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## “My Cleverly Dead and Vertical Audience”: Medbh McGuckian’s “Difficult” Poetry

The looking-glass of Medbh McGuckian’s mind reflects, but transmutes to its own purposes, all that it receives. McGuckian, the author of twelve collections of poetry, has the rare ability to transform dreary, time-rubbed words into phrases that 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.”<sup>1</sup> Kevin T. McEneaney concurred, observing that the poetry’s “obscure logic” created “unnecessary confusions.”<sup>2</sup> Reviewers of subsequent collections have often had the same reaction: Aidan Matthews lamented that her poems had a propensity to “escape the reader.”<sup>3</sup> Nick Rowe complained that the collection was characterized by the “dark speak of riddle.”<sup>4</sup> James Simmons (like McGuckian, a poet from the North) went so far as to say of one collection that it 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.”<sup>5</sup>

While one cannot deny that McGuckian’s poetry is often difficult to understand, critics have of late developed different strategies to enable a reader’s appreciation of the thematic and stylistic richness of her verse. For example, critics have usefully read her work within a Kristevan theoretical framework, empha-

1. 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.

2. Kevin T. McEneaney, “Flower Masters and Winter Works,” *Irish Literary Supplement*. Clipping in McGuckian Papers, Box 35, Folder 2.

3. Aidan C. Matthews, “Mandarin Muse,” *Irish Times*, 13 October 1984. Clipping in McGuckian Papers, Box 35, Folder 3.

4. Nick Roe, “Belfast’s Dark Lady,” *North Magazine*, 3 (October, 1984), 21.

5. James Simmons, “A Literary Leg-pull?” *Belfast Review*, 8 (Autumn, 1984), 27.

sizing its pluralist and non-essentialist nature.<sup>6</sup> Others have paid close attention to her linguistic strategies and polysemantic play with words to explore how her meta-representational verse displays encounters with "Otherness."<sup>7</sup> McGuckian describes her method of composition as highly deliberate. "I never write just blindly," she has said. "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."<sup>8</sup>

Before 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."<sup>9</sup> 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.

If we recognize that the poet is engaging in an intertextual practice, then it follows that the tracking down of her sources could shine some light on the intricate workings of the poems and open up new pathways into her oeuvre. For example, "The Over Mother" is a poem that has been 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

6. See: Guinn Batten, "'The More with Which We Are Connected': The Muse of the Minus in the Poetry of McGuckian and Kinsella," in *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Ireland*, ed. Anthony Bradley and Maryann Gialanella Valiulis (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), pp. 212–44; Sarah Fulford, *Gendered Spaces in Contemporary Irish Poetry* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2002), pp. 171–97; Moynagh Sullivan, "The In-formal Poetics of Medbh McGuckian," *Nordic Irish Studies*, 3, 1 (2004), 75–92; Erin C. Mitchell, "Slippage at the Threshold: Postmodern Hospitality in Medbh McGuckian's Poetry," *LIT: Literature Interpretation Theory*, 17, 2 (June, 2006), 137–55.

7. See: Robert Brazeau, "Troubling Language: Avant-garde Strategies in the Poetry of Medbh McGuckian," *Mosaic*, 37, 2 (June, 2004), 127–44; Helen Blakeman, "'Poetry Must Almost Dismantle the Letters': McGuckian, Mallarmé and Polysemantic Play," in *The Poetry of Medbh McGuckian*, ed. Shane Alcobia-Murphy and Richard Kirkland (Cork: Cork University Press, 2010), pp. 68–83; Elin Holmsten, "Signs of Encounters in Medbh McGuckian's Poetry," in *The Poetry of Medbh McGuckian*, pp. 84–104.

8. McGuckian, interview with author at the John Hewitt Summer School, 28 July 1995.

9. McGuckian, "Interview with Medbh McGuckian," interview by Shane Alcobia-Murphy and Richard Kirkland, *The Poetry of Medbh McGuckian*, p. 201.

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?<sup>10</sup>

Reading the poem in light of its intertexts and the context in which it was written can help dispel its apparent opacity. Below, McGuckian's text is cited on the right. The quotations on the left are from the poem's intertexts: Diane Wood Middlebrook's *Anne Sexton: A Biography*, marked here with an *M*, followed by the page number, and Elaine Feinstein, *Lawrence's Women: The Intimate Life of D. H. Lawrence*, denoted by *F*.<sup>11</sup>

the sealed hotel (*M* 87); men were handled as if  
 were furniture (*F* 160); passion exhausts itself at the  
 mouth (*F* 108); the play kisses (*M* 281)  
 The circuits of the body (*M* 300); underloved  
 Person (*M* 259); the ever-resurrection (*M* 228);  
 the never-had tenderness (*M* 239); I'd just die  
 inside (*M* 381); cleverly dead (*M* 142)  
 vertical audience (*M* 332); words can fly  
 out (*M* 184); climate of unexpectation (*M* 144)  
 leaky letters (*M* 83); shallowised (*M* 301)  
 What you has spoken? (*M* 207)

In the sealed hotel men are handled  
 as if they were furniture, and passion  
 exhausts itself at the mouth. Play kisses  
 stir the circuits of the underloved body  
 to an ever-resurrection, a never-had tenderness  
 that dies inside me.

My cleverly dead and vertical audience,  
 words fly out from your climate of unexpectation  
 in leaky, shallowised night letters—  
 what you has spoken?<sup>12</sup>

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. 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."<sup>13</sup> Such freedom, however, is tempered not only by the poem's overriding sense of enclosure, but by the theatricalized nature of communication which takes place therein—with "play kisses" and "shallowised night letters," all is covert, potentially superficial, and unreal.

10. David Mason, "Irish Poetry at the Crossroads," *The Poetry of Life and the Life of Poetry* (Ashland, OR: Story Line Press, 2000), p. 112.

11. Diane Wood Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1991); Elaine Feinstein, *Lawrence's Women: The Intimate Life of D. H. Lawrence* (London: Flamingo, 1994).

12. McGuckian, "The Over Mother," in *Captain Lavender* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1994), p. 64.

13. McGuckian, interview with author, Marine Hotel, Ballycastle, County Antrim, 19 August 1996.

As the poem's main intertext—the Middlebrook biography of Sexton—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.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the speaker is left asking “what you has spoken?” Selfhood is occluded and true expression is curtailed in this environment. McGuckian remarked in an interview that the “letters are ‘leaky’ because they are censored and ‘shallowised’ because they cannot be deep.”<sup>15</sup> 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.”<sup>16</sup> Although the “wings” here are physical ones 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 Hocking “looks to me as if I could suddenly give him wings—and it is a trouble and a nuisance.”<sup>17</sup> 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. She becomes a different sort of “Over Mother,” an enabling one 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.”<sup>18</sup> One could argue that the poem itself 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 favor 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 describes Sexton as an example of

14. Middlebrook, p. 184.

15. McGuckian, “A Dialogue with Medbh McGuckian, Winter 1996-1997,” interview by Rand Brandes, *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 30, 2 (Fall, 1997), 44.

16. Feinstein, p. 160.

17. Feinstein, p. 148.

18. McGuckian, quoted in Catherine Byron, “A House of One's Own: Three Contemporary Irish Women Poets,” *Women's Review*, 19 (May, 1987), 33.

someone who benefited from "a social experiment involving women," namely the setting up of the Radcliffe Institute to "harness the talents of intellectually displaced women." The Institute's founder 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.'"<sup>19</sup> The "vertical audience" sought by McGuckian is symptomatic of the poet's assertion of her own authority. She desires to move outward from the private realm and into the public, "the 'vertical audience' of peers living and dead, measurable in the tables of contents of influential anthologies."<sup>20</sup> In many respects, then, the text can be read as a declaration of originality—and as a protest against critics like Mason.

By selecting, modifying and juxtaposing quotations to form a poetic text, McGuckian engages in a form of "appropriative writing." Practitioners of the genre include John Ashbery and Walter Abish, among others; Raphael Rubinstein describes their method by noting, "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."<sup>21</sup> 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 ninety-nine excerpts, each from a different novel and each "from a page bearing that same . . . mystically significant number" is really a composition by mosaic organization rather than an authored piece.<sup>22</sup> The reader is aware from the outset that each segment is a quotation: Abish declares from the outset that the work is "undertaken in a playful spirit—not actually 'written' but orchestrated."<sup>23</sup> Similarly, a poem like John Ashbery's "The Dong with the Luminous Nose" is foregrounded as a cento, 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. Not only is there an implied tribute being made to the poet's precursors, but the reader is also meant to appreciate the poet's skill in manipulating existing lines. In McGuckian's case, the quotations are not recognizable, 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. The deliberateness of her method can be seen by the following list, marked "Biography," included in McGuckian's papers:

19. Middlebrook, p. 144.

20. Middlebrook, p. 332.

21. Raphael Rubinstein, "Gathered, Not Made: A Brief History of Appropriative Writing," *American Poetry Review*, 28, 2 (March-April, 1999), 31.

22. Walter Abish, 99: *The New Meaning* (Berkeley: Burning Deck, 1990), p. 9.

23. Abish, p. 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<sup>24</sup>

McCuckian accompanies these by a brief indication of the writer or historical figure featured in each one; she envisages the sources themselves 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."<sup>25</sup> McGuckian's formulation indicates an ongoing relation between the quoting and quoted texts. But 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 italicized "*my*" emphasizes the notion of ownership.

To what extent, then, is a McGuckian text "original"? Poststructuralist thinking indicates it is difficult to attribute "originality" to any text, as, in Roland Barthes's words, it is "woven entirely with citations, references, echoes, cultural-languages . . . antecedent or contemporary, which cut across it through and through in a vast stereophony."<sup>26</sup> Barthes argues that all words accrue meanings and connotations, and that a text is merely "a fabrication of quotations, resulting from a thousand sources of culture."<sup>27</sup> However, leaving that general argument

24. McGuckian Papers, "Biography," Box 26 Folder 59: Notes.

25. "I Am Listening in Black and White to What Speaks to me in Blue": Medbh McGuckian Interviewed by Helen Blakeman," *Irish Studies Review*, 11, 1 (April, 2003), 67.

26. Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text," *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), p. 160.

27. Barthes, "Death of the Author," *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1987), p. 53.

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, stitching 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."<sup>28</sup>

She does so without any anxiety of influence, very much in the spirit of Emerson's remark that, "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."<sup>29</sup> What is crucial in McGuckian's case is the element of modification, a process that secures her place among T. S. Eliot's pantheon of "good poets." Eliot declared, "bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different."<sup>30</sup> A clear example is the title poem from her fourth collection, *Marconi's Cottage* (1991). In the opening stanzas below, quotations from Anne Stevenson's *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath* (1990) are cited on the left as BF:<sup>31</sup>

small & watchful (BF 357); a light-house (BF 356); pure clear place (BF 357) no particular childhood (BF ix); as if she had spoken in you (BF 22); dry, dry, the words (BF 26)	Small and watchful as a lighthouse, A pure clear place of no particular childhood, It is as if the sea had spoken in you And then the words had dried.
bitten (BF 312); sea-fostered (BF 13) this British spring (BF 81); there seemed only this one way of happening (BF 86) And a poem to prove it happened (BF 78)	Bitten and fostered by the sea And by the British spring, There seems only this one way of happening. And a poem to prove it has happened.
castle-thick walls (BF 222); learning to use this wildness (BF 138); locked and unlocked (BF 64); weaker than kisses (BF 121)	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. <sup>32</sup>

Stevenson's biography of Sylvia Plath 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."<sup>33</sup> But readers would be hard-

28. "McGuckian," in *Sleeping with Monsters: Conversations with Scottish and Irish Women Poets*, ed. Gilleen Somerville-Arjat and Rebecca E. Wilson (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1990), p. 2.

29. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 1 (London: Taylor Francis, 1913), p. 467.

30. T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1969), p. 125.

31. Anne Stevenson, *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath* (London: Penguin, 1990).

32. McGuckian, "Marconi's Cottage," *Marconi's Cottage* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1991), p. 103.

33. Stevenson, p. xi.

pressed to identify this as the source, based on thirty-four quotations selected to make up this poem: they are very short, 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 McGuckian and her husband in Ballycastle, County Antrim. The house in the first stanza is depicted as at the mercy of the elements, acutely vulnerable and eternally vigilant; such watchfulness, however, does not simply stem from a self-protective urge as 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. 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"). 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. As Patricia Boyle Haberstroh has pointed out, voices "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."<sup>34</sup> This would seem to suggest 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 that speak to her and for her. She often relates to the source material in such a manner, and has said, "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."<sup>35</sup> Thus, one can read the poem without any knowledge of Plath's biography. However, it is not wholly true to say that the poet has "totally" forgotten the source text. McGuckian acknowledges Plath as a "significant"

34. Patricia Boyle Haberstroh, *Women Creating Women: Contemporary Irish Women Poets* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996), p. 149.

35. McGuckian, "Interview with Medbh McGuckian", interview by Alcobia-Murphy and Kirkland, pp. 201-02.



influence, and the poem attests to this.<sup>36</sup> The text's addressee can be read as Plath herself, with McGuckian learning to use the example or 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."

McGuckian often self-reflexively signals the presence of an intertext—as she does in in "Marconi's Cottage"—by staging encounters with others in her work, particularly by employing images of contact, among them letters, telephone calls, face-to-face conversations, and human touch. In "Venus and the Sun," also in *Marconi's Cottage*, she writes about Jean Cocteau's influence on her work. The parenthetical references in the left column below are to Francis Steegmuller's biography of Cocteau:<sup>37</sup>

"he returns . . . as if from a seashore" (C 42)  
 "the streets of dream" (C 366); whatever it  
 was he was full of, naming itself (C 350);  
 "There is a colour walking around, with people  
 hidden in it" (C 315);  
 was meant to mean nothing (C 221); "lifted  
 his ten fingers like a fence between us" (C 430)  
 "snow that doesn't fall" (C 145); "I feel them  
 through the envelope" (C 251); touching glove  
 to glove (C 304); "sound-curves" (C 304);  
 shorn of all words (C 188); "humming' you  
 with my eyes and mouth" (C 158)

When I return from poetry as from a sea-shore  
 To the streets of dream, what is left on waking  
 Is whatever I was full of, naming itself:  
 'A colour walks around, with people hidden in it'.  
  
 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.<sup>38</sup>

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 telegram sent

36. 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.

37. Francis Steegmuller, *Cocteau: A Biography* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1970).

38. McGuckian, "Venus and the Sun," *Marconi's Cottage*, p. 81.

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."<sup>39</sup> The second is Cocteau's own recorded debt to his friend Vander Clyde, known as "Barbette," 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."<sup>40</sup>

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 wilful 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 wrote 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."<sup>41</sup> 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 seashore 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 poesis, 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." The quotations denoted with an "A" are from Amanda Haight's study *Anna Akhmatova: A Poetic Pilgrimage* (1976):<sup>42</sup>

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);

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

39. Steegmuller, p. 42.

40. Steegmuller, p. 366.

41. Steegmuller, p. 158.

42. Amanda Haight, *Anna Akhmatova: A Poetic Pilgrimage* (New York: Oxford University Press 1976)

"cut into dreams" (A 9); I learn how to cut into other people's dreams,  
telephoned again, "Paris style" (A 109) How to telephone them Paris-style . . .<sup>43</sup>

The verbal phrase "to cut into" may connote unwanted intrusion, but 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."<sup>44</sup> Normally, such an intertextual practice would establish the relation between precursor and quoting poet as one of teacher and pupil or parent and 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.

When self-reflexively commenting on poesis, McGuckian often adopts the form of the "ekphrastic text." She deploys this mode of writing when exploring the limits and possibilities of her craft. The term "ekphrasis" originally referred to a rhetorical theory and practice dating from classical antiquity.<sup>45</sup> In contemporary literary criticism, it has come to refer to "the act of speaking to, about, or for a work of visual or plastic art."<sup>46</sup> 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."<sup>47</sup> 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.<sup>48</sup> As such, the poem constitutes an effort "to reproduce the supposed advantage of the rival art in its own medium,

43. "Calling Canada" from McGuckian and Nuala Archer, "Two Women, Two Shores" (Baltimore: Chestnut Hills Press, 1989), p. 21.

44. McGuckian, "Interview with Medbh McGuckian," interview by Alcobia-Murphy and Kirkland, p. 201.

45. See Ruth Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 1-11.

46. Jane Hedley, "Introduction: The Subject of Ekphrasis," in *In the Frame: Women's Ekphrastic Poetry from Marianne Moore to Susan Wheeler*, ed. Jane Hedley, Nick Halpern, and Willard Spiegelman (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2009), p. 15. See also Leo Spitzer, "The 'Ode on a Grecian Urn,' or Content vs. Metagrammar," in *Essays on English and American Literature*, ed. Anna Hatcher (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), p. 72.

47. Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux, *Twentieth-Century Poetry and the Visual Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 4.

48. Grant F. Scott, "The Rhetoric of Dilation: Ekphrasis and Ideology," *Word & Image*, 7, 4 (October-December, 1991), 302.

which is of course to deny or steal that avowed capacity."<sup>49</sup> At its heart, ekphrastic poetry is said to be "paragonal" in nature, as it implicitly or explicitly enacts "a struggle for dominance between the image and the word."<sup>50</sup>

Again, a knowledge of the poem's intertexts can provide a reader with a greater appreciation of how McGuckian frames this "struggle." Her poem "A New Portrait in the Naughton Gallery" from *My Love Has Fared Inland* (2008) shows this clearly. The text of this poem is based on James Elkins's study of emotional responses to paintings. *Painting and Tears*, cited in the excerpts below as *PT*.<sup>51</sup> The poem 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, or the five wounds in imitation of those inflicted on Christ on the cross:

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

there is no green (*PT* 80); Some of the blues  
are stained  
by browns (*PT* 80); scatters of fine dirt (*PT* 80);  
a fuzz of blighted grass (*PT* 80);  
The ripped surface reflects a wan (*PT* 80);

tender sap (*PT* 80); toxic fog (*PT* 81);  
A slate-gray donkey (*PT* 80); a close-cropped  
field (*PT* 80); parched and marred by thistles (*PT* 80);  
Is the saint looking up at the sun? Possibly (*PT* 81);

he even has a tiny yellow glint in his eye (*PT* 81);  
as if someone has jumped into it (*PT* 81)

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 . . .

There is no green, though some  
of the blues  
are stained by browns and scatters of dirt,  
a fuzz of blighted thorns.  
The ripped surface reflects no tender

sap, but a wan or toxic fog,  
the slate-grey of a close-cropped field,  
parched and marred by thistles.  
Is he looking up at the sun?

Possibly – for he has a tiny yellow  
glint in his eye, as if someone has just  
jumped into it. . . .<sup>52</sup>

49. Stephen Cheeke, *Writing for Art: The Aesthetics of Ekphrasis* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), p. 1.

50. James A. W. Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashberry* (1993; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 1.

51. James Elkins, *Pictures and Tears: A History of People Who Have Cried in Front of Paintings* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

52. McGuckian, "A New Portrait in the Naughton Gallery," in *My Love Has Fared Inland* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 2008), pp. 74-76.

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 with an evaluative commentary upon the artwork's materiality and coloration. In McGuckian's text, forensic analysis, speculation and poetic re-presentation combine to comment upon, and to rival, Bellini's treatment of his subject. The two similes—"as if he were a boulder / in a stream" and "as if someone had just / jumped into it"—provide a way of rationalizing 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 *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."<sup>53</sup> Such a conclusion would suggest a defeat for art critic and poet alike. Linguistic resources are here subsumed by those associated with the pictorial. However, Elkins does, in fact, write his commentary in words, as does McGuckian. 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 it attempts 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.

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

53. Elkins, p. 75.

Medbh McGuckian's "Difficult" Poetry

about the distance you'd stand from someone (PT 18); like a whispered secret that goes around a room (PT 77); centred on its wall (PT 79); 'daylight would fall, later on in the year, once this tangible season was history' (PT 135); 'I nearly wanted to step forward and warm my hands on it' (PT 55); 'it had something to do with the war, and with the charred, burn-up books' (PT 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 (PT 74); it held me in thrall (PT 87); Now it's like peering between the shelves in a library . . . beyond the wall of books (PT 91); coloured an impossibly smooth and chilling blue (PT 89); They were easier to see (PT 84)	About the distance you'd stand from someone, like a whispered secret that goes around a room, it was centred on its wall, where daylight would fall, later on in the year, after this tangible season. I wanted to step forward and warm my hands on it: it had something to do with the war, the charred, burnt-up books—it had a lovely air— it smelled as if it were scented with the finest particles of disintegrated books—it held me in thrall. It was like peering between the shelves of a library, beyond a wall of books, coloured an impossibly smooth and chilling blue,  which made the picture easier to see.
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The emphasis here is less concerned with providing a descriptive outline of an artwork than with detailing the conditions and context of its reception. To be fair, the term "artwork" is perhaps a misnomer. Based on Elkins's monograph, the poem's "painting" is a conflation of Mark Rothko's fourteen opaque Black Chapel paintings (1964-67), Vincent Van Gogh's *The Olive Trees* (1887), Bellini's *The Ecstasy of St. Francis*, and unspecified works by Anselm Kiefer.

McGuckian's poem does not slavishly follow, copy, or describe a single existing artwork; thus, the writing here is tantamount to "notional ekphrasis," to use John Hollander's term for literary representations of imagined artworks.<sup>54</sup> One could contend that the poem is implicitly a polemical, agonistic display, one that matches iconic portraiture by means of its own imaginative projection. The stanzas themselves are characterized by a structure of unresolved tensions, typical of McGuckian's love of ambiguity: the opening line delineates the appropriate distance from which to gain a full appreciation of the artwork, but the second line's simile undercuts such precision ("Each time you recall something

54. John Hollander, *The Gazer's Spirit: Poems Speaking to Silent Works of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 7. McGuckian's "portrait" is not located in the Frick Collection, but at the Naughton Gallery at Queen's University Belfast.

it changes a little, like a whispered secret that goes around a room and gradually changes into nonsense").<sup>55</sup> The third line foregrounds the painting's stability ("centred"), yet this contrasts with the two conflicting temporal frames depicted therein (the Van Gogh is said to portray "two distinct times at once").<sup>56</sup> Although the speaker is attracted to the painting, wanting to "warm" her hands on it, the predominant color 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" and "something to do with the war").

However, the key opposition resides in the third and fourth stanzas. These suggest that literature is directly opposed to painting and, surprisingly, the latter seems to be valorized 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, as 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. 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 that allows her to reflect self-consciously upon her own creative process; indeed, as Elizabeth Loizeaux contends, due to "the self-reflexive nature of ekphrasis," writing about "a work of art becomes a way of looking sideways at poetry."<sup>57</sup>

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

These stanzas are crucial, as they reflect upon how we react to an artwork. The painting seems remote, enigmatic, and forbidding; yet the painting, 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, to "be in love with a painting—to cry," one must "be able to

55. Elkins, pp. 76-77.

56. Elkins, p. 135.

57. Loizeaux, p. 9.

believe a painting can be alive: not literally, but moment by moment in your imagination." 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.<sup>58</sup>

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."<sup>59</sup> Perhaps the fault lies with them and not with the artwork.

Notably, none of the intertextual analyses presented here article leave us with the impression that McGuckian's poetry is less obscure, or less difficult, than has been previously thought. They do indicate, though, that there is a vibrant, thinking presence behind the texts' construction and they give the lie to the view that her work is simply a "salutary joke." McGuckian does not select texts in an arbitrary way, and the ways in which she incorporates quotations into her work are by no means capricious. In fact, she consistently signals the importance of an intertextual approach in her oeuvre. Unearthing McGuckian's sources leads to a deeper appreciation of her engagement with past literary exemplars—and puts an end, finally, to the lingering suspicion that her work is simply "alluring nonsense."

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58. Elkins, p. 217

59. Heather Cam, "A Metro-ride through Love and Death," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 February 1989. Clipping in McGuckian Papers, Special Collections Department, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University, MSS 770. Box 35, Folder 5.