

Dreamin' my Dreams with You

Medbh McGuckian and the Theatre of Dreams

In recent years in Ireland, much poetry written by women deals with matters spiritual, often in terms understood as mystical. In a large sense, poetry has stepped in to compensate women for what is not provided by organised religion, addressing an important spiritual gap. That poetry should begin to work out such issues is unsurprising as religious, national and orphic authority already intensely converge in Ireland's poetry, investing its nominated poets with the custody of the national spirit. Thus, women poets are doing no more than intruding on this powerfully pervasive view of poetry as a secular sacred space, in which the uniqueness of the enlightened and humbled humanist subject is individuated, and in which, by extension, the so-called inimitability of the Irish national spirit is evoked.

Because of the ubiquity of narratives of personal healing and epiphany, not only in poetry but in the wider popular culture, such subjects have been diminished in both effect and value. The result is that women's poetry in this vein can be easily dismissed as prosaic, predictable and aesthetically unchallenging. Such accusations could as fairly be levied at the poetry of many male writers yet by virtue of the fact that they reconfirm themes considered to be of national spiritual importance they are called "minor", and their work, more often than not, deemed "interesting if limited". In contrast, women poets are often treated as a mob, an undifferentiated collective whose lack of any aesthetic daring or technical and thematic surprise, elicits verdicts that amount to a questioning of the ethical right of the speakers to seek a place in the culture at large at all. Such outright dismissal is testimony to the need for such symbolic interference in the national spiritual network as a vital aspect of any society that still has ambitions for justice and equality; and to the importance of performing what Catriona

Clutterbuck calls the “function of witness”, as an index and agent of changing social relations to authority and truth narratives. Equally, however, it is important not to confuse æsthetic and sociological values and accept that some poetry, however worthy, may not be the most inspiring. My concern here is not with the notion of æsthetic discrimination, but rather with how differently men and women’s work is discriminated.

Medbh McGuckian is probably one of the most æsthetically complex poets working today, and in no way can her work be described as minor or pedestrian, yet much of the early criticism of her work trivialised it as it seemed to be concerned with “women’s issues”, and especially with spiritual questions pertaining to women’s liminal experiences. Her last three volumes of poetry are increasingly explicit about the intersection between poetry, nationality, and spirituality. They neither fall prey to predictability nor compromise any of her characteristic wily rigour. To a considerable extent, this has to do with the way in which her work overturns the æsthetic assumptions and reading positions of generations of readers trained, almost religiously, in seeking the word. Although Ezra Pound powerfully theorised the image as an experiential gestalt, as a vortex, in the vast body of twentieth century poetry criticism, the image has come, for the most part, to be understood textually rather than “texturally”. In other words, the word quality of the image is more usually the focus of critical attention than the experiential dimension evoked by it. Susan Sontag disputed this orthodoxy in her formative essay, “Against Interpretation”, where she argued against the act of translation involved in interpretation, and for immediate apprehension of the work in its stead. The division between text and textuality is also found in another practice likewise based on interpretation and understanding, psychoanalysis, most especially in relation to dream analysis.

In much the same way that post-modern critical practices emphasise Pound’s and Sontag’s stress on experience, psychoanalysis inflected by post-modern philosophy is recuperating the dream experience as an æsthetic event which had until recently been eclipsed by the dream “text”. Christopher Bollas is one of the most interesting of contemporary psychoanalysts who is revising clinical practice and analytical theory, and whose ideas have many interesting applications to literary practices. In *Being a Character: Psychoanalysis and Self Experience* (1987), he contends

that the “classical notion of the dream as only the road to something else (the unconscious) has resulted in some neglect of the dream as a lived experience”. He goes on to point out that, “Freud restricted himself to an analysis of the dream text—specifically to identifying the dream thoughts that sponsored the dream—in order to translate the image back into the word”. Although psychoanalysis originated from the concern for what the dream symbols *mean*, rather than how they make an analysis and *feel*, it has evolved as a theory and a practice that seeks to account for how experience alters textual meaning. I am not advocating a “feel-in” here, in which we abandon interpretation and criticism in favour of losing ourselves in the purity of experience, but rather I ask—what is happening when we are lost in a McGuckian poem?

Psychoanalytical models are especially useful in thinking about this, for McGuckian’s poems create an experience for the reader of being inside a dream, that is, being inside a syntactical terrain that mutates and changes in a similar fashion to that of a dream landscape. The aspect of McGuckian’s work has been commented on too often and by too many diverse readers of her work to be either accidental or incidental. For instance, Elizabeth Lowry reviewing *Selected Poems* in *Metre 4* wrote that “all too often though the words begin to live entirely in their sounds, and the poem itself fragments into unrelated sense units, each evoking a self-contained impression. “Querencia”, for instance, has the treachery, sluggish rhythm of a dream, as well as its incoherent free-association of images... this is dream poetry with a vengeance”. Seamus Heaney writes that McGuckian’s “language is like the inner lining of consciousness, the inner lining of English itself, and it moves amphibiously between the dreamlife and her actual domestic and historical experience”. The dreamlike dimension to McGuckian’s work is not something the reader observes, but the place in which the reader finds himself or herself. The effect of being “inside” what Nick Roe called McGuckian’s “exotic but indistinct dream-world”, is that of disorientation and this is often attributed to the poetry itself, when in fact it properly belongs to the experience of being inside the dream-theatre that McGuckian creates, in which the reader unwittingly experiences being the poem’s unconscious object. For we find that, we are not the overseeing subject when reading a McGuckian poem, but an object in an alien gestalt. “Although we may temporarily enjoy the illusion

of managing the dream event”, Bollas observes, “we recognise that we are inside a drama that has a bewildering logic of its own... not only do such moments often feel not like of our own making, but they may be repellent and disturbing occasions that deny any semblance of our subjectivity and seem to underline precisely the opposite: our rather passive presence as an object cast into some bizarre drama”. Bollas likens the loss of control implied in such an experience to being directed and scripted by the dream itself, and he likens the dream to a theatrical space that is itself an æsthetic as well as a psychic event.

This event is sponsored by an aspect of the unconscious that is neither “disavowed” nor repressed. One of the most significant aspects of Bollas’s work is his theory of creativity, where he departs from the Freudian position which holds that creativity proceeds primarily from sublimation of sexuality and the resolution of past pain and trauma through their symbolisation and designation. Instead, he argues that it also proceeds from an avowing, and “generative” unconscious, which is not repressed, but known and yet unthought, and manifest in the dream, which, as Bollas tells us, “reflects an organised and avowing unconscious whose discourse, as Lacan has argued is structured like a language: the speech of a visual theatric that both represents and veils thought... the syntactical forms of this other are the dream, the joke”. The language of the “avowing unconscious”, is a sensory “idiom of our selves”, a grammar of self laid down by our experience of our earliest care. For Bollas, a poem and dream are similar events, and perform similar functions, which is to bring to consciousness the syntax of the avowing unconscious, what also he calls the “maternal æsthetic”, or the “unthought known”. This is not as it may first sound an æsthetic experience restricted to mothers but is rather the pre-verbal experiences of the syntax of being “handled” by our earliest carers, the idiom of our earliest selves. Our earliest carers, most especially the mother, shape our avowing unconscious, which carries the promise of creativity and generation. McGuckian’s poem “Dear Rain” from *Marconi’s Cottage* (1991), demonstrates the avowing aspect of the unthought known in the following lines:

Once it is long enough over
It is only his language they understand,
Not what he was trying to say:

But I
had cried out my promise in his unconscious.

This generative unconscious is not only manifest in words, but more specifically in shapes and relationships in what Bollas calls handling: “a poem is a unique way of forming a theme, and poetic handling becomes as important as the theme it presents; similarly a dream is a special technique of forming meaning, for the dream not only speaks us—it handles us”.

Arguably the disruptive interruptions of what Julia Kristeva calls the Semiotic, and Bollas the maternal aesthetic, are what distinguish poetry from prose, as well as distinguishing poetry that handles us satisfactorily, even if unpleasantly or disturbingly, from poetry that is imitative of a previous or established mode of handling. In the theatrics of McGuckian’s aesthetic, the syntactical forms of “this other” are avowed not only as the dream and joke, but the affects of the structural other are actually dramatised and narrated. Poems such as “The Dream Theatre”, “The Parents of Dreams”, and “Poem Without Words” from *The Book of the Angel* (reviewed in this issue by Lucy Collins) tell it exactly as it is on the tin. McGuckian’s work has many rooms, and houses, and these structures collapse, open out, speak and dream. These represent the “unthought known”, a holding and mediating environment, which is a shape changer, as in “View Without a Room” from *Marconi’s Cottage*:

You like a dream in fact, able to take
the next step, and shape your self like
a fold out bed of bones, like an actual
House I know, where everything was under a spell
and sure to form itself into a circle?

In “The Sun-Moon Child” from the same collection, the house makes its presence felt in the “skip”, both hiatus and rhythm, of the sentence: “the house dreams/ in the skip of my sentence”. The holding environment is itself also held, as is represented by the many containers that are scattered through her symbology, such as bowls, cups, glasses and pitchers, which are often handled and passed from one character to another. The dream/home/poem becomes also an object of exchange between subjects, and does not always function as the containing environment. Frequently

then, in McGuckian's work dreaming, handling and motherhood are explicitly connected, as in the lines from "Sabbath Park" from *Captain Lavender* (1994), which read, "almost a hostage in the dream/ Of her mother's hands". In "Earth Weather", again from *Marconi's Cottage*, the lines, "My dream goes to its hands, they allow themselves to be/ Dreamed", makes the connection between handling and dreaming explicit. This is a holding which is not "hands on" and which does not "wholly contain" the object: "I hold it without hands, then a hand opens with the coldness/ Of a boy's hand, and lets something go". Bringing the handling into representation is not the only way in which McGuckian's work fleshes out the "unthought known".

Mary Jacobus, in *First Things: The Maternal Imaginary in Literature, Art, and Psychoanalysis* (1995), has pointed out that "mother [is] a "universal event"—an interpretative structure", and McGuckian's work actually describes that act of interpretation when it narrates what normally structures unconsciously. In dramatising that interpretative act, subject and object positions are unmoored and the reader is confronted with thinking about the processes of the "unthought known", whether by registering bewilderment or pleasure. Whilst, "Freud's idea was to bring a repressed idea into consciousness—to the word", Bollas argues that "we must search for an entirely new experience to find representation of the unthought known", and suggests "that the ego's management of the subject in the dream setting represents some aspects of the infant child's early experience as subject and object". Thus, the repeated "I", "yous" and "wes" in McGuckian's poems, representing the fluidity between subjects, the mixing up of, and simultaneous experience of subject and object positions, reflect the ontological experience of early care within the theatre of the mother's body, and her early handling. The switching from subject to object, as in a dream, is disturbing to many of McGuckian's critics, as the critic is faced with being, as Bollas writes elsewhere, "inside an object world that will absorb him", that is, he or she is thrown back into the earlier experience of being both subject and object, an undifferentiated place that brings either intense pleasure or anxiety, or both.

Indeed, part of the anxiety that induces punitive projections onto her poems are a displacement of what Bollas calls a fear of being inside the "internal theatre of the mother", within the idiom of their earliest care. McGuckian's aesthetic disrupts the

modernist mechanism of confirming identity at the expense of the object, by making the experience of being inside her poetry one which displaces us as meaning-bestowing subjects. In other words, the conventional ways in which a reader can be confirmed are not available when negotiating a McGuckian poem and instead the reader is invited to question the usefulness of attempts to understand the poem within a modernist theatrics. The reader trained in critical readings derived from modernism understands a poem at some level as a site of becoming, a space that is both a poem and its own act of criticism, a poem that includes linguistic self-reflexivity, linguistic self-awareness. This poem is thus also an osmotic space and as such represents the synthesising imagination—a site of self-realisation for the consciousness of the empathic, ideal reader, the critic, whose self-realisation depends on a mirroring relationship with the poet's mind and intentions. In contrast a poetics that disallows such self-confirmation, such as McGuckian's, is not a perfectly mirroring object, like Pound's object which "disturbeth not the reflection" of the "ideal reader" mirrored in the poem. Instead, it depends on unpredictable slippage between subjects and objects.

In "The Mirror Game" from *Had I a Thousand Lives* (2003), a fixed subject-object mode of reading is overtly dramatised and withstood. The poem addresses the reader's role as a theatrical space in which they confirm themselves through the poem, "I think of the theatre as you". In the poem McGuckian dramatises the interchange between the reader and poem:

Now is the time for you to play with the sound,
 The poems of the world tugging at your throat,
 And suddenly it becomes difficult to say
 What my meaning feels like.

The addressee's poem, made from this encounter, the "free sound of [his/her] airspill/ Robs me as a speaker;/ For you are living differently,/ As you join sound to sound". This mirrored mode of reading refuses the invitation the poem issues to change the body and voice of the reader and instead invites the speaker's body to inhabit the reader:

Inviting me to make the journey
 To inhabit you, to let my body change,

Or let it work through into voice,
To find your voice and let my body follow.

Here the body of the female speaker is repressed in the voice of the other that “robs me as a speaker”. Her body gives the other speech, a voice. The later lines “There is no longer an image, only you,/ the fluency of real life”, affirm the transaction between subjects, and the destabilising of the image from textuality to textuality. The disruption of the reader/subject-poem/object relationship into the “fluency of real life” reveals another aspect of the unthought known. Bollas has noted that “analysis of the transference and counter-transference reveals another system of representation of the unthought known”, that is another representation of the maternal aesthetic. Instead of confirming a mirrored ideal critical self, the McGuckian poem offers a theatre for an ontological rearrangement of self and other:

Later, I played I was my own daughter for a year:
I designed a many-pocketed beaded dress for her
so she could sense the spark of her skeleton.
I reshelved her books, old and new: I reproduced more
dreams for her than if I had lived in sixty houses,
to make her feel as framed and central as a night
without a dream.

McGuckian’s is thus a poetic dynamic that does not simply invert previous subject-object hierarchies, but which dramatises the “act of becoming”, that had already been assured even before reading, in modernist poetics. “To Call Paula Paul” from *Marconi’s Cottage*, invites the other to be part of the dream poem in which that relating can result in a different sense of the self, with the lines: “Telling you later means it will be/ Deeper, no dream can be told/ Quite as it was, I am asking/ Someone else to be it with me”. That “someone else” is the reader, who is invited to “be both subject and object” in the dream theatre of the poem, to be “it” with the poet, to be an object. “Field Heart” from *Captain Lavender* explicitly situates the narrating poet in the conscious day-time symbolic economy and the reader/interlocutor as the dreamer:

Nothing was to be seen through the closed lids
of your eventual dreaming,

the closed avenue of your new sense
beginning as absolute strangers
their ready to be reaped, matured homecoming.

Lines from “Journal Intime” from *Marconi’s Cottage* attest to the unthought known that forms the patterns and rhythms of consciousness but not brought to light:

In the dreams of men the pattern
Of the wallpaper by moonlight
Is the death-devoted colour of masculinity.
And in artfully-placed mirror
A single, grieving shape, to the
Weak-eyed, echoes and re-echoes,
More than sister, more than wife.

Crucially, this operation *necessitates* the acknowledgement of the avowing other, the unconscious, the mother’s existence, as the deep and latent universal structure of the mother becomes surface expression. The poem outlines this process of the mother’s “dreaming” the child and the child “dreaming” herself: “In a child’s first (and most satisfying)/ House, where everyone is repeated/ In everyone else, the door that is so light/ To her, so dark to us, is wise enough/ To dream through”. The pre-natal relationship of “dreaming through one another” in the child’s first home where “everyone is repeated in everyone else”, narrates the early lack of ego boundaries that leads to fluid subject-object experiences. The “wise door” is the opening which must not be closed over to form a scar, a site of lack, a “mirror” image of a castrated man, which is always only a failure in representational terms and through which a voice cannot pass: “Her voice fills the mouth/ Of her own mirror, as if she were a failure:/ As if, what is lifelike, could be true”.

In “To Call Paula Paul”, the scene of a dream is delineated in which “The music of my mother-to-be-dreams” is played. The poem goes on to note that, “most children have theatre in them,/ my one-child audience smiles/ like a deck-chair unrelaxed”. Insofar as the speaker’s one-child audience is *in* her, then she has theatre in her too, and this is an uncanny theatre. Freud suggested that the uncanny “recalls the sense of helplessness experienced in some dream states”, but he resists taking this insight further to

connect uncanniness directly to the dependence of the child in his or her earliest years, when the mother object becomes uncanny by being her own subject with a life beyond the child's orbit, when his or her containing environment, home, becomes other, uncanny. However, it also evokes the child's experience of being inside the mother's body, which is at once both the child's home and the mother's body. Freud's description of the uncanny as that which is homely yet unhomely corresponds exactly to the experience of being in a home, that is also someone else's being, that is not simply your object, your structure, but which becomes "uncanny", unhomely when the mother carrying the child moves or expresses herself, or when it contracts to expel the child. Thus as mother/dream, the uncanny McGuckian poem is not just a space of performance and interplay for the subject and object positions of the reader, but is also that of the first home, the mother's body. The "homely" object, the maternal aesthetic, gains a subjectivity and is no longer confined to "form", to object use.

McGuckian's aesthetics challenge the legacy of modernist poetics, but also crucially tackle Irish literary cultures and traditions, which are fixed in subject-object positions which designate the woman primarily as an iconic mother and as an unchanging structure from which a historical body of male poets may negotiate their relationship to the nation, or the island. As is well known, in Irish nationalist tradition woman is constructed as both dream and poem in the Aisling form. McGuckian's "The Aisling Hat" from *Captain Lavender*, in dialogue with modernism and the foundational antithetical poems of Yeats's nation state, that is, the post 1916 poems, is also in conference with the nationalist tradition of collapsing woman and dream. The poem explores the handling of McGuckian by her poetic carers, her cultural "unthought known", which was made by fathers not mothers. It begins with the narrator going back in textual history, represented by a street as "long as night", which is stamped with her own "surname" the mark of the father and by the "grandfather's house". She exposes the ego bounds or deep structure of the literary maternal aesthetic that she has herself inherited, and examines Yeats's legacy of care in particular. "If a child feels that his subjectivity is held by some container, composed of the actual holding environment of parental care and subsequently the evolving structure of his own mind, the subjectifying of the world feels licensed, underwritten", Bolas writes, "but if its right is not

secure, the child will feel hesitant to release the abandonment of self to their experiencing: such abandonment's feel life threatening". Structurally Yeats provided the matrix for McGuckian's "subjectifying" of the world, but he did not provide the terms in which such a subjectification could be realised. For the economy bequeathed to McGuckian is one in which a woman will more than likely be collapsed back into the unthought known, despite the fact that her subjectivity is not co-terminus with the early care and structure she provides. Male poets do not risk this collapse, but because Irish poetic traditions explicitly, and modernisms implicitly, think of "woman as poetry", then woman's separation from the maternal aesthetic that distinguishes poetry from prose is hard for such a culture to recognise, literally to see. "The Aisling Hat" represents Yeats's "stone" as encasing a rose, as that on which a rose is written: "like a pregnant/ woman, a rose inscribed in stone". In "Open Rose" from *Marconi's Cottage*, McGuckian represents the rose as a womb of words, "I have grown inside words", in which she grows "into a state of unboriness", thus charging the Yeatsian and modernist legacy of being unable to gestate her to full term, or terms. The "open rose on all sides/ has spoken as far as it can", so the terms of the subject are not sufficient to representing the "unthought known", and differentiating it from woman. In the legacy that McGuckian finds herself in, the poem/dream, or the unthought known confused as woman, is transcended in order for the subjectivity of the other to be affirmed, and thus it ends up "god-forsaken", dead:

Adding a feminine ending to
 whatever parts are dream. Of the place,
 it was godforsaken: of the season dead
 but whether it was sea or flesh,
 short capsules of conscripted
 cooling wax were laid like expiry
 dates over partings of quite a different
 cast. I said I must find it,
 Using the feminine form of must,
 What you want, what I want, what can be done.

In McGuckian's aesthetic, the adding of a feminine ending does not result in the annihilation of form, transcendence of the place, but con-scripts an operational form between the reader and the

poet, which makes the poem into a dramaturgy made from the “sea” and the “flesh” of the modernist poem, allowing for “partings” of and *with* “quite a different cast”. Thus, the mediating role played by the unthought known can be distinguished from the subjective difference of woman, in an æsthetics where experience is that of interpretation.