

The In-formal Poetics of Medbh McGuckian

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When a woman poet uses tropes of birth in her work, she seems to be consigned by our culture to a distinctively female poetics. Given the ways in which masculinised concerns are valued as universal and representative, and female concerns considered of interest to women only, then a woman writer, writing from her own maternal experience, appears to be disqualified from the sphere of the high-minded and seriously poetic. Pregnancy and gestation are the 'central events'¹ of Medbh McGuckian's *Marconi's Cottage* and when giving readings from this volume, McGuckian noted how her audiences reacted with indifference if she introduced a poem saying, 'this is a poem about early pregnancy', or 'that is a poem about late pregnancy'.² She observed that 'all these men are sitting there, and the women are bored, and the men I think are not too excited either, you know'.³ The prospect of listening to poems about birth obviously did not satisfy an audience expecting more traditional poetic subjects and themes and this boredom would appear to stem from a belief that such subjective exploration of a gender specific experience can have no objective correlative with general appeal. However, in this article I will argue that resistance and indifference to birth as a poetic theme does not result from such experience being too particularised and too far outside the ambit of what is properly poetic, but that the explicit treatment of such experience overloads a poetics already deeply imbricated in incarnatory metaphors. The disinterest of McGuckian's audience has thus less to do with this being a site of difference and more to do with the fact that it is a site of too much sameness: a poem about actual gestation is not too 'different' from prevailing poetics but far too alike. Poetry that deals with the materiality of motherhood is highly problematic in an economy that prizes euphemistic birth in linguistic and abstracted terms. This poetic economy masculinises voice, and feminises form, that is, the body of the poem. Therefore, within such an economy, a woman poet's voice, (regardless of whether she deals specifically with incarnation or not) undermines the inertness of the

matter/mater considered necessary for the self-birthing of national masculine poets.

Myths of patriarchal (auto)genesis mark the transition from a matriarchal economy to a patriarchal one through figuring masculine birth. In Judeo-Christian discourses genesis comes forth from the father's word rather than as mother's body,⁴ and myths of poetic autogenesis involve the same erasure of the mother's body in the privileging of a word named as the father's. The incarnatory tendencies of romanticism have long been noted by critics, as have the autochthonic self-sufficiency tropes of much North American literature. Modernist critical practices compounded the legacy of the language of incarnation and self-sufficiency as an aesthetic standard, and this combined with modernist reclamations of the metaphysical poets and Milton have resulted in a poetics in which the achievement of canonical status in twentieth century tradition relied heavily, if not almost exclusively, on organicist metaphors of birth. Metaphors of birth are central to the critical procedures whereby poets become canonised in twentieth century traditions of representative poetry, particularly as national or culturally representative poets.

In her polemical essay "What Foremothers?" Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill notes that Seán Ó Ríordáin's poem 'Banfhile' 'repeats again and again with a sense of ever increasing hysteria' that "'woman is not poet, but poetry"'.⁵ This repetition carries with it more than an Irish cultural taboo against women becoming poets, but also, crucially, an understanding of the matter of poetry as feminine, that is as the material matrix from which a distinctive poetic voice is individuated. In the same essay Ní Dhomhnaill draws attention to the fact that 'banfhili' (women poets) went out 'with the "mna luibheanna" (herb women) and the "mna cabartha" (midwives)' and 'in come the poets (male only) with the physicians and obstetricians'.⁶ The confluence of relations of birthing and midwifery to poetic practice, especially modernist poetics, determines not only the gender of the 'matter' of poetry, but also the critical operations at work in canonisation. To name but one example, Christopher Ricks's *The Force of Poetry*,⁷ demonstrates how incarnatory tendencies inform ideas of what poetry is and how it should perform. The 'force of poetry' that Ricks invokes as 'animating' poetry and by extension his own critical text is taken from Johnson, and is understood as 'that force which calls new powers into being, which embodies sentiment, and animates matter'⁸. The matter animated is feminine, and the gestational space for the emerging voice of the poet. Ricks's influential style in poetry criticism repeatedly traces 'the relation between the turning of a phrase, the turning of someone into someone or something else, and the bodily act of turning'⁹ as indicative of greatness in

poetry. Ricks's turning body is like the child turning in readiness for birth, and in one representative instance the 'division of the couplet' is such that it makes 'its second line swing open like a great door to let in the light',¹⁰ like the opening of the cervix, or indeed the incision of a scalpel in a caesarean cut.

Another influential theorist of canonicity and genius in the twentieth century, Harold Bloom, also relies heavily on invocations of birth that result from man-to-man reproduction in his ideas of poetic greatness. His work is of especial interest in an Irish context given his editing of the 1986 *Seamus Heaney: Modern Critical Views*, a critical collection that firmly established Seamus Heaney on the international map as a poet of representative national standing. Each essay in this edition tested Heaney's work, explicitly or implicitly, against the criteria outlined for recognising 'poetic strength' set out by Bloom's work. Given this, Bloom's template can be seen as exerting considerable influence in the mapping of the later twentieth, and early twenty-first century Irish poetic landscapes, as echoes of his ideas reverberate powerfully through contemporary discourse on poetry. Individuation figured in oedipal terms, and through man-to-man regeneration thus underwrites the tradition into which Medbh McGuckian writes and against which her work is measured. Bloom asserts that 'Only a poet challenges a poet as poet and so only a poet makes a poet. To the poet-in-a-poet, a poem is always the other man, the precursor, and so a poem is always a person, always the father of one's second birth'.¹¹ The linguistic second birth is explicitly appointed as the origin of poetic identity, and as such the pre-oedipal period and the original material birth are expunged from the symbolical landscape. Bloom's argument that 'to live, the poet must *misinterpret* the father, by the crucial act of misprision',¹² is unable to see the more obvious mis-prison of the matter of the poem. This second birth becomes established as the origin of the poet's history, in which the first birth and pre-oedipal consciousness become mythicised and mystified. Bloom describes the psychological pull the memory of the first birth and pre-oedipal relating exerts in mythical terms when he writes:

Ocean, the matter of Night, the original Lillith or 'feast that famished', mothers what is antithetical to her, the makers who fear (rightly) to accept her and never cease to move towards her. If not to have conceived oneself is a burden, so for the strong poet there is also the hidden burden: not to have brought oneself forth, not to be a god breaking one's own vessels, but to be awash in the word not quite one's own.¹³

The burden of being 'awash in the word not quite one's own', is kept 'hidden' by the insistence on the origins of voice beginning with the second birth. The establishment of the linguistic birth as primary is achieved through a critical emphasis on poets having both conceived and brought themselves forth through the godlike breaking of their own vessels or form. However, in order to achieve representative status on these terms, a poet's heroic vocal struggle to be self-birthed from the 'body' of the poem must have a sympathetic critical circle to bear witness to this poetic birth. As Diana Tietjens Meyers argues, such authenticating criticism takes part in the tradition in which the language attaching to midwifery and birth are 'used to symbolise the assistance men give to each other in their creative labours' and which goes 'back as far as Socrates'.¹⁴ In Heaney's case this happens when he is 'pulled' into canonical visibility by critical midwives who read his work as veering too dangerously close to the moist, wet, and boglike matter, the maternalised land and form. The essays effectively deliver Seamus Heaney into the Irish canon, and indeed the canon of modernism, by means of bearing critical witness to the all-important second 'oedipal' birth into the so-called language of the father. In order to help Heaney transcend what Bloom calls 'the vowel of the earth', these critics emphasise moments of 'hard technical mastery' and of transcendence to pull him from the slabber and wetness his early work favoured to dry linguistic safety, and translate his fascination with echolalia and sound play into a symbolically ordered system of meaning. The poet's work must be hospitable to being read as presenting a catastrophic and rupturous poetic birth, that obscures and prevents the conscious naming of the first birth.

Thus, the unnamed, unsymbolised *history* of birth is the sublimated sub-text of the most cathected and valorised literature of the western canon, and the pull that Bloom describes accounts for much of the seemingly inexplicable inherent paradoxes that marks poetry off from other forms of writing. For poetry, more than any other literary practice, retains a mystique, a sacredness that tacitly places it at the top of the literary hierarchy, even in these post-structuralist times when all texts are supposedly equal. Indeed, post-structuralism itself, despite its attempt to escape metaphysics of presence continues to draw heavily on organicist metaphors of birth and gestation in its valorisation of the disconnected dry birth of the word. Derrida, for instance, writes:

The poet, in the very experience of his freedom, finds himself both bound to language and delivered from it by a speech whose master, nonetheless, he himself is [. . .] in question is a labor, a deliverance, a slow gestation of the poet by the poem whose father he is.¹⁵

Poetry is identified even in this deconstructive reading as a gestational space. In modernist fashion, it is an autochthonic activity – the poet is master of the speech that ‘binds’ and ‘delivers’ him, and he is gestated by the very poem that he himself has ‘fathered’. The inert matter of the poem is, as in Ricks’s critical view, ‘moved’ by the poet to deliver himself from it. Thus in both modernism and postmodernism the poem is constructed as an ‘ageless wound’, without either history or name, so that it can best facilitate the poets’ self-naming and historicisation. As Derrida points out, ‘poetic discourse *takes root* in a wound’.¹⁶ However, naming the form, the matrix, the matter of poetry as a wound, does in fact give away that it has a specific moment in psychic history. This poem mother is specifically the phallic mother, after castration, and post Oedipus: it is woman as a site of loss – the loss of the phallus. Thus the oedipal fantasy of omnipotence can be seen here as retrospectively reconstituting the first birth in such a way that the child is recast as orchestrating its own original birth. In this way the mother’s agency, as well as both the child and mother’s materiality is edited out. As Madelon Sprengnether points out in *The Spectral Mother*:

from a feminist and psychoanalytic standpoint, post-structuralist theory suffers from a tendency to render the condition of biological motherhood either meaningless or irrelevant, thus repeating the repression of motherhood that Irigaray perceives at the heart of Western Culture.¹⁷

In both modernist and postmodernist accounts, the poem is regarded then, however inexplicitly, as a masculinised womb, to which it is necessary to return, and to inhabit, in order to create truly. In his significant analysis of creative behaviours, *The Psychoanalysis of Artistic Vision and Hearing: An Introduction to a Theory of Unconscious Perception*, Anton Ehrenzweig notes that the condition of ‘artistic and scientific perception’ is one in which ‘retrogression can be considerable, where the child cannot even differentiate his own ego from the external world’.¹⁸ Ehrenzweig likens this ‘retrogression’ to a return to intra-uterine experience:

Plato’s famous simile of the captive reflects a philosophical vision which has retrogressed to a pre-natal state; the captive, lying bound in a cave averted from the light of the external world, may symbolise the unborn child in the womb. Freud shows us that the mystic in his ‘oceanic’ feeling of union with the Universe contemplates an infantile state of consciousness before the formation of a separate ego.¹⁹

A common prerequisite to the second self-birth of a poet is an imaginary journey of return. This return to the 'place' of writing in which male poets explore pre-, peri- and post-natal registers also functions as a testimony to the authenticity and the fecundity of their work, as explored, for instance, by Seamus Heaney in *The Place of Writing*.²⁰ In a cultural imaginary in which the phallic mother replaces the maternal body, then, the 'textualised' experience of being inside the mother's body can be affirmed metaphorically by men and function as a touchstone of their 'inner' authenticity, and of their struggle to emerge from doors in the dark, from this creative but insensate state. The cultural imaginary that valorises the mother as 'the place' of writing depends on a metaphor of creativity which recalls the state of being inside the womb, and this is available to men, but it is forbidden to women. This is borne out by differing critical attitudes to women and men poets writing about incarnation. In contrast to the rescue operation performed on behalf of Heaney, the practitioners of oedipally configured criticism do not rush to rescue a woman poet who writes about birth and gestation, but instead treat her work as too interior and self-obsessed. For instance, Clair Wills observes that the presence of both poetic and reproductive creativity in McGuckian's work has 'given rise to condemnations of her work as obsessed with the internal workings of the female self'.²¹ Wills's footnote on 'the most notorious example of such an attack'²² is in this respect most interesting. She remarks that 'Patrick Williams criticises McGuckian for thinking her language can present what is "really" happening, while at the same time condemning her for representing "pseudo" rather than actual femininity'.²³ 'Actual femininity' is, in this understanding of course, masculinity, and a masculine identification with the womb; by this measure actual material experience of maternity can only be understood as pseudo femininity, as it threatens to displace the inert and passive femininity of the poem/matter. Wills goes on to note that 'Williams believes that "true" poetry deals with the representation of "worthwhile human experience tellingly conveyed"'.²⁴ A woman's experience of 'the internal workings of the female self' is within the economy of 'true' poetry not admissible as 'worthwhile human experience'; according to this logic then, only man's experience of 'the internal workings of the female self' is 'worthwhile human experience'. The woman writing *in* her own body is too close to the denied condition of the poet as privileged in a post-oedipal economy – writing *in* the mother's body, which is both invoked and disposed of as matter in myth.

Irigaray observes that women's position relative to the symbolic order is 'as its residue or waste'²⁵ and in *The Place Of Writing*, Heaney perceives that in Thomas Kinsella's work 'the place of waste, the place of renewal

and the place of writing have become coterminous within the domain of his poetry'.²⁶ The womb mother is consigned to a symbolic wasteland, and replaced by the matter of the poem and by the mothering-father 'poet'. The lesser poet, who has not mastered the wealth of ancestry, is in Bloom's terms, an epigone, which literally means, 'to be born after'; that is, they fail because they have not sufficiently erased traces of the one who bore them and who was born before them. The hen woman who 'drops the egg' of 'poetry' in Kinsella's poem is thus not fit for poetic vocation, not fit for the sort of mothering that only a male poet is fit for, and the lesson to be learned here is that woman must remain in 'place' as place.²⁷ Moreover, Heaney argues that the Kinsella poem 'His Father's Hands' uses birth metaphors, but, these are, more importantly in terms of this argument, self-birthing metaphors,²⁸ that pertain to the father and son's autochthonic regeneration, and which disposes of the woman as a fit mother for poetry. The *simultaneous* representation of mother and child is one that is highly problematic in a culture which privileges an illusory autonomy, and which cannot admit of the *a priori* existence of the mother, as mother. The maternal body has to become a wasteland, disposed of in the imaginary. Borsch-Jacobsen argues that the subject has to 'dispose of' the 'womb-mother', this *a priori* and 'external' presence 'in order to constitute its myth of itself'.²⁹ The possibility of representing the mother's perspective carries with it the threat of annihilation for the child, that is the fear of the loss of the mother encoded in the either/or, all or nothing oedipal complementarity. This is annihilation in fantasy, which has become a cultural staple in which the loss of the mother is repeatedly restaged as part of the sacrosanct narratives of artistic emergence and poetic birth.

Thus, the view privileged in the drama of this poetic is that of the child, who fetishises the mother in her capacity as an object, and fantasies that they themselves are mummy. Ehrenzweig also importantly observed that the 'retrogression' involved in approaching a creative state 'can be considerable, where the child cannot even differentiate his own ego from the external world'.³⁰ Here I wish to make a clear distinction between the mother object and a woman's subjective difference from this object. The mother object is literally the use to which a pre-oedipal child puts the mother. As the primary object, the mother is the representational limits of the world to the child, and indeed mediates the world for the child who identifies with her to the extent of 'seeing through her'.³¹ This erasure of the mother-object is a psychic necessity but, because no adequate cultural symbology to represent the separation of woman and mother-object exists, this erasure also ensures both the representational sacrifice of woman's subjective difference as well as the deletion of the 'holding' environment of

the mother-object. Thus, the most privileged cultural perspective is that of the pre-oedipal child who mistakes the world/mother for themselves, and for whom the admission of mother either as woman or as matter is tantamount to its own elimination. In this either/or model, identity politics is thus haunted by a fierce battle between 'mother' and 'child' for representational space.

As a 'threader of double-stranded words', McGuckian's work brings the mother back into the picture and into earshot. In McGuckian's avowal of the mother's subjective difference and presence her work is bewildering to a critical economy that therefore often reads her work as 'meaningless' though pleasurable, mysterious, whimsical, dreamlike, unconscious, but always outside the register of 'representationally' admissible meaning. This is because it makes present the mother and child as *separate* subjectivities, *and* as each other's objects in the *same* space, that is the space of the poem. Through signifying the mother's with the child's perspective, the subject with the object, the poem itself ceases to be matter/an object and becomes instead a transitional space in which differing subject and object relations can be negotiated. The simultaneous representation of co-subjects and of one's own object use is substantially under-read by the interpretative frames that privilege the self-reflective birthing of the univocal subject. McGuckian's work, in a psychic and symbolic act of tmesis, iterates a separation of the mother object and a woman's subjective difference, through expressing how it feels to be representationally restrained by the confines of the inside view. However, her work does not involve a refuting of this psychic work, rather it explores what it means to be needed and used in this way by others, whilst also ardently bringing the point of view of the woman watching herself in this role into the symbolic space of the poem. In doing so she insinuates that doubleness is an appropriate and representative template for subjectivity that, at the very least, does not involve the suppression or appropriation of the mother.

In the poem 'Porcelain Bells', McGuckian highlights the operation wherein the mother becomes the world to the child, by describing the child's identification with the mother's eyes and voice, the mother's powers, and by explicitly naming the mother as universe, in her role as object. The speaker identifies the mother with the whole of nature: 'Even if you were outside, where summer was, / you would still be inside every leaf'.³² 'Porcelain Bells' also significantly connects the mother's lack of a language in which to name herself with the powerful legacy her daughter contends with: 'your mysteriously-suppressed / name sickness / will weave itself into all I see'.³³ The poem suggests that because of a mysterious suppression of the name of mother, the culture will be sick, as all women

are collapsed into the object, without adequate means to symbolise and recognise their individuality in the culture at large. The limits of the womb from within, and of the mother from the inside, the 'idiom of her care', are culturally taken as the sum of a woman, and, more crucially, as all that can be represented. In this symbolic system a woman's subjectivity must always be its unrepresentable other. The mother's lack of language, and the sickness of remaining 'unconscious' that it promotes, weaves itself into all the speaker/poet envisions. However, this provides a poetic template of naming the supposedly 'unnameable' for McGuckian's work in order to heal the 'mysteriously suppressed name sickness'.

Describing the supposedly unnameable is evident in the McGuckian poem 'Something like a Wind', which expresses the desire for representing a woman's subjective difference to be recognised as more than just a boundary for the subjectivity of the child. Here the speaker wishes to prise the lips of the 'single line' of the matter away from each other: 'your lips were always a single line of time / Flowing through a single place [...]'; 'they / fastened the years together, when I would like / to have prised them ever so gently apart'.³⁴ The lips closed together in a single line, suggest the scar of 'lack' when woman is figured in phallic terms, as a wound, as a site of loss; that is, it represents woman as the negative of man rather than in the fullness of her difference. The speaker wishes to 'open' the lips in order to gain access to, and, bring into representation, the holding environments of the womb or mother-object. Vitally, the speaker does not wish to be confined there, or to mistake the limits of the womb for the sum of all that is representable, for the poem isolates such confinement as mitigating against life, to the extent of instigating the death of the other. For, contained together 'their movements' therein lead to the eradication of the presence of the other: 'how deeply wrong / were all our movements, like someone waking / With no one in a mixture of morning and lamplight' (VR 52). Instead the speaker wishes to fly and not remain in the waters of the womb: 'I wanted the bird just then, even more than the / slightly rocking sea, its sound as entirely blue / as if it were a scrap of sky, with something / like a wind blowing over it' (VR 52). The air, the sky, and the wind are associated with the upper chambers of the mother's body, the person surrounding the womb: the part of her that is not 'sea'. Recognising this difference rather than obliterating it in favour of a fantasy of an omnipotent self is critical for a woman poet in a way that is not so urgent for a male poet. To erase the mother is to delete the self-same, she with whom you identify, and thus the important identification that allows mature individuation and development of a healthy self is disallowed. This is reflected in the seemingly confusing use of you and me in 'Teraphim', in which the

cultural child is invited to 'over-hear' the mother and bring her back into representation: 'But only you can take me back / Beyond yourself, only you / can change me by overhearing you speak'.³⁵ Being 'over-heard' means hearing the woman who holds the representational matrix of the mother object, bringing the speaker into a mode of being that does not require self-denial. The reader is invited to listen carefully, to overhear, and in these lines from 'Turning the Moon into a Verb', to 'reach much / further up; with this new / listening' (MC 76).

Hearing the Outside Speak

The rupturous emergence of Voice from a form that needs to be mastered and restrained, or at the very least, trained, has been powerfully invoked in various modes of criticism as a marker of poetic greatness, and, as if in playful dialogue with this cultural prevail, McGuckian's work asks us to listen carefully. The voices that emerge in her work are the voices heard in Thomas Docherty's salient reading of *The Waste Land*, a poem prototypically considered the foundational poem of modernism. In his reading the emphasis is placed on 'listening', on the aural labyrinth that is muted in favour of the spatial and visual emphasis that has attracted most modernist poets. He observes that the very 'scandal of the womanly voice / vote' which haunts the poem constitutes what might be thought of as its Orphic moment, and argues that 'it wants to hear a music, but this music is noise it cannot hear'.³⁶ Noting that 'the text is about the difficulty of writing, speaking, composing at all',³⁷ the 'struggle' of poetry is linked here to the silencing of the woman's voice, which is most profoundly the silencing of the mother's difference from her object use as the mediator of the child's voice in the world. Acknowledgment of this struggle is echoed in Bloom's claim that we know 'the true epebe [...] by hearing in his first voices what is most central in the precursors' voices',³⁸ but Bloom's analysis takes such an insight in a very different direction, in which the criticism itself colludes in not hearing the womanly voice haunting his theories. Ostensibly, Bloom alludes to the influence of the poetic fathers with whom the epebe is in agon, but equally, and more accurately, this means the muting of the mother's precursive and percussive voice, in order to persist with the fantasy that the child/poet is the mother/world. McGuckian's 'The Difficult Age' chronicles the return of this repressed scandalous womanly voice. The speaker observes that 'he could not leave his voice alone: / He took it apart, he undressed it'. The voice he eventually summons 'Like a coherent father' speaks in another language and in the feminine voice. S/He says, "Je ne suis pas heureuse' (VR 15), which

translates as 'I am not happy', a simple and powerful statement of the effects of such voicelessness.

The muting of the voice goes hand in glove with the abjection of the body that houses it. Bloom notes that strong poets (or those who, within a privileging economy based on the cathexis of birth and gestation within the poem, have been designated as strong), 'tend to incarnate by the side of the ocean, at least in vision, if inland far they be'.³⁹ McGuckian's Aphrodite, Venus, speaks from the place of the woman above the 'ocean', and challenges the expunging of the woman who houses the ocean, by speaking about the birth of the inner ocean culturally valorised as the creative space of the strong poet. The economy protecting the strong poet attributes hollowness and abjection to the woman's body. In 'Venus and the Rain' McGuckian's speaker, Venus, says:

On one occasion I rang like a bell
For a whole month, promising their torn edges
The birth of a new ocean (as all of us
Who have hollow bodies tend to do at times).
What clues to distance could they have,
So self-excited by my sagging sea,
Widening ten times faster than it really did? (VR 32)

The distance between the woman and those whose self is excited – aroused by her ocean, by her bringing them forth after 'widening' ten times, dilating ten centimetres for the belly to empty itself as a 'sagging sea' – is emphasised as the bell's music is lost behind the torn edges of another's self-excited birth. The birth by ocean is called up in Bloom's description of the self-incarnation of the strong poet, who will convert the oceanic waves of the womb into the waters of the word:

We move from ocean to land by a drying up of the oceanic sense, and we learn sublimation through our precocious memories of a glacial catastrophe. It followed that our most valued activities are regressive.⁴⁰

Bloom here elaborates a theory of poetic incarnation in which regression is privileged, but the regressive activity of returning to the womb is culturally sanctioned as a return to the dry womb of the intent modernist imagination. His definition of poetic incarnation as 'desiccation combined with unusually strong oceanic sense [as] the highly dualistic yet not all paradoxical answer',⁴¹ gestures towards the doubleness of the subject. However, it ultimately resists seeing beyond the limits of its

representation to name the woman whose difference from the matter represents the 'yet not all'. The paradoxical dualism is prevented from 'answering the bell' that exceeds it as 'yet not all', because of the insistence on the dry oedipal birth and on the autochthonic powers of the father that assure the refusal of the maternal body. McGuckian's work represents the consciousness of the one that 'is not yet all' within the dualism of the oceanic oneness, the perspective of the mother, who births this ocean and who is then represented as a hollowed out, sagging and abjected body, waste. The music of the bell obscured by the function of birthing the ocean, the representational matrix for the 'strong poet', becomes in 'East of Mozart' more explicitly a condition of unrecognised somatic memory, except when *heard* through 'the *lens* of poetry', when music becomes *seen*, through the seer's eye and vision, in incarnatory and representative poetry:

Snow gleams like an old leaven
In one corner of my room, a feeling
With no name in actual language
Which perhaps does not exist except in me. (MC 64)

This 'feeling / with no name in actual language' and which she suspects may not exist except in her, has a sound that:

[. . .] represents the cousin
Or the mirror of a kingdom
That nobody believes in. (MC 65).

The 'kingdom that no one believes in' suggests the womb and the experience of intra-uterine life that is within our culture mythicised as impossible and unbelievable. In 'Visiting Rainer Maria' McGuckian writes of being the container of the imaginary which forbids and keeps the representation of her subjectivity without itself:

So was my shape dictated by
The curved outer wall, the eccentricities
Of the corridor, all sorts of untils. (MC 10)

Her shape dictated by the 'outer wall' refers to the inheritance of definitions of femininity from her mother, whom she identifies as the 'outer wall' in 'Porcelain Bells'. And in 'The Invalid's Echo' – the title suggesting the under-voice of the mother, which is heard as an 'echo' in poetics of incarnation and transformation – she writes:

I think his family so ancient,
his heart must still be over on the right,
though I have searched for it before
In full swing until it shrank to nothing,
Merging with my name, that comes
From nowhere, and is ownerless,
like all we can see of the stars. (MC 13)

This is also echoed in In 'Pain Tells You What to Wear', where the 'fear of retouching [. . .] the priceless vertebrae of the stars' (VR 41), represents the fear of retouching the mother's body, the holder of the stars: of seeing beyond the finite of lack. Derrida writes that the 'overabundance of the signifier, its supplementary character is thus the result of a finitude, that is to say, the result of a lack which must be supplemented'.⁴² The mother is not visible beyond the heaviness of the full womb, for as the speaker in 'Venus and the Rain' declaims: 'I can never be viewed / Against a heavy sky' (VR 32). As a poet, bringing into primary voice the invalid's echo, she now like the stars, 'lies with her back / to him, his chance neighbour', outside of his imaginary, which by 'having forgotten / Everything', (MC 13) he will construct by:

imagin[ing] the sky
In its second appearance as
The quintessence of blue. (MC 13)

In 'Swallows' Wood, Glenshesk', 'the sky cleared only / For [her] Birthday, adding an upper voice to it' (MC 72). With birth, the sky is 'cleared', opened up to an upper voice, which is represented as belonging to someone else, although it has echoes with the poet's own. The 'upper voice' of the mother is not appropriated by the poet, and thus denied its own existence. 'The Unplayed Rosalind' is a poem about the woman above and around the womb who is herself 'unplayed', within a poetics that appropriates the 'most beautiful room in the world' (MC 59), and speaks as if it were this room itself speaking. 'Upstairs', from this 'rose-red room, a roseate chamber', lives the woman who mourns for her own loss within the poetics of the chamber:

Upstairs above my head lives someone
Who repeats my movements with her double
Weeping. My heart beats as though it were
Hers, and sometimes I have her within my clothes
Like a blouse fastened with a strap. (MC 60)

The 'double' is represented here as resonating within the roseate room, within the poet whose place is that chamber:

In her there was something of me which
He touched, when she lay on his arm like the unknown
Echo of the word I wanted to hear
Only from his mouth; she spoke words to him
I had already heard. (MC 60)

She, who carries something of the speaker, is the 'unknown echo' for which McGuckian seeks a word, and which she seeks to represent. The poet desires to hear the unknown echo from *his* mouth, to move this knowledge of twoness in a shared symbolic system. The speaker's relation to this woman 'upstairs' from the womb is ambivalent, for the imaginary of this woman's uterus as the world is so well established, that the poet's own attempts both to occupy the roseate chamber for her own purpose, and to bring the woman above the womb into representational visibility/audibility may find themselves without growth, without planting:

Though she swore
That she did not carry
Another man's child under her heart,
My seed is a loose stormcoat
Of gold silk, with wide sleeves, in her uterus. (MC 61)

The poet's 'seed' portends birth in a loose 'stormcoat', a 'loose' poetic form, in which the unnamed woman can play. It is also a poetic form that is not an embodiment of her, but is a garment, a storm-coat: a role. In 'Isba Song', the speaker resists appropriating the mother for the self and separates out to affirm a doubleness of voice:

I have heard
In the sound of another woman's voice
Which I believed was the sound of my own,
The sound the first-timeness of things we remember
Must make inside. And although she was eager
To divide her song, from her I took nothing
But the first syllable of her name, so the effect
Was of a gentle terrain within a wilder one,
High-lying, hard, as wood might learn to understand
The borrowings of water, or pottery capitulate
Its dry colours. Otherwise I might have well
Ignored the ground that shone for me, that did enough
To make itself rebound from me, out of which I was made. (VR 26)

Through this separation she is able to source and name the mother as the origin of her being, the ground out of which she was made, and a ground she was in real danger of ignoring, as the tradition does. Naming the mother does not mean discarding her as used matter, but rather limns her into the symbolic picture. The speaker in 'Ode to a Poetess' does not seek the radical disidentification of the modernist transcendental subject from matter, but rather expresses a desire to acknowledge two-ness and relatedness: 'what survives of our garden is held together / By the influences of water, as if we could only live / In the shelter of each other, and just leave the matter / Where we must leave all the doors that matter' (VR 13-14). Here doubleness is affirmed alongside oneness. The speaker seeks to identify with the mother in 'the shelter of each other' but also to separate, to 'leave the matter', but leave the matter as a portal, as a door through which access to the memories of the pre-oedipal relationship with the matter can be both accessed, and left behind, in order to bring them into a symbolic field that currently resists their realisation. This symbolic field is one in which the 'essence of man' is confirmed *within* the unrepresented woman, who is instead represented as the divided couplet – the lips that have parted, or the skin that has been sliced apart and folded back to 'frame' the child's singleness. The woman is 'unplayed', not brought into subjectivity through symbolic play, but functions as the limit text, the limit body for the child's essence. In the 'The Unplayed Rosalind' (MC 59-61), 'essence' is represented as that of two, not one:

I have been the poet of women and consequently
Of the young; if you burned my letters
In the soiled autumn they would form two hearts. (MC 59)

Thus as a poet of woman and of the young, McGuckian writes of pre-oedipal and pre-natal relating and difference, writes the unwritable, and makes the poem a site of 'play' not simply of matter. In *The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known*, the psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas elaborates his provocative and brilliant theory of an aesthetic of self, in which we internalise the sense of the mother long before we internalise the symbolic content of language. He writes that at 'the beginning of life, handling of the infant is the primary mode of communicating, so the internalisation of the mother's form (her aesthetic) is prior to the internalisation of her verbal messages'.⁴³ McGuckian, as the poet of woman and the young, brings this aesthetic, this sense of the mother's handling forward into representation,⁴⁴ as she structurally plays with received notions of form, and is actually able to illuminate the process

whereby the child dispenses with this early experience of the mothering in favour of their own myth of self-creation and singular self-handling.⁴⁵ Bollas also calls this the 'maternal aesthetic',⁴⁶ which is described as a structural experience, the template for which is 'the mother's idiom of care'.⁴⁷ When read as the bringing forth of pre-oedipal and pre-natal relating into representation on its own terms then, McGuckian's poetry literally makes pre-linguistic sense. Her work challenges Bloom's critical admonition that 'to know that we are object as well as subject of the quest is not poetic knowledge but rather the knowledge of defeat, a knowledge fit for the pragmatist of communication, not for that handful who hope to fathom (if not to master) the wealth of ocean, the ancestry of voice'.⁴⁸ The defensive desire, long parlayed in poetry, and expressed most eloquently by Bloom, to master the first ocean and the first voice, that is, the mother, has long been influential in setting standards for the measurement of strong poetry. This means of aesthetically and quietistically encoding a child's fantasies of omnipotence and self-delivery needs radical reassessment in the light of the poetics of relationship and transition explored by McGuckian's compelling work, for her poetry affirms the doubleness of being both subject and object, and succeeds as poetry.

Notes and References

1. Medbh McGuckian, in interview with Susan Shaw Sailer in *Michigan Quarterly Review* 32.1 (1993): 111-127, 113.
2. McGuckian, in Sailer 113.
3. McGuckian, in Sailer 113.
4. Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Aesthetics of Radical Feminism* (London: The Woman's Press, 1991 [first 1979]).
5. Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, 'What Foremothers?', *Poetry Ireland Review* 36 (1992): 18-31, 23-24.
6. Ní Dhomhnaill, 'What Foremothers?' 22.
7. Christopher Ricks, *The Force of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984).
8. Ricks 6.
9. Ricks 21.
10. Ricks 22.
11. Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (New York: Oxford UP, 1975) 19.
12. Bloom 15.
13. Bloom 15.
14. Diana Tietjens Meyers, 'The Rush to Motherhood – Pronationalist Discourse and Women's Autonomy', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 26.3 (Spring 2001): 735-775, 768.

15. Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Plc., 1985) 65.
16. Derrida 64.
17. Madelon Sprengnether, *The Spectral Mother* (London: Cornell UP, 1990) 238.
18. Anton Ehrenzweig, *The Psychoanalysis of Artistic Vision and Hearing: An Introduction to a Theory of Unconscious Perception* (London: Sheldon Press, 1975) 170.
19. Ehrenzweig 170.
20. See Seamus Heaney's essay 'The Pre-Natal Mountain: Vision and Irony in Recent Irish Poetry', in *The Place of Writing* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholar's Press for Emory University, 1989).
21. Clair Wills, *Improprieties: Politics and Sexuality in Northern Irish Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993) 159.
22. Wills 159, footnote 3.
23. Wills 159, footnote 3.
24. Wills 159, footnote 3.
25. Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine* (London: Routledge, 1991) 79.
26. Heaney 62.
27. Heaney 62.
28. Heaney 62.
29. Brennan, Teresa, *The Interpretation of the Flesh: Freud and Femininity* (London: Routledge, 1992) 165.
30. Ehrenzweig 170.
31. A good example of this process of identifying with the mother's 'powers' and seeing through the mother-object is demonstrated by the BBC's children's television programme *Teletubbies*. Its operations mediate and facilitate a child's imaginary transfer from womb to world in the pre-oedipal period. The Teletubbies live in a mound shaped like a pregnant belly that is internally supported by a pulsating placenta-like and umbilical central structure. The Noo-Noo's activities correspond to the object function of the mother post-natally which is to organise and transform the chaos of the drives and appetites by digesting the child's psychic waste and reconstituting it meaningfully for the child. Each teletubbie has a window/television screen unto the world on their tummy through which they watch children in various activities. This looking through its own stomach at the 'world' corresponds to the child's feeling/seeing the world pre-natally through the mother's belly, and, post-natally through her object use. However, by representing the stomach as their own, they identify with the primary object in a way that appropriates her powers and which representationally erases her. The Teletubbies become mother by looking through her stomach/care and representing it as looking through themselves.
32. Medbh McGuckian, *Captain Lavender* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1994) 14-19.
33. McGuckian, *Captain Lavender* 14-19.
34. Medbh McGuckian, *Venus and the Rain* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1994) 52. Hereafter cited parenthetically as (VR).
35. Medbh McGuckian, *Marconi's Cottage* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1991) 104-105. Hereafter cited parenthetically as (MC).

36. Thomas Docherty, *After Theory: Postmodernism/postmarxism* (London: Routledge, 1990) 162.
37. Docherty 150.
38. Bloom 13.
39. Bloom 13.
40. Bloom 11.
41. Bloom 11.
42. Derrida, 1985. 281.
43. Christopher Bollas, *The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known* (London: Free Association Books, 1987) 34.
44. Whilst representation is being discussed here, there is another way in which her work brings such handling into the aesthetic realm and that is in the relationship created between reader and poem.
45. Bollas describes how this aesthetic operates in terms of replacing the infant's rage and hunger with the pleasure of 'fulness': 'if the infant is distressed the resolution of discomfort is achieved by the apparition-like presence of the mother', when the pain of hunger, a moment of emptiness is transformed by mother's milk into an experience of fullness' (Bollas 33). The pre-oedipal mother-child dyad is at the centre of modernist aesthetics, the rage for order representing the child's need for the mother's material transformation of their hunger. The relation that existed between the modernist artist's 'rage for order' and the idiom 'sufficient' to order this is the same relational structure that prevails between the pre-oedipal child and mother. In Wallace Stevens's 'Of Modern Poetry' the (retrospective) manifesto poem of modernism, the modernist poet seeking 'the finding of a satisfaction', seeking 'what will suffice', (Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*, London: Faber and Faber, 1967. 54), is the child seeking the 'good enough mother', the good enough idiom of care. Albert Gelpi argues that 'Stevens' spoke for his modernist peers when he said that a 'blessed rage for order' conferred on the driven artist a heroic nobility in an ignoble time and a function in society, since the work of the imagination "helps us to live our lives"'. (Albert Gelpi, 'The Genealogy of Postmodernism: Contemporary American Poetry', *The Southern Review* 26:3 (1990): 517-541,519). The resolutionary structure invoked in the face of emptiness and a rage for order is the fetishised amalgamating imagination of modernism, represented in Eliot's amalgamating mind, Pound's homogenous fullness, Brooks's synthesising imagination, and Ransom's 'fulness of poetry', Yeats's 'theory of the great mind and great memory to explain disparate events' (Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, *Gender And History In Yeats's Love Poetry*, New York: Syracuse UP, 1996. 232), and this structure is the maternal aesthetic. However, the masculinisation of the imagination obscures the doubleness of this dyad, the pre-oedipal differences between mother and child, poet and critic, and these differences are recast as one and the same, and represented by the univocalism of the male child.
46. Bollas 32.
47. Bollas 32.
48. Bloom 16-17.