

DREAM ON



Elizabeth Lowry

MEDBH MCGUCKIAN, *Selected Poems*. Gallery Press, £7.95 (Hardback
£13.95)

What is it about Medbh McGuckian that attracts giddy, high-flown gush from even the most sure-footed critics? In an otherwise straight-talking notice of her new *Selected*, the *Irish Times* reviewer recently hazarded that “the pacing of these poems is precise and instinctive, as though McGuckian were allowing language simply to occur”, adding inconsequentially, “the result is that when concerns with gender and national politics begin to appear in the later verse, they do so with a sense of decorum and are never tacked-on or gratuitous”. Allowing language simply to occur? Decorum? Papa, prunes and prism. We are talking about *poetry*, aren't we? In the race to pseud's corner, however, the review still lags a couple of strides behind Lucien Jenkins's claim in *Poetry Review*, when *Marconi's Cottage* came out in 1991, that McGuckian's images “behave not like objective correlatives but rather as [sic] chords in Messiaen, where attempts to understand his synaesthetic system and allot individual colours to individual sounds do not prove fruitful”. As a highly sophisticated way of dodging the problem of McGuckian's bewildering obscurity (as Nick Roe did more brazenly in *North*, apropos of *Venus and the Rain*, by saying that “her evasive and hermetic technique is central to her meaning”) this is very neat, not less so for being diffuse. Easily first past the finishing post, though, is Seamus Heaney with the gloriously magniloquent suggestion that “her 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 as a woman in late twentieth-century Ireland”. That's fine as an advertisement for a wet-suit, but it tells us nothing about a talent that has produced five well-received collections and won McGuckian a sibyl-like status among contemporary Irish poets while frequently baffling her readers. Either the *Irish Times*, Jenkins, Roe and Heaney are all being unbecomingly ironic, or it would seem as if no one has the faintest idea as to what McGuckian is on about. Ditching the critics, we will have to return to the poems themselves to answer the question, hoping that the McGuckian effect won't begin to wreak its dreadful havoc before this review is done.

The selection begins with samples from McGuckian's first full collection, *The Flower Master and Other Poems*. Now this would be neither here nor there if it weren't for the fact that it represents her best work, leaving us for the remaining 62 pages with a keening sense of how good she can be. In her early thirties, McGuckian had it all: power, verve, an impressive formal command and a seductive self-confidence that still took the reader's separateness and craven desire for meaning into account. "Faith", "The 'Singer'", "Lychees", "Slips", "The Hollywood Bed", "The Flower Master" and "Power-Cut" are all superb poems, in which a distinctive visual opulence is ruthlessly focused into diamond-sharp tropes. "Faith", "Slips" and "Power-Cut" introduce a number of symbols—snow, the moon, water, leaves, ice—which recur freely throughout the later work but here still have a localized, particular, and above all accessible significance. "Faith", one of McGuckian's rare, hushed poems about her childhood, starts quietly:

My grandmother led us to believe in snow
as an old man in the sky shaking
feathers from his mattress over the world.

Her grandmother's bed, we learn, is covered every morning "with tiny scales, / sloughed off in the night from peeling skin".

I burned them in a heap, a dream of coins
more than Thérèse's promised shower of roses,
or Virgil's souls, many as autumn leaves.

Understated, intimate, the poem unobtrusively explains the dynamics of metaphor by mimicking the language of fairy-tales, religion and literature, which all use as their shorthand analogies drawn from the physical world—snow like feathers falling from a bed in the sky, virtue like treasure stored up in heaven, Thérèse of Lisieux's promise to let fall a shower of miracles like roses after her death, Virgil's glimpse of the hosts of the dead thronging together like withered leaves. We recognize that the imagination really does work like that: as embodied intelligences we choose concrete things as vehicles when expressing our intuitions. The closer the fit between a symbol and the laws of the world as we know it, the easier it is for us to give our assent to it. What a tremendous account of faith, and, incidentally, of how poetry works. The snugness of its symbolical fit is what makes us assent instinctively, too, when we read this description of a kitchen at night in "Power-Cut":

My dishes on the draining-board
lie at an even keel, the baby lowered
into his lobster-pot pen; my sponge
disintegrates in water like a bird's nest,
a permanent wave gone west.

The images are immediately convincing: the journey of life, the house like a trim ship steering a steady course in the darkness of a storm, the precious catch stowed away; everything shipshape, except for the pathetic fragility of human safeguards against the natural world. More than that, they seem always to have existed, to have been drawn from a common pool, to be rooted in a collective memory. As so often in McGuckian's early poems we are in the realm of archetype. "Gateposts", another accomplished example from her first collection, has the stateliness of a verbal ritual:

A man will keep a horse for prestige,
but a woman ripens best underground.
He settles where the wind
brings his whirling hat to rest,
and the wind decides which door is to be used.

In spite of its apparent plainness, this aphoristic style is actually highly wrought, since it is rhetorical and heavily dependent for its credibility on a symbolic register shared by both the poet and reader. In its own way it is also peculiarly Irish, marked by a courtly formality of speech that looks back to the Gaelic ballad. Even if we don't recognize the literary convention invoked here, it hardly matters because the paradigm (the joining of male and female, the wanderer hanging up his hat at the threshold of a shared life) is already familiar and sets up its own resonances. If these seem difficult to pin down at first, we should remember that McGuckian expressly warn us, in "Slips", that she is susceptible to the alluring open-endedness of metaphors drawn from myth and folklore:

My childhood is preserved as a nation's history,
my favourite fairytales the shells
leased by the hermit crab.

I see my grandmother's death as a piece of ice,
my mother's slimness restored to her,
my own key slotted in your door—

How, then, are we to approach these fairytales which are part both of the poet's metaphorical kit and the nation's history? It is perhaps necessary

here to say something about Ireland's great secular literary legacy, the bardic poem. Heaney's suggestion that McGuckian's poems reflect a "dreamlife" is not simply random, for Irish poetry, especially the *aisling* or vision poem which was so popular in the eighteenth century during the era of the Penal Laws, is full of references to dreams and hallucinations, tokens for the hidden life of a people whose natural energies had been driven underground. Gaelic folk verse, with its recurring motifs—similar to McGuckian's own metaphorical stock of forests, lakes, stones, certain types of flower and fruit, the sun and moon and colours such as blue, red and gold—its syllabic metre and at times cryptic formality, can strike the modern reader used to pliancy and individualism in poetry as odd, until we realize that it is the musical and decorative quality of the words themselves that matters. Typically in the vision poem the poet, oppressed or in darkness, is approached by a beautiful woman, the *Spéir-bhean* or *Spéir-bhrúinneal*, an emissary from the dream world promising physical liberty and psychological release. Her brightness illuminates the gloom as she speaks musical words, with crimson cheeks and eyes flashing like crystal:

Gile na gile do chonnarc ar slighe i n-uaigneas;
 Criostal an chriostal a guirmruisc rinn-uaine;
 Binneas an bhinnis a friotal nar chríon-ghruamdha;
 Deirge is finne do fionnadh n-a gríos-ghruadhnaibh.

(The brightest of the bright met me on my path so lonely;
 The crystal of all crystals was her flashing dark-blue eye;
 More melodious than music was her spoken language only;
 And glorious were her cheeks of a brilliant crimson dye.)

This is the first verse of one of the earliest *aisling* poems, written by Aodhagán ÓRathaille (and here given in Daniel Corkery's 1924 translation). Before disappearing the *Spéir-bhean* charges the poet with a task: he must devote himself to freeing her from her captivity. Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's "The Bond", which appears in this collection in McGuckian's elegant, unfussy translation, follows the form closely:

A boat comes up the river by night
 with a woman standing in it,
 twin candles lit in her eyes
 and two oars in her hands.

She unsheathes a pack of cards.
 "Will you play forfeits?" she says.

We play and she beats me hands down,
and she puts three banns upon me:

Not to have two meals in one house,
not to pass two nights under the same roof,
not to sleep twice with the same man
until I find her.

In several places McGuckian appropriates the vatic mood of the *aisling* poem, adapting its central conceit to explore a variety of themes. “The Aisling Hat” reverses the convention’s traditional gender roles as the female speaker pursues a recalcitrant male muse (“I search for a lost, unknown song/ in a street as long as night” [...] “Carefree skater on air, his language / cannot be worn down”). “On Her Second Birthday” paints a nightmare landscape in which the poet’s ambiguous relationship with the elusive vision suggests a state of mental crisis:

Suddenly ever more lost
between the trees
I saw the edge of the forest
which had no end,
which I came dangerously close
to accepting for my life,

and followed with my eye a shadow
floating from horizon to horizon
which I mistook for my own.
It grew greater while I grew less,
gliding like a world, a tapestry
one looks at from the back.

“Elegy for an Irish Speaker”, taking a tip from Sexton and Plath, recasts this figure as “Miss Death” lying in wait on the road of life. In “Four O’Clock, Summer Street”, the disappearing visitor is a vision of the child the speaker and her lover long to have: “She had the boy-girl body of a flower, / moving once and for all past the hermetic front door”. So far, this is very impressive: McGuckian seems successfully to have updated and personalized what is perhaps the most well-known archetype in Irish poetry. Elsewhere, too, her images have the vigour of integrated symbols: “The Dream-Language of Fergus”, for instance, compactly describes the ancient languages persisting in their present-day European offshoots in fossilized form, “till what began as a dog’s bark / ends with bronze, what began / with honey ends with ice”. 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 treacly, sluggish rhythm of a dream, as well as its incoherent free-association of images:

She remembers his having to throw stones in the water
to break his dream—and how the river returned them—
or seated at the stone table under the yew, explaining
his need for streets.

At which the birds and vine bed-hangings complain, we have
been taken in too many times by leaves against the window:
a window should be a wide-eaved colour beyond anything.

This is dream poetry with a vengeance. Disturbingly and rather irritatingly, McGuckian’s later poems often create a parallel world in which the signifiers have mutated and no longer correspond to their workaday meanings, so that one has to guess what even the most ordinary words are supposed to denote. The change coincides roughly with her third book, *On Ballycastle Beach*, and is offset by equally surreal syntactical high-jinks. Of course poetry can bend the rules of syntax, but even poetry can only bend them so far. One can just about say, as McGuckian does in “The Partners’ Desk”,

I arranged the Christmas tree in its green outfit,
producing its green against the grey sky like handwriting
that has been traced over

But what are we supposed to make of the addendum to this thought? Fellow literal-minded reader, just as you and I have managed to come to grips with the idea of that Christmas tree, presumably a fir or spruce, with its jagged branches sticking out like vertical rows of letter z’s, the line runs on as follows:

that has been traced over or, when snow tires us,
the sunshine inside and out of my birthday dove.
Both our birthdays are today, and I was playing with
its feather on the bed as if it were a brake

on the thawing weather, that almost-summer
had already arrived. Being still in the grip
of a dream of pearls which robbed me
of my un-English language (yesterday
he dreamed of laburnums).

Does the green of the tree resemble the sunshine inside and out of the birthday dove when it is not like handwriting? What is that demonstrative pronoun doing before “almost-summer”? Who is dreaming of laburnums? One begins to feel that McGuckian hasn’t really been robbed of an un-English language at all. Similar problems arise when we start to read “No Streets, No Numbers”:

The wind bruises the curtain’s jay-blue stripes
like an unsold fruit or a child who writes
its first word. The rain tonight in my hair
runs a firm, unmuscular hand over something
sand-ribbed and troubled, a desolation
that could erase all memory of warmth
from the patch of vegetation where torchlight
has fallen. The thought that I might miss
even a second of real rain is like the simple
double knock of the stains of birth and death,
two men back to back carrying furniture
from a room on one side of the street
to a room on the other.

The mind reels, trying frantically to fit these ideas to what it knows about the waking world. In what way, physically or otherwise, is a child who writes its first word like an unsold fruit, or a breeze bruising the stripes of a curtain? Is there a possible connection between the hair stroked by the rain and that torch-lit patch of vegetation? Why is the torchlight falling there anyway? What happened there to arouse a memory of warmth? The picture of birth and death, walking back to back like removal men, is terrific, but how do the stains of birth and death (or rather, their double knock) resemble a thought about missing even a second of real rain? Some of these later poems are accompanied by hints that we should approach them as if they were paintings—possibly the sort of abstract expressionist pieces done by Kandinsky, as the titles “Sea or Sky?”, “The Blue She Brings with Her” and “Breaking the Blue” suggest. And here we come to the source of the problem. Words are not like paint, which is infinitely flexible in what it may represent, but have quantities already assigned to them. In our lazy way we say that a picture “speaks” to us, but of course it doesn’t: the colour blue does not necessarily signify the Irish Sea, the summer sky or my new jumper, but the words “the Irish Sea”, “the summer sky” and “my new jumper” do just that. Use blue poster paint to depict anything you like, reader, but use the words “my new jumper” to refer to Dublin airport, the telephone directory or the Statue of Liberty, and you do so at your peril. I can’t in all conscience write an entire poem about

“my new jumper” and expect you to know that I was actually referring to Dublin airport all the while. This haphazardness seems perverse when one remembers that McGuckian can be witty (“I think his family is so ancient, / his heart must still be over on the right”, she says of a friend in “The Invalid’s Echo”), precise (just look again at that description, in “The War Degree”, of birds calling to each other “Like a transfusion made directly from arm / to arm”) and genuinely off-beat (who else but McGuckian could write with a straight face that “Of all silences, the hardest to bear / is the strange vegetation of your clothes”?) Once you have passed the middle point of the book, however, a stanza from “What does ‘Early’ mean?” begins to seem queasily prophetic:

Every sentence is the same
old workshop sentence, ending
rightly or wrongly in the ruins
of an evening spent in puzzling
over the meaning of six o’clock or seven[.]

Reader, on putting down this collection, utterly puzzled and the evening by now well ruined, I was about to abandon English entirely and learn Sanskrit instead, when suddenly there appeared the *Spéir-bhean* herself. Her hair was golden, flowing in wreathed layers to the ground. In her cheeks the red of cherries overlay the whiteness of a lake in winter. Her teeth were like pearls in her witty mouth, which was sucking a pencil. To cut a long story short, she stooped, reading aloud, over her tablets, unfolding to me the missing verbs, conjunctions and subordinate clauses which would make sense of the poems we have been discussing. She assured me with a knowing smile that the editors had kindly agreed to print them all on p. 73 if I would just take a dictation. Eagerly I sharpened my pencil. I was even prepared to write an apology to Seamus Heaney and co. Oh well, reader, you know now what these *aislings* are like. When I looked up she was gone.