

“ROAMING ROOT OF MULTIPLE MEANINGS”:  
Intertextual Relations in Medbh McGuckian’s Poetry



*Shane Murphy*

In Medbh McGuckian’s early poetic manifesto “The Seed Picture”, the analogy between “seed-work” and creative writing appears to reinforce a conception of her method of composition as simply dual in nature. The importance of intuition and her willingness to allow unconscious or submerged elements to take the lead is suggested when the poet states that “The seeds dictate their own vocabulary, / Their dusty colours capture / More than we can plan”. The secondary activity, then, is one of arrangement: “I only guide them not by guesswork / In their necessary numbers”. Although this reads very much like Seamus Heaney’s well-known distinction between craft and technique, what has not been recognised is that her process of writing actually entails three stages, the neglected one being the primary activity of gathering seeds (vocabulary). While this poem only states the theme that words “capture / More than we can plan”, McGuckian’s poetry from *On Ballycastle Beach* on enacts this process because the words are taken from a variety of memoirs, biographies, critical essays, etc. and are arranged by the writer who attaches them “by the spine to a perfect bedding” (i.e. her book of poems).

The arrangement within a single poetic text of Medbh McGuckian’s carefully selected quotations can be described as a “patchwork”, the function of which is akin to, but significantly different from that described in the second verse of Michael Longley’s poem of the same name:

I pull over us old clothes, remnants,  
Stitching together shirts and nightshirts

Into such a dazzle as will burn away  
Newspapers, letters, previous templates \_

The idea of creating poetry by re-cycling other people’s images and phrases is not all that artistically purposeful in itself; however, if the “previous templates” are not burned away but held together and made self-regarding, meta-textual, ironic or parodic, the writer can make use of the dialogic potential of a precursor’s own words. One example of McGuckian’s emphasis on the relational aspects of quotation is “Little House, Big

House”, a poem which uses (unacknowledged) borrowings from a biography to set up a parallel between herself and another writer.

It must be admitted that precise knowledge of the particular biography or memoir the poet is using would save the critic from making unwarranted assumptions like those contained in Patricia Boyle Haberstroh’s recent assessment of McGuckian’s poetry. Analysing “Little House, Big House”, Haberstroh contextualizes the poem within the literary/socio-political paradigm of the Anglo-Irish Big House tradition: “Alluding to the big houses inhabited by English settlers and the small homes of the Irish cottagers, the speaker imagines a different kind of house\_”. Since the poem is bereft of footnotes, dates, or historical personae, this is a curious reflex on Haberstroh’s part; indeed, the text does not invite such an interpretation, hinging solely on the poem’s title. It is noteworthy that she overlooks the poem’s only cited placename, Tarusa — a town whose Eastern European location weakens the plausability of her narrowly focused argument.

Since our blood  
Is always older than we will ever be,  
I should like to lie in Tarusa under matted winter grass,  
Where the strawberries are redder than anywhere else.

Knowing that Tarusa was the town in which Marina Tsvetaeva’s family had their summer residence, Meva Maron was able to take the reference as evidence of a possible intertext: “But Tarusa and all the strawberries at the end of ‘Little House, Big House’, which caught my eye because I used the same quote in a more satirical poem presumably about the same time... does more than let you say, ‘Aha, Tsvetaeva! I’ve solved the crossword’”. However, her letter to the *Honest Ulsterman* is yet another example of (unintentional) misdirection since McGuckian’s reference is far more indirect than Maron suspects. Although “Tarusa” and the “strawberries” are mentioned in Tsvetaeva’s *A Captive Spirit: Selected Prose* and although the strawberries are mentioned again in her poem “Much like Me” (“It’s true that graveyard strawberries / Are the biggest and sweetest of all”), McGuckian in fact appropriates her final lines from Olga Ivinskaya’s reminiscences of her life with Boris Pasternak. Describing the tragic fate of Tsvetaeva (who committed suicide on 31 August 1941), she laments the fact that the poet was buried in an unmarked grave in Yelabuga, contrary to her wishes:

In May 1934, while she was still in Paris, Marina had written: ‘*I should like to lie in the khlyst* [Russian religious sect. Tsvetaeva’s

family spent their summers in *Tarusa* before the Revolution] cemetery at Tarusa, under an elder bush, in one of those graves with a silver dove on it, *where the wild strawberries are larger and redder than anywhere else* in those parts'. (emphasis added)

The poem is, in this respect, a meditation upon Tsvetaeva's suicide ("So different from an ordinary going-away"). That McGuckian is not simply quoting Tsvetaeva, but Ivinskaya's account of her death is confirmed by further unattributed quotations within the poem. In the final line of the second stanza, McGuckian states that she deepens shadows with her "autumn brown raincoat". The connotations of death and decay are reinforced when we learn that, during her final days, Tsvetaeva was "dressed very badly—in a long dark dress, an old brown autumn raincoat, and a beret of a dirty-blue colour she had knitted herself". Similarly, in the previous lines, McGuckian asks: "Why should I take / My apron off for a wineless dinner?" The growing apathy and despair to which these lines allude are made all the more poignant when we realize that before her death, Tsvetaeva "did not even take off the apron with the large pocket in which she had been doing her housework that morning". McGuckian's "wineless dinner" is a clever allusion to "For My Poems", and gives one possible reason behind the Russian poet's fateful decision to take her own life. The poem begins by declaring "For my poems, stored deep like wines of precious vintage, / I know a time will come"; during her depressing days spent in the wooden house on Zhdanov Street, it was evident that she was no longer able to compose. McGuckian has spoken of Tsvetaeva's suicide with compassion (and even respect) in an interview with the author in which she contrasts Tsvetaeva's conduct with that of Mayakovsky: "I suppose hers [suicide] was more understandable, hers was more choreographic. He had written one poem against it, and then he did it, I found it disappointing—whereas I felt that her reasons were not cowardice but real despair, and that I could admire her". Her ability to identify with the Russian poet is not belied by their different social or political circumstances, as shown in a comment in a review of Tsvetaeva's prose:

But I understand something of her obsessive maternal instinct towards both husband and son, a reaction of sorts to those bereavements; her absolute need for the emotional involvement in her subject matter; her abject loyalties; and the social, psychic break between her prolonged adolescence with its security and material comfort, its privileged education, and the nightmare of her maturity, its wars, deprivation, and exile: 'caught up in the middle of her life by a brutal era' (to quote Joseph Brodsky).

The poem's title, which Haberstroh so decisively misreads, points towards another reading as it contains a veiled reference to the love affair between Boris Pasternak and Olga Ivinskaya. She describes how he kept a country house (*dacha*) at Peredelkino, a village situated twenty kilometres from Moscow, and how he lived there with his second wife, Zinaida Nikolayevna, in what is called "the big house" as opposed to Ivinskaya's "little house" nearby:

I think Zinaida Nikolayevna understood very well that by making a good home for BL, she strengthened her position as his legal wife and the mistress of *the "big" house*—which made it easier for her to reconcile herself to the open existence of *the "little" house* (that is, mine), and she knew that any ill-considered attempt to put pressure on BL would have meant disaster for her.

But it was not quite as simple as that. In his last years, the study with his favourite books and his desk had its due place in his heart, but he often said to me: 'I am going off to work. I have to be worthy of you. My place of work is over there.' (emphasis added)

Several narratives are conjoined, the thematics of which differ according to our identification of the speaker and addressee. For instance, when, in the fourth stanza, McGuckian says "And the house like me / Was tangled with the emotion of cut flowers", the emotion in question alternates between despair (Tsvetaeva) and frustration (Ivinskaya), depending on which historical figure she is empathizing with at the time. It is also important to note the implicit link that the poem makes between Pasternak and Tsvetaeva. Ivinskaya reports in her memoirs that "[d]uring my years with BL I heard him speak over and over again about his sense of responsibility for Marina's return to Russia, for her feeling that she was utterly abandoned, and for her death. Till the end of his life he never ceased to mourn her". This guilt was occasioned by his reluctance to allow Tsvetaeva to stay at the "big house" when she turned to him for help towards the end of her life, a refusal which he later deemed a contributing factor to her decision to commit suicide: "Years later BL told me that he had not invited Marina to stay—the thing he would really have liked to do—partly because of his own indecisiveness and partly because of the domestic situation at the Peredelkino house".

Medbh McGuckian's use of dovetailed quotations is not limited to establishing an empathy with precursor female poets. Other people's words are often brought to bear upon a situation when the author herself, due to some traumatic event, is unable to speak in her own words. One such occasion was the death of her father. In "The Finder Has Become the

Seeker", the poet addresses her dead parent using a combination of her own images and those culled lovingly from Osip Mandelstam's prose. McGuckian's verses strive to become "resurrective" and, in her struggle to celebrate her father, she turns to an existing word hoard. Contrary to Jehan Ramazani's contention that the modern elegy is anti-consolatory, McGuckian's elegies attempt to resurrect the father-figure—biological and literary—using Mandelstam's words to do so: "I think in my loss of a father I took on M. as a poetic ancestor". It is somewhat appropriate that McGuckian should turn to Mandelstam since he himself contended that "poetic speech may be compared to a piece of amber in which a fly still buzzes, having long ago been buried under layers of resin, the living foreign body continuing to live even when fossilized". Such an image describes the immortality which McGuckian wishes to establish for her father through her own words.

Sleep easy, supposed fatherhood,  
resembling a flowerbed.  
Though I extract you here and now  
from the soil, open somehow  
your newly opened leaves:  
I like to breathe what ought to be.

The poet implicitly compares "fatherhood" to poetic composition by describing each activity in related organic metaphors: while fatherhood is said to resemble a "flowerbed", the poet's focus on the present time of writing ("here and now") implies that picking a flower is an analogy for the writing process. This can also be seen in the ambiguous order to open "your newly opened leaves", which can refer to both a flower as well as to a book of poems. Paradoxically, death becomes life-giving; although the father has departed from his earthly existence, he is urged to flourish on a new spiritual/textual level. Yet the poem is hesitant in its optimism: "somehow" and "ought" are less than self-assured. Matters are made even more complicated by her questioning the essential maleness and ultimate source of "fatherhood". The poet extends the concept beyond a narrow biological definition by giving it a literary slant vis-à-vis poetic ancestry. Indeed, using the same organic metaphor, she has stated that "I have always believed that the lives of people who lived before us were the rightful soil in which poetry grows".

You desire to exist through me;  
I want to disappear exhausted in you.  
We are things squeezed out, like lips,

not that which serves as coverings —  
give me the strength to distinguish myself  
from you, such ill-matched wings.

In this second stanza, she puts forward two seemingly antithetical wishes: “to disappear exhausted in you” and “to distinguish myself / from you”. On one level, McGuckian is expressing filial love and seeking the fatherly protection which she has lost, but she does not wish to lose her identity in the process; on another level, by adopting a palimpsestic form in her poem, she is fulfilling her need to use another writer’s words to express her emotions while maintaining her own inimitable style. Asked why she borrows so heavily from Mandelstam in the elegies, McGuckian replied that “in the initial stages of loss and grief one is less in control of one’s consciousness than usual and therefore for me to hand my consciousness over to another poet’s full keeping was necessary”. One such borrowing has to do with poetic form. In “Conversation about Dante”, Mandelstam writes that “[t]here is not just one form in Dante, but a multitude of forms. One is squeezed out of another and only by convention can one be inserted into another.... ‘I would squeeze the juice out of my idea, out of my conception’—that is, he considers form as the thing which is squeezed out, not as that which serves as a covering” (emphasis added). McGuckian’s form, like Dante’s, both creates and depends on its content, and it is this symbiosis which she wants to establish with her biological and literary father. By using Mandelstam’s words in a new context, her texts become dialogic and polyphonic in the manner of much mainstream contemporary British and Irish poetry. Her words become ambivalent, taking on new meanings while retaining the old; in particular, her words adopt what Julia Kristeva calls a “hidden interior polemic”, characterized by “the active (modifying) influence of another’s word on the writer’s word. It is the writer who ‘speaks,’ but a foreign discourse is constantly present in the speech that it distorts”. Incorporating Mandelstam into her work, she is all the while free from his overweening authority. She self-reflexively comments on this process in the third stanza:

Night furs you, winter clothes you,  
Homerically studded in your different planting.  
You jangle the keys of language  
you are not using, your understanding  
of sunlight is more language than that,  
your outcast sounds scatter their fluid carpet.

The second line is ironic as the words “Homerically studded” are them-

selves newly planted from a different context: in “Journey to Armenia”, Mandelstam states that the entire island of Sevan “is Homerically studded with yellow bones, leavings from the pious picnics of the local populace”. The reference bears little trace of its original meaning, the name of “Homer” suggesting an alternative literary provenance. She follows this with a quotation from the same essay describing the Armenians’ use of language: “As a result of my incorrect subjective orientation, I acquired the habit of looking upon every Armenian as a philologist.... However, this is partly correct, for these people *jangle the keys of their language* even when they are not unlocking any treasures” (emphasis added). This discordant music, in its new “planting”, refers to the effect which is produced by McGuckian’s layering and sampling of pieces of text. However, not only do the quotations produce non-synchronous reading, but they also allow her to communicate with two distinct people at the same time. Asked in an interview why she uses the Russian poet as a literary source, she commented that “now that I was left without my father I would have to adapt to a new way of being communicated with and I would have to refine all my senses in a spiritual way, which would be painful, but it was up to me to turn more sophisticated now, to keep in touch with the dead person who was gone—so I would be able to differentiate between them”. The “outcast sounds” that “scatter their fluid carpet” ensure that such polyphony occurs. Indeed, this metaphor is itself taken from a passage where Mandelstam describes poetic discourse in terms which have much in common with dialogism:

Poetic discourse is a carpet fabric containing a plethora of textile warps differing from one another only in the process of coloration, only in the partitura of the perpetually changing commands of the instrumental signalling system.

It is an extremely durable carpet, woven out of fluid: a carpet in which the currents of the Ganges, taken as a fabric theme, do not mix with the samples of the Nile or the Euphrates, but remain multi-coloured....

McGuckian’s use of quotations translated from the Russian produces “a semiotic polyvalence” which works against the grammatical rationale of the English language. Analysing the final stanza, one could interpret it solely in terms of her borrowings from Mandelstam, yet this would neglect the discordance which results from her estrangement from the language. Since her own “language and grammar is so doubly foreign”, she uses quotations from other writers for a montage effect, writing in a form of non-English. Her poetry adopts a more covert form of quotation in

order to symbolically undermine the English, male canon: "I have to live under this mountain and try to belong to it without becoming narrow or jealous, to be eternally grateful to Milton without being deluged into silence, to continue what women have begun without succumbing to the inevitable real or ritual self-immolation".

McGuckian's resistance to the English language and her desire to articulate the inexpressible are best expressed in "Elegy for an Irish Speaker", an elegy whose five stanzas comprise forty quotations taken from twenty-one essays by Osip Mandelstam. The circuitous logic, convoluted syntax and uncertain referents of the opening stanza are an example of McGuckian's attempted disruption of patriarchal discourse, mimicking the emergence of the semiotic through the symbolic order:

Numbered day,  
night only just beginning,  
be born very slowly, stay  
with me, impossible to name.

It is difficult to tell when the "Numbered day" ends and the "night" begins. Juxtaposing the two, McGuckian again links birth with death, but reverses the usual chronology. The male persona, (a fusion of her own father and Mandelstam), is said to "fertilize" death and make a new level of communication possible. This partly explains the ambivalence surrounding the phrase "impossible to name". While it seems to signify McGuckian's inability to name death, the original context in Mandelstam's prose suggests that this is far from negative: "How dreadful that man (the eternal philologist) has found a word for this: 'death'. Is it really possible to name it? Does it warrant a name? A name is a definition, a 'something we already know'. So Rozanov defined the essence of his nominalism in a most personal manner: the eternal cognitive movement, the eternal cracking of the nut which comes to nothing because there is no way to gnaw through it". McGuckian's use of language is neither static nor monological, but metamorphic and dialogical, and it facilitates her assumption of a priest-like role:

Today a kind of speaking in tongues is taking place. In sacred frenzy poets speak the language of all times, all cultures. Nothing is impossible. As *the room of a dying man is open to everyone*, so the door of the old world is flung wide open before the crowd. Suddenly everything becomes public property. Come and take your pick. Everything is accessible: all labyrinths, all secret recesses, all forbidden paths. The word has become not a seven-stop but a thousand-stop flute, brought to life all at once by the breathing of



ages. The most striking thing about speaking in tongues is that the speaker does not know the language he is speaking. (emphasis added)

The passage from which McGuckian takes her quotation emphasizes the inspired and unconscious manner in which a poet writes. It is on this level that communication can take place with her father/Mandelstam:

He breaks away from your womb  
to talk to me,  
he speaks so with my consciousness  
and not with words, he's in danger  
of becoming a poetess.

The father/Mandelstam are said to be reborn when celebrated in McGuckian's poetry, and a fusion occurs between all three. McGuckian deliberately reads Mandelstam's text against the grain and uses her quotations to modify the poles of his word/consciousness binary opposition:

But too often we fail to see that the poet raises a phenomenon to its tenth power, and the modest exterior of a work of art often deceives us with regard to the monstrosity condensed reality contained within. In poetry this reality is the word as such. Right now, for instance, in expressing my thoughts as precisely as possible, but certainly not in a poetic manner, *I am essentially speaking with my consciousness, not with the word.* (emphasis added)

For Mandelstam, speaking with one's "consciousness" is not poetic and contrasts with the inspired use of "the word", the religious overtones of which re-emphasize the poet's "speaking in tongues". McGuckian subtly alters the quotation by pluralising "the word" (thereby secularizing it) and by emphasizing the spiritual nature of her communication with the dead. Whereas Mandelstam uses "poetess" as a term of abuse for Mayakovsky, McGuckian's use is wholly positive.

Most foreign and cherished reader,  
I cannot live without  
your trans-sense language,  
the living furrow of your spoken words  
that plough up time.

Two of her quotations are from passages which she has already referred to in earlier poems. In "Constable's 'Haywain'", McGuckian describes the father's coffin as if it were a funerary ship and she repeats the image here:

“How can one equip this ship for its distant voyage, without furnishing it with all the necessities for *so foreign and cherished a reader?*” (emphasis added). In “The Dream Language of Fergus”, the poet uses a religious register of language when distinguishing the poetic from the non-poetic use of language: “Not the rudiment / Of half a vanquished sound, / The excommunicated shadow of a name...”. Repeating the reference, she reaffirms her commitment to what is poetic: “*I cannot live without language*, I cannot survive excommunication from the word. Such, approximately, was Rozanov’s spiritual state. The anarchistic, nihilistic spirit recognized only one authority: the magic of language, the power of the word...” (emphasis added). While it is obvious from the context that the audience to whom her poetry is addressed is her father/Mandelstam, the poem’s title offers an alternative reading of what she might mean by “foreign”. McGuckian extends the meaning of “trans-sense language” to include not only “those transitional forms which succeeded in not being covered by the semantic crust created by the properly and correctly developing language”, but also the unconscious/uncolonized traces of the Irish language which reside in her father (and, implicitly, in McGuckian since the two have become one). This is emphasized by the connection she establishes between land and language: while not quite “racy of the soil”, the “trans-sense language” is a form of earth writing, creating “the living furrow of your spoken words / that plough up time”. She has need of this language for a deeper understanding of the past. When she states that “Instead of the real past / with its deep roots, / I have yesterday . . .”, she is quoting Mandelstam’s belief that one should study the literature of *both* the past and present in order to get a fuller understanding of both: “whoever fails to comprehend the new has no sense of the old, while whoever understands the old is bound to understand the new. Nevertheless, it is our great misfortune when, instead of *the real past with its deep roots*, we understand the past merely as ‘yesterday’”.

Medbh McGuckian’s use of quotation does not present the reader with a collage of decontextualised phrases; rather, she imposes her own vision upon the array of intertextual references, each of which is used to achieve a particular poetic effect. In the poems discussed in this article, her use of Ivinskaya, Tsvetayeva and Mandelstam allows her to critically examine the ideas of each writer while at the same time discussing her own poetic practice. Although such allusive writing tends toward obliquity and produces disjointed, fragmentary texts, the (apparent) irrationalism is precisely the effect which McGuckian strives for, subverting as it does the tra-

ditional masculinist preference for linearity and logic. In conclusion, one should begin to celebrate the vast intelligence and intricate beauty of her work, despite (or in spite of) those who persist in writing her poems off as mere “surreal obliquities”.

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## TWO POEMS



*Stephen Burt*

FIRST MORNINGS IN NEW YORK  
*for Claudia Gonson*

Thick sprigs of holly paint-stained by mistake  
stick by their tack-ends to the iron fence  
squat painters and card-salesmen stood beside,  
whose chained-up gear banged on the rails all night,  
accordions as tuneless as an index.  
The music drags, the street musicians stay:

canebreaks of leather and discarded boys,  
too willing to be discarded to look discarded,  
still span the sidewalk catwalks at St Mark's—  
I'm happier to see them there, some days,  
than to see friends... unstuck, precipitous,  
hearing myself, I blush and then admit

my sour wish to elegize the living.  
Youth isn't wasted, it outlives all the young;  
the steely Argo will survive its parts  
and reach its port with every nail renewed,  
its job to cross water, corrode and be renewed.  
Each morning the Williamsburg Bridge commuters look out,

brake, turn, dodge, spit and swerve past the onramps;  
only cabdrivers' passengers look back  
to watch Delancey Street greet the unseen:  
four-storey high billboards, their optimist  
commercial painters rampant, bearing cans,  
cartoon speech-bubbles poised above the cars—

*Welcome to Manhattan. Do It Yourself Here. Save.*

## UNSEASONAL

A summer morning in winter,  
meat in the air.  
Packets, dispensed, of aerosol rain.  
The college town's cathedral square

is like a children's refuge: adult stars

have tried hard to see out.

Since Mardi Gras is soon, the stone  
guys standing up in doorways wear fake jewels.

Corroded—what?—white oak leaves have survived;

as black as photograms, as thin as prints,  
they are blown from the roof slowly, their own means.

An unaccompanied piano—

“Just because I walked in on you singing  
in the bathroom, doesn't mean you were bad! You were  
good!”

Each kind of person persons claim to be,  
or claim to have been, turns into a place

we treat as means to reach

any of them, before they go away.