Medbh McGuckian:
The Poetics of Exemplarity

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For Cassilda - is leatsa mo chroí go deo
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INTRODUCTION

She has an extraordinary mind: I think she forgets nothing, and yet she reads enormously: but it’s not chaos. It’s just as though the creative intelligence brooded above the mass.¹

Due to the fact that her mind’s looking-glass not only reflects, but transmutes to its own purposes, all that it receives, Medbh McGuckian, author of twelve collections of poetry, has the rare ability to transform dreary, time-rubbed words into phrases which enliven the spirit with the first-timeness of poetic thinking. However, when reading her work, reviewers are often made to feel like puppies barking at the Sphinx. For instance, puzzled by the apparent gnomic tendencies of her first collection, The Flower Master (1982), Robin Lane Fox stated that it was ‘exotic in its imagery and impenetrable in its reference’.² Kevin T. McEneaney concurred, observing that the poetry’s ‘obscure logic’ created ‘unnecessary confusions’.³ Reviewers of her second collection, Venus and the Rain (1984), tended to follow suit: Aidan Matthews lamented that the poems had a propensity to ‘escape the reader’; Nick Rowe complained that the collection was characterised by the ‘dark speak of riddle’; and fellow-poet James Simmons went so far as to say that the collection was ‘a salutary joke by one who hates the excesses of reviewers or literary critics or bad poetry and knows she can elicit rave reviews by writing an alluring book of nonsense’.⁶ Indeed, her poetry continues in many quarters to be read as ‘private and inward-turning, non-rational, built upon the inaccessible logic of dream and subconscious associations’. The critical reflex here stems not only from a belief that poetry must possess the clarity of prose, a mindset that resists the ambiguities that arise from poetry built on convoluted syntax and a non-standard collocation of words, but also from a failure to discern any coherent rationale behind her poems’ construction. Consequently, it is still

² Robin Lane Fox, ‘Poetry Now’, Financial Times 8 January 1983. McGuckian Papers, Special Collections Department, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University, MSS 770, Box 35 Folder 2.
a critical commonplace to describe her poetry as ‘obscure’, a term rarely used in approbation with regards to her oeuvre and, as Patrick Grant has argued, ‘the future reputation of McGuckian’s work as a whole might well depend on whether or not the critical consensus is that she provides mainly alluring enigmas […] or that there is a key to these enigmas, releasing a coherence that readers find illuminating and not just arbitrary’.

The aim of this study is to provide one such key to her work by paying close attention to her own stated method of composition: ‘I never write just blindly. I never sit down without an apparatus. I always have a collection of words. It’s like a bird building a nest: I gather the materials over the two weeks, or whatever and I keep a notebook or a diary for the words which are happening to me and occurring to me’. Prior to constructing her poetic texts, McGuckian reads a number of biographical studies, critical works or diaries by other authors and keeps a record of phrases that appeal to her in one of her notebooks. ‘What you look for in the texts are images,’ she says, ‘striking combinations of maybe two or three unusual words, esoteric vocabulary; in other words, the poetry which is there, embedded in what people write and say, and what they themselves quote from’. She then makes a selection from this list and arranges the words in two columns on the top half of a page. The first draft of a poem is then composed on the lower half of this page, with each phrase being cancelled out once it is selected. Recognising that the poet is engaging in an intertextual practice led me to form a fundamental working hypothesis, namely that the tracking down of her sources could shine some light on the intricate workings of her poems and open up new pathways into her oeuvre. That process has not been easy and there were times over the past twelve years when I became unhealthily attracted to rooftops (the parapet and the drop), with a gentle, almost articulate murmur beckoning me downwards. A painstaking sift through the manuscripts, notebooks and letters kept in the Special Collections Department at Emory University provided the clues as to the provenance of her literary borrowings. For example, there is an overdue books’ reminder from the Linen Hall Library dated 22 July 1998 asking for the return of *Jane Austen: A Life* (by David Nokes) and *The Boys: Triumph over Adversity* (by Martin Gilbert). Reading these texts together, I found they were sources for ‘The Frost Fair’. Similarly, a bibliographical annotation written at the back of a notebook—‘Amanda Haight, Akhmatova’—yielded the source for

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11 McGuckian Papers, Box 11 Folder 1 (Correspondence May-July 1998).
‘Calling Canada’. The majority of the sources were found by analysing the word-lists themselves. Often there were dates recorded that indicated to which period the source was referring, and proper names narrowed the search parameters, as did the lexis used. Sometimes, thankfully, the details were explicit. For instance, two of the items in the list used for ‘The Moses Room’ read as follows: ‘The first recorded Ulster Casement was Hugh’; ‘Look well on this man, because he carried in himself the whole story of Ireland. Learn the secret of this man, and you have learnt the secret of Ireland’ (Shaw Desmond). With such an attributed quotation, it was then relatively easy to hone in on the correct biography of Roger Casement used for the poem.

The methodology adopted throughout this monograph has come under criticism. Leontia Flynn, a wonderful poet in her own right and a dedicated McGuckian scholar, has argued, referring to a number of articles that I have published, that ‘while offering a glimpse on to bewildering intertextual vistas, and a commentary on its own forms, the meaning continues to elude us as far as interpretation of McGuckian’s individual poems is concerned’. I remain both suspicious and sceptical of any such singularity (‘the meaning’), and I would contend that a close inspection of the poems’ sources and a subsequent reading of them in light of the intertextual relations can provide meanings which readers might otherwise miss and resolve some of the reviewers’ confusion about the texts’ intelligibility, all without closing off the texts from further analysis. One such example is ‘The Over Mother’, a poem dismissed vociferously as unintelligible by Patrick Mason: ‘I’m not sure I can think of a better example of sheer pretentiousness in contemporary poetry. Are we really supposed to guess what “the sealed hotel” means, what kind of “passion / exhausts itself at the mouth”, or what “the underloved body” refers to? Are her critics the “cleverly dead and vertical ones” she apparently insults?’ Reading the poem in light of its intertexts and the context in which it was written can help dispel its apparent opacity:

13 McGuckian and Nuala Archer, Two Women, Two Shores (Baltimore, Maryland, 1989), 21.
15 McGuckian Papers, Box 30 Folder 5: Notebooks: 2 Notebooks with fragments of poetry.
17 McGuckian, ‘The Over Mother’, Captain Lavender (Oldcastle, 1994), 64.
The poem's locus is ironically depicted as a ‘sealed hotel’, a temporary place of residence bereft of the usual trappings of luxury and ease associated with a hotel; here, the location is clearly a contained space wherein freedom of movement is curtailed. At the time of writing, McGuckian was teaching poetry classes to the inmates of the Maze prison and much of Captain Lavender, the collection from which the poem is taken, is written in response to the prisoners’ conditions. The inmates, ‘handled / as if they were furniture’, are at the mercy of their jailor (the poem’s ‘Over Mother’). Referring to the prisoners depicted throughout the collection, McGuckian states: ‘I just wanted to ring the changes on their still being in a cage. They had freedom. […] In their own world they had their own private republic, their own Gaeltacht’. Such freedom, however, is tempered not only by the poem’s overriding sense of enclosure, but by the theatricalised nature of communication which takes place therein: with ‘play kisses’ and ‘shallowised night letters’, all is covert, potentially superficial, and unreal. As the poem’s main intertext—the biography of Anne Sexton by Diane Middlebrook—suggests, there is a distinction to be made between “a human relationship” and “a letter relationship between humans” in which “words can fly out of your heart (via the fingers) and no one really need live up to them” (M, 184, my italics). Indeed, the speaker is left asking ‘what you has spoken?’ Selfhood is occluded and true expression is curtailed in this environment; as McGuckian stated in an interview, “[t]he letters are “leaky” because they are censored and “shallowised” because they cannot be deep”. In contrast to the lack of agency depicted in the opening stanza (‘handled / as if they were furniture’), the poet concludes the third and final stanza by wishing that the poem’s addressee would ‘look to me / as if I could give you wings’. Both similes are taken from Elaine Feinstein’s biography of Lawrence. The first refers to the rough, intrusive treatment meted out by
an institution (the military) which results in making Lawrence desire ‘to have wings, only wings and to fly away’ \((F, 160)\). While the ‘wings’ here are physical ones (those of an airplane), the simile at the poem’s conclusion is taken from a different part of the biography which details how Lawrence once tutored William Henry Hocking, a young farmer more used to working with his hands than engaging in the pursuits of the mind: in a letter to Barbara Low, Lawrence writes that ‘[h]e looks to me as if I could suddenly give him wings—and it is a trouble and a nuisance’ \((F, 148)\). In contrast to Lawrence, McGuckian welcomes the opportunity to educate and encourage the intellectual curiosity of her charges. By providing poetry classes for the prisoners, she adopts a nurturing, tutelary role, that of an enabling ‘Over Mother’ who can facilitate intellectual freedom which allows them to rise above their present physical constraints.

However, one can read ‘The Over Mother’ in quite a different way. The ‘house’ in a McGuckian poem is, in the words of the poet, ‘probably the poem itself […] or a symbol for the world of the poem’.\(^22\) One could argue that the poem is ‘the sealed hotel’, a place in which she handles her literary exemplars ‘as if they were furniture’, where passion ‘exhausts itself at the mouth’: citing from the biography of Lawrence here, that text is sampled and then dropped in favour of the next exemplar. Yet one could argue that McGuckian uses her poem as a protest against patriarchal restrictions and as a means of asserting her words’ abilities to ‘fly out from your climate of unexpectation’. The latter phrase is taken from Middlebrook’s biography which cites Anne Sexton as an example of someone who benefitted from ‘a social experiment involving women’, namely the setting up of the Radcliffe Institute whose programme was designed to “harness the talents of intellectually displaced women” \((M, 144)\). The Institute’s founder, May Bunting, had contended that ‘many well-educated women in the Boston area were ready, after raising families, to return to full-time intellectual or artistic work but struggling for opportunity in a “climate of unexpectation”’ \((M, 144)\). The ‘vertical audience’ sought by McGuckian is symptomatic of the poet’s assertion of her own authority and of her desire to move outwards from the private realm into the public since the phrase refers to ‘the “vertical audience” of peers living and dead, measurable in the tables of contents of influential anthologies’ \((M, 332)\). In many respects, then, the text can be read as a declaration of originality and as a protest against critics like Mason.

Knowledge of a poem’s source can also lend added depth and significance to a text which has been generally ‘understood’ by critics and which has been favourably reviewed. ‘The Hollywood Bed’\(^23\) is one such poem:

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\(^{23}\) McGuckian, ‘The Hollywood Bed’, \textit{The Flower Master and Other Poems} (Oldcastle, 1993), 24. This version is being used as it has been revised slightly since its first
We narrow into the house, the room, the bed,
Where sleep begins its shunting. You adopt
Your mask, your intellectual cradling of the head,
Neat as notepaper in your creaseless
Envelope of clothes, while I lie crosswise,
Imperial as a favoured only child,
Calmed by sagas of how we lay like spoons
In a drawer, till you blew open
My tightened bud, my fully-buttoned housecoat,
Like some Columbus mastering
The saw-toothed waves, the rows of letter ms.

Now the headboard is disturbed
By your uncomfortable skew, your hands
Like stubborn adverbs visiting your face,
Or your shoulder, in your piquancy of dreams,
The outline that if you were gone,
Would find me in your place.

Analysing this poem, Elmer Kennedy-Andrews argues that ‘[s]leep unromantically “shunts” the couple apart into separate, private worlds’ and that the poem ‘emphasises sexual difference in describing their contrasting sleeping patterns’. A surface reading certainly confirms this contention. During sleep, the lovers’ positions are markedly separate. Although the speaker implies that there is still the potential for communication, employing, as she does, the trope of ‘notepaper’, she depicts her partner as a closed text, cold and forbidding, wrapped in the ‘envelope of clothes’. In light of the poem’s intertext, Samuel Dunkell’s Sleep Positions, we discover that the speaker envisages her partner as ‘the Envelope man’, one of Dunkell’s former patients, who each night found himself undergoing a complex pre-sleep ritual: ‘The covers on the bed had to be tucked in so there wasn’t the least crease showing, and the sheet had to be pulled up as tightly as possible, like a veritable swaddling cloth. Into this envelope of bedclothes he would insert himself as neatly as a piece of notepaper’. The self-enforced ritual indicates that the individual is ontologically insecure; his preparations act as a defence mechanism and are symptomatic of a neurotic desire for total control. As Dunkell states, the patient ‘was reassuring

26 Ibid., 13.
himself that the day world, the ordinary waking world of work, of social and other relationships in which he took part, would be there during sleep and that he would find it still there when he awoke in the morning’. The male figure’s adoption of the specific sleep positions depicted in the poem support this view and suggest both a lack of true intimacy and a fear of the Other: firstly, sleeping with the face buried in his hands is a sign of mourning and a fear of loss; secondly, the grasping of the shoulder suggests either that he needs ‘the warmth of someone else’ or that he ‘has to hold [himself] together’. The sleep positions are neither arbitrarily designated nor neutral in their meaning. As Dunkell’s study indicates, body language during sleep is expressive of a couple’s feelings towards one another and, like ‘the adjectives and adverbs used to give a simple sentence additional colour and significance, the small parts of the body often suggest a more intricate meaning’. The speaker’s own sleep position is thus equally revealing: ‘Imperial as a favoured only child’ implies the assumption of the ‘Royal position’ (sleeping on one’s back), indicative of someone who feels themselves ‘to be the king or queen of their sleep—as well as the day universe’. Such an individual, according to Dunkell, was usually a favoured child or someone who always has been the centre of attention. The confidence and sense of secure proprietorship are maintained in the face of rejection by her partner only through the recollection of ‘sagas of how we lay like spoons / In a drawer’. The sustaining memory, one which is perhaps fictional given the mythic propensity of ‘sagas’, is of their former sleeping position whereby their bodies nestled against each other ‘like two spoons in a drawer’, one described by Dunkell as making possible ‘maximum physical and emotional intimacy during sleep’. However, such solace is broken and the power relations reversed: in the latter half of the first stanza, as Kennedy-Andrews states, ‘the act of sex marks a transference of power from female (‘imperial’) to male (‘Columbus mastering’). The wearing of the housecoat in bed is, as Dunkell describes, one of the manoeuvres and stratagems employed to keep a partner at a distance: ‘One woman, who wished to avoid sex with her husband, slept in a fully buttoned housecoat’. Such a strategy fails here, and the poem makes use of the rhetoric of rape inherent in colonial voyage narratives to depict sex as a violent usurpation of self: the male, as ‘Columbus’,

27 Ibid., 14.
28 See Dunkell, Sleep Positions, 73.
29 Ibid., 71.
30 Ibid., 64.
31 See Dunkell, Sleep Positions, 55.
32 Ibid., 89–90.
33 Ibid., 108.
is a discoverer and conqueror of virgin territory. Moreover, not only do the ‘saw-toothed waves, the rows of letter m’s’ suggest an image of imperialist aggression, they also imply, via the source text, the male’s penetration and mastery of the female figure’s own dream world.35 Indeed, that fear is inscribed in the text through the use of ‘m’s: the poet’s own initials have been traversed. What follows, then, is a threat if not an outright declaration of independence: if the male figure departs, his place would be supplanted by the female figure.

By selecting, modifying and juxtaposing quotations to form a poetic text, McGuckian is engaging in a form of ‘appropriative writing’, a genre whose practitioners include John Ashbery and Walter Abish, amongst others, and whose methodology has been outlined as follows: ‘rather than weave obvious quotations into his or her words, the writer becomes a kind of scribe, transferring small or large passages, usually without attribution or other signals that these words were written by someone else’.36 However, McGuckian’s contribution to the genre is different from that of the other writers in terms of both scale and function. A work like Abish’s ‘99: The New Meaning’, which juxtaposes 99 excerpts, each from a different novel and each ‘from a page bearing that same […] mystically significant number’,37 is really composition by mosaic organisation rather than an authored piece. Abish declares from the outset that the work is ‘undertaken in a playful spirit—not actually “written” but orchestrated’38 so that the reader is aware from the outset that each segment is a quotation. Similarly, a poem like John Ashbery’s ‘The Dong with the Luminous Nose’ is foregrounded as a cento (‘a cloak made of patches’), a classical form whereby the poet constructs a new poem from lines taken from other works. Crucially, recognition is central to the cento’s effect since not only is there an implied tribute being made to the poet’s precursors, but the reader is meant to appreciate the poet’s skill in manipulating existing lines. In McGuckian’s case, the quotations are not recognisable, nor does she openly acknowledge their presence. However, while the relations between poem and source text may be difficult to discern, they are not intended to be arbitrary, as can be seen by the following list, marked ‘Biography’, included in McGuckian’s papers:39

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35 Just prior to REM sleep, an electroencephalograph represents the brain’s electrical impulses as a ‘burst of saw-toothed waves, like a row of the printed letter m’. See Dunkell, *Sleep Positions*, 33.
36 Raphael Rubinstein, ‘Gathered, Not Made: A Brief History of Appropriative Writing’, *The American Poetry Review* 28.2 (March-April, 1999): 31. (I should note here that the opening sentences of this introduction were written using Medbh McGuckian’s compositional method.)
38 Ibid., 9.
1. Felicia’s Café woman poet
2. Princess of Parallelograms. poet.
3. Isba Song, women poet
4. The Sitting. painter
5. Vanessa’s Bower. Male writer/lover
6. Heiress. Historical
7. Aphrodisiac. lover/historical
8. Katydid. Historical
9. Mrs McGregor. woman writer
10. Oak-Leaf Camps. woman writer
11. Time before you. poet
12. Coleridge. poet
13. Charlotte’s Delivery—woman writer
14. Road 32—woman painter
15. Gigot Sleeves—woman poet
16. Moses Room—Irish historical figure

Each title is accompanied by a brief indication of the writer or historical figure featured in each one; hence, the sources themselves are envisaged as integral to the poem’s meaning. Indeed, in an interview McGuckian intimates that the link between source and quoting text is not broken after the compositional process is completed: ‘I like to find a word living in a context and then pull it out of its context. It’s like they are growing in a garden and I pull them out of the garden and put them into my garden, and yet I hope they take with them some of their original soil, wherever I got them’.

While McGuckian’s formulation describing her poetic praxis indicates an ongoing relation between the quoting and quoted texts, it also suggests both literary theft and originality at one and the same time: the words are taken from someone else’s ‘garden’ and are subsequently planted in hers (the italicised possessive adjective emphasises this notion of ownership). To what extent is a McGuckian text ‘original’? Within poststructuralist thinking, it is difficult to attribute ‘originality’ to any text since it is ‘woven entirely with citations, references, echoes, cultural—languages […] antecedent or contemporary, which cut across it through and through in a vast stereophony’. Barthes argues, for instance, that all words accrue meanings and connotations, and that a text is merely ‘a fabrication of quotations, resulting from a thousand sources

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of culture’. However, leaving that general argument aside, it must be noted that a McGuckian poem is very rarely a transcription of large quotations which are left unmodified, as if they were ‘found poems’; rather, she alters the (relatively short) quotations, stitches them together to form a new whole, in a manner akin to a collage or patchwork quilt. As she says in one interview, ‘I just take an assortment of words, though not exactly at random, and I fuse them. It’s like embroidery’. She does so without any anxiety of influence. After all, as Emerson claimed: ‘All minds quote. Old and new make the warp and woof of every moment. There is no thread that is not a twist of these two strands. By necessity, by proclivity and by delight, we all quote’. What is crucial in McGuckian’s case is the element of modification, a process which secures her place amongst T. S. Eliot’s pantheon of ‘good poets’: ‘bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different’. A good example to demonstrate this is the title poem from her fourth collection, *Marconi’s Cottage*, the opening stanzas of which are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>McGuckian’s Original</th>
<th>Sentence Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>small &amp; watchful (<em>BF</em>, 357); a lighthouse (<em>BF</em>, 356); pure clear place (<em>BF</em>, 357)</td>
<td>Small and watchful as a lighthouse,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no particular childhood (<em>BF</em>, ix); as if she had spoken in you (<em>BF</em>, 22); dry, dry, the words (<em>BF</em>, 26)</td>
<td>A pure clear place of no particular childhood,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bitten (<em>BF</em>, 312); sea-fostered (<em>BF</em>, 13)</td>
<td>It is as if the sea had spoken in you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>this British spring (<em>BF</em>, 81); there seemed only this one way of happening (<em>BF</em>, 86)</td>
<td>And then the words had dried.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And a poem to prove it happened (<em>BF</em>, 78)</td>
<td>Bitten and fostered by the sea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And by the British spring,</td>
<td>And by the British spring,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There seems only this one way of happening.</td>
<td>There seems only this one way of happening.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And a poem to prove it has happened.</td>
<td>And a poem to prove it has happened.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Now I am close enough, I open my arms
To your castle-thick walls, I must learn
To use your wildness when I lock and unlock
Your door weaker than kisses.

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43 McGuckian, in Gillian Somerville-Arjat and Rebecca E. Wilson (eds), *Sleeping with Monsters: Conversations with Scottish and Irish Women Poets* (Dublin, 1990), 2.
The source for this poem is Anne Stevenson’s biography of Sylvia Plath which presents ‘an objective account of how this exceptionally gifted girl was hurled into poetry by a combination of biographical accident and inflexible ideals and ambitions’ (BF, xi). Readers would be hard-pressed to identify the source from the thirty-four quotations selected to make up this poem: they are very short, they lack overt reference to Plath, and the relation between them in the biography is rarely proximal. As such, this poem can be read as a direct address to ‘Marconi’s Cottage’, the summer dwelling purchased by the poet and her husband in Ballycastle, Co. Antrim. At the mercy of the elements, the house in the first stanza is depicted as acutely vulnerable and eternally vigilant; such watchfulness, however, does not simply stem from a self-protective urge since the initial simile (‘as a lighthouse’) indicates a deliberate openness to the sea. The emphasis on land-sea communication is apt given the poem’s title (and the name of the cottage) since Marconi’s assistant, George Kemp, came to the Northern Irish coast in 1898 to see if he could receive wireless signals at Ballycastle from the lighthouse on Rathlin Island. While the house acts as an antenna, or listening post, receiving communications (‘as if the sea had spoken in you’), the parley between sea and land has failed, or at least has resulted in a loss (the sea’s words have ‘dried’). The second stanza presents an acceptance that this is how the communication must occur. The relation between the house and the sea is again depicted as ambivalent: it is at once destructive (‘bitten’), and nurturing (‘fostered’). Indeed, this stanza acts as a gloss on the first and the closing lines in each refer to communication. Thus, the influence of the sea on the house is akin to the relation between muse and poet: they are both being inspired (literally, being breathed upon). Indeed, as Patricia Boyle Haberstroh has pointed out, ‘[v]oices coming over telephones and answering machines’ recur throughout the collection and ‘numerous poems suggest an analogy between Marconi’s wireless communication and the work of the poet and artist’. That being the case, there is a suggestion that the resulting ‘poem’ is merely a trace or compromised translation of the initial influence. Yet as the poem progresses, the speaker learns to open herself to the influence of the cottage and tries to control and harness its wild energies (‘lock and unlock / Your door’).

McGuckian has read Stevenson’s text and chosen words which speak to and for her, and this is often how she relates to the source material: ‘I forget the texts totally because I have to—like a diving board—otherwise I would be left up there. They provide the means, but my dive is each time my own skin into the world.’ Thus, one can read the poem without any knowledge of Plath’s

48 Shane Alcobia-Murphy and Richard Kirkland, ‘Interview with Medbh McGuckian’,
biography. However, it is not wholly true to say that the poet has ‘totally’ forgotten the source text. Plath is acknowledged by McGuckian as a ‘significant influence’ and the poem attests to this. The text’s addressee can be read as Plath herself with the poet learning to use her ‘wildness’ in her own work. The lines contain Plath’s biography in miniature: the psychic disorder which stemmed from ‘no particular childhood’; the way she viewed herself as being ‘sea-fostered’; her belief in forces beyond human control; her fascination with death which brought out an intense creativity in her. Yet what the poem ultimately celebrates is the successful encounter between two very different poets: ‘you are all I have gathered / To me of otherness’. McGuckian learns to appreciate and use Plath’s influence; as the speaker pleads in the final stanza, ‘Let me have you for what we call / Forever’.

As in ‘Marconi’s Cottage’, McGuckian often self-reflexively signals the presence of an intertext. In ‘The Carrying Ring’, for example, she alters a passage from Graham Bird’s study of William James to foreground the way in which a biography can be a rich source of inspiration:

‘Just as the seen room is also a field of consciousness, so the conceived or recollected room is also a state of mind’ (HJ, 102) As the seen room is also the field Of a biography, as the conceived or recollected Room is the beginning of a life.

A biography can act as the stimulus for a text and the contents are as real and immediate to the poet as her surroundings. Similarly highlighting the intertextual provenance of her poem in ‘The Word-Thrower’, the speaker states:

‘heard with surprise my voice talking to the man’ (DM, 278); from the pillow (DM, 265); ‘I had let him swim out to sea’ (DM, 421); ‘bitten by the past’ (DM, 364) I heard my voice talking to the dream-voice from the pillow; I let the days overlap and out to sea, as though bitten by the past.

The lines, taken from Margaret Forster’s biography of Daphne Du Maurier, signal McGuckian’s preoccupation with listening to, and re-using, past voices; indeed, the title itself indicates that the poet is engaging in a form of literary

\[\text{in Alcobia-Murphy and Kirkland, } \textit{The Poetry of Medbh McGuckian}, 201–2.\]

49 McGuckian, ‘Uncharted Territory’: An Interview with Medbh McGuckian’, unpublished interview by Michaela Schrage-Früh, September 2004. The interview has been uploaded onto the ‘Medbh McGuckian’ group on Facebook.


ventriloquism. By contrast, in ‘The Ballybogy Road’ the relationship is more equal, with the two poets working together to produce the text:

you’re meeting all of him (OP, vii);  Meeting almost all of him, 
drawing them a little further along the drawing him a little farther 
road (OP, viii);  along the road that can be danced in, 
the shadow which brims a room (OP, 215);  his daily shadow brims the room 
something we make together with […] our prints it back like something 
lips (OP, 14)  we make together with our lips.

The encounter between literary exemplar and contemporary poet is staged here, and the resulting poem is ‘something / we make together with our lips’. The source text is particularly apt in this instance since Paz’s series of essays focus on his own sense of indebtedness to previous writers. Likewise, in ‘The Mirror Game’, a poem about the poet finding her own voice, the speaker identifies with another person in an enabling fashion:

Inviting the listener to make the journey to inhabit […] inviting me to make the journey 
us (V/B, 228); find the voice of the character and to inhabit you, to let my body change, 
let the body change accordingly (V/B, 230); let it or let it work through into voice, 
work through into voice (V/B, 230); to find your voice and let my body follow.

Thus, by staging encounters with others in her work, particularly by employing images of contact (letters, telephone calls, face-to-face conversations and human touch), the poet indicates her use of sources.

In ‘Venus and the Sun’, for instance, she writes about Jean Cocteau’s influence on her work (using Francis Steegmuller’s biography):54

‘he returns […] as if from a seashore’ (JC, 42)  When I return from poetry as from a sea-shore
‘the streets of dream’ (JC, 366); whatever it To the streets of dream, what is left on waking
was he was full of, naming itself (JC, 350); Is whatever I was full of, naming itself:
‘There is a colour walking around, with people ‘A colour walks around, with people hidden in it’.
hidden in it’ (JC, 315);

54 McGuckian, ‘Venus and the Sun’, Marconi’s Cottage, 81. The poem is cited on the right. The source text is Francis Steegmuller, Cocteau: A Biography (Basingstoke, 1970), and the quotations are marked as ‘JC’.
was meant to mean nothing (JC, 221); ‘lifted
his ten fingers like a fence between us’ (JC, 430)
‘snow that doesn’t fall’ (JC, 145); ‘I feel them
through the envelope’ (JC, 251); touching
glove to glove (JC, 304); ‘sound-curves’ (JC,
304); shorn of all words (JC, 188);
““humming” you with my eyes and mouth’

A summer that was meant to mean nothing
Lifted his ten fingers like a fence between us
Or snow that does not fall. I felt him through
An envelope, a glove touching a glove.
His sound-curves so quivering, I was shorn
Of all words, and hummed him with my eyes
And mouth.

The images in the second stanza—‘fingers like a fence’, ‘felt him through / An envelope’, ‘a glove touching a glove’—indicate communication across boundaries; though unable to touch the precursor directly, his presence is nevertheless felt. The poem’s opening images are themselves quotations acknowledging the influence of and admiration for a fellow artist. The first is from a telegraph sent by Rainer Maria Rilke in 1926 to his friend Madame Klossowska: “Make Cocteau feel how warmly I admire him. […] He is the only one whom poetry admits to the realm of myth, and he returns from its radiance aglow, as from a seashore” (JC, 42). The second is Cocteau’s own recorded debt to his friend Barbette (Vander Clyde), a trapeze artist and female impersonator: Cocteau was full of praise for his performances, stating that his act seemed to take place “in the streets of dream” (JC, 366). That emphasis on indebtedness and tribute-paying is continued throughout the poem. In the third stanza, for instance, the speaker says that she ‘hummed him with my eyes / And mouth’. The inference here is of a willful communion whereby the speaker incorporates the male figure into herself; McGuckian may be ‘shorn / Of all words’, but art can be made with someone else’s influence. The quotation itself refers to Cocteau’s own tribute to Valentine Gross, an artist and set designer. In 1916 he writes to her, declaring: “My image of you, so sweet, so substantial, stands out against the ronde of the Rite like a ringlet of George Sand’s hair uncurling in a Chopin waltz. This to make you understand that you are helping me, pursuing me, like a musical motif. […] I am ‘humming’ you with my eyes and my mouth” (JC, 158). However, as much as the poem records the poet’s debt to a precursor, it is also manifestly about poetry. As in ‘Marconi’s Cottage’, the movement from sea-shore to land is here an objective correlative for the transition between inspiration and composition. This time, however, there is no suggestion of loss or inexactitude; rather, there is a confidence that the preoccupations of the dream-world, or the unconscious, can successfully find linguistic approximation in her text. Thus, ‘what is left on waking / Is whatever I was full of, naming itself’.
Much of McGuckian’s poetry tends to contain a commentary on *poësis*, informing the reader of how she conceives the work. In ‘Calling Canada’, for example, poetry is a means of cutting into ‘other people’s dreams’:

she talks as if to a daughter (A, 126); into the seething darkness (A, 133); her ‘striped notebook’ (A, 30); just a dress over her bare body (A, 7); ‘for no reason’ (A, 171); ‘cut into dreams’ (A, 9); telephoned again, ‘Paris style’ (A, 109)

I talk to the darkness as if to a daughter, Or something that once pressed from inside Like a street of youth. My striped notebook Is just a dress over my body, so I will Waken At a touch, or for no reason at all. In it I learn how to cut into other people’s dreams, How to telephone them Paris-style […]

While ‘to cut into’ may connote (unwanted) intrusion, the poem suggests otherwise. For McGuckian, creating a poem is an involved and involving process: having read biographies detailing the lives of others, she (figuratively) cuts extracts from the texts and then consciously or unconsciously relates the experiences recorded in her notebook to her own life. As she states, ‘these separate phrases from different places are fused together in a paradoxical, contradictory way to give or get at some truth of something in my life’.

Normally, such an intertextual practice would establish the relation between precursor and quoting poet as one of teacher-pupil or parent-child, with the precursor always inhabiting the more powerful role. In ‘Calling Canada’, however, McGuckian is the ‘mother’ speaking to ‘a daughter’ and she is the one who is figured as actively communicating. This is a necessary (psychological and poetic) strategy to assert the originality of one’s work. Not all writers are as secure as this. Vona Groarke, a prolific and inventive poet, wrote a letter to McGuckian (dated 28 December, 1998) expressing fulsome praise for *Shelmalier*, her new collection which had just been published. In the course of the correspondence, Groarke made a point of saying the following: ‘By the way, I was thinking of calling my second book *Other People’s Houses* and I see, by coincidence, that’s it’s a phrase you have in ‘The Sofa in the Window with Trees Outside’. (There’s intertextuality for you now, Shane Murphy!)’. While Groarke is keen to point out that she had come upon the phrase independently, McGuckian for her part has no such qualms in inhabiting ‘other people’s houses’. Indeed, not only does the phrase occur in that poem to indicate that she is taking up residence in two texts (a collection of letters by the writer Virginia Woolf, and a series of

55 The poem is cited on the right. The intertext is Amanda Haight, *Anna Akhmatova: A Poetic Pilgrimage* (New York, 1976) and is cited as ‘A’.
57 Vona Groarke, letter to McGuckian, McGuckian Papers, Box 11, Folder 3.
biographical essays by Lytton Strachey), the phrase also occurs in an earlier poem, ‘The Sudarium’, to indicate temporary residence in a biography of the painter Mark Gertler.  

While some of McGuckian’s poems do not need to be read in light of their intertexts, some seem to positively invite an intertextual approach. ‘Revival of Gathered Scents’, a text which borrows from Sei Shōnagon’s *Pillow Book*, focuses on the theme of veiled or secretive communication. The source text, written by a Lady-in-waiting to the Empress Sadako in the final decade of the tenth century, is a collection of poems, lists, observations, anecdotes and gossip. In it, we see the world through Shōnagon’s eyes: she is the agent of all her passions and all is subject to her powerful and discerning, if not subversive, gaze. She records the rituals, conventions and power struggles that take place within the Imperial Palace. One particular aspect of the text which seems to fascinate McGuckian is the ways in which communication takes place within the Imperial Palace:

Someone will tap a door with just a single finger (\textit{PB}, 84); whose beaks are still tucked under wings (\textit{PB}, 82); the woman nestling close to the blinds (\textit{PB}, 94); has received a letter in the dark (\textit{PB}, 240); a knotted letter (\textit{PB}, 240); the ink-seal on the outside was frozen (\textit{PB}, 240)

While the opening description might suggest unequal gendered subject positions, with an (assumed) imperious male declaring his presence to a woman located indoors, ‘nestling / close to the blinds’, nevertheless she is shielded from his gaze and does not invite him in as she is preoccupied with reading a missive


\textsuperscript{60} McGuckian, ‘Revival of Gathered Scents’, \textit{The Face of the Earth} (Oldcastle, 2002), 31–2.

\textsuperscript{61} Sei Shōnagon, \textit{The Pillow Book of Sei Shōnagon}, trans. Ivan Morris (New York, 1991)—referred hereafter as ‘\textit{PB}’.
Introduction

(a letter in the dark). Not only is the manner of its receipt secretive, so too are its contents: the poem simply reveals that ‘The paper white as a flower / wraps up a single petal of mountain rose’. While the letter may seem designed to frustrate all attempts at decipherment, the source text reveals that it is a coded message. When Shōnagon receives a letter from the Empress, she states: ‘There was nothing written on the paper. It had been used to wrap up a single petal of mountain rose, on which I read the words, “He who dares not speak his love”’ (PB, 164). The Empress is engaging in an intertextual game with her Lady-in-waiting as the line refers to a poem in which her intended message (a declaration of love) is to be found: ‘He who does not speak his love / Yet feels its waters seething far below, / Loves more than he who prates his every thought’ (PB, 302). Just as the reader of this ‘knotted letter’ needs to understand the code in order to decipher its meaning, so too does the reader of McGuckian’s text.

A poem which overtly declares its secretive nature is ‘Sealed Composition’,62 from her most recent collection My Love Has Fared Inland:

62 McGuckian, ‘Sealed Composition’, My Love Has Fared Inland (Oldcastle, 2008), 17. The quotations from the poem’s primary intertext, Glauco Cambon’s Dante’s Craft (Minneapolis, 1966), are cited on the left and are referred to as ‘GC’. The other intertext is The Medieval Craft of Memory, eds. Mary Carruthers and Jan M. Ziolkowski (Philadelphia, 2004)—and is hereafter referred to as ‘MC’.
Medbh McGuckian: The Poetics of Exemplarity

While ‘sealed’ connotes authoritative ratification—it bears the mark of the author to denote the text’s authenticity (and originality)—the adjective also suggests that the text is a private missive for a specific audience, hence it is closed off from all other eyes. ‘Composition’ suggests the product, the work of art itself, but the word’s definition equally calls attention to its means of production: it has been formed by combining various elements together. That these elements come from a literary exemplar is conveyed by the poem’s epigraph from Goethe, a citation which at once informs the reader of her characteristic style and of its rationale: ‘One learns only from those one loves’. There seems, then, to be a tension evoked by the title and epigraph: while the poet asserts the composition’s originality (that it comes from her), she also intimates its derivative nature. In an interview she states: ‘[t]he words are given to me […] and the authors, and the translators, especially if they’re dead, they are very aware of me using them and that they want it, they want me to make the same words live again in a new way and do things with it that carries me and marks my reading of the book and marks my learning process with them’. There is clearly no anxiety of influence here, an assertion to which the opening stanza, composed of phrases taken from Glauco Cambon’s Dante’s Craft, a study of Dante’s influence on later writers, bears testimony. In her work, McGuckian ‘tends’ to the names of dead authors and in the opening line she is in the position of Dante communing with the souls in hell. In the Inferno, Virgil ‘passes on to Dante the role of interceding for the dead with the living’ and for the dead ‘it is a little like returning to life to have the privilege of speaking to a man of flesh and blood’ (GC 112, my italics). For McGuckian and the resurrected author alike the use of the intertext provides ‘a new spinal cord’ and ‘reddens’ the throat. Of course ‘reddens’ initiates a tension whereby the use of someone else’s words can both be harmful, (‘redden’ as indicative of soreness), and life-giving (‘redden’ meaning ‘to grow ruddy with health’). There is no one way of reading the stanza, and indeed it intimates that nothing is fixed or wholly determined in her work: she aligns herself with the outlook of the Italian poet Eugenio Montale who argues that ‘dreaming and probing, seeing and testing are one in the act of poetry’ (GC 184).

The emphasis on concealment runs throughout the text: the girl is ‘cloaked’; the bride is ‘moated’; the male figure ‘snaps his helmet shut on his face’. McGuckian is tracing a particular use of the encoded message (or ‘trobar clus’) in

63 Interview with McGuckian, Marine Hotel, Ballycastle, Co. Antrim, 19 August 1996.
literature: although it initially seems as if she is referring to Dante’s employment of coded writing in which he shares ‘an ineffable sum of mental experiences’ with ‘his initiated friends’ (GC 18), as one reads the poem in light of the intertext it becomes apparent that McGuckian is alluding to Montale’s appropriation of both Dante’s style and content to encode and work through his unrequited love for Irma Brandeis, a translator and student of Dante whom he met in 1932, and who is represented in his own poetry as ‘Clizia’, a latter-day Beatrice.4 She is the ‘cloaked girl’ of the second stanza: ‘cloaked’ both literally, since this is Dante’s vision of Beatrice in the famous opening of the Vita Nuova, and figuratively, as Brandeis is figured here at several removes. The stanza records the tension between her status as a real, ‘all-too-human’ woman and as an imaginative construct, a ‘lady of the mind’. The latter is a necessary and self-protective construct: Montale conceives of her as ‘his mind’s moated bride’ because he had married someone else.

The third stanza presents a tension between the desire to communicate and the deliberate withholding of information. When McGuckian writes that the ‘seraph’s second wing’ is said to ‘reverse the needle of happiness / at the wrist’, she conjoins two quotations from very different sources. Within Dante’s schema, when love is aimed at the object of desire it is said to be ‘the needle of happiness in the compass of the soul’ (GC 63). However, McGuckian writes that this needle has been ‘reversed’; desire is directed elsewhere. There is perhaps an inference of male self-pleasuring since the ‘needle of happiness’ is reversed ‘at the wrist’. Hence, there is both a denial of the desired object and sublimation. The image of the ‘seraph’s second wing’ being ‘reversed at the wrist’ is taken from The Medieval Craft of Memory, a study of medieval memory images. The particular image referred to is a drawing from the Beinecke Library MS.416, fol.8, based on Alan of Lille’s mnemonic treatise on penance. While the first wing is the ‘self-accusing demonstration of sin’ (MC 94), the second wing is ‘reparation’, namely ‘the full execution of the penance imposed, or the appropriate rebuke and reform of sinners’ (MC 97). The wing is ‘reversed’ so that it can more easily be read and not hidden. In a stratagem that is characteristic of ‘Sealed Composition’, therefore, the reparation is openly declared (via the mnemonic), but only to those who know the code. The self-denying poet is represented as snapping ‘his helmet shut on his face’, an image interpreted by Cambon as being a ‘mask of otherness’ and ‘the price for self-isolation’ (GC 172).

The final stanza’s image of ‘going up / and down another’s staircase’ (from Dante’s Paradiso) can be taken to signify the habitation and journey through another writer’s oeuvre (Montale through Dante, McGuckian through both via

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Cambon’s critical study). But where does the journey lead? One reading suggests a narrative of arrival: ‘he’ and ‘she’ finally come together as ‘they’ ‘on the reached shore’. While ‘lips’ connotes both sensuality and communication, they are ‘dry’ and, in the intertext, ‘silent’. That the line refers to the disembarking of spirits onto ‘Purgatory beach’ (GC 92) is perhaps significant since throughout the poem the male figure has been keeping his desires at bay and attempting to atone for his sin. Hence, he has not reached Paradise nor found peace with his Beatrice.

While none of the above analyses, in their following of McGuckian ‘going up / and down another’s staircase’, actually give the impression of a poetry that is less obscure and difficult than has been previously thought, they do indicate a vibrant, thinking presence behind the texts’ construction and they give the lie to the view that her work is simply a ‘salutary joke’. However, there will always be certain barriers which cannot be overcome. My own readings of McGuckian’s poems never try to discern her specific associative contexts or work out their ‘primary meanings’. To show how difficult (if not futile) that enterprise would be, consider ‘Unused Water’ from her 1994 collection, Captain Lavender:  

| Lost ear rings (CP, 396); | Lost earrings, |
| a dash of acrid green (CP, 257); | a dash of acrid green |
| at the wrong time of year (CP, 459); | in the wrong time of year. |

| They have ripened in the night (CP, 402); | How can they have ripened |
| irreflecting (CP, 480); This died so | in the irreflecting night, |
| thin (CP, 459); hawk coloured (CP, 367); | they died so thin and hawk-coloured, |
| to match clouds (CP, 347); rapidly | like matching clouds, one drying rapidly, |
| drying (CP, 490); completely dry (CP, 358); | one completely dry. |

| opening endearment (CP, 346); | One letter’s opening endearment, |
| like August, only gentler (CP, 296); | like August’s, only gentler, |
| just awake (CP, 383); | slips a transparent skin |
| uncored (CP, 306); | over the eye just awake |
| you put down the telephone, and the | Autumn had left it uncored, |
| whole Atlantic (CP, 474) | as when you put down with the telephone |
| | the whole Atlantic. |

The poem seems to depict an overwhelming feeling of loss, of being ‘uncored’. The mind’s wound can only be salved by reaching out to the Other, thus signalling the potency of, and desire for, communication. Without such a connection, the

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speaker is left with a sense of both distance and absence, ‘as when you put down the telephone / the whole Atlantic’. The yawning gulf between speaker and addressee can be bridged by a ‘letter’s opening endearment’; signifying friendship and intimacy, the writing of the letter can salve the mind’s wound. As in previous poems, the presence of an intertext is indicated by images of communication (letter; telephone) and one could analyse the text not only in light of the source (Woolf’s letters), but also in conjunction with the surrounding poems in the collection since they too are based on the same series of letters. However, such an analysis would not come close to the primary meaning of the text (namely, McGuckian as first reader). Her commentary on the poem is worth quoting at length:

It’s a regret poem. It’s very much to do with the ovaries, and it’s a woman reaching the point where her fertility is ending. So what does a woman do with her womb when she can no longer have a child? So the ‘unused water’ is the amniotic fluid (well, it could be) — it isn’t needed anymore, yet the woman is there with all the apparatus for birth and she still goes through the rest of her life with this. It was written for a woman who had just had a hysterectomy, who is also a poet, Joan McBreen, and so it’s very much a personal poem for her, to comfort her for the loss of her womb, and to say that it’s not the loss of her poetic creativity. She did come to my house and leave an earring, but I saw those two little dangling things as the two ovaries, and the twin sides of the woman’s body was part of the generative thing. So I said ‘lost earrings’— she lost one, but I said she lost both. ‘A dash of acrid green / in the wrong time of year’: it’s like her womb has been removed surgically, which was too early, and it was painful. It was a way of talking about that. ‘How can they have ripened / in the irreflecting night’: it’s like now that she has lost the power of the ovaries, the real creativity would begin; it would now be spiritual (not) physical. Actually, in leaving, she has gained. ‘They died so thin and hawk-coloured, / like matching clouds, one drying rapidly, / one completely dry’: it’s how a woman runs down. One ovary won’t function—it’s out of synch with the other one. I was sort of trying to talk about that — one ovary would be completely bad, it wouldn’t be producing any ova, or whatever. I use the word ‘One’ again here to say ‘One letter’, meaning like a love letter or a personal letter, but also even to write one letter of the poem would be to be alive and to be producing. The one letter to begin— even to put down ‘end’, to start off again. ‘One letter’s opening endearment’: like ‘Dear’, just say ‘Dear Medbh’, write me a letter, anything, you’re still alive. ‘Like August’s, only gentler’: it’s that time of year, she is now in the August of her life, that sort of thing. ‘Slips a transparent skin / over the eye just awake: the transparent skin is like a bald skin or a membrane of some kind over something newborn, that you could wrap yourself up again in life. ‘Autumn had left uncored’: you’ve been wounded and broken up, and your centre has been dug out by an organ, like a knife. I said
‘uncored’, like an apple. ‘As when you put down the telephone / the whole Atlantic’: this was going back to the water image. When phoning someone, you think you’ve ended the conversation, but you’ve actually been in touch with an ocean; if you phone someone your voice is going across.  

Her account is both coherent and convincing as an appreciation of the text. Of course, McGuckian’s use of language and the associations each word have for her may not correspond with those of her readers. However, while he or she may often miss the full import of her words, this is no different from encountering any other poet’s work. Indeed, as George Steiner has argued, ‘No two human beings share an identical associative context’. Indeed, because that associative context is made up of ‘the totality of an individual existence’, and because it ‘comprehends not only the sum of personal memory and experience but also the reservoir of the particular subconscious’, it will not be the same for any two people. ‘There are’, he says, ‘no facsimiles of sensibility, no twin psyches. All speech forms and notations, therefore, entail a latent of realised element of individual specificity’.  

While no special pleading is required for McGuckian’s own reading of her poems, as readers we do not have to assent to her interpretation. While many of my own critical appreciations of her work are often guided by her comments in interviews and letters, they are not determined by them. My approach looks at the rationale behind and effects of her use of intertextuality. Why, for instance, does she feel the need to use Woolf as a source in the above text? In what ways does the intertext change our appreciation of the poem?  

In what follows, I wish to present pathways into McGuckian’s poetry that have thus far remained relatively untrodden. The opening three chapters focus exclusively on her use of female artistic exemplars and explore the ways in which the poet uses them to gain a sense of authority. The chapters present different ways in which McGuckian’s use of intertexts allows her to follow a feminist revisionary praxis: she inscribes within her own texts the psychodramas of female literary authorship and learns the lessons of her foremothers on how to circumvent patriarchal power. The fourth chapter, focusing on her ekphrastic texts, examines the ways in which she uses the work of artists to explore and overcome the limitations of her craft. The remaining chapters each explore different issues concerning memory, namely her engagement with past conflicts, trauma and elegiac remembrance. While each chapter is concerned with the sources behind McGuckian’s work, the intention is not to detract from the texts’ status as poetry. Indeed, the conclusion argues that her work self-reflexively presents a deeply felt belief in the primacy (and efficacy) of poetry in the modern world.

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In *Object Lessons*, the Irish poet Eavan Boland quotes approvingly from the prologue to Ralph Ellison’s novel, *Invisible Man*, and seeks to appropriate the narrator’s doctrine of covert action for her own use: his marginality, she suggests, has an inherent subversive potentiality which can be adopted to great advantage by the female Irish poet within the context of their apparent lack of canonical status.\(^1\) She argues that ‘[m]arginality within a tradition, however painful, confers certain advantages’ and that it ‘allows the writer clear eyes and a quick critical sense’.\(^2\) While it is correct to stress the positive aspects of an alternative perspective, one that affords critical distance, it surely constitutes a serious misreading of Ellison to state that marginality is a subversive condition *per se*. Enforced peripherality is, on the contrary, especially conducive to subjugation and the complete maintenance of the *status quo*. Far from being a consequence of marginality, the ‘quick critical sense’ to which she refers is the necessary prerequisite for non-cooperation and retaliatory action. The narrator’s self-imposed invisibility is derived in hindsight from his gradual awakening to a prior invisibility, namely the life-long prejudice meted out to him by white Americans which renders him ‘unseen’. This primary invisibility is defined concisely as ‘a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality’.\(^3\) Self-awareness helps initiate a course of strategic counter-action, the (secondary) form of invisibility praised by Boland.

This sequence can be found in many other tales of oppression. For instance, the epigraph to Ben Okri’s *Songs of Enchantment*, ‘felix, qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas’ (Blessed are those who know the causes of things), prefigures the narrative’s emphasis on the necessity for revelation to combat exploitation, a theme reiterated by the references to such binary oppositions as sight/blindness, visibility/invisibility. This preoccupation is subsequently taken up and expanded in *Astonishing the Gods* in a manner reminiscent of Ellison’s novel. The narrator begins by discovering that prejudice has rendered him invisible: ‘He searched for himself and his people in all the history books he read and discovered to his youthful astonishment that he didn’t exist’.\(^4\) Completing his quest for a

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2 Boland, *Object Lessons*, 147.
sense of self, or ‘the secret of visibility’, he comes to cherish ‘the invisibility of the blessed’, a mixture of creativity and grace which implicitly counters his sense of inadequacy at the novel’s outset.\(^5\) Such narratives recall the significant intervention made in the debate between centre and margin by the post-colonial theorist bell hooks. Exploring what she terms ‘the politics of location’, hooks seeks to delineate a means by which marginality could be established as a ‘central location for the production of a counter-hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives’:

I am located in the margin. I make a definite distinction between that marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures and that marginality one chooses as site of resistance — as a location of radical openness and possibility. This site of resistance is continually formed in that segregated culture of opposition that is our critical response to domination. We come to this space through suffering and pain, through struggle. We know struggle to be that which pleasures, delights, and fulfils desire. We are transformed, individually, collectively, as we make radical creative space which affirms and sustains our subjectivity, which gives us a new location from which to articulate our sense of the world.\(^6\)

Although this outline of her place within society mirrors the distinction made by Ellison and Okri between categorisations which are externally imposed and those which are embraced by the self, hooks’s own theoretical discourse retains an unhelpful rigidity, restating rather than deconstructing the original binary opposition between centre and margin.

More cogent for a critical reappraisal of the act of canon formation are the lectures by Toni Morrison which exploit the doubleness of invisibility and explain how the act of reading can make manifest the prejudices and (racial) assumptions of those who, consciously or unconsciously, sought to erase the Africanist presence from American literature:

The act of enforcing racelessness in literary discourse is itself a racial act. Pouring rhetorical acid on the fingers of a black hand may indeed destroy the prints, but not the hand. Besides, what happens in that violent, self-serving act of erasure to the hands, the fingers, the finger prints of the one who does the pouring?\(^7\)

The bringing to light of that which is omitted from narratives is close to what Boland actually seeks to achieve in her re-evaluation of the role of the Irish


woman poet, but with one significant difference: Morrison’s analysis undermines the very notion of a tradition, actively questioning the sense of ‘self’ upon which it is founded. In effect, she does not fetishize her own apartness since this would presuppose an integral, stable centre; rather, by recognizing how subjectivity is rooted in, among other things, gender, race and class, the writer brings a necessary provisionality to her critique, a self-reflexive dimension, one which is apparent in the work of the Northern Irish poet Medbh McGuckian. In what follows I want to examine how the marginal personae in Medbh McGuckian’s poetry are aware of the dangers which enclosure pose and how, as in the novels of Ellison, Okri and Morrison, invisibility subsequently becomes a means of empowerment, a way of undermining established attitudes. The crucial (and as yet underestimated) form which this invisibility adopts is that of intertextuality, whereby one text is hidden within another.

The second stanza of McGuckian’s early poem, ‘The “Singer”’, provides a brief pen-picture of the pressures and frustrations experienced by the poet as an adolescent:

Every year at exams, the pressure mounted —
The summer light bent across my pages
Like a squinting eye. The children’s shouts
Echoed the weather of the street,
A car was thunder,
The ticking of a clock was heavy rain […]

External phenomena are experienced as invasive and disembodied — the sun becomes a squinting eye, the noise from a car is thunder — and these accentuate the poem’s atmosphere of enclosure, the ‘squinting eye’ and ‘ticking of a clock’ being especially Kafkaesque in their effect. Awareness of time passing also implicitly poses a threat to the speaker as a young girl, introducing as it does the dual frustration of her sedentary, repetitive activities coupled with an as yet unfulfilled sexual yearning, symbolised by the phallic rain and the children’s shouts. Indeed, the drawing of the curtains reinforces the already sharp differentiation between what is either inside or outside. However, the poem itself is anecdotal, re-told in the past tense by the more worldly-wise speaker who has outstripped such disappointments, and the inherent ambiguity of the poem’s title hints at just how she has achieved this: a ‘Singer’ is both a creative artist and the brand name of a sewing machine.

9 The equation had previously been made in a less successful poem by Eavan Boland entitled ‘Patchwork’, Night Feed (Manchester, 1994; 1982), 35–6.
In the evenings I used to study
At my mother's old sewing-machine,
Pressing my feet occasionally
Up and down on the treadle
As though I were going somewhere
I had never been.

The poem bears more than a little resemblance with what has been described as Seamus Heaney's poem of 'vocational dedication', 'Digging':10 not only do both texts contrast manual work with writing through the use of a clever analogy – pen/spade, sewing machine/singer – they also seek to break with family continuity. While Heaney describes how he has substituted the hard, physical work on the land performed by his father and grandfather for the aesthetic musing upon those roots which ‘awaken in [his] head’, McGuckian transforms her mother’s labour into a romantic vagrancy of the mind. Although it may be argued that the speaker affirms continuity with her mother by taking her place at the old machine, composition and book-learning is favoured over the stereotypical female activity (sewing). The wheel is, significantly, ‘disconnected’ and the empty bobbin rattling in its case is an apt image for her desire to escape from what she conceives to be a restrictive life.

The use of sewing, weaving, quilting and embroidery as metaphors for writing is widespread in contemporary Irish women’s poetry: Mary Dorcey and Mary O’Malley employ ‘word-spinning’ and stitching, respectively,11 as symbols for the joining of words together; Katie Donovan’s image of the spider weaving a silent language is her depiction of the marginalised female poet achieving a voice peculiar to herself;12 and both Anne le Marquand Hartigan and Eva Bourke use Penelope as the archetypal weaver in an effort to reverse the stereotype of the marginal, passive woman waiting for the wandering hero to return.13 Although McGuckian seems in one interview14 to criticise her own practice of

14 McGuckian stated in an interview with Sarah Broom, that ‘I have an awful fault of weaving in the sounds and images because I like them, but they don’t particularly suit, they’re just sort of thrown in for the fun of it’ (McGuckian, cited in Sarah Broom, ‘Image and Symbol in the Poetry of Medbh McGuckian’, unpublished dissertation [University of Wales, 1995], 126).
weaving phrases into texts, a description in another interview of her method of composition demonstrates its relevance and importance:

Inspiration works with me. It takes over, if it's a good one. I'm just a medium for it. I don't really have to work. If I have to do a lot of thinking and rationalizing, it's not going to be a great poem. I just take an assortment of words, though not exactly at random, and I fuse them. It's like embroidery. It's very feminine, I guess. They are very intricate, my poems, a weaving of patterns of ins and outs and contradictions, one thing playing off another.¹⁵

Unlike the other poets who raid the myth-kitty in a somewhat obvious and standard fashion, McGuckian's use of the images of weaving and sewing is more complex and has affinities with Emily Dickinson's famous spiders, unwinding the 'Yarn of Pearl' and sewing at night 'Upon an Arc of White'. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have pointed out, Dickinson's symbol has multiple levels of meaning, and therein lies its potency:

But what garment does the spider sew from this insubstantial substance? A uniform of snow? A spangled gown? Here Dickinson reveals the strategy of her own yarn of pearl. Hers, she suggests, is a fiction of multiplicity which artistically adopts numerous roles and, even more artfully, settles for none.¹⁶

'The Seed-Picture'¹⁷ is a poem in which McGuckian focuses on weaving in a manner reminiscent of her peers; however, while the craft itself highlights the young adolescent's marginality as well as the demands of familial obligation and inheritance, the form of the poem bespeaks a different kind of weaving, emphasising a Dickinsonian multiplicity and multivocality. The speaker's 'portrait of Joanna' emphasises both the materiality of the creation as well as the substitutive function those materials serve: 'Her hair / is made of hook-shaped marigold, gold / Of pleasure for her lips, like raspberry grain'. The similes themselves call attention to the fracturing of the self as each is used to represent different parts of the girl's body, gradually attempting to complete a full picture. Although the craft under discussion uses seeds rather than thread—but is still a 'womanly or domestic' craft according to the poet—¹⁸ the image used to convey confinement is notably that of embroidery:

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¹⁵ Gillean Somerville-Arjat and Rebecca Wilson (eds), Sleeping with Monsters: Conversations with Scottish and Irish Women Poets (Dublin, 1990), 2.
¹⁸ McGuckian in a personal correspondence with the author, 28 February 1996.
Was it such self-indulgence to enclose her
In the border of a grandmother’s sampler.
Bonding all the seeds in one continuous skin,
The sky resolved to a cloud the length of a man?

The ‘sampler’ not only connotes a beginner’s exercise, but also the pattern or archetype from which a copy may be taken, suggesting once again the continuation of tradition; yet such an occupation is restrictive to the feminine, enclosing the woman ‘in one continuous skin’, and is dictated (ominously) by ‘the length of a man’. The danger is made even more apparent at the poem’s close, when the speaker states that

The single pearl barley
That sleeps around her dullness
Till it catches light, makes women
Feel their age, and sigh for liberation.

The final two lines contain an ironic awareness of marginality: though symbolising confinement, the portrait, like a latter-day version of Browning’s ‘My Last Duchess’, disturbs patriarchy since the woman’s image, silent and enclosed within a frame, is implicitly given a voice.

The analogy between ‘seed-work’ and the writing of poetry, developed in the first half of the poem, appears to reinforce a conception of McGuckian’s method of composition as simply dual in nature. The importance of intuition and her willingness to allow unconscious or submerged elements to take the lead is suggested when the poet states that ‘The seeds dictate their own vocabulary,
/ Their dusty colours capture / More than we can plan’. The secondary activity, then, is one of arrangement: ‘I only guide them not by guesswork / In their necessary numbers’. Although this reads very much like Seamus Heaney’s well-known distinction between craft and technique, what has not been widely recognised is that her process of writing actually entails three stages, the neglected one being the primary activity of gathering seeds (vocabulary) together. The words ‘capture / More than we can plan’ because they are taken from varied contexts and are subsequently arranged by the writer who attaches them ‘by the spine to a perfect bedding’, (in other words, her book of poems):

So those words, my inventive methods are just to keep drawing on these, they come to me, obviously they are all over the place particularly in books, so you just collect these and then eventually they will all just somehow have this nuclear fission, that

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they swim around together and then in your head they can fuse and come out as a pattern that meets the needs of that particular suffering or that particular situation.\textsuperscript{20}

The words, as we have seen in the introduction, are usually taken from biographies, diaries, exhibition catalogues or other critical studies. The texts which result from this ‘seed work’—the planting of words in her own garden—often have the appearance of dream logic, or a type of \textit{écriture féminine} and this corresponds to the poet’s desire to resist patriarchy and masculinist ways of writing. As the speaker states in ‘I Thought it was Still February’:\textsuperscript{21}

\begin{quote}
you have the awkward join to make (\textit{I/W}, 346); You have the awkward join to make—
to unsay it (\textit{I/W}, 347); every other word is one to talk, to unsay, till every other word
I know (\textit{I/W}, 372) is almost one I know.
\end{quote}

Yet while there certainly is an impetus to ‘unsay’ and to deconstruct patriarchal thought, McGuckian’s work does not simply replace symbolic law with the Kristevan semiotic. As Moynagh Sullivan has pointed out, ‘[b]y 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’. Sullivan’s argument is astute and highlights the way in which McGuckian ‘thematically gestures towards a refusal of the symbolic law (by refusing to abide by the rules of legal ownership of language)’.\textsuperscript{22} As such, form and content are in harmony since both deal with the twin issues of authority and authorship. As we shall see, appropriation is one way whereby the poet challenges her marginal status as a female writer within a predominantly male canon.

In an article centred on one of her own Irish female literary exemplars, Eavan Boland, McGuckian cited from Gilbert and Gubar’s influential examination of nineteenth-century women’s fiction to set out the key dilemma facing the female writer:

The female poet’s basic problem is an anxiety of authorship; a radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a ‘precursor’, the act of writing


will isolate or destroy her. […] Her battle is not against her (male) precursor’s reading of the world but against his reading to her. In order to define herself as an author she must redefine the terms of her socialization. […] Frequently, moreover, she can begin such a struggle only by actively seeking a female precursor.23

Employing The Madwoman in the Attic as a foundational text from which to construct her poem ‘Brothers and Uncles’,24 McGuckian references key nineteenth-century literary foremothers, all of whom share ‘a common, female impulse to struggle free from social and literary confinement through strategic redefinitions of self, art and society’ (MLA, xii). She uses extracts from Gilbert and Gubar to inscribe within her own text the psychodrama of female literary authorship and attempts to circumvent the ‘socially prescribed subordination’ (MLA, 65) that befell her exemplars. Indeed, she indicates her intertextual praxis by means of a clever enjambment in the opening line: ‘I write with my eyes’. Framing ‘nature’ within speech marks, the lines signal her awareness that the term is socially constructed as ‘female’ andforegrounds the confining gendered subject positions associated with authorship:

*I write with my eyes* (MLA, 305); *These days called ‘nature’, I write with my eyes*

*I write with my eyesshut* (MLA, 311); *Shut to the male sky and its most common clouds.*

*sky male* (MLA, 294); *Their whiteness is not an invitation, their whiteness*

*whiteness implies an invitation* (MLA, 616); *Has not chosen me…*

*a deliberate choice of whiteness* (MLA, 620)

In the past, McGuckian saw ‘the role of the poet as a male role’, one that she ‘adopted’ in recognition,25 as Gilbert and Gubar outline, that ‘the text’s author is […] an aesthetic patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis’ (MLA, 6); however, here she rejects ‘the male sky’, firmly shutting her eyes and refusing to be taken in by the apparent freedom offered by the white clouds. To regard them as constituting a putative *tabula rasa* would be delusive given that their ‘whiteness’ is encoded with patriarchal values: whiteness is indicative of the patriarchal ideal of feminine purity, often ‘chosen as emblematic by or of women’ (MLA, 615). As Gilbert and Gubar argue, ‘whiteness implies an invitation’ (MLA, 616) in the sense that it constructs the female as ‘a screen for the projections

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and fantasies of men’. Referring to Snow White, they contend that ‘her childish white dress is a blank page that asks to be written on just as her virginity asks to be “taken” […] [H]er whiteness, vulnerability made palpable, presents itself to be stained, her intactness—her self-enclosure—to be broken’ (MIA, 616). Employing the end-line rhyme of ‘whiteness’-‘mistress’, McGuckian gestures towards the sexual ideology encoded within the colour symbolism. However, the reader must ponder over the pronominal in ‘their whiteness / has not chosen me’. Does it refer to the cloud’s whiteness, or is it a decidedly patriarchal ‘their’, declaring ownership of the clouds? There is another possibility here, one that marks a radical distance between McGuckian and her foremothers. While authors like Emily Dickinson may have chosen white—‘impersonating a “little maid” in white, a fierce virgin in white, a nun in white, a bride in white, a madwoman in white, a dead woman in white, and a ghost in white’, the discontinuities signalling ‘her own psychic fragmentation’ due to ‘her society’s multiple (and conflicting) demands upon women’—the Northern Irish poet does not. In fact, she rejects the choices made by each of her literary foremothers in this opening stanza: while Charlotte Brontë has Shirley declaim that ‘“I will stay out here with my mother Eve, in these days called Nature”’ (MIA, 305), McGuckian is alive to the dangers inherent in that gendered locus. Similarly, while Brontë in her Roe Head journal records that ‘“I write with my eyes shut”’, thus embracing the Romantic ‘entranced obsessiveness’, McGuckian is aware, since Gilbert and Gubar call attention to the fact, that the metaphor has been ‘determined primarily by her gender’ (MIA, 312).

\[
a \text{a blank page asking to be written;}
\]
\[
\text{Winter was a page that asked to be written on:}
\]
\[
on (MIA, 616); \text{one with a broad foot […]}
\]
\[
\text{I asked for her fatigue to be removed, her broad foot,}
\]
\[
a falling lip […] one with a broad
\]
\[
\text{Her falling lip, her broad thumb, the heavy weight}
\]
\[
\text{thumb (MIA, 521); ‘A heavy weight laid}
\]
\[
\text{Laid across me, my truest and darkest double …}
\]
\[
\text{across me’ (MIA, 313); Jane’s truest and}
\]
\[
\text{darkest double (MIA, 360)}
\]

The second stanza, like the first, self-consciously refers to the act of writing, evoking the male literary conventions that define women: ‘Winter was a page that asked to be written on’. Winter, with its association with white snow/Snow White are as much symbolic of female purity as female vulnerability. Yet the insistent repetition—‘her fatigue’, ‘her broad foot’, ‘her falling lip’—suggests the distinctly female consciousness that pervades the poem. Read in conjunction with The Madwoman in the Attic, the figure imagined by the speaker embodies the characteristics of ‘The Three Spinners’ from Grimm’s Fairy Tales, powerful

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27 Brontë cited in MIA 311.
weaving women who ‘remind us of figures [who] exercise their art subversively and quietly in order to control the lives of men’ (*MLA*, 521). They are also linked to the abused Philomel who wrecks her revenge through her writing. As Lynn Enterline outlines: ‘On her tapestry, Philomela weaves a set of purple “notae”, a noun that […] suggests several divergent but crucial meanings. *Nota* may signify a written character—a mark of writing used to represent “a sound, letter or word”. It may signify the “vestige” or “trace” of something, like a footprint. It may also designate a mark of stigma or disgrace’.²⁸ Just like Philomel, and indeed Brontë who, in her Roe Head Journal, records the fact that she ‘wanted to speak’ but felt ‘a heavy weight laid across me’, McGuckian escapes patriarchal restriction by speaking the unspeakable, by recording the wound and doing so secretively. For Gilbert and Gubar—citing Adrienne Rich—one of the key strategies in the feminist revisionary struggle is “the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction” (*MLA*, 49), and this is precisely what the Northern Irish poet does. Constructing a poetic cento that draws on a literary psychohistory, she incorporates the tropes and ideas of her foremothers in order to read into, and out from, their psychodramas. Crucially, she does so by using their one of their own strategies whereby ‘revolutionary messages are concealed behind stylistic facades’ (*MLA*, 74). The embedded citations, unacknowledged and devoid of quotation marks, replay the concealments and evasions of her predecessors.

Unlike Boland, who frequently bemoaned and felt disempowered by the lack of Irish literary foremothers,²⁹ McGuckian seems to relish seeking exemplars from outside of her own culture, and in ‘Isba Song’ she acknowledges the way in which their direct influence provides her with a ramifying sense of authority:³⁰

I have heard
In it 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.

Using selected quotations from Ellen Moers’s *Literary Women*, a study which traces the historical tradition of, and key tropes used by, Western female writers, the poem’s speaker acknowledges a sense of literary sorority and indebtedness. The

opening sentence conjoins three quotations, each of which has to do with the theme of influence. The first is Moers’s observation that, while women writers have their own ‘distinctive style’ and refrain from imitation, what is ‘special to literary women’ is ‘their sense of encountering in another woman’s voice what they believed was the sound of their own’ (LW, 66, my italics). The second quotation is from Gertrude Stein’s admission of, and justification for, her borrowing from George Eliot when beginning her literary career at Radcliffe College in 1894: “When I first wrote my first story when I was at Radcliffe I called it Red Deeps out of George Eliot, one does do that, and since well since not, it is a bad habit, American writers have it, unless they make it the taken title to be a sounding board to send back the sound that they are to make inside, that would not be too bad” (LW, 66, my italics). The third extract is taken from Alice James’s rationale behind our memory’s selective process: “The things we remember have a first-timeness about them which suggests that that may be the reason of their survival” (LW, 106). The literary exemplars, then, act as a ‘sounding board’ for the speaker; their works can serve to corroborate her own literary efforts. What those writers were battling against is delineated in the poem’s opening:

Beyond the edge of the desk, the Victorian dark
Inhabits childhood, youth-seeking, death-seeking,
Bringing almost too much meaning to my life […]

The desk, a metonym for writing, is depicted as a safe haven for the speaker. Yet such a position is a limited one: as Moers argues, ‘writers who wish to extend their experience beyond the edges of their desks must rely on the method we call research’ (LW, 83, my italics). McGuckian does this by reading about her precursors and the psychodramas that they faced. Two contrasting scenarios are indicated in the above lines: one the hand, we have a reference to Charlotte Brontë’s conclusion to The Professor in which, by resolving the tale with a happy marriage, one in which we have a working wife and an acquiescent husband, she ‘let her guard down and reveals herself a woman novelist, whistling in the Victorian dark’; on the other hand, we have a reference to Willa Cather’s ‘youth-seeking, death-seeking Professor’ (LW, 235) from The Professor’s House, a recluse who keeps cloth-covered wire dummies in the attic where he works. The female statuary symbolise the opposite of the freedom envisaged by Brontë: the female figure is voiceless and lacks agency.

In her poetry, McGuckian dwells on the lives of such isolated, marginalised precursors. In an early unpublished poem entitled ‘Names’, McGuckian name-checks several female writers, such as Jane Carlyle and Dorothy Wordsworth, who were silenced or marginalised due to the careers of their more famous husbands, and comments on the fate of others, such as Sappho and Virginia Woolf, who
gave in to an internal pressure—what Elizabeth Hardwick terms a ‘demand for relief’—by committing suicide:31

Though Dorothy and Jane signed up
mortgaged (SD, 59); dislocation (SD, 191);
Carlyle’s love affair with Silence ‘was only platonic’ (SD, 12);
She weighted her skirts and managed to drown in the river (SD, 111);
Sappho threw herself from a rock into the sea (SD, 110)

A mortgaged dislocation, in their
Half-platonic love-affairs with silence,
Virginia weighted her envious skirts
And managed to drown in the river—
Some believe that even Sappho Threw herself from a rock into the sea.

Much later, McGuckian constructs a poem entitled ‘Something Called Sleep’, based on Jean Strouse’s biography of Alice James, the infirm and less well-known younger sister of the eminent psychologist, William, and the celebrated novelist, Henry.33 As in ‘Names’, the female figure contemplates suicide because of her enforced isolation:

Through the gossamer walls of a fourteen-year-old, the long afternoons burn like a verandah running along two sides with no interiors.

A month of mountains honeycombs the broken spell of her breast, a week of windows lets them more into her secret than they want to be taken.

Alice suffered from neurasthenia, nervous hyperesthesia and hysteria, due in part to her biographical and social circumstance. As Strouse notes, ‘[g]irls of the middle and upper classes were seen, in the nineteenth century, as emotional and sensible, not intellectual or aesthetic; they were supposed to be “accomplished”—able to sew, dance, sing or play music, read French, discuss certain novels, perhaps draw or paint—but not learned’ (AJ, 43). Alice was unsuccessful in rebelling against

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32 McGuckian, ‘Names’, McGuckian Papers, Special Collections Department, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University, MSS 770, Box 17. The source—Hardwick’s Seduction and Betrayal—is referred to as ‘SB’.
such strictures. Hence, at the age of fourteen she ‘had concluded that life for her meant renunciation, a sort of spiritual suicide’ \((\text{AJ}, 81)\). In McGuckian’s poem, the adolescent female figure is depicted as a fragile house without ‘interiors’, thus negating her intellectual disposition. Yet there is an inner core, a ‘secret’, which demands to be spoken. The nature of that secret is revealed in Alice’s diary. In response to the way in which newspapers tried to obscure how the English psychologist Edmund Gurney died in June 1888 (he killed himself with chloroform), she wrote:

‘Every educated person who kills himself does something towards lessening the superstition. It’s bad that it is so untidy, there is no denying that, for one bespatters one’s friends morally as well as physically, taking them so much more into one’s secret than they want to be taken. But how heroic to be able to suppress one’s vanity to the extent of confessing that the game is too hard.’ \((\text{AJ}, 271, \text{my italics})\)

Society is seen as complicit in the silencing, thus offering little relief and perhaps exacerbating the problem. Of course, McGuckian’s text is not forthcoming either and does not lift the veil on the pressures on those living in Victorian society since the source is withheld. However, using Strouse’s text, the poet can effectively play out and live through the dynamics of her precursor’s psychodrama (without suffering the consequences). What attracts her to Alice James in particular is their joint love of using other people’s texts in their writings: Alice kept a commonplace book in which she ‘used other people’s voices to express her own thoughts’, thereby remaining ‘safe, risking no ideas or phrases of her own, yet engaging in the world of ideas to express something about her own mind’ \((\text{AJ}, 272)\).

If figures like Alice James regard themselves as ‘voiceless’, McGuckian does not subscribe to that view. Her reading of biographies and other source material allow her to be inspired by their writings. In “Paris”, for example, she writes about Colette, the famous French novelist who was once so dominated and overshadowed by her husband that she was forced to relinquish credit for her own artistic output. McGuckian’s text, however, begins by foregrounding Colette’s power of expression:

\begin{quote}
the inside of the mouth \((C, 147)\); full of surprises \((C, 24)\); One room was sunny enough \((C, 90)\); an ‘almost old house’ \((C, 49)\); ‘Under its balconies, I need no winter coat, its balconies’ \((C, 114)\); no winter coat \((C, 51)\); Nor the cool retaliation of my plaited hair. cool retaliation \((C, 162)\); ‘plaited it’ \((C, 52)\);
\end{quote}

While the imagery replays the scenario of other poems (confinement within a house), the text acknowledges the subject’s intellect and expressive potential by going inside her mouth. For McGuckian, research of her female precursors always throws up ‘surprises’: the supposed lack of a discernible lineage of foremothers is belied by what she uncovers. While this chapter has tended to focus on women writers as marginal and oppressed, the following chapter looks at how McGuckian uses their writings (or work about them) to engage in a feminist masquerade and to enable her own writing practice.
Portraiture is performance, and like any performance, in the balance of its effects it is good or bad, not natural or unnatural. The point is that you can’t get at the real thing itself, the real nature of the sitter, by stripping away the surface. The surface is all you’ve got. You can only get beyond the surface by working with the surface. All that you can do is to manipulate that surface—gesture, costume, expression—radically and correctly.1

Foregrounding the performative nature of Untitled Film Stills (1977–80),2 the American photographic artist Cindy Sherman presents herself as both the primary subject and object of her work, undermining in a play of simulacra the very notion of the unitary subject.3 The idea of the stable, centred ‘I’ is revealed as nothing but a social, patriarchal construct. If, as Laura Mulvey has argued, ‘woman […] stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions […] by imposing on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning’,4 then Sherman’s work determinedly and self-reflexively resists such a male scopic gaze. Whilst viewing the series of filmic stills, one becomes aware that the artist has used her own face as ‘a neutral base on which she inscribes the countless faces of The Girl in her myriad embodiments’.5 Carefully composing her gestures, expressions and the overall mise-en-scene of her self-portraits to present stills from (fictional) 1950s films, Sherman presents different selves to the viewer in an ironic act of ‘self-effacement’,6 mocking the male penetrative gaze whilst evoking the representational conventions that define (and thus restrict) the subject. Commenting on Sherman’s manipulation of personae, Susan Sailer Shaw states:

Photographer Cindy Sherman costumes herself and applies makeup in a style that defines the look of a given era and perhaps an historical person such as Rembrandt. Then she places herself in a context defined by images associated with that period and person. Finally she takes a photograph of herself in that re-created space. In other words, she appropriates the ‘look’ of a particular person or a ‘type’ of person, including their ‘era’. But it is always the features of Sherman’s face juxtaposed with the semiotics of others’ hair style, costume, makeup, setting.

In part, her work can be seen as an examination of the stereotypes of women that are presented in filmic texts of the 1950s, and the media in general; in part, her work explores the means by which these conventions are established: woman as passive housewife; woman as seductress; woman as eternal victim. The conventionalised imagery defines women as victims of phallocentric power, unable to control their own representation. Yet Sherman’s *Untitled Film Stills* presents a masquerade, with the victim exaggerating ‘the very modes of passivity and object-ness projected onto her via the male gaze’. Sherman’s mimicry and theatrics, then, constitute an overt parody, a knowing, though not complicit, re-staging of what is expected of the subject. As Judith Williamson notes, ‘within each image, far from deconstructing the elision of image and identity, she very smartly leads the viewer to construct it; but by presenting a whole lexicon of feminine identities, all of them played by “her”, she undermines your little constructions as fast as you can build them up’. Distorting and multiplying her self-image, Sherman exposes ‘the sociality of [the] image’s construction’, unveils ‘the foundational otherness of women within contemporary Western representation’, and pointedly undermines ‘the attempt to fix her image according to our desires’.

As an embodied discourse and a genre that reveals, critiques and ultimately resists the codes by which the male projective eye seeks to confirm its authority, the masquerade has become a key feminist mode of self-production in late twentieth-century culture. For example, the artwork for Tori Amos’ *Strange Little Girls* recalls the photographic practice of Sherman through its dislocation of

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10 Jones 64, 60.
11 Amada Cruz, ‘Movies, Monstrosities, and Masks: Twenty Years of Cindy Sherman’, *Cindy Sherman: Retrospective*, 3.
the female self. For each song, Amos adopts a different persona and, by means of a curious revisionary poetics of exemplarity, she rewrites the lyrics of songs written by men so that they can be appropriated by the female voice, one which both highlights the diminutive status and categorical otherness of these ‘strange little girls’, and at the same time questions the assumptions made by the male authors. The object of the male lyricist now becomes the subject of the female voice.

Such a feminist revisionary praxis lies at the heart of Medbh McGuckian’s oeuvre. She is a poet who can be said to read and write ‘in the interstices of masculine culture, moving between use of the dominant language or form of expression and specific versions of experience based on their marginality’. Like Sherman, she self-reflexively critiques the ways in which the female subject is culturally constructed and determined by the male gaze. We see this explicitly in ‘Film Still’, a poem which borrows from Sandy Nairne’s *State of the Art*, a survey of contemporary art practice:

The gesture of to-be-looked-at-ness
has gone on, though the space inside it
is where his body stood.

When the eyes of every face we have kissed
have been covered with leaves, his eyes
open in his cupped hands […]

The title references Sherman’s *Untitled Film Stills* and its opening stanza seems to focus on the power imbalance that occurs when the (passive) female figure is subjected to the (active) male gaze. McGuckian’s lines appear to implicate an unnamed male figure as the source of a disempowering ‘gesture’, one that objectifies the female. Indeed, the first line alludes to Mulvey’s famous contention in ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ that female characters in Hollywood cinema were filmically constructed in accordance with male fantasies: ‘In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness’ (Mulvey cited in *SA*, 131). However, one could also argue that McGuckian has subversively reversed the trajectory of the gaze here and has located the male as viewed object rather than as viewer.

since the ‘gesture’ has ‘gone on’ (happened) in the space ‘where his body stood’. While ‘stood’ might imply that he is no longer locatable, it also suggests that he is absent in quite a different sense: she has cast him as an aesthetic object, thus effacing his subjectivity. (The phrase ‘the space inside it / is where his body stood’ refers in the source text to the hollowed-out sculptures of Anthony Gormley). His ‘eyes / open in his cupped hands’ indicate both shame and a coming to consciousness at what the male gaze involves, namely the death of the subject (or curtailed potentiality). Yet the image of eyes being ‘covered with leaves’ does not simply connote a death ritual since the phrase in the source text refers to a celebrated photo-text from 1983 by the feminist avant-garde artist, Barbara Kruger. Nairne writes, ‘[w]hen “We won’t play nature to your culture’ is set across a woman’s face whose eyes have been covered with leaves, Kruger is making an implicit objection to the circumspection of women’s creative roles as “natural” while men are given the more significant position of the “cultural”’ (SA,160). Just as Kruger culls ‘photographically derived mass-media images’ to critique the stylized and misogynistic portrayal of women in the media, McGuckian borrows from Nairne’s sourcebook to cite from like-minded artists who refuse to reduce women’s place to that of ‘Other’.

The process of using other people’s words makes it difficult to view the ‘I’ as stable. Indeed, in ‘Film Still’ the speaker declares that her mind is ‘no longer able to be unified’ and that ‘It was my hand made these marks but not / my handwriting’. McGuckian’s lines borrow from Susan Hiller’s rejection of an essentialist view of identity: ‘We are all multiple beings with many voices and many possibilities. […] I suppose there’s something frightening about giving up the notion of the unified self, but in any case, I start with relinquishing that essentialist definition. So, yes, the marks are made by me, my hand […] my “hand” made these marks, but not in my “handwriting”’ (SA,121 – 2). For Hiller, art becomes a form of automatic writing, with the gestural marks indicating irrationality, a lack of control and the absence of a single, controlling mind; for McGuckian, the borrowing of such phrases makes it difficult to locate ‘her’ in any of the poems. Recognising this propensity for creating poetic centos—bricolages of unattributed quotations that are dislocated from their original sources—allows us to consider many of her poems as masquerades wherein the poetic self is brought into the world whilst simultaneously withdrawing from the public gaze. One form which this takes is the revisionary masquerade whereby the poet appropriates extracts from a biography of an historical female icon and subtly rewrites the original text, foregrounding, in the process, the patriarchal codes by which that persona lived, and exposing her socially allocated gendered subject position. One example is

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15 See Nairne 102.
‘The Aphrodisiac’, a poetic text produced early on in McGuckian’s career, in which she replays the life of Madame de Pompadour by selecting and splicing together passages from Nancy Mitford’s celebrated biography:

She gave up sleeping with him…
her lover has turned into her friend …
she gave it out as it might be a marriage, a
birth, or some other interesting family event
(MP 161); ‘It’s his heart I want’ (MP, 166);
the key to his study (MP, 167);

banishment to his estates (MP, 13);
lived like a man in a glass house (MP, 15);
she had taken to a little cap of fine lace in
the morning (MP, 193); feeding her baby
(MP, 251); its wonderful garden… it could
be visited blindfold for the scent alone (MP,
150); a ray of grace has fallen (MP, 190);
Nothing is so frumpish as last year’s gambl-
ing game (MP, 39);
Dressed in pink, driving a blue phaeton,
or in blue driving a pink one (MP, 36);
the black hair held by a diamond comb
(MP, 251); to float without panniers
(MP, 36); he had a most caressing
look, a curious husky voice (MP, 37);
so suffocated by her own enormous power
(MP, 254); She was something more than a
kept woman (MP, 200); a between maid (MP,
167); the secret staircase was not the only
one in the north wing (MP, 192); Rumour
has it that the Queen has taken to rouge
again (MP, 24)

She gave it out as if it were
A marriage or a birth, some other
 Interesting family event, that she
 Had finished sleeping with him, that
 Her lover was her friend. It was his heart
 She wanted, the bright key to his study,
 Not the menacings of love. So he is
 Banished to his estates, to live
 Like a man in a glasshouse; she has taken to
 A little cap of fine white lace
 In the mornings, feeds her baby
 In a garden you could visit blindfold
 For its scent alone:
 But though a ray of grace
 Has fallen, all her books seem as frumpish
 As the last year’s gambling game, when she
 Would dress in pink taffeta, and drive
 A blue phaeton, or in blue, and drive
 A pink one, with her black hair supported
 By a diamond comb, floating about
 Without panniers. How his most
 Caressing look, his husky whisper suffocates her,
 This almost perfect power of knowing
 More than a kept woman. The between-maid
 Tells me this is not the only secret staircase.
 Rumour has it she’s taken to rouge again.

Born into a bourgeois family that lived on the rue de Cléry at the heart of Paris in early eighteenth-century France, Jeanne-Antoinette Poisson—later Madame de Pompadour—is depicted in both Mitford and McGuckian’s text as an intelligent and powerful individual, alive to the nuances of a Royal Court in which the

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18 Nancy Mitford, Madame de Pompadour (London, 1955). McGuckian’s poem is cited on the right, extracts from Mitford are on the left, marked ‘MP’.
supposedly private life is played out within the public gaze and wherein actions and expressions are highly codified, each adopted according to one’s position within a uniquely stratified hierarchy. The Court, referred to by its denizens as ‘ce-pays-ci’, had ‘a language, a moral code and customs all its own’ which were to be transgressed at the individual’s peril (MP, 51). The worst calamity that could happen to a man owing to a transgression ‘was banishment to his estates; this not only meant loss of place and influence; the exile, condemned to live in the country, became ridiculous in the eyes of his friends’ (MP, 13, emphasis added). Behaviour was codified and all at Versailles knew how to interpret the signs: when we are told by Mitford that ‘Rumour has it that the Queen has taken to rouge again’ (MP, 24), it was known to everyone that this meant that she was re-engaging in conjugal duties. In short, as both texts state, at Court one ‘lived like a man in a glass house’ (MP, 15).

As the King’s mistress, Madame de Pompadour was subject to the same public scrutiny and any change of relationship between her and the King was, by definition, a very public affair, one which had to be declared. As recorded by Mitford and cited by McGuckian, the visible sign of the change ‘was that she moved into a new apartment […] At the same time we are invited to believe that she gave up sleeping with him. […] It is nothing if not unusual to think that her lover has turned into her friend; and yet the Marquise announced the fact, she gave it out as it might be a marriage, or a birth, or some other interesting family event’ (MP, 161, emphasis added). Adopting a new piety, Madame de Pompadour had the secret staircase, between her own bedroom and that of the King, blocked up; she spoke of giving up rouge, prayed at the tomb of Alexandrine, fasted during Lent and read holy books. Such behaviour was the talk of the Court. The Duc de la Vallière, writing to Voltaire, declares: ‘A ray of grace has fallen ….’ (MP, 190, emphasis added). All of this was for public display. Indeed, the event whereby her own change from being the lowly Madame D’Étoiles (she was married in 1741 to Charles Guillaume Le Normant d’Étoiles, her guardian’s nephew) to becoming mistress of the King was equally public. Attracted by Louis XV’s power and beauty—‘He was tall and handsome, he had a most caressing look, a curious husky voice which nobody ever forgot who once heard it, and a sexy moodiness of manner irresistible to women’ (MP, 37, emphasis added)—she attempted to catch his eye at his hunting lodge in Choisy by undertaking a stratagem (noted by McGuckian) which demonstrated both courage and acumen:

Although the bourgeoisie was never allowed to rise with the King’s hunt, only families noble since 1400 having that privilege, the rule was relaxed in favour of near neighbours, who had permission to follow it in carriages. Madame d’Étoiles took full advantage of this opportunity. She drove her own phaeton, knew the forest like the palm of her hand, and was always popping up in the path of the King.
Dressed in pink, driving a blue phaeton, or in blue driving a pink one, a vision of prettiness, a skillful, dashing driver, she could hardly have failed to attract his attention. (MP, 36, emphasis added)

Yet, while Madame de Pompadour was much loved by Louis and had proved herself an able mistress and skillful designer of public works (she created the Hermitage at Versailles with ‘its wonderful garden, all arranged for scent so that one heavenly smell led to another; it could be visited blindfold for the scent alone’ [MP, 150, emphasis added]), nevertheless she was still subject to the vagaries of Court and the whims of an often erratic King. Just as she was able to capture his heart, so too were others, thus her position was intensely precarious. One such rival suitor was Madamoiselle Romains who, when she refused to be put into Parc aux Cerfs—for all intents and purposes the royal brothel—Louis purchased a house for her at Passy where she gave birth to a son. Madame de Pompadour was powerless to avert her attentions and was forced to disguise herself to spy on her from a distance: she witnessed Mlle Romain ‘feeding her baby in the Bois de Boulogne; she and it were both smothered in beautiful lace, the black hair held by a diamond comb’ (MP, 251, emphasis added).

While Mitford records that Madame de Pompadour ‘was something more than a kept woman’ (MP, 200), she also cites from an account written by Madame de la Ferté d’Imbault of a meeting with the Marquise which suggests that the latter was “suffocated by her enormous power”, meaning precisely the opposite: namely, that despite her position as official mistress she was powerless to affect what was happening in the King’s bedroom, namely the granting of sexual favours by and to others (MP, 252). Yet McGuckian’s text subtly alters this account: the woman in her version declines the male’s attention—his whispers are ‘suffocating’—and declares that she has ‘This almost perfect power of knowing / More than a kept woman’. Herein lies the key difference between Mitford’s account and that of the poet. While both convey the machinations of such an able woman to obtain (and maintain) power, and while both demonstrate the insecurity of her position at a Court in which all proceedings are codified and strictly hierarchical, where Mitford’s narrative is one which tells of the rise and inevitable decline of Madame de Pompadour’s fortunes, McGuckian’s imaginatively narrates an altogether different trajectory. She alters the chronology of Mitford’s account and begins with the altered relations between the couple, the cooling off between the King and his mistress. Indeed, Madame de Pompadour is imagined as the person holding all the power, with Louis XV banished to his estates. In turn, Madame de Pompadour is viewed as enjoying literal and figurative space: while Mitford has her knowing her place and riding in a phaeton trying to catch the King’s eye, in ‘The Aphrodisiac’ this scene is placed after the separation. Thus, Madame de Pompadour is pictured riding carefree at Choisy (now figured as her
own domain) and is depicted as the woman enjoying time with her own child (and not as spying cravenly at her rival). Indeed, it is Madame de Pompadour who is seen to ‘take up rouge again’ to win a new suitor.

‘The Aphrodisiac’, then, projects an alternative future for the Marquise, one which is only possible in a society adhering to entirely different codes. This is a change much wished for and one that is alluded to in the poem’s title: Louis XV’s doctor tells him, after warning him to mend his ways because he was making love too often, “Change is the greatest aphrodisiac of all!” (MP, 164). Yet the overriding message of McGuckian’s first collection, The Flower Master, is that society then, as now, has not fundamentally changed and is run according to patriarchal rules, and that even powerful women must struggle against such restrictions. As I have shown elsewhere, poems like ‘The Heiress’ and ‘The Katydid’ cite from biographies to depict the (at times self-defeating) efforts to maintain power made by historically renowned female icons such as Mary Queen of Scots and Tz’u-hsi, The Empress Dowager who effectively ruled over China as Regent (from 1862–73, 1875–89 and 1898–1908).19 What marks such poems out is not simply the fact that they show how women’s lives were governed by masculinist ideologies, but that they refer to the women’s very public struggles against such codes of practice. One curious example of this is ‘The Standing’,20 a text which imbricates unacknowledged quotations from Martin Holmes’ biography of Lady Anne Clifford, Proud Northern Lady,21 and whose opening stanzas appear to depict an inactive and altogether traditional view of the domestic female subject.

‘day-by-day’ book (PL, 159); open-air Oratory (PL, 50); month with no news […] weather so uncertain (PL, 67); curtains of her sick-room (PL, 85); to see light (PL, 108); understanding kinswoman (PL, 39); her little namesake (PL, 59); natural daughters (PL, 91); cushion of Irish stitch (PL, 69); cloth-of-silver cushion (PL, 109); re-stringing her jewels (PL, 101); loose pearls (PL, 69); drop-shaded pearls (PL, 137); static occupations (PL, 101); her

This is my day-by-day book, my open-air Oratory, of that tenacious month, so little News, uncertain weather, I began to see Light through the curtains of my sick-room.

My godmother, an understanding kinswoman, Had taught me, her namesake, almost natural Daughter, cushion-making—Irish stitch On cloth-of-silver—how to restring Loose drop-shaded pearls, such static

19 See chapters 2 and 4 of Sympathetic Ink: Intertextual Relations in Northern Irish Poetry (Liverpool, 2006).
21 Martin Holmes, Proud Northern Lady: Lady Anne Clifford, 1590–1676 (London, 1975). Citations from Holmes are on the left, marked ‘PL’, McGuckian’s text is on the right.
memories of keeping silkworms as a little girl (PL, 98); her everlasting embroidery (PL, 92); lay with me (PL, 27); surreptitious kindness (PL, 28)

Occupations ... I remember keeping silkworms girl
As a little girl, my everlasting embroidery;
How my mother lay with me, her surreptitious Kindness ...

By declaring that the poem constitutes her ‘day-by-day book’, the speaker gives it the generic designation of a journal intime, a form of writing that is inherently private and one that is deemed ‘suitable’ for the female subject of the early seventeenth-century. Given that Lady Anne Clifford’s ‘day-by-day book’ is not extant, McGuckian’s text constitutes an imaginative reconfiguration of the original, incorporating extracts from the transcribed Knole diary and Holmes’ commentary. Her life during ‘that tenacious month’ appears at first to be wholly insignificant, with her social position figured as utterly marginal. The speaker dwells on her ‘static occupations’ and each one accords with traditionally feminine concerns: she is taught how to re-string her jewellery, embroider and make cushions. Enclosed within her ‘sick-room’, the speaker is introspective, wholly preoccupied with her memories. Even the title adverts to a private world, referring as it does to that place within the gardens at Knole now known as ‘the Duchess’ seat’, but which was named in Lady Clifford’s diary as the ‘Standing’, a location ‘habitually used by her as a kind of open-air oratory in those days of her distress’ (PL, 50, emphasis added). However, by eliding the place of writing with the actual text – the ‘day-by-day book’ is her ‘open-air oratory’ – the speaker provides an indirect reference to an as yet unspoken disturbance.

The revelation of this threat adds depth to the title’s meaning, alluding as it does to the key thematic concern of social standing and the act of making a defiant stand for one’s rights. When Lord Clifford’s son died in May 1591 he became acutely aware that there was no longer a male heir directly in line to inherit his earldom and estates. In 1605 he made a will which bequeathed most of his estates to his brother Francis (who was in line to inherit the earldom) with a proviso that, in the absence of any future male heirs, the property would revert back to his daughter, Lady Anne Clifford. However, as Holmes records, ‘[w]hat he had overlooked was the awkward fact that it was not entirely legal. By a deed drawn up in the reign of Edward II, nearly three centuries before, the great northern estates were entailed in the direct line from parent to child, even if that child should be a daughter’ (PL, 5–6). Effectively dispossessed of what was rightfully hers, Lady Clifford had to battle in the courts against her cousin, her husband (Lord Dorset) and even the King (James I), who had tried to intercede and force her to drop her suit. The poem’s conclusion refers to her dispossession and to her very public lack of subservience to those men who had tried to cajole, threaten and bully her:
and ‘malefactours’ could still be lodged in the lowest storey of the Keep (PL, 12); the Pagan Tower (PL, 15); her feet just clear of a recumbent lamb (PL, 118); Her dress without a wrinkle (PL, 134); unwrinkled (PL, 137); the Rhône, flowing through the lake of Geneva (PL, 128).

The speaker conflates two of her estates, the castle at Appleby with that of Brougham—the keep at the former was known as ‘Caesar’s Tower’, while the one at the latter was ‘The Pagan Tower’—in such a way as to suggest that since the phrase ‘render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s’ does not apply to Lady Clifford because of the will, she is forced into the Pagan Tower. Yet her retreat is not figured as a defeat. The simile which concludes the poem—‘Like the Rhône passing through Geneva’—was coined by her cousin, Francis Russell, the Earl of Bedford, to describe the unswerving nature of her character: like the current of the Rhône when it flows into Lake Geneva, Lady Clifford does not lose her own identity. She may be temporarily dispossessed by the ‘malefactors / Lodged in the lowest storey of the keep’, but she will retain her piety, dignity and belief in her sense of rightness. In 1646 Lady Clifford did, in fact, come into possession of her rightful inheritance.

‘From the Dressing-Room’, a poem which borrows from Ruth Jordan’s biography of Aurore Dupin, or George Sand as she is more famously known, is a continuation of McGuckian’s preoccupation with historical figures who circumvent social codes through self-assertion and acts of wilful independence:

[... ] This ‘An absence passionately sought’ (GS, 27); ‘the poet’s attic’ (GS, 151); ‘my hands are as steady (GS, 337); She called him [...] her blue lizard (GS, 313); her moans could be heard at the far end of the garden (GS, 337); ‘I like his ways. He is light on his feet [...] He does not break anything’ (GS, 282); ‘He puts his entire soul into getting me a glass of water’ (GS, 282); is an absence I have passionately sought, Brightening nevertheless my poet’s attic With my steady hands, calling him my blue Lizard till his moans might be heard At the far end of the garden. For I like His ways, he’s light on his feet and does Not break anything, puts his entire soul Into bringing me a glass of water.

‘I can take anything now, even his being away’ (GS, 283); ‘It always seems to me that this handwriting is for me’ (GS, 33);

A length of flesh-coloured silk (GS, 35); ‘there are moments in life when you can give notice’ (GS, 331); jolly wifely tone (GS, 40);

letter of farewell (GS, 309);
‘careful to find his own lodgings’ (GS, 60);
‘my good little room is lockable’ (GS, 59);
Shivery (GS, 55); ‘I seem to recover at the mere Sight of him propping a pillow’ (GS, 282)

I can take anything now, even his being away, for it always seems to me his Writing is for me, as I walk springless From the dressing-room in a sisterly Length of flesh-coloured silk. Oh there Are moments when you think you can Give notice in a jolly, wifely tone, Tossing off a very last and sunnsetty Letter of farewell, with strict injunctions To be careful to procure his own lodgings, That my good little room is lockable, But shivery, I recover at the mere Sight of him propping up my pillow.

The ‘dressing-room’ is the locus par excellence of divestment and disguise, and the chameleonic speaker, like Cindy Sherman, is playing a part. At times she can adopt a ‘wifely tone’; at other moments she is ‘sisterly’, though dressed in a ‘length of flesh-coloured silk’. The narrative in this poem is seemingly romantic: she can countenance his absence and even indulge in fantasies of a cold, abrupt dissolution of their union, secure in the knowledge of their mutual fidelity. However, the two protagonists are not equals. The speaker is depicted as an empowered woman who has full control of the domestic space: the personal pronouns in ‘my poet’s attic’ and ‘my good little room’ imply secure proprietorship, while ‘lockable’ suggests control over use and access. The male figure, by contrast, is depicted as utterly servile: he is valued merely for his physical prowess (‘light on his feet’) and his complete devotion towards the speaker (‘puts his entire soul/ into bringing me a glass of water’; ‘propping up my pillow’); at best, he is but a servant who ‘does / not break anything’. The enjambment here is significant: not only does it suggest that he is appreciated for the duties that he discharges, but he ‘does’ in the sense that he is someone who is ‘sufficient to one’s needs’. Rather than intimating loving familiarity, the use of a hypocoristic epithet (‘blue / lizard’) may betray an underlying contempt: he is considered reptilian. Indeed, the ‘moans’ which her actions occasion may not be those of pleasure, but of lamentation, and she remains all the while unmoved (‘steady hands’). The connection between them is described in transactional terms: she can ‘give notice’ at any time. In many respects, she is portrayed as despotic: she is the strict taskmistress delivering ‘strict injunctions’ and she is able to terminate the relationship in a callously offhand manner, ‘tossing off’ the ‘letter of farewell’. The overall effect is of a challenge to patriarchal values.
George Sand, upon whom the speaker is based, was the epitome of someone who ‘mixin[d] up genders’ and defied patriarchy: she was, for a time, ‘in the practice of wearing trousers and a top-hat at a time when such accoutrements were considered unbecoming in a lady’ (GS, xiii), and her education was in ‘subjects more suitable for a young man about to embark on a professional career than for a young lady with expectations of an early marriage’ (GS, 17). Her early novels constitute a critique of social mores and an assault on matrimonial conventions: as Jordan argues, ‘in presenting married women as victims of society, she condemned the laws which sanctioned their status’ (GS, 86). Sand not only presented narratives which preached ‘free love’, she was also ‘trampling down time-honoured class barriers, allowing ladies of high birth to fall in love with actors and peasants’ (GS, 88). These are the elements which McGuckian encodes into her own work. Despite the veneer of marital constancy, the poem’s male figure is based on four separate men, not all of whom were high-born: Casimir Dudevant, whom Sand married on 10 September 1882; Aurélien de Séze, a barrister with whom she enjoyed a Platonic, though illicit, relationship; Jules Sandeau, a law student who became her lover during the early years of her marriage; Alexandre Damien Manceau, an engraver, born to a working-class family, who later became her lover. Thus, the speaker’s ‘wifely tone’ is belied by her actions. Indeed, from reading the biography we learn that it is the husband who has to ‘procure his own lodgings’; meanwhile, the lover and speaker occupy the marital bed in a room where the door is ‘lockable’ to avoid unwanted intrusion and scrutiny.

McGuckian’s feminist masquerades not only present the very public struggles of strong female icons they also celebrate key examples of female creativity. While Lady Clifford’s writing in her ‘day-by-day book’ was essentially private, the songs sung by Billie Holiday, a black singer born Elinore Harris on 7 April 1915, were directed at a very different, public audience. Having worked as a prostitute and suffered sexual abuse, she emerged from a racial under-class to become one of the finest jazz singers of the twentieth-century. Borrowing from Donald Clarke’s thoroughly researched biography, Billie Holiday: Wishing on the Moon, McGuckian dwells on the freedom achieved by Holiday through singing in a poem entitled ‘Man-of-War Bird’. At the poem’s outset the speaker asks:

she sang behind the music (BH, 83);
on the street side (BH, 257);
‘The Street that Never Slept’ (BH, 68)

What do you sing behind the music
on the street side of the street
that never slept?

The quotations here are phatic in function, transforming the meaning of the extracts from her chosen intertext. When one of Clarke’s interviewees states that Holiday ‘sang behind the music’, he was referring to her idiosyncratic style of vocalisation, of how she never sang on the beat with the music; in McGuckian’s text, however, the speaker is referring to the songs’ content, or rather their possible subtext. The ‘street that never slept’ was, famously, 52nd Street, home of some of the best jazz clubs in 1930s New York and celebrated in Arnold Shaw’s 52nd Street: The Street of Jazz, a book which originally had the title The Street that Never Slept (1971). While the use of such a title would indicate unrelenting creativity, the other quotation used in the sentence—‘on the street side’—hints at a darker undercurrent to Holiday’s work. Although it pointedly indicates that hers was a public form of art, it also suggests the stresses placed on the artist to always be ready to perform. The phrase comes from an interview with a narcotics agent, Jimmy Fletcher, who attests to Holiday’s drug addiction and tells of how she readily gave him the evidence when he went to search her room in the Braddock Hotel: ‘She reached out the window. Got the syringe out of the side, on the street side of the window’ (BH, 257). Nevertheless, McGuckian’s poem commemorates the success of a woman who battled through the odds and achieved artistic freedom:

This is a face that dressed itself (BH, 206); free of everything except beauty (BH, 212); open from the beginning (BH, 208);

‘he was taking pictures of the air’ (BH, 369)

Constructing masquerades wherein the artistic lives of past exemplars are presented and lived through by the poet allows McGuckian to examine the idea of female authority. Writing in 1989 about exemplarity, McGuckian questioned the extent to which female writers in the past had been successful in overcoming patriarchal restrictions:

I touch the foetal body of women’s poetry like a tear in the human ocean. Did any of them in their time sufficiently surmount their gender to make a single universal poetic statement? Whereas when Eliot said, ‘We are the hollow men’, women were automatically included, or when Yeats said, ‘A man must choose / Perfection of the life or of the work’, women were automatically excluded. I have to live under this mountain and try to belong to it without becoming narrow or jealous, to be eternally grateful to Milton without being deluged into silence, to continue what women have begun without succumbing to the inevitable real or ritual self-immolation.25

This same area of enquiry and the identical Yeatsian example recur in Lyndall Gordon’s critical biography of Charlotte Brontë, a text that McGuckian uses, along with Albert Schweitzer’s *The Primeval Forest* and Homer’s *The Iliad*, to construct her poem ‘The She-Eagles’. The title, like the one used for ‘Man-of-War Bird’, depicts the female artist as aggressively free, belying the conventions of the time. The title also intimates one of the key thematic concerns of the poem, namely the way in which Brontë’s fiction is to be read as mirroring her life. The eponymous heroine of Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley* is said to be based on her sister, Emily, who was ‘a law unto herself with the eye of a she-eagle’. This idea of art imitating life, of Brontë working through her psychodrama in her fiction, is one which is central to Gordon’s biography: ‘The drama of [Brontë’s] life,’ she writes, ‘as of her art, takes place there, at that point of ferment, at the intersection of opposing modes: on the one hand, a frail and shrinking lady; on the other, the pilgrim resilience.’ At the mid-point of McGuckian’s text, she presents a key image of the female voice:

‘a breeze with a voice in it’ (*LG*, 56); 
utterance is smooth (*LG*, 67); 
he spoke to his own valour (*Iliad*, 190); 
unshaded self (*LG*, 3); 
snowy social self (*LG*, 231); 

she took the word up as if from his lips (*LG*, 114); 
pouring off at intervals 
the outer rings of blood (*PF*, 68); 
manner of snow (*LG*, 261); freezing her blue (*LG*, 291); a war Christmas (*PF*, 103)

A breeze with a developed voice in it 
utters smoothly, 
sparks to its unshaded, 
snowy self. 

They take the words up as from lips, 
pouring off at intervals 
the outer rings of blood 
in the manner of snow freezing blue on a war Christmas.

The image of ‘a breeze with a voice in it’ comes from Brontë’s Roe Head journal (January 1836), cited by Gordon, which records, using the universal image of creativity, a moment of inspiration which wakens her dormant sense of herself as an author. The ‘developed voice’ is said to ‘utter smoothly’. The quotation comes from a crucial point in Gordon’s biography which records Brontë’s reply

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to Robert Southey who had sought to quell her ambitions to be a writer. She had written to the Poet Laureate to seek an authoritative sanction for her life as a writer, but his reply in March 1837 was pompously dismissive: ‘Literature cannot be the business of a woman’s life, and it ought not to be. The more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure she will have for it, even as an accomplishment and a recreation’ (LG, 64). Her reply is courteous, almost deprecatingly subservient, but also utterly subversive. ‘She deals her words like blades’, says Gordon, ‘sculpting the caricature of feminine obedience as it takes shape under the injunctions of the Laureate who reserved creativity for men alone’; she ‘appropriates Southey’s discourse and returns it to him in more polished form’ (LG, 66). In the letter, ‘utterance is smooth’, mimicking ‘the given structures’, and the writing ‘throbs with an energy that deviates from the contemporary image of a lady as delicate and passionless’ (LG, 67). The writing of this letter is a moment which McGuckian elevates to heroic status by splicing together the quotation from Gordon’s biography with one taken from Homer’s Iliad. She refers to that moment when, finding himself alone on the field of battle since the other Argives have all fled, Odysseus is forced to ‘speak to his own valour’ (Bk XI, 1.408) and declare ‘Cowards are men who leave the front of war’. That the breeze speaks ‘to its unshaded / snow self’ is significant in a number of ways. Firstly, the ‘unshaded self’ is Brontë’s passionate self, ‘the source of a new voice of truth that was to burst on Victorian society in the late 1840s’ (LG, 3). Secondly, the adjective ‘snowy’ links the author to her fictional creation, and alter ego, Lucy Snowe, who is said to be “[r]ising from the shadows’, someone who by the end Villette is ‘ready to write it: the work of art to complement the exchange of letters which, at the crest of rapport, shapes character and extends expression’ (LG, 274). Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, the quotation adverters to the key tension for the Victorian female writer:

Her ‘Reader’ is the person who responds to the stimulus of secrecy, the tension between the snowy social self and the ardent inner self. Without secrecy, there would have been no art. For advancing women in the nineteenth century, the gap between public and private was so great that the pressure of art (in the sense of truth, utterance, exposure) was the more explosive. (LG, 231, emphasis added)

To demonstrate the ways in which Brontë allows the reader to glimpse her ‘unshaded self’ is the main purpose behind Gordon’s biography. Writing in her conclusion, Gordon states that ‘Again and yet again, Charlotte Brontë invites us to peer in the shadow: to see Miss Hall by the flickering candle in the empty dormitory; to see Jane Eyre in the dimmest corner of Mr Rochester’s drawing-room; to see Lucy Snowe as she recedes down the forbidden alley to meet the ghost of her buried self; to see in “Emma” the sleepwalking girl who is unable
to say who she is’ (LG, 339). While the author can hide ‘undaunted creative fire under the public mask of perfect docility’ (LG 65), (or at least under the male pseudonym of ‘Currer Bell’), McGuckian’s poem emphasises the dark, passionate and unrestrained side of the female writer. Crucially, the female writer learns from the male writer how to construct her public discourse. However, the example cited in McGuckian’s poem is an enabling one: having rejected Southey as a literary exemplar, Brontë chooses M. Heger, her tutor while she was in Brussels as an affirming literary influence. The words that are taken up from lips are *his* words. McGuckian quotes from a passage in *Shirley*, one that shows the eponymous heroine being treated as an equal and learning from her exemplar (again, art transfiguring real life events for Brontë): “‘she took the word up as if from his lips: she took his very tone; she seized his very accent; she delivered the periods as he had delivered them: she reproduced […] his expression’.”

The imagery associated with battle and violence is taken from Schweitzer’s *Primeval Forest* and Homer’s *The Iliad*. While the key intertext remains Gordon’s biography of Charlotte Brontë, the two other sources provide the poet with graphic images to portray the intensity of the inner conflict within the female writer. Hence, the poem’s opening depicts the writer as a ‘war-bred bird’ whose mouths can be threatening:

- birds which circle above water (PF, 59);
- leaf-roof (PF, 141);
- half-tender (LG, 241); wolves of the sea (PF, 23);
- his mouth served as his purse (PF, 23);
- strike the water singing (PF, 29);
- underside of its head (PF, 22);
- as loud as a man’s head
- can hold (Iliad, 192); ‘the whole night seemed to feel her’ (LG, 260)

Put simply, this is a battle of the sexes, a war in which the female writer is in pain, suffering like Odysseus who, when in trouble, must give three shouts ‘as loud as a man’s head can hold’ (Bk 11, l. 465). Yet the female writers will emerge successful; they will ‘strike the water singing’. The emergent writer can be seen in the extract quoted by McGuckian in which Lucy Snowe finds her buried alter ego in the spectral nun: ‘As the nun passes with fierce gestures through a storm, “the whole night seemed to feel her”. Lucy, too, stays out in the wild hour ‘pealing out

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such an ode as language never delivered to man’ (LG, 260, emphasis added). The language of female art is figured as alien to that of male discourse. For McGuckian, the alienation of female writers from patriarchal discourse is akin to her alienation when writing as an Irish writer in English:

the English words did not breathe (LG, 107);
the gap in the given language (LG, 268);
close-packed graves (LG, 8);
sleep of bronze (Iliad, 186);
the words she willed on him (LG, 137);
his letters were real food (LG, 274)

But the English words refuse to breathe and two spread hands
make the cell-learned Irish
a semi-jail prayer.

There’s a white silk gap in the given language
where close-packed graves
and their slow-waved sleep
set in glimpsed bronze the sister words
so willed they become a food.

In interviews she has consistently emphasised her antipathy to the English language: ‘I am more and more aware of English as being a foreign medium’,[32] ‘[a]ll of the English language repels me’. [33] ‘The poem’s conclusion, then, suggests the struggle of the female writer with ‘the given language’ and writing in it is akin to death (figured here as Iphidamas’ dropping into a ‘sleep of bronze’). But when McGuckian writes that ‘his letters were food’ she is again pointing to the enabling influence of those male figures who acknowledge women writers as equals. The allusion is to M. Heger (under the guise of M. Paul), whose letters ‘were real food’ for Lucy/Brontë.

What I have argued in this chapter, then, is that McGuckian offers, like Sherman and Amos, a revisionary masquerade in her work, a poetic enterprise that uses a poetics of exemplarity to present a performative self, one that is constantly under erasure, and that hers is a poetic praxis that is cognisant of the embodied discourse of the female pen. Her peculiar method of composition, weaving together quotations from source texts, enables her to re-live and re-examine the lives and works of historical and literary female icons and to use them as exemplars for her own work. What is enacted in each text is a masquerade whereby McGuckian’s ‘shaded self’ can work through the psychodrama of the female author in a public forum (the collection of poetry) using one of the key strategies of her exemplars, namely that of concealment.

In a recent article, María Jesús Lorenzo-Modia and Cristina Fernández-Méndez contend that, although Medbh McGuckian’s work ‘shows certain feminist traits’, it ought not to be viewed within the paradigm of feminism for two key reasons: firstly, ‘the protean nature’ of her poetry ‘prevents it from being assimilated into any pre-existing way of seeing the world’; secondly, answers given by her in interview seem less than radical, upholding instead ‘the traditional Irish stereotypes for women’.¹ In many respects the authors’ findings do not differ from those of Anne Fogarty’s critically astute article “A Noise of Myth” from 1994 in which she articulates the seeming discrepancy between McGuckian’s poetic voice, one that seeks ‘an accommodating space for female experience and language’, and her public persona, which appears utterly antithetical to the feminist movement.² Indeed, their reading of her work within a Kristevan theoretical framework, emphasizing its pluralist and non-essentialist nature, is a strategy which is much in vogue since it allows critics a methodology to appreciate, and write about, a poetry that is so self-reflexive about its own production.³ Yet it seems odd to deny the poetry’s feminist aspects which have been widely acknowledged, certainly since Clair Wills’ seminal study, Improprieties, in which she convincing showed how McGuckian opposes the overbearing Catholic and nationalist ideals of femininity with a poetry that foregrounds ‘the bodily and corporeal nature of the meanings of motherhood’.⁴

¹ María Jesús Lorenzo-Modia and Cristina Fernández-Méndez, “Longer and Longer Sentences Prove Me Wholly Female”: Medbh McGuckian and Feminism(s), in Manuela Palacios and Laura Lojo (eds), Writing Bonds: Irish and Galician Contemporary Women Poets (Oxford, 2009), 53.
Looking at the arguments put forward by Lorenzo-Modia and Fernández-Méndez, their first objection for viewing McGuckian as a feminist can be easily dismissed since describing a poet’s work as ‘feminist’ does not necessarily restrict her worldview to a single ideology. However, there is some compelling evidence to support their second objection. McGuckian, in conversation with Susan Shaw Sailer, stated that ‘I find feminism attractive in theory but in practice I think it ends up influenced by lesbians and—very lonely and embittered and stressed and full of hatred’.\(^5\) Such a reductive (and potentially offensive) generalisation certainly suggests that she had, at the time of the interview at least, little affinity with the work done by feminist practitioners and/or theorists. However, it is unwise to dismiss a poet’s feminist credentials on the basis of selective quotation from interviews since their contexts differ and the answers can vary from one moment to the next. A year later, when interviewed by Kimberly S. Bohman, the poet is discernibly less antagonistic. Asked if she regarded herself as a feminist, she offered a *mea culpa*: “To me I failed as a feminist once I got married. It seems to me that if you were wearing a ring on your finger then you’re chained to male society and you’ve accepted that. You’ve accepted their *mores*.\(^6\)” While Lorenzo-Modia and Fernández-Méndez cite this response in their article, they fail to acknowledge her immediate corrective: ‘Well, I didn’t see it as a failure. I just felt that I was a weak person. I felt I had to belong to somebody, or felt that in order to be free in the poetry, I had to be tied in the life’.\(^7\) What McGuckian actually puts forward here is a reflective self-critique, one which displays an awareness of the power differentials inherent in matrimony and does not intimate a current stance inimical to feminism. Indeed, far from being ‘unable and unwilling to distance herself from her Northern Irish Catholic community’ in terms of her views on gender,\(^8\) the poet in the same interview criticises misogynistic Catholic ideology: ‘I believe that sin is something that the church has given us—women especially—an idea that their bodies are in themselves evil’.\(^9\) In this chapter I want to argue that McGuckian’s oeuvre is profoundly concerned with matters of female identity in ways that mark it out as feminist. Her historical gaze lays bare the essentialist, gendered rhetoric used within patriarchal culture which renders women as marginal, submissive and disempowered. In poems which borrow from texts as diverse as source books on women’s culture in Renaissance Italy and sociological studies of women’s


\(^7\) McGuckian ‘Surfacing’, 103.

\(^8\) Lorenzo-Modia and Fernández-Méndez 53.

housework, McGuckian investigates the sources of male power, explores how women’s bodies are viewed and defined throughout the ages, examines different practices of ‘mothering’, and presents cultural conventions as both relative and subject to change. Using and altering the words of others, she is never complicit in the practice of ‘othering’; rather, each of McGuckian’s poems can be viewed as a palimpsest, a means of ‘writing in the interstices of texts, boring thru the white between the lines, scribbling on the margins’.10

In “The Character of the Dug Explained”, McGuckian employs as her source text Will Pritchard’s *Outward Appearances*, a study which ranges across the literature, legal reports, conduct books and anatomical treatises of the Restoration period in its exploration of how men perceived female display.11 Pritchard argues that women of the time were under a contradictory imperative: ‘keep yourselves private, so as to remain modest, and make yourself public, so that your modesty may be proved and approved’ (*OA*, 63). While display was thus both encouraged and stigmatized in equal measure, a woman’s moral well-being was said to be inscribed on her body; exterior features were read to determine ‘the truth of her social and spiritual identity’ (*OA* ,15). The contemporary debate concerned the notion of an ‘authentic’ identity. Was character essentially a matter of birth and breeding, or could it be acquired? Could that character be discerned accurately from a woman’s appearance? If character is to be determined according to behavioural traits and physical appearance, is it not subject to manipulation and dissemblance? The poem’s title alludes to these matters: while ‘character’ refers to the aggregate of the breast’s distinctive features, the word also means ‘the sum of moral and mental qualities’; the latter is supposed to be revealed through the former. What interests both Pritchard and McGuckian is the gendered rhetoric surrounding such issues of female legibility. The opening stanza depicts a Cartesian mindset whereby the rational faculty is separate from, and has priority over, the body:

> Philosophy I say and call it he, my throat hurts
> From all the j’s and h’s: a woman and a melon
> Are both alike, nobody knows what is in them
> Until they are broke up. It is as impossible
> To dive into the heart of a woman as to run
> Your head, body and all into her fundament.

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Here, ‘philosophy’ is properly the remit of men who objectify and seek free access to, and control of, the (female) body. The opening line adopts the rhetoric of the time: as Pritchard argues (citing from Abraham Cowley’s poem “To the Royal Society”), ‘[i]n writings from the period, probing science was repeatedly cast as male (“Philosophy, I say, and call it, He. / For what-so’ere the Painters Fancy be, / It a Male-virtue seemes to me”), and fleeing nature was female’ (O.A, 65). While scientific advances in anatomy held out the promise that female legibility was attainable, the stanza incorporates the obverse fear of inscrutability. ‘Woman’ and ‘melon’ are equivalent in the sense that they must be penetrated and broken up in order to be rendered fathomable. As Pritchard states,

‘Women’s actions are like their wombs, not to be fathomed’, was one adage; another was ‘A woman and a melon are both alike. For till they are broke up, nobody knows what is in them’. But when authors made claims such as ‘it is impossible to dive into the Heart of a Woman, as it is to run your Head, Body and all into her Fundament’, they were implying that full carnal knowledge of a woman was equivalent to knowledge of her innermost self. The very impossibility of fathoming a woman’s womb, breaking her open like a melon or entering entirely into her ‘Fundament’ (anus), reinforced the sense that the female body contained the secrets of women’s hearts and actions. (O.A, 67, original italics)

Viewing a woman as naturally ‘other’ meant that her body ‘must be subjected to constant surveillance’,12 yet patriarchal control falters here: the inability to fully discern a woman’s nobility and moral probity leads to the fear that she is inscrutable and ultimately unknowable. To render the female body transparent and wholly legible, the poem’s addressee turns to the discipline of anatomy:

‘Y’ have taught the curious Sight to press / Into the privatest recess / Of her imperceptible littleness’ (O.A, 67); Sweet-bread […] Piss-bladder […] Arse-gut […] Flank-bone (O.A, 69); The parts which in Women serve for generation (O.A, 69); The descendent Trunk of Vena cava with its Branchings (O.A, 69); The Trumpets of the Womb […] so called, or the blind passage of the seed (O.A, 69); resembling the Wings of Bats or Flitter-mice (O.A, 69); The greatest and middlemost Kernel (O.A, 69);

You have taught the curious sight to press
Into the privatest recess of her littleness,
Her sweet-bread, piss-bladder, arse-gut,
Flank-bone, the parts which in women serve
For generation, the descendant trunk
Of Vena Cava with its branching,
The trumpets of the womb or blind passage
Of the seeds, resembling the wings of bats
Or flittermice, the greatest and middlemost kernel.

In the stanza’s opening lines, McGuckian cites Cowley’s encomium to the medical profession which praises the Royal Society for its ability to peer into the depths of the female body. She then uses the corporeal descriptors from a medical diagram in *Bartholinus Anatomy* (cited by Pritchard) that outlines ‘the parts which in Women serve for Generation’ (*OA*, 69) in order to ‘dissect’ her subject. Of course, ‘dissection’ has a double meaning: on the one hand, it refers to ‘the delicate separation of constituent structures’; on the other, it can be viewed as ‘a more violent “reduction” into parts’.\(^{13}\) Dissective culture demands that the once complete body must be opened up and fragmented to form a new body of understanding.\(^{14}\) McGuckian’s description, breaking down one section of the body into its constituent parts, is no less grotesque than Shakespeare’s anatomisation of the female subject in Sonnet 130, wherein the loved one is reduced to ‘eyes’, ‘breasts’, ‘lips’, and ‘cheeks’, but the later poem more overtly lays bare the violence associated with the male appropriative gaze and therein lies an implicit critique of the period’s treatment of women as objectified, marginal beings who were subject to male prohibitions.

Cultural studies of the Renaissance and beyond demonstrate that the ‘female body […] was the *locus* of a quite specifically gender-determined fear’,\(^{15}\) namely an anxiety associated with female viscera, specifically the areas associated with generation and parturition. As Katharine Park has shown, in anatomical studies there was a ‘disproportionate emphasis on the uterus relative to the other members of the human body’ because it was ‘mysterious’ and ‘difficult to understand’.\(^{16}\) In contrast to woodcuts of the dissected female figure in the *Fasiculo de medicina* (1494) which portray her as instructing the anatomist, thus implicitly having voice and authority despite being the object of scrutiny, the autoptic vision is reversed in Bartholinus: while we are presented with an unimpeded view of the genitals, female agency is displaced to the surrounding captions. The descriptive terms serve less to idealise than to excoriate the female body: ‘piss-bladder’ and ‘arse-gut’ reveal a fundamental baseness, ‘sweet-bread’ indicates availability for consumption, and ‘littleness’ betrays the woman’s unequal social standing. In McGuckian’s poem, the display of female viscera is not done for the purpose of teaching anatomy to medical practitioners but merely to allay the addressee’s fear arising from withheld access. Yet full visibility is not granted: the Fallopian tubes


are described as ‘the blind passage of the seed’ (my italics). The following stanza further confirms this inscrutability:

‘So sea-like, so investigable, / That no land map, nor seaman’s chart, / … Can direct us direct us’ (O.A, 66); ‘Men use where there is a Bush’ (O.A, 56); ‘A good Inn hath very seldom a bad Sign-post’ (O.A, 52); nothing less than what she most appeared (O.A, 44); ‘as if you were created for no other end than to dedicate the first-fruits of the morning to your Looking-glass, and the remainder thereof to the Exchange, or Play-house’ (O.A, 19)

A thing so sea-like, so investigable, that no chart Can direct us—men use to look for wine where There is a bush, and a good inn hath very seldom A bad sign-post. But some women are nothing less Than what they most appear, as if they were Created for no other end than to dedicate The first-fruits of their morning to their looking-glass And the remainder thereof to the playhouse.

The opening quotation, from Charles Cotton’s poem ‘Woman’, portrays the objectified female as an irresistible puzzle which is nevertheless resistant to scientific enquiry. The next quotations, from Dorcas Bennet’s Good and Seasonable Counsel for Women, from a Woman (1670) and Richard Graham’s Angliae Speculum Morale (1670), counsel women to cover up their body. Female attire functions as an index of moral character; in this post-Edenic worldview, nakedness is akin to sinfulness. In the quotations cited by McGuckian, the bodily signs of the neck and breasts function in the manner of a sign above a shop. Hence, there is a presupposed belief in the intrinsic relation between the female subject’s interior and exterior disposition. Bodily signs rather than those associated with behaviour were privileged as a means of determining a woman’s identity. As Pritchard argues,

First, they were seen as more determinate and indelible, less open to manipulation or falsification. Behaviour could be feigned, bodies could not; they did not seem susceptible to self-difference. Second, bodily signs more strongly asserted the importance of birth to identity. They mitigated against the type of relativism and social fluidity that behavioural signs permitted. (O.A, 52)

Yet such certainty is undermined in McGuckian’s poem as she goes on to cite from the story of Mary Carleton, an infamous bigamist and confidence trickster, ‘who was nothing less than what she most appeared’ (O.A, 44). Arriving at the Exchange Tavern in March 1663, Carleton for a time successfully passed herself off as a German noblewoman; traversing class boundaries, she assumed the role through the manipulation of both costume and behaviour. While a conduct book such as The Gentlewoman’s Companion (1675) might advise against behaving ‘as if you were created for no other end than to dedicate the first-fruits of the morning to your Looking-glass’ (O.A, 19), Carleton gained social status and riches by
doing just the opposite. Indeed, in a later stanza McGuckian cites from Jacques Olivier, *Discourse of Women* (1662) to present the various means by which women triumphed over men through imposture and cunning:

[T]hey have a whole arsenal
Of aspects and idle looks, gaudiness and ceremonies.
They will wanton with their gloves and handkerchiefs.

Female identity, then, is treated throughout McGuckian’s poem as being non-essentialist, fluid and theatrical, open to both bodily and behavioural manipulation; it defeats the male gaze, avoids scientific scrutiny and contravenes social prescription. Of course, the form of the text embodies its key thematic concern: by constructing her poem from unattributed quotations, the poet has hidden from our gaze; she has adopted a persona, one whose identity is utterly false and unstable. Her poetic impersonation allows her to co-opt a male Restoration world-view, with its constituent rhetoric, all the while remaining subversively detached from and non-complicit with its ideological presumptions.

McGuckian does not restrict her critique of how women are constructed as ‘patriarchal territories’ to the Restoration period. In ‘The Good Wife Taught her Daughter’, for example, she rewrites the medieval didactic poem of the same name—generically, it was a parental advice text—by splicing together quotations from Sarah Salih’s cultural analysis of the conduct literature of the time:

Lordship is the same activity whether performed by lord or lady ([MW], 128); in which a lord happens to be a lady ([MW], 131); ‘all the faults’ ([MW], 131)

A woman ‘stedfast in lokyng’ ([MW], 134); ‘a callot’ ([MW], 135); any woman in the wrong place ([MW], 125–6); A woman outside of her proper location is by definition ‘a foolyshe woman’ ([MW], 126)

The harlot […] is ‘talkative and wandering, not bearing Lordship is the same activity whether performed by lord or lady or a lord who happens to be a lady, all the source and all the faults.

A woman steadfast in looking is a callot and any woman in the wrong place or outside her proper location is, by virtue of that, a foolish woman.

The harlot is talkative and wandering

to be quiet, not able to abide still at home, now abroad, now in the streets, now lying in wait near the corners’ (*MW*, 125);

‘their hair straying out of their wimples and the collars of their shifts and robes one upon the other’ (*MW*, 134)

The opening lines’ declaration of the apparent equality between the sexes has some basis in fact since the conception of lordship was at times gender-neutral; noblewomen and gentlewomen often took charge of the estates in the absence of their husbands, and their household activities were not always gender-specific. However, given that the poem focuses exclusively on how the behaviour and appearance of women were closely regulated, the statement is soon made to sound hollow. A woman who was not in the right place, who strayed beyond her ‘proper location’ was branded as ‘foolish’. Although the term sounds relatively benign, the specific example, from which the general rule is inferred, relates to Dina, a victim of rape who was deemed to have invited the assault by the mere act of leaving her house. ‘Foolish’, in McGuckian’s text, is equated with a second term: ‘callot’ (harlot). In the Ménagier de Paris’s treatise on good household management practices, a woman who maintains her bodily self-discipline, she who is ‘stedfast in lokying’, becomes a symbol of the respectability of her household: she ‘shalle ye holde you in youre estate more ferme and sure’ (*MW*, 134). Yet in McGuckian’s poem such a woman is designated as a prostitute. ‘Steadfast looking’ in the original text infers that the woman is dutifully aware of her status in society: downcast eyes indicate social inferiority, while a steady gaze signifies nobility. Advice manuals of the time recommended that women, to preserve their space in the public realm, should ‘keep their eyes down’; hence, as Barbara Hanawalt argues, ‘[w]omen’s spaces […] could be effectively preserved by physical limitations of the movement of the head and eyes’. 19 However, McGuckian alters the context and changes the implication of ‘looking’: here, in a sexual context, the woman has a clear determination to ‘look’ (appear) despite strictures to the contrary. Unregulated contact, or even simply being seen at a window, can imply availability and entail symbolic penetration, thus entailing a threat to her chastity (*MW*, 131). Indeed, McGuckian’s speaker later cautions against making oneself visible at such a dangerous liminal space by repeating the instruction given by the author of the *Ancrene Wisse*: ‘love your windows as little as you can’ (*MW*, 33).

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Both the source and quoting texts foreground the prescriptions and prohibitions imposed upon women in medieval Europe. As Salih argues, everything associated with women was ‘legible and significant: dress, gesture, speech, and place all embodied the discipline of which the individual [was] both subject and performer’ (MW, 136). The regulations which dictated how women were meant to negotiate domestic and social spaces could be found in the conduct literature which worked ‘to contain women literally, but also to produce women who [had] so interiorized the values of the household that they [would] carry them with them even when elsewhere’ (MW, 133). A ‘good woman’ had to adopt a demeanour which exemplified ‘her control over her speech and sexuality, thus defining the nature of her interaction with the outside world’ (MW, 134).

The woman was designated ‘bad’ if she ignored the gender-specific regulations governing her behaviour. Thus, she became a ‘harlot’ if she transgressed the injunctions governing her speech (‘not bearing to be quiet’), appearance (‘hair straying out of its wimple’), and movement (‘not able to abide still at home’). Indeed, these examples conform to Stallybrass’s analysis of patriarchal territories: he argues that ‘the closed mouth’ was a sign of chastity, which in turn was ‘homologous to woman’s enclosure within the house’.20 McGuckian’s poem relates the story of one particular ‘bad woman’:

‘the said Margery left her home in the parish of Bishopshill and went to a house, the which this witness does not remember, in the city of York without and contrary to the said Thomas, her husband […] and stayed there from noon of that day until the darkness of night’ (MW, 126)

The said Margery left her home in the parish of Bishopshill, and went to a house, the which the witness ‘does not remember’, and stayed there from noon of that day until the darkness of night.

Margery Kempe had petitioned for a separation from her husband, Thomas, on the grounds of cruelty; however, his violence was deemed acceptable by the court because of ‘her refusal to stay within the household’ (MW, 126). Hence, given the inherent gender inequalities of medieval prescribed social protocols and legal codes, in this poem ‘Lordship’ is clearly not ‘the same activity / whether performed by lord or lady’.

The late medieval poem, ‘The Good Wife Taught her Daughter’, an exhortative text in which a mother figure both counsels and admonishes her female offspring in order to inculcate the dominant social values, does not envisage a society in which a woman must be wholly confined to the domestic space, and does assume ‘that a housewife will routinely sell goods in the market place’ (MW, 125).

However, the speaker in McGuckian’s poem voices a contrary, more prescriptive view:

‘he should never haue my good wyll for to make he should neuer haue my good wyll for to make my to selle kandyll and mustard in Framlyngham’ (MW, 125); a shopping list of crossbows, almonds, sugar, and cloth (MW, 129)

Comparing the source text with McGuckian’s poem, it is possible to argue that she is making a correct distinction between the ways in which space is controlled for upper and lower class women; as Salih states, ‘[e]ntirely proper wifely behaviour in the one case is a shocking breach of class status in another’ (MW, 125). Yet perhaps the real reason why McGuckian takes a more caustic view is due to the research that she has done while composing her historically based poems: the essays, monographs and conduct books that she has consulted consistently depict women as being subject to male surveillance, self-censorship and curtailed movement in society.

‘The Good Housewife’, for example, is based on a sourcebook edited by Mary Rogers and Paola Tinagli containing extracts from diaries, conduct books, legal documents, inventories, letters, treatises, and poetry, each of which presents burdensome instructions for and idealised portraits of Italian women during the Renaissance. The following is taken wholesale from the advice presented in a letter from Francesco Datini to his wife, Margherita:

The good housewife should take care that no part of the house, no place, no household goods are hidden from her. She should look everywhere, think of everything, go everywhere, so that when she needs something she will have what she wants under her eye, or under her hand, quickly and without difficulty, just like a captain who often inspects

The good housewife should take care that no part of the house, no place, no household goods are hidden from her. She should look everywhere, think of everything, go everywhere, so that when she needs something she will have what she wants under her eye, or under her hand, quickly and without difficulty, just like a captain who often inspects

While she is sitting working, or doing some other duty within her room, she should go over the whole house

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McGuckian, ‘The Good Housewife’, *My Love Has Fared Inland* (Oldcastle, 2008), 64–5. Extracts from the poem are cited on the right and quotations from the source text—Mary Rogers and Paola Tinagli (eds), *Women in Italy, 1350–1650: Ideals and Realities* (Manchester, 2005)—are cited on the left and marked ‘WT’. 
his soldiers (WI, 154) while she is sitting working or doing some other duty within her room, she should go over the whole house in her mind, thinking whether there is anything lacking, or anything in excess (WI, 154)

The wife’s identity, her personality and character traits, are nullified by, or at least subsumed under, the general epithet, ‘good housewife’, a designation which is far from neutral in meaning: the adjective conjoins occupational proficiency with moral probity, the former determining the latter. The husband’s letter constitutes a ‘found poem’ for McGuckian, and her rendition of it from prose into poetry calls attention to its more malign features. The first line break calls our attention to the threatening aspect of his instruction: the line now reads as a stern warning rather than as a spousal entreaty. The wife is urged to ‘look everywhere’, to ‘think of everything’ and to ‘go everywhere’: such imperatives may at first suggest freedom (of movement and of access), yet they are, strictly speaking, impossible to carry out. The scopic regime depicted in the text seems to suggest that all the power resides with the wife: she is the overseer who shall ensure that nothing is ‘hidden from her’, and she is like the ‘captain’ who ‘often / inspects his soldiers’. However, the personal pronoun used here, and the fact that the husband employs a simile, implies that only a man can inhabit such a role (‘his soldiers’). Thus, the section title given for this letter in the source-book—‘A wife rules over the household’—is now rendered wholly ironic by its poetic treatment. It is clear that the husband is the overseer and she is merely one of his troops. Indeed, the line break at the start of the second verse calls attention to the wife’s subordinate role since it emphasises her ‘duty’. Similarly, the reader may notice how the opening stanza is characterised by movement (indicative of free access) whereas the following stanza is far more constrained, each line opening with an image connoting stillness: ‘while she is sitting working’, ‘within her room’ and ‘in her mind’. Thus, the wife is less a ruler than a captive confined within the house.

Another poem in which we apparently see the wife’s identity being effaced by that of her husband is ‘Rebecca-at-the-well Teapot’ which borrows from Laurie Wilkie’s *The Archaeology of Mothering*:

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22 McGuckian, ‘Rebecca-at-the-well Teapot’, *The Currach Requires No Harbours*, 42. Extracts from the poem are cited on the right while quotations from the source—Laurie A. Wilkie, *The Archaeology of Mothering: An African-American Midwife’s Tale* (New York, 2003)—are cited on the left, marked ‘AM’. 
childlike head on an adult body (AM, 105); ‘would bite out my married name in addressing me’ (AM, 82); ‘I have no feeling left in my fingers’ (AM, 115); These houses were designed to be read like a book (AM, 103)

One reading suggests that the speaker is addressed by an unidentified, but infantilised, female figure, who pointedly reminds her of her own marital status: the ‘married name’ supplants any previous appellation; situated within a culture which prioritises patrilineality, she is known only in terms of her relationship to her husband. One can discern from the opening lines the speaker’s specific habitus, the ‘structuring structure’, or that which ‘organizes practices and the perception of practices’.

The domestic surroundings, and the speaker’s negotiation of them, reveal an internalised set of social practices which govern her disposition and worldview. Firstly, we can tell that she is pious and self-sacrificing since she has lost the feeling in her fingertips due to acts of religious devotion ‘at each corner of the house’. Secondly, the interior décor functions as a material reification of Victorian values, particularly those which celebrate ‘the cult of true womanhood and values of motherhood’ (AM, 7). For example, the poem’s title refers to a type of ceramic teapot, one which is said to symbolise the wife’s role as ‘the spiritual and physical protector of the household’ (AM, 90-1): ‘The woman represents Rebecca of the Old Testament, who had been identified as the woman chosen to be the wife of Isaac based upon her offer to draw enough water from the well to satiate his camels’ (AM, 90). The source used by McGuckian also reveals that the woman with the ‘childlike head’ is actually a white parian figurine, one which represents balance and refinement. The interior of the domestic space is thus said to be perfectly legible, connoting the values of the time: it is ‘a house designed / to be read like a book’. The speaker’s values are reflected by her physical surroundings while she, in turn, is as objectified and lacking in agency as the tea-pot and figurine.

Of course, since the room is ‘designed / to be read like a book’, this does not necessarily mean that it is to be interpreted in one way only: the same book may well be read differently, subversively, and against the grain. Indeed, McGuckian’s portrayal is not so simplistic or generalising. Her historical gaze differentiates between types mothering practices and their status in society. Here, in a poem based on Wilkie’s study of the life and work of Lucretia Perryman, a late nineteenth-century widowed African-American midwife from Alabama,

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she portrays the surrogate mother-figure as having an active and somewhat subversive role, particularly in the third stanza:

‘motherwork’ (AM, 119); tea brewed from eggshells (AM, 133); May water (AM, 133); hen feathers tea (AM, 133); Cow hoof teas (AM, 129); teas of rusty nails (AM, 164); mole’s taken gunpowder out of a gun’ (AM, 160); ‘womb veils’ (AM, 148) My motherwork was brewing tea from eggshells in Maywater, from hen feathers and cow’s hoof, from rusty nails and mole’s foot, from peach leaf and floral remains. I took gunpowder out of a gun to veil her womb.

The making of tea seems at first a confirmation of her role as a Victorian ‘Angel of the House’; however, there are very different teas being brewed here, not all of which would sit well in the titular tableware. Many of the teas had curative powers: teas made with eggshells and those with hen feathers were used to ease the pain of contractions; cow hoof teas eased menstrual cramps; mole’s foot worked on teething babies. However, teas made with peach leaves and those with rusty nails were used to ‘take the gunpowder out of the gun’. In other words, they were used for abortions. The ‘motherwork’ is varied and far more socially active than that described in ‘The Good Housewife’. Wilkie’s analysis demonstrates the extent to which midwives like Perryman functioned as ‘generational and gender mediators for their communities’ (AM, xviii-xix) and that there were ‘conflicting social constructions of what it meant to be a woman and mother’ (AM, xx).

Although Wilkie outlines the ways in which midwives were subject to laws and regulations (particularly instituted by male medical practitioners), McGuckian’s text does not offer any critique of them. However, she does return to the topic in spectacular fashion in a later poem.

In ‘A Priest Assesses Breastmilk for Wet Nursing’, she quotes verbatim from the rules, set down by Rosen von Rosenstein in 1764, governing the selection of an appropriate wet nurse:

A fat nurse is preferable to a thin one, but if one can be found
That nearly corresponds with the constitution
Of the child’s mother, she will answer still better:
She ought to be able to suckle at each breast,
The nipples of which should be of a middling size.
These ought to be irritable, so they grow erect
By being gently stroked with your finger,
Which is a necessary quality of their giving milk.

Whose goodness may be tried,
1. by its colour, which ought to be rather bluish.
2. by the smell, as it should be void of any,
3. by the taste, not by any means salt or bitter.
4. by its consistence, when thin it is always better than thick […]

McGuckian has a tendency to quote large passages of prose, without altering the content, in order to highlight its sheer absurdity (often for satirical purposes). However, at first, it was tempting to view the fifty-five line poem as an example of plagiarism since there is so little alteration to the original text (even her characteristic cutting and splicing is kept to a bare minimum). The inclusion of an itemised list, which has eight numbered parts, running on for seventeen lines, seemed utterly bewildering and entirely unpoetic. Yet perhaps therein lies a clue to the poet’s intent as a numbered list is unsayable: ‘1’ may be the equivalent of ‘one’, but they are not the same; only the latter can be spoken. Just as the reader has trouble accepting her text as a poem, s/he perhaps is urged not to accede to its content either. To be selected, the wet nurse must submit to an invasive inspection, the excruciating details of which are presented to us. In fact, the reader is placed in the position of the priest who must assess the quality of her body and the breast-milk: ‘so they grow erect / By being gently stroked with your finger’. The poem’s title is taken from an engraving which depicts a priest inspecting a nun (somewhat lasciviously) and who is waiting to collect the milk in a porringer. Priests signed the wet nurses’ registration certificates and at times were empowered to evaluate the milk’s quality (its colour, smell, taste and consistency). To extract the passage from its original context and publish it at a time when the sexual activities and moral hypocrisy of certain priests have come under intense scrutiny in Ireland is perhaps McGuckian’s way of intensifying the passage’s implicit unequal gendered power relations.

One could also contend that the entirely negative view of ‘wifely’ and ‘motherly’ duties, and the restrictions under which the women must live, stems from her more contemporary concerns regarding the status of the housewife. In fact, it is clear that the theme has been a major preoccupation throughout her writing career. There are very many early poems by McGuckian which are based on feminist critiques of a wife’s status in society and her work in the home. One untitled (and unpublished) text takes as its source Ann Oakley’s *Woman’s Work*, a sociological study of women’s status in pre- and post-industrialised Western society, and Patricia Morgan’s *Child Care: Sense and Fable*, a rejoinder to the Maternal Deprivation Theory which argued that unbroken child care was essential to the development of one’s offspring:25

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25 McGuckian, untitled, McGuckian Papers, MS 770, Special Collections, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University, Box 29, folder 5. The poem is cited on
The poem’s opening is entirely ironic: although it seems to be a statement of secure proprietorship, a declaration of implicit pride about her domicile’s pristine condition, and an acknowledgement that nothing is revealed therein, the opposite is the case. The speaker’s self-reflexive comments acknowledge that she is aware of how she has become entrapped by her menial, economically dependent occupation as a housewife and, consequently, has been isolated from society (‘fear of marketplaces’). In her study, Oakley cites from Alice Rossi’s survey of American female college graduates (1961) which concluded that “‘[i]t is almost as though home-makers had romantic notions concerning marriage and family roles which the reality of marriage and motherhood tempers’ […] Marriage and family roles are less fully satisfying to the home-makers than they expected them to be” (WW, 198). Since McGuckian quotes from this passage, the speaker’s opening remarks imply that she has become equally disillusioned. While ‘haven’ connotes a place of safety and refuge, a welcome retreat from a threatening or unforgiving world, it has been argued that housewives, due to gender-role conditioning, have come to embrace their ‘vocation’ as ‘an unparalleled haven’ out of psychological necessity, and view it as an index of femininity (WW, 128). It is almost as if the speaker has become objectified and delimited by this ‘haven’: she is simply one more feature amongst the ‘dried grasses’ and ‘sisal carpets’. While the description of the flat seems to contradict the contention that it ‘supplies no information’, the speaker’s statement is true in one important respect: since ‘work can only be self-actualizing when it provides motivation for the worker’ (WW, 223), the housewife’s occupation is said to lack ‘any motivating factor’ and has little possibility for growth or self-advancement; thus, she ‘cannot get any information about herself from the work she does’ (WW, 223). Realisation of her enslaved predicament does not lead the speaker to educate her daughter any differently; rather, what the reader witnesses is the child’s socialisation for motherhood and the self-perpetuation of dominant patriarchal values:

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the right. Quotations from the source texts—Anne Oakley, *Woman’s Work: The Housewife, Past and Present* (New York, 1976) and Patricia Morgan, *Child Care: Sense and Fable* (London, 1975)—are cited on the right as ‘WW’ and ‘CC’, respectively.
‘animated toy, stuffed animal’ (WW, 195);
‘deck out’ (WW, 195); ‘affectionless’ (PM, 14); tyranny of the womb (PM, 14); female doll (WW, 193); between ‘her’ legs there is a smooth unbroken surface (WW, 193); responds in a certain way to some stimulus (PM, 62);

The female child becomes a ‘stuffed toy’, a ‘doll’ with which the mother plays; thus, she too is objectified. The absence of genitalia on the doll is significant: as Oakley comments, when a daughter plays with a doll the message which is transmitted to her ‘is a denial of biological femaleness, and thus of biological maternity’; hence, what the child learns to value ‘is not her inherent and quite unchangeable capacity to give birth to children, but the multitude of servicing activities she must perform for them’ (WW, 193). Conduct books and doll literature portray dolls as useful vehicles in feminine socialisation; in other words, they are used to educate a girl’s maternal instinct. However, in the poem it is the mother who plays with the doll (her child). This scenario suggests more than simply the infantalisation of the mother. Since the doll is a self-representational toy which is used to shape and normalise the female subject, to inculcate in her the ‘conservative patriarchal ideals of female domesticity’, one can see that the mother is not only enslaved by ‘the tyranny of the womb’ (her biological condition), but also by ‘a new, equally implacable Fact of Nature: her child’s need for her uninterrupted, undivided and devoted attention’ (PM, 14). The prevailing Maternal Deprivation Theory argues that the withdrawal of a mother’s constant support and attention will lead to an ‘affectionless’ child (one lacking in ‘normal’ values; an asocial monster). Hence, the female subject in this poem is in ‘bondage’ not only to ‘homemaking’ but also to the care of her child.

In her influential monograph entitled On Motherhood, the poet Adrienne Rich argues that ‘[t]he image of the mother in the home, however unrealistic, has haunted and reproached the lives of wage-earning mothers’ and that it has created a ‘dangerous archetype’, one which defines the mother as a ‘source of angelic love and forgiveness in a world increasingly ruthless and impersonal’. Mothers who work are made to feel guilty for not devoting all of their time to the care of their offspring. As an institution, motherhood is viewed by Rich as

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restricting a woman’s potential (in all areas). In an early poem entitled ‘The Moon Mother’, McGuckian uses Rich’s text as a source to reflect these views:28

The title is an ironic appellation for the speaker: in a pre-patriarchal culture, the Moon Mothers were not restricted by the institution of marriage; they ‘belonged’ to themselves and enjoyed great freedom (WB, 107). McGuckian’s speaker views herself as a colonial subject, twice-lost because she is bound in severance to both husband and child. (One can also read the opening sentence as depicting the child as ‘colonial’ as s/he is now part of the patriarchal machine.) The text registers the speaker’s anxiety and sheer exhaustion at being the primary caregiver. The mother is bound to the incessant and changing needs of the child. As Rich states, children develop ‘not in a smooth ascending curve, but jaggedly, their needs inconstant as weather’ and ‘cultural “norms” are powerless to decide, in a child of eight or ten, what gender s/he will assume on a given day’ (WB, 38). The speaker’s identity is almost effaced: the ‘I’ must ‘go round with the / Machine’ and she is powerless to alter her circumstances.

In a much later poem, ‘The Doll Funeral’, one written at the time of her own mother’s death, McGuckian returns to the ‘doll’ motif and the mechanical model of selfhood, the one now being used as an image for the other. In the final three stanzas, the poet borrows from Miriam Formanek-Brunell’s Made to Play House to depict the mother as an automaton, a mechanical doll who is unreflecting in character and repetitive in action:29

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28 McGuckian, ‘The Moon Mother’, in Ruth Hooley (ed.), The Female Line: Northern Irish Women Writers (Belfast, 1985), 76. An extract from the poem is cited on the left and quotations from the source are cited on the left, marked ‘WB’.

‘My talking doll [...] was as nearly perfect as machinery can be’ (MP, 41); enigmatic [...] mute, vain, and delicate (MP, 23); voices were too faint to be; heard (MP, 58);

when sheet music inside the doll body stuck (MP, 9);
two opposite faces’ (MP, 41); A moveable lower lip (MP, 41); ‘buzzing like an entrapped be’ (MP, 59)

Selfhood is here effaced: the mother seems to lack both agency and voice. (Although the doll can talk, its voice is ‘too faint to be heard’.) McGuckian’s invocation of the mechanized female subject has its roots in eighteenth-century novels and conduct books in which the machine often ‘works as the standard against which female character is not only compared and measured, but self-created’.30 In such works, as in the poem, the woman is presented as essentially a male construct: fragile, unthinking and utterly compliant. Crucially, the type of doll figured in ‘The Doll Funeral’ was devised by men. As Formanek-Brunell states, businessmen who became doll manufacturers in the late nineteenth-century conceived of the doll as ‘an autonomous object’; striving for realism, they gave it movement and voice, thereby removing ‘the doll they created from the child’s imagination and control’ (MP, 37). In one respect this had a positive outcome in that the children tended to reject the creation (thus circumventing the socialising process). However, in McGuckian’s poem the mechanical doll functions as an image of the mother: she is a truly frightening figure, a creeping monstrous (m)other. Where she once employed caustic irony, now she deploys full-blown Gothic horror in order to critique the male conception of motherhood. Yet a closer look at McGuckian’s lines may reveal why the mother is monstrous: the emphasis on ‘voice’ (a word strategically placed at the end of the line) points to her burgeoning, yet repressed selfhood. Lacking an outlet for her thoughts, she is merely a broken machine like the doll described in the source text: suffering from ‘locomotor ataxy’, the mechanised toy ‘staggered against the board, and then fell down, buzzing like an entrapped bee’. That evocative image of a maddening white noise describes the mother’s mental state: the thoughts persist, yet can go nowhere.31

Throughout her career, then, McGuckian has analysed the performative dimensions of gender, noting how women have been constructed, regarded and treated at different times in history. Her explorations of gender conventions have

31 I am indebted to Samira Nadkarni for pointing out this interpretation.
not, however, been confined to Western culture. In ‘A Hell Bird’,\(^{32}\) for example, she uses Catherine Weinberger-Thomas’s *Ashes of Immortality* to construct a poem centred on a particular form of self-immolation and voluntary death in India: widow-burning (*sati*).\(^ {33}\) The widow is viewed as ‘an object of universal repugnance’ (*AI*, 146): she must live an ascetic life devoted to self-mortification and religious observance; her hair is shaved and she is deprived of all comforts. The poem’s opening focuses on her marginal status, confined as she is indoors with her behaviour severely regulated and life practices controlled by strictures laid down by an intensely patriarchal culture:

She of the corner burned parting
Of haunted hair, she burns herself
With the fire of her yoga […]

The epithet, ‘she of the corner’, is a translation of ‘*kunevālī*’, an insult designating her as ‘a bearer of misfortune’; hence, she is expected to ‘emaciate her body, sleep on the ground, spend a full year in penance and live in a corner of a tiny room’ (*AI*, 146). ‘Burned parting of the hair’, or *māng jali*, equally belongs to the extensive catalogue of pejorative expressions used to denigrate the woman by her in-laws, a usage ‘legitimized by the belief that the widow has “eaten” her husband’ (*AI*, 147). McGuckian’s alteration of the phrase to include the notion of being ‘haunted’ signals the woman’s internalised guilt; indeed, as Weinberger-Thomas states, the widow who does not burn herself to death ‘may find herself haunted by the feeling that she has wronged him’ (*AI*, 132). To alleviate such guilt and to fulfil her marital duties, she must immolate herself on her husband’s funeral pyre and become a *sati*, ‘a virtuous wife, faithful to her conjugal vow’ (*AI*, 11). In so doing, she follows the example of the goddess Sātī, the wife of Śhiva, who, in the origin myth for widow-burning, withdraws ‘to the sacrificial ground and burns herself with the fire of her yoga’ (*AI*, 135). The poem’s conclusion, based on quotations from *Ashes of Immortality*, seems to depict such an adherence to the patriarchal code:

| to speak in a gravelly voice that is the sign of possession (*AI*, 148); the sacred finger (*AI*, 154); ‘a third of Indra’s sin’ (*AI*, 210); one worshipped in one’s heart of hearts (*AI*, 188); the left eye being a careful almond (*BH*, 30) | Her gravelly voice that is the sign of possession divides from her sacred finger. One third of her sin is the child-pebble worshipped in her heart of hearts, Her left eye being a careful almond. |

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\(^{33}\) Catherine Weinberger-Thomas, *Ashes of Immortality: Widow-burning in India* (Chicago, 1999). Referred to hereafter as ‘*AI*’. 
Weinberger-Thomas’s interviews with Hindu women reveal the extent to which sati culture influenced their lives. Lineage satis were honoured ‘if one wished to have sons or shield oneself from the hand of fate’; these satis were consequently ‘worshipped in one’s heart of hearts’ (AI, 188). Indeed, Weinberger-Thomas outlines how a woman, by nature, is viewed as ‘sinful’: within Hindu culture, as (as explained in the Srimad Bhagavatam, canto 6 chapter 9), the monthly discharge of blood (menses) is a sign of her impurity; menstruation means that she has taken on ‘a third of Indra’s sin’ for his killing of Vritasura. While the female figure in McGuckian’s poem appears to lack agency, be complicit in viewing herself as both guilty and impure, and to practice self-immolation (as indicated by ‘the sign of possession’), the final line, set apart in a separate stanza, functions as an ironic counterpart to poem’s foregoing narrative. Taken from Matthew Gale and Chris Stephen’s exhibition catalogue centred on the work of Barbara Hepworth, the line refers to a detail from the sculptor’s Figure of a Woman (1929 – 30) which appears, at first glance, to be a clay-based unglazed ceramic since it ‘resembles terracotta in texture and colour’ (BH, 30), but is in fact a sandstone sculpture. Thus, this particular ‘woman’ has not been ‘fired’. While one could argue that, as a sculpture, it constitutes an example of female objectification, it is generally considered ‘a powerful image of self-assurance’ (BH, 32) – she is not possessed but self-possessed – and the detail singled out by McGuckian indicates that we, and not it, are subject to a scopic regime.

While McGuckian’s poems indicate that gender conventions are context dependent, generally speaking women are shown to occupy marginal and often disenfranchised positions. In “The Sulking Room”, for example, she juxtaposes quotations from Cornelia Sorabji’s memoir, India Calling, with extracts from Women in Italy, 1350 – 1650, to indicate a shared experience of gender inequality. Sorabji (1866 – 1954), a writer and tireless social reformer became involved in social and advisory work on behalf of the purdahnashins, women who, according to Hindu law, were forbidden to communicate with the outside ‘male’ world; while in many cases these women owned property, they had no access to the necessary legal expertise to retain control over it. The poem’s opening description – “The blinds of scented grass embroidered / With the lighthouse of good omen” – uses an architectural trope to depict social exclusion since it describes the zenana (literally, ‘of the women’). It refers to the location reserved for

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35 The almond, to which her eye is compared, is a biblical symbol of watchfulness.
women in a Muslim household in South Asia. The reference perhaps undermines the seeming empowerment promised by the poem’s title: the ‘Sulking Room’ was the place to which a Hindu wife ‘might retire to sulk until she coerced her husband to her wishes’ (IC, 10). Yet Sorabji notes that such a room was not to be found in the modern Hindu household.

The poem goes on to list a series of proscriptions relating to duties, behaviour and dress:

- Doors must not be shut by her nor cooking-pots covered, nor the lids of boxes let down (IC, 141); the dead brown petals [...] must never be swept out (IC, 72);
- They may wear a marten around the neck without any gold (WI, 148)
- She may wear a marten round her neck without any gold [...]

The first quotation refers to the time of pregnancy when the woman is forbidden ‘to close anything’: ‘doors must not be shut by her, nor cooking-pots covered, nor the lids of boxes let down’ (IC, 141). The second quotation refers to the wedding garlands which, to maintain happiness, ‘may never be swept out’ of the ‘The Temple of Happiness’ (IC, 72). The third quotation evokes an entirely different culture and time period: it is taken from the Italian sumptuary laws of 1558 which ‘regulated dress according to social rank through prohibitions regarding types of cloth, intricate and costly decorations, ornaments and jewellery, in order to highlight the differences between ranks and to privilege the wealthy and more powerful groups which were exempt from restrictions’ (WI, 147). The image used by McGuckian presents a new element of social differentiation: class. The suggestion here is that there is a lack of gender solidarity due to class difference: women at all levels of society may rank lower than men, yet lineage and affluence may in turn reinforce social stratification and deny empathic feelings of sisterhood.

Although McGuckian herself lives in an enlightened and liberal age and place (at least relative to the early modern period), she has still found it difficult to balance the competing demands made of her because of her gender:

> You want to be a good mother, a good wife, a good daughter, you want to play all these roles that you have to, but your main need is to be the poet. You have to keep all these things in little compartments within your mind, and when one dominates over the other, then there’s a crisis. So I try and try to keep these parts of myself operating. It’s like different pieces or different selves, and it was very, very difficult for me.

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The tension between the competing demands of motherhood and of the poetic
vocation is explored in ‘The Rising Out’. In an interview with Clair Wills, she
reveals that ‘this whole poem was about the baby—my dream sister—it’s about the
poet being kindled in you’. The poem begins as follows:

My dream sister has gone into my blood
To kill the poet in me before Easter. Such
A tender visit, when I move my palaces,
The roots of my shadow almost split in two,
Like the heartbeat of my own child, a little
Blue crocus in the middle of a book, or the hesitating
Beginning of a song I knew, a stone-song
Too small for me, awaiting a drier music.

For any that I loved, it was for their hair
That never really belonged to them, its colour
Like a line of clouds just about to crumble,
The breaking of ice in a jar. In my mind,
I try and try to separate one Alice
From the other, by their manner of moving,
The familiar closing of the unseen room,
The importunate rhythm of flowers.

In constructing this text McGuckian has spliced together quotations from Karen
Petersen and J. J. Wilson’s Women Artists, a monograph which contextualises and
historicises the lives and production of women artists from the Early Middle
Ages to the twentieth-century. One of the early questions that Petersen and
Wilson ask is: ‘Is it mirroring or some deeper psychic process that causes so many
double images in women’s art?’ (WA, 3). This accounts for the doubles that occur
throughout ‘The Rising Out’. McGuckian alludes to two of the examples cited
by the authors when examining this question. The first is Mary Cassatt’s The Loge
(1882), a painting in which ‘the fan seems to separate one Alice from the other Alice in
the looking glass’ (WA, 3, my italics); the second is Frida Kahlo’s The Two Fridas
(1939), which ‘reflects a frequent dream women have of joyous embrace between
the dark sister and the fair sister’ and which presents Kahlo’s feeling of being ‘split in
two’ (WA, 3, my italics). What the poem explores, in part, is ‘the fear that women

39 McGuckian, cited in Clair Wills, Improperities: Politics and Sexuality in Northern Irish
40 Karen Petersen and J. J. Wilson, Women Artists: Recognition and Reappraisal from the
Early Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century (London, 1978). Quotations from this
text cited as ‘WA’.
describe of looking into the mirror one day and seeing nothing’, an ‘allegory of non-identity’ which ‘also reveals fear of desertion, of dependence upon an insufficiently integrated self’ (WA, 4). Here we have a clear binary opposition between the social/socialised self and the desiring, subversive, artistic self. What is being played out is a psychodrama, a fear that the subject cannot reconcile two seemingly disparate dispositions, and that it is condemned to being split in two.

McGuckian’s poem, however, using the documented experiences of female artistic exemplars, attempts to resolve the conflict. In the second stanza the speaker declares:

\begin{quote}
I continue meanwhile working on my arm-long
‘Venus Tying the Wings of Love’, hoping
She will recede with all my heroes, dark
Or fair, if my body can hold her bone to term.
\end{quote}

Here the poet is referring to Elisabeth Vigée Lebrun’s statement that, on the day her daughter was born, she did not quit her atelier and ‘continued working at [her] Venus Tying the Wings of Love, in the intervals between the throes’ (WA, 52). Each of the extracts cited by McGuckian in the poem centres on a key dilemma: how can one be both a mother and an artist? For example, in the concluding stanza we have a pairing together of female artists:

\begin{quote}
If she had died suddenly I would have heard
Blood stretched on the frame, though her dream
Is the same seed that lifted me out of my clothes,
And carried me till it saw itself as fruit.
\end{quote}

The first artist referred to is Frida Kahlo, one of whose paintings ‘deals with her own miscarriage’. Petersen and Wilson relate how she ‘wanted so much to have a child by Diego [her husband], but her body could not hold it to term.’ Later, ‘she took up the scene again and again, sometimes painting the blood out over the frame as if to warn us that life and art cannot be kept separate’ (WA, 135, my italics). The second artist referred to in the stanza is Paula Modersohn-Becker. The quotation is from a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke which addresses Modersohn-Becker: ‘And finally you saw yourself as fruit, / Lifted yourself out of your clothes and carried / that self before the mirror’ (WA, 110, my italics). While Rilke berated Modersohn-Becker for returning to her husband and seemingly betraying her art for a life of domesticity, McGuckian’s poem offers a corrective. The experiences of Kahlo and Modersohn-Becker are conjoined. When the speaker refers to ‘the same seed’, she is quoting Joanna Griffin’s poem (cited by Petersen and Wilson) affirming the inseparability of life and art. The allusion also, significantly,
establishes a connection between the contemporary female artist (McGuckian/Griffin) and those female exemplars who had to resolve their own psychodramas (Vigée-Lebrun, Kahlo, Cassatt, Modersohn-Becket): “Her dream is my seed / Her vision my task to make the centuries see her / with such clear eyes as hers are” (Wa, 62). McGuckian takes solace from the example of previous artists and affirms that it is possible to be both a mother and a creative artist.

McGuckian’s dramatic monologues often work to explode prevailing assumptions about the female subject, particularly those pertaining to ‘her defining domestic and nurturing function’, ‘her existence as object rather than creator of art’ and ‘the patent ridiculousness of her attempts to insert herself actively into the realm of history by means of work or engagement in political struggle’.41 One final example is ‘Self-Portrait in the Act of Painting a Self-Portrait’,42 a poem which centres on the themes of canonicity and female artistic authority, and whose title adverts to the author’s self-reflexivity regarding the conditions of her own poetic production. The poem makes use of many quotations from Germaine Greer’s The Obstacle Race, an in-depth survey of the historical context and socio-sexual ideology of female production in the graphic arts throughout the ages, and works by pairing together the work of different artists to explore a key tension, namely that between an art which is introverted, self-absorbed and inherently private, and that which intervenes in the public realm.43

The poem begins, however, by declaring that ‘Unreadable day, you must have sat / too often by the dying’. This sentence conjoins two quotations which present opposing artistic credos. The first, from Rainer Maria Rilke’s Malte Laurids Brigge, suggests that the writer, to create, must abjure narcissistic tendencies and act as a witness to public events: ‘One must have sat by the dying, one must have sat by the dead in a room with open windows’.44 However, McGuckian alters the quotation by saying that the addressee has ‘too often sat by the dying’, and the suggestion here of censure perhaps aligns her view with the second disposition, one adopted by the painter Aloïse Corbaz (1886 – 1964). Corbaz, an artist who was committed to a psychiatric clinic in 1918, is said to have rejected realism in favour of a private symbolism, resulting in an art which is described by Greer as ‘a timeless re-working of the images of courtship which she never experienced, in which the woman is a preposterously

43 Germaine Greer, The Obstacle Race: The Fortunes of Women Painters and Their Work (London, 2001). Quotations are marked as ‘OR’. There are also quotations from Sean O’Faolain’s Constance Markievicz which add a particularly Irish dimension to the poem.
voluptuous concatenation of circular and oval shapes, gazing narcissistically at the beholder out of lake-blue eyes which she is overwhelmed by the male profile’ (OR, 117). Corbaz’s ‘unconscious imagery’ is said to respond to ‘the enculturation of women’ and, as such, results in ‘unreadable forms’ (OR, 117, emphasis added). This aligns her with the next artist mentioned by McGuckian: Gwen John (1876–1939). Her art is said by Greer to be unreadable in the sense that she ‘she withdrew into a single drop, forever compressing and concentrating her art and her feelings to one inner end, the intense, energetic but utterly circumscribed life of a mystic’ (OR, 110). This is alluded to at the end of the first stanza when the speaker states that the addressee’s ‘Musehood has withdrawn / into a single drop’. Such inviolable privacy is seemingly paralleled at the beginning of the following stanza with an allusion to Lavinia Fontana’s Minerva Disrobing (1613), a painting which features the female goddess of war, Minerva, ‘assuming her feminine role after a hard day at the battlefield’: ‘Minerva stands with her left shoulder turned to the beholder and her left leg stretched behind her. The face she turns over her shoulder is sweet but unexpressive. The gown she lifts without looking is painted with the same delicate and loving attention to detail that we see in Fontana’s portraits, and contrasts oddly with the blankness of the treatment of the figure’ (OR, 213). While the painting presents us with Minerva, her naked flesh displayed for the male scope gaze, as an objectified female figure now confined within a domestic setting, McGuckian subtly alters the quotation from Greer to suggest a far more active protagonist: ‘The striped gown she lifts / without the painting looking’. While the painting’s title states that Minerva is ‘disrobing’, there is nothing else to suggest that she is not, in fact, preparing to depart for war. Rather, she could be lifting the gown to don it and depart, ‘without the painting looking’.

The poem’s conclusion, like its opening, presents two contradictory positions by means of conjoined quotations: ‘her ears closed and her lifetime’s gaze [...] on her own reflection, undigested, / in the fruit with their dismembered trunks of faces’. The first refers to Clara Peeters’ Still Life (1612), a painting in which the artist has ‘carefully painted her own reflection, six times, in the flare of light from a window’ (OR, 237, emphasis added). The multiple miniature self portraits are indicative of an artistic subjectivity which has been rendered split and peripheral by the prevailing masculinist ideology. Such a psychodrama bespeaks a frustrated and insufficiently integrated self of a type discussed in ‘The Rising Out’. Yet McGuckian counters this introversion with a further allusion to Greer: ‘To the deadening pull towards passivity is added the pressure of politics which would drag the artist in another direction until her soul lies dismembered’ (OR, 327). The artist’s self is further split by the call to bear witness as an artist to public events, to break free from the so called ‘feminine realm’ of the domestic interior. While McGuckian’s poem does not seek to resolve
the tensions between private and public, it does display an awareness of restrictive ideologies arising from specific historical contexts, and how they impact upon the female artist. By stitching together a dramatic monologue from quotations pertaining to her female precursors, McGuckian can, thus, adopt different masks and play out her own literary psychodrama. While artists like Peeters and John may have had, perforce, to inhabit peripheral positions, McGuckian’s personae glide between them, adopting a strategic and self-reflexive marginality.

In conclusion, far being inimical to feminism, McGuckian’s poetry, with its historical gaze and intertextual negotiation with past concepts of ‘mothering’ and ‘housewifery’, presents a scathing critique of patriarchy. Rather than featuring what Lorenzo-Modia and Fernández-Méndez term a ‘celebration of motherhood and the maternal body’, McGuckian’s work is alive to the ways in which the female subject is constructed and curtailed by masculinist ideology.

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‘The Painting Was Trying to Gather Me in’: Medbh McGuckian’s Ekphrastic Poetry

Much of Medbh McGuckian’s oeuvre constitutes a self-reflexive enquiry into the limits and possibilities of poetic expression. Language, for her, ‘has been devitalized by advertising and news’ and, consequently, ‘poetry must almost dismantle the letters’. However, her preoccupation with the revivification of the English language does not stem merely from a frustration with the increasing proliferation of clichés and hackneyed phrases by the media; rather, language *per se* is seen as a severely insufficient medium for giving voice to her emotional matrices and unconscious impulses. Indeed, echoing Roger Fry’s exasperation at the difficulty of writing, she states in ‘Idée Mère’ that ‘I want words that don’t exist’. But even when she does find the appropriate word, its meaning somehow strays far beyond the specifically chosen conjunction of signifier and signified: for her, ‘words are only sign posts’; they ‘are not the destination’. Here, the linguistic sign is merely a trace, in the Derridean sense, of that which it wishes to represent: ‘Since the trace is not a presence but a simulacrum of a presence that dislocates itself, displaces itself, refers itself, it properly has no site, erasure belongs to its structure’. Hence, McGuckian’s poetry often becomes deictic in function, pointing the reader towards the experience or emotion that she wishes to convey. In ‘My Father Walking’, for example, she depicts a father-figure as a guide in order to explain how the linguistic sign functions:

But he walks ahead,  
aware that he is leading someone,  
as reality heads towards the light  
of meaning, as what is not literature,  
our lives, no more than language,

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is a language that can always be spoken
by another language.

McGuckian, borrowing from Roland Barthes’s *Critical Essays*, equates the male subject with Orpheus (poet), leading Eurydice (language) out from the underworld. In his Orphic scenario, Barthes distinguishes the function of ordinary language from that of literature: ‘One could say that literature is Orpheus returning from the underworld; as long as literature *walks ahead, aware that it is leading someone*, the reality behind it which it is gradually leading out of the unnamed— that reality breathes, walks, lives, *heads towards the light of meaning*, but once literature turns around to look at what it loves, all that is left is a named meaning which is a dead meaning’.6 While ordinary language works to present us with a sense of the real, of that which can be named, by contrast, literature evokes that which cannot be (securely) named. Literature is the site of ambiguity and to fix it with our gaze and attempt to limit its meaning is to kill it. As Lombardo argues, paraphrasing Barthes, ‘though [literature] is made of language, it perverts the communicative nature of language itself by blocking its transitivity and making it […] a site of uncertainty’.7 While McGuckian confidently asserts that ‘our lives’ can be ‘spoken’, nevertheless she points out that this activity is one of translation, and thus the movement from experience to linguistic sign involves a loss: even if ‘our lives’ and ‘literature’ are both ‘languages’, they are not equivalent. The poem functions as a meta-linguistic commentary in which McGuckian (via Barthes) reminds us to be aware of writing as a medium, one which is always used subjectively: ‘writing is never anything but a language, a formal system […] at a certain moment […] *this language can always be spoken by another language*, to write (in the course of time) is to seek to discover the largest language, this language which is the form of all the others’.8

Writing for McGuckian is an ongoing process of refinement, of trying to incorporate within language that which is ineffable. It is an experience which is alluded to time and again in her work. In ‘She Which Is Not, He Which Is’, for example, she presents an overt commentary on her art:9

words without words (*SW*, 146); My words will be without words

‘A boat can be hidden in a creek, like a net hidden in a lake,

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7 Patricia Lombardo, *The Three Paradoxes of Roland Barthes* (Athens, Georgia, 2010), 76.
8 Barthes, *Critical Essays*, xii, my italics.
The speaker proclaims, somewhat paradoxically and counter-intuitively, that her ‘words will be without words’. The phrase, as used by Simone Weil in the source text, is a translation of the Greek term for irrational numbers, or ‘Logoi alogoi’ (unnamed ratios). Just as Weil states that geometry is the mediator between us and such numbers, McGuckian establishes poetry as a mediator between the reader and the ineffable. The evocative simile that explicates her conception of poetry’s role as mediator—‘like a net hidden in a lake’—once again locates the world of poetry in an underworld: a word serves to catch the emotion, or experience, and carry it out from its element. The image is highly appropriate for two reasons: firstly, not only does ‘net’ suggest a fabric which is formed into a mesh, thus linking it to ‘textus’ (‘that which is woven’; ‘tissue of a literary work’), it also denotes ‘a network of semantic or formal relationships in language’; secondly, the material form of a net indicates both a binding together and a loss at one and the same time, since the warp and weft yarns are knotted at their intersections, thus leaving large spaces for organisms or objects to slip through. In McGuckian’s figurative usage, then, words are carried to the surface, but something is always left behind. That notion of a lacuna, or that which is incomplete, is conveyed in the lines themselves since, unlike ‘My Father Walks’, which provides a prosaic explanation of her craft, they are unparaphrasable: while they are punctuated as if they constituted a coherent grammatical unit (a sentence), the third line disrupts this structure, lacking, as it does, both verb and object. The lines intimate, and the reader is forced to confront, that which is irrational or unsayable. The manoeuvre is deliberate on McGuckian’s part. Indeed, such ambiguity and uncertainty are not viewed negatively by her, and this can be seen in ‘Sky in Narrow Streets’.

I drive words abreast
Into the interior of words;
It is murder or kindling when two meanings
Rush together from such a distance,
No multiplicity can distress them.

Here her characteristic appropriative writing—taking phrases from pre-existent texts to form collage poetry—performatively enacts the thematics of the text. Quoting paratactically from C.S. Lewis’ Studies in Words, George D. Painter’s biography of Marcel Proust and Henri de Lubac’s The Faith of Teilhard de Chardin, 11

she comments on her *ars poetica* by allowing ideas from different sources to rub up against each other. C. S. Lewis contends that the sense of a word is governed by the context in which it appears; consequently, the intrusion of an unintended or irrelevant sense is said to cause ‘a semantic explosion’ because ‘the two meanings rush together from a great distance’ (*CSL*, 12). While Lewis’ series of essays intends to limit connotations and avoid unwarranted ambiguity through his technique of ‘driv[ing] words of different languages abreast’ (*CSL*, 2), McGuckian drives these words “into the interior of language”. The source for this latter phrase comes from the biography of Proust in which Painter recalls the fastidious editorial practices of Louis Ganderax who would, when correcting proofs for the *Revue de France*, pursue hiatuses “‘into the very interior of words’” (*MP1*, 92). The two sources, then, assert the necessity for exactitude of meaning. Yet while Lewis and Ganderax are at pains to avoid verbicide, namely ‘the murder of a word’ (*CSL*, 7) through incorrect semantic usage, McGuckian’s poem introduces her own caveat: ‘It is murder or kindling’ (my emphasis) when the two meanings come together. Hence, in this case, when words from the two texts are conjoined the resultant ambiguity is not necessarily destructive. That the speaker is reading the two sources against the grain is made apparent in the stanza’s final line, which is taken from de Lubac’s study of de Chardin: ‘He to whom it is given […] to see Christ more real than any other reality in the World, Christ everywhere present and everywhere growing more great, Christ the final determination and plasmatic Principle of the Universe, he indeed lives in a zone where no multiplicity can distress him’ (*TC*, vii, original emphasis). McGuckian is using the phrase in a very different context from de Lubac: ‘multiplicity’ refers here to the multiple meanings which are generative in a poetic context. The ambiguity, for McGuckian, does not ‘distress’ words (however much the unwilling reader may cry ‘murder’).

Water-colour of trees (*MP2*, 3); seascapes My watercolour of trees, seascapes at dawn, (*MP1*, 281); At dawn, noon and night (*MP1*, 207); furniture of earth (*CSL*, 15); promise to pay which is never going to be kept (*CSL*, 7)

This stanza works against Lewis’ prescriptive linguistic theories. In *Studies in Words* he argues that ‘verbiage’ is a form of ‘verbicide’ when a writer uses ‘a word as a promise to pay which is never going to be kept’. For McGuckian, such an emphasis on precision and exactitude is detrimental to the imagination. So, when using a phrase from Lewis like ‘the furniture of earth’, she does not adopt his above as ‘*MP1*’ for volume 1 and ‘*MP2*’ for volume 2; Henri de Lubac, *The Faith of Teilhard de Chardin* (London, 1965)—referred to above as ‘*TC*’.
Medbh McGuckian’s Ekphrastic Poetry

metaphorical application (“that which is to earth as tables and chairs and so forth are to a house”); rather, she dismantles and ‘unmakes’ prescribed meanings. Trees are very different from a ‘water-colour of trees’: art transforms ‘the real’. A word may have a referent, but one ought not to confuse the sign for the thing itself. To convey this idea, McGuckian, at the poem’s close, cites a lesson learnt by Proust from John Ruskin’s Praeterita. Entranced by a group of young trees in a forest, Ruskin begins to draw the branches: “With wonder increasing every moment I saw that they “composed” themselves, by finer laws than any known of man. At last the tree was there, and everything that I had thought about trees, nowhere” (MP1, 283). McGuckian’s driving of words into ‘the interior of words’ is a means of capturing and conveying that sense of wonder and allows readers’ access to the imaginative potential of language.

That final stanza of ‘Sky in Narrow Streets’ is an example of McGuckian’s ekphrastic verse, a genre and mode of writing most commonly deployed when exploring the limits and possibilities of her craft. Although the term originally referred to a rhetorical theory and practice dating from classical antiquity, within contemporary literary criticism it has come to refer to ‘the act of speaking to, about, or for a work of visual or plastic art’. Ekphrastic poetry is often motivated by an envious regard for painters and sculptors in whose work poets have seen ‘an immediacy, a presence, a “hereness” that they have wanted for words, but that they suspect words can only gesture toward’. In writing a poem about a painting, then, poets attempt to appropriate the ‘visual other’ and ‘transform and master the image by inscribing it’ within their text; as such, the poem constitutes an effort ‘to reproduce the supposed advantage of the rival art in its own medium, which is of course to deny or steal that avowed capacity’. At its heart, ekphrastic poetry is said to be ‘paragonal’ in nature since it (implicitly or explicitly) enacts ‘a struggle for dominance between the image and the word’. In this chapter I want to explore how and why McGuckian creates ekphrastic poems and argue that, while there are moments of real anxiety concerning the

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16 Stephen Cheeke, Writing for Art: The Aesthetics of Ekphrasis (Manchester, 2008), 1.
17 James A. W. Heffernan, Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery (1993; Chicago, 2004), 1.
limitations of her craft, anxieties similar to those already explored, ultimately she regards paintings as a rich resource for imaginative projection. We will also see that she dwells upon certain paintings as exemplary artworks in order to present (and validate) her own *ars poetica*. Ekphrasis becomes for her a way to confidently re-assert the validity of her poetic enterprise. However, the *paragone* between the arts, wherein the poetic text projects the visual as other to language, is seen as inherently gendered: as W. T. J. Mitchell argues, ‘the treatment of the ekphrastic image as female and other is commonplace’.

Hence, an ekphrastic text is not always simply an exercise in imitation or aesthetic comparison; rather, when ‘the self is understood to be an active, speaking, seeing subject, while the ‘other’ is projected as a passive, seen, and (usually) silent object’, ekphrasis plays out a scenario of cultural domination. In the latter part of this chapter I will argue that McGuckian’s texts constitute examples of feminist ekphrasis, a genre which ‘recognizes that a woman’s place as viewer is established within, beside, or in the face of a male-dominated culture, but that the patterns of power and value implicit in a tradition of male artists and viewers can be exposed, used, resisted and rewritten’.

The poems stage a self-reflexive meditation upon ‘the idea of a mastering male gazer and a feminized art object’ and the poet’s gaze ultimately rejects female objectification.

‘A New Portrait in the Naughton Gallery’, a recent poem by McGuckian based on James Elkins’s *Painting and Tears*, a monograph concerned with emotional responses to paintings, presents a vivid pen-picture of Giovanni Bellini’s *The Ecstasy of St. Francis* (1475–80), a work which is part of the permanent collection at the Henry Clay Frick House, New York. Eleven of the poem’s nineteen stanzas are devoted to this painting in which we see Saint Francis of Assisi caught in ecstatic rapture at the moment when he is pierced by the stigmata (the five wounds in imitation of those inflicted on Christ on the cross):

- dressed in monk’s robes, looking up into the sky (*JE*, 79);
- surrounded by a swirling sea of bluish rocks (*JE*, 79);
- chalky and dry (*JE*, 79); as if he were a chalky and dry, as if he were a boulder in a stream (*JE*, 79)

He is dressed in monk’s robes, looking up into the sky, surrounded by a bluish sea;

- chalky and dry, as if he were a boulder in a stream (…)

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21 Ibid., 81.
there is no green \((JE, \ 80)\); Some of the
stained by browns \((JE, \ 80)\);
scotters of fine dirt \((JE, \ 80)\) ; a fuzz of
(blighted grass; \(JE, \ 80\) ); The ripped
surface reflects a wan \((JE, \ 80)\);
tender sap \((JE, \ 80)\); toxic fog \((JE, \ 81)\);
A slate-grey donkey \((JE \ 80)\) ; a close-
cropped field \((JE, \ 80)\); parched and
marred by thistles \((JE, \ 80)\); Is the saint
looking up at the sun? Possibly \((JE, \ 81)\);
he even has a tiny yellow glint in
his eye \((JE, \ 81)\); as if someone has
jumped into it \((JE, \ 81)\)

Following the speaker’s gaze as it traverses the painting’s surface, the stanzas present a mixture of description, interpretation and imaginative projection. As readers, we are provided with details of the dress, position and deportment of the painting’s central figure, as well as an evaluative commentary upon the artwork’s materiality and colouration. In McGuckian’s text, forensic analysis, speculation and poetic re-presentation combine to comment upon (and rival) Bellini’s treatment of his subject. The two similes—‘as if he were a boulder / in a stream’, ‘as if someone hast just / jumped into it’—provide a way of rationalising and enlivening the static artwork. However, one could argue that not only is the poem’s originality complicated by the service paid to Bellini’s painting, it is also compromised by its reliance upon and co-option of Elkins’s commentary. Indeed, the poem’s conclusion, when the speaker says that ‘it sinks / forever into the way I think’, accords with and appropriates Elkins’s own reaction to the painting: ‘Somehow, the \textit{Ecstasy of St. Francis} resembled the way I thought. It had the right texture, it pooled in the right places. When I looked, it was as if words had been swept out of my head and replaced by brushstrokes and colours’ \((JE, \ 75)\). Such a conclusion would suggest a defeat for art-critic and poet alike since linguistic resources are here subsumed by those associated with the pictorial. However, Elkins \textit{does} write his commentary in words (as does McGuckian), and although ‘sinks / forever into’ may well acknowledge influence, it is not marked as unduly invasive, nor does it result in submissive silence. That the poem does not cede authority to Elkins can be seen by a close comparison between source and quoting text: ‘rocks’ is changed to ‘sea’ to highlight a tension between the painting’s static form and the action which it is attempting to convey; ‘grass’ becomes ‘thorns’ to accentuate the religious symbolism. The poetic transformation of prose fragments is perhaps best seen in the deployment of clever enjambments: ‘boulder’ brings us up short at the line’s end, prohibiting
momentarily the reader’s advance; ‘jumped’ matches the action of the reader’s eye as we follow the sentence over into the stanza’s third line. But enjambment is not simply used to present equivalence between the painting and poem’s subject matter; it is used equally to highlight difference. When the viewer notices that the monk is ‘looking up / into the sky’, her eye takes an ascending course; when reading the poetic description, she is forced to move in the opposite direction.

While the latter half of the poem describes the painting’s form and content in great detail, the opening stanzas are more concerned with the ways in which these are read:

about the distance you’d stand from someone (JE, 18); like a whispered secret that goes around a room (JE, 77); centred on its wall (JE, 79); ‘daylight would fall, later on in the year, once this tangible season was history’ (JE, 135); ‘I nearly wanted to step forward and warm my hands on it’ (JE, 55); ‘it had something to do with the war, and with the charred, burnt-up books’ (JE, 226); The Frick has a lovely air. To me it has always smelled as if it were scented with the finest particles of disintegrated books—it held me in thrall. Now it’s like peering between the shelves in a library […] beyond the wall of books (JE, 91); coloured an impossibly smooth and chilling blue (JE, 89); They were easier to see (JE, 84)

The emphasis here is less concerned with providing a descriptive outline of an artwork than with detailing the conditions and context of its reception. ‘Artwork’ is perhaps a misnomer since, based on Elkins’s monograph, the poem’s ‘painting’ is a conflation of Mark Rothko’s fourteen opaque black Chapel paintings (1964–7), Vincent Van Gogh’s The Olive Trees (1887), Bellini’s The Ecstasy of St. Francis and unspecified works by Anselm Kiefer. Since it does not slavishly follow, copy or describe a single existing artwork, writing here is tantamount to ‘notional ekphrasis’, John Hollander’s term for literary representations of imagined artworks.23 Thus, one could contend that the poem is implicitly…

23 John Hollander, The Gazer’s Spirit: Poems Speaking to Silent Works of Art (Chicago, 1995), 7. McGuckian’s ‘portrait’ is not located in the Frick Collection, but at the Naughton Gallery at Queen’s University Belfast.
a polemical, agonistic display, one which matches iconic portraiture by means of its own imaginative projection. The stanzas themselves are characterised by a structure of unresolved tensions, typical of McGuckian’s love of ambiguity: while the opening line delineates the appropriate distance from which to gain a full appreciation of the artwork, the second line’s simile undercuts such precision (‘Each time you recall something it changes a little, like a whispered secret that goes around a room and gradually changes into nonsense’); the third line foregrounds the painting’s stability (‘centred’) yet this contrasts with the two conflicting temporal frames depicted therein (the Van Gogh is aid to portray “two distinct times at once”); although the speaker is attracted to the painting, wanting to ‘warm’ her hands on it, the predominant colour is a ‘chilling blue’; finally, the assertion that ‘it had a lovely air’ is tempered by the source of the scent (‘charred, burnt-up books’, ‘something to do with the war’). However, the key opposition resides in the third and fourth stanzas since literature is directly opposed to painting and, surprisingly, the latter seems to be valorised at the former’s expense: ‘wall of books’ suggests an impediment to vision and her gaze must move between and beyond the shelves in the library to gain access to the painting. Indeed, since she is ‘held in thrall’ by the painting (hence captivated by and in bondage to its power), literature it seems has lost this paragone. Yet this is to simplify McGuckian’s text since movement through the library makes it ‘easier to see’ the painting. Indeed, it is only by reading Elkins’s text, one made from words and not pigment, that she can see (and construct) her ‘painting’. She gathers together books from the library, selects key phrases and then, through her arrangement, moves beyond the source. Thus, instead of viewing the poem as agonistic, it would be more correct to argue that it uses paintings (and a work about paintings) as an imaginative resource, one which allows her to reflect self-consciously upon her own creative process; indeed, as Loizeaux contends, due to ‘the self-reflexive nature of ekphrasis’, writing about ‘a work of art becomes a way of looking sideways at poetry’.

The eye is rebuffed by the dim canvas (JE, 217); ‘How beautiful’ (JE 217); how flat (JE, 217); The painting is sealed off from us (JE, 165); It’s a relic (JE: 165); like the prize antiques in a funeral parlour (JE 79); like a hand that reaches out (JE, 133); as if the painting had reached out and put a hand behind her head, and was trying to gather her in (JE, 184)  

My eye was rebuffed by the dim canvas—how beautiful, how flat! It was sealed off from me like a relic, a prize antique in a funeral parlour, but the hand that does not reach out on to our side of the painting was trying to gather me in […]

25 Ibid., 135.
These stanzas are crucial since they reflect upon how we react to an artwork. The painting seems remote, enigmatic and forbidding; yet it, rather than the viewer, initiates contact and attempts to ‘gather’ her in. For a full appreciation of an artwork the viewer must be open to the aesthetic experience. As Elkins argues, ‘[t]o be in love with a painting—to cry’, one must ‘be able to believe a painting can be alive: not literally, but moment by moment in your imagination’ (JE, 217).

In contrast, many viewers simply close themselves off and refuse to take the risk of giving themselves over to aesthetic bliss: ‘That way paintings can be beautiful and safely dead, propped up by the hundreds of little facts that we have placed around them like so many votive offerings. There is no imaginative contact, no risk. The eye is rebuffed by the dim canvas, and keeps falling back into the lazy chair of clichés—‘How Beautiful’, people say, without thinking how flat that sounds’ (JE, 217, my italics).

Elkins’s argument applies to the reception of poetry as much as it does to painting. In many respects, the stanzas act as a rebuttal to the legion of literary reviewers who continue to regard McGuckian’s poems as ‘frustratingly opaque and inaccessible pieces with titles that give no clue to content’; perhaps the fault lies with them and not with the artwork.

In ‘Painting a Verb Half Golden’, a poem which again uses Elkins as a source, McGuckian intercedes in the long-standing debate concerning the distinctions between painting and literature. In 1766 Gotthold Lessing’s Laokoon, written in part as a rejoinder to Leonardo da Vinci’s championing of the plastic arts over literature, contrasted the static nature of the pictorial arts with what he saw to be the more active, time-based work of literature. Summarising the key distinction drawn by Lessing, Laura Eidt states that ‘[w]hereas poetry is best suited to represent actions in time due to the temporal nature of its reception, painting can only represent a single pregnant moment in space since it is perceived as a static object’. Yet rather than side with Lessing over da Vinci in this paragone, McGuckian’s text blurs the distinctions between the art forms:

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28 The fault lies within me as well since my critical approach has been to take refuge in ‘hundreds of little facts’ and to place them around the poem. There are no tears staining these pages, though they have motivated me to write about the poem.


30 Laura M. Sager Eidt, Writing and Filming the Painting: Ekphrasis in Literature and Film (Amsterdam, 2008), 12.
the horizon [...] is in danger (JE2, 119); just off the real land grown on (REC, 18); thoughts rub against it, and it aches (JE2, 124); an otherworldly poisonous black star (JE2, 181);

There are a number of possible readings of this opening stanza. If we take ‘horizon’ as belonging to the (notional) painting under discussion, then how and why are thoughts rubbing up against it? In What Painting Is, Elkins states that ‘imagination is fluid, or it wants to be, and the very act of painting is an act of violence against the liquidity of our thoughts'; in contrast, a painting ‘is frozen, and its permanence is very much unlike our evanescent ideas’. For the art critic, this is viewed as ‘one of painting’s powers, since the stillness of a painting can set the mind free in a remarkable way’ (JE2, 124). In other words, the static art form gives the viewer time for reflection and her mind licence to roam. Yet for the painter, the static, finished aspect of the work is troubling: ‘the continuous partial freezing of each day’s work is [...] something unpleasant, like a necrosis creeping through healthy tissue’ (JE2, 124). Here, Elkins is referring to painting as a process: when one part of the work is finished, the paint ‘swirls around the fixed spot, protecting and enclosing it like a bandage’; however, the painter’s thoughts are said to ‘rub against it, and it aches’ (JE2, 124). Thus, ‘aches’, ‘danger’ and ‘poisonous’ in McGuckian’s poem convey the injurious, rather than stabilising, aspect of the painting’s fixed point. Yet the simile—‘like a poisonous otherworldly / black star’—is not wholly negative. Throughout his study, Elkins compares painting with alchemy, arguing that both entail ‘negotiations between water and stone’ (JE2, 1). The goal of the alchemist is to ‘to turn something as liquid as water into a substance as firm and unmeltable as stone’ (JE2, 1); hence, the creation of an ‘exotic product like [...] the Stellated Regulus of Antimony, an otherworldly poisonous black star’ (JE2 181), is a mark of success. Clearly, then, McGuckian’s poem disrupts the categorical determination that associates painting purely with stasis and celebrates its more ambiguous nature.

Indeed, the process outlined within the first stanza is similar to that associated with her own craft since it resembles the workings of the egotistical sublime whereby the solitary poet’s imagination overpowers both reason and nature. The poet/painter’s thoughts are so powerful that ‘The horizon is in danger’; the painting’s ‘horizon’ has supplanted that of ‘the real land grown on’. Such a Romantic conception of art had previously been explored by McGuckian in ‘Bedroom with Chrysanthemums’:

McGuckian, ‘Bedroom with Chrysanthemums’, Had I a Thousand Lives (Oldcastle, 2003), 32. The poem is cited on the right and the quotations from the source text—Anne Olivier Bell (ed.), Virginia Woolf, The Diary of Virginia Woolf, vol. 4:
My desk a failure (W, 279); I easily flood my empty room (W, 286); the window a ripple of water (W, 337); the image of a garden (W, 329); the morning has been fluent [...] too fluent (W, 337); with a red breadth in it from some flowering tree (W, 219); skimmmed the top of the words (W, 345); one jewel (W, 349); after one cup (W, 359)

The stanza captures an ecstatic inward turn; it portrays the moment when the exterior and interior fuse and boundaries are broken down by the writer’s overpowering imagination. The placing of ‘breaks’ at the end of the line enacts the moment of fissure when poetic creativity begins. While ‘image’ points to the fictive nature of her creation (it is merely an imitation or a simulacrum), ‘flowering’ implies a process that is ongoing and generative. ‘Breaks’ and ‘flood’ suggest excess and violent disruption, but ‘fluent’ tempers any inference of excess. The poet is in control here: the flood is finally contained within ‘one cup’, and the violence becomes dissipated. The entire experience can be encapsulated within a stanza (literally, a room) and conveyed through language: the heady nature of the experience is captured by the run-on lines, while the abruptness of both its initiation and completion is intimated through plosives (‘ripples, breaks’, ‘abruptly’, ‘pouring one cup’).

In ‘Painting a Verb Half Golden’ McGuckian’s commentary on art is more complex as she not only depicts its interrelationship with nature, the one becoming fused with the other, she dissolves the distinction between self and text:

I want to hear the wind blow between it (REC, 18);
The steep face of the wave (JE2, 136);
changes the way in which the fingers are held (V/N 90);
lines of rain over the skin (JE2, 3); change in the feel of the skin (JE2, 164)

The wind blows between it and the steep face of the wave that changes the way my fingers are and the feel of the lines of my skin.

If the artist’s imagination has supplanted nature, it has also co-opted its life-force: the painting is certainly far from static, as the wind (the natural element and a symbol for inspiration) is blowing within. Body and canvas become conjoined: the wave has a ‘face’ which in turn alters how ‘the way [her] fingers / are’. The prominent positioning of ‘lines’ calls attention to its multiple connotations:

1931 – 1935 (London, 1982)—is cited on the left as ‘W’.
Medbh McGuckian’s Ekphrastic Poetry

as both a sign of lived experience and as a method of rendering artistic form (drawing and writing), the term conflates the real with the imagined. This process is continued in the following stanzas:

letting the wrist of fingers turn white (JE2, 98); scorch the tongue (WP1, 102); ‘living silver’ (JE2, 62); young gold (JE2, 76); pretty red (JE2, 19);
salt on its side (JE2, 65);
The grey, which is left naked at the corner of the eye (JE2, 115)

When blue was nothing
I let you turn my wrist white
and scorch my tongue to living silver
with your young gold:
I let a pretty red hold

me like salt on its side,
and when I was alone
blue’s opposite

left a naked grey
at the corner of my eye.

The corporeal images are significant as they indicate that the addressee (the painter) has affected parts of the body associated with writing: ‘eye’ (perception), ‘wrist’ (inscription), ‘tongue’ (recitation). The speaker may have become transformed and fused with the painting, represented as she is in alchemical terms as ‘silver’ and saltpetre (‘salt on its side’), nevertheless the lines do not portray an attitude of submission since each action is undertaken in accordance with the poet’s own volition: ‘I let you turn […] I let a pretty red hold’. Indeed, the poem’s title points towards her willed traffic with painting: literature is conventionally associated with action in time (‘verb’), but in her poem McGuckian attempts, in part, to transmute fluidity into stasis (‘Golden’). Of course, she does not lose sight of poetry’s difference from painting: the verb is only half painted.

McGuckian’s ekphrastic texts present analogies for and commentaries on poetic creation, with many of them functioning as a poetic manifesto. In ‘Three-legged Angel’, the form and subject matter embraces the surrealists’ call for the adoption of a playful analogical perception. McGuckian’s determination to revivify the language is in accordance with the aims of the surrealist poets; for them, it was ‘not simply a matter of juxtaposing the words to create new elements, but of rejuvenating the word itself. With its use of surprising juxtapositions, dream logic and a concentration on inner experience, the poem could neatly fit within the surrealist canon. 

‘the gauze of the curtains’ (SP, 265); ideally faded [...] by the moon (SP, 136); its range of seasons (SP, 141); ever more finely strained light (SP, 198); a ‘delay in glass’ (SP, 99); pollen-coloured (SP, 308–9); The garden bristles with idols (SP, 143); to make the apple into something open (SP, 52)

What ‘curtains’ are being referred to in this opening stanza? In what sense have they been ‘ideally faded’? How can they ‘pleat’ light? In what way can the glass make the garden ‘bustle’ and the apple ‘more open’? What are the connections between these images? Although the speaker presents a narrative which establishes causal links, the narrative sense remains decidedly unclear. The surrealist imagery is unsettling for the reader because, as Mary Caws states, ‘it destroys the conventional laws of association and logic, so that the objects which compose it, instead of seeming to fit side by side naturally and normally, “shriek at finding themselves together”’.

The opening line’s question cites from Arthur Rimbaud’s letter to Paul Demeny (15 May, 1871) in which he depicts the poet’s role as that of an oracle: a voice is said to speak through the poet, but its origin comes from within the realm of the subconscious. In the letter Rimbaud scathingly repudiates the example set by a fellow poet, Alfred de Musset, who chose to ignore his vocation as seer: ‘There were visions behind the gauze of the curtains: he closed his eyes’. Unlike de Musset, McGuckian is able to see through the curtains for they have become more diaphanous, ‘ideally faded by the moon’. ‘Faded’ does not have the negative connotations of being ‘dull’ or ‘lacking vivacity’ here; for true vision to occur, the curtains must be parted, or at least become less opaque. The quotation comes from André Breton’s commentary on the art of Wolfgang Paalen, a fellow surrealist: ‘The enormously extended figures from a shadow theatre slide down backcloths that are fishing-boats’ sails ideally faded and burnished with phosphorous by the moon’ (SP, 136). McGuckian then juxtaposes the phrase with another excerpt from a passage in Breton’s *Surrealism and Painting* which emphasises freedom: ‘There is a country where the world’s heart opens out, relieved of the oppressive feeling that nature everywhere is drab and unenterprising, […] where creation has been prodigal with undulations of the ground and species of plant-life, and has surpassed itself with its range of seasons and cloud architectures’ (SP, 141, my italics). To throw off the shackles of a deadening society, the artist must open her work to the irrational energies of the unconscious in the manner of Enrico Donati, Marcel Duchamp, Frida

34 Caws, *The Poetry of Dada and Surrealism*, 70.
Kahlo and Cézanne (each of whom are praised by Breton and cited in the stanza cited above). Consequently, art becomes less strictly mimetic; for Breton and McGuckian alike, ‘[t]he mission of art is not to copy nature, but to express it’ (SP, 52). The ‘apple’ referred to in the poem is one example of this new approach to art. In 1895, Cézanne famously boasted to the critic, Gustave Geffroy, that ‘with an apple I will astonish Paris’. In Surrealism and Painting, Breton praises ‘Cézanne’s determination to make the apple into something open’ (SP, 52, my italics), meaning that the artist had looked beyond the immediate referent and chosen to represent what it meant to him instead.

I have used all my tongues (SP, 173); quick-changing purple (SP, 187); when creating my stars (SP, 305); The human-headed rainbow (SP, 254); exchange their longest sparks (SP, 149); her transparent house

[...] I have used all my tongues when creating my quick-changing purple stars and the human-headed rainbow where they exchange their latest sparks. But her transparent house

(SP, 143); nine moving fireplaces (SP, 253); guide to sunrise (SP, 154); after-taste of volcano (SP, 234); the fall of the older butterflies (SP, 263); when the butterflies formed a single, still uncut ribbon (SP, 136); that pearl-grey wood which the sea throws up on beaches (SP, 218)

with its nine moving fireplaces has been my guide to sunrise, my concealed mountain, my aftertaste of volcano. The fall of the old butterflies forms a still uncut ribbon of that pearl-grey wood the sea throws up on beaches.

Each of the images in these stanzas refers to artworks by, or commentaries on, innovative twentieth-century figures: Yves Tanguy, Roberto Matta, Joseph Crépin, Marcel Duchamp, Victor Brauner, Kahlo, Yahne Le Toumelin, Rufino Tamayo, Paalen and Jean-Paul Riopelle. The emphasis throughout is on ‘exchange’ between the members of this group, and the speaker’s way of perceiving the world has been ‘guided’ by their example; their lineage stretches into the present as they form ‘a single, still uncut ribbon’. Images of light proliferate (‘rainbow’, ‘sparks’, ‘fireplaces’), thus confirming that vision is no longer hindered by the curtain’s gauze. The poem’s form, a veritable Dadaist collage of quotations, is perfectly suited to its content as it initiates an intoxicating, poetic logic, one which is not wholly reliant on rationality, and embraces what Rimbaud called for, namely ‘le dérèglement de tous les sens’.36

In McGuckian’s ekphrastic poetry, individual words become freighted with disparate, private connotations. A simple adjective like ‘blue’, for example, often carries great significance and the word’s meaning strays far beyond the confines

of the *OED*. As she stated in interview, ‘I think it’s a sexual thing with “blue”. It’s very evocative to me: it’s a word that I love. It’s almost Freudian, I suppose. I like it because it unites the Catholicism with nature, and when I think of “blue” I feel very much with Our Lady, that kind of pure thing, that very feminine thing — the purity of the sky. […] That word, even just the sound of it — “belooood” — it’s just so open, and so many words in English are closed—they end with a consonant quite a lot, or a consonant-sounding vowel, and that one doesn’t. It’s like a sound that goes on forever, like a trumpet. So I always fall in love with it as if I’ve found the word for the very first time’.\(^{37}\) The chromatic reference is intended to denote different concepts (religious, social and meteorological), but also evoke the feelings that it conjures in the poet’s mind, with all their Freudian connotations. One good example of this is ‘Imagined Pastoral’, a poem in which ‘blue’ is shown to have intensely personal connotations:\(^{38}\)

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A blue came to my mind (*M*, 108); A blue came to my mind, A certain blue enters your soul (*M*, 143); as a certain blue enters your soul … the result of remembered bouquets long since dead (*M*, 111) the result of remembered bouquets long since dead […]

The lines intimate a connection with Henri Matisse’s conception of colouration: in an interview with André Verdet, the painter stated that ‘[c]olours win you over more and more. A certain blue enters your soul. A certain red has an effect on your blood-pressure. A certain colour tones you up’ (*M*, 143). Colours are not used in an abstracted fashion, as merely a means to an end; rather, they affect the artist in a bodily manner. ‘Blue’ enters the soul and conjures up memories and associations from the past. The third quotation taken from Matisse is crucial as it functions as a self-reflexive commentary on art:

> When I take a walk in the garden I pick flower after flower, gathering them as I go, one after the other into the crook of my arm. Then I go into the house with the intention of painting them. After I have rearranged them in my own way, what a disappointment: all their charm is lost in this arrangement. What has happened? The unconscious grouping made when my taste led me from flower to flower, has been replaced by a conscious arrangement, the result of remembered bouquets long since dead, which have left in my memory the bygone charm with which I have burdened this new bouquet. (*M*, 111, my italics)

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For Matisse, the movement from unconscious collection of the flowers to conscious arrangement results in a loss: the present bouquet becomes overburdened with associations from the past. The anecdote echoes remarks made by McGuckian in interview when she reflected on her method of composition: she stated that the words were like flowers growing in someone else’s garden (the intertextual sources) and that she would ‘pull them out of the garden and put them into my garden’. These words/flowers are then arranged by her to make up a poetic text: ‘for me the process of writing a poem begins with linking a few words oddly together […] and those words mean something poetically, not logically’. This subsequent arrangement never entails a loss for the Northern Irish poet; indeed, in ‘Imagined Pastoral’, the ‘blue’ that enters the soul is the result of the ‘remembered bouquets long since dead’.

The use of colours in McGuckian’s work puts a strain on her relationship to her readers; after all, we do not have access to her ‘soul’. However, she is aware of this and frequently comments in her work on how she stretches her linguistic resources. One such example is ‘Impressionist House’, a poem which has as its source Van Gogh: A Self-Portrait, a collection of the artist’s letters in which he expresses his observations on art:

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Just because there is a blue sky in the background these loves are not for everyone’s understanding. See them against the blue, in the blue even, you will tell me that mountains are not like that, a glooming over-admixture of restless black, the voice of the wheat sun-steeped in the furnace of harvest-time’s height.
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The speaker anticipates the criticism that her art will attract: it is ‘not for everyone’s understanding’. Such a negative appreciation stems from her non-realist aesthetic; hence, critics will complain that ‘mountains are not like that’. Neither Van Gogh nor McGuckian is interested in mere surface detail or verisimilitude. Adhering

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to a post-impressionist outlook, Van Gogh intended to create ‘portraiture with
the thoughts, the soul of the model in it’ (VG, 319). The colours in his work
were not simply chosen to capture a likeness; rather, as he wrote to his brother,
Theo, ‘[b]ehind the head […] I paint infinity, a plain background of the richest,
intensest blue that I can contrive, and by this simple combination of the bright
head against the rich blue background, I get a mysterious effect’ (VG, 313). In
the following stanzas, McGuckian’s speaker assumes the guise of just such a
post-impressionist artist:

the first person who came along (VG, 323); 
the first person who came along and felt the spring
felt so deeply (VG, 276); a nude
man, realistic and simple. He stands leaning
against a door or a pillar, in a gloomy interior
(VG, 306); I exaggerate the fairness of the
hair (VG, 313); leisure for love-making (VG,
315); the French air (VG, 280); the broken
tones in the face (VG, 325); languid, clumsy
hands (VG, 363); claws (VG, 321); that diffi-
cult bottle-green hue (VG, 364); majolica jug
(VG, 291); the eternal nests of greenery for
lovers (VG, 357); violet glass [… ] violet-
coloured eggs (VG, 322); luminously asleep
(VG, 303); the sky itself colours it (VG,
300); Do the years in your case count
double (VG, 304); the necessary palatable
prisoners of war (VG, 290)

The painter-poet provides a pen-picture of this nude study, carefully adumbrating
the subject’s physical features, all the while evaluating his deportment (‘languid
postures’, ‘clumsy hands’, ‘arms like claws’). She informs us of her pictorial
symbolism (the jug ‘represents the eternal nests of greenery / for lovers’) and
calls attention to the mediated nature of representation (‘half-broken tones
of his face’, ‘tinting French air’). Like the post-impressionists and surrealists,
all of whom count amongst her exemplars, McGuckian strives to go beyond
mimeticism: ‘I write about things which are deeper than the surface experience.
I erase my daily experience for the paranormal or for experiences which happen
to me on another plane, the one where poetry happens. Poetry exists to tap into
that life, the life of the mind, the spirit, the inner life’.42 The poem’s speaker

42 McGuckian, ‘Interview with Medbh McGuckian’, in Shane Alcobia-Murphy and
Richard Kirkland (eds), The Poetry of Medbh McGuckian (Cork, 2010), 196–7.
foregrounds this adherence to a non-realistic aesthetic by telling us that she has exaggerated ‘the fairness of his hair’.

The ekphrastic texts that McGuckian constructs when foregrounding the materiality of her text and its status as representation are not always based on the theoretical writings on (or of) painters. In ‘Carving Colour’ she conjoins quotations from three very different intertextual sources: the exhibition catalogue for the works of the sculptor Barbara Hepworth at the Tate Gallery and the Hepworth Museum at St. Ives; Elizabeth Prettejohn’s study of the Pre-Raphaelites; a series of essays on Medieval architecture edited by Barbara Hanawalt and Michal Kobialka. What the three sources have in common is a close analysis of the artists’ craft and of how the artworks’ desired effects do not come \textit{ex nihilo} or without modification.\textsuperscript{43}

\begin{multicols}{2}
I smoothed it too soon (BH, 95); the fading has been absolute.  
‘the fading has been absolute’ (BH, 98); But it is more than its completeness, 
more than its incompleteness (MPS, 207); larger against the sea and sky larger against the sea as we have it here. 
as we have it here (BH, 77); a ‘cruel material’ (BH, 61); I polished a cruel material 
polished to show its grain (MPS, 119); to show its grain, stone shape 
‘must be stoneshape and no other and no other shape, giving the wayward creases 
shape’ (BH, 52); the wayward creases creases an ennobling, classical skin. 
(\textit{MPS}, 86); ‘the inanimate hand asleep’ My hand asleep and fully matter 
(BH, 89); ‘The left hand […] is also a listening hand’ (BH, 91); the everyday tongue is also a listening hand, my everyday tongue 
\textit{PR}, (11); an ennobling classical skin recalls chains of words like pale blue 
\textit{MPS}, (13); ‘pale blue’ (BH, 98); genuflecting holes 
the autumn leaves have come to rest on where autumn leaves have come to rest 
the embroidery \textit{PR}, (12); firmly on the embroidery. […] 
\end{multicols}

The poem’s title comes from one of Hepworth’s inspirational sources, Adrian Stokes’s \textit{Colour and Form}, a study on the role and effects of colour in painting and which frequently employs imagery taken from sculptural theory: ‘Carving colour gives the interior life, the warmth to composition … the simultaneous life of the

\textsuperscript{43} McGuckian, ‘Carving Colour’, \textit{My Love Has Fared Inland}, 16. The poem is cited on the right. The quotations from the source texts—Matthew Gale and Chris Stephens (eds), \textit{Barbara Hepworth} (London, 2001); Elizabeth Prettejohn, \textit{The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites} (London, 2000); Barbara A. Hanawalt and Michal Kobialka (eds), \textit{Medieval Practices of Space} (Minneapolis, Mn., 2000)—are cited on the right as ‘\textit{BH}’, ‘\textit{PR}’ and ‘\textit{MPS}’, respectively.
blood’ (*BH*, 77). While such a statement is in line with the expressive theories explored in McGuckian’s other ekphrastic texts, the phrase ‘carving colour’ focuses on the artisanal process rather than the finished product. The poem’s speaker assumes the role of a sculptor reflecting upon her art, one who notes the unforgiving nature of the material with which she is working and the very fragile making process, one prone to error and mishap. Unlike in ‘Three-legged Angel’, ‘fading’ here is utterly detrimental and the artist admits that due care has not been taken. She is also aware that an artist must be alive to the context in which the work is to be shown: it can appear ‘larger against the sea as we have it here’. The text establishes an implicit analogy between sculpture and poetry when she says that ‘my everyday tongue / recalls chains of words’. As in ‘My Father Walking’, she contrasts ordinary language with those of literature: here, the words spark off associations in her mind and are associated with the sacred rather than the mundane. Hepworth’s raw materials have been formed and worked upon by the elements just as McGuckian’s have been produced by past writers, but both require the intervention of the artist to give them ‘an ennobling, classical skin’. The artist’s intercession entails striking a careful balance between conscious and unconscious intentions; while ‘classical skin’ and ‘embroidery’ imply an intricately structured finished piece, one characterised by order and precision, the making process must be open to the body’s impulses and rhythms. Hepworth describes her process thus: “My left hand is my thinking hand. The right is only a motor hand. This holds the hammer. The left hand, the thinking hand must be relaxed, sensitive. The rhythms of thought pass through the fingers and grip of this hand into the stone. It is also a listening hand. It listens for basic weaknesses of flaws in the stone; for the possibility or imminence of fractures” (*BH*, 91, my italics). McGuckian has altered the source (‘My hand asleep and fully matter’) to indicate a balance between the physical and the subconscious elements involved in poetic creation.

The sources from which McGuckian borrows to construct her ekphrastic texts not only allow her to inhabit vicariously the world of others, as if she had a thousand lives, but they garner authority for her own craft by aligning it with the critically lauded praxes of others. ‘The Voice Coach’, for example, celebrates and pays homage to Isadora Duncan, the supremely gifted progenitor of modern dance who sought to develop a new language, one opposed to the constrictive dictates of classical ballet.44

unsent letter (*ID*, 179); ‘The hips may not lift’ (*ID*, 47); I am an unsent letter, my lips
‘The shoulders may not ripple’ (*ID*, 47); May not lift, my shoulders may not ripple.
‘the speech of the feet’ (*ID*, 58); the brief glossary The speech of my feet is a brief

One reading of this stanza would see it as an admission of the limitations of McGuckian’s verse and an allusion to the gnomic excesses perceived by many of her critics: the letter and lips fail to function properly, the ‘speech of feet’ is merely a ‘glossary’, and the rushed utterance at the close—‘The sun, I am, my soul, yours’—seems like garbled nonsense. Yet the opening lines refer to the prescriptions against free movement in ballet which Duncan thought of as unnatural and an impediment to communication: “‘No movement, pose or rhythm is successive, or can be made to evolve succeeding action’” (ID, 29). The ‘speech’ of Duncan’s feet was much freer, expressive as it was ‘of something such as a thought, a feeling, or a motive’ (ID, 18). While she needed a ‘glossary of Hungarian words’ to facilitate communication at her press conference in Budapest (11 May, 1902), no such translation was necessary during her performance as ‘the speech of her feet’ was perfectly accessible to her audience and transcended national boundaries. The stanza is addressed to Duncan and the poet overtly gives herself over to her influence: ‘I am, my soul, yours’. Dance and poetry become equivalent as both entail a ‘speech of feet’: one uses human limbs, the other poetic metre.

In the above ekphrastic texts, McGuckian’s speaker is either an observer of a work of art or its creator, and in each case an element of active conception or imaginative investment is stressed. However, in a number of texts the speaker finds herself objectified and the subject of outside influence. Such a passive (if not submissive) position relegates her to a state of powerlessness. In ‘The Hard Summer’, for example, the speaker states:

one long curve (FF, 30); from the top of the head all the way down to the toes (FF, 33); An unseen arm (FF, 80); keeps it from falling over (FF, 35); The locked leg forms the letter $S$ (FF, 28); a kind of sweep (FF, 33); diffuses as it pulls away (FF, 10); The contours of the breast and arm change when they press together (FF, 84)

Then I was one long curve, from the top of my head to my toes, And an unseen arm kept me from falling over My locked line Was a kind of sweep, like the letter $S$, diffusing as it pulled away The light that came from below. Your fingers found how breast and arm change when they press Together […]

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45 McGuckian, ‘The Hard Summer’, Venus and the Rain (Oxford, 1984), 27. The poem is cited on the right and quotations from the source—Joseph Sheppard, Drawing the Female Figure (New York, 1975)—is cited on the left as ‘FF’. 
The speaker is reduced to a text (her body’s shape becomes an ‘S’) and cannot remain stable without the attentions of an unnamed male figure. The act of looking and the exercise of male power are intimately linked here and, although this process of objectification becomes even more pronounced in the latter half of the poem—her breasts and the folds of her palms form ‘the letter M’, her face is a ‘T-shape’ and the back of her knee resembles a ‘H’—there is little to suggest that the speaker resists becoming the object of the male scopic gaze. However, that is far from the case with the majority of McGuckian’s texts which feature female objectification. In such poems McGuckian tends to stage (in Loizeaux’s terms) ‘self-conscious conversation[s] with the idea of a mastering male gazer and a feminized art object’.46

In ‘Head of a Woman’ McGuckian depicts an artist’s model gradually becoming objectified as a work of art and who struggles to regain the agency denied her. Although the ‘head’ is iconically associated with both intellect and identity, the title objectifies the female speaker: it renders her anonymous and presents an unnatural disconnection from the body. In a defensive action, the model strives to create a body for herself, one that is separate, self-sufficient and safe:

This morning I have joined my elbows
To hide my breasts, that single gesture
Has created a body for itself, the sun
In his dispersal of activity was unable
To shake out my close-laid hair, its
Heavy nocturnal concentration.

Georg Simmel, writing in 1911 about Auguste Rodin, the pre-eminent French sculptor of the time, noted that he was ‘in the habit of having his models assume a variety of poses according to their whims’ and that when his attention was held by a particular pose, he would seek to capture it in clay ‘without sculpting the rest of the body’. ‘Without doubt,’ wrote Simmel, ‘that single gesture, by continuing to grow in the sculptor’s unconscious, has created a body for itself so to speak, and a movement has found a life’.48 In McGuckian’s re-writing of her source she transfers agency away from the artist to his model. A reading of Rodin in Perspective makes clear why McGuckian would deem such action necessary. The group of sculptures of which the subject is to form a part is described as follows: “Strong beauty, on her knees before beauty so frail” holds in her arms a frightened child

46 Loizeaux, Twentieth-Century Poetry and the Visual Arts, 81.
48 Georg Simmel in Ruth Butler (ed.), Rodin in Perspective (New Jersey, 1980), 129. This source text will be referred to above as ‘R’.
who hides her nakedness, both arms tight, her elbows joined to hide her nervous young breasts, her legs held tightly to defend her virginity' (R, 56–7, my italics). Within the poem’s structure of tensions, the ‘sun’ is male and threatening, while the female subject seeks refuge under the cover of night; resisting the sun’s ‘dispersal activity’, ‘nocturnal concentration’ is maintained and her hair remains ‘close-laid’. That particular image is important as McGuckian again reverses the dynamics of power. In the intertextual source, Rodin is depicted as giving life, almost as if he were liberating the statue from bondage: ‘In these unmeaning blocks slumber captive statues, that to-morrow’s chisel shall set free, unbinding the fettered limbs, loosing the cramped torso, shaking out the close-laid hair’ (R, 63, my italics). In McGuckian’s text, this ‘shaking out’ is denied him. Yet as the poem continues, the female subject seems powerless from falling under male control:

It was

a face that has grown under Rodin’s hand (R, 68); A face that grew under his hand,
the man’s hand waits, giving the movement which His hand waits to give the movement
completes the woman’s head (R, 117); a hand […] Completing my hand that found its way
has found its way out of another study (R, 117); Out of another study, and settled
her lips swollen (R,70) On my swollen lips […]

With her admission of being ‘incomplete’, and the growing sense of dissociation from her own body indicated by the lack of a possessive pronoun in ‘a face’, the female subject has clearly come under the sway of the male artist. Her lips (a symbol of expression) are violently distended, and her hands (a symbol of authorship) have been created from ‘another study’. Although the poem ultimately seems to suggest an escape from male authority when it declares that ‘the dawn […] has not broken’, thus suggesting that the model maintains her ‘nocturnal concentration’, nevertheless that resolution is less than convincing and the poet appears ambivalent about her own use of exemplars: as a writer, does she relinquish authorship if her texts require a hand ‘out of another study’ to complete it?

In my final example, ‘Still Life of Eggs’, a text which cites from a critical biography of a female exemplar, the modernist painter Vanessa Bell, there is no such anxiety of influence:

‘these women almost kneeling’; (VB, 4); the diagonal shoreline (VB 124); two harbours between two harbours, in the house-fostered darkness. (VB, 215); The house itself fostered darkness The tilt of your head reflects the arc (VB, 16); the tilt of the head” (VB, 125); the curve of the tablecloth, the curve of the sea. And if the weather could fling its reds,
sea (VB, 126); it flung reds, greens, blues and greens, blues, and purples across table-tops
purple across table tops (V/B, 122); ‘thought upon the unthinking’ (V/B, 161); ‘the blue was a lake’ (V/B, 126); fog frays at the edges (V/B, 158); the beginning of a painting (V/B, 184); ‘our feelings have been so watched’ (V/B, 181); the house had squeezed into its steep roof an additional attic storey (V/B, 150); ‘to freeze some parts of herself’ (V/B, 318); forever ripening (V/B, 352); eyebrows and neck (V/B, 141) contained and containing (V/B, 363)

While ‘eggs’ suggest a generative function, and ‘life’ both vigour and enervation, ‘still’ is more ambiguous as its connotations are both positive (endurance) and negative (inanimation). The title’s explicit painterly reference contains a paradox which the poem goes on to explore: should a poet seek for her work the stasis and presence of a painting if this entails a loss of vitality? While this paragonal theme is explored in poems discussed above, such as ‘A New Portrait in the Naughton Gallery’ and ‘Painting a Verb Half Golden’, what is different about ‘Still Life of Eggs’ is that the battle is depicted in explicitly gendered terms. The poem is addressed to a female artist who finds herself under the control of an ordering scopic gaze: she has been ‘so watched’. As the subject of a ‘still life’, she is triply marginalised: not only is she objectified in a genre that is ‘relegated to the lowest rank’ within the canon of pictorial representation, the ‘universe of rhopography’ is itself ‘not indifferently gendered’ as it relegates its constituents (women) to a lower rank and level of importance than that of men.49 She is thus confined to the domestic realm, hidden away from a world of action. McGuckian’s ‘still life’, however, is far more ambiguous since, as in ‘Bedroom with Chrysanthemums’, the boundary between the exterior and interior is blurred: the woman’s position—‘almost kneeling’—is compared to ‘a diagonal shoreline / between two harbours’, ‘the arc / of the tablecloth’ is equated with ‘the curve of the sea’, and the colours which represent the table ‘might stay / a river or a lake’. Everything in the poem seems liminal, caught in a hiatus: spatially, the poem focuses on the ‘shoreline’, ‘edges’, and the place ‘between two harbours’; temporally, the text uses the present continuous tense to represent action which is never complete, yet also never-ending (‘ripening’, ‘containing’). Thus, the poetic text embraces the stasis of pictorial representation.

Does her embrace of stasis entail a loss of volition, agency and animation for its depicted subject as it did in ‘Head of a Woman’? The poem’s ending suggests not. While it is clear that McGuckian attains stasis (rather than painting

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her verb half golden, she excises it from the final line), it is not depicted in negative terms: the subject is both ‘contained’ (within the painting) and ‘containing’. She creates for herself an ‘additional storey squeezed / into a steep roof’, thus becoming, in literary terms, the ‘madwoman in the attic’. Although enclosive and seemingly imprisoning, this location is not subject to the laws and whims of men: she constructs this room on her own. The pictorial genre chosen to inscribe this vision is also important in this respect. In his study of the feminine space within still life painting, Norman Bryson argues that while normally a ‘painting controls the contents of the visual field by means of a sovereign gaze that subordinates everything in the scene to the human observer’, in a still life this gaze is absent; rather, the viewer encounters a peculiar trompe l’oeil whereby we see ‘the appearance the world might have without a subject there to perceive it’. Thus, the objects in a still life are said to ‘reveal their own autonomy’.  

To designate the inscribed female subject as a ‘madwoman’ is appropriate here not only due to the ways it has been re-interpreted in feminist criticism (foregrounding and laying bare the manner in which women have been designated as ‘other’, to be feared and controlled within society), but also due to its connotation of ‘wildness’, a trait much-coveted by McGuckian. The latter can be seen in the phrase which seems out of place in her poem: ‘(thought upon the unthinking)’. Presented as a parenthetical remark, it is held apart from the surrounding text, and semantically it seems not to make any sense. Its position on the margins, ‘perfectly alone’, mirrors that of the stanza’s final line, and its meaning suggests the way by which the female artist must proceed. It is a quotation from Maynard Keynes, who argued that “words ought to be a little wild, for they are the assaults of thought upon the unthinking” (V/B, 161). As a writer, McGuckian seeks out female exemplars like Vanessa Bell who are not restrained by societal and artistic codes, and wholeheartedly embraces their wildness.

To conclude, McGuckian’s ekphrastic texts examine the distinctions between the different arts and often blur these divisions. The connections forged with other artists allow her to present self-reflexive statements about her own poetic praxis. Throughout, she drives words into the interior of paintings, and other artworks, to test out and validate her imaginative resources. To write poems based on the words of others, to borrow from and comment upon other texts, is McGuckian’s way of expanding these resources. Clearly, many hands from other studies find their way into her poems: some, like Breton, find themselves firmly grasped, while others are slapped on the wrist. While her texts often express

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50 See Bryson, ‘Still Life and “Feminine” Space’, 142–3.
multiple anxieties—of influence, of the inadequacy of words to express the ineffable, of her marginalised status as a female writer—they ultimately affirm the Orphic dimension of her craft.
‘Signs of the Still Recent War’: Medbh McGuckian and Conflict

In a review of Medbh McGuckian’s poetry, Christopher Benfey maintained that ‘[t]o scan her poems for allusions to sectarian violence would be as fruitless and naïve as to sift Emily Dickinson’s poems for references to the Civil War’.\(^1\) McGuckian’s work is not often read for its commentary on or critique of violence in Northern Ireland. Indeed, in an interview with John Brown, the poet revealed that ‘I never thought of myself as a “Troubles” poet; it was not part of my oeuvre and I couldn’t do it simply as an exercise, so I didn’t take it on’.\(^2\) This chapter tests the validity of her self-assessment by examining poems which borrow from sources focused on conflict, particularly the two World Wars. The intertexts allow the poet to explore moments of crisis (due to violence, imprisonment and enforced deprivation) without having to deal explicitly with the more immediate conflict in Northern Ireland. However, it must be admitted from the outset that many of her texts avoid explicit references to violence.

Even when responding artistically to the IRA’s killing of a school-friend, the poet seems to adopt a position far removed from the political realm. The footnote to ‘Drawing Ballerinas’, the title-poem from her 2001 collection, states: ‘This poem was written to commemorate Ann Frances Owens, schoolfellow and neighbour, who lost her life in the Abercorn Café explosion, 1972. The painter, Matisse, when asked how he managed to survive the war artistically, replied that he spent the worst years “drawing ballerinas”’.\(^3\) In the poem, McGuckian splices together quotations from John Elderfield’s study of Matisse’s drawings to present an eloquent meta-commentary on the artist’s theoretical principles of draughtsmanship:

And the lines’ desire is to warp to accommodate
a body, a lost and emptied memory of a lost
body, the virgin mind emptied from or of it

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\(^2\) Medbh McGuckian in John Brown, *In the Chair: Interviews with Poets from the North of Ireland* (Clare, 2002), 182.

to discover the architecture of pressed-together
thighs, or lips that half-belong to a face.⁴

Although one cannot deny that the ‘pressed-together thighs’ and the ‘lips that half belong to a face’ refer to Matisse’s Portrait of Mademoiselle Yvonne Landsberg (1914) and Portrait of Josette Gris (1915), respectively, the ‘lines’ are also McGuckian’s poetic lines. Appropriating Matisse’s ideas, the stanza becomes an *ars poetica* espousing not only the importance of remembrance (as opposed to spontaneity), but also the essential interiority of artistic creation: though the source may be ‘accessible to sight’, composition relies on ‘an image that existed in the artist’s mind’.⁵ For Matisse, line drawing constituted ‘the purest and most direct translation’ of his emotion.⁶ This response is not to be found in the representation of the model’s body but in ‘the lines or special values distributed over the whole canvas or paper, which form its complete orchestration, its architecture’.⁷ To achieve ‘complete orchestration’, Matisse emphasised the overriding importance of visual perception, empathetic analysis and linear simplification.⁸ Underlying his artistic credo were three basic precepts: ‘first, Matisse’s virtual identification of feeling and memory; second, the idea of drawing as the tracing of sensations springing from the model; and third, that this takes place in a virgin mind emptied of preoccupations’.⁹ Such a detached stance, then, one that upholds the eternal validity and verity of art, seems to accord with McGuckian’s own thinking. ‘Drawing Ballerinas’ side-steps political turmoil and concerns itself instead with the mechanics of and rationale behind artistic composition. In an essay included in Lizz Murphy’s *Wee Girls*, McGuckian writes that the poem ‘saw the conflict in terms of the European Holocaust and based itself on Matisse’s aesthetic stance which Picasso envied—of continuing to devote himself to the creation of human beauty while his wife agitated against the death-camps’.¹⁰ Here, McGuckian refers to the apolitical aspect of the French artist’s drawings, paintings and cut-outs, the way that they do not respond to the violence of the time; rather, what Matisse dreamt of was ‘an art of balance, of purity and serenity, devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter’.¹¹

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⁷ Ibid., 82.
⁹ Ibid., 27.
In ‘Crumlin Road Courthouse’, a poem named after the judicial institution situated in north Belfast (which has been closed since 1998), McGuckian yet again turns to Matisse as an artistic exemplar. Despite the political overtones of the title (the courthouse is situated close to the remand centre for those suspected of terrorist offences; an underground tunnel connects the two buildings), the poem itself borrows from Hilary Spurling’s biography of Matisse and Judith Thurman’s study of Colette to envisage a peaceful space, free from conflict:12

‘My house, which touches the church’ (UM, 261); ‘restful surface’ (UM, 337); exalted (UM, 338); ‘enchanted wall’ (UM, 384); Where my house touches the church its restful surface is exalted by an enchanted wall.

dark spires (UM, 289); would melt away (UM, 293); rather than having to be blown apart (UM, 293); ‘if a cloud changes shape’ (UM, 280); If dark spires would melt away rather than having to be blown apart, if a cloud could change

The flowery, light-filled essence (UM, 284); ‘I divine the river, the hospital, and the citadel’ (SF, 261); the flowery essence of its shape, I could divine the river, the hospital, the citadel,

‘some phantom rocks’ (UM, 138); ‘just showing above the rim’ (UM, 245); protected by water (UM, 280); and listen to some phantom rocks just showing beyond the rim, protected by the lifelike water,

‘growing in the sea like a shell’ (UM, 280); ‘your ravishing Sea’ (UM, 413) growing in the ravishing sea like a shell—life-giving ghosts mirroring nothing.

The scene pictured here is utterly serene: the surface is ‘restful’ and the wall ‘enchanted’. The speaker imagines what it would be like if ‘dark spires’ simply would ‘melt away’ rather than ‘having to be blown apart’. In such a scenario, she could adopt the role of a diviner and listen in to nature; even the ghosts would then be ‘life-giving’. The details taken from Spurling emphasise places and moments characterised by tranquillity and artistic productivity. In 1903 Matisse moved to a ‘house which touches the church’ in Lesquielles St-Germain, and wrote that ‘This place suits my wife, and as for me, I see an unlimited succession

of paintings to be done’ (UM 261). In 1904, Matisse was influenced by the style of Henri Edmond Cross and was content to explore his ‘gentler vision of an earthly paradise in which moral and physical ugliness would melt away of their own accord rather than having to be blown away’ (UM 293). In 1905, Matisse managed to complete Le Bonheur de vivre, a painting he described as ‘my Arcadia’, by adopting a more calming style: ‘I replaced the vibrato with a more responsive, more direct harmony, simple and frank enough to provide me with a restful surface’ (UM, 337). In 1907, Allan Stein, the nephew of Gertrude and Leo Stein, reacted in awe to his mother’s hanging of twelve paintings by Matisse on a single wall in their apartment on 58 rue Madame, Paris: ‘You couldn’t help but give in and let yourself be carried away by the magic of the colours on that enchanted wall’ (UM, 384). Equally enthralled by Matisse’s painting, Sergei Ivanovich Shchukin wrote to the artists in 1908, declaring: “I think all the time of your ravishing Sea […] I see the painting all the time before my eyes. I can feel that freshness, that majesty of the ocean, that sense of sadness and melancholy” (UM, 413).

As the poem progresses, it becomes clear that what the speaker describes is not her ‘real’ surroundings, but rather their transmutation into art: the water is described as ‘lifelike’ and ‘rocks’ is qualified by the adjective ‘phantom’. At the poem’s close, even the thunder is described as ‘sumptuous’ in a world which has been reduced to shape and colour:

‘what depths and suppleness in the shadows’ (UM, 254); What suppleness there is in the shadows of the least landscape,

the clear blue rectangle of a long window (UM, 228); sumptuous (UM, 138);
the sky and river festivals (UM, 156); The Blue Vase which ultimately gave birth to Matisse’s The Blue Window (UM, 190)

the clear blue rectangle of the long window, the sumptuous thunder of the sky and river festivals the vase gave birth to.

While the quotation from Joris Karl-Huysmans’s appreciation of Turner’s artwork blurs the distinction between the actual world and its representation—“And yet these scenes are real: autumn landscapes, rust-coloured woods, running water, tall dishevelled forests […] these are the sky and river festivals of nature sublimated” (UM, 156)—nevertheless, there is an unresolved tension in the poem, one which has not eliminated or domesticated conflict. Firstly, the speaker adopts a conditional mood by using a periphrastic construction (“If dark spires would melt away […] I could divine the river”), thereby implying that her desire has not yet come to pass. Secondly, when the speaker declares that ‘I divine the
river, the hospital, and the citadel’, she is not citing from Matisse’s biography; rather, a more troubling context is evoked since McGuckian is here citing an extract from a wartime letter from the French writer Colette to Léon Hamel in 1914 describing her time in Verdun near the trenches.

War may be a marginal (albeit disruptive) concern in ‘Crumlin Road Courthouse’, but it takes centre stage in ‘The Half-Marriage’, a poem which cites from biographies of Picasso and Wilde:13

Everyone had returned—you no one had returned the same (CD, 131); the leather band around his head wound (CD, 145); he would catch fire (CD, 140); ‘in front of you’ (OW, 346); ‘beside you’ (OW, 345);
from hospital to hospital (CD, 136);
his love turned inward (OW, 136);

His war over while the war still raged (CD, 141);
floral surge (OW, 131);
amber-brown dress (OW, 108);

The text focuses not only on the physical injuries incurred by an unnamed male figure, but also on the psychological after-effects of war. While Picasso did not fight in the trenches in the First World War, his fellow artists and close friends Georges Braque, André Derain, Guillaume Apollinaire and Jean Cocteau answered the call-to-arms. After the war, Picasso stated that ‘I never found them again. […] Everyone had returned—you no one had returned the same’ (CD, 131).

Braque, who received a serious head injury during a battle at Carency and who was moved ‘from hospital to hospital’, became more distant with Picasso because of his wartime experiences: when he was back in Paris he saw ‘no bridge between his world, his war and the flamboyant new direction taken by his pre-war partner’ (CD, 145). Of course, the ‘he’ in the poem is not Braque: in many respects, he is an ‘Everyman’, or at least a composite figure of those who endured suffering in the trenches. From Creator and Destroyer we read that it was Apollinaire who wore a ‘leather band around his head wound’ and it was Cocteau who was discharged from the marines, ‘his war over while the war still raged’ (CD, 141). The way in which the quotations are spliced together imply that the male figure suffers from

post-traumatic stress disorder: the war not only ‘still raged’ at the Front, but also within his mind. However, reading McGuckian’s poem alongside its sources suggests a different thematic focus, namely the tension between two types of art: a decadent, individualistic art espoused by Wilde, and the more politically radical output of Picasso.

When the speaker uses the image of ‘love turned inward’, she intimates that the violence experienced (or witnessed) by her protagonist has rendered him melancholic and introspective; thus, traumatic events have made him unresponsive, unable to seek the solace and comfort of others. In Ellmann’s biography, the phrase refers to Wilde’s ‘The Garden of Eros’ which features Narcissus whose ‘love turned inward’ (OW, 136), a trope which perhaps helps characterise Wilde’s work as an art-for-art’s sake. That impression is reinforced by a second quotation from Ellmann: after the final curtain for Lady Windermere’s Fan (1892), Wilde appeared on stage and opened his address by saying, ‘Ladies and gentlemen, […] it’s perhaps not very proper to smoke in front of you, but… it’s not very proper to disturb me when I’m smoking’ (OW, 346, emphasis added). The address is thus witty and thoroughly self-involved. When juxtaposed to quotations from Picasso’s biography, and when placed in the context of war, such a narcissistic pose seems thoroughly out of place, perhaps as anachronistic as the ‘floral surge’ of the second stanza. (Analysing Wilde’s ‘The Burden of Itys’, Ellmann contends that the ‘floral surge’ with which it begins is ‘botanically suspect’ since the flowers are out of place and blooming at the wrong time.) In contrast to (admittedly, this version of) Wilde, Picasso was a politically-minded artist. Indeed, in light of his friends’ experiences, he began to lay ‘“bare the illusions of personified, material, synthetic beauty”’; hence, behind ‘“captivating, fascinating female beauty he sees the horror of disintegration and decomposition”’ (CD, 136). This strategy is one which McGuckian herself has been increasingly adopting in her work.

In ‘Butcher’s Table’ she borrows from the Countess of Ranfurly’s diaries to depict war as both violent and dehumanising. Hermione, Countess of Ranfurly (née Llewellyn) married Daniel Knox, the sixth Earl of Ranfurly, on 17 January 1939. They had met in Canberra when the Earl was the Aide-de-Camp to Lord Gowrie, the Australian Governor-General, and she was a personal assistant to Lord and Lady Wakehurst (the Governor of New South Wales). On their first wedding anniversary the Earl was posted to British-controlled Palestine and she resolved to follow him, despite army rules prohibiting non-regular wives from accompanying their husbands to the war front. In April 1941 the Earl was captured after the Battle of Tobruk and was a prisoner-of-war for three

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14 McGuckian, ‘Butcher’s Table’, Drawing Ballerinas, 63. Quotations from the source—Countess of Ranfurly, To War with Whitaker: The Wartime Diaries of the countess of Ranfurly, 1939–45 (London, 1994)—are marked as ‘WW’.
years. The Countess, despite an attempt by the British to forcibly repatriate her, worked for the Special Operations Executive office in Cairo. Her wartime diaries, detailing her anxiety for her husband’s safety and her reactions to the carnage and political intrigue of the time, caught the public’s imagination when they were published in 1994. In McGuckian’s poem, the opening image of the couple flying ‘between two sheets of heavenly blue’ suggests a safe, inviolable position, one that accords a panoptic view. Also, the way in which she arranges the quotations in the first two stanzas presents a tension between the relative safety indoors and the public upheaval outdoors:

We flew between two sheets of blue (WW, 251); to cross the top of the world (WW, 360); bank notes fluttering on the pavements (WW, 116); cool arched rooms (WW, 132); His eyes match his conversation (WW, 121); He played me a little sad Chopin (WW, 6); Cairo’s ‘blue-out’ is bright (WW, 143); The fields were a strange sour green (WW, 176);

We flew between two sheets of heavenly blue which crossed the top of the world. Bank notes fluttered on pavements, and in cool arched rooms, eyes matched conversations. He played me a little sad Chopin, the blue-out was bright, but the fields were a strange sour green.

The tone here is dispassionate, reflecting an apparent lack of concern or involvement in world events: the speaker is without volition and agency, and does not seem to care about what is happening (‘Bank notes fluttered’, ‘eyes matched conversations’). Indeed, when we are told that ‘He played me a little sad Chopin’, it is almost as if we are witnessing a contemporary incarnation of Nero fiddling while Rome burns. Yet the detail is a telling, poignant one as it refers to a telephone conversation between Jan Smeterlin, a Polish pianist living in London, and the Countess, when the latter relays the chilling news that Warsaw had capitulated to the Nazi forces: ‘He was so upset he could hardly speak. “Hold on”, he said. “I’ll put the receiver down on my piano”. He played me a little sad Chopin and then came back on the line – “That’s how I feel” (WW, 6). Music, in this instance, constitutes neither cold-hearted escapism nor substitutive satisfaction; rather, it provides a means of expression when the linguistic resources are inadequate. Following this moment, the speaker more readily documents her reactions to wartime violence:

some of the tallest are the shortest now (WW, 150); the burns cases lie so still (WW, 151); beyond belief or forgiveness (WW, 171); dark marks […] show how deep the water rose (WW, 275); we are alone in the war,

Some of the tallest are the shortest now, the burn cases lie so still, beyond forgiveness, dark marks show how deep the water rose. Once again we are alone in the war,
On 11 February 1943, the Countess recorded her reaction to the terrible conditions under which the Polish army were fighting (‘riddled with disease and practically starving’) and noted that the ‘rate of their mortality is beyond belief or forgiveness’ (WW, 171). McGuckian applies this judgement more generally when describing those who have lost limbs (‘Some of the tallest are the shortest now’) and those who have been burnt beyond recognition. The speaker no longer inhabits a domicile at a remove from conflict: the graphic image of tearing ‘the skin off rooms’ implies that the physical distance between outside and inside is increasingly diminished, and the violent, brutalising nature of the activity described intimates the degree of self-sacrifice called for in times of war. The trope employed here, that of ‘dolls’ houses’, seems grotesquely out-of-place: the times are most certainly out of joint, with the ludic suddenly becoming ludicrous. It is as if the ‘rooms’ shrink in scale and the people are mere playthings, at the mercy of outside forces. To describe the disarticulated remnants of human beings as a ‘jigsaw of bodies’ is similarly a very curious poetic strategy: no explanatory framework is placed around the violated bodies, and no attempt is made to offset the disordering nature of the encounter by sanctifying or elegising the corpses. The image is unsettling: the bodies are fragmented, resting in pieces and waiting to be put together as if they were part of a child’s puzzle. But this is an encounter with the abject, and the speaker provides neither aesthetic consolation nor closure. As Scott Brewster has argued, the abject body ‘provokes a crisis of witness or, rather, it stages the act of witnessing in (amidst) crisis: it makes a struggle between traumatised articulation and muteness, between the ethical responsibility to testify and an aversion to the exploitative, even pornographic, exposure of suffering and privation’.15 Thus, the speaker resists ‘an explanatory meta-narrative that would “frame” violence and keep the uncanniness of the corpse[s] at bay’.16

Although McGuckian’s poetry raises concerns about the representation of violence, she clearly does not shy away from it as a thematic concern. Even in poems in which she declares that violence is not a theme which she feels


16 Ibid., 22.
comfortable with, conflict is still evoked. In a late text, ‘River of January’, the opening poem of *Had I a Thousand Lives*, the speaker states:

I do not sing of arms and the man,
I have nothing to say which I can say.
People walk about as if they own
where they are, and they do.¹⁷

However, this anti-epic gesture, the refusal, or negation, of a Virgilian opening (‘arma virumque cano’), is not quite what it seems: while the poem does not ostensibly address the theme of warfare, it is nonetheless a political text which touches on exile and expatriation, though it does so in remarkably different ways to the *Aeneid*. The poem is based on two sources: Diana Collecott’s *H.D. & Sapphic Modernism*, a study which examines the erasure of women in modernism and the silencing of lesbian voices in the wider culture, and Jonathan Bate’s *The Song of the Earth*, a series of eco-critical essays on the importance of poetry for our modern world.¹⁸ The first stanza incorporates a number of quotations, each of which recounts a moment of marginalisation and disempowerment. The first is voiced by H.D.’s persona, Midget, in her suppressed and posthumously published autobiographical novel, *Paint it Today*: “That runs in my head, arma virumque, that beats down the battered fortress of my brain […] What do I sing? I don’t know what I sing. What anyhow does it matter what I sing, I, a nebulous personality without a name” (HD, 46). Here, as Collecott argues, the bi-sexual protagonist ‘registers her non-entity, as far as the master narratives of masculine expatriation are concerned’, by means of an intertextual reference that resists ‘the opening flourish of the *Aeneid*’ (HD, 59–60). Her sexuality places her outside of cultural norms. That experience of exclusion is also registered in the second quotation, from a love letter sent by Janet Flanner to Natalia Danesi: “I have nothing to say that I can say” (HD, 46). Here, the Paris correspondent for *The New Yorker* acknowledges that, because the Second World War is still raging, her letters are subject to scrutiny and censorship and, thus, she is unable to be explicit about her ‘socially unacceptable’ desires. The quotation is juxtaposed with a third, voiced by the black, homosexual author, James Baldwin, who becomes aware that he does not belong in the ‘white world’ of downtown New York: “People walk about as if they owned where they are—and they do … . You know—you know


instinctively—that none of this is for you’’ (HD, 59). In what follows, a solution to societal alienation is envisaged:

‘séparé de l’auto-séparé’ (HD, 60); ‘forêt d’erreur’ (SE, 87); ‘nous appelons la mortelle morbideur qui nous assaillit par de nombreuses autres noms’ (HD, 60);

How and why do we dream of living in unity
with her? (SE, vii); the island becomes as
the forest (SE, 88); ‘warming her hands in her warm breast’ (HD, 63); flower-rich (SE, 6);

‘cœur d’un nid’ (SE, 157);
‘dans une forêt non touchée’ (SE, 43);
‘suggestion d’orchards’ (SE, 15);

‘Comme chaque promesse […] c’est juste une promesse et elle est belle comme toutes les promesses’ (SE, 123); ‘dans sa forme pure de montagne’ (SE, 51);

man’s shadow was the forest which he cleared (SE, 88)
Bate, ‘the island becomes as the forest’ (SE, 88). While man may repress nature’s wildness, the repressed returns in the form of the sublime and, through art, one can once again be in touch with a true sense of liberation. As Bate argues when commenting on Adorno’s ‘The Beauty of Nature’:

Nature is not just an image of beauty, it is also an object that is worked over and commodified, but the beauty of nature nevertheless offers us a promise of freedom, peace and belonging. By withdrawing into its own realm and thus obliterating the scars of commodification, art has the capacity to redeem that promise. (SE, 122–3)

This urge to seek a haven beyond normative discourses, free from restrictive societal rules, is expressed in McGuckian’s poem by means of her vision of an unspoilt, idyllic, virgin territory: ‘pure mountain form’, ‘flower-rich shelter’, and ‘wood left untouched’. It is tempting to view McGuckian’s appropriation and use of these quotations as an expression of her own sense of peripherality as a Catholic in Northern Ireland, particularly in light of the image of ‘living in unity / with the island’. At the time of composition, the Belfast Agreement had been signed and peace in Northern Ireland was in its infancy. As such, the text can be seen to encode the hope and desire for the full integration of warring parties. In such a reading, the sense of sexual and racial otherness expressed by the poem’s quotations is appropriated by McGuckian to present divisions endemic to Northern Ireland.

While the relation to Northern Ireland is left unstated in ‘River of January’, in ‘The Mickey-Mouse Gas Mask’19 the speaker locates herself in ‘the country of comparative peace’, thus intimating a more immediate connection to the volatile post-Agreement political environment in Northern Ireland, one confirmed in a radio interview given by the poet:

Well I think the time that poem was written was in that very shady grey period when they kept talking about these ceasefires but people were still being butcheted and murdered and bombs were going off everywhere and in fact it was even worse than the time before that. So it is a very ironic term, the comparative peace, using Peace with a capital letter almost like it was something that was impossible and yet things were becoming regularised and there was all sorts of concessions being made.20

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While the main paramilitary groups had declared a cessation of violence, or at least had been maintaining a ceasefire by the time the poem appeared in Drawing Ballerinas (2001), in the year prior to publication the Continuity IRA had been responsible for bomb attacks at Mahon’s Hotel in Irvinestown (Fermanagh) on 6th February, and at the Shackleton British Army Barracks in Ballykelly (Londonderry) on the 25th of the same month. They were also believed to have been behind the pipe bomb attack on the RUC base at Castlewellan (Down) on the 31st October, and for a series of bomb alerts in Belfast in May. Thus, in the interview there is a level of anxiety behind McGuckian’s use of the phrase ‘comparative peace’. Yet the poem itself had been written prior to the Downing Street Declaration, and years before the Belfast Agreement had been signed. It was first published in an anthology edited by Ken Smith and Judi Benson entitled Klaonica: Poems for Bosnia (1993) as a measure of solidarity for the victims of the Bosnian war (1992–95). Therefore, it is only in retrospect that the ‘comparative peace’ can be construed as referring to post-Agreement Northern Irish society. Instead, a comparison is being drawn between the Bosnian civil war and the Troubles.

The poem, which uses quotations from Marie Belloc Lowndes’s diaries and letters, describes the speaker’s precarious sense of identity, her ‘far-from-clear citizenship’, at a time when the legitimacy of both the Bosnian and Northern Irish States was being called into question:

In the country of comparative peace,
conscious of trees, I taste my far-from-clear citizenship: like continental mourning kept in an Italian hurtwood marriage-chest.

I have never been out in so black a night,
people stood in the roped-off streets
Watching the sky.

The Clubhouses’s pretty double drawing-room
had gone completely flat, its back
As if a giant knife had cut it through.

Huge blocks of stone were thrown up in the air
like cricket balls, furnishings were flung fifty yards on to the course. Every window
missing, the church had only its spire left.

Drawing on a female literary exemplar’s experience of violent conflict—Belloc Lowndes was a prolific English novelist who lived through both the First and Second World Wars—McGuckian captures a moment of powerlessness and fragility, when one’s private life of leisure and routine becomes suddenly exposed to the fierce intensity of national warfare. While ‘so black a night’ might serve as a melodramatic scene-setting description, it also evokes the speaker’s psychic despair and moral indignation as an unseen and once-distant enemy reeks havoc and becomes suddenly, and frighteningly, close. That which epitomises the speaker’s supposedly inviolable middle-class gentility—‘The Clubhouse’s pretty double drawing room’—has now been utterly destroyed. There is no longer a distinction between inside and out: the furnishings have been ‘flung / fifty yards on to the course’. Even the institution which gives spiritual succour in times of hardship, the Church, has been irreparably damaged. The similes used—as if a giant knife, ‘like cricket balls’—suggest the mind’s attempt at processing the effects of this unnerving irruption of violence: that which is unfamiliar is described in familiar terms, and the effect is all the more surreal for that.

McGuckian’s own experience of the Troubles becomes filtered through intertextual references; to write about violence, she requires the distance granted by the texts from which she quotes. Such a strategy is not unusual in contemporary Northern Irish poetry. Seamus Heaney argues that when a problem seems insurmountable, it can best be dealt with from an enabling distance. In The Place of Writing, he refers to the ‘need to raise historical experience to a symbolic power, the need to move personal force through an aesthetic distance’.22 Michael Longley, another fellow poet, equally requires an ‘aesthetic distance’ when referring to internecine strife. His strategy is to translate (and rewrite) episodes from Homer to create poetic texts which touch on, and create implicit analogies for, Northern Irish violence: ‘Moments in the Odyssey’, he says, ‘chimed with emotion that I would have found almost impossible to deal with otherwise: heartbreak, paranoia, bitterness, hatred, fear. Homer gave me a new emotional and psychological vocabulary’.23 Likewise, for McGuckian, existing texts provide access to experiences outside of her purview, as well as a basis for constructing analogies between different conflicts, and a vocabulary in which to explore to them. The enabling distance that McGuckian seeks not only can accord the poet a more objective attitude, but it also makes her less vulnerable from attack by those who disagree with her political sympathies, and it can relieve her from the burden of the title ‘Troubles Poet’. In an interview with Helen Blakeman, she states: ‘You see the danger is of feeding off the Troubles, and I would not want

22 Seamus Heaney, The Place of Writing (Atlanta, Georgia, 1989), 55.
to be that kind of poet. It still is very dangerous, that you could feed off the kind of high, the buzz of it, a kind of ‘notoriety’. One good example of a poem which guards against her becoming, in Heaney’s words, ‘mired in attachment’ and ‘a feeder off battlefields’, is ‘The Chimney Boys’, a poem which deliberately masks its prime thematic concern: the infamous murder of three young boys in a sectarian attack.

On 29 June 1998, the Parades Commission announced that the Orange Order parade planned for Drumcree on 5 July was to be re-routed so that it would not go down the predominantly Catholic Garvaghy Road; in response, the Orange Order declared that they would attempt to hold their traditional parade and, if prevented from doing so, ‘they would stand their ground for as long as it might take’. Widespread civil disorder ensued: ‘Orange roadblocks and protests were augmented by rioting youths, to the extent that one twenty-four hours period brought 284 outbreaks of disorder, 115 attacks on the security forces, 19 injuries to police, with petrol bombs thrown on 96 occasions, 403 petrol bombs seized, 57 homes and businesses damaged’. However, one particular attack was to shock the British public. At 4 a.m. on the 12 July, loyalists threw a petrol bomb into the home of Chrissy Quinn, a Catholic mother living in a largely Protestant area in Ballymoney. Her three sons, Jason (aged eight), Mark (nine) and Richard (ten) were burned to death:

Inside the blazing house Chrissy Quinn was woken up by “the weans shouting, Mummy, smoke”. Minutes later, ten-year-old Richard pressed himself against the upstairs window crying out that he was frightened and that his feet were burning. The firefighters arrived within ten minutes, and risked their own lives to try to reach the boys. The three small charred bodies, each of them curled up in the foetal position, were carried out of the ruins.

Although the RUC declared it a sectarian attack, some loyalists dismissed its connection to the Drumcree protest: ‘the Quinns had been murdered for family reasons; the murders were drug-related; they had nothing to do with Drumcree protests; the boys were Protestant anyway’. Such excuses, as Ruth Dudley Edwards argues, ignored ‘the fact that, using Drumcree as an excuse, loyalists

had been fire-bombing Catholic houses throughout the week’.30 Along with the denial of responsibility came attempted justifications. ‘The other side has killed and maimed our side and look what they’ve got out of it,’ argued Sandra Gamble. ‘There’s going to be a lot of lives lost. Those poor wee children. But we have the right to march’.31 A statement like this derives from a reprehensible tally-keeping mentality and a corrosive moral relativism; the murder of three children is thus glossed over with a ‘but’. While, as we shall see, McGuckian’s anger at the killings and their aftermath is discernible in her text, there is no overt contextualisation: the Quinn brothers are not named, nor is there any specific reference to Northern Ireland.

The opening stanzas are made up of quotations taken from Carola Peck’s collection of reminiscences, letters and anecdotes about Mariga von Urach (born Hermione Marie-Gabrielle), and from E. S. Turner’s collection of essays on nineteenth-century social reform:32

‘it is late earlier’ (RR, 242); the faded biscuit-pink of the Vento houses (MF, 131); infill building (MF, 151); a slanted blue and white chessboard (MF, 128); ‘Those darling policemen’, we thought […] But no—Those darling policemen, we thought, they really were—Insurgents’ (MF, 126); a’swatch’ (MF, 132); crumbs of colours (MF, 132); ‘go dark’ (MF, 152) a swatch of crumbs of colour going dark.

With her husband, the author and conservationist, Desmond Guinness, Mariga established the Irish Georgian Society in 1958 and set about restoring many of Ireland’s eighteenth-century buildings to their former glory. The phrases assembled from Mariga and Her Friends predominate here and serve to paint a picture of upper-class gentility (‘faded biscuit-pink’, ‘blue and white chessboard’), but one which is threatened, or on the decline (‘Inflames’, ‘colour going dark’). There is a quaint naivety in the way the protagonists think of those ‘darling policemen’; in retrospect, this is marked as mistaken (‘we thought’), since those loyal upholders of law and order are revealed as ‘insurgents’. As the poem progresses, quotations from Turner come to dominate so that, by the conclusion, the initial emphasis on construction and entitlement is replaced by a critique of the repressive measures needed to maintain

privilege: ‘six-pounders spraying glass marbles / and clay balls’. The attitude of those in power is shown to be utterly insular and defensive. In order to uphold what the poem terms ‘the feudal right of introspecting houses’, laws are passed—specifically, the Game Laws—to enable the landed gentry to use spring guns and traps in defence of their lands: ‘country gentlemen, driven nigh apoplectic in their efforts to keep pheasant from the bellies of the middle and lower classes, began to set their murderous machines more and more indiscriminately in their woodlands’ (RR, 16–7). While those with privilege are protected by the law, those from the lower classes are vulnerable, particularly the children:

A boy is hard to quench, mingled too much with bitter wood; but what is a toasted child, lying in his negritude, his corkscrew motion, his sable consolation, to a deranged dinner party? Murder by proxy, a melancholy but imperious necessity.

It is in this stanza that the analogy with the Quinn murders becomes clear. The specific reference is to the ‘chimney boys’ of the poem’s title, those who, from the age of four or five, were trained to climb up the inside of chimneys to clean them. As Turner states, their lives were regarded as utterly disposable: ‘there were thousands of undersized and under-privileged urchins who could be bought for the price of a terrier, or even kidnapped’ (RR, 34). To save a dinner party from being ‘deranged’ (or, ‘put out of order’), it is deemed acceptable to sacrifice a child:

A large party are invited to dinner—great display is to be made—and about half an hour before dinner there is an alarm that the kitchen chimney is on fire! It is impossible to put off the distinguished personages who are expected. It gets very late for the soup and fish, the cook is frantic—all eyes are turned on the sable consolation of the master chimney sweep—and up into the midst of the burning chimney is sent one of the miserable little infants of the brush! There is a positive prohibition of this practice, and an enactment of penalties in one of the Acts of Parliament which respect chimney sweepers. But what matter Acts of Parliament, when the pleasures of genteel people are concerned? Or what is a toasted child, compared to the agonies of the mistress of the house with a deranged dinner? (RR, 37, my italics)
While such a sacrifice may be ‘a melancholy but imperious, necessity’, the speaker in McGuckian’s text accuses those who arranged the dinner of a crime: the sacrifice is designated as ‘murder by proxy’. At this juncture, one could argue that McGuckian is implicating the Orange Order, and all those who acted to ensure that the march would proceed, in the death of the Quinn brothers. Further evidence of this intent can be seen in a previous stanza:

Lashed his child workers from their beds            lashed from their beds clutching their clothes
 […] clutching their clothes over their arms over their arms by loving Sabbatarian
(RR, 60); ‘purifying their manhood’ (RR, 72) engines purifying their manhood

There are multiple ironies here: not only do the ‘Sabbatarian engines’ refer to those murderous machines used to defend privilege and entitlement, the killing of the Quinn brothers took place on a Sunday, thereby contravening one of the requirements for entry into the Orange Order (one has to ‘remember to keep holy the Sabbath day’). The image of children ‘lashed from their beds clutching their clothes’ is a sickening reminder of what happened the young boys due to the un-Sabbatarian activities.

If McGuckian had written an overtly polemical poem against the Orange Order she would have courted controversy and have been open to a Loyalist backlash. We only know that the poem was intended as a response to the killings because of a letter sent on 3 May 2000 to a young researcher, Sylvie Ramel, who was completing a dissertation on the themes of mourning and reconciliation in Northern Irish poetry. In their correspondence, McGuckian states that she deliberately chose a small, obscure journal in which to publish the poem: it was ‘a place [she] was happy to see it. Because not many would see it that would be offended. But still it would have a life’. Although her poem was intended to be more overt in its reference to the atrocity, dedicated as it was ‘to the politician who was first to arrive on the scene’, the dedication was removed at his suggestion (‘he felt it unadvisable’). However, such caution was dispensed with when writing ‘Crystal Night’, a poem in which we find a very negative portrayal of the Orange Order:

‘Seven days yearly’ (RS, 323); timed the act to coincide For seven days yearly, with summer solstice (RS, 319); a murder timed to coincide

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Boots, drums, songs, lights, rhythms (RS, 301); with the summer solstice, they parade their boots, drums, songs, their undinist rhythms, insignia, flags, their uniforms and pageantry, their forests of banners, their declarations of loyalty, their endless repetitions of slogans, their standard greetings, their catechetical speeches, their myopic, frustrated ideology of the cheated through the city of convulsionaries.

Critics, such as Conor Carville, have already pointed out the ‘reference to Northern Ireland’s July marching season and the uses of historical imagery in Orange banners’.35 The poem’s imagery—of parades, drums, songs, uniforms, banners—and the references to ‘declarations of loyalty’ and ‘catechetical speeches’, invoke the different elements of the Orange marches. It is obvious from the description that the speaker has little time for these annual celebrations: she characterises their ideology as both ‘myopic’ and ‘frustrated’. Indeed, the marchers’ ‘rhythms’ are described as ‘undinist’; in other words, these marchers are characterised as people who achieve sexual gratification by having others defecate or urinate upon them. Since the text is partly based on Modris Eksteins’s *Rites of Spring*,36 we can surmise that the poet is establishing a rather crude (and offensive) analogy between Nazi rallies and the Orange parades. Of course the poem’s title does hint at this analogy: *Kristallnacht* is the name given to the orchestrated series of attacks against Jewish homes, synagogues and workplaces carried out by the Nazis on 9–10 November 1938. In the poem, then, the parades are associated less with the re-assertion and celebration of Protestant identity than with a desire to claim territory and oppress one’s enemy. Yet the source is not acknowledged and nowhere does she single out the Orange Order for mention. Thus, selecting quotations from her source allow

Medbh McGuckian and Conflict

her to work through (and express covertly) her antipathy towards the Orange Order without attracting undue notice.

Using intertexts to write about difficult subject matter may allow sufficient objective distance for the poet, and provide her with productive analogies, but there is also a danger that they might lead her to co-opt someone else’s suffering for the sake of art. In other words, art may take a past atrocity as a theme and treat it as a mere ‘subject’, thus doing further injustice to those who have suffered. Unlike, for example, ‘Butcher’s Table’, a poem such as ‘Butterfly Memory Object’, which centres on trauma, does come close to providing too neat a closure. It is a text concerned with the memories which inhere within a place:

Still deadly places are folded
Into an unburial ground, where resting
Soldiers tell the munitionettes
They’re easy to sleep with,
And for your button a kiss.  

Citing heavily from Nicholas Saunders’ Trench Art: Materialities and Memories of War, the poem highlights the persistence, rather than erasure, of the past. Once the corpses in these ‘still deadly places’ are merged with the natural features, the landscape becomes a ‘multi-vocal palimpsest’. The ground is marked as an open wound. ‘Unburial ground’ is Susan Sontag’s coinage to describe the location of Felice Beatto’s photograph taken inside the Secundra Bagh after two thousand rebels had been slaughtered by British forces in 1857. Yet the act of ‘folding’ the soldiers into the ground, and the presentation of them as ‘resting’, suggests pacification and silencing. Indeed, the narrative trajectory indicates a movement backwards, before death as if denying what has (or will) happen: the ‘resting’ soldiers are not lying dead on the ground, but playfully flirting with the munitionettes prior to going out to battle. The ‘Butterfly Memory Object’ of the poem’s title suggests a further silencing: although such an artwork, made from shells and other destructive armaments, serve in the first instance to remember the dead, Saunders acknowledges that now the narratives which lie behind the artworks remain unknown.

That McGuckian is mistrustful of art’s propensity to transmute rather than transmit pain can be seen in ‘Life as a Literary Convict’, a memory poem which

38 Nicholas J. Saunders, Trench Art: Materialities and Memories of War (London, 2003), 127.
39 See Saunders, Trench Art, 7.
borrows heavily from Graham Robb’s biography of Balzac, the setting evokes a post-war context:

signs of a still recent war (GR, 147);
‘creep amongst them like a plague’ (GR, 263);
dressed as Phoebus (GR, 231);
‘while I wander about in search of the dead,
all I see are the living’ (GR, 416);
pull into full existence (GR, 416)

While the speaker is ‘in search of the dead’, those around her are concerned with pulling the living ‘into existence’. The ‘signs of the still recent war’ have become transformed and have lost all their horror: they are ‘dressed as Phoebus’, or Apollo, the god of art. The speaker is separated off from such activity and plays no part in the covering over or transmutation of suffering. For her, the wounds must remain visible to avoid historical amnesia and to facilitate commemoration. While the urge to move on from the turmoil of war is understandable, to fail to recognize the violence done to the victims, and to neglect the duty to mark their passing, is to risk becoming complicit with the aggressors who have already conceived of them as ‘other’. In *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler asks, ‘Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? […] What makes for a grievable life?’ In times of war, the ‘enemy’ is often dehumanised both in the media and in political discourse, and what results is a ‘perverse anonymity’ which can legitimise violence directed against ‘them’; hence, as Butler argues, ‘[v]iolence against those who are already not quite living, that is, living in a state of suspension between life and death, leaves a mark that is no mark’. For a populace to be negligent towards their dead is to equally render them as ‘other’, and the poem’s speaker registers her dissent towards such a situation.

In the above poems, McGuckian treats wartime experiences in her idiosyncratic way: juxtaposing quotations from unacknowledged sources, she at times maintains distance from the more immediate conflict in Northern Ireland, and the degree of difference between the sources and her texts indicates the level of poetic shaping that has taken place. She does not co-opt the experiences of others in an unethical manner, nor could one say that she treats the

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horrific events either voyeuristically or opportunistically. Yet what is the reader to make of my final example, ‘Comfort Station’, which is based on Prosecution Document No. 5591 from the records of the Netherlands Forces Intelligence Service (NEFIS)?

(About 40 natives were captured and killed in September 1944)

Q: How were the men killed? A: They were lined up in threes in column of route [sic] and then the 21 soldiers mentioned above charged them with bayonets, killing three at a time.

Q: A witness has said that you raped women and that women were brought to the barracks and used by the Japs. Is this true?
A: I organized a brothel for the soldiers and used it myself.

Q: Were the women willing to go?
A: Some were willing, some not.

Q: How many women were there?
A: Six.

Q: How many of these women were forced into the brothel?
A: Five.

Q: Why were the chosen?
A: They were daughters of men who attacked us.

Q: Then they were punished for the deeds of their fathers?
A: Yes.

Q: How long were they kept?
A: Eight months.

Q: How many used them?
A: Twenty five.

Q: Did they bathe between the rapes?
A: They were lined up in threes and the twenty five soldiers mentioned above charged them with bayonets, killing three at a time.

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McGuckian, ‘Comfort Station’, White Review 3 (2011), online version only (cited on the right): http://www.thewhitereview.org/poetry/comfort-station/, accessed 8 December 2011. The website states that only an extract is published online and that the full version is included in the print copy. However, the print copy omits the poem. I received a copy of the poem from McGuckian and it corresponds with the online version. The source (cited on the left) for the poem can be found at space.geocities.jp/japanwarres/center/hodo/hodo38.pdf.
After the Second World War, the Dutch military intelligence gathered evidence of war crimes committed in the Dutch East Indies and an International Tribunal for the Far East was established to prosecute the guilty parties. It has been alleged (and to a great extent proven) that ‘between 1932 and 1945, untold thousands of women, euphemistically known as “comfort women”, were systematically rounded up and imprisoned in “comfort stations”, brothels where they were repeatedly raped and abused by Japanese military personnel’.45 Following a suit filed by three Korean women ‘demanding an official apology and compensation from the Japanese government for crimes committed against them during the Asia Pacific war’46, Japan’s chief cabinet secretary, Kono Yohei, acknowledged the existence of the comfort stations. However, in the absence of a full official apology, the controversy continued to rage. On 31 January 2007, the United States House of Representatives passed Resolution 121 ‘expressing the sense of the House of Representatives that the Government of Japan should formally acknowledge, apologize, and accept historical responsibility in a clear and unequivocal manner for its Imperial Armed Forces’ coercion of young women into sexual slavery, known to the world as “comfort women”, during its colonial and wartime occupation of Asia and the Pacific Islands from the 1930s through the duration of World War II’.47 The Japanese Prime Minister at the time, Shinzo Abe, dismissed the call and declared, ‘There’s no conclusive evidence, in a narrow definition, that comfort women were forcibly recruited. It wasn’t like the government and the army took these women away like kidnapping’.48 Previously unpublished evidence from the International Tribunal has since been used to counter the Prime Minister’s claims. One vital piece of testimony came from Lieutenant Ohara Seidai, who was accused of running a comfort station on Moa Island, Indonesia. He was questioned by the military intelligence in 1946 and his answers confirmed the disputed element of coercion. McGuckian has based her poem on the Q & A session between an unspecified military official and the Lieutenant.

By appropriating the testimony and maintaining a narrative voice in the first person, McGuckian is engaging in a form of imaginative projection, or what Gregory Currie terms ‘a process of role taking, or empathetic enactment’.49 As such, she does not inhabit the role of victimiser simply for shock value; rather, it allows her to imaginatively explore a particular mindset and to understand

46 O’Brien 3.
what Hannah Arendt termed the ‘word-and-thought-defying banality of evil’.\textsuperscript{50} Reporting on the Eichmann trial which began on 15 April 1961, Arendt was shocked to find that ‘[t]he deeds were monstrous, but the doer […] was quite ordinary, commonplace, and neither demonic nor monstrous’;\textsuperscript{51} one perhaps can say the same about Lieutenant Seidai. His answers (and those of the poem’s speaker) register neither remorse nor emotion; they are entirely factual and convey the methodical way in which the women were selected. The phrases ‘to be used by’ and ‘went there myself’ rather pointedly resist the interviewer’s own term: ‘rape’. The speaker’s answers acknowledge the objectification and coercion of the women, but his terminology admits no illegality. Indeed, he attempts to legitimate the treatment meted out to them: since their fathers had attacked members of the Kempeitai (the Japanese military police), they must be ‘punished’.

The poem’s stark question and answer format, its lack of both rhyme and set metre, and its close approximation to prose, help guard against aestheticisation. Yet there is something cold and unfeeling about the manner in which the inquisition takes place. Throughout, the victims and victimisers remain anonymous; thus, with its emphasis on numerical facts (six women, five of whom were coerced; twenty-five abusers), one could argue that the process continues the cycle of objectification. Indeed, the women are not the only ones who are depicted as ‘other’ here. The interviewer clearly has internalised the Allied propaganda about the Japanese since he uses the derogatory term ‘Japs’. As Paul Fussell has argued, ‘[f]or the war to be prosecuted at all, the enemy […] had to be severely dehumanized and demeaned’,\textsuperscript{52} and one way of doing this was to refer to them by means of a derogatory classification: ‘japs’. As he wryly notes, ‘monosyllabic enemies are easier to despise than others’.\textsuperscript{53} Throughout the poem, language is shown to play a pernicious role in facilitating violence towards a dehumanised enemy. The poem’s title, ‘Comfort Station’, is a case in point: since it suggests a location where one can find love, compassion and sympathy, it masks the true horrors occurring therein. The term used to describe the victims, ‘military comfort women’ (jūgun ianfu), has become commonplace, but its obscenely euphemistic character has been widely acknowledged. As Yoshimi Yoshiaki has argued, ‘[m]any feel that the stark contrast between the original meaning of the term “comfort” and the coerced

\begin{footnotes}
\item[53] Ibid., 117.
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horror these women experienced renders the term utterly unacceptable’. The one line which does not feature in the original testimony—‘Did they bathe between rapes?’—is the only one which humanises the women. It also marks the point at which McGuckian changes the historical record: the women were not killed ‘three at a time’: that fate was reserved for their fathers. The alteration is part of McGuckian’s imaginative projection and highlights the interviewee’s inability to conceive of the women as people: he does not (or cannot) answer the question about their bathing.

One can argue that the testimony constitutes a ‘found poem’ for McGuckian and that by presenting it for publication, not only is she showing solidarity with those who demand a full apology and compensation from the Japanese government, she is arguing against revisionist historians who have tried to deny or ignore the historical record. For example, Professor Ikuhiko Hata has urged his government to refrain from apologising. He contends: ‘There were at most 20,000 comfort women. None of them were forcibly recruited (by Japanese military). Forty percent of them were from Japan, the most heavily represented nation. Many were sold to brokers by their parents. Some responded willingly to brokers’ offers; others were deceived’. A text like McGuckian’s can help counter such propaganda. The poem, like all the others cited in this chapter, does not shy away from representing, or referring to violence: it constitutes her dissenting voice against those who would perpetuate injustice.

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‘Snared by Words’:
Representations of Trauma

Trauma, as Cathy Caruth states, ‘describes an overwhelming experience of sudden, or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena’. Trauma is characterised by the compulsion to repeat the initial experience either in order to achieve a belated mastery or, as Otto Fenichel contends, due to ‘the tendency of the repressed to find an outlet’. The power of the traumatic experience lies not simply in the fact that it is ‘repeated after its forgetting’ but, as Caruth argues, ‘that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all’. A key text which demonstrates this in a Northern Irish context is Willie Doherty’s 2007 exhibition *Ghost Story* which comprises a fifteen minute colour video installation and an accompanying soundtrack, both of which are continuously played on a loop. Structurally, the piece is unending and lacks closure. The voiceover by the actor Stephen Rea presents a narrative that is said to ‘evoke memories of the dead and a sense of loss and foreboding’. More specifically, the speaker’s first memory returns to the events of 30 January 1972 in Derry and to what he witnessed on Bloody Sunday:

I found myself walking along a deserted path.
Through the trees on one side I could faintly make out a river in the distance.
On the other side I could faintly hear the rumble of far away traffic.
The scene was unfamiliar to me.

I looked over my shoulder and saw that the trees behind me were filled with shadow-like figures.
Looks of terror and bewilderment filled their eyes, and they silently screamed, as if already aware of their fate.
The scene reminded me of the faces in a running crowd that I had once seen on a bright but cold January afternoon.

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3 Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 17.
Doherty’s previous work on Bloody Sunday, in exhibitions such as 30 January 1972 and How It Was, focused primarily on the transmission and dissemination of memory and emphasised ‘how mediated images become the dominant images and replace or embellish other forms of forgetting’. Doherty’s interest in Ghost Story lies elsewhere:

The subtext of the work I’m showing here, Ghost Story, addresses the deeper-seated problems of how we deal with the memory and loss and tragedy of the past 30 years—or some people might say of the past 300 years—of the conflict in Ireland. That is what the political process is not dealing with, but there is an opportunity of being here in the context of representing Northern Ireland to flag up these issues.

The opening statements of Ghost Story are characterised by passive constructions, indicative of the subject’s lack of both volition and agency. His inability to engage with his memories results in incomprehension. The lexis used places us in the realm of representational discourse: ‘scene’, twice mentioned, marks the experience as unreal and this is symptomatic of his dissociative behaviour. He remains a witness rather than an active participant in the experience being related. Lacking corporeality the disembodied ‘shadow-like presences’ which crowd the speaker’s memory all suggest the spectral return of the repressed. The silent scream is an emblem of the subject’s own current predicament since the initial event ‘is such that beyond it there remains only a speech in pieces, splinters and fragments of speech’. With trauma, there is an inherent tension between the desire to recount and master one’s experience and the need to repress the memory. As Gabriele Schwab notes, ‘[w]riting from within the core of trauma is a constant struggle between the colonizing power of words and the revolt of what is being rejected, silenced. […] Trauma as a mode of being halts the flow of time, fractures the self, and punctures memory and language’. As spectators, we follow the subject as he retraces his footsteps along the paths and streets that, as he relates, he had thought he had forgotten. Yet all that remains are shadows, footprints, tracks and traces of the crowd. At one point the narrator finds that his ‘train of thought’ is interrupted by what he calls ‘a further incursion of unreality.’

Representations of Trauma

My eyes deceived me as I thought I saw a human figure. No matter how quickly or slowly I walked the figure did not seem to get any closer. When I took my eye off the figure he disappeared. When I stared at the point where the path vanished the figure emerged once again from the trees or from the path itself. I could not tell.

This irruption of the uncanny once again marks the return of the repressed but the fact that he ‘cannot tell’ also suggests that the trauma marks the limits of both perception and narration. That Doherty gives Ghost Story, a circular, looped structure, being endlessly replayed in the exhibition space, is important as it conveys the subject’s experience of trauma. What we have here is trauma in the sense of ‘a disease of time [which] permits the past to relive itself in the present, in the form of intrusive images and thoughts’.9 Because trauma is a ‘breach in the mind’s experience of time’10 the standard experience of time as a linear, chronological progression from past to present to future is disrupted. Traumatic events are timeless: for the victim, trauma appears to have ‘no beginning, no ending, no before, no during, and no after’.11 Lacking closure, Ghost Story allows the viewer to get an understanding of what trauma may be like; as viewers we adopt the subject’s point of view and are forced to bear witness to his pain.

Medbh McGuckian’s first ‘professional’ poem was written in response to Bloody Sunday. As she stated in an interview with Sawnie Morris:

On that day, in 1972, I wrote the poem and took it to Seamus Heaney, who was teaching me at the time. It was in response not just to a political, but a military event that threatened our very existence, and the feeling that the state was not being the nurturing force that would protect us from invasion. No. The state would, in fact, turn around and destroy us.12

Since that time, her reading and lived experience has allowed her to tackle such ‘military events’ in her work and to depict trauma more expertly. In a later interview, she informed Michaela Schrage-Früh that ‘I am gradually learning the shared experience of oppression and imprisonment, poverty and hunger, racial discrimination, social inferiority and even genocide, although the comparisons are not explicitly made but only imaged’.13 One way in which she has become

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10 Caruth, Unclaimed Experience, 4.
13 McGuckian, ‘Uncharted Territory’: An Interview with Medbh McGuckian’, unpublished interview by Michaela Schrage-Früh, September 2004. The interview has
attuned to the effects of state oppression has been through her study of East European culture. In ‘Converted Church’, for example, she employs a host of intertexts, chief of which are anthropological studies of memory and illness in post-Soviet Latvia. The opening stanza depicts, like Doherty’s *Ghost Story*, a discomfited, anomic speaker, one who is in a depressive state characterised by self-abasement and an almost paranoiac alertness:

\[
\begin{align*}
  \text{I couldn't cultivate myself,} \\
  \text{‘this […] moment has settled in my blood’ (EH, 182);} \\
  \text{‘to return to whatever it locked’ (P, 1);} \\
  \text{‘watchings, lowness and melancholy’ (EH, 32)}
\end{align*}
\]

While the text self-reflexively ponders the liminal state in which she finds herself—in the first line she admits that her personal development has been impeded—the narrative is marred by imprecision (‘whatever’) as the speaker is unaware as to the cause of her *ennui*. The dual temporality invoked (‘this moment’; ‘return to whatever it locked’) implies that the past has adversely intruded upon the present and accounts for the speaker’s sense of frustrated progress; indeed, as Lockhurst argues, one of the key ways in which trauma ‘has been conceived is around the symptom of the intrusive or recurrent image, the unbidden flashback that abolishes time and reimmerses you in the visual field of the inaugurating traumatic instant’. ‘Locked’ connotes the psychic crypt wherein the source of trauma is sealed off from the self. However, as Schwab has noted, the mind’s protective mechanism does not ultimately shield the individual from the effects of trauma since ‘untold or unspeakable secrets, unfelt or denied pain, concealed shame, covered-up crimes, or violent histories continue to affect and disrupt the lives of those involved in them and often their descendents as well’.

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Representations of Trauma

The city frozen in its past (WV, 61); The city frozen in its past:
‘ruthless departure’ (TL, 14);
To the sun’s mind, ruthless departure.

The sources deployed by McGuckian shed some light on the nature of this experience. In *Empathy and Healing*, Skultans examines narratives by self-identified sufferers of neurasthenia in post-Soviet Latvia and argues that the illness is often conceived in relation to political context: ‘shared ideas about damaged nerves, damaged heads and damaged hearts’, he argues, ‘are ways of representing the collective and patriotic body and using such representations to articulate a critique of the period of Soviet occupation of Latvia’ (*EH*, 7). McGuckian’s second line cites from one such narrative in Skultans, namely the life story told by Uldis Versis:

[…] I was overcome with a great feeling of poetry that at last I was in Siberia, in a real Siberian house, with real Siberians, with a real Siberian stove. You could even say that I’d almost fulfilled my mission. And this romantic—I could even describe it as euphoric—moment has settled in my blood in such a way that it will probably remain with me for the rest of my life.’ (*EH*, 182)

The narrative relates his sense of joyous homecoming, a feeling entirely absent in McGuckian’s text. Yet Skultans notes the manner in which the tale is structured and concludes that there are a number of competing voices registered in the text. The tale draws not only from personal memory, but also from literature and folklore. Versis frames his story in the manner of Anna Brigadere’s play, *Spriditis* (1905), and this strategy functions as ‘a screen for other memories which cannot be ordered in such a way as to offer an acceptable identity’ (*EH*, 183). Skultans argues that those who have endured exile and injustice at the hands of the State ‘draw in varying degrees upon conceptual structures derived from history and literature in order to rearrange disrupted lives into a meaningful pattern’ (*TL*, 24); thus, a narrator is able to ‘bestow a unity of experience upon the narrated life’ (*TL*, 24). This is precisely what happens in McGuckian’s text since the stanza is made up of quotations from Skultans and from Mary Beard’s account of the volcanic eruption at Pompeii on 25 August 79 CE. (The specific line refers to one couple’s action of locking the door to protect their belongings so that they could return and repossess them once the disaster had passed).

The speaker’s narrative relies on pre-existent texts, specifically those based on disordering experiences, to give shape to her own trauma. Of course, coherence and unity are denied in the poem since there is a related tension here between
the desire to articulate one’s experiences and the mind’s attempt to protect the individual from harmful recollection. As Schwab states, the traumatised survivor carries ‘an impossible history within them’, a personal history which they strive to communicate and over which they wish to gain mastery; yet it is also one which defies narrativisation. While ‘stories are a mode of symbolic structure that constructs identity’, trauma by nature is ‘that which evades structure and shatters identity’. The mind rebels against the recollection of traumatic memories and actively distorts and fragments the ensuing narrative. Indeed, the following two stanzas are characterised by questions and uncertainty rather than coherence and narrative closure:

she did manage to bottle the cherries (EH, 171);
the bitterness of the honey harvest (EH, 193);
‘What gives my life from inside-out so peculiar’ (WV, 12)

I did manage to bottle the cherries
Despite the bitterness of the honey
And the wilderness between things,
My life from inside out so peculiar.

‘How should she not flow black’ (TL, 49);
what is a clinging street (SS, 77);
more ‘alive’ than indoors (CL, 14)

How could it be a mistake?
How should she not flow black?
And what is a clinging street,
More alive than indoors?

What is particularly noteworthy about these lines is not simply that we have three unanswered (and perhaps unanswerable) questions arising from indeterminate matters (‘it’; ‘things’), but that there are so many different sources and contexts invoked here. As Skultans argues, motifs from song and literature are used by the patients he interviewed as a means of giving shape to their narratives: ‘References to destiny’, he argues, ‘are made using these preassembled segments and in so doing they help bind together a narrative whose meaning or lack of it may otherwise threaten to destroy the individual narrator’ (TL, 49). In one folk song, cited by McGuckian, the river Daugava is associated with ‘the fate of the nation’: ‘How should she not flow back / Being full of precious souls?’ (TL, 49). Such a use of ‘prefabricated discourse’ and verbal formulae is rife within the stanzas cited above. The first two lines conjoin extracts from Empathy and Healing to suggest agency and achievement: the patient is reassured that they are neither inept nor lazy since they have managed to ‘bottle the cherries’. However, the speaker’s self-assurance is undermined by her use of three very different sources. The fourth line above comes from a letter by Wagner, written in Venice, which is full of self-pity: ‘What gives my life from inside-out so peculiar, almost

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Representations of Trauma

dreamlike a character, is its utter lack of future … When I go on the water of an evening, survey the mirror-bright expanse of sea, which, stretching motionless to the horizon, there joins the sky with absolutely no distinction to be noted’ (WV, 12–13). The lack of volition and the sense of an inhibiting location experienced by Wagner (and implicitly by McGuckian’s speaker) are reinforced by the reference to Kafka’s The Castle:

K. kept expecting the street to turn at last toward the Castle and it was only in this expectation that he kept going; no doubt out of weariness he was reluctant to leave this street, what amazed him, too, was the length of this village, which wouldn’t end, again and again those tiny little houses and the frost-covered windowpanes and the snow and not a living soul—finally he tore himself away from this clinging street, a narrow side street took him in, the snow here was even deeper, lifting his sinking feet was hard work, he broke out in perspiration, suddenly came to a stop and could go no farther.20

Kafka’s protagonist is alienated and out of his element; his progress through the streets is frustrated at every turn. While the speaker in McGuckian’s poem seems to qualify (or at least modify somewhat) the sense of anxiety induced by the ‘clinging street’ by suggesting that the speaker is ‘more alive than indoors’, the source for that phrase (Roland Barthes’s Camera Lucida) indicates just the opposite: Barthes feels himself to be a ‘passive victim’, being forced to pose outdoors in the mistaken belief that the location will produce a more life-like impression (CL, 14).

Of course, McGuckian’s speaker does not cite from Kafka’s text per se, but from a review by J. M. Coetzee which ponders the accuracy of its different translations: ‘When Kafka is obscure enough to defeat any but an inspired reader (what is a clinging street, eine festhaltende Strasse?), the Muirs’ tactic is to take a guess at what Kafka might have intended, rather than—the last honorable recourse of the baffled translator—to fall back on word by word transposition. Their guesses are not always convincing—here “the obsession of the street”’. Such a reference encodes a further anxiety concerning the accuracy of language to convey one’s thoughts, feelings and intentions. The traumatised speaker resorts to literature and metaphor for suitable corollaries of her suffering; she strives to give shape to her narrative and thus assert control over her life-story. Indeed, as Skultans argues, metaphor ‘reaches into the fractured and irreconciled corners of people’s lives’; it allows people to reconcile themselves with a traumatic past since it ‘attributes an underlying unity to life and in doing so binds together past and present’ (TL, 31). However, while that may be the case for McGuckian’s speaker, the reader

experiences a text which is illogical, disjunctive and lacking in closure; in other words, it is a poem which intimates the disordered and disordering nature of trauma. This is a strategy which McGuckian employs to excellent effect in her texts which touch on the Shoah.

After attending a conference in Poland, McGuckian wrote on 22 January 1998 to say that ‘I have had a week of nausea and shock which would either kill or cure a poet’,21 these words were written on the back of a postcard picturing the ruins of the Gas Chamber and Crematorium II at Auschwitz-Birkenau. The sense of ‘nausea and shock’ that she experienced compelled her to undertake research on the subject. ‘To write about the Holocaust, and to write criticism on a text, any text, that acknowledges the Holocaust’, argues Robin Silbergleid, ‘is necessarily to engage in a conversation about literature and ethics’.22 One objection raised against writing about the Shoah is that the very idea of genocide is unthinkable and therefore unrepresentable. As another writer has put it, ‘[n]o symbolic universe grounded in humanistic beliefs could confront the Holocaust without the risk of being shaken to its foundations’.23 Indeed, survivors often face the dilemma of being at once impelled to bear testimony whilst simultaneously finding the ordeal either intolerable or unfeasible. The problem is not due to the limits of memory but, as Laurence Kirmayer argues, it lies in ‘the inadequacy of ordinary words to express all they have witnessed’: the event presented ‘an incomprehensible catastrophe that undermines the very possibility of coherent narrative’.24 If for the traumatised survivor narrativisation of genocide is psychically problematic, for the creative writer who wishes to make art out of such atrocity the dilemma is of an ethical order. Many commentators regard art as an unconscionable obtrusion on the Shoah: while Berel Lang has condemned the fictive dimension of artistic production (‘literary representation imposes artifice, a figurative mediation of language, and the contrivance of a persona—that is, a mask—on the part of the writer’),25 Theodor Adorno famously castigated the distortive ‘aesthetic principles of stylization’ with which art transfigures and strips genocide of its horror, thus doing injustice to its victims.26 Art, then, is said to render genocide knowable, its formal strategies containing and aestheticising the suffering; narrative may offer closure, yet such

atrocities resist being closed off. Equally, art may constitute a second form of subjection for the victim since, as is implied in Adorno’s critique, the writer may fall into the double trap of sensationalism and voyeurism. As the Oxford academic Christopher Ricks notes, ‘atrocity may get flattened down into the casually “atrocious”, or it may get fattened up into that debased form of imagination which is prurience.’ In such a situation, writers must be vigilant against simply treating the Shoah as a fashionable or convenient topic. ‘The burden which the writer’s conscience must bear’, writes the poet Geoffrey Hill, ‘is that the horror might become that hideously outrageous thing, a cliché. This is the nightmare, the really blasphemous thing: that those camps could become a mere “subject”’. However valid such reservations may be, an artist within his or her text can remain vigilant against voiding atrocity of its true horror. Indeed, as Ezrahi contends, ‘it may be precisely in its resistance to conceptual abstraction, to psychological reductionism, that art as a version of historical memory can provide form without fixing of meaning, insight without explanation, for the recovered events.’ The subtle ambiguities of art, with its allusive and often elusive strategies, can open up the event for the contemporary reader thereby resisting closure. Yet if the artist is not a survivor and has little connection to the Shoah, does he or she have a right to treat it as an object of scrutiny and as a subject for art?

Is it morally acceptable to speak at all about an atrocity one did not really know? Is it permissible to use our distance from the events of the Shoah as an enabling conduit of their imaginative reconstruction? And how can writers reconstruct those events without giving them an aesthetic order or finish that makes them assimilable and thus frighteningly admissible (or repeatable)?

Susan Gubar argues that even the most ethically-minded poets (and scholars) feel a modicum of shame when depicting the suffering of others and that they ‘mistrust their right to speak, even as they attest to the means by which they speak’. Medbh McGuckian is one such poet and in ‘Goddess of the Candlelight during Childbirth’ she engages with and quotes from Gubar’s study, along

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31 Ibid., 29.
with two other equally unacknowledged sources,\textsuperscript{33} to create a poem which self-reflexively signals the impossibility of fully comprehending the Shoah. Instead of narrative precision and closure, the poem is marked by fragmentation and associational logic; rather than presenting a narrative of trauma, it circles around and gestures towards it. As Jenny Edkins argues with regard to the inexpressibility of trauma, ‘We cannot try to address the trauma directly without risking its gentrification. We cannot remember it as something that took place in time, because this would neutralise it. All we can do is ‘to \textit{encircle} again and again the site’ of the trauma, “to \textit{mark} it in its very impossibility”’.\textsuperscript{34} The text mimics the cryptonmic narrative whereby trauma is revealed in the distortions, gaps and fragmentations of language. Within such a text, what Schwab calls ‘the buried ghosts of the past’ emerge ‘to haunt language from within, always threatening to destroy its communicative and expressive function’:\textsuperscript{35}

\begin{quote}
the weekday gods (\textit{RG}, 230); 
blocked the windows with thorns (\textit{RG}, 231); fires of male olive (\textit{RG}, 114); yellow roses (\textit{SG}, 216); star risings and settings (\textit{RG}, 230); The tangible hand at the centre of things (\textit{TC}, 138); large red J (\textit{SG}, 31); rounded up to eat grass in the town square (\textit{SG}, 31)
\end{quote}

The opening stanzas (cited above right; sources quoted on the left) present a series of juxtaposed images which disorientate the reader. Who are the ‘weekday gods’ and why have they blocked the windows with thorns? To whom does ‘we’ refer? What is the connection between the ‘male olive’ and the ‘yellow roses’? How can a hand be ‘a large red J’? How can that letter ‘eat grass’ and in which ‘town square’ does this activity take place? As readers, we bear witness to a speaker for whom language is in pieces due to an unspecified traumatic event, one which cannot be contained within a fully comprehensible narrative because, in Blanchot’s terms, ‘the disaster de-scribes’.\textsuperscript{36} The poet, of course, has undergone no such trauma and the lines imitatively advance a cryptonmic narrative. Uncovering the sources

\textsuperscript{34} Jenny Edkins, \textit{Trauma and the Memory of Politics} (Cambridge, 2003), 15.
\textsuperscript{35} Schwab, \textit{Haunting Legacies}, 49.
\textsuperscript{36} Maurice Blanchot, \textit{The Writing of the Disaster}, trans. A. Smock (Nebraska, 1986), 7.
and reading them alongside each other enables us to discern the rationale behind such imitation.

The first line presents a tension between, on the one hand, faith in a coherent belief system which may ultimately grant the individual protection from harm and, on the other, the individual’s lack of agency and a sense of being at the mercy of inscrutable forces. While the source text indicates that the placing of thorns in the window at the time of a birth constituted an apotropaic ritual in ancient Rome (RG, 231), ‘blocked’ and ‘thorns’ mark the domestic space in McGuckian’s text as unsafe. This is a pattern which is continued in the following lines. Although the stanza’s birth imagery is connected with catachetic astrology (‘star risings and settings’) to show how infants are placed under the care of a supervisory divinity (Candelilfera, who is ‘connected with the candle-light during childbirth’), the purificatory and protective images of fire associated with both the birth of the individual and of the nation are rendered wholly ironic when conjoined with ‘the heavy grace of deeper yellow roses’. ‘Grace’ refers to the bestowing of the free favour of God as manifested in the salvation of sinners, yet what is granted in this instance does not constitute a blessing; rather, the image is taken from a passage in which Gubar cites from Gertrude Stein’s ‘Adler’ to describe the hue of the corpses of dead Jews at Treblinka, ‘those with gold in their mouths, and those with skin / the colour of yellow roses’ (SG, 216). The ‘fires’, then, have less to do with the purificatory rites on the eve of Parilia (the birth-date of Rome) than with the concentration camps’ crematoria. Such is the destination for those who had been subject to a systemic process of othering enshrined within German laws and regulations. The poem quotes from Gubar’s text to indicate how the Jews became dehumanised: categorised by and reduced to an alphabetical sign—‘passports stamped with a large, red J’ (SG, 31)—they are further forced to conform to the Nazi’s conception of them as animals, ‘rounded up […] to eat grass in the town square’ (SG, 31). Throughout the opening stanzas, then, language has become an unstable system with each image having a double, and self-cancelling, signification: birth-death; protection-imprisonment; purification-destruction.

However, what is one to make of ‘The tangible hand at the centre of things’? As a trope the hand may indicate authorship and, as it is ‘at the centre’, it may signify control; however, the word ‘things’ subverts the idea of mastery as it implies both objectification and imprecision. In fact, the stanza conveys an inexorable process of dehumanisation, from human subject (‘hand’), to object (‘thing’) and finally, to a sign (‘J’). Yet the hand also belongs to a female figure which the poem goes on to describe:

37 Jorg Rupke’s Religion of the Romans outlines how, on the birth-date of Rome, ‘[o]ne or more fires of male olive-, pine-, juniper- and laurel-branches were lit, and offerings made to Pales, requesting protection from dangers’ (114).
lines of darkness put around the heel of her hand (TC, 134); cursive grey (TC, 135); barely does its work of holding the cashmere shawl (TC, 138);

the stab of her thumb back towards her body (TC, 221); silence issues from her as from a drowned or empty ship (TC, 138);

not that I dream of describing her (TC, 140); in one of her states (TC, 133); a presence simple as absence (TC, 138); disturbing perfume (TC, 140); the faded bead of her nipple (TC, 134)

On the surface, these stanzas overtly mark the trauma which they cannot narrate: the apparent solidity of the body dissipates and the text is marked by ‘silence’, ‘absence’, that which is ‘faded’ and empty. Indeed, since the speaker declares that she would ‘not dream of describing her near shoulder’—instead, she de-scribes the subject’s body—one could argue that McGuckian conforms to Gubar’s conception of the hyper-sensitive poet who must insistently dwell on her authority to speak for or about the victim: ‘[her] scrupulous scrutiny of [her] own warrant for composing and [her] wariness about retrospection manifest how creative analyses of the Shoah resist exploitative rhetoric’ (SG, 30). Yet the poem’s deployment of corporeal imagery is more complicated than this: not only does it mark the site of trauma and imitatively depict the ways in which such trauma fragments narrative, it reveals (via the source text from which the images are quoted) the fear which lay behind the Nazi’s autocratic control, namely contagion (the blurring of distinctions between the Aryan and the Jew).

The text establishes a parallel between a stricken Jewish figure in the first two stanzas and an objectified female figure in the remaining stanzas. The ‘hand at the centre of things’ belongs to the subject of Edouard Manet’s *Olympia* (1863), a painting which, according to T.J. Clark, was shocking when displayed at the Paris Salon in 1865 because the nude body was unfixed and refused categorisation. In nineteenth-century Paris, the prostitute was a social ‘other’ and was by necessity categorised and objectified ‘in the files of the police, a number, apart from all social beings’ (TC, 103). By contrast, the category of *courtisane* was more acceptable and ‘was what could be represented of prostitution’ (TC, 109). Manet, however, renders unclear the distinction between the two; as Clark argues, ‘Olympia is depicted as nude and *courtisane*, but also as naked and *insoumise*; the one identity is the form of
the other, but the two are put together in such a way as to make each contingent and unfinished’ (TC, 131). Each quotation from Clark that McGuckian cites is an example of this deliberate blurring: Olympia’s face is described as the ‘disturbing perfume of a fleur du mal’; ‘the faded bead of her nipple’ (TC, 134) makes the body indefinite; the placement of the hand disobeys ‘the rules of the nude’ (TC, 136) as it fails ‘to enact the lack of the phallus’ (TC, 135). What was so unacceptable about Olympia for contemporary reviewers was that her physical body could not be categorised, hence it lacked a determinate place in the social body; thus, the image challenged and subverted not only conventional codes of representation, but signalled the ways in which the strict boundaries upon which an entire class system had been founded were, by the mid-nineteenth century, being eroded. Olympia’s erasure of clear distinctions reflects the degree of social mixing and free circulation amongst the different classes and this reflected wider ‘fears of insurrection’ (TC, 105).

Thus, while McGuckian’s splicing together of quotations in ‘Goddess of the Candlelight during Childbirth’ serves to encircle the site of trauma and indicate how the catastrophic event annuls ‘the possibility of recounting the totality’ by presenting ‘speech in pieces, splinters and fragments of speech’, the specific content of her quotations reveals the cause of that trauma. She parallels two instances of social control which, stemming from a fear of contagion, objectify and dehumanise the individual. Yet while her poem graphically depicts the victim and appears to lay the female body open to our scopic gaze, she resists objectifying her. Indeed, just as Manet’s Olympia blurs distinctions and resists categorisation, so too does McGuckian’s text. Language here becomes an unstable system due to the deployment of ambiguous imagery and the withholding of information about the sources (thereby refusing to provide the reader with a key to read the poem). Her work, then, resists exploitative rhetoric and refuses to categorise the victim as ‘other’.

A more controversial strategy adopted by McGuckian in her attempt to commemorate those who survived the Shoah is the unacknowledged co-option or appropriation of existing testimony within a first-person narrative since such a manoeuvre risks claiming the suffering of others as her own. For example, ‘So Warsaw’s Coming to Wait on Us Now’ is, to all appearances, a lyric poem in the sense that it seems to give direct expression to a state of mind or a process of perception and feeling (the opening stanzas are on the right; the source text is on the left):

The war kept going on and on (G, 426);
And we were rotting away (G, 426); Who would
Have thought it would go on like this so
long? (G, 415);
I want to escape to the Old Town (G, 411);
I felt as if I were in some strange German city,
where I should feel afraid of the stones under my
feet (G, 317)
I just kept going in circles doing nothing (G, 428)
‘I have so much to say to you I prefer to keep
silent’ (G, 432); snared by words (G, 253)

For the reader who is unaware of McGuckian’s practice of composing poetic centos and who does not realise that the poem is based on Michal Grynberg’s Words to Outlive Us—a collection of prose narratives centred around twenty-nine eyewitness testimonies from Jews who were either confined to the Warsaw Ghetto or hiding in other parts of the city—there is a risk of viewing the poem as, in M. H. Abrams’s definition of the lyric poem, a ‘fragment of reshaped autobiography’. Therefore, there are two issues at stake here: firstly, the appropriation of eyewitness testimony—six of the quotations come from Dawid Fogelman’s narrative, with a single quotation taken from testimonies by Stefan Ernest and Franciszka Grünberg—for aesthetic purposes; secondly, the apparent ventriloquising by the poet of another’s suffering through the lyrical ‘I’. However, recent critical and theoretical arguments have persuasively reminded the reader not to confuse the poet with the speaker when analysing a lyric poem, and, in any case, it is perhaps best to regard this text as a dramatic monologue, one which plays out a psycho-drama not experienced by the poet herself. Still, how is one to answer the charge of impropriety regarding the use of the words of others? The answer lies in discerning the poem’s thematic focus and purpose.

The text presents a retrospective narrative which holds in tension times past and present. The speaker reveals that her identity had unravelled due to enforced segregation within the Ghetto; what the speaker describes in the second stanza is a form of self-alienation (figured in the text as a misrecognition of place). The impulse to escape leads only to inaction and a circling back upon herself (spatially and mentally). For her, words were to be mistrusted and what

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resulted was silence: she ‘preferred not to be snared by words’. This scenario is presented in contrast with her present state since she now relates her history. In the opening tercet the speaker’s mind circles back to the past in order to describe a traumatic condition; however, the use of the past continuous tense for verbs which signify a cycle of generation and degeneration (‘brewing’; ‘rotting’) hints that the trauma has not been kept at bay. Indeed, ‘on and on’ signals continuing distress: the phrase not only repeats the semantic content of the opening sentence, thus disrupting the flow of the narrative and allowing it to circle back on itself, the narrative becomes fragmented since the sentence lacks grammatical structure. Language in the poem ceases to function properly. The question asked in the sentence that follows—‘Who would have thought it would so long?’—fails to provide resolution and it cannot be answered since it lacks the implied verb (‘last’). Thus, the speaker is seen to void her own discourse (consciously or unconsciously) of any sense of ending. McGuckian’s selection and juxtaposition of quotations does not seek to appropriate the eye witnesses’ suffering; rather, she fragments the oral testimony to convey a sense of ongoing suffering often missing from Words to Outlive Us. While the oral testimonies collected in Grynberg’s work are undoubtedly authoritative, moving and of real historical value, the majority of the narratives present a retrospective coherence. Trauma, however, affects the ability to place memories of events into a coherent and linear narrative: when trauma occurs ‘time cannot be made to tell a […] story, cannot be restored to narrative coherence, because violence shatters time’.43 Hence, McGuckian’s poem dislocates the narratives to recreate the traumatic condition.

She deploys many of the same strategies in ‘Skirt of a Thousand Triangles’,44 a poem based on Michelangelo in Ravensbruck, Karol Lanckoronska’s account of her wartime experiences, particularly her time in Ravensbruck concentration camp.45 We again have a retrospective narrative, one which appropriates first-hand testimony by a camp survivor. The opening two-line stanza presents a tension between the defensive urge to deny one’s experience and the contrary impulse to bear witness (the text is on the right, the source is on the left):

‘I am at present reading a fascinating book called Dante n’a rien vu’ (MR, 46);
I am at present reading a fascinating book

Called ‘Dante n’a rien Vu’ – a tortoise-shell reading.

it was […] minus twenty-seven (MR, 106);
It was minus 27. The city was drowning in flags.

Kraków was drowning in flags (MR, 45);
We closed our still normal windows in order

closed their windows [...] in order not to hear those bells (MR, 45); All around the Market Square enormous white poles had been planted every one and a half metres, from which fluttered blood-red banners, many metres long, with an embroidered white circle [...] That same night, in Kraków, more than sixty persons were registered as having committed suicide (MR, 45); I had quickly sat down with my back to the window (MR, 79); I could only count the shots (MR, 132); the unravelled sweaters and scarves (MR, 135); while I was winding bandages (MR, 42); common-or-garden nerves (MR, 120); told me precisely how to knock on the door (MR, 42); a house [...] was ‘liberated’ (MR, 64); The first two days we spent sitting on our suitcases (MR, 40)

Not to hear the bells. All around the Market Place, Enormous white poles had been planted every One and a half meters long, embroidered With a white circle. That same night More than sixty persons were registered As having committed suicide.

Having quickly sat down with my back To the window, I could only count the shots. Not the unravelled scarves. While I was binding Bandages, with my common-or-garden nerves, She told me how precisely to knock upon When a house was ‘liberated’.

The first two days we spent Sitting on our suitcases.

Foregrounding the time of writing, the speaker declares that she is reading a book entitled Dante n’a rien vu, a title which seemingly corresponds to the reading process which is characterised by the self-protective ‘tortoise-shell’: Dante saw nothing. Yet that text, properly entitled Dante n’avait rien vu, is a testimony by Albert Londres published in 1924, one which offers a critique of French military prisons in the colonies and which bears witness to the atrocities committed by the authorities. The distance between Londres’s disposition and that of the speaker mirrors that between the poetic text and its source. Lanckoronska’s narrative is intended as testimony. In the prologue she states: ‘My memoir is meant to be a report—and only a report—of what I witnessed during the Second World War’ (MR, xxv). In contrast, the poetic speaker’s actions in the past are characterised by a wilful blindness to what is happening: the closing of the windows is enacted to affirm normality, yet it is clear that the opposite is the case (the ringing of the bells celebrate the capitulation of France and in the market square the blood-red banners herald the appearance of Nazi swastikas). The strangely passive construction—‘More than sixty persons were registered / As having committed suicide’—indicates a failure to comprehend the horror of what is occurring: the human beings have become textualised. The speaker has turned her back on the outside world and can only ‘count the shots’: there is a deliberate effort not to witness the execution of her fellow citizens. The action of sitting on her suitcase indicates the desire to flee, yet her inaction conveys her lack of agency. In effect, she herself is caught within ‘the white circle’ of the embroidered flag.
By reversing the intention and effect of the source text, McGuckian focuses our attention on the understandable, though utterly self-defeating refusal to bear witness to atrocity.

The image of the embroidered flag is picked up on and transformed later in the poem when the speaker, having undergone imprisonment and on point of release, declares, ‘You have to back out / Of the cell as you leave, and tread on a rag / On the splintering floor’. The source text states that this is a ritual undertaken by anyone leaving the prison cell: ‘As I was on my way to the door, one of the Ukrainian girls flung herself on me and turned me round to face the cell: ‘You have to back out of the cell as you leave. That way you draw us all out after you, and you’ve got to tread on a rag as you go’’ (MR, 143). Within the poetic text, the ritual’s meaning is clear: it forces the released prisoner to look at and bear witness to her former companions, and to remember them. Incorporated within the poem, it marks a moment when the speaker is no longer self-absorbed, as she was when within the white circle. The fact that the rag is dragged along ‘the splintering floor’ is a significant departure from the source text. The unravelling of this fabric perhaps indicates that a further meaning is to be gleaned from the image as it is one which has its counterparts in the other poems. In ‘Goddess of the Candlelight during Childbirth’ when we are told that Olympia’s hand ‘barely does its work / Of holding the cashmere shawl’, it is a disruptive moment (a refusal to conceal that which must be hidden). By contrast, in ‘So Warsaw’s Coming to Wait on Us Now’, when the speaker’s companion ‘seals herself with her shawl’, the speaker herself has a blouse cut for her and she sews it up quickly, an action which is self-protective and serves to resist the hardship she is undergoing. When McGuckian borrows tropes of woven or sewn garments from her sources she not only highlights their status as texts woven together from earlier texts (textus: tissue of a literary work, literally that which is woven), she is also adverting to a key function behind her reprising of exemplary texts.

In their introduction to *Rewriting/Reprising in Literature* the editors state that trauma is ‘a sudden intrusion of the shapeless and the nameless which tears the fabric open, whether it be in the narrative of our lives or in the stories which try to give shape to such disruptive events’. When attempting to counteract a trauma which not only evades narrative structure but also actively describes it, when ‘snared by words’ in the face of the indescribable, or indeed when faced with describing that for which one has no authority to speak, a writer may delve into the pre-existing word-hoard and, to paraphrase Eliot, use the fragments to shore against the ruins. To do so is to highlight an alternative

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meaning of *reprise*, namely the darning of a fabric/text: ‘rewriting/reprising may be understood as an endless attempt to heal […] breaches loaded with silent affects’.\textsuperscript{48} Yet in McGuckian’s work her emphasis is not on healing or on the construction of coherent narratives. The tearing, unravelling or divestment of a garment in her work signals her intention to remain truthful to the nature of trauma. Paradoxically, then, her stitching together of fragments from source texts is not intended to grant wholeness, unity or coherence to the original; rather, she uses them to disorientate the reader and make us bear witness to experiences which we cannot fathom.

\textsuperscript{48} Claude Maisonnat, Josiane Pacaud-Huguet and Annie Ramel, *Rewriting/Reprising in Literature*, xiii.
Death is always a crux around which I write. It’s the only thing you can be sure about, but it also brings you up so short against everything. Death is what poets are supposed to define, not deal with death or even understand or to cope with it, and not give answers but just meditate, not on death but on life as curtailed by death, or broken by death and whether it is just broken or whether it is broken completely. To try and find, I suppose, the answers to all those huge questions. When I say death, what I really mean is life, because I don’t believe that death is the end of things because of my faith.¹

For Medbh McGuckian, it is intrinsic to her vocation as poet to consider issues of loss, grief and the concomitant consolations of religious belief; she has, time and again, explored the functions and limitations of conventional rites and obsequies in her oeuvre. Death is not merely a theme in her work, but rather a limit condition to be explored and to which writing must not be found wanting. For example, in ‘A Religion of Writing’ she compensates for the perceived inefficacy of memorial inscriptive practices by intimating the commemorative function of poeisis. (The two intertexts for this poem are Armando Petrucci’s Writing the Dead and Theodor Adorno’s Beethoven, cited on the left):²


A loved one may be interred within an earthen grave, but they live on in the memories and dreams of those that survive their passing. Remembrance may be facilitated or initiated by the very words and dates that record their absence from the world, but within these stanzas the intended immortalising function of writing is seen to fail: despite the apparent solidity of the gravestone inscriptions, the capitals are referred to as ‘unsteady’, ‘slanting’, ‘detached’, and ‘opposed’, and the lines are ‘half-empty’; hence, those commemorated are doubly erased (from life and then from language). Indeed, there is an opposition established early on in the text between ‘music’ and inscription, with names belonging to the latter. In the opening stanza, McGuckian writes that:

… the sea beauty
Of the air was moved
By warmed music which caused
that question to vanish.

In contrast to this ‘music’, naming and names seem ineffective. While ‘remoteness / of name to meaning’ seems, on first reading, to be an admission of failure, almost as if it were a Derridean gloss on the arbitrary nature of the sign and a disavowal of the western belief in the ‘presence’ of language, the sense of the fragment’s meaning alters when viewed in context. Adorno argues that ‘[m]usic is name in the state of absolute impotence; it is also the remoteness of name from meaning, and both are the same thing. The holiness of music is its purity from dominance over nature’ (B, 172). While McGuckian’s poem acknowledges its limitations since it has everything to do with naming, nevertheless it attempts formally to achieve the status of ‘warmed music’, and it does this, in part, through the poem’s incorporation of quotations which fragment the poem’s linearity and focuses the reader’s attention not on its rational content but on its musicality brought about by her non-standard collocation of words. Commenting on Adorno’s unfinished, fragmentary study of Beethoven, the editor states that ‘fragmentary texts may become legible as a kind of spatial configuration: a signature that can only be
deciphered if the surviving fragments and drafts are arranged in a constellation
determined by their *inherent meaning* (B, ix, original italics). The fragmentary
nature of the text does not militate against the achievement of meaning; rather,
as the editor claims, ‘[j]ust as each of the […] fragments on Beethoven contains a
question to answer which nothing less than the unwritten book on the composer
would be needed […] the constellation which the fragments form objectively
together […] may cause that question […] to “vanish”’ (B, x, my italics). McGuckian’s
dislocating appropriative practice is perhaps her attempt to achieve the quality of
music, one which can better commemorate and re-member the dead.

As a fervent believer in the Roman Catholic faith, McGuckian acknowledges
death as an inevitability that must be faced prior to an eternal afterlife, yet
she is impelled, perhaps both by fear and natural curiosity, to contemplate the
experience itself. In ‘The Sin Eater’, a poetic text written ‘in the voice of Christ
in Gethsemane’, she emphasises the son of God’s humanity by having him
contemplate what will happen in the moments following his final breath. The
opening stanza addresses the ‘Angel of Agony’ and is made up of quotations
appropriated from Michael Kennedy’s *The Life of Elgar*:

> Angel of the Agony (E, 39); ‘I have found no name for you yet’ (E, 117); ‘I am still […] trying to fix the sounds’ (E, 11); ‘I am really alone in this music’ (E, 119)

‘Agony’ here refers not so much to a physical torment but to Christ’s spiritual
crisis (*agonia*: a struggle) as documented in Luke 22: 42–3: “Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done”. And there appeared an angel unto him from heaven strengthening him. And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly.”

However, the Agony in the Garden becomes universalised in McGuckian’s text: Christ is transfigured into an Everyman since the addressee is also ‘The Angel of Agony’ who tends to, and intercedes for, the soul of Gerontius [literally: old man] in Cardinal Newman’s *The Dream of Gerontius* (1865), a poem which was adapted musically by Elgar for the Birmingham Festival in 1900. Unlike Elgar who contends that ‘I am really alone in this music’, the ‘I’ of the text (a composite of McGuckian/Christ/Gerontius) suggests the potential to draw solace from the Angel’s presence and attempts to understand and rationalise death through language. The emphasis here is on poetic making (*poeisis*): the ‘I’ seeks to ‘fix’ the sounds both in the

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4 Email from Medbh McGuckian, 14 September 2009.
6 The version is taken from the Authorized King James Bible.
sense of ‘giving permanent form to evanescent images’ and of ‘arranging [them] in proper order’. Clearly, the process is incomplete—as attested by ‘trying’ and ‘yet’—and in order to pursue the matter further, the speaker contemplates other attempts to understand the afterlife.

In the second stanza, McGuckian appropriates from two further intertexts: Roy Porter’s *Flesh in the Age of Reason* and a collection of essays entitled *Voluntary Simplicity*.7

His long sleeps (*FAE*, 217); ‘threw herself into an elbow chair’ (*FAE*, 119); best-selling funeral sermon (*FAE*, 105); when those seasons are separated from you (*VS*, 180) Their long sleeps threw them into an elbow chair sweetened with my blood, like a best-selling funeral sermon or when those seasons are separated from you.

The lines lack the opening stanza’s clarity and the reader may well baulk at the unclear deictics employed by McGuckian: to whom does ‘their’ refer, and when exactly do ‘those seasons’ occur? The simile deployed here is also unclear: in what way is the action of throwing someone into ‘an elbow chair’ akin to both ‘a best-selling funeral sermon’ and to the experiential dynamics of when ‘those seasons are separated from you’? Indeed, do the comparisons refer to the action of throwing ‘them’ into an ‘elbow chair’ or to the way in which this chair is ‘sweetened with my blood’? McGuckian’s ‘fixing’ of the sounds is, in fact, an ‘unfixing’; her non-rational approach has the quality of ‘unadorned music’ which is akin to the ‘warmed music’ of ‘A Religion of Writing’.

Just as Newman’s *Gerontius* presents the reader with a clear and satisfying view of the soul’s journey after death, McGuckian’s second stanza refers to two narratives which claim knowledge of post-death experience. The first is the pious narrative of Nicholas Hart about his ‘long sleeps’ which occurred every year on his birthday when he would ‘fall so deeply asleep that he could not be awakened’ (*FAE*, 217). Hart rationalised his ‘long sleep’ as ‘a journey of his soul into the afterlife’ (*FAE*, 217). Thus, he purported to relate to the public details about ‘the judgement of the souls of the newly dead’ (*FAE*, 217), an account which perfectly matched that of Newman’s poem. The second narrative referred to is the ‘best-selling funeral sermon’ entitled ‘Death and Heaven’, delivered in 1722 by the Dissenter Isaac Watts, who refuted the orthodox view that heaven ‘was a place of contemplation and rest’ (*FAE*, 105); the afterlife, he claimed, was characterised by ‘active duties’, an ideology which was unsurprisingly influenced by his own Protestant work-ethic. Both visions are comforting and accord with the idea that Christ is indeed the eponymous ‘sin eater’: taking upon himself the

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7 The sources—Roy Porter, *Flesh in the Age of Reason* (London, 2003) and Daniel Doherty and Amitai Etzioni, (eds), *Voluntary Simplicity: Responding to Consumer Culture* (Maryland, 2003)—are cited in the text as ‘*FAE*’ and ‘*VS*’, respectively.
sins of the world, our passage into heaven has been ‘sweetened’ by the spilling of his blood.\(^8\) For a believer in the Christian faith, death is not to be feared; rather, it has been tamed and rendered almost pleasurable, as if the dying person is simply thrown into ‘an elbow chair’.\(^9\)

In the following stanzas, which draw on two further intertexts,\(^10\) the speaker re-affirms his belief in and supplication to God, but then begins to wonder what attitude he will adopt towards death:

| kneeling down after every three steps, walking backwards all the way (MP, 9); | Kneeling down after three steps, walking backwards all the way, |
| to hear the military mass (MP, 298); | I heard a military Mass play, |
| trust in God (VS, 112); | and worked my trust in God into the floor. |

| which step was the real death (TD, 46); | Which step was the real death on the nicely polished marble, |
| nicely polished death (TD, 32); the ‘wild’ death (TD, 26); old-fashioned ending (TD, 11); the secret death (TD, 27); ‘the oldest death there is’ (TD, 26) | the wild, old-fashioned, secret death, the oldest death there is? |

The distinction posited here is between what Daniel Callahan in *The Troubled Dream of Life* terms the ‘tame death’ and the ‘wild death’: the former is ‘the oldest death there is’ (TD, 26), one met by calm acceptance by man since it is considered a routine part of life; the latter is resisted fiercely with the aid of modern medical advances which have rendered ‘near-invisible the line between extending a life and extending a death’ (TD, 46). Belief in God’s mercy acts as a balm to the Christian soul and, with the help of the ‘Angel’, the speaker has lost all fear and, closing his eyes with his own fingers, chooses the ‘tame death’.

The meditations upon death in the previous poems intimate McGuckian’s deeply held faith concerning the afterlife, but they are each conducted in an abstract sense. The poet’s sanguinity was tested, however, when it was a real demise which was under consideration. On 12 June 2003, the actor Gregory Peck died of bronchopneumonia. McGuckian had first met him at her American

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\(^8\) The specific reference to the ‘sin eater’ refers to “an old custom at funerals to hire poor people, who were to take upon them the sins of the party deceased” in order to facilitate the dead soul’s passage into the afterlife (FAE, 218).

\(^9\) The reference to the seasons ‘separated from you’ is equally comforting: the reference, taken from *Voluntary Simplicity*, refers to the means by which man is able to live in harmony with nature (VS, 180).

Ireland Fund Literary Award ceremony in 1998 and they had corresponded ever since. His death came as a real shock to the poet. She wrote on 25 June 2003:

Gregory is gone. In a wall. I am lost. Can you explain this? I am reading Dante. I know by chance that his funeral service will begin in Los Angeles at 2 p.m. their time. It is 10 p.m. in Belfast. I read—‘Six thousand miles away the sixth hour burns’. So begins my poem. But how was it written in the year 1300? I can’t understand. That is what you have to explain.\(^{11}\)

The poem to which she refers is ‘Street of Straw’, a text made up of quotations from Dante’s *Paradiso.\(^ {12}\)*

The lines in the opening stanza are characterised by light: the time on earth is near sunrise and at this point Dante begins the ascent towards the Empyrean (*empyrus*, ‘in or on the fire’), the dwelling place of God. The text at this moment comes to celebrate the distance between the mortal and celestial realms. The poem’s protagonist begins to perceive the divine idea in all things when looking upon the Eternal Light: ‘In its depth I saw that it contained, bound by love in one volume, that which is scattered in leaves through the universe, substances and accidents and their relations as it were fused together in such a way that what I tell of is a simple light’.\(^ {13}\) While McGuckian feels utterly bereft at being separated from Gregory—the funeral was taking place at the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in California while she was composing the poem 5115 miles away in Belfast—she compensates for this heartache by rewriting Dante’s text and installing herself as the protagonist. Thus, she inhabits the realm to which (presumably) Gregory was travelling: heaven. While he, recently dead, is ‘climbing with his eyes’, she is already there. As she states in the final stanza, ‘heaven has no other where than my place, my place, / my place’. The insistent, almost fevered repetition wills the distance between them to disappear. Using Dante as an intertext is comforting


\(^{13}\) Dante, 483.
for the poet since it offers a coherent and ordered belief system. Death is not registered in terms of finality. Rather, as the epigraph to a companion poem, ‘Playing with the Stars’ states: ‘Whoso laments that we die here to live above has not seen there the refreshment from the eternal showers’.14

The depth of emotion present in ‘Street of Straw’ is also evident in my final example, an as yet uncollected elegy, ‘Corner of Field with Farm’,15 written following the death from cancer on 7 April 2007 of Siobhán Kilfeather, who was an internationally renowned Irish Studies scholar and senior lecturer at the School of English, Queen’s University Belfast. Although seriously ill, she ‘generously managed to attend a weekend symposium in Coleraine’ on McGuckian’s work; ‘sadly,’ says McGuckian, ‘she died soon afterwards, and I read at her funeral’.16 Made up of quotations selected and adapted from Simone de Beauvoir’s *Diary of a Philosophy Student*, the opening stanza is as follows:17

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\begin{align*}
\text{The Earth has done its time } & \text{ (PS, 128);} \\
\text{To think that she is dead, she who read Lamartine in a dark blue net dress} & \text{ (PS, 139)} \\
\text{by the dimly lit window and who laughed} & \text{ By the dimlit window, and laughed} \\
\text{so overflowing with the joy of living […]} & \text{ So overflowing with a ladle full of holes.}
\end{align*}
\]

‘The beginning’, McGuckian states, ‘is about Siobhan and her excruciating death which upset everyone, (me especially into a nervous breakdown)’.18 A meditative, end-stopped opening line, written in iambic trimeter, pronounces the conclusion of a sentence and conveys both a sense of finitude and release: the sentence (judicially and linguistically) is brought to a close. The poem’s context, however, suggests an alternative reading for ‘has done its time’, one that connotes not the conclusion of servitude, but rather the end of a reprieve. In their account of Kilfeather’s life entitled *Siobhán’s Miracle*, her parents-in-law Ellen and Derek Jameson record how she ‘had been granted an extra seven years of life through

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14 McGuckian, ‘Playing with Stars’, *The Book of the Angel*, 70. The poem is also an elegy for Gregory Peck and is equally composed using the *Paradiso* as its source text. The epigraph comes from Dante, 201.


17 The source—Barbara Klaw et al. (eds), Simone de Beauvoir, *Diary of a Philosophy Student*, vol. 1. 1926–27, trans. Barbara Klaw (Urbana, 2006)—is referred to as ‘PS’.

18 Email from McGuckian, 16 July 2008.
divine intervention—now her time had come’. She had travelled to Lourdes in February 2000 when it became known that the cancer had spread to her lungs and she prayed for the intercession of ‘the Blessed Mother of Jesus’ so that she could have more time with her children: ‘They need me. I beg you; find it in your heart to give me more time. Let me see them grow up a bit first—then I’ll be ready’. The ‘miracle’ was granted and all trace of the cancer disappeared. Hence, displaying both courage and gratitude, when the disease did reappear at a later date, she ‘did not cry “Why me?” or rage against the cancer which cruelly ravaged her body between Christmas Eve 2006 and her death the following Easter. She knew she was living on borrowed time’. The poet, however, is less sanguine: for her, the death of such a close friend is figured apocalyptically: the Earth itself has come to an end. (The line in its original context signals the end of a natural cycle, both diurnal and seasonal, taken as it is from Jules Laforgue’s ‘Couchant d’Hiver’ [Winter Sunset].) ‘To think that she is dead’ may well signal a process of measured reflection on loss, one that instigates a process of healthy mourning, yet the phrase leads to excess and an inability to restrain her feelings within an ordered structure: the first line’s metrical pattern is repeated only to be subsequently disrupted following the caesura. Contemplation of loss not only leads to the breaking of metrical pattern, it also initiates a series of run-on lines as well as imagery of flawed containment (‘net dress’; ‘ladle full of holes’).

The second stanza’s opening expresses a form of survivor guilt: the ‘Earth’ may have done its time, but the poet still continues to live. The lack of agency and sense of fatalism stem from (or at least concur with) the text’s source: writing on 28 September 1926, de Beauvoir writes that ‘I cannot do anything; life carries me along. I have never obtained anything from it by force; I will never take anything from it that it does not consent to give me. How sincerely at such moments one wishes to die!’ (PS, 96). Yet McGuckian neither revels in nor is subsumed by such feelings of ennui and alienation; in contrast to de Beauvoir, who writes at this time of how ‘[l]iterature disgusts me; even the books that

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20 Jameson and Jameson, Siobhán’s Miracle, 3.
21 Ibid., 2.
are not literature can do nothing for me' (PS, 96), the poet deliberately turns to the arts for comfort. Firstly, and most obviously, she uses de Beauvoir’s text (which often compiles lists of favourite quotations) as a source for her own literary creation. Indeed, for McGuckian, poetry is a way of dealing with the fact of death and the resultant intimation of her own mortality. In an interview McGuckian stated that, ‘I wrote a poem to do with death, to provide some kind of solid bulwark against the true death, not bypassing it or avoiding it. […] I don’t know how it works, but that’s the whole point of [writing something]—not even in defiance, but shaping it, something that will outlast you even if it’s only for a few years, something that will go beyond your death.’

The arts, then, can provide a bulwark against the reality of death. Secondly, the ‘brown-toned boats’, which are appreciated for their visual impact, belong to the realm of art, framed as they are within an unspecified painting exhibited by Marcel Gromaire at the Salon d’Automne (viewed by de Beauvoir on 11 November 1926). Finally, there is an explicitly causal relationship (‘Because …’) between the poet’s awareness of her own continued existence and the discovery of ‘a photograph / Of my beautiful sculpted daughter’, and this accords with the first stanza’s in-line rhyme of ‘dead/read’ which implicitly associates the activity of reading with the life principle.

Her daughter is here trebly constructed as an artefact: not only is she figured as a linguistic construct of the poet’s own making, she is framed and contained as a ‘photograph’ and has the unaging solidity of a sculpture. Theories of visual culture foreground the indexical nature of the photographic text (as relic, trace and fetish) and suggest a crucial connection with the material presence of that which is photographed, one that paradoxically indicates the text’s relation with both life and death. While Susan Sontag argues in On Photography that ‘[p]hotographs state the innocence, the vulnerability of lives heading toward their own destruction and this link between photography and death haunts all photos of people’, Roland Barthes highlights the subject’s ‘presence’ within the text: ‘The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent […] light, though impalpable, is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed’. For McGuckian, the photograph functions as an anticipatory denial of absence: it preserves the daughter, aged twelve. As Elizabeth Hallam and Jenny Hockey argue in Death, Memory and Material Culture, a photograph is created ‘with a view to the future’, as ‘a means to preserve, in the form of a “transparent” image, the present moment for later contemplation’; hence, it ‘has the capacity to preserve, or maintain as living, aspects of that which has passed

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22 McGuckian, personal interview at The Marine Hotel, Ballycastle, 19 August 1996.
and those who have died: “to enshrine identity, creating a memorial which pleads for deathlessness and issues a challenge to time”.

Indeed, in the second stanza the daughter is contained within the photographic text, which itself is kept within ‘an old box’.

While the poem’s internal logic implies that the person referred to as ‘she’ in the opening stanza, who is never named, could in fact be the speaker’s daughter—thus, displacing her grief through a fixation on a compensatory image, the poet forestalls the move from loss to consolation since, as in traditional elegies, the ‘consoling sign’ of the photograph may well carry ‘in itself the reminder of the loss on which it has been founded’—the extra-textual information provided by McGuckian, biographical circumstance and the logic of the succeeding stanzas all suggest otherwise. Instead, the poem can be seen to trace a movement from an initial overwhelming sorrow to a consideration of art’s potential to confer immortality on own her daughter; she becomes a substitute for the deceased. However, the poem does not linger on the consolations offered by art as the following stanzas consider the real relationship between mother and daughter.

I tortured myself to resemble what I thought she desired me to be (PS, 191); ‘stretches like gloves worn during a long journey’ (PS, 237); ‘between her and me, from the other to me no word and no hand’ (PS, 200); shut doors (PS, 96); she airs her grievances to Papa […] even closer under the umbrella (PS, 192); It was as if he had shaken my hand very hard (PS, 192); the beauty of an image born of us (PS, 229); simultaneously most ‘self’ and the most ‘the other’ (PS, 229); She is nothing to me (PS, 230)

I had tortured myself to resemble what I thought She desired me to be, stretched like wet gloves Worn by a long journey. Between her And me, from the other to me, No word, no hand, shut doors. She airs her grievances to Papa, even closer Under the umbrella. It was as if he had shaken My hand very hard. The beauty of an image Born of us is simultaneously The most self and the most the other, She is nothing to me.

Siobhán Kilfeather’s death had contributed to the poet’s nervous breakdown, thus leaving her incapacitated and vulnerable. As the poet recalls, ‘[m]y daughter Emer was doing A-levels and had to look after me—in fact, feed, nurse me—so her dad and she seem in a conspiracy of the well against (if for) me. There was a lot of mixed love, loss and anguish in this poem’. The poem’s third movement, then, describes a relationship between mother and daughter which has

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25 Elizabeth Hallam and Jennifer Lorna Hockey, Death, Memory and Material Culture (Oxford, 2001), 143 and 142.
27 Email from McGuckian, 16 July 2008.
become fraught—figured here as ‘stretched like wet gloves / Worn by a long journey’—due to the former’s frustrated anxiety to please the latter. Although ‘gloves’ serve to protect the wearer, here their utility has been tempered by use; ‘worn’ functions not simply to describe their act of covering but also as an indication of their current state of disrepair. ‘Stretched’ may indicate the tensile nature of relations between the two, but it at least indicates connection; however, the enclosive and forbidding environment (‘shut doors’) counter this assumption and serves to intensify the emotion towards the close yet utterly alien ‘other’. McGuckian cites from Paul Claudel’s ‘Ténèbres’ to convey the seemingly painful co-existence (and non-communication) that persists in their intimate and stifling world:

I am here, the other elsewhere, the silence seems to live.
We are the wretched ones, and Satan sifts us in his sieve.

I suffer, the other suffers, and there is no travelled land
Between her and me, from the other to me, no word and no hand.28

Yet recovery from her breakdown is facilitated by the daughter and it is figured in aesthetic terms (‘the beauty of an image’). What is ‘born of us’ is the poem; self and other here are only seemingly at odds with one another. Indeed, in the source’s context, de Beauvoir is not adverting to an irreconcilable alterity but to a welcome familiarity: ‘Oh! You, so close and yet so far, the only one who, I feel, is like myself, elusive and yet so easy to grasp, simultaneously the most “self” and the most “other”’ (PS, 229). Although the phrase ‘She is nothing to me’ seems starkly dismissive, it is ‘fully ironic […] she was in fact more than everything’, 29 a position which is substantiated by the concluding stanza:

‘full of inner happenings’ (PS, 238);
‘the house did rest […] its full smell’ (PS, 238);
The black collar whose folds march the waves
In the hair (PS, 244); ‘White twilights grow tepid underneath my head’ (PS, 231)

She is full of inner happenings,
The house does the rest with its dull smell.
Her black collar folds like the waves
In her hair, her white twilights
Grow tepid underneath my head.

The final five lines are perhaps as complex as any in McGuckian’s oeuvre. The quotations were appropriated and juxtaposed by de Beauvoir in her diary and they are now transposed and adapted by the Northern Irish poet. As cited in the introduction to this monograph, McGuckian revealed in interview that: ‘I like to

29 Email from McGuckian, 16 July 2008.
find a word living in a context and then pull it out of its context. It’s like they are growing in a garden and I pull them out of the garden and put them into my garden, and yet I hope they take with them some of their original soil, wherever I got them.\textsuperscript{30} In her elegy for Siobhán Kilfeather the flowers are decidedly \textit{Fleurs du Mal}: ‘white twilights / Grow tepid underneath my head’ is a quotation from the Baudelairean poem ‘Renouveau’ by Stéphane Mallarmé and is said to describe ‘the sad paradox of this spring which has put an end to the artistic creativity of winter’.\textsuperscript{31} Such an enforced silence is compounded by the opening quotation from Rilke’s \textit{The Notebooks of Malte Brigge} which centres on a traumatic experience that necessarily remains unvoiced:

\begin{quote}
… at that time I already felt something had entered my life which I alone would have to walk around with, forever and ever. I see myself lying in my little bed, unable to sleep, and somehow vaguely foreseeing that life would be like that: full of truly strange experiences that are meant for one person alone and can never be spoken. What is certain is that gradually a sad and heavy pride arose in me. I pictured to myself how a person could walk around full of inner happenings and silent.\textsuperscript{32}
\end{quote}

The traumatic equivalent within the poem is, of course, Kilfeather’s death, which leads to the poet’s nervous breakdown. According to psychoanalytic theory, the trauma cannot be described; rather, it de-
scribes: ‘Writing from within the core of trauma is a constant struggle between the colonizing power of words and the revolt of what is being rejected, silenced. […] Trauma as a mode of being halts the flow of time, fractures the self, and punctures memory and language’.\textsuperscript{33} However, in McGuckian’s poem it is the daughter who is ‘full of inner happenings’ and her ‘white twilights / Grow tepid underneath’ the poet’s head. In other words, rather than being an image of alienated solitude and of stalled creativity, the conclusion reinforces the penultimate stanza’s emphasis on the overcoming of alterity. Otherness becomes domesticated and rendered familiar in this stanza. When the poet writes that ‘The house does the rest with its dull smell’, she is again quoting Rilke; this time the context refers to socialisation and conformity: ‘you are already the person they thought you were; the person for whom they had long ago fashioned a life, out of his small past and their own desires’.\textsuperscript{34}

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\textsuperscript{30} Medbh McGuckian, “I Am Listening in Black and White to What Speaks to Me in Blue”, 67.
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\textsuperscript{33} Gabriele Schwab, ‘Writing against Memory and Forgetting’, \textit{Literature and Medicine}. 25.1 (Spring, 2006): 95 and 96.
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{34} Rilke, \textit{The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge}, 253.
\end{flushright}
While McGuckian’s transplanted quotations do indeed take ‘some of their original soil’ with them, their reconfiguration within ‘Corner of Field with Farm’ changes their meaning to a much greater extent than for the other two poems. The text’s overall structure is a movement from winter to spring (from ‘Couchant d’Hivers’ to ‘Renouveau’), from darkness to twilight, and from failed containment to the successful interiorisation of the ‘other’. While many of the quotations connote silence and silencing in their original contexts, there is a shift of meaning through appropriation: the poem has been produced and, although it describes a period in her life in which grief subsumed her voice, it suggests how that voice has been recovered. There is a depth of feeling present in this poem which is absent from both ‘A Religion of Writing’ and ‘The Sin Eater’, yet it too affirms an acceptance of death as part of life’s cycle and presents a place for writing in the midst of an almost disabling loss.
‘IF I PROLONGED THE LOOK TO REDISCOVER YOUR FACE’: MEDBH MCCLUSKIAN’S EKPHRASISTIC ELEGIES

The modern elegy is not a refuge for outworn nostalgias and consolations. The characteristic elegy of our time evinces the astringency of modern death and bereavement [...]. At its best, the modern elegy offers not a guide to ‘successful’ mourning but a spur to rethinking the vexed experience of grief in the modern world. We should turn to it expecting not so much solace as fractured speech, not so much answers as memorable puzzlings.\(^1\)

In *Poetry and Mourning*, Jahan Ramazani contends that when writing elegies, modern writers resist ‘the psychological propensity of the genre to translate grief into consolation’; instead, they ‘conjoin the elegiac with the anti-elegiac, at once appropriating and resisting the traditional psychology, structure, and imagery of the genre’.\(^2\) Elegies by contemporary Northern Irish writers seem to fit Ramazani’s generic description. For example, Michael Longley’s much commented upon short lyric ‘*Kindertotenlieder*’ (*Songs of the Death of Children*),\(^3\) whose title comes from Mahler’s non-symphonic song cycle (1904), is a case in point, beginning as it does with the line: ‘There can be no songs for dead children’. As critics have pointed out, the text refuses consolation and expresses ‘the poet’s sense of his irrelevance and ineffectualness when confronted with such terrible need and misery’.\(^4\) Hence, Longley, like the modern poets noted by Ramazani, questions “the ethical ground of recuperative art”.\(^5\)

Equally anti-consolatory is Peter McDonald’s ‘The Resurrection of the Soldiers’:\(^6\)

> Of course the walls are silent, but
> can music be implicit there?

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\(^2\) Ibid., 3, 1.
What horns and pumping trumpets, shut
in paint, might blast and shake the air?

What happens when the skies unclose,
and how does the sour ground come fresh?
How freely do the worms compose
their variations on the flesh?

The text and title refer to Stanley Spencer’s commissioned decorative mural of army life for the Sandham Memorial Chapel in Burghlere, Hampshire, particularly its concluding altarpiece (entitled *Resurrection of the Soldiers* [1928–9]). Writing about the mural, Spencer stated that the cross, of which there are well over a hundred in the painting, ‘is one of the forms through which the state of peace has been expressed. Here it is caressed as a sweetheart, & there it is forming a kind of door to a house so that a soldier can re-enjoy his old days of sitting in his doorway & chatting to his neighbour’. The image of the cross, then, is consolatory, as is the intact wall figured in the background at the far left. Evoking, and symbolically standing in for, the walls of Jericho, Spenser’s image is an affirmation of life rather than a melancholic preoccupation with loss: as Adrian Glew puts it, ‘the thought of Jericho’s destruction lends weight to the fact that the walls of Spencer’s town have not fallen’. McDonald’s poem, however, refuses such consolation: it comprises four questions, none of which are answered. An ekphrastic text, it question whether ‘music’ can be ‘implicit’ in the painting. The only composition which is possible is done by the worms (‘their variations on the flesh’).

Perhaps the most affecting Northern Irish non-consolatory elegy is Paul Muldoon’s recent ‘Horse Latitudes’, a poetic sequence written about the death of a lover from cancer. (She is given the fictional name ‘Carlotta’, an anagram for ‘oral tact’.) The opening lyric, ‘Beijing’, refers to the artefacts found at the tomb of Qin Shi Huangdi, namely the celebrated ‘terracotta army’:

I could still hear the musicians
cajoling those thousands of clay
horses and horsemen through the squeeze
when I woke beside Carlotta.
Life-size, also. Also terra-cotta.
The sky was still a terra-cotta frieze
over which her grandfather still held sway

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7 Adrian Glew (ed.), *Stanley Spencer: Letters and Writings* (London, 2001),
8 Timothy Hayman and Patrick Wright (eds), *Stanley Spencer* (London, 2001), 52.
with the set-square, fret-saw, stencil, plumb-line and carpenter’s pencil

his grandfather brought from Roma.

Proud-fleshed Carlotta. Hypersarcoma.

For now our highest ambition
was simply to bear the light of the day
we had once been planning to seize.

The sonnet is characterised by stasis, an inability to move on. This is conveyed not only by the title of the sequence\(^\text{10}\) and the speaker’s admission that, due to the lover’s illness, they are unable to think about the future, but also by the prominence of words indicating stillness: ‘still’, ‘frieze’ and ‘seize’. Indeed, the word ‘still’ is repeated three times and such repetition in an elegy creates a sense of continuity, of an unbroken pattern such as one may oppose to the extreme discontinuity of death. Time itself is thereby structured to appear as a familiar, filled-in medium rather than an open-ended source of possible catastrophe. Repetition is, moreover, one of the psychological responses to trauma. The psyche repeats the shocking event, much as the elegy recounts and reiterates the fact of death.\(^\text{11}\)

This is Freud’s ‘open wound’, with the speaker, like the Ancient Mariner, having to recount and replay the narrative over and over again. What results is a becalmed poet/text. Although this ekphrastic lyric poem equates ‘Carlotta’ with the memorial statues which were to ease the passage of the Chinese emperor into the otherworld, he does so in two sentences devoid of verbs: ‘Life-size, also. Also terra-cotta’. Indeed, the heavily spondaic line disrupts the poem’s predominant metre, as does the same metrical pattern in line 11; hence, at points north and south of the middle line, the poem’s rhythm is halted, mirroring the becalming subtropical latitudes to which the sequence’s title alludes. The overriding impression, then, is of a lover and poet forever stranded in the ‘Calms of Cancer’.

While the ekphrastic texts by Longley, McDonald and Muldoon refuse the consolations traditionally offered by the elegiac genre, those by Medbh McGuckian, their contemporary, embrace them. Each of the poems uses paintings as ways of mourning the death of a loved one, and they also function

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\(^{10}\) ‘Horse Latitudes’ are the subtropical latitudes which are characterised by very light winds. Also known as the ‘calms of Cancer’, the term originates from when sailors, travelling to the New World, became stranded and were forced to kill the on-board horses in order to preserve their fresh-water supply.

as commentaries on art. ‘Constable’s *Haywain*’ was written shortly before the death of the poet’s father and functions as a pre-elegy for him. Commenting on the significance to her of *The Haywain*, she stated in a letter that ‘[all of us [members of her family] have copies of Constable’s *Haywain* and I think of the central character in the river as his idealised former-self that he lost when he moved away from the River Shesk in Glenshesk, Co. Antrim, and became an elementary school teacher in Belfast’. Elaborating on this, she later stated in interview that

The painting for me summed up a lot about my father’s tragedy, his desire for art and his desire for heaven and stability and his love of the country and his masculinity and tenderness. I was preparing in poetry for my father’s death, like I’m now preparing for my mother’s death. He started having heart attacks when he was sixty-three and he died when he was seventy-three. So the first verse is about the time before he died. A week before he died, I was sent a form to fill in. It asked me to fill in the parent’s birth-date and, if applicable, the date of his death and it was very strange. I felt this was a warning. It was very clinical.

The poet encounters the reality of her father’s impending death in the opening stanza, faced as she is by the disturbing task of having to write-in the possible date of his death:

The incised triangle,
the angle of the sciatic notch,
divides the month from the year
in my father’s birthdate:
as bone becomes transparent
against the background of viaticum.

The sheer numerative brutality of this predictive act progressively eliminates the subject: ‘bone becomes transparent’ as she contemplates the administration of the Eucharist (‘viaticum’) to the dying *paterfamilias*. Reduced to two inscribed temporal nodes, the father’s foreshortened life is in danger of curtailing her own powers of expression: although what she is faced with writing here may be starkly factual, it is also, strictly speaking, unsayable; as Christopher Ricks reminds us in *The Force of Poetry*, one cannot, ‘without a terrible dehumanized bureaucratic numerateness’, actually *say* dates (they are numbers, not words).

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12 Medbh McGuckian, ‘Constable’s *Haywain*, *Captain Lavender* (Oldcastle, 1994), 36.
13 McGuckian, letter to the author, 8 March 1996.
Hence, in the face of a loss which cannot be encompassed or compensated for by poetic expression, she turns to Constable’s artwork as a pre-existing and summative expression of the father’s life-story. There is a danger, however, that this attempt to move from loss to consolation may result not in healthy mourning but, rather, in melancholia. As in traditional elegies, the ‘consoling sign’ of the painting may well carry ‘in itself the reminder of the loss on which is has been founded’.16 Not yet dead, the father has become displaced into, and preserved by the picture. Yet this entails a loss and a distancing: although central, he is figured in Constable’s painting with his back to the viewer, positioned in the middle of the river (already in another realm, as it were).

In the second stanza, the poet changes tack by asserting that he is not dead:

the corpseless tomb (154);
His body […] is assiduously absent (166);
richer than […] in life (137); grave
goods (155); bracelets (137)

As yet his tomb is corpseless,
his absent body richer than life;
the grave goods, bracelets
of piano strings snapped by him;
the semi-quavered darkness to light
where amber forms and collects.

Here, she has compensated for her inability to find adequate words by yet again turning to pre-existent forms, namely words and phrases from Peter Metcalf and Richard Huntingdon’s monograph on mortuary rituals, *Celebrations of Death*.17 Of course, this is something McGuckian always does when writing poetry: ‘I have on a clean lined page enough words on their own, or together, from all over the place to begin [the poem]. I usually read them aloud at this stage to see if any rhyme or fit each other. The more ludicrous, often the more poetic sense. Then I will see that it is falling into a pattern concerning what is my most unconscious anxiety, fear, love, or anger at the time I am working on it, not the time I was reading’.18 However, in this instance, the imminent death of her father makes the reliance on the words of others all the more insistent: ‘There’s a mixture of truth in the poem and a mixture of quotation in it. To me, the sources are a crutch and help’.19

The detail about the ‘absent body’ is not only literally true, it also carries symbolic weight. Referring to the death rites of the Shilluk king, Metcalf and Huntingdon write: ‘Once the king is dead, he ceases to be a symbol of national

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19 McGuckian, interview by the author, Athol Hotel, Aberdeen, 6 May 2007.
unity. His body, on whose physical condition the nation depended while he lived, is assiduously absent after death’.\(^{20}\) The absence signals loss and the beginning of an interregnum. Yet the king will live on in one important sense: the spirit of Kyikang (the ‘immortal culture hero of the Shilluk’) will continue to reign through every successive king, each being merely receptacles ‘of the one and only kingship’\(^{21}\). Despite connoting physical absence, the quotations that are conjoined in the stanza refer to the deaths of three kings (from different cultures), each achieving immortality: they are ‘richer than […] in life’ due to the grave goods that accompany them on their journey to the afterlife. The father, then, is figured as one such immortalised king. The reference to ‘amber’ forming and collecting affirms the memorialising function at work here, whereby the father becomes fossilised and preserved. Yet, McGuckian’s rephrasing of the quotation to ‘richer than life’ bespeaks an excess: life cannot contain him.

In one sense, this accords with the breaking of the piano strings and his own frustrated artistic yearning: ‘He had this old piano and carried it into the house. So the piano was like his coffin, it was a symbol for me. He didn’t play the piano and I failed to play it properly—I always wanted to’.\(^{22}\) Everything is excessive and inexpressible. Just as the birth/death dates focus our attention on the failure of expression, so too do the snapped strings. Indeed, the continued evasiveness of the father from the poetic text highlights the failure of signification (in the opening stanza he is displaced; in the second he is absent). McGuckian takes the place of the father as the artist-figure, internalising and identifying with ‘the idealized parental figure’.\(^{23}\) The dangers of such secondary narcissism which, as Sacks states, lies ‘at the core of melancholia’,\(^{24}\) are plain to see in the remaining stanzas:

\begin{align*}
\text{Only my I, my lost skinfold,} & \quad \text{Only my I, my lost skinfold,} \\
\text{has disturbed the ground} & \quad \text{has disturbed the ground} \\
\text{with this sentence of speechlessness} & \quad \text{with this sentence of speechlessness} \\
\text{as if I owned the willed} & \quad \text{as if I owned the willed} \\
\text{or invented death} & \quad \text{or invented death} \\
\text{high on its bed of extrovert papyrus:} & \quad \text{high on its bed of extrovert papyrus:} \\
\text{to justly cheat my wife-giver} & \quad \text{to justly cheat my wife-giver} \\
\text{and wife-taker} & \quad \text{and wife-taker} \\
\text{of his islandlike afterworld,} & \quad \text{of his islandlike afterworld,}
\end{align*}

\(^{20}\) Metcalf and Huntingdon, *Celebrations of Death*, 166.  
\(^{21}\) Ibid.  
\(^{22}\) McGuckian, interview by the author, Athol Hotel, Aberdeen, 6 May 2007.  
\(^{24}\) Ibid., 10.
Medbh McGuckian’s Ekphrastic Elegies

Not only has the poet become objectified, her identity is in danger of being lost. The implied result of having to write the date of his death is that the poet herself has ‘willed / or invented’ her parent’s demise. What is certain, however, is that in writing the poem she has prefigured his death: his coffin/the piano becomes a funerary ship. ‘This sentence of speechlessness’ seems at first paradoxical: even such a heavily self-reflexive utterance constitutes speech. However, ‘sentence’ here also connotes a judgement or judicial determination, and the poet’s ‘I’ has condemned the father to ‘speechlessness’, i.e. death. Yet, given the intertext, it also connotes a necessary funeral rite to mourn the (about-to-be) deceased (and recover her ‘lost skinfold’). Referring to the highly codified rituals of native Australians, Metcalf and Huntingdon relate how women were often ‘prohibited normal speech during mourning’, and that ‘[s]ometimes whole villages of women are under sentence of speechlessness for long periods’. At the end of the poem, she will lapse into silence, but by then she will have created a necessary consolatory image whereby father and daughter are together, both expressing themselves artistically ‘at one piano’. The poem constitutes not a rite of separation, but one of transition. McGuckian cites from Metcalf and Huntingdon to note the proliferation of ‘water journeys and islandlike afterworlds’ in death ritual symbolism, and she uses Constable’s \textit{Haywain} in the poem to represent one such transitional phase, namely the liminality of the father’s condition (moving away from land, undertaking his water journey).

‘Lake in Middle Shadow’, a poem from the collection \textit{Shelmalier}, is an elegy for an unnamed person whom McGuckian wishes ‘in a single glance, / will be able to picture [himself] again as a lover’. The title calls to mind different kinds of shadows, all of which are thematically explored in the text: the comparative darkness produced by a body intercepting rays from the sun; the \textit{umbra mortis}, or shadow of death; a spectral form or ‘shade’. The title also invokes the notion of being ‘in the shadow’ of something or someone: applied rhetorically, this refers to a portrait as contrasted with the original; applied figuratively, it suggests the overwhelming influence of a precursor. Turning again to an existing word-hoard when faced with the death of a loved one, McGuckian composes the poem from the published fragments of a thesis on painting by an artistic exemplar, Leonardo da Vinci. Does this mean that she is in his shade? Does

\begin{itemize}
\item Metcalf and Huntingdon, \textit{Celebrations of Death}, 49.
\item Metcalf and Huntingdon, \textit{Celebrations of Death}, 32–3.
\item Martin Kemp (ed.), Leonardo da Vinci, \textit{Leonardo on Painting}, trans. Martin Kemp and
\end{itemize}
her work lack the lustre of the original? And can her poetry succeed in conjuring up a life-like portrait of the deceased given that the poetic text is made out of words, at a third remove from reality (in the Platonic sense)? While the poem is most obviously about, and addressed to, the lover’s shade, it is also self-reflexively about art: is one form of artistic production more realistic, more powerful and more affecting than another? For da Vinci, the answer is self-evident. He claims that ‘[p]ainting moves the senses more rapidly than poetry’, and cites the following example to demonstrate the stronger potency of the former: ‘if a painter in the cold and harsh wintertime set before you the same or similar landscapes as those in which you once took your pleasures before a spring, you will be able to picture yourself again as a lover with your beloved in flowery meadows’. While McGuckian borrows the excerpt for her conclusion, it is not a theory to which she subscribes; rather, her poetic text usurps the original and claims success for poetry. However, the opening of her poem begins with an admission of abject failure.

When the speaker states that ‘Here it is fully nighttime’, she may simply be referring to the time of writing; however, she could also be adverting to the fact that here, in the poem, everything has been cast in the shade by her exemplar and that all is dead (the loved one; the artwork). Of course, as da Vinci surmises, ‘if

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Margaret Walker (New Haven, 1989).

it is fully night-time the difference between light and shade is so imperceptible to the human eye that the shape of everything is lost.\textsuperscript{30} Nothing has emerged from the darkness, the loved one is still deceased. Also, there is no discernible difference between McGuckian’s text and that of da Vinci’s at this juncture (and so poetry is still the lesser art). The lover is ‘twice dead’ in three very different ways. Firstly, by inscribing him into the text, a procedure which entails ‘Some measure / of conscious violence’ on the author’s part, she replays his death. Secondly, if the artwork is not ‘made with great immediacy, exhibiting in the figure great emotion or fervour’ it will be ‘deemed twice dead, inasmuch as it is dead because it is a depiction, and dead yet again in not exhibiting motion either of the mind or of the body’.\textsuperscript{31} And thirdly, the loved one’s death entails that of the poet (‘twin vein of my bud’). This ‘death of the author’ is also synonymous with the text’s ‘absence’ or its failure to make present: citing from a passage in which da Vinci observes that ‘the attachment of the leaf always leaves a trace of itself under its branch’,\textsuperscript{32} McGuckian invokes the Derridean, self-effacing ‘trace’, the absent part of the sign’s presence. In the act of \textit{différance}, the sign is said to leave behind a trace which is whatever is left over after everything present has been accounted for: ‘[i]n presenting itself, it becomes effaced’.\textsuperscript{33}

Due to the fact that all signifiers viewed as ‘present’ in Western philosophy will necessarily contain traces of other (absent) signifiers, the signifier can be neither wholly present nor wholly absent, and this accords with the spectral subject and liminal locus (‘Lake in Middle Shadow’) of McGuckian’s text. However, even if in theory language lacks presence (or a function of making present), the author is asserting that ‘you are the side / of the world to which I am turned’. The loved one \textit{is} there and for now he constitutes her world (‘the diameter of my sky’). The stanza has moved from a time of complete darkness to one of growing light. As da Vinci notes, ‘[i]f you are on the side from which the wind blows, you will see the trees looking much lighter than you would see them from the other side. And this occurs because the wind reveals the reverse sides of the leaves, which are all much paler than their right sides, and above all they will be very light if the wind blows from the quarter where the sun is located, \textit{towards which you have turned your back}?\textsuperscript{34} The stanza also moves inwards from the liminal position by the lake to the city, towards which the deceased’s face is now turned. Such a movement is confirmed by McGuckian’s own explanatory gloss on the poem:

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 162.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 144, emphasis added.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 177.
\textsuperscript{34} Da Vinci, \textit{Leonardo on Painting}, 168, emphasis added.
It is an anniversary poem for my father after one or two years, coalesced with an address to the main prisoner of the book, towards the end of the ceasefire negotiations. He was one if the last to be freed. I feel the poem swings from where my father is buried on the Northside, above the lough, below Wolfe Tone’s Cavehill, to myself and out to the Maze prison on the south, near Lisburn, both fairly inimical situations that I would feel are unwelcome or hostile to me. So the bed and grave are symbols for each other. I guess it is an erotic poem about one man stirring towards the renewal of his sexual life and the other as my source—almost like a male foetus somehow retaining his energy or potency, like Christ, on some spiritual level I am trying to tune into without loss of my boundaries.35

At the time her father died, McGuckian had been working in the Maze prison, conducting creative writing classes for the prisoners. They became almost an adopted family for her, allowing her space and time to grieve, and in her imagination they become conjoined with him: ‘because of the intense way I got distracted with the “death” or “living death” of the prisoners, I was able to use that as a metaphor for mourning him [her father]’.36 The aim of the poem is to allow the composite figure of her father and the prisoner to ‘regain’ their ‘ancient bed’, as the final stanza puts it. While the grave ‘bed’ signifies the loss of life, the marital bed implies a revitalisation, a bringing back to life (with the poet again becoming a ‘wife-giver, wife-taker’). The second stanza is the key ‘resurrective verse’37 and the regenerative process begins when the poet, with ‘some measure / of conscious violence re-ignites / the percussed air’, thereby illuminating what was once dark. The absent one becomes present: his face is shown ‘part by part’. This violence, of course, is also done to da Vinci’s text rendering it ‘twice dead’ since, as the editor states, ‘[w]ith respect to the detailed assembly of the actual texts, the editorial procedures […] involve some measure of conscious violence towards the original sources’.38 Indeed, she uses Da Vinci’s text against him, contradicting his argument that the poet cannot rival the painter when representing a person due to ‘the fact that the words which he delineates the elements of beauty are separated from one another by time, which leaves voids between them and dismembers the proportions’. This, it seems, is the crucial failing of poetry:

A poem, which has to accomplish the representation of a given beauty by means of the representation of each of those parts which would comprise the same

harmony in a painting, does not achieve any more grace than music would produce if each note were to be heard on its own at various intervals, failing to produce any harmony—just as if you wished to show a face part by part, always covering the section previously shown.\(^{39}\)

No such failure occurs (or is admitted) in McGuckian’s text; rather, the gradual presentation of her word-picture is a measure of its success, conveying, as it does, the energy and effort taken to imaginatively bring the deceased back to life. Indeed, she transforms Da Vinci’s prose into poetry in the process. When, in the third stanza, we are told that ‘each makes / an angle for something not touched / by the principal light’, Da Vinci’s text simply refers to a physical phenomenon; McGuckian, however, is referring to the imagination, the utterly transformative inner light. Hence, the concluding stanzas are diametrically opposed to the opening ‘nighttime’:

along the path of the wind (185); seems to tinge its path with the semblance of its colour (67); each root is surrounded by a rainbow (71); of equal height (79); where the ray is intersected and destroyed (70); final shadows (73); shadows share in the colour (76); as if wishing to be avenged (174); the water that runs most narrowly (174); very receptive to the shadow (170); shadowy rain (168); lets its bed be seen; (169); in the luminous rains (168); regains its ancient bed (175); one interval of dense air (78); span of the shoulders (125); run together into the eye (188); single glance (32); you will be able to picture yourself again as a lover (32); your longest fingers (120); allow the arms to fall (146) Brighter when viewed along the path of the wind, they seem to tinge its path with the semblance of their colour, till each root is surrounded by a rainbow of equal height. And where the ray is intersected and destroyed, the final shadows share in the original colour, even taking on more blue, as if wishing to be avenged, on the water that runs most narrowly, which is most receptive to the first or any shadow, in shadowy rain lets its bed be seen, in luminous, regains its ancient bed. An interval of dense air fights with the span of your shoulders, runs them together into my eye like the neck of a captive animal. But you, in a single glance, will be able to picture yourself again as a lover, your longest fingers, letting your arms fall.

Using Da Vinci’s claim that ‘[e]very object that moves with speed seems to tinge its path with the semblance of its colour’, McGuckian depicts a world which has been transformed: rather than being static, everything is vibrant; rather than being dark, the lover’s realm is awash with colour. This is not simply a portrait of the lover: this is the original (‘the final shadows / share in the original colour’). The water moves swiftly here, breaking the lake’s confines:\(^{40}\) ‘The mountains,


\(^{40}\) Running water is said to be ‘most receptive to the first or any shadow’ (Da Vinci,
collapsing into the rivers, close the valleys, and, as if wishing to be avenged, prohibit the course of such a river and convert into a lake in which the slow-moving water appears to be subdued, until such time as the blockage caused by the collapsed mountain is in turn consumed by the course of the aforesaid water.\textsuperscript{41} The concluding stanza ends, like the opening stanza, with the speaker’s perception of a tree: ‘there is a mixture of air and darkness within the shadowy tree, which run together into the eye which sees them’.\textsuperscript{42} However, having mourned the father and having created a consolatory image of him as a revitalised lover freed from his dark prison, she is no longer bound to him. Indeed, the concluding image is of Christ—already referred to in the poet’s gloss, and alluded to in the third stanza’s image of ‘a cross’—coming down from the cross, being resurrected, ‘letting your arms fall’.

My final example of an ekphrastic text, ‘Angel with Blue Wings’,\textsuperscript{43} also uses the image of Christ to construct a recuperative elegy, one that is devoid of the traits identified by Ramazani as characteristic of the modern elegy (irony, anti-sentimentality, self-mockery).\textsuperscript{44} The text was written following the death of one of McGuckian’s most influential muses, Gregory Peck: ‘The angel poems are to do with Greg[ory Peck], really. As others in the book, [“Angel with Blue Wings” was written] after his death. [It is about] the time when they have just died and are hovering between worlds’.\textsuperscript{45} The poem’s title alludes to Édouard Manet’s \textit{The Angels at the Tomb of Christ} (1864), a painting that presents Jesus at the moment of waking from the dead, flanked by two angels, one with strikingly blue wings. Making use throughout of extracts appropriated from Michael Fried’s study of Manet,\textsuperscript{46} McGuckian captures, in the third stanza, the liminal moment when Christ was “in the first stages of resurrection”:\textsuperscript{47}

\begin{quote}
stillness, heldness (327); 
Oversoft your eye, your hand, 
the heldness and stillness of your seated step, 

seated step (313); 
against a body felt as pale (314); 
fingerprints and palm prints (386); 
fingerprints and palmprints large against a body felt as pale in the first stages of resurrection (318) 
in the first stages of resurrection (318)
\end{quote}

\footnotesize{\textit{Leonardo on Painting}, 170).}

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 174.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 188, emphasis added.
\textsuperscript{44} See Ramazani, \textit{Poetry of Mourning}, 17.
\textsuperscript{45} McGuckian, email to the author, 30 November 2007.
\textsuperscript{46} Michael Fried, \textit{Manet’s Modernism, or The Face of Painting in the 1860s} (Chicago, 1996).
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 318.
As in Muldoon’s poem, there is a temporal hiatus here, signified by the absence of verbs. However, the ‘seated step’ indicates movement; as Fried notes, ‘[t]he right foot in particular seems about to move if it isn’t already taking a first, tentative, seated step’. The assertion of a religious consolation—resurrection from the dead—is a necessary step for the poet’s grieving process. Gregory Peck, then, is figured as Christ in Manet’s painting. Gazing upon it and reading about Manet’s art, McGuckian considers how it will help her mourn Peck’s death.

The poem begins with what seems like a prohibition: the speaker must not continue looking at (or for) the deceased, despite their past closeness.

must be understood almost feature
by feature (115); ‘the unity of a world
in a soul’ (119); ‘if one prolonged the
look’ (119); ‘to rediscover the faces’ (362);
‘he would make someone else passionate’
(363); ‘he even seeks to disappoint’
(360); the quarter-smile (401); ‘in the
claws of a laughing look’ (340)

Though I understood, almost feature by feature,
the unity of a world in your soul,
if I prolonged the look
to rediscover your face,
you would make someone else passionate,
or even seek to disappoint
my quarter-smile in the claws
of a laughing look.

Yet one wonders why Peck/Christ has a ‘laughing look’ here, and the reader is puzzled at how the image ‘would make someone else passionate’. Looking closely at the intertexts, one finds that they refer to Manet’s (and, by extension, McGuckian’s) appropriative praxis. Fried’s monograph focuses on Manet’s use of sources in his art, on ‘the extent to which [he] based his art upon specific paintings, engravings after paintings, and original prints by artists who preceded him”, and argues that this intertextuality must be “accounted for if [his] enterprise is to be made intelligible”. This accords with McGuckian’s desire that critics engage with her sources:

I am actually pleased to have critics unearth the sources as they are usually good books that people might enjoy. Also, it is payment to that author for my use of him or her and only right. However, if I were to detail it all myself […] it would be too scholarly and a pain, as if I were saying, as some do, “look at all the work I have done”. And also, I do change and adapt, so the crossover is not simple. But I feel critics should go further sometimes and explain what the poem means again in the light of their findings.50

48 Ibid., 313, emphasis added.
49 Ibid., 23.
50 McGuckian, interview at the Athol Hotel, Aberdeen, 6 November 2007.
When McGuckian states that ‘I understood, almost feature by feature, / the unity of a world in your soul’, she is, of course, talking about her intimate understanding of Peck; however, the lines also refer to the reception of art, of how Thomas Couture’s *Romans of the Decadence* (1847) can only be understood ‘almost feature by feature’ in light of its borrowings from the work of Jacques-Louis David. (The ‘unity of a world in a soul’ in this context refers to the way a painting may capture and convey the concept of ‘fraternité’.)

Similarly, the remaining lines refer to the reception of art. One critic wrote of Manet’s work that “[i]f he had the smallest bit of passion, he would make someone else passionate”, but that his art said nothing. Equally, another critic had said that “Manet unsettles and has no wish to satisfy; he even seeks to disappoint”. These reviews stem from Manet’s resistance to closure in his art. At the same time, however, despite the works’ expressive opacity, he sought to ‘preserve “the immediate freshness of the encounter, in the claws of a laughing look, to treat as nothing, in the pose, the fatigue of the twentieth session [of the Salon]”’. What is being alluded to is a tension between the work’s studied artfulness and the immediate simplicity of its reception: ‘It’s as if the viewer is made conscious of a fundamental tension or contradiction between the inherent temporality of positing, *the boldness and stillness* it implies, and the rapidity or instantaneousness of visualization and execution that Manet’s contemporaries came increasingly [...] to regard as his ideal’.

The same tension occurs in McGuckian’s work: there is the immediacy of its direct address (to a ‘you’), and a studied opacity resulting from its desire to resist closure. The poetic text works, then, on two very different levels: it is about her process of mourning and about its own reception as art.

As in ‘Lake in Middle Shadow’, the text is initially characterised by an overwhelming darkness, signifying the death of the loved one and the resultant despair of those left behind to mourn his passing:

the doorway hung with rags (384–5); Through a doorway hung with rags
the darkness of the room [...] the darkness of the room belongs
belongs on the side of the body (378); to the side of your body,
the depths of the body’s darkness, the depths of your body’s darkness
of the body’s darkness and blindness (380); its blindness and obliviousness
obliviousness to being beheld (218); locking to being beheld in a locking of gazes,

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52 Ibid., 363.
53 Ibid., 360.
54 Ibid., 340.
55 Ibid., 340, emphasis added.
of gazes (310); the act of seeing […] comes almost to seem beside the point (385); so that the act of seeing comes to seem almost beside the point.

‘would no longer say anything to the eyes’ (232); ‘the school of the eyes’ (379); ‘the eye of the dead, at that precise moment when mourning begins’ (367); ‘two eyes that he, must, however get over mourning’ (370)

I would no longer say anything to your eyes, the school of your eyes, the eye of the dead at that precise moment when mourning begins, two eyes that I must get over mourning.

‘The school of your eyes’ hints at the exemplary status accorded her muse by the poet, but she must ‘get over mourning’ him to avoid a melancholic obsession with his death. Indeed, her gaze here is not reciprocated: the body does not register her presence so that ‘the act of seeing comes to seem / almost beside the point’. These lines also comment on how ‘a painting might seek to represent the voiding of its own imaginative space’, referring as they do to “that extreme region where painting becomes vague, taking one step further would fall into an absolute indeterminism and would no longer say anything to the eyes”.

In one sense, the poem begs the question: how can one represent death? One way is to suggest its unrepresentability, the way such a negation of subjectivity can result in a blank art. Another way is to adhere to a strict realism, ‘the school of the eyes’ as Montifaud called the new Impressionist movement in 1874. Here, he was commenting on the fact ‘that Impressionism put a new premium on a sheerly visual order of experience, which also meant on an unexampled rapidity of seeing and execution’. However, Manet, like Henri Fantin-Latour, departed from this style to express a tension between ‘a realism of the body and a realism of visual perception’. The quotations used to atmospherically convey despair in the above stanzas refer specifically in Fried’s monograph to instances whereby an artist might convey such a tension: Writing about Fantin-Latour’s Drawing of a Room (1860), he states: ‘[T]he darkness of the room […] belongs on the side of the body: as if the hyperbolic desire to evoke corporeal presence called for darkness as a means of minimizing eyesight in favour of an emphasis on bodily experience’. Taking a second example, that of James McNeill Whister’s The Rag Gatherers (1858), Fried points to its insistence on organic form: ‘This is evident in the treatment of the doorway hung with rags: the crumbling plaster hints at the yieldingness of flesh; particular configurations evoke human faces, organs, body parts; indeed so intense are those effects that the image as a whole assumes the character of a single internal corporeal space—a kind of body cavity—in relation to which the act

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56 Duret cited in Fried, Manet’s Modernism, 231–2.
57 Fried, Manet’s Modernism, 379.
58 Ibid., 384.
59 Ibid., 378.
of seeing narrowly defined comes almost to seem beside the point.\textsuperscript{60} While Manet’s *The Angels at the Tomb of Christ* succeeds in conveying an organic realism (Christ’s suffering body is painful to behold), nevertheless the painting points to something beyond representation. It is oblivious to ‘being beheld in a locking of gazes’. While the painting beside it in the Salon (Gustave Moreau’s *Oedipus and the Sphinx* [1864]) ‘staged a point-blank interlocking of gazes between two antagonists’, Manet’s painting ‘stressed the principal figure’s facingness’.\textsuperscript{61} The emphasis is not on this world, but on the next. Hence, there is a religious consolation for McGuckian here, whereby Peck, figured as Christ, will be resurrected in the next life and this facilitates her mourning of him. By the end of the poem, he has risen from the dead (the ‘gaze’s own will’ has ‘come clear of the body’).

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 384.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 310.
CONCLUSION

Finally, Beckett leaned forward and said, ‘What can you tell me, Mr. Burroughs, about this cut-up method of yours?’

‘Well, Mr. Beckett,’ Burroughs said, ‘what I do is I take a page of my writing and a page of the Herald Tribune, I cut them up and then I put them back together, and I gradually decipher new texts. Then I might take a page of your writing, and line it up with what I already have, and do the same thing all over again.’

Suddenly indignant, Beckett asked, ‘You’re using other writer’s words?’

‘Words don’t have brands on them the way cattle do’, Burroughs said. ‘Ever heard of a word rustler?’

‘You can’t do that!’ Beckett said. ‘You can’t take my writing and mix it up with the newspapers.’

‘Well, I’ve done it,’ Burroughs said.

‘That’s not writing,’ Beckett snorted, ‘it’s plumbing.’

Beckett’s annoyance is understandable, if not quite justifiable: his texts still remain uncontaminated by any other source; despite the existence of Burroughs’s writings, Beckett did not lose possession of, or credit for, his own work. The same applies when we look at McGuckian’s borrowings: her precursors do not lose credit for their artistic production when extracts from their work appear within her work. But can we call the activity that McGuckian is engaged in ‘writing’? Rather than regard it as ‘plumbing’, one could argue that it is, as Thomas McFarland said of Coleridge’s poetry, a form of ‘composition by mosaic organization’. As we have seen, there are several processes involved in this activity: she selects texts, rewrites passages and juxtaposes extracts. The rationale behind her selection of texts is varied: at times the sources are chosen to learn about the choices made by her precursors, and to comment on, or critique, the societal conventions under which they were forced to work; at other times she selects sources to tease out, and overcome, the limitations of her medium, or as a resource for when she is lost for words in the face of that which seems unspeakable. Rather than rendering her poetic creations as unoriginal, she is able to bolster her own sense of authority and authorship. When she borrows large passages without significant alterations, the work can be seen as a type of ‘found poetry’. As Tom Hansen argues:

Most found poems begin their lives as passages of expository prose. Their intended purpose is to feed easily digestible information to the reader. Nothing could be less poetic. But suddenly poetry is discovered imbedded within the prose. The discoverer is alert to the possibilities of irony, absurdity, and other incongruities.\(^3\)

In reshaping the original into poetic form, there is always some element of comment or critique involved, thus highlighting aspects normally missed when reading prose.

McGuckian herself has broached the issue of originality in ‘Attempt at a Room’,\(^4\) a poem which is predominantly composed of quotations from *Letters, Summer 1926*,\(^5\) a collection of correspondence between Rainer Maria Rilke, Marina Tsvetayeva and Boris Pasternak:

> ‘Into a dream hand take / Another hand’s dream’ (*L*, 29); Letting in the ‘other’, living by him and for him, instantly (*L*, 98); adding nothing to his world, always sailing in his waters (*L*, 5); I had not counted on my letter’s having, not two, but more than four destinations (*L*, 106); tight-lipped when pressed (*L*, 107); when writing the poem about England for the newspapers (*L*, 105); I’ve not a soul to swipe an anthem from (*L*, 109);

> Take into your dream hand another hand’s dream, Letting in the other, living by him and for him Instantly, always sailing in his waters, adding nothing to his world, I had not counted on my letter’s having not two But four destinations, tight-lipped when pressed, Writing the poem about England for the newspapers, I’ve not a soul to swipe an anthem from. I’ve understood your terror of worlds already mangled by use, Already ambiguous. […]

These lines constitute the most overt acknowledgement of her own concerns regarding her use of and engagement with literary precursors, with the lexis (‘take’; ‘swipe’) suggesting an acknowledgment of wilful appropriation, if not theft. Indeed, not only does she use the letters, she also cites from existing

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Conclusion

McGuckian’s text seems to ask whether or not a poet can be original if he or she uses words ‘already mangled by use’, and whether an author’s self can remain secure if they let in ‘the other’ and live ‘by him and for him’. Yet such dilemmas are not new, and she takes comfort from that, for she is citing from letters by Pasternak and Tsvetayeva which register their own sense of indebtedness to Rilke, and which raise anxieties of influence. Both Russian poets recognise the ways in which their own poetic enterprise has been subsumed to an extent by Rilke’s genius. In a letter cited by McGuckian, Pasternak states: “I always believed that in my own efforts, in all of my work, I did nothing but translate or write variations on his themes, adding nothing to his world, always sailing in his waters” (L, 5). And the following lines from the fifth stanza—‘all has been taken in advance / He breathes on me the bitter cold of a possessor, / Of whose possessions I am knowingly a part’—are taken from a letter from Tsvetayeva to Pasternak dated 22 May 1926 (L 109) which express the former’s complicity in being possessed by Rilke. In their letters, neither Russian poet intimates regret at this influence, nor do they consider their work as having been compromised in any way. Just as Pasternak and Tsvetayeva allow themselves to be open to poetic influence—to take in their ‘dream hand another hand’s dream’—so too does McGuckian.

For readers of her work, knowledge of the sources can allow them to gain a fuller appreciation of it. One does not need to know of the presence of Rilke, Tsvetayeva and Pasternak in the above poem to understand its key thematic concerns, but I would argue that by revealing the presence of the intertext a critic can provide another pathway for the reader. This is as true for a McGuckian poem as it is for any artwork. For example, if one were to go to Tom Hunter’s Living in Hell and Other Stories exhibition and stand in front of his photograph ‘Woman Reading a Possession Order’,6 one would undoubtedly be moved by the poignant scene depicted therein: a woman stands in a sparsely furnished room reading a letter (presumably the possession order) in front of a closed window, while a baby looks on, lying on its back. The caption anchors and focuses our interpretation of the text: mother and child are soon to be evicted. Yet the photographic composition directly quotes from (and subtly alters) an existing artwork: Vermeer’s A Girl Reading a Letter by an Open Window. Reading one in light of the other, allows us to approach Hunter’s text in a new way. Why has he used Vermeer as a source? To what extent is he commenting on the distinct economic and social circumstances of the two female figures? Knowledge of McGuckian’s sources allows us to read the contemporary texts in similarly relational terms.

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Not all critics are convinced by this argument. Leontia Flynn, for one, seems to regard source hunting as a waste of time:

The ‘sources’ with which McGuckian makes her poems continuous form an apologia for poetry as inherently unoriginal, intertextual and dialogic—an act of simultaneous translation. Since the texts to which she refers (fleeting and invisibly) echo back the mysterious, vatic and sibylline figure of McGuckian herself, rather than touching discursively on their subjects, there is also more than a whiff of the wild goose chase about the whole thing.7

Flynn remains suspicious both of McGuckian’s use of sources and the intertextual approach to her work. While I hope the preceding chapters give the lie to the accusation that there is ‘more than a whiff of the wild goose chase’ about any reading which uses McGuckian’s sources to provide pathways into her oeuvre, the following concluding argument takes issue with the contention that her sources ‘form an apologia for poetry as inherently unoriginal’. I want to demonstrate how a reading of Martin Heidegger’s philosophy might illuminate McGuckian’s work and to show ways in which it helps to define (and affirm) it as poetry.

While poetry in the weak sense—or what Martin Heidegger terms ordinary naming (eindentig)8—makes use of language as a means for unambiguous information exchange, McGuckian’s work will be seen in the strong sense: it is ‘language in itself and not the arbitrary individuality of the poet that really speaks in the poem’.9 As such, hers can be viewed as an example of poetic naming (vieldeutig):

If we are to use ‘vieldeutig’ to understand the essence of poetry we must, says Heidegger, decompose the term into its literal meaning: ‘of many things’, possessed of a ‘multiplicity’ or ‘richness in meaning’. For to every ‘genuinely’ poetic word belongs an ‘inexhaustible’ range of ‘complex spaces of [semantic] vibration (vielfältige Schwingungsräume)’, from which it follows that, unlike the word of (at least ideal) information exchange, the poetic word has no ‘definition’. It communicates, means, more than can ever be captured in words, is, to use a familiar word from the philosophy of art, unparaphrasable.10

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7 Leontia Flynn, “‘No Misprints in This Work’: The Poetic ‘Translations’ of Medbh McGuckian and Frank Kuppner”, in Peter Mackay, Edna Longley and Fran Brecton (eds), Modern Irish and Scottish Poetry (Cambridge, 2011), 280.
8 F.W. von Herrmann (ed.), Martin Heidegger: Gesamtausgabe, v. 52 (Frankfurt-on-Main, 1977), 15.
10 Julian Young, Heidegger’s Philosophy of Art (Cambridge, 2001), 103.
**Conclusion**

While poetry as a singular linguistic construct is one that ‘overreaches the self-understanding of the poet, that is irreducible to the personal and communal circumstances of its production and inexplicable in terms of psychology, logic or philosophy’, it does not follow that as readers we ought to side-step the issue of comprehensibility and assert that ‘her poetry only becomes difficult if the reader attempts to find meaning, and tries to intellectualize her writing’; rather, as Julian Young notes with regard to Heidegger’s conception of vieldeutig, to argue that ‘information transference is not the point of poetry’ is ‘not the same as saying that poetry lacks “cognitive import”’. Of course, since the interpretations which follow constitute a paraphrastic rephrasing of the poetic texts, they will run the risk of doing violence to them: they will put ‘in other words what the poet could only have said poetically’. However, there is too much at stake here to avoid the attempt at providing at least a glimpse at the rationale behind McGuckian’s poems. In the introductory chapter I have suggested how an uncovering of her intertextual borrowings can aid in the grasping of their ‘cognitive import’; indeed, the intertexts themselves often suggest interpretative frameworks for analysing the poetry. In what follows, I want to argue that McGuckian’s texts often declare their status as poetic texts and that her use of Heidegger, in particular, can provide the compass with which to best appreciate her images. This does not mean that her work is any the less oblique since it still requires considerable scholarly effort to unearth the sources; nevertheless, an analysis of how she uses Heidegger counteracts claims that her work is somehow irrational and meaningless.

The very title of McGuckian’s ‘The Self-concealing’ pointedly alludes to the text’s dislocation of narrative voice; it initiates what Danielle Sered terms a ‘radical […] disruption of a traditional concept of authority’: what we perceive is the ‘animation of […] the speaking voice, an opening up of the text to endless proliferations, and an absent—or at least different—lyric centre’. The second and third stanzas express, through the related tensions of multivocality/single voice and sound/silence, the correlative conflict that arises from a venture that imbricates borrowed textual fragments within a lyric poem: what supposedly ‘ring out’, or sound vigorously, are the dispersive ‘voices’ and not the author’s distinctive

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13 Young, *Heidegger’s Philosophy of Art*, 103.
16 Danielle Sered, “‘By Escaping and [Leaving] a Mark’: Authority and the Writing Subject of the Poetry of Medbh McGuckian”, *Irish University Review* 32.2 (Autumn–Winter, 2002), 273.
voice, whose ‘ownmost self’ is shielded. Yet McGuckian’s poetry disrupts this opposition: while clamorous, the ‘ringing out of voices’ is not discordant, and as readers we do not perceive ‘the silent voice / of this joining’ to be dissonant; rather, the author’s characteristic voice is constituted by the weaving together of the unperceived and unattributed voices. Structurally, the poet conveys the seamless nature of her enterprise through thematically apt enjambments: firstly, between the stanzas (a structural ‘joining’); and secondly, between the opening lines of the third stanza (initiating its own ‘flow’). Indeed, the stanza-break itself intimates the silent voice being described, graphically represented as it is by the liminal white space over which the reader’s eye must pass:

not only through a ringing out of voices (EH, 202);  
Only with the greatest difficulty can we hear the silent voice (EH, 203);
And the name flows from the naming (EH, 215);
dwells on earth (EH, 204);
spares its appearing (EH, 203)

McGuckian’s poem is made up of carefully selected quotations from Heidegger’s *Elucidations of Hölderlin’s Poetry*, a series of essays which, steeped in an idiosyncratic Graecocentrism, lament the departure of the gods and depicts the modern epoch as characterised by alienation, meaninglessness and nihilism: ‘In the disenchanted world of *Gestell*, the age in which, as resource, everything “obtrude[s] and accumulates in a dry, monotonous and therefore oppressive [claustrophobic] way”, nothing at all stands forth, for modern man, as holy and so, in particular, the names of the gods fail to do so’. In an age where human beings treat one another as ‘consumers’ and ‘human resources’, Heidegger turns for salvation to poets, ‘the authentic few who, remembering the past, are truly alive to the desolation of the present’. McGuckian’s poem constitutes a concise gloss on, and affirmative restatement of, Heidegger’s thesis; it is a poetic manifesto, a deeply serious avowal of poetry’s role and power, and one that upholds the

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18 Young, *Heidegger’s Philosophy of Art*, 90.
19 Ibid., 74.
belief that in ‘poetic meaning [...] we experience the “self-secluding” in things, the infinitude, the unfathomability, the “secret” life that belongs to every being’, that ‘in its naming the holy shows itself’.  

The two stanzas cited above envisage poetry as ‘the deepest revelation of what is’ and project a way of breaking free from ‘the grip of technologically oriented thinking’, and are written in answer to a question posed in the preceding stanza:

But to where could we step back? \((EH, 202)\); To where could we step back this destiny of denial \((EH, 202)\); from this destiny of denial its fourfoldedness \((EH, 203)\); whose fourfoldedness encircles the globe \((EH, 202)\)

The ‘fourfoldedness’ is the ideal unity, ‘the fourfold of earth, sky, mortals and gods’, one which modern man cannot achieve because he no longer has an originary encounter with the world; as Heidegger states, ‘[t]he appearing of the infinite relation as a unified whole remains denied to us’ \((EH, 202)\). Caught within ‘this destiny of denial’, the poet asks ‘to where could we step back’? Heidegger’s answer is enigmatic: ‘Into the awaiting reserve. This is at the same time the supposing which thinks in advance. Such reserve anticipates what is coming, in that it attempts to experience what is present’ \((EH, 202)\). To understand what the German philosopher means here, and to comprehend the role that he conceives poetry as playing, we must look more closely at the quotations that McGuckian uses in the second stanza which both diagnose the ills of modern society and offer a prescription:

It is the center of the whole infinite relation. It is pure destiny itself. What is uncanny encircles the globe now that destiny strikes the men of this age directly, not only through a ringing out of its voices. Destiny approaches man silently—a mysterious kind of stillness. Thus, he is still unable to correspond to this destiny of denial. Rather, he evades it through his more and more hopeless attempts to master technology with his mortal will.

As soon as we trouble ourselves to reflect on this, a supposition arises: the ordering of a joint may hold sway within the power of that provocation, that is, within the absolute, essential domination of modern technology, from which and through which the whole in-finite relation joints itself into its fourfoldedness. Only with the greatest difficulty can we hear the silent voice of this joining. For in preparation for this listening, we must first learn again to hear an older saying, in which the once great destiny of Greece rang out. \((EH, 202–3, emphases added)\)

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20 Ibid., 104.
21 Pattisson, The Later Heidegger, 162.
22 Ibid., 160.
To counteract a world that is led by a nihilistic, yet all-encompassing, belief in the primacy of scientific technology, Heidegger proposes art (Dichtung) as a means of illuminating the ordinary, of ripping ‘us for a time out of the ordinary into another world’.23 Championing this poetic use of language, he contends that ‘[b]eauty is truth experienced in a Greek way, namely, the unconcealing of what comes to presence by its own power, of φύσις that nature in which and from which the Greeks lived’ and that art ‘as the pointing that allows the appearance of what is invisible, is the highest kind of showing’ (EH, 185, 186). ‘For Greek thought’, says Heidegger in ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’, ‘the essence of knowing consists in αλήθεια, that is, in the revealing of beings’,24 and it is poetic language that acts as the mode of unconcealment, a projective saying, ‘a bringing forth of beings in that it brings forth what is present as such out of concealment and specifically into the unconcealment of its appearance’.25 As a title, then, ‘The Self-concealing’ refers directly to that ‘older saying’ in which ‘the once great destiny of Greece rang out’, echoing as it does Heraclitus’ Fragment 54 which declares: ‘The joint that denies its appearance is of a stronger ruling than the one that comes to appearance’.26 Glossing this phrase, Heidegger states that it intimates how ‘we must experience all Greek beings, nature, men, human works, and the divinity; everything visible in terms of the invisible—everything sayable in terms of the unsayable—everything which appears in terms of the self-concealing’ (EH, 206–7). Thus, the title not only meta-poetically alludes to the self-concealment that consequentially arises from McGuckian’s strategic arrangement of intertexts within her poems, it also refers directly to the Heideggarian notion that ‘[p]oetry is the saying of the unconcealment of beings’ (EH, 198). When she cites Heidegger as saying that ‘the name flows from the naming’, she is thus referring to the idea that naming ‘unveils, reveals’, that poetry is a ‘showing that discloses what and how something is to be experienced and preserved in its presence’ (EH, 215). Hence, quoting directly from Hölderlin’s ‘Greece’, she is able to contend that, with the poet as mediator between man and the gods, ‘more willingly / beauty dwells on earth’.27

Now, now words for it (EH, 214); the eyelids of those eyes the eyes’ blue school (EH, 190); whose school is the blue of heaven (EH, 194) Now, now, words for it, the eyelids of those eyes, the eyes’ blue school, whose school is the school of heaven.

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25 Ibid., 184.
26 Heraclitus cited in EH, 203.
27 Hölderlin, “Greece”, cited in EH, 204.
In Heidegger’s commentary on Hölderlin, the singer’s voice is said to call out to heaven, looking for immortality. Yet the gods are reconciled to their concealment—they ‘cover the eyelids with art’, ‘the eyelids whose school is the blue of heaven’ (EH, 194). The poem’s opening cites a well-known line from Hölderlin’s ‘Bread and Wine’ which, in context, suggests that, since man is ‘incapable of openly and directly receiving’ the gods’ presence, he must be resigned to ‘bearing one’s burden’: he must wait for the words to be found and to blossom (EH, 214):

Such is man; when the good is there, and a god himself
Cares for him with gifts, he neither knows it nor sees it.
First he must suffer; but now he names his most loved,
Now, now words for it, like flowers, must spring to life.

Yet the same line, transplanted to ‘The Self-concealing’, becomes both declarative and affirmative: for this poet, the words are now blossoming. Hence, at the poem’s conclusion, she can declare that immortality is conferred:

Insofar as death comes, it vanishes (EH, 190);
death is also a life (EH, 189)

McGuckian’s text has named the names; its projected saying finally breaks the ‘destiny of denial’.

The importance of Heidegger’s conception of poetry for McGuckian can hardly be overstated as he is one of the few exemplars to whom she returns in subsequent texts. In ‘Four Voices without an Instrument’ she again presents a manifesto on poeisis and the poet’s status using textual fragments borrowed from the German philosopher. The title, however, is a quotation from a letter written by the composer Felix Mendelssohn to his sister, Fanny, commenting on his proposed settings of Heine’s Volkslieder (1839): in a departure from his more usual piano/voice arrangement, he intends to set them to “four voices without an instrument”. According to Mendelssohn’s biographer, Mercer-Taylor, this constituted a move away from the ‘Romantic instincts of his youth’ and towards ‘the Biedermeier’, a type of art which was ‘embraced as the embodiment of all that was insufferably decorous, comfortable, complacent and respectable in the conservative culture of the decades following the Napoleonic wars’. One

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30 Ibid., 131–2.
could well conclude that, with such a title, McGuckian is playing into the hands of those who wish to dismiss her own work as ‘merely arch’, ‘maddeningly fey’, ‘insubstantial’ and ‘irritatingly whimsical’.\textsuperscript{31} Yet the title does have a more immediate relevance for the poem, referring, in part, to the ‘four voices’ in her text—her own, Heidegger’s \textit{Elucidations of Hölderlin’s Poetry}, Oliver Taplin’s edited collection of essays entitled \textit{Literature in the Greek and Roman World}, and Peter Mercer-Taylor’s biography of Mendelssohn\textsuperscript{32}—and it is in the weaving together of such voices that we find an insistent poetic credo.

In the month of March (\textit{EH}, 103); another March month has come
temperature had been further raised (\textit{LGR}, 107); to raise the temperature of the world,
a self-opening (\textit{EH}, 79); in mourning (\textit{EH}, 80); a self-opening, clear, in mourning,
the becoming-light (\textit{EH}, 80); becoming light.

The northeast wind (\textit{EH}, 103); The northeast wind
Reading the quarters of the sky (\textit{EH}, 111); reads the quarters of the sky
where the moon falls awake into its own mouth
When day and night are equal (\textit{EH}, 103) till day and night are equal.

The poem’s opening stanzas depict the anticipated primaveral relief from a bleak winter’s darkness: spring brings welcome light and life to the world. However, it is ‘another’ March month not only because of the calendric certainty of its recurrence, but also due its poetic return in the form of a quotation from Hölderlin’s ‘Remembrance’: ‘The northeast blows, / Of winds the dearest / To me […] In the month of March, / When day and night are equal’.\textsuperscript{33} ‘March’ in this context refers to the beginning of the Greek festivals, or holidays in the original sense of ‘holy-days’. On a ‘\textit{Feier-tag}’, says Heidegger, ‘we “step into the […] intimation of the wonder (\textit{Wunder}) that around us a world worlds all, that there is something rather than nothing, that there are things and we ourselves are”’.\textsuperscript{34} Yet everything is held in a liminal stasis in the poem at this point: March is the transitional month, promising ‘the reconciliation between the harshness and sternness of winter and the ease and force of summer’ (\textit{EH}, 132); nature (\textit{Φύσις}) is depicted as ‘an emerging and an arising, a self-opening, which, while


\textsuperscript{32} The poem is made up of quotations from Heidegger (2000), Oliver Taplin, ed., \textit{Literature in the Greek and Roman World: New Perspectives} (Oxford, 2000) and Mercer-Taylor (2000). Quotations from these texts are referred to as ‘\textit{EH}’, ‘\textit{LGR}’ and ‘\textit{LM}’, respectively.

\textsuperscript{33} Hölderlin in \textit{EH}, 103.

\textsuperscript{34} Heidegger cited in Young 86.
Conclusion

rising, at the same time turns back into what has emerged, and so shrouds within itself that which on each occasion gives presence to what is present’ (EH, 79). Nature may be awake, becoming light, but she is said to be ‘awake in the manner of mourning’. Mourning, argues Heidegger, ‘withdraws from everything into the memory of one thing only. The remembrance of mourning remains near to what has been taken from it and seems to be distant’ (EH, 77). What is being mourned, or remembered, is the presence of the gods (or rather, their present distance). Using the present continuous tense and a clever enjambment, McGuckian’s text balances transition with stasis: nature is ‘in mourning / becoming light’. This sense is reinforced by representing day and night as being equal. So how can the world emerge fully from its darkness, from its mourning?

The ‘northeast wind’, significant, of course, due to McGuckian’s domicile in Belfast, is said to be ‘the wind […] which in the poet’s homeland brightens up “the air” […] and extends gaiety into the distance’ (EH, 109). The pervasive imagery of brightening is all-important here since, being alienated from the ‘holy “fire”’, man’s task in a modern world characterised by spiritual destitution is said to be ‘the opposite of the Greeks’, that is, ‘to recover the “fire”’.35 Who exactly can achieve such a task? The answer is, unsurprisingly, the poets. The northeast wind is said to set the mariners in Hölderlin’s ‘Remembrance’ on their travels, and these sailors are read by Heidegger as figures of the poet: ‘They say the holy. They must therefore know the heavenly bodies and be masters in reading the quarters of the sky’ (EH, 111). To where are these poets-mariners voyaging, and what draws them there? In fact, their journey to a foreign land is, in essence, a homecoming. ‘In this preference for the northeast’, says Heidegger, ‘there reigns the love for the experience of the fiery spirit in the foreign land. The love for what is not like home, purely for the sake of becoming at home in what is one’s own, is the essential law of destiny by which the poet is sent into the foundation of the history of the “fatherland”’ (EH, 111–12). Such a statement makes for uncomfortable reading given Heidegger’s past affiliation with the German fascist regime in the 1930s, but when he says, commenting on Hölderlin’s text, that the northeast wind “calls” the poets to find themselves in the destiny of their historical being’, it does not pertain to matters solely Deutsch; rather, it is a further call for poets to act as mediators between the gods and man.

The journey, simultaneously to a foreign land and homeward, is neatly suggested in stanza three of McGuckian’s poem:

there is no dust (LM, 52); no deluge (EH, 74); the blue city (LM, 96); the city had swollen (LM, 79); There is no dust, no deluge. The blue of the city has swollen or returned to itself

35 Young, Heidegger’s Philosophy of Art, 97.
his dark ship \((LGR, 27)\);
in its dark ship

the reverberating sea \((LGR, 28)\);
the reverberating sea.

The extracts taken from \textit{Literature in the Greek and Roman World} come from the editor’s own essay entitled ‘The Spring of the Muses’, a title which is directly linked to the thematics of McGuckian’s text. Indeed, the essay begins with a crucial image which pervades ‘Four Voices without an Instrument’, that of sunrise: “The rosy fingers which heralded the extraordinary era we know as “ancient Greece” first gradually spread between 900 and 700 \(BCE\)’ \((LGR, 22)\). The specific quotations taken from Taplin’s text are from a passage where he is quoting Hesiod’s \textit{Works and Days} to tell of how that poet’s father changes his livelihood from agriculture for a life on the sea, ‘quitting Kyme in Aiolis, all the way \textit{in a dark ship}’ \((LGR, 27, \text{my italics})\). Like the mariners in Hölderlin’s ‘Remembrance’, the father is compelled to undertake a journey to an unfamiliar territory.\(^{36}\)

What then follows is a section on seafaring in which Hesiod states: ‘I shall show you the measures of the \textit{reverberating sea}, / Uninitiated though I am in the skills of seamanship and boats’ \((LGR, 28, \text{my italics})\). The journey’s trajectory, however, is homeward: the city figured in McGuckian’s poem returns ‘to itself’. To illustrate this, the stanza depicts a second artist journeying southward: Mendelssohn travels to Italy in 1831 and describes Florence in a letter as ‘the blue city’ \((LM, 96)\). Yet that foreign territory is conjoined in the poem with the Mendelssohn family home at 3 Leipzigerstrasse, a magnificent, idyllic and enclosed plot: ‘there is no dust’ because ‘one doesn’t hear any carriages or see anyone’ \((LM, 52)\).

In the following stanza, the poet registers the fear that ‘Even the light … would never be allowed its brightness’. This refers to Heidegger’s commentary on Hölderlin’s poem ‘Homecoming’: having described how the angels, the ‘messengers of gaiety’, greet the poet, the philosopher contends that the poem describes how, ‘above the light, gaiety itself opens itself up into its pure brightening, without which even the light would never be allowed its brightness’ \((EH, 37)\). While McGuckian is initially afraid that such gaiety will not come to pass, the remaining stanzas reaffirm her faith in poetic speech:

\begin{quote}
Since we have been a conversation \((EH, 56)\); 
three-in-one \((EH, 38)\); 
this sign has become my chosen one \((EH, 61)\); 
a garden, which is itself surrounded by 
other gardens \((LM, 52)\); 
houses those times we call the seasons \((EH, 36)\);
\end{quote} 

\begin{quote}
Yet since we have been a conversation, 
the three-in-one sign 
of your stained-glass voice 
has become my chosen one, 
a garden surrounded by other gardens, 
housing the seasons.
\end{quote}

\(^{36}\) See \textit{LGR}, 28.
Conclusion

their lives may have overlapped (LGR, 27); the musicians actually blew out their candles and left the stage one by one (LM, 141);
the sunburst of winds (LM, 117);
on their lowest strings (LM, 202);

Not without wings (EH, 134);
When the mists vanish (EH, 109);
the brightening earth is the first angel (EH, 35);
first ‘angel of the year’ (EH, 36)

Though our lives may have overlapped
the musicians that blew out their candles
and left the stage, one by one,
now blow for me
a sunburst of winds
on their lowest strings;

so that not without wings,
when the mist vanishes,
the brightening, endangered earth
is the year’s first angel.

These final stanzas bring together the poem’s key strands of imagery, each suggestive of completed transitions: movement from one season to another; the journey home; the visitation of the muse/gods/angels. The poet is ‘at home’ in two senses: physically, since the description refers to the secure and peaceful surroundings of 3 Leipzigerstrasse (“A whole row of rooms opens on to a garden, which is itself surrounded by other gardens”, LM, 52); and spiritually, since she has experienced that which is unheimlich. “The year”, says Heidegger, ‘houses those times we call the seasons’, and at this juncture we have moved to Spring: ‘the brightening light is the first “angel of the year”’ (EH, 36). The figure of the angel is appropriate here given that McGuckian’s collection, The Book of the Angel, is an examination of the role played by angels in religion and literature. In Greek, ‘messenger’ can be translated as ‘angel’, and this also links him to Hermes, the god of the paths and Heidegger’s god of hermeneutics. The poet in McGuckian’s text has journeyed over the paths towards home, only with the aid of the messenger. As Heidegger comments with reference to Hölderlin’s ‘The Ister’, ‘the paths name the transition for passing over to the other side. Not without wings may… one cross over from the side of the foreign to the side of home’ (EH, 134). Those ‘wings’ belong to the angel which appears here in the form of ‘the brightening light’, glossed by Heidegger as ‘the first “angel of the year”’ (EH, 36). The ‘three-in-one sign’ not only connotes three exemplars within a single text—Heidegger-Mercer-Taylor-Taplin or Hölderlin-Hesiod-Mendelsshon—but also refers to the necessary conjunction of earth, light and god which brings gaiety to the poet: ‘The joyful one and the joyful messengers of the brightening, father aether, and the angel of the house (the earth), and the angel of the year (light), cannot accomplish anything by themselves. Indeed, among all those who dwell within the orbit of gaiety, these three-in-one are loved the most by those who rejoice’ (EH, 38). The ‘sign’ may also refer to that which signifies the god’s

Writing to a friend prior to his final journey to France, Hölderlin tells of his joy at beholding the symbol of heavenly fire: ‘I am pleased as when in the summer “the old holy father with calm hand shakes the holy lightning flashes out of the red clouds”. For among all that I can see of God, this sign has become my chosen one’ (*EH*, 61).

In ‘Four Voices without an Instrument’, the poet self-reflexively comments on the influence on her of her exemplars: having been in ‘conversation’ with them, they become her ‘stained-glass voice’. They have become her muses, her visiting angels, and they help her affirm her own belief in poetic language (in the Heideggarian sense). Man’s being, for the German philosopher, ‘is grounded in language’; however, he argues, ‘this actually occurs in *conversation*’ and ‘since language has authentically come to pass in conversation’, the gods are said to ‘have come to expression and a world has appeared’ (*EH*, 57). The stanza in which McGuckian mentions this ‘conversation’ is made up of quotations which speak of enabling influences. The first extract comes from Taplin’s essay which talks of how the lives of Homer and Hesiod ‘may have overlapped’, how they may have been contemporaries and may have participated ‘in the same poetic occasions’ (*LGR*, 27). The second refers to Mendelssohn’s ‘advocacy of older music’, particularly in his 1838 series of four ‘Historical Concerts’. During the second of these concerts, which closed with Hayden’s ‘Farewell’ Symphony, ‘the musicians actually blew out their candles and left the stage one by one’ (*LM*, 141). The third extract also comes from Mercer-Taylor’s biography, referring to Mendelssohn’s self-quotation in his Italian Symphony in which ‘the sunburst of winds with which the piece begins is lifted more or less directly from a colouristic wash early in the “Prosperous Voyage” [an earlier piece]’ (*LM*, 117).

Appropriately, the stanza as a whole constitutes a plea for influence: while her exemplars’ work has been completed and may be rooted in the past, she asks for the musicians ‘to blow for me’. The sound produced is a curious hybrid of the melancholic and the uplifting: she asks for the cheerful ‘sunburst of winds’ to be played on ‘the lowest strings’, referring here to the second movement scherzo from Mendelssohn’s String Quartet in F-minor from 1847 which features the ‘cheerless, dark-hued trio (the cello, viola and second violin spend nearly the entirety of the trio on their lowest strings)’ (*LM*, 202). That double-edged sound is apt given that the earth in her final stanza is described as both ‘brightening’ and ‘endangered’: while poets like McGuckian may act as messengers of the gods to affirm the ‘fourfold unity’, the earth is still in thrall to their ‘destiny of denial’.

Perhaps the foregoing analyses of McGuckian’s texts confirm that her poetry is ‘obscure’ since the references are all unattributed and it requires scholarly effort to trace the allusions. However, what cannot be denied is that there is a clear rationale behind these poems and that they constitute not only intense negotiations with past art, but also a deeply felt belief in the primacy (and
efficacy) of poetry in the modern world. Such analyses ought to prompt critics to look more closely at McGuckian’s texts and for their relations to their sources.
SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY ON MEBH McGUCKIAN’S WORK

I. Primary Sources

Poetry Collections


Articles, Reviews, Diary Entries


**Interviews:**


**II. Secondary Sources:**


