

An “Unthought Known” of Her Own: The Aesthetics of Interruption

Moynagh Sullivan, Ph.D.

National University of Ireland–Maynooth

Although Baraitser (2009) investigates interruption as a condition of maternal subjectivity, this essay concerns itself with how maternal presence itself can interrupt aesthetic practice. Reading Baraitser with and through the work of the Northern Irish poet Medbh McGuckian, I interweave the aesthetic with the philosophical and psychoanalytical possibilities of taking “maternity as the norm” that Baraitser so suggestively explores (p. 10). McGuckian’s poetry, I argue, answers Baraitser’s question when she asks what kind of subjectivity emerges “when we live in close proximity” to a child and “are somehow responsible for them, too” (p. 11). Also calling upon the careful and enabling work of Christopher Bollas, this essay explores through the poetry how the “unthought known” or the “maternal aesthetic” described by Bollas as “the first if not the earliest human aesthetic” (Bollas, 1987, p. 32 can also be supplemented in light of Baraitser’s evocative thesis.

Lisa Baraitser’s arresting *Maternal Encounters: The Ethics of Interruption* (2009) interposes itself in a recent reenergizing of thinking about and through the maternal in philosophy, psychoanalysis, art, creative writing and critical methodologies, converging practices increasingly identified as Maternal Studies. Baraitser’s work explores “interruption [as] the given of maternal experience” (pp. 120–121) and enlarges on the implications of this ethical sociopolitical practice. In *Maternal Encounters*, Baraitser acknowledges important genealogical links with and takes care to distinguish her work from earlier feminist writers who also explored the conjunction between maternity, subjectivity, political, and ethical practice, such as Sara Riddick in her influential 1989 book *Maternal Thinking*. Baraitser locates her own interchangeable use of the terms *motherhood* and *mothering* in Adrienne Rich’s key work on motherhood, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976), in a “bid to trouble the notion that ‘experience’ may lie outside of the cultural, political and social institutions that both shape and are shaped by it” (Baraitser, 2009, p. 138), but it is in fact Rich’s suggestive exploration of the *aesthetics* of motherhood in the germinal essay “When We Dead Awaken” (Gelpi and Charlesworth Gelpi, 1993) that *Maternal Encounters* most powerfully invokes. Whereas Baraitser investigates interruption as a condition of maternal subjectivity, this short commentary concerns itself with how maternal presence itself can interrupt aesthetic practice. Reading Baraitser with and through the work of the poet Medbh McGuckian, I interweave the aesthetic with the

philosophical and psychoanalytical possibilities of taking "maternity as the norm" that Baraitser so suggestively explores (Baraitser, 2009, p. 10).¹ Baraitser summons up Rich's description of discontinuous motherhood as a condition of her writing both in her treatise on interruption and in her description of her use of "anecdotal theory," with which Baraitser attempts 'to interrupt [herself], or, as much as possible, throw [herself] off the subject—especially [her] own tendency to be drawn back towards the relative safety of theory' (Baraitser, 2009, p. 13). In Rich's elaboration of a maternal aesthetic of discontinuity she resists the De Beauvoirian and Woolfian identification of motherhood as the enemy of independent creativity and affirms writing not from a *room* of her own but from the perspective of the mother of young children, barely able to have an uninterrupted *thought* of her own. She writes,

In the late fifties I was able to write, for the first time, directly about experiencing myself as a woman. The poem was jotted in fragments during children's naps, brief hours in the library, or at 3.00 A.M. after rising with a wakeful child. I despaired of doing any continuous work at this time. Yet I began to feel that my fragments and scraps had a common consciousness and a common theme, one which I would have been very unwilling to put on paper at an earlier time because I had been taught that poetry should be "universal," which meant of course, nonfemale [as quoted in Gelpi and Gelpi, p. 175].

Later Rich was to note that her early work conflated mother and woman, and much subsequent feminist theory worked to disentangle the discursive collapse of woman and mother in order to elaborate conceptions of womanhood separate from motherhood. Baraitser (2009) also decouples the conflation of woman and mother but does so "not this time for the sake of the feminine, but for the sake of the maternal" (p. 10). In this respect for the maternal, we can also turn to the "unthought known" or the "maternal aesthetic" that forms the baseline for much of the careful and deeply enabling work of Christopher Bollas. The "unthought known" is the sensory recollection or evocation later in life of early transformative experience facilitated by the mother's "idiom of care" (Bollas, 1987, p. 32): "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, 1987, p. 33). Bollas describes this maternal idiom as "the first if not the earliest human aesthetic" (Bollas, 1987, p. 32), and in these early experiences the "grammar of our being" is laid down, providing not only the template for self-experiencing with others but also with objects, which can evoke a mysterious familiarity (whether positive or not) and/or sense of oneness (Bollas, 1987, p. 32).

Understanding "transformation" as tied to early maternal relating, as Bollas (1987) shows, gives us a suggestive template for thinking about gender politics in cultures in which the child's viewpoint of "uncanny" handling by the object becomes reified as the privileged perspective on and mode of aesthetic experience. Herbert Marcuse observed that one of the characteristics of the "formalists" was to emphasize the "transformative element in art" (Marcuse, 1969, pp. 39–40) and the narrative of whether or how art transforms us continues to inform both popular and academic meditations on the subject. Feminist theorists in a range of disciplines have long asked

¹For a more elaborate treatment of maternal, aesthetic, and psychoanalytical registers in the work of McGuckain, see also M. Sullivan, "Medbh McGuckian's 'On Her Second Birthday'" (2009), *IUR*, 39(2), 320–333; "'Dreamin' My Dreams with You': Medbh McGuckian and the Theatre of Dreams" (2005), *Metre*, 17, 100–112; "Medbh McGuckian's In-Formal Poetics" (2004), *Nordic Irish Studies*, 2(1), 75–92.

what happens to a maternal point of view in discourses of art and writing that are overconditioned by perspective of the child seeking transformative resolution, in which the maternal must operate primarily as an object for that metamorphosis. The questions that have informed my own work about how, where, and when maternal perspectives interrupt aesthetic experience are asked in another register by Baraitser when she quotes Jacqueline Rose's response to Bollas, which asks, "When does a mother get to speak?" (Baraitser, 2009, p. 51).² Medbh McGuckian is a Northern Irish poet, born in 1950 and famous for her beautiful poems of great obscurity, who instead of glossing and illuminating her work gives conflicting and often contradictory readings of her own poems. Her poetry, I argue, answers Baraitser's question when she asks what kind of subjectivity emerges "when we live in close proximity" to a child and "are somehow responsible for them, too" (Baraitser, 2009, p. 11). The co-presence and insistence on the "avowing" maternal presence of "form" is embodied in "The Unplayed Rosalind":

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 [McGuckian, 1991, pp. 59–61].

Moreover, McGuckian's (1995) "double-stranded words" (pp. 48–49) give not answers but instead gift similes to the paradigm-changing question Baraitser asks: "What is it *like* rather than what does it mean?" (Baraitser, 2009, p. 15; emphasis added) when in their simile-laden, metaphoric pleasures they bear witness to the fragmented, interrupted consciousness of the mother. McGuckian appears to write with an awareness of the formal role of poetry as a "maternal space" that coheres fragments for the reader in aesthetic experience and of how her own interruptions as a woman poet writing about maternity, as mother and daughter, complicate this formal operation. Maternal interruptions interpose in the body of the poem via the use of simile, initiating the reader into the symbolic realm of play, not equation, in which the difference of the mother-subject from her use as an object can be acted out. Jessica Benjamin (1995) outlines Symbolic Equation as "a function prior to symbolization, in which the symbol does not stand for the thing, it is that thing," for in the "symbolic equation (she *is* that thing) the verb 'to be' closes spaces opened by the verbs 'seem' or 'feel'—by the action of play and just pretend" (pp. 94–95). Play is the means by which both mother and child negotiate her object use by the child, and in this distinguishing of the mother from her object use, she becomes present as a subject to the child. The identification *with* the mother that characterizes symbolic equation can be negated by the simultaneous process of identification *of* the mother teased out in symbolic play. Play allows for, as outlined by Benjamin, the coexistence of the fantasy of maternal omnipotence (the mother-object) and the mother's subjective difference as a woman. The fantasy of maternal omnipotence and the mother as a woman co-exist in reality, and the tension between the two needs to be negotiated rather than idealistically reaching for the complete obviation of object use (Benjamin, 1995, pp. 85–86). Correspondingly, the preponderance of "like" and "as" in McGuckian's work links us to a parallel register on which the lyric "I" and the apostrophic "you" realign in a constellation of variable relationships. Accordingly, a tension between the poem's formal use as an aesthetic object for the reader and the interrupting co-presence of

²Jacqueline Rose's (2003) beautiful essay "Of Knowledge and Mothers: On the Work of Christopher Bollas" works with and yet also gently challenges and complicates the trope and figure of the mother in the work of Bollas. In: *On Not Being Able to Sleep: Psychoanalysis and the Modern World*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, pp. 149–167.

the mother is established and gives the poetry its particular and precarious energy. In "Porcelain Bells," a poem dedicated to McGuckian's mother, the speaker addresses the mother thus: "There is a closeness of many lights in you,/like stars moving forward meaningfully" (McGuckian, 1994b, pp. 14–19). "Closeness" is linked to "moving forward meaningfully" by the simile marker "like," suggesting a symbolic register on which the "many lights in [her]" can be "declined" into many modes of presence for her beyond her formal object use. If the mother is not experienced as a subject through this play, then the child continues to see the world *through* her and not *with* her. Thus, McGuckian's readers feel what it is "like" being "inside" the holding environment of her poetry, to "see through her", but are concurrently invited by the interruptions of maternal co-presence to "see" her:

In the beginning I was no more
 Than a rising and falling mist
 You could see through without seeing [McGuckian, 1991, pp. 107–108].

Although "moving forward meaningfully" suggests moving onto an intersubjective register on which the mother can also be "seen," where the covalency of subjects can be negotiated and recognized, "moving forward meaningfully" is also interrupted when aim-driven arrival at a "meaning" is frustrated by the presence of an/(m)other. This is an interruption into an overdetermined discursive system that needs to be broken open in order to rethink the possibilities of subjective experience. To encounter a McGuckian poem is also to have syntax, trains of thought, formal rules interrupted for us through her idiosyncratic use of punctuation, itself an interruption of time.³ In this way, her work actively interrupts and frustrates "answers" and provides instead a sensory experiential phenomenology of co-being in which "the forward thrust of our lives" is interfered with (Baraitser, 2009, p. 73). McGuckian's "interruptions" of grammar, the linguistic marker of time, echo what Baraitser (2009) argues is the "fundamental change" in "a mother's experience of her temporal being" (p. 74). In "Something like a Wind," the speaker wishes to coax the lips of the "single line," ("your lips were always a single line of time/Flowing through a single place") of the flow of time apart:

they
 Fastened the years together, when I would like
 To have prised them ever so gently apart [McGuckian, 1994a, p. 52].

The lips closed together in a single line of time are opened when McGuckian's work interrupts a poetics bound around the univocal lyric "I," a singular voice that is understood paradoxically as individual yet universal. Arguably the haunted lyric "I" is enabled by repressing a fragmented, interrupting maternal specificity, leading to the illusory nonfemale "universality" noted by Rich. A maternal interruption creates, as Baraitser (2009) points out, "a 'between' or 'among' in an otherwise undifferentiated continuum" (p. 68), which, as Baraitser goes on, "paradoxically . . . gives rise to something . . . and reveals the taken-for-granted background of experience" (p. 68). The "taken-for-granted background of experience," the maternal aesthetic, clearly

³In a 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." Elizabeth Lowry (1998), "Dream On: Review of McGuckian's *Selected Poems, Metre*, 4 (Spring/Summer), 46–53.51.

interrupts in “Venus and the Rain,” when the nominative “gibbous voice” splits into phonemic pro-vocative fractures and passes between leaves or pages, retelling the story of its own repression and interruption:

—my gibbous voice
 Passes from leaf to leaf, retelling the story
 Of its own provocative fractures [McGuckian, 1994a, p. 32].

The partially lit, gestating bulging belly of a voice is ready to split, and the split of half-hidden, protuberant moonlike sound, the mother, here resists relegation to acting as the formal device that provides the singularity of the viewpoint of the child seeking to be brought together by the formal coherence of the poem. Playing on the shared etymology of voice and vocative, we are invited to fracture the univocalism that holds the expectancy of meaning in place. She moves into the pro- vocative case, evoking “pro” as in “for,” but also as in “before” and “forward,” paradoxically anterior and yet also simultaneous while gesturing toward a changed future and addressing herself in the vocative. The now addressed mother “retells” how the transformational stories of others deprived her of a structural means to encode the co-present voices that mark her until they swelled up into a “gibbous” voice, a voice bulging with a lifetime of “unsaid” that lacked a formal apparatus. The vocative case directly addresses the maternal form of the poem, breaking up the words into fragments that, paradoxically, in chorus bring forth from partially lit gibbous wane the mother into full light. The nominative gibbous “voice” becomes (pro-) vocative, not by following the traditional syntax of the line, but because of interruptions in words themselves. Here, the mother interrupts word formation itself as phonemes are prised open to the possibility of the mother becoming the choral vocative subject of her own address in the lyrical convention that has traditionally needed her to elaborate “the grammar of another’s being.” What is ruptured, broken, cleft apart is the formal requirement that the mother remain as “taken-for-granted background” in order to transform others. Here, we are invited into another mode of relating, passing from page to page, this retelling of the story of her own interruptions and interventions into a closed system of meaning highlights the “pro-vocative fractures” “that come to interrupt us, to call us into a new relation with ourselves” (Baraitser, 2009, p. 89). What is more, we are invited not only to risk in Bollas’s (1992) words “going through the processional moment provided by an object’s integrity” (p. 59) but also to encounter “the ghosts of others who have affected [us].” In other words, we are challenged to name, see, and hear the mother who haunts aesthetic experience.

REFERENCES

- Baraitser, L. (2009). *Maternal Encounters: the Ethics of Interruption*. Hove, UK and New York, NY: Routledge.
- Benjamin, J. (1995). *Like Subjects Love Objects: Essays On Recognition and Sexual Difference*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Bollas, C. (1987). *The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known*. London, UK: Free Association Book.
- . (1992). *Being a Character: Psychoanalysis and Self-Experience*. New York, NY: Hill and Wang.
- Gelpi, A. & Charlesworth Gelpi, B. (1975). *Adrienne Rich’s Poetry and Prose: Poems, Prose, Reviews and Criticism*. London, UK, and New York, NY: Norton, 1993.
- Marcuse, H. (1969). *An Essay on Liberation*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- McGuckian, M. (1991). *Marconi’s Cottage*. Oldcastle, Ireland: The Gallery Press.

- . (1994a.) *Captain Lavender*. Oldcastle, Ireland: The Gallery Press.
- . (1994b.) *Venus and the Rain*. Oldcastle, Ireland: The Gallery Press.
- . (1995). The dream language of Fergus. In: *Ballycastle Beach*. Oldcastle, Ireland: The Gallery Press, pp. 48–49.
- Rich, A. (1976). *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. Norton, 1986.
- Riddick, S. (1989). *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Rose, J. (2003). *On Not Being Able to Sleep: Psychoanalysis and the Modern World*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

AUTHOR BIO

Moynagh Sullivan, Ph.D., lectures in English Literature at National University of Ireland–Maynooth; was the Fulbright Scholar in Irish Studies at University of California, Berkeley (2009); and has published extensively in Irish and Gender Studies.