully re-instates that rule'.⁹ This is an attractive distinction, and, as McGuckian's work is not overtly funny, say, compared to that of Rita Ann Higgins or Julie O'Callaghan, is one which seems to situate McGuckian's 'excessive signification' in terms of permitted poetic transgression of symbolic operations, and not in terms of comic functions. But as Purdie's inquiry concerns itself with elaborating a theory of jokes, and not poetic discourse, the contention that all poetic discourse breaches and re-instates symbolic law without perceived violation remains under-investigated. I would thus contend that as McGuckian's work arguably 'violates' symbolic law in a marked way, making one of the elements of her aesthetic that of the joke proper.

Responses to McGuckian's work suggest that it does indeed violate the symbolic law. Criticism of her work demonstrates that it has been received as occurring outside the 'agreement' that in poetic discourse 'excess language' constitutes

‘a proper signification’. The violating aspect of her aesthetic is perhaps best exemplified by those critics who react punitively to her work. In a ‘common-sensical’ review of *Selected Poems*, Elizabeth Lowry writes that ‘disturbingly and rather irritatingly, McGuckian’s poems often create a parallel world, in which the signifiers have mutated and no longer correspond to their workaday meanings, so one has to guess what even the most ordinary words are supposed to denote....of course poetry can bend the rules of syntax, but even poetry can only bend them so far’.¹⁰ She has elsewhere been accused of deliberate obsfucation to the point of nonsense.¹¹ Such accusations clearly miss the joke. Far from being the wilful stretching of language beyond even the endurance of poetic licence, her work’s ‘excess’ can instead be productively read as a joking violation of symbolic law.

One of the characteristic functions of the joke-mechanism is to formulaically divert ‘attention away from the fact that some violation of symbolic law is about to be elicited [my emphasis]’¹². If a joke is to elicit laughter instead of groans, it is important that we do not ‘see the punchline coming’, so to speak. Thus, the successful telling of a joke involves a ‘set-up’, to seduce the listener into forgetting that a punchline is imminent. The punchline is the climax of the joke proper, what Freud calls the ‘tendentious joke’ and which Glover describes as having ‘two forms, the hostile and the obscene, the first giving the opportunity to express ‘aggressiveness, satire, or defence’, the second ‘serving the purpose of an exposure’.¹³ The joke-mechanism in McGuckian’s work operates in both forms, but for the present argument, I will concentrate on her use of the second which ‘serves the purpose of an exposure’. In other words, the exposure of something in McGuckian’s poetry is its punchline, or climax. In the case of McGuckian’s poetry, however, such ‘exposure’ is non-teleologically experienced, as the reader’s attention is diverted away at the same time at which the violation is enacted. As a result her work is not marked by funniness, as in the joke, for the diversion and climax, or exposure, do not occur contingently, but contiguously. Janus-headed, the joke form is comprised of simultaneous set-ups and punchlines.

In McGuckian’s work there are many ‘jokes’, but here I will concentrate on one of the things that is both hidden and revealed through the strategy of intertextuality — inter-textuality itself. Her idiosyncratic use of syntax ‘lead[s] readers astray’¹⁴ from her multi-layering of traces of other texts within her poems. Shane Murphy comes close to uncovering the set-up effect of her deliberate inter-textuality when he writes: ‘McGuckian’s ‘special language’ is in fact, very often that of others refracted within her own text, the quotations giv[e] it the veneer of a dream language’.¹⁵ he goes on:

Faced with her idiosyncratic matrix of simile, metaphor and grammatical

peculiarities, one is prompted towards the reading which McGuckian herself has advocated, namely that of unconscious dreamwork.....yet unconscious in this case needs to be kept within the confines of inverted commas. Less a re-writing, more a reconfiguration.¹⁶

The dreamlike quality in McGuckian's work depends on a more complex interaction of elements than Murphy suggests, but his point is, for my purposes here, well taken. The multi-layering of texts does, indeed, create the 'veneer' of a dream, but by imitating the dream operation of displacement through dis-placement, rather than being configured by it. By dis-placing syntax and other texts, McGuckian diverts attention from the exposure that her work is indeed fully conscious and operates *within the terms of symbolic law, and she is thus able to transgress it.*

The set-up in McGuckian's work is continuously marked by its own exposure. Regarding the use of other texts in her work Shane Murphy has written: 'the very act of appropriation is thematically apt and is commented upon in the poems themselves'¹⁷. Such comment is much more than simply thematically apt — it is formally apt. In that her work embeds and diverts attention away from such appropriation, it thematically gestures towards a refusal of the symbolic law (by refusing to abide by the rules of legal ownership of language). It thus marks its refusal of the law through providing clues to ensure its own 'exposure', and thus it transgresses, rather than refuses, the law and so takes the form of a joke.

Thus responses which read her 'excessive signification' as 'meaningless' either negatively, as do 'common-sense' analyses, or positively, as do postmodern and feminist analyses which emphasises her use of *écriture féminine*, don't seem to get the joke. McGuckian's work signals that her 'words are traps,'¹⁸ and this fits with the description of 'the work a joking mechanism performs' which is to 'trap' the audience into a situation where their proper activity of 'making sense' inevitably entails producing symbolic error.¹⁹ Readings which see McGuckian as exemplifying 'woman speak' are diverted away from the continuous exposure of the fact that she is working within, and not without, the symbolic law. Postmodern commentary which reads her work as subverting the possibility of identity and meaning are seduced by the continuously diverted exposure of a meaningful joking self. What follows is a brief account of the ways in which these criticisms have 'been trapped', by the form of the joke, into producing 'symbolic error'.

Eileen Cahill's analysis — which reads McGuckian's refusal to signify within the agreed terms of symbolic function, not as a strategy, but as symbolic of a 'woman's writing' — has arguably produced 'symbolic error'. The essay suggests that because McGuckian 'sins against the laws of logic, syntax, congruity, grammar, causality, linear structure, and unity' her work can be understood as 'approximat[ing] both Helen

Cixous' *parler femme* and *écriture féminine*, [and] achieving a female voice'.²⁰ A thorough consideration of the complex differences between theories of a structurally differentiated woman's language are outside the ambit of this article, but such theories can be summarised, briefly, as sharing a refusal to operate within the terms of symbolic law. Irigaray describes how such a syntax would formally operate: 'there would no longer be either subject or object, 'oneness' would no longer be privileged, there would no longer be proper meanings, proper names, 'proper' attributes'.²¹ Clearly it is tempting to suggest that McGuckian 'parler femmes'. The content of her work does after all, appear to dissolve the boundaries between subject and object, and meanings, names and attributes do 'improperly' occur, suggesting a refusal of symbolic law.²²

However, McGuckian's relation to symbolic law is not quite that simple. Lacan contends that the symbolic law is constructed in and through language and that the imaginary — the repressed aspect of language — is feminine, and is manifested ordinarily in transgressions of linguistic operations. His pithy summary of why women thus have no remit as subjects within symbolic law is much quoted: 'Women know not what they are saying, that's the whole difference between them and me'²³ Now this is clearly nonsense (and reader, you can take my woman's word for it) and is treated as such by McGuckian, who certainly knows what she is saying. In her poetry, the symbolic law is clearly represented as accessible to both women and men, and importantly as the site of her own articulation, rather than the imaginary. In 'The Soil Map', for instance, the speaker desiring to be wedded to the poet is male. The poet embodies symbolic law, both as Queen Maeve ('you are never without one man in the shadow/ of another'²⁴), a sovereignty goddess to whom kings needed to be wed in order to legitimately rule, and as a poet who controls the function of symbolising. The husband to be is constituted as feminine, identifying himself, not as groom, but as 'bride'.²⁵ Symbolic power is not understood as prescriptively masculinist, and access to it depends not on the gender of the speaker, but on their position in relation to it. McGuckian does not refuse symbolic law, but she does refuse the premise that it is inherently masculine.

McGuckian not only knows what she is saying, she, more importantly, knows how she is saying it. Cahill's reading of McGuckian as refusing the symbolic law rests, amongst other things, on her assertion that McGuckian's genius 'resists both mimesis and symbolism'.²⁶ However, McGuckian's work is both mimetic and symbolic. She mimics the syntax of the unconscious or imaginary, and thus appears to refuse symbolic law, and this masks her formal symbolic transgression. McGuckian's act of mimesis, or imitation operates, as argued above, in the symbolic realm of appropriation of language, and thus ownership of identity. And this is in direct contradistinction to a feminine syntax which would instead 'preclude any distinction

of identities, any establishment of ownership, thus any form of appropriation'.²⁷ Moreover, as a formal joker, McGuckian's work cannot exemplify 'feminine' syntax because, as Purdie pertinently points out, in such a discourse where the boundaries between the imaginary and the symbolic are dissolved — and therefore no marked transgression of the symbolic law is available — joking is not possible.²⁸

Such mimesis of 'meaninglessness' — within the terms of symbolic law — is understood as seduction in Thomas Docherty's 'Temper, Initiations, Seductions: Postmodern McGuckian'.²⁹ The 'excess signification' is read as performing the function of persistently de-stabilising meaning in the face of trying to 'make sense' of it: 'each poem is, as it were, a threshold inviting the initiation of its reader into some meaning; yet it also denies that meaning at the very instant of its perception'.³⁰ Seduction is understood here, after Baudrillard, to 'describe a state of relation between powers or forces, and one which explicitly forbids production'.³¹ Docherty reads the 'play of forces'³² in McGuckian's poetry as seduction itself, whereas, seduction is in fact only one of the forces in play. This allows him to assert that seduction formally governs her aesthetic: 'the form this takes is one of seduction'.³³ The effect of this is to invalidate the possibility of producing identity in and through her work: 'rather than subscribing to some desire to identify what is produced, McGuckian prefers to work at the level of seduction itself... this way she questions the modern belief in the availability of identity'.³⁴ Docherty can thus argue that 'all here is image: there is no presence, only representations'³⁵ and so contend that her poetry interrogates an aesthetics of identity. Seduction as form precludes the possibility of effective agency within the symbolic law, to the opposite effect of the joke's marked transgression, which far from forbidding production, actually *produces* the joker's 'controlling possession of full human subjectivity'.

McGuckian's work may resist producing identity in seduction, but identity is 'produced' through the telling of a joke. McGuckian can thus be understood not as a postmodern seductress, identity's destructress so to speak, but as a joker. McGuckian's joke-mechanism does not rely on a process of chronological set-up and punchline, so when she is constituted as a joking subject within the symbolic law, it is not as a master of discourse. Nor does joking establish her as a seductive mistress of discourse, but instead as one of its sovereignty goddesses — as one through whom symbolic power is generated. Critics wedded to her work legitimise their own problematics of 'meaninglessness', by attending to its 'excess signification'; joking does, after all, entail 'discursive exchange'. It is thus through the activity of critical discursivity that the joke is produced — her work jokingly resists valorising these critical 'meanings' of meaninglessness. Its 'excess signification' is not nonsense, nor woman speak, nor postmodern seduction — it is one of the means by which she jokes, and the joke is on us. The fundamental distraction in her work is from the exposure of the joke

mechanism itself. The joke that McGuckian both tells and hides, is that she is joking — but not , and this is critical, only joking.

Notes

- 1 Seamus Heaney is quoted on the cover of *Selected Poems* as saying 'her language is like the inner lining of consciousness, the inner lining of English itself, and it moves amphibiously between the dreamlife and her actual domestic and historical experience' (Medbh McGuckian, *Selected Poems*. Oldcastle: Gallery Books, 1997).
See also Eileen Cahill, 'Because I Never Garden': Medbh McGuckian's *Solitary Way*' *Irish University Review* 24:2 (Autumn/Winter 1994) 264-271;
Mary O'Conner 'Rising Out: Medbh McGuckian's Destabilising Poetics' *Eire-Ireland* 30:4 (Winter 1996) 154-72;
Shane Murphy. 'You Took Away My Biographyote : The Poetry of Medbh McGuckian', *Irish University Review* 28:1(Spring/Summer 1998) 110-132.
- 2 Nicola Glover, *Psychoanalytic Aesthetics: The British School* London: Free Association Books, 1997, 9.
- 3 Sigmund Freud, *Art and Literature*, Gen. Ed. James Strachey, London: Penguin Books, 1985, 432.
- 4 Glover, 7.
- 5 In *Alterities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) Thomas Docherty writes that 'a postmodern sublime lies available here', 137.
- 6 See Cahill and O'Conner as above.
- 7 Susan Purdie, *Comedy: The Mastery of Discourse*, London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993, 5.
- 8 Purdie, 5.
- 9 Purdie, 36.
- 10 Elizabeth Lowry 'Dream On: Review of McGuckian's *Selected Poems*'. *Metre* 4 (Spring/Summer 1998) 46-53, 51.
- 11 Catriona O'Reilly, reviewing *Shelmalier*, in *The Irish Times*, Jan. 30th 1999, Weekend, wrote: 'There are moments of utter impenetrability and grammatical sloppiness', 11.
Cahill summaries such criticism thus: 'Hirst finds her 'mysterious' and 'evasive'. Drexel calls her poems 'puzzling' and even accuses her of 'whimsy'. Jenkins considers her 'whimsical or wilfully idiosyncratic' and claims one looks in vain for meaning', 264.
- 12 Purdie, 37.
- 13 Glover, 7.
- 14 O'Conner, 158.
- 15 Murphy, 120.
- 16 Murphy, 124.
- 17 Murphy, 110.
- 18 McGuckian, 50.
- 19 Purdie, 37.
- 20 Cahill, 265.
- 21 Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, (trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke) New York: Cornell University Press, 1985, 134.
- 22 Michael Allen wrote: 'the oppositions between 'female' and 'male', freedom and constraint, intuition and expression, emotion and the violence of logic, are never stereotyped, always fluid'.
Quoted in Murphy. 111.
- 23 Quoted in Cahill, 264.
- 24 McGuckian, 20.

In *A Dictionary of Irish Mythology*, (London: Constable and Co. Ltd., 1987) Peter Berresford Ellis writes: 'Medb represented the sovereignty of Connacht and no King was legitimate unless symbolically wed to her. It is recorded that 'she never was without one man in the shadow of another', 166.

25 McGuckian, 20.

26 Cahill, 267.

27 Irigaray, 134.

28 Purdie, 142.

29 Docherty, 127-148.

30 Docherty, 138.

31 Docherty, 143.

32 Docherty, 143.

33 Docherty, 143.

34 Docherty, 143.

35 Docherty, 144.