

Borbála Faragó

“Artfully placed mirrors”

The Poetry of Medbh McGuckian

I. “THE MOON IS MY SECOND FACE” - A NEW POETIC VOICE

Medbh McGuckian, perhaps the best known Northern Irish woman poet, writes a poetry that is undoubtedly difficult. Arriving on the scene with the second generation of the Ulster ‘poetic revival’ (together with Muldoon, Paulin, Carson and others), she emerged as a poet in the 1980s with a new, sensuous and intense language that challenges the reader’s traditional approach to poetry. On the following pages I wish to explore the basic features of this poetry, and I especially want to focus on the way the private and the public relate in her poetic imagination, but for such an investigation the treatment of the linguistic texture of her work must be the initial step.

It is necessary to explore this linguistic texture all the more because McGuckian’s use of syntax and vocabulary constantly challenges the reader’s primary conception of language. Her sentences do not speak with a linguistic logic. The pronoun (referent) may change within one sentence, often baffling our attempt to paraphrase. And this is exactly what McGuckian aims at. She does not want her reader to paraphrase, instead she opens the door to a different kind of understanding. Her poems mirror life similarly to Lewis Carroll’s “looking glass:” one has to go through the glass into its other world in order to understand what is seen there. I have chosen a poem, “Open Rose”, to enter McGuckian’s looking glass and depict what is “found there.”

The moon is my second face, her long cycle
 Still locked away. I feel rain
 Like a tried-on dress, I clutch it
 Like a book to my body.

His head is there when I work,
 It signs my letters with a question-mark;
 His hands reach for me like rationed air.
 Day by day I let him go

Till I become a woman, or even less,
 An incompletely furnished house
 That came from a different century
 Where I am a guest at my own childhood.

I have grown inside words
 Into a state of unbornness,
 An open rose on all sides
 Has spoken as far as it can.
 ("Open Rose")¹

The hidden, the mysterious and obscure is McGuckian's "second face." The moon, an age-old image, stands not only for femininity here but it also represents night and darkness. "Her long cycle still locked away" may mean that the moon is never visible in its completeness, neither in time nor in extension. (The phase and the face.) Thus the poet's "face" will always be "locked away" from the illuminating intellect (which is the sun, the "male light" as opposed to the "female dimness". Here gender distinctions refer to attributes of the self rather than actual sexual difference.) "Rain" is a "tried-on dress" is a "book" in the next few lines of the poem. This is a very typical way of using the metaphor in McGuckian's work, which one might argue is inconsistent and confusing, yet it may remind one of Gertrude Stein's famous line: "A rose is a rose is a rose."² The complex metaphor emphasises an essence (the 'roseness'). Similarly, McGuckian's "rain," "tried-on dress" and "book" cover up one, essential, image. In my interpretation this is the

¹ Medbh McGuckian: *Marconi's Cottage* (The Gallery Press, 1991), p.80.

² Gertrude Stein: *The World is Round* (New York, Camelot, 1972), p.5. and also p.89: "I am Rose and while I am Rose / Well well Rose is Rose." Stein's sentence is brought up in Clair Willis: *Improprieties: Politics and Sexuality in Northern Irish Poetry* (Oxford, 1993)p.175n.

image of poetic activity. Rain has always been a (male) symbol of fertilisation, impregnation. The connection between fertility and poetic creativity is clear. For a poet poetic creativity can indeed be like a “tried-on dress.” It is like a dress because it is a mask, a different ego if you like (which the poet from time to time puts on and takes off), and it is “tried-on,” in a sense that its shape follows the poet’s shape.³ The connection between the already connected images of “rain,” “tried-on dress” and the image of “book” is now evident. Poetry is poetry is poetry, as we are informed, and the relationship between poet and her work, which is really the new information here, is also expressed in three, connected, ways. Poetry is the poet’s “second face” (seen only at night - a possible explanation for the difficult understanding), her “tried-on dress” and something that is “clutched to the body.” They all express that writing poetry is very closely attached to the speaker-poet, but final unification, just as final separation, is impossible.

The second stanza explicitly mentions the word “work” and also introduces a strong male presence: “His head is there when I work.” The male agent questions her work. We can interpret this as a disturbing presence of a man in her life, but also (and I think more aptly) as a disturbing presence of the male in herself. Poetic activity, traditionally, is male. Especially in Ireland, where religion and tradition so strongly tied down the woman to passivity (think of Mother Ireland and also see Seamus Heaney’s *The Tollund Man* and Paul Muldoon’s *Aisling* that reflect a traditional female-Ireland image), writing poetry for a woman was a challenge to deconstruct her stereotypical role as a passive, often asexual, female. This deconstruction leads to a gender-confusion, or rather, a complex gender identity. Thus representing poetic activity as a questioning male is, in my opinion, very accurate. Also that the “he” of the poem “signs” her “letters” suggests that he is in a way one with her, his signature is her signature and his presence is not the least provisional. “His hands reach for me as rationed air” underlines the idea that she talks about her poetic self, referring back to their ‘relationship’ depicted in the first stanza (“I clutch it / like a book to my body”).

³ Michael Longley has a beautiful poem called “Form” in which, I think, he talks about the same relationship, emphasising the impossibility of having a “tried-on dress” that could absolutely fit the poet: “Trying to tell it all to you and cover everything / Is like awakening from its grassy form the hare: / In that makeshift shelter your hand, then my hand / Mislays the hare and the warmth it leaves behind.” (in: *The Ghost Orchid*, p.1.)

The third stanza deepens and also unfolds the metaphor. It speaks about her 'self' deprived of the poetic self. "Day by day I let him go / Till I become a woman, or even less, / An incompletely furnished house". These lines wonderfully connect to the traditional female-stereotypes mentioned above. That poetry is a male image means not only that it is strong and "aggressive". It also means that "he" is a lover to the female poet. As such, when he "leaves" the woman poet, she necessarily becomes "incomplete" and only a woman, in the traditional sense. Without the male the female is passive and unproductive ("unreproductive"). Deprived of poetry the woman poet becomes the woman of a "different century," where she has no control over her life ("a guest at my own childhood").

The last stanza plays with language again. "I have grown inside words / Into a state of unborndness" carries two meanings, depending on the grammatical function of "inside." If it is a preposition meaning 'in' (i.e. in the words) then the sentence says that the poet has grown into a state of unborndness inside of words. If "inside" is an adjective (like the inside pages of a newspaper) then we can paraphrase the sentence this way: 'I [the poet] have grown the words inside me into a state of unborndness'. In the first case it is the poet who has grown into a state of unborndness, in the second it is the words (i.e. her poetry). The grammatical ambiguity, I believe, enriches rather than dulls the metaphor. What it tells us is that the poet, entrapped in her work, is 'unborn' (maybe for the 'normal', traditional female identity?) and also that she is unable to give birth to words: poetry is a life-long pregnancy for her. (Pregnancy is a recurring metaphor for poetry in McGuckian's work. Just one example: in "Next Day Hill"⁴ she says: "Upstairs, the hard beds, the dimity / Curtains, the dreadful Viking strain / Of the study's brick floor where / My poems *thicken* in the desk" -my italics.)

The last two lines and the title articulate what Medbh McGuckian thinks about her work: "An open rose on all sides / Has spoken as far as it can." This belief is again twofold: first it formulates an attitude towards the reader, claiming the passivity of a rose and also the opening up to the intellect as a rose. Secondly, it claims a metaphorical simplicity in a Gertrude Stein-way, saying that her poetry is an open rose and remains to be so.

⁴ *The Flower Master and Other Poems* (The Gallery Press, 1982, 1993) p.52.

II. "TO PROTECT THE INNER INWARDNESS" - STRATEGIES OF COMMUNICATION

"Open Rose" has shown some of the most important features of McGuckian's work. In the following I intend to outline the arguments that characteristically appear in McGuckian - criticism.

Obscurity, or linguistic ambiguity, are the most frequently considered ideas. Patrick Williams, in his notorious review of Medbh McGuckian's third collection, *On Ballycastle Beach*, says:

If lines are so arbitrary that they mean more or less anything, then necessarily they mean more or less nothing - less than nothing in a vicious sense, as they add to unreality.⁵

And Tom Clyde quotes a similar sentence in his work: "Sounds great Medbh: can't understand a word, but sounds great."⁶ While accepting that reading McGuckian is difficult, I would disagree with Patrick Williams on the grounds that poetic meaning and poetic understanding are rooted in a different linguistic logic than everyday speech. The coherence and logic of a poem may be associative. 'Arbitrariness' does not "necessarily" lead to chaos, to a meaning "less than nothing." On the contrary, the linguistic ambiguity of a poem can be understood as a door, an entrance to manifold interpretations. McGuckian's poems, even the very difficult ones, offer themselves to intellectual interpretations. It is true, however, that many of her poems deny paraphrasing. Marina Tsvetaeva's line aptly expresses this idea: "All my doors are entrances, with no exits. Understand?"⁷ I would suggest that not only her poems carry a meaning but her obscurity itself also bears major significance. Medbh McGuckian's own interpretation of her obscurity is the following:

I feel every poem is a whirlpool around me to protect the inner inwardness - that if anyone did actually pierce to the centre of the poem, the poem is then ... that there always must be some part of it that cannot

⁵Patrick Williams: Review of Medbh McGuckian's third collection, *The Honest Ulsterman* 86 (Spring 1989), p.50.

⁶Tom Clyde: "An Ulster Twilight," *Krino* 5 (Spring 1988), p.101.

⁷ Marina Tsvetaeva: letter to Boris Pasternak, in *Letters Summer 1926: Correspondence between Pasternak, Tsvetaeva, Rilke*, quoted in Clair Wills: *Improprieties*, p.169.

be penetrated. There always must be this inner inviolability to it. The language is just spinning around all the time, and it's never going to be "this is what happened". It's all imagined, and the imagination is so very vulnerable, and if anyone did actually deconstruct the whole poem, the poem is dead, the poem is killed.⁸

It is an interesting and paradoxical desire which the poet has. Writing and publishing poetry suggest a wish "to be seen", to be exposed to the public. At the same time she talks about her poetry as a means of protecting herself (her "inner inwardness") from the scrutinising eye of the public. The defensive walls around her premises are "artfully placed" transparent mirrors:

And in artfully placed mirrors,
A single, grieving shape, to the
Weak eyed, echoes and re-echoes,
More than sister, more than wife.
(“Journal Intime”)⁹

Thus we have seen that obscurity is a consciously used device which is aimed at protecting the poet's personality. (Another element of her obscurity is her attitude towards the English language. She says in an interview: "I feel I don't love the language enough ... Because it's an imposed language, ... and although it's my mother tongue and my only way of communicating, I'm fighting with it all the time. [My aim is] to reach an English that would be so purified of English that it would be Irish."¹⁰) But why does she need protection? There is an argument that the various tensions in Northern Ireland facilitate creative activity. Poets react to the tense and complex situation they live in, each in his/her own way. Writing in a difficult language creates a space for an "inner exile". The linguistic reaction to a difficult environment provides artistic security. Medbh McGuckian's new and individual language shows "resistance to the mechanistic, bureaucratic, media-polluted language and thought of the contemporary world."¹¹ It is also a resistance to the political situation. McGuckian never talks directly about the Troubles. We

⁸Medbh McGuckian and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill: "Comhrá" with a Foreword and Afterword by Laura O'Connor" in: *The Southern Review* 31 (July 1995), p.606.

⁹*Marconi's Cottage*, p.26.

¹⁰"Comhrá" in: *The Southern Review* 31 (July 1995), p.605-6.

¹¹Clair Wills: *Improprieties*, p.47.

may say, she never speaks directly at all. Ciaran Carson's reaction to the Troubles is a "fusillade of question-marks," as he writes in *Belfast Confetti*, McGuckian's is obscurity. Neither of these attitudes show ignorance. As Clair Wills argues:

Moreover, the veiling of personal experience, behind a cloak of obscurity and semantic indeterminacy merely intensifies the suggestion that significant truths lie within. Secrecy becomes both a form of protection and of seduction.¹²

Medbh McGuckian's "symbolic meta-language"¹³ is an exile that gives protection in its precariousness.

That "secrecy is protection and seduction" is apparent in many of McGuckian's recurring imagery. She constantly uses familial relationships, personal spaces and objects as metaphors in her poems. She concentrates on the female body and many of her poems are highly erotic. Again, I believe, her exploration of the well-known represents complex, and not only personal, ideas. One reason for returning to the same images is that exile for a woman could hardly be an actual leaving-of-the-place. Women are more strongly tied to the home and, consequently, women poets will more often turn to household-imagery. That does not necessarily mean that this metaphorical language is narrower. On the contrary, reading Medbh McGuckian one has the feeling that she has crammed the universe into her poems. I have already interpreted, to some extent, the metaphors in the "Open Rose" ("the moon"; "tried-on dress"; "book"; "body"; "woman"; "incompletely furnished house"; "childhood"; "unbornness"). Let us see now another poem where personal metaphors dominate:

Night-hours. The edge of a fuller moon
waits among the interlocking patterns
of a flier's sky.

Sperm names, ovum names, push inside
each other. We are half-taught
our real names, from other lives.

Emphasise your eyes. Be my flare-

¹²Wills: *Improprieties*, p.64

¹³Edna Longley's term, in *The Living Stream*, p.54.

path, my uncold begetter,
 my air-minded bird-sense.
 ("Captain Lavender")¹⁴

The first verse is a good example of semantic indeterminacy. However, it definitely evokes the notion of incompleteness ("the edge of a fuller moon") and night. The second and third line, in my interpretation, speak about her poetry again. "Flier" would be the poet, the pilot of her work, whose "sky" has "interlocking patterns." Indeed, McGuckian's images create "interlocking patterns" in her work. (For example "moon" has appeared in "Open Rose" as expressing mystery and obscurity. It reappears here as a metaphor for [in]completeness.) Thus the first verse tells us that completeness (the "fuller moon") is hidden in her poetry, but it is not yet revealed. (We can only see the "edge" of it.) The next verse brings the female and male together in very strong sexual imagery: "Sperm names, ovum names, push inside each other." McGuckian first of all knocks down the stereotype of the male 'pushing inside the female and creates an equal responsibility. This has a personal, a social and a political message as well, but since we have already seen in "Open Rose" that male and female can represent something within her own personality, we suspect that something similar might take place here. "Open Rose" talks about the way "he" facilitates and inhibits her poetry. "Captain Lavender" (the title refers to a male figure) depicts the nature of this relationship. "Sperm" and "ovum" are obviously metaphors of reproduction. (Biologically speaking not metaphors at all.) If, as I mentioned above, pregnancy stands for writing poetry in McGuckian's work, organs of the reproductive system clearly represent poetic activity. "We are half-taught / our real names" suggests that "sperm-names" and "ovum-names" are not real, in a sense perhaps that they facilitate creation but the pushing "inside each other" is not yet art and "other lives," which might mean the past or the opposite sex or simply someone outside, are needed to "make it real." The last verse addresses somebody: "Emphasise your eyes." It may be Captain Lavender who, in my interpretation, has already turned out to be the poet (the "flier"), it might be a male figure (inside or outside), it might be her poetry or she might directly be speaking to herself. Whoever it is, the addressee is the seer, the eye who guides the poet in her flight ("my flare-path") and who "begets" her and/or her work. "Air-minded bird-sense" goes back to the beginning, unfolding the sky-metaphor. This

¹⁴*Captain Lavender* (Gallery Press, 1994), p.76.

is a “sense” that concentrates on the air and sky rather than the earth - the poet again. However, as we have seen, she does that exactly through “earthy” images.

This poem again can be seen as an *ars poetica* though nothing is said explicitly about art. McGuckian uses the personal to show something universal. Moreover, her intimacy does not unfold anything biographically personal at all. The reader is invited into her “house” to find something which belongs very much to the outside. Or rather, to return to a previous simile, her poetry is like the living mirror of Carroll. We climb in, find a “Jabberwocky-poem,” we decode it with great difficulty and find ourselves outside again. (And what McGuckian tells us is the following:

They [the poems] don't so much translate fact as build fantasy on fact. I'm not sure they don't remain private, at least until some scholar totally identifies with me.¹⁵)

Her poems remain private but show a private sphere which is disrupted, claustrophobic and at the same time exposed, open and receptive. Occasionally the sea or the sky represent a more intimate sphere than a house or the body. (As for example in “Dovecote”: “Even to the wood of my sunflower chest, / Or my kimono rack, I owed no older debt / Than to the obligatory palette of the rain / That brought the soil back into tension on my slope / And the sea in, making me an island once again.”¹⁶) McGuckian’s focus on personal dimensions is very complex. She hides into what she wants to escape from and escapes from what she wants to hide into. Her use of language and imagery “parodies the very idea of a private or intimate domain; instead of intimacy we are confronted with secrecy...”¹⁷

But this secrecy is not merely a parody. As a metaphor, it represents an important, and serious, message. McGuckian’s microcosm is again a mirror of the macrocosm around her. For a Northern Irish poet the relationship between private and public is a tangled and delicate issue. The painfulness of what is said to be public (politics) settles down in a private language (poetry) which, when published, becomes public again. Some poets make this connection very apparent

¹⁵Kathleen McCracken: “An Attitude of Compassions” (An interview with Medbh McGuckian) *Irish Literary Supplement* (Fall 1990), p.20.

¹⁶*Venus and the Rain* (The Gallery Press, 1984, 1994), p.40.

¹⁷Wills: *Improprieties*, p.75.

in their work, others approach the question “crabwise.”¹⁸ Medbh McGuckian does not approach at all; she opens up the personal sphere for the public and she creates a new language, as well as a new “imaginative space” for herself:

McGuckian’s “miniaturised domestic interiors” escape into the public and political world ... The imagery ... creates for McGuckian the sort of “imaginative space” necessary not only for Irish poets to thrive but for an Irish woman poet to speak to her political and cultural situation without at the same time having her poetic voice distorted...¹⁹

In my opinion McGuckian’s poetic voice is distorted, but distorted in a way which mirrors the distortedness of the public sphere around her. She attempts to talk about public issues through her private symbolism. As Clair Wills asserts: “The body, the home, and the family are thus not outside culture, but the very place where society’s battles are staged.”²⁰ Public and private are not separated in McGuckian’s world but tangled. The inside mirrors the outside and the outside mirrors the inside. Indeed, this “incomplete separation”²¹ is in itself a mirror to the actual social, political and cultural condition of Ulster. McGuckian’s “artfully placed mirrors” show a claustrophobic universe where private is exposed and public is drawn inside. I have chosen a poem from her earliest volume to demonstrate my discussions above:

Close your eyes
Unwinding the bitter onion -
Its layers of uncertainty are limited,
Under brown paper its sealed heart sings
To the tune of a hundred lemons.

Today I am feeling up to it:
I bend my throat aside -
There is no pain, only the soft entrances

¹⁸“I’ve usually chosen a bit of personal mythology or a bit of mythology from Irish myth or Greek myth to allow me to approach the subject ‘crabwise’, as it were, and at the same time be direct.” Michael Longley in *BBC STANZA Northern Irish Poetry*

¹⁹Susan Porter: “The ‘Imaginative Space’ of Medbh McGuckian” *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 15/2 (December 1989), p.103.-104.

²⁰Wills: *Improprieties*, p.190.

²¹Wills: *Improprieties*, p.67.

Again, again, the vegetable's
 Finely numbered bones.
 ('Chopping')²²

Nothing could be more stereotypically a "female site" than the kitchen. And the peeling and chopping of onions are also most everyday activities. However, the fact that onions make us cry, is symbolic. It is a symbol of the burden of housework, of the rigidity of stereotypes, of the claustrophobia and loneliness of the kitchen. (And it is also a symbol of fake tears, fake emotions.) Thus it is well understood why McGuckian says "Close your eyes" in the first line. It means that the pain of being entrapped in a stereotype should not reach you and also that you should remain honest. "Its layers of uncertainty are limited" perhaps suggests that the easy tears of the onion lead the woman to "uncertainty": she cries and after a while it becomes uncertain whether it is merely because of the onion. "Its sealed heart sings / to the tune of a hundred lemons" reinforces the previous image: the "sealed heart" is the real pain, real tears, "tune of a hundred lemons" is the emphatic sourness of them. By using only kitchen-images the first verse has already expanded the imaginative space of the poem.

The second verse introduces a (female) speaker. The first line - "Today I am feeling up to it" - may refer again to several things. Either she feels up to the unpleasant onion chopping, or she feels up to accepting her role as a housewife, or she feels up to crying ("to the tune of hundred lemons"), it is not to be decided. The next line ("I bend my throat aside") shows a very physical submission. The poem is no longer about the chopping of onions; the knife is aimed at her throat. McGuckian "dissolves her being into that of the object, which thereby becomes subject," says Tom Clyde²³. What is interesting here is to trace the basis of the association from onion to throat. Cutting or "unwinding" the onion you find tears. Cutting the throat: "There is no pain, only the soft entrances / Again, again, the vegetable's finely numbered bones." What are we then to make of this? That opening herself up, entering her personality (remember: "all my doors are entrances, with no exits") does not mean that something else is found there apart from "the vegetable's bones"? Do "vegetable-bones" refer to the 'vegetableness' of the vegetable (roseness of the rose)? Or is there a wider, more general message here? Perhaps that the familial and social tensions lead her to "cut her throat," to

²²*The Flower Master and Other Poems* (The Gallery Press, 1982, 1993) p.17.

²³Tom Clyde: "An Ulster Twilight" *Krino* 5 (Spring 1988), p.102.

open up herself, to write poetry? Whatever our understanding of the poem may be, it is evident that the way McGuckian uses personal, household images shows that she is not simply a “housewife-poet.” In this poem the kitchen, the onion and her own body served as battlefields for fighters inside and outside herself.

As a conclusion to this section I would argue that the main characteristics of Medbh McGuckian’s poetry is ‘mirroring’ the public and private in a transformative way. The objects and persons around her are mirrored and transformed at the same time in her poetry. She transforms them and dissolves herself in them to show herself. The ‘knottedness’ and difficulty of her poems are partly a result of this method. If the poem is dismantled into its original components it ceases to be a poem. Metaphors work in “interlocking patterns”. The appropriate approach, in my view, is “feeling up” to McGuckian’s “bird-sense” (rather than “chopping” her up to “finely numbered bones”).

She dissolves the public in the private and vice versa. She inserts one thing into an other to arrive at a “scattered alphabet.” When she begins with homely, familial images she ends with hard, and harsh ones. Her poems are like misunderstood aeroplanes that can never reach land, empathy and understanding:

So one river inserted into another
Becomes a leaping, glistening, splashed
And scattered alphabet
Jutting out from the voice,
Till what began as a dog’s bark
Ends with bronze, what began
With honey ends with ice;
As if an aeroplane in full flight
Launched a second plane,
The sky is stabbed by their exits
And the mistaken meaning of each.

('The Dream-Language of Fergus', second part)²⁴

²⁴*On Ballycastle Beach* (The Gallery Press, 1988, 1995), p.57.

III. "TIME OUTSIDE OF TIME" - AN ANALYSIS OF "THE WAR DEGREE"

You smell of time as a Bible smells of thumbs,
a bank of earth alive with mahogany-coloured
flowers - not time elaborately thrown away,
(you wound yourself so thoroughly into life),
but time outside of time, new pain, new secret,
that I must re-fall in love with the shadow
of your soul, drumming at the back of my skull.

Tonight, when the treaty moves all tongues,
I want to take the night out of you,
the sweet Irish tongue in which
death spoke and happiness wrote:

a wartime, heart-stained autumn drove
fierce half-brick into the hedges; tree-muffled
streets vanished in the lack of news.
Like a transfusion made direct from arm
to arm, birds call uselessly to each other
in the sub-acid, wintry present. The pursed up
fragrances of self-fertile herbs
hug defeat like a very future lover.

Now it is my name and not my number
that is nobody now, walking on a demolished
floor, where dreams have no moral.
And the door-kiss is night meeting night.
(*"The War Degree"*)²⁵

The reason I have chosen this poem is that its approach to the public sphere is markedly different from McGuckian's other poems. She addresses a political situation directly: she brings up political images and words, which is not typical of her. Before taking a closer look at the poem, let me quote from an interview where she talks about "The War Degree":

²⁵*Captain Lavender*, p.74.

"Could you introduce [...] your poem 'The War Degree'?"

"I was sort of accused by my own side [Catholic] really of not taking issue, or of not supporting them or of escaping. Then I began to feel a bit conscious-stricken as an artist.

I think I'm basically, if I'd been born in different time, I'm just a love-poet you know. So I'm not a war-poet. So this is a love-poem to the war if you like. I suppose it masculinizes it in a way. ... It [the title] plays on the word 'degree'. Like extent and also qualification."

"If you'd been living in a Northern Ireland that was free of violence and free of division how different would your poetry have been?"

"It wouldn't exist. It lives of it."²⁶

The most important information here are that her poetry would not exist without the Troubles and that she considers herself a love poet. That explains the absurdity of writing a love poem to the war. The unbearable political (social, cultural) situation haunts her imagination as a lover would do. Writing a love poem to the war is a recognition of the fact that nobody can escape the war. McGuckian said in an interview:

No one here can be an observer. Everyone has lost someone or been scarred over twenty years. More than half of my life - all my adult life - has taken place in this war. It's impossible not to see the poetry as a flower or defence mechanism, so the relationship is a complex one.²⁷

Thus addressing the war as a lover suggests a defence mechanism as well: by masculinizing it it becomes human, more predictable and less fearsome.

And this is what the first verse actually seems to be about. The first three lines evoke (describe) the war. "You smell of time as a Bible smells of thumbs" tells us that the war, just like the Bible, has an eternal presence in the history (time, chronology) of mankind. However, the time-conception of war is different: "not time elaborately thrown away / [...] but time outside of time"... This "time outside of time" describes the inhuman nature of war. (Almost all of the holocaust-books describe this phenomenon. In his bewildering book, *La Nuit*,

²⁶BBC STANZA *Northern Irish Poetry*, interview with Michael Longley, Edna Longley, Medbh McGuckian and Ciarán Carson by Simon Armitage; recorded at the John Hewitt International Summer School on 28th July 1995

²⁷Kathleen McCracken: "An Attitude of Compassions" (An interview with Medbh McGuckian) *Irish Literary Supplement* (Fall 1990), p.21.

Elie Wiesel writes the following: “So many things have happened in just a few hours that I have lost my sense of time. When did we leave our home? And the ghetto? And the train? Was it a week ago? Or was it just one night ago? Just one night? And for how long have we been standing here in the icy wind? For an hour? One single hour? Sixty minutes? I must be dreaming.”²⁸) The fourth line of the poem, “(you wound yourself so thoroughly into life),” expresses the impossibility of ignoring war. (The past tense verb ‘wound’ forms a telling homograph with the noun ‘wound’ here.) The second line, “a bank of earth alive with mahogany-coloured / flowers,” is again a description of war, the flowers being human blood that “vitalise” war. What the first verse has told us so far is that, when it is there, war is inescapable. The relationship thus is very much predestined. That the poet approaches the war by “re-falling in love” with it does not mean that she would celebrate violence. On the contrary, the poem brings to the fore the impossibility of relating to violence in any ‘normal’ ways. When war is constantly “drumming at the back of my skull” a reaction is forced out and “re-falling in love” is indeed a “must”.

The second verse mentions a political event. The “treaty” is the cease-fire which was declared in September 1994. (*Captain Lavender*, the volume in which this poem appeared, came out in November 1994.) Thus the first line places the poem at a particular time where war and violence were, supposedly, “killed” by peace. “All tongues” both refer to a collective “everybody” and the different languages (mother tongues) of the people living there. “Tonight [...] I want to take the night out of you” - here the poet speaks to her lover, the war, with an attempt to take the darkness, the evil out of him(?). This is just as absurd as falling in love with the war and shows the same impossibility of relating to violence. It is linguistically uncertain whether “the sweet Irish tongue” refers to the “night” or the “I” of the previous line. I will assume the first, where the darkness of the war is the “sweet Irish tongue” itself. This, journalistically, could easily refer to the IRA’s allegiance to the Irish language. The more so because it is a language “in which death spoke and happiness wrote.” (Speech and writing are contrasted in an interesting way here. Is death “audible” because of its immediate communication and, similarly, is happiness “written” because it communicates in a less immediate way?) The first three lines of the next verse contain the message of the “sweet Irish tongue”: “a wartime, heart-stained autumn” - this might be the autumn of 1994 - “drove / fierce half-bricks into the hedges; tree-muffled / streets vanished in

²⁸Elie Wiesel: *Az éjszaka (La Nuit)*, (Láng kiadó), p.47. (my translation)

the lack of news." Communication, either of death or of happiness, is not reached. The "news", maybe that of the cease-fire, is not heard. Looking back to the previous verse this, in my interpretation, means that the "night" (darkness, evil) of the war is that its own death (the treaty) is not heard, or understood. Thus the speaker's attempt to take this (indeed the non-achieved or incomplete peace) out of him is actually an attempt to kill him, i.e. to achieve peace. (This is very complicated but I think it aims to be complicated. The other possible interpretation, where "Irish" stands for "I," in fact unfolds the same implication.)

The next few lines illuminate another aspect of the matter: "Like a transfusion made direct from arm / to arm, birds call uselessly to each other." "Birds" (as "bird-sense" in the other poem, "Captain Lavender") stand for the poets, whose language, generally in McGuckian's work, stands above the "inherited grievances"²⁹ and hostilities of the others. (McGuckian several times compared her profession to priesthood: "I decided that the second best thing to becoming a priest would be to become a poet," she said in an interview.³⁰ That explains why she considers poetry a language that stands above ordinary language.) However, the two lines quoted above speak about the incomplete communication between poets ("birds call uselessly to each other"). "Transfusion" might mean that what McGuckian calls "inherited grievances" actually communicate much more directly than any poetic message would. The hostility towards the 'other' is transfused by blood "from arm to arm" despite poetry's attempt to communicate a new understanding. That makes the "sub-acid, wintry present." ("[In my poetry] I just suggest an attitude of compassion in what is part of a universal tragedy."³¹)

The last three lines of this stanza, in my reading, speak about the treaty and its chances in the future as McGuckian saw it at the time. "Self-fertile herbs" I understand to be the metaphor of the treaty. With reference to this metaphor another line from another poem comes to mind: "You cannot reproduce in your own shade," says McGuckian in "Dovecote."³² This "self-fertility," or indeed

²⁹Medbh McGuckian in "An Attitude of Compassions": "I don't have a fixed allegiance. I have inherited grievances, but while these are consciously eliminated they subconsciously obtrude." p.21.

³⁰Medbh McGuckian and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill: "Comhrá" with a Foreword and Afterword by Laura O'Connor, *The Southern Review* 31 (July 1995), p.592.

³¹Medbh McGuckian in "An Attitude of Compassions", p.21.

³²*Venus and the Rain*, p.40.

sterility, explains why “defeat” (of peace which is war) is again the “very future lover.” (Now we know it was not that far in the future at all.)

I am afraid that I am losing the reference of the first line of the last stanza (does it speak for the Catholic community that is a minority in number and with the treaty its identity - name - is put at stake?) However, I think, the closing section of the poem depicts a very pessimistic opinion about the peace-process. The “demolished floor” is probably Belfast, the “dreams” that “have no morals” are probably dreams that have been pursued by violence. “Door-kiss” assumes an “unreal kiss,” “night meeting night” speaks for itself: nobody could take the night out of the war.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen, Medbh McGuckian’s poems are not only capable of carrying public, or even political, messages, but this seems to be occupying a central space in her imagination. McGuckian is a poet with several coexisting and clashing identities: there is the shy housewife and mother (“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.”³³), there is the free and autonomous woman artist and there is the male alter-ego as a poet as well. It seems to me as if her poetic strategy was to mirror these identities into each other. This way she is able to personalise public matters and also to bring the private to a public sphere which becomes available to her readers. She speaks about herself all the time (“It is a funny book. It is exactly me - me all over again.”³⁴) and she does not speak about herself at all. (As I have mentioned earlier, biographical information are not explicitly played out in her poetry.) She says in “Harem Trousers” that

A poem dreams of being written
Without the pronoun ‘I’.³⁵

³³Kimberly S. Bohman: “Surfacing: An Interview with Medbh McGuckian, Belfast, 5th September, 1994” in: *The Irish Review* 16 (Autumn/Winter 1994), p.103.

³⁴She speaks about *Captain Lavender* here. “Surfacing: An Interview with Medbh McGuckian” *The Irish Review* 16 (Autumn/Winter 1994), p.106.

³⁵On *Ballycastle Beach*, p.40.

What is fascinating about this sentence is the personification of “a poem.” In McGuckian’s mind a poem, and language in general, has an individual power and an individual identity. She is writing a sentence where the sentence dreams of being written without her. Not only is she a woman and/or a poet but her poems themselves form a separate branch of identity. These manifold aspects of her identity create a tension in her poetic language and imagery which, in an artistic way, are mirrors of the diverse political, cultural etc. tensions she lives in. (“My dream sister has gone into my blood / To kill the poet in me before Easter.”³⁶)

Mirrors are indeed central to McGuckian’s poetry. The mirror as an object is exciting in itself: it is an object and it is not an object since it merely reflects other objects. It is the representation of unreal reality, a mirrored life which is never there. However, mirror is not only reflection but self-reflection as well. Since nobody can ever see him/herself, there are several things we call and see as mirrors. Mirrors are the beloved people, mirror is the work we are doing, mirror is the visual reflection of our face(s). That explains why it is an exciting and rich metaphor to use in poetry. Earlier I mentioned Lewis Carroll’s mysterious “looking glass” which, instead of and apart from reflecting, takes the reader inside. This is exactly what McGuckian is doing. In her mirrors we see her many faces but only from the inside. There is no way of staying outside. “My words are traps,” as she says very aptly in “On Ballycastle Beach.”³⁷

Her poetry is “A book with primrose edges and a mirror / In the cover”³⁸ which reflects the writer and the reader as well who opens the book. “With the mirror where her soul was”³⁹ we are lead into the inside of the “book” to face her soul, “A scarlet-draped window-seat, shaped to echo / The circular mirror, itself a sort of chamber....”⁴⁰ Within this “chamber” we see “small tables taking shape / in an unbroken, ray-reflecting mirror that did away with the possibility / of other conversations...”⁴¹ It sometimes turns against its creator so McGuckian says: “The mirror bites into me,”⁴² which I find a wonderful image of the way identities clash and confront each other. The mirror we found outside is there in the inside as

³⁶*Venus and the Rain*, p.36.

³⁷*On Ballycastle Beach*, p.61.

³⁸“Next Day Hill” *The Flower Master and Other Poems*, p.52.

³⁹“Mazurka” *On Ballycastle Beach*, p.20.

⁴⁰“Brothers and Uncles” *Marconi’s Cottage*, p.27.

⁴¹“The Appropriate Moment 4. Ignoras in Artes” *Captain Lavender*, p.24.

⁴²“The Blue She Brings with Her” *On Ballycastle Beach*, p.29.

well. The deeper you wish to get the more “scattered” images you find. And in the end “The mirror doubles distances / So the garden is a cascade of paths.”⁴³

My discussion in this paper outlined the way McGuckian weaves and mirrors public and private spheres together. While I believe that poetry in a way mirrors politics I would not like to forget that this is a “mirror of a kingdom that nobody believes in”⁴⁴ and, moreover, that “the mirror [itself] hardly believes it.”⁴⁵ What is important when reading Medbh McGuckian is to take her advice and always

Remember
The overexcitement of mirrors, with their archways
Lending depth...⁴⁶

⁴³“Scenes from a Brothel” *On Ballycastle Beach*, p.48.

⁴⁴“East of Mozart” *Marconi’s Cottage*, p.65.

⁴⁵“Porcelain Bells 3. Speaking into the Candles” *Captain Lavender*, p.17.

⁴⁶“Aviary” *Venus and the Rain*, p.25.