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## Contemporary Irish Women Poets

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Published by Liverpool University Press

Collins, Lucy.

Contemporary Irish Women Poets: Memory and Estrangement.

Liverpool University Press, 2015.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

# Medbh McGuckian's Radical Temporalities

Medbh McGuckian's abstract and challenging work has fascinated and puzzled readers in equal measure since she first began publishing in the 1980s.<sup>1</sup> Her language describes, and dwells in, an inner world and retains the freedom to explore a multiplicity of identities and to respond to both real and imaginative worlds, past and present. The strangeness of McGuckian's language makes it memorable for the reader, and in this way the processes of memory and estrangement are closely woven into each poetic encounter. In keeping with these practices her engagement with acts of remembrance is oblique but, as I will argue in this chapter, both her recurring themes and compositional strategies are linked to a desire to alter the linear relationship between past, present and future in order that new ways of understanding experience can be achieved. In this way her poetic process privileges the practices of memory over those of the conventional historical narrative as her means of accessing the past depends upon its imaginative presence to both poet and reader.

The world of McGuckian's poetry is an intimate one in the relationship it suggests between the reader and the sensory world of the poem. Yet these works do not represent the self directly, nor do they interrogate ideas of selfhood except by abstract or associative means. This reflects the poet's convictions concerning the radical instability of language: as well as the subjective processes of writing and reading, McGuckian attributes these challenges to communication to 'Irish and English and the language problem, and the way that the language was killed through the fighting, that the language was lost by that awful trauma but very recently, only one hundred and fifty years ago'.<sup>2</sup>

This concern for the changing dynamics of language in Ireland is reflected in her metaphorical uses here, in her references to language being 'killed' and to the trauma of its loss.<sup>3</sup> Unlike Mary O'Malley,

who mourns the loss of the language but connects with it through place and landscape, McGuckian initiates more fundamental challenges to the contemporary lyric mode. Shane Murphy argues that the kind of decolonization in which McGuckian engages does not appropriate English but ‘deterritorialises the English language, subjecting it to a radical displacement’.<sup>4</sup> The strategic nature of this approach creates further receptive tensions: ‘The extraordinary logical and associative disjunctions that typify her poetry offload sense-making almost entirely onto the reader’, writes Eric Falci, ‘while keeping an esoteric and exclusive mode of authority – an authority effect – for the poet’.<sup>5</sup> These ‘disjunctions’ have an estranging effect on all McGuckian’s readers, but the retention of authority that Falci describes would seem to underpin the vexed critical reception of her work. The practice of displacement is not the mark of a devolved authority, then, but a contortion of linguistic temporality that has implications for the relationship between creative and critical discourses, since the latter can neither accurately express, nor claim authority for, the patterns of meaning here.

One aspect of McGuckian’s handling of time that is immediately evident is the sheer proliferation of her work. In the 35 years since she began writing she has published more than eighteen volumes of original work, suggesting not only a continuous creative process but also a degree of compositional simultaneity. It is this dimension of her practice that keeps McGuckian’s poems in a state of interpretative play, one with another. Her poems resonate with one another, circulating language as well as creating it anew. Borbála Faragó has argued persuasively for the importance of the creative process as an enduring theme for this poet and her recent study demonstrates the cumulative nature of the poet’s investigation of creativity.<sup>6</sup> Though Faragó’s detailed close reading of the poems reveals the networks of meaning that they progressively generate, McGuckian herself has acknowledged the difficulties that her creative abundance presents for a certain kind of critical order. Some commentators, though, see this profusion as essential to the meaning of her work: fellow poet Nuala Archer describes McGuckian’s poems as ‘resonating prisms that amaze the mazes of partition and parturition’, revealing the need for a critical vocabulary sufficiently flexible to express the originality of McGuckian’s art and its arresting effects on the reader.<sup>7</sup> The prismatic quality, and the links between self-division and pro-creativity suggested here, are especially illuminating of the intertextual dimensions of McGuckian’s work, which have attracted significant critical attention in recent years.<sup>8</sup> She describes her practice thus:

I never write just blindly, I never sit down without an apparatus, I always have a collection of words – it's like a bird building a nest – I gather materials over the two weeks, or whatever [...] I never sit down without those because otherwise you would just go mad, trying to think of words.<sup>9</sup>

This accumulated material, often gleaned from the poet's current reading, is consciously assembled by her and reshaped to form a new poem. The memory of the earlier text becomes a specific trace that remains in the finished poem creating a multifaceted work that may or may not reveal its past selves to the reader. McGuckian rarely offers explicit signals to the texts she is drawing from, a fact that confirms the delicate balance in her work between the desire to express and the desire to communicate: 'I don't think you need to know it all to get something out of it. In fact, maybe if you know it all you get less out of it'.<sup>10</sup> For McGuckian, the encounter with strangeness is not an alienating but an invigorating experience and in this she has much in common with avant-garde poets such as Catherine Walsh. The partial occlusion of an interpretative history offers creative freedom to the reader. In this way, the textual past may be as important to the mood of the poem as to its detailed analysis, contributing to the textured quality of McGuckian's language without adding essential layers of meaning. Shane Murphy argues that this intellectual/personal dynamic represents McGuckian's complex relationship with her precursors, permitting her

to retain vestiges of prior writings while including a critique or commentary on them [...] For the poet, such a layered composition initiates a personal relationship to a literary precursor, a relationship wholly dissimilar to that established by literary biographers whose work she reproduces.<sup>11</sup>

Deryn Rees-Jones further maintains that the intertextual references are McGuckian's attempt 'to reconcile, rediscover, rewrite, to literally incorporate the feminine body into the body of the text as texts, often by canonical male authors, become intimately woven into the female textual body, intersecting with her "own" writing, like warp to weft'.<sup>12</sup> It is this drawing in of the world that makes the imaginative mobility of McGuckian's work so memorable to readers. Nothing in these poems is fixed; language and voices move freely from the poet's reading to her writing, reformed but never fully contained by this process.

In some respects, then, McGuckian's work may be seen as antithetical to Ní Chuilleanáin's in that it eliminates, rather than reflecting upon, the boundaries between self and other, present and past, writing and reading. For McGuckian, reading is an act of remembering, so that

each poem has a textual past as well as a textual present – a variable pre-existence that allows her work to open imaginatively again and again as different voices are heard within the poem's compositional structure. Her poems therefore require an active form of remembering but also the ability to forget in order that new interpretations may emerge: as the poem 'Mazurka' suggests: 'A newly-understood poem will melt / And be hard again'.<sup>13</sup> This explicit acknowledgment of the endless renewal of meaning possible in the single poem is again suggestive of the simultaneity of McGuckian's work: rather than one act of reading following another, all are open to reinterpretation. Here forgetting is foregrounded as a necessary counterpart to the processes of remembering. In order that some things are remembered, others must be forgotten: 'every act of remembrance, whether individual or collective, necessarily involves selective, partial, or otherwise biased forms of forgetting'.<sup>14</sup> These energies make McGuckian's poetry endlessly receptive to the changing relationship between past, present and future, a relationship that has figured both thematically and formally throughout her career to date.

### Creating Past Selves in *The Flower Master* and *Venus and the Rain*

An appreciation of this dynamism of language is essential in approaching McGuckian's earliest work. Not only is it a hallmark of her style, and an element that set her apart from her peers, but it is an important dimension of her first two collections – *The Flower Master* (1982) and *Venus and the Rain* (1984) – both of which were republished by Gallery Press in somewhat altered form in 1993 and 1994 respectively. The evolution of these books clarifies aspects of McGuckian's relationship with her own creative past and therefore of the processes of self-remembering that are so important in her work. The Oxford *Flower Master* itself bore the traces of earlier pamphlet publications: poems from *Single Ladies* (Interim Press) and *Portrait of Joanna* (Ulsterman Publications) appear there, charting the gradual evolution of McGuckian's work towards a full-length collection. The titles of both pamphlets draw attention to female experience and their poems reveal the importance of gendered perspectives in this poet's earliest texts. The ambiguity of the later title – *The Flower Master* – is in keeping with the interplay of opposites with which McGuckian's most fully realized work always engages. Its cover illustration of Georgia O'Keefe's 'White Trumpet Flower' also brings

the woman's body back to the centre of reading. This combination of the oblique and the immediate is exemplified by McGuckian's frequent use of the present tense: the states of being that are depicted here are vivid, sensory yet temporally complex – suggesting the layers of meaning that can be generated by intense experience. The speakers in her poems wrap the past into present sensation: there is no consciousness here of the act of remembering, instead it becomes part of bodily experience. This technique draws attention to the endurance of the somatic as an imaginative wellspring but this is not confined to the connection to traumatic experience; for McGuckian, what is joyful and pleasurable can also be recalled in this way. The poems of *The Flower Master*, in particular, dwell on the relationship between child and woman, on the changes of body and sensibility that mark this transition.

The opening poem of the Oxford edition of *The Flower Master* is a key text in this respect. Its position in the original volume marks it as a poem of transition, so that its concern with the passage from childhood to adulthood is also a herald of the creative self. This process of evolution highlights the importance of memory in recognizing how the self can coexist in its past and present forms, much as Paula Meehan uses the space of teenage rebellion to signal this dual subjectivity. McGuckian's 'That Year' signals the importance of retrospect from the start; it recalls the new interests of the soon-to-be woman in terms of material things – playing with rings, experimenting with hair colouring and wearing a bra. Immediately, subjectivity is split into two: the other – the 'you' of the first line of the poem – is on the threshold of adulthood, while the first person perspective of the rest of the poem moves more slowly towards this position. Childhood memories prefigure this process, combining joy and sorrow in the images of the red kite lost in the sky, and the white ball disappearing on the tide. The hints of menstruation in the red and white coloration of this stanza seem distant possibilities, from which the girl distracts herself by looking down, studying the linoleum at her feet and the stitching on her dress, dominating the poem's shifting perspective now. The power of contrasting imagery to configure the overlapping states of innocence and experience is demonstrated here. Violence and pleasure combine in the images of bee-sting (often used to describe the sensation of female orgasm) and the bullet lodged within:

It was like a bee's sting or a bullet  
Left in me, this mark, this sticking pins in dolls,  
Listening for the red and white

Particles of time to trickle slow, like a wet nurse  
Feeding nonchalantly someone else's child.

(*FM* 1982 9)

When the text appeared in the revised edition from Gallery Press it was no longer the opening poem but placed fifth in the collection under the new title 'Eavesdropper'. Its changed final line – from 'The grass is no bed after dark' to 'The grass is an eavesdropper's bed' – reinforces the subtle shift of emphasis away from the processes of memory and towards a more suggestive mode. As Leontia Flynn has pointed out, the new title makes the poem's concerns 'strangely both more and less elusive'.<sup>15</sup> She goes on to indicate how the associations brought by these revisions combine ideas of original sin (via Eve's 'drop' into the fallen world of childbearing) with the phrase 'falling off the roof', which is slang for menstruation.<sup>16</sup> The proliferation of meaning that even such relatively small alterations can cause is significant. For the same reason poems such as 'Problem Girl' (with its persona of dreamy adolescence) and 'The Chain Sleeper' ('Unshameable this leggy girl who sleeps and sleeps') (*FM* 1982 11; 12) are omitted from the Gallery Press volume, making room instead for poems of multiple subjective states – 'Gateposts' or 'The Truth Room' (*FM* 1993 35; 50). This is in keeping with a creative strategy that moves away from subjective experience, preferring instead to see changed states as coexisting in time, where both are imaginatively available to the poet, and reader, at any stage.

The process of creative coexistence has an important effect on McGuckian's exploration of the twin states of childhood and motherhood. In her work the adult woman 'contains' the child that is her past self, at the same time as she carries the child to whom she will give birth. Thus the potentiality of birth-giving is closely linked to the processes of memory: the mature female body expresses past, present and future, and her textual manifestation opens interpretation to new temporal frameworks. Moynagh Sullivan defines the maternal aesthetic in McGuckian's work as one of experience rather than representation: '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 that displaces us as meaning-bestowing subjects'.<sup>17</sup> In this way, the reader is brought into an intimate relationship with the material of the poem, eliding the temporal distinctions that situate the reader as coming after, rather than in the midst of, the act of making. The maternal instinct recorded by the poet does not emphasize only the childbearing capacity of the body but rather its entire creative nature.

'Confinement' from McGuckian's second full collection, *Venus and the Rain* (1984), explores the coming together of fixed images of the human subject and the contingent process of awaiting birth – that moment in which the potential child becomes actualized in the world. The 'sleepy, glassed-in child' is described as the speaker's 'fair copy', suggesting the presence of a more perfect version of the adult self, yet a version that comes after the untidiness of lived experience. The idea of doubleness is soon confirmed in the simultaneity of the poem's image patterns: 'While you were sailing your boat in the bay, / I saw you pass along the terrace twice' (VR 1984 42). The child occupies two imaginative spaces at once, 'sailing' in the safety of the womb and moving freely in a liminal space, neither inside nor outside. The autumnal air of the poem, with its flying leaves and recovery from summer heat, suggests a darker reading in which the child becomes a ghost – at once laid out at the centre (the heart) of the house and haunting its marginal spaces. In this way, the memory of the unborn child becomes a kind of memorialization, a momentary stilling of the imaginative dynamic. Meanwhile, the natural world, and its creative potential, also shifts and changes, the 'river imagery' of the speaker's arms testifying to the endless flux of the maternal imaginary.

The trope of movement that is so prominent in McGuckian's early works is a means to indicate key transitions between childhood and adulthood, between single and married states, but also to speak of the impossibility of containment. This trope brings with it a number of themes and images that will recur in her poetry and that the reader can trace through their various forms as indicators of difference rather than sameness: the house, with constantly shifting perspectives; the garden, together with more extensive natural imagery; motherhood and child rearing; crafts of making. Most significantly, the metaphors by which these themes are introduced appear conjoined in inexplicable ways. First, the juxtaposition of inner and outer spaces means that houses and landscape are rendered simultaneously, making the boundaries between them hard to read. As imaginative creations of place, they distort the function of memory by permitting no fixed point of recall. Further, the identification of material elements with complex emotional states means that such shifts in spatial representation – or the evocation of a range of disconnected objects – also trace the mutation of feeling and perception in the poem. Many of these early poems use the trope of moving house as a means of addressing the dynamic ways in which the subject position is realized in poetry. 'The Flitting', the poem that won the National Poetry



competition in Britain and first drew critical attention to McGuckian's work, exemplifies the unfixed position of the speaking voice, a strategy in keeping with one of the poem's themes – the disorientating shifts that new domestic arrangements must occasion. The first phrase of the poem registers the connection between states of emotion and states of the body, drawing explicit attention to a relationship already discernible in earlier poems from this collection: "You wouldn't believe all this house has cost me – / In body-language terms" (*FM* 1982 48). The inclusion of direct speech here is comparatively rare in McGuckian and separates these lines from those that follow, though they seem continuous in their representation of the experience of domestic upheaval. The current state is invoked first, before the process that helped to form this state is addressed. In this way, present emotion is constituted from memory, though no direct perspective on the past is offered. Likewise, the sense of human connection that this movement fosters is replaced by a more anxious readjustment to new space and experience.

Art provides the means to bridge this gap: the 'living' walls of the house – likened to strawberries and tomatoes – are covered with paintings of Dutch interiors, their female protagonists testifying to the new importance of the domestic realm as a world of metaphorical meaning.<sup>18</sup> The implicit treatment of Vermeer's 'Girl with a Pearl Earring' reveals the importance of visual memory here and draws on its power to represent complex states simultaneously, rather than sequentially as language requires. It extends McGuckian's reflection on states of interiority: the girl's 'unconscious / Solidarity with darkness' explores the relationship between the female subject and the dark background of the painting, a field created by the painter and of which the girl can have no knowledge. Like Boland, in her textual treatment of Chardin's female subjects, McGuckian records the fact that much is concealed by the act of representation itself since the narrative of women's experience extends far beyond the static image.<sup>19</sup> Yet there is also a suggestion that the process of illustration itself creates significance: 'Her narrative secretes its own values, *as mine might* / If I painted the half of me that welcomes death' (my italics). Value, then, may be at once concealed and generated by the shape of the girl's life story; it may not be inherent in the life, but rather be found in the afterlife of the work of art – a partial though not a false representation. Just as the boundaries between art and life are challenged by McGuckian here, so past and present merge as the speaker takes on the garments of seventeenth-century Holland, much as she relished the 'fraternity of clothes' that shaped her twentieth-century

transition from one house to another. Neither can nature and technology be held apart – the digital clock is ‘well-earthed’ and the train ‘plough[s]’ through ‘the cambered flesh of clover and wild carrot’ (*FM* 1982 48). Creative futures merge with timeless landscapes that are both real and literary: ‘I postpone my immortality for my children, / Little rock-roses, cushioned / In long-flowering sea-thrift and metrics’ (*FM* 1982 48). The postponement of full artistic realization marks a recognition that while the poem may be in the process of creation – and therefore present to the poet – its materials are already past and move freely among visual and linguistic traditions, to form new meanings and connections.

Art in various forms has concerned McGuckian throughout her career. Sometimes she uses aspects of conventional representation as much to question the nature and reception of the artistic act as to create a subtle intertext with the life and work of the chosen artist. At other times, it is the act of creation itself that offers an equivalence to her own poetic formation and to the complex temporalities that attend the conversion of nature into art. ‘The Seed-Picture’, from McGuckian’s first collection, draws attention to this act of making by combining nature and artifice in inextricable ways. It is also a text that exhibits the poet’s preoccupation with the relationship between word and object. Here they are conflated, seeds becoming words and words seeds – the conglomerate picture is made, bringing natural and poetic worlds into alignment. Here the seed as the originator of life is also its completed representation, suggesting a cumulative form of signification that contains its point of origin within its final state. Each instance of creation carries within it a memory of nature that is supported by the subtle shift that can be observed here from the male, as the expected seed-bearer, to the female as the agent of making. These seeds are on the surface of picture and poem, offering themselves in a depictive pattern, yet they are also buried, hidden within their fruits. The poem itself sprouts and grows from apparently inconsequential beginnings and the child within it forms through the textures and colours of the natural world:

Her hair  
 Is made of hook-shaped marigold, gold  
 Of pleasure for her lips, like raspberry grain.  
 The eyelids oatmeal, the irises  
 Of Dutch blue maw, black rape  
 For the pupils, millet  
 For the vicious beige circles underneath

(*FM* 1982 23)

Just as in McGuckian's numerous flower poems, closeness changes perspective here. The detailed focus links human and natural patterns; flowers becoming not merely flowers but powerfully sensual objects. This process affirms the role of the reader in bringing such observations to light and, in particular, in drawing inferences from the creative materials chosen. The arresting visual elements in such poems highlight the importance of form for both image and poem, while female sexuality, which is so often the force behind both, finds a curiously blatant yet delicate expression. Through these visual elements, McGuckian accesses a range of disciplines, from physics to painting, from linguistics to botany, and there are interesting after-images of all these fields to be found in her work.

The significance of art emerges again in 'The Sitting', from *Venus and the Rain*, which is a form of self-portrait – 'My half-sister comes to me to be painted' (VR 1984 15). It highlights one of McGuckian's most familiar strategies, the extension of a speaking poetic self into another persona. This displacement allows strangeness and familiarity to be combined. The ambiguity of her use of pronouns serves this purpose, leaving the boundaries between selves fluid in order that emotional territory can be most freely explored. The self that is presented in this poem is reclusive, seeming to affirm the view of Clair Wills that there is a tension in McGuckian's work 'between her wish to represent the self in order that it be more perfectly understood, and her wariness of opening herself up before the public'.<sup>20</sup> Sarah Broom sees a further consequence of this mixed motivation: 'McGuckian's is a poetry which invites (though not without anxiety) the intrusion of others, and welcomes as a source of inspiration the "fragmentation" which results from full interaction with others'.<sup>21</sup> This interaction between self and other takes place both inside and outside the poem and so affects McGuckian's relationship with her own readers, courting the blend of intimacy and estrangement noted from her earliest work. Even as she is acquiring considerable critical attention, McGuckian can remark: 'I began to write poetry so that nobody would read it', thus transforming her own readers into strangers.<sup>22</sup> 'The Sitting' continues: 'She is posing furtively, like a letter being / Pushed under a door, making a tunnel with her / Hands over her dull-rose dress' (VR 1984 15). The disowning of the physical body is contrasted to the attentive representation of it, as though art can reclaim what is lost in life and offer intimacy in place of distance. Again, the detail ('painting it hair by hair') causes the reader to shift perspective and to see the value in minutiae here. This close-up approach also goes some way to address

McGuckian's apparent reluctance at this time to deal with larger political and historical issues, revealing a double existence that is focused on the vivid representation of individual subjectivity, yet revealing of the larger dynamics shaping social and political events. Even the precise forms of representation create ambivalent tones: the mixed feelings involved in self-revelation become clear here in the held-back pose; the scepticism concerning the accuracy of the rendering; the paradoxical desire to evade artistic capture just at the moment when the representation is complete.

The explicit exploration of the role of the artist – and thus obliquely of the writer – is an important development of this visual dimension. McGuckian's second major collection, *Venus and the Rain*, engages more fully in this process. This is a more stable collection than the first: though it appeared in two separate editions, its revisions are not as radical as those that can be traced in the transition of *The Flower Master*. Its opening poem, 'Venus and the Sun', uses planetary configuration to consider the relationship between space and time, and thus the relationship between the artist and her own creative identity. Venus, the first planet inside the earth's orbit, is associated with the capacity to apprehend wholeness while maintaining an intimate connection to the experiences of earth. In this poem, it is the relationship between Venus and the sun – or between artist and inspiration – which is key. The sun provides creative energy but the artist in turn shapes this inspiration to realign the cosmos: the moon and stars are curved into new relation to one another, an inclusive and binding form. Though describing herself as 'the sun's toy', the speaker loves to test the boundaries of such authority. It is a marker of McGuckian's confidence that, at the threshold of her second volume, she can announce her ambitions in this way, and suggest the freedom that a break from temporal restrictions will bring:

If I travel far enough, and fast enough, I seem  
 To be at rest, I see my closed life expanding  
 Through the crimson shells of time

(*FM* 1984 9)

Yet the universe that the poet creates at this point in her career is an expanding one: the stars 'fly apart / from each other to a more soulful beginning' – moving, that is, towards their origins, which are singular rather than collective. In the final line, Venus and Mars, female and male elements, are brought into alignment as the speaker speculates how she might 'double-back' from her extraordinary creative trajectory to inhabit a masculine space – the 'dullest blue of Mars' (*VR* 1984 9).

The companion poem to this one, and the title poem of the collection

*Venus and the Rain*, is situated halfway through the volume, as though suggesting the symmetry of such doubling-back and embedding new temporal freedoms into the physical space of the book. Again, the poet is concerned with the relationship of the parts to the whole, but here the bright flames of the sun are replaced by the icy fissures of a distant planet:

my gibbous voice  
 Passes from leaf to leaf, retelling the story  
 Of its own provocative fractures till  
 Their facing coasts might almost fill each other  
 And they ask me in reply if I've  
 Decided to stop trying to make diamonds.

(VR 1984 31)

This fractured voice again tells of time's reversal, here of the drawing together of continents. The creation of diamonds from the compression of rock might find a parallel in the diamond-like appearance of the frozen raindrop – one a hard and lasting form, the other endlessly changing in relation to its environment. As Catriona Clutterbuck has argued, the making of diamonds is also an allusion to the creative process and to the critical questioning that McGuckian's challenging style has inevitably provoked.<sup>23</sup> Instead of a fixed art, the speaker privileges its alternative, offering forms of water which – as well as being mutable – are unpredictable in their flow. Though she teases us with the thought that the 'cruising moonships' of criticism might 'find / Those icy domes relaxing' (VR, 1984 31), ultimately, the poet asserts the power of the meltwaters of poetry and their energizing flow. Again we enter a strange and timeless realm; however, now McGuckian asserts this not as a by-product of more personal themes but as a clear expression of freedom from cause and effect and one that will go on to shape her political poems of the nineties and beyond.

**Intimate Remembrance:**  
*Shelmalier and Had I a Thousand Lives*

McGuckian's relation to the specific cultural circumstances of her writing has occasioned much debate. Though the work of all Northern Irish poets is read against the backdrop of the violence in the province, McGuckian has explicitly resisted the view that her work represents the Northern conflict: 'the "Troubles" affect my life and enter my poetry

that way,' she says, 'but I avoid them as a subject as I avoid taking arms against a sea'.<sup>24</sup> Though she has acknowledged that the violence had little direct impact on her family,<sup>25</sup> yet she is aware of the shaping forces of the environment on her creative process: 'I was brought up in Belfast. I wouldn't have been a poet, I don't think, if I had lived anywhere else.'<sup>26</sup> The significance of place does not find expression in a direct representation of experience, whether of the individual or the community, but rather in a synthesis of the less visible or tangible elements of the conflict both for herself and for her readers. This process draws attention to the importance of cultural memory in shaping opinion, past, present and future: 'cultural memory contains a number of cultural messages that are addressed to posterity and intended for continuous repetition and re-use'.<sup>27</sup> The 'cultural messages' carried by poetry, however, are subtle ones. Here it is not the role of the poem to represent violent conflict directly, but rather to achieve an understanding of its effects. McGuckian has remarked on the sense of dislocation that the Troubles have brought and of the role of suffering in shaping writing, yet before the publication of *Captain Lavender* in 1994 there was little to indicate that politics were a direct influence on her work.<sup>28</sup> That collection clearly marks the transition towards a more politically motivated poetics, but one that does not mark a stylistic break with her earlier collections. Flynn argues that McGuckian's 'keen political intelligence' is already evident in her work, especially in her engagement with historical suffering in other cultures.<sup>29</sup> This lays the foundation of her later treatment of Irish political violence through the lens of history. The atemporality suggested by Republicanism, which understands armed resistance as both the result of (and therefore coming after) lengthy political conflict and ideologically coexistent with Ireland's revolutionary past, allows McGuckian to assimilate this material into her existing preoccupation with synchronicity. Her choice of a quotation from Picasso as an epigraph – 'I have not painted the war [...] but I have no doubt that the war is in [...] these paintings I have done' – is a testament to the subtlety of her approach.

McGuckian's treatment of political material is not markedly different from her engagement with personal relationships, yet the poems in the second part of *Captain Lavender* present more uncertain emotional territory for poet and reader. Here the greater effect of sectarian violence becomes more visible in her work: the mood becomes darker and a whimsical sense of difference gives way to estrangement. Poems like 'The Albert Chain' expose the distortion that the province suffers under terrorist violence – the shortened watch chain of the title indicating

this constriction. Vibrancy is set against stagnation and destruction in the opening stanza where fruit hangs from a dead tree; the wild cat is stripped of its skin; the squirrel stoned to death. There is something deliberate about this state of affairs, however, as though the deathliness is both cause and effect of the actions of nature: 'Like an accomplished terrorist, the fruit hangs / from the end of a dead stem' (*CL* 68).

The speaker returns to the situation of war and finds it to be a dark and threatening place, much as Heaney felt his return to Northern Ireland after a year abroad was like 'putting on an old dirty glove again'.<sup>30</sup> In this way she remains trapped between past and present, registering the trauma of both and powerless to reach a place of peace and reflection. This entrapment indicates the cyclical nature of the violence in Northern Ireland, and the extent to which it draws its iconography from a long history of divided political allegiances. The repetition of violence ties its citizens to the past, so that though the poem may posit a single speaking voice, the exploration of subjectivity is layered and volatile. This returns us to Thomas Docherty's contention:

Often it is difficult to locate any single position from which the poem can be spoken. [...] It reads as if the space afforded the 'I' is vacant: instead of a stable 'persona', all we have is a potential, a voice that cannot yet be identified.<sup>31</sup>

This issue, which is what makes McGuckian's poetry so distinctive, is also what offers the greatest challenge to readers and divides critics most forcefully. Shane Murphy refutes Docherty thus: 'The voice may be "unidentified", but this does not void it of "identity"; and although the "I" may be multiple in the poem, he is incorrect to consider this as nullifying its actuality.'<sup>32</sup> Eric Falci has also argued that McGuckian's use of the 'I' reinforces rather than eliminates subjectivity: 'the "I" of most poems consistently asserts its own gravitational pull'.<sup>33</sup> This debate is one of no little significance for women writers, whose struggle to establish a voice is inextricable from the reader's willingness to engage seriously with it, whether it be singular or multiple. McGuckian's complex use of the voice is what makes her work so important in any study of poetry by women, because it enacts the shifting and often unfathomable aspects of identity politics in immediate ways. She registers the familiarity as that of being buried alive 'like a dead man / attached to the soil which covers him'; one that involves a dissipation of the self 'in little pieces, like specks of dust' (*CL* 68). The figure of the prisoner, hands 'bruised against bars', foreshadows the men that will later populate *Shelmalier* (1998) and

*Had I a Thousand Lives* (2003). The personal trauma associated with the death of her father becomes part of the larger cultural distress to which she bears witness. Though her father's death had no direct association with the political conflict, McGuckian has linked it to the Troubles: 'I felt I had to avenge his death, in a sense, myself, that my father was my Republican.'<sup>34</sup> The extent to which she felt the lives of her parents' generation had been limited by social circumstances and political violence is clear from her remarks, as Helen Blakeman concludes: 'McGuckian mourns the death of her father as a casualty of war, relating his "imprisonment" within a lifetime of conflict to the actual imprisonment of political prisoners.'<sup>35</sup> By thinking politically about these personal events, McGuckian displaces feelings of grief and loss into ones of estrangement, memorializing her father through a renewed sense of the injustices inherent in the Northern political situation.

This realization lays the foundation for two important volumes that commemorate Ireland's revolutionary past. *Shelmalier* (1998) centres on the United Irishman rebellion of 1798 and links this landmark period of Irish history with the contemporary violence in Northern Ireland. As Falci has pointed out, however, even these parallels are untimely: 'considering that many of the poems [...] were most likely written between the IRA cessation of military operations in August 1994 and the Good Friday Agreement in April 1998, McGuckian's conflation of 1798 and 1998 becomes aggressively anachronistic'.<sup>36</sup> This observation confirms the poet's tendency to create her own temporal frameworks, which may bear only passing resemblance to the chronologies of recorded history. In calling the book 'the dawn of my own enlightenment', she is, Faragó argues, 'explaining her role as the *reader* of history, before her role as the writer of poetry'.<sup>37</sup> This dynamic adds a new layer to the temporal play of McGuckian's work, emphasizing the process by which she reads and uses other texts, rather than the intertextual product that is the result of this practice. Here the shaping of the book around a central concept allows the displacement of meaning to acquire a centrifugal force.

The book is divided into five sections, each of which combines different moments of history and different perspectives on the interweaving of national and personal material. Each begins with an italicized poem that resonates with the texts that follow, sounding a note that is taken up in other voices and forms. Though the unified nature of the collection might come as a surprise to McGuckian's readers, the indeterminacy of voice is already a familiar strategy, here made more politically significant by the poet's exploration of national history. The opening poem of the



book, *Script for an Unchanging Voice*, speaks of forms within forms: 'Here is a stone with a stone's mouth inside, / a shell in which a lighter shell has died' (S 16). Linking this image to the Yeatsian 'stone in the midst of all', Eric Falci traces its departure from this solidity to express a form of negation: the mouth 'is made non-functional by being placed inside of a stone, where, if nothing else, it will not work as a mouth. This figure for utterance is canceled by the act of its figuration'.<sup>38</sup> Yet the image also speaks of replication: of the present as a harder, more obdurate version of the past, which it has subsumed. This accounts both for the ruthlessness of terrorist violence and for the failure of coherent speech in the face of oppression. The layered nature of past and present results in the close connection between the speaker in these poems (usually female) and the men of 1798. This is a collection animated by ghosts who are, as Guinn Batten has observed, paradoxically more alive than the speaker herself.<sup>39</sup>

Yet in spite of the new and unified purpose of this volume, it retains links with McGuckian's past texts as well as with history, in this way memorializing not only armed confrontation but also the kind of poetic resistance that McGuckian has been practising since the beginning of her writing career. One poem from the opening section explores the subtle yet enduring nature of the past. 'The Sofa in the Window with the Trees Outside' reintroduces an image from one of McGuckian's earliest poems – the 'serious sofa' which there signified the creative process itself – and thus records the creative changes that her work has undergone. The title here draws attention to divisions of space even as it dismantles them. As in the earlier poem, internal and external blend, the gold forget-me-nots appear alongside the hedge thick with flowers; 'storm and blue [sit] under the one light' (S 20).<sup>40</sup> The effort to keep things separate seems doomed to failure. To accompany these spatial shifts there are shifts in time:

The dead among the spices of words  
 brush their eyes over me, as if  
 all my limbs were separate.  
 They are pearls that have got  
 into my clothes

(S 20)

This deathly presence within the language of her poetry comes from the earth. In 'The Feastday of Peace' the dead who 'steer' the speaker's dreams are 'Deep in time's turnings / and the overcrowded soil, / too familiar to be seen' (S 23). In 'Cleaning out the Workhouse', 'Your eighteenth-century fingers spice the soil / with blood and bone' (S 30).

These overlapping words and images reinforce the unity of the collection and emphasize the power of language, like the earth, to contain and renew the materiality of the past. In this way, burial without commemoration is an unfinished process.<sup>41</sup> This suggestion can be linked to the claim made by Luke Gibbons that Emmet's speech indicates a deferral of writing rather than a refusal to write: "The inability to achieve the full inscription of the word within a subaltern or colonial culture points to a *lack* of definition, a transitory, indeterminate condition at odds with the homogeneity of the "imagined communities" of print culture".<sup>42</sup> In words the speaker brings the dead to life: her 'joyful / fighter' comes to the door, she can feel 'his breath's / smoothness' but blocks out the memory of his ravaged body, preserved at the dark centre of the poem, itself a kind of grave ('Green Crucifix', *S* 46). His missing backbone is replaced by the 'straight mast' of the cross: it is not the fighter only but also the witness who attains the identity of a Christ – a sacrificial figure bound by fate to suffering. This unification of fighter and speaker is an important dimension of these poems, and suggests not only the linking of contemporary Ireland with its revolutionary history but the unification of female and male, of witness and participant in ways that make the past present. 'Shoulder-Length, Caged-Parrot Earrings' (*S* 48) is formed around such tensions. It begins by associating 'female eyes' with a 'male hand', and by depicting the open throat of the fighter as at once expressive and deathly. The poem's Yeatsian echoes – 'How lightly then your rich body weighed' ('They weighed so lightly what they gave') – reinforces its unification of opposites, and its sense of the sacrificial rebel as transcending earthly realities, and watching from a heightened vantage point.<sup>43</sup>

*The Face of the Earth* (November 2002) and *Had I a Thousand Lives* (July 2003), published barely eight months apart, reveal the different strands clearly emerging in the poet's work at this time, yet paradoxically assert the overlapping nature of the emotions they involve, for both writer and reader. The former is a meditation on death and loss, situating these in a philosophical rather than a political frame; the latter commemorates the deaths of Robert Emmet and Thomas Russell, organizers of the 1803 rebellion, and considers the role of personal sacrifice for a political cause. McGuckian's work of this period confronts the trauma to be found in private as well as public lives; its presence in both these books confirms that it is distinct yet simultaneous – the publication of *Had I a Thousand Lives* does not consign *The Face of the Earth* to the past, but rather keeps it present to the reader. In spite of

this process, the opening poem of the second book meditates on the difficulty of 'saying' anything in a culture where past and present are fraught with violence. The title 'River of January' implies a temporal movement that belies the frozen language of rebel and poet: 'I have nothing to say which I can say' (*HTL* 13). The security of ordinary people who 'walk about as if they own / where they are, and they do' is juxtaposed to the feelings of others who yearn for a unity that is expressed here in primeval terms, through the image of the forest. Yet this place of symbolic richness cannot yield actual comfort – the poem questions the attempt to create a 'flower-rich shelter [...] / [...] in a wood left untouched / by the prospering suggestion of orchards' (*HTL* 13). The 'old meanings' of the forest persist, in spite of the blasted landscape depicted here – the 'treeless, herbless, overfished sea', a reversal of the Elizabethan colonists' appreciation for Ireland's rich landscape and evidence of the ways which language can accommodate oppositional meanings. The metaphor of belonging has become more important than the reality of community.

The persistence of ideological commitment in the face of social change is noteworthy here, and a partial representation of the past becomes essential to this dynamic. Memory and forgetting are keys to *Had I a Thousand Lives* both because of its commemorative impulse and because the individual creative act is linked to the process of memory itself. 'My body cannot forget your body' begins 'The Chamomile Lawn' – a poem concerned with the tenuous separation of life and death (*HTL* 78). Even the roses only 'give the impression' of existing in the present; it is the scent of earlier roses that endures. The presence of death has both individual and collective significance: 'I hear my Death speak, / making silencing gestures while he speaks / through all the other deaths in the room' (*HTL* 78). This 'speaking through' is ambiguous, in that it uses another's experience as a channel for communication at the same time as it obliterates the suffering of the other in order to assert that of the self. Here McGuckian articulates the anxieties around ideas of collective memory that may invalidate the recollections of the individual subject. Elena Esposito argues, however, that the seat of collective memory is 'not in society, but indirectly in the consciousnesses (or in the minds) of the individuals taking part in it'.<sup>44</sup> This doubleness is reassuring for the speaker in 'The Chamomile Lawn' since, at the same time as these anxieties emerge, the necessity of collective action seems to be asserted in two different ways. First, the sacrifice of a leader must be matched by that of countless anonymous rebels, whose commitment to

the cause lends gravitas to the event. Secondly, those who die fighting for nationalist causes join a host of other who have died similarly over the course of centuries. The relationship between action and emotion is significant here: the movement beyond violence towards fear in this poem marks a crucial confrontation with the self. This turbulent sense of selfhood is closely linked to the nationalist struggle in the desire for self-determination it indicates. It also ties the rebel leader to succeeding generations who benefit from his sacrifice:

My head

and heart line up behind him, my legs' darkness  
 fold around his waist. He pours his blood out  
 striving to free his *I* from the *I*,  
 and finds himself to be so non-masterfully  
 that indescribably delicate personality  
 of light by which he sees, this quartered  
 death is worth a whole life, my life, me.

(HTL 79)

The sexual connection between speaker and rebel here is integral to McGuckian's poetic technique: 'my legs' darkness / fold around his waist' mimicking her practice of folding disparate meanings into her poems, of subsuming the past into the present. Bodily movement drives the enjambment here but it is the darkness between the legs that can take in and offer in return the blood the dying man pours out. In striving for freedom, he is both actor and acted upon – the subject and object of violence, verb and adverb in these lines. His fragmented body demands a response from the living who, in their wholeness, must atone for his past suffering even as they recognize its continuing presence.

The legacy of the insurgent is featured again in 'Petit Bleu' and once more the issue of self-expression emerges. The rebel's prison existence radiates meaning: 'You burn like an extra- / special sunset / in the warmth of your bed, / the very soul of the prison' (HTL 20). More importantly, the sprinkling of 'small pieces of torn letters' around the prison yard, suggest the partial yet memorable communication of the experience of incarceration and sacrifice. The poem itself is composed of fragments, the first two of its three sections ending in ellipses. The struggle to find language adequate to experiences of death and torture has informed modern literature in significant ways; in problematizing linguistic coherence, it demands a new approach to expression – 'Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the

sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned'.<sup>45</sup> McGuckian's work further recognizes the struggle for any form of expression given the choices and pressures inherent in language itself. Though liberty may be 'the eternal letter *L*' that drives this poem, it is marked by confinement and truncation, even the place of execution is set apart 'On the north side / where no one walks / except in new shoes returning / from Mass' (*HTL* 20). Yet this sense of being set apart will fuel the memorialization of 'the doomed in all but name'.

The inspirational nature of sacrifice is explored in this collection both through McGuckian's recognition of the legacies of history and, more specifically, because she records the writerly aspects of this exploration directly. 'A Religion of Writing' chooses the motif of inscription to examine the lasting nature of texts and the problematic relationship between words and meaning ('the remoteness / of name to meaning'). The inscribed gravestone is at once a marker of identity and an indication that identity has been lost through the death of the body. The writing here is fragmented into letters, which themselves have no coherent meaning: 'Such unsteady capitals, / / the backward *S*, the *L* / with its foot slanting sharply / downwards' like the mutilated figures of the executed (*HTL* 22). For Conor Carville, this leaves us to infer the name or epitaph on the tomb, suggesting 'a degree of imaginative freedom, of interpretation on the part of both the narrator and the reader'.<sup>46</sup> This drawing together of the processes of narration and reading increases the sense of containment created in the poem. Enclosure is emphasized for both text and body: 'letters of smaller / size placed inside others' are paired at the close of the poem with 'a death's head carved / with a human head inside it', recalling the earlier '*stone with a stone's mouth inside*' of *Shelmalier* (*HTL* 23; *S* 16). Within the representation exists the life itself, so even as McGuckian creates oblique palimpsestic poems she acknowledges the primacy of human feeling within them.

### Transformations: *The Book of the Angel*

In McGuckian's most recent collections, especially those published since *Had I a Thousand Lives* in 2003, there is a pronounced emphasis on the representation of the spiritual as a means of engaging, once more, with the relationship between the revelatory power of language and subjective experience. This development might be seen as the natural outcome of her search for ways to unite past and present. By figuring the act of commemoration as one of personal connection – an expression of

intimate relation to the past – McGuckian seeks to construct meaning through the breaching of physical and semantic boundaries. So the intrusion of the divine into the human world, and the corresponding challenge to rational systems that it presents, is suggestive of McGuckian's poetic project as a whole, and the important role the strange and the inexplicable play within it. Throughout her work, codes of meaning are exposed to sudden interpretative shifts; time frames extend and collapse without warning. As a result, our normal strategies of reading must change, because the progression of our interpretative acts demands it. Reading McGuckian's latest poems requires us to remember our earlier encounters with her work and to allow its continuities to illuminate her recently written and yet-to-be-created texts. Through her representation of the divine, in particular of the figure of the angel, McGuckian explores the temporal implications of the creative process, extending her experimental uses of language and deepening her engagement with the body as the experiential nexus of knowledge.

The Annunciation is an important trope for the poet: it is a moment of the utmost significance for Christian civilization, yet it is also a turning point in the life of the individual woman. Its role in cultural memory, and its endurance as a subject of textual and visual representation, can sometimes obscure the complex temporalities it invokes. As a transformative event in the understanding of individual and world, it demands a rethinking of time, projecting meaning from the moment of revelation into the newly significant future. This dynamic suggests an estrangement from the past and thus an implicit detachment from earlier texts, causing us to rethink the implications of McGuckian's intertextual strategies. Thomas Docherty has commented on what he calls McGuckian's 'untimeliness', which he further defines as 'the gap between what is said and the voice that says it'.<sup>47</sup> In McGuckian's recent work the disjunction of voice and language is highlighted by the presence of 'voice' within poems not as a speech act but as an entity in itself. The voice is not therefore 'heard' as much as it is understood conceptually through a kind of representation that moves beyond the auditory.

I encounter now my only  
 language, an eye that opens  
 at a summit, something prior  
 to the sentences we speak,

as if, in the eloquent  
 survival of that voice,

spirit said something  
I wanted to say

(BA 54)

That the voice should exist prior to, yet also come after, wordless expression is significant when exploring the concept of the Annunciation itself. Between the momentous articulations of John the Baptist and of the Angel Gabriel lies the silence of private experience. This is the gap between the foretelling of the event and the event itself; between the significance of the Word and its implications for the listening subject.

The Annunciation is of course the prelude to the Word made flesh: the stage of pregnancy before it is manifest bodily, when its statements occur in language only. For Julia Kristeva, this is an event that calls attention, in turn, to the 'gap' in language between the analytical and the poetic. Her text 'Stabat Mater' combines a study of the cult of the Virgin Mary with reflections on her own experience of maternity that fragment – or merge with – the main text. This double discourse confirms the presence of the subjective within the intellectual; it forms part of our understanding of the argument throughout.

Words that are always too/distant, too abstract for this/underground swarming of seconds, folding in unimaginable spaces. Writing/them down is an ordeal of discourse, like love. What is/loving, for a woman, the same/thing as writing.<sup>48</sup>

This struggle to fit words to the maternal experience is the result of the kind of folding inward that Kristeva describes here; the same kind that creates private spaces in McGuckian's poems, making them resistant to interpretation. This process is also one in which the strange and the familiar meet: the intimacy that makes both love and creativity testing experiences permits these processes to be reconfigured, so that the subject is at once knowing and unknowing. Again, the hollow body – redolent of McGuckian's concern with childbirth – is the empty space through which a plurality of inferences may circulate. Culturally and textually, this collection affirms that what is missing from the poems can be at the centre of their meaning. The Magnificat is the unspoken text in *The Book of the Angel* (2004), for example: its absence at once constitutes the system of belief that underpins the poem's linguistic structure and emphasizes its radical strangeness to the human mind.

*The Book of the Angel* meditates on representations of the angelic that inflect medieval and Renaissance art, linking these to contemplation of poetic purpose and cultural conflict. Here the intrusion of the divine

into the secular world can seem both passive and active – an aesthetic representation and a dynamic mystifying force. This unifying theme also draws attention to the theatrical aspects of the poems and to the spiritual nature of the poet's creative quest, a quest that has involved the persistent excavation of personal and cultural memory. The continuing significance of religion in McGuckian's work has been acknowledged by the poet herself: 'I realised I had some kind of message to hand on and that I was in some degree a priest'.<sup>49</sup> However, the topic of religion clearly bears uneasy relation to the circumstances of her Belfast upbringing. Borbála Faragó argues that its appearance in her poems 'cannot ... be interpreted simply within the context of her politicised surroundings, but rather as the symptom of the development of a highly personalised moral code'.<sup>50</sup> In this collection, McGuckian uses the revelatory potential of the angel to address the connections among religion, national identity and artistic expression, as well as to effect the transcendence of historical time. The angel as a transitional figure – one that belongs neither to heaven nor to earth, and whose gender is ambiguous – could be seen as akin to the poet in mediating between spiritual and material worlds, and between different forms of experience, the kind of messenger that McGuckian has already recognized in herself. Aspects of the poet's involved style suggest that the angel might better be interpreted as of *both* heaven and earth, however, since throughout McGuckian's poetic career apparently separate realms have been cast together in arresting ways. In this regard, especially, the political dimension of the collection becomes clear: both sides of the Northern community are inextricably linked through the experience and performance of suffering so that neither, in a sense, can exist without the other.

Such duality is in evidence throughout the volume. 'Angel in Two Parts' draws specific attention to the role of the poem in the act of revelation: since the work itself contains two sections, the angel is not only represented within it, but in some senses 'becomes' it. There is a familiar blend here of containment and freedom, beginning with a question that casts doubt on the position of the speaking subject: 'How often, truly, have we found ourselves in that square' (*BA* 50). This opening line reveals just how nuanced such an apparently straightforward question may become. The inflected 'truly' does more than question shared memory, it seems to reveal its inherent powers of collusion. By undermining the shared understanding of 'we', McGuckian implicates not only the figures within the poem but writer and reader too. In this way, she opens the traumatic past to new forms of scrutiny, examining how the



shared bonds of suffering can be transcended by singular reflection. The holocaust may be evoked in the image of the train reaching the 'end of beaten track / end of final roofs'; man-made civilization yields to nature, though even nature is damaged and distorted. This apocalyptic vision is attended by an angel: 'The last angel / sings the words, at first so dazzlingly severe' (*BA* 50). Here, as elsewhere in McGuckian's work, language bears witness to its own intensity: when Wittgenstein dwells on the language of meaning (as opposed to the mere rehearsal or repetition of words) he invites people to sing their sentences, since this is how the sign can be made 'alive'.<sup>51</sup> In this poem the angel achieves both intensity and a transcendent lightness in a context that suggests cultural trauma. The first part of the poem renders the continuous present and the single instant of experience. By questioning the truth of specific memory, McGuckian dismisses the possibility of a logically formed sequence of meanings in favour of impressionistic, repeatable moments of being: 'It was here, more than anywhere, / that we met, the sky unfeathered and burned, / as if a valley were pounded into it' (*BA* 50). The second half of the poem dwells on time itself: calendar time is telescoped so that it can be experienced in multiple ways: 'Even though it has time, still, / / the mountain above the door is weatherless, / supplying time for time' (*BA* 51). The last phrase suggests that time itself is what facilitates the temporal in being absorbed or understood, seeming to support the symbiotic relationship between past and present that the process of memory itself may suggest.<sup>52</sup> This is an idea that raises particularly interesting questions concerning the relationship between the act of reading and the passage of time, since McGuckian's work renders the temporal both outside the realm of her consideration (she refuses to adhere to its rules) and at the centre of an endless process of interpretation within which no closure can be reached. 'Supplying time for time' also suggests a sleight of hand, by which one appreciation of time is replaced by another, without our frame of understanding ('the door') being disturbed. There are ambiguities of punctuation in this final stanza too: the hyphenation of the 'angel- / boatman' turned 'angel- / doorkeeper' stresses the angelic as a qualifying characteristic, yet elsewhere it seems an essential of identity, especially since the word 'angel' concludes two consecutive lines. Charon and St Peter merge, allowing the final threshold to be both structured (the door) and unstructured (the river).

If the metaphor of the Annunciation is about the power of language to create the real, to intervene between what is known and what is believed,

then it has significance for the relationship between memory and imagination. In McGuckian's hands the metaphor probes the relationship between the visual tradition and the meanings it accumulates. *The Book of the Angel* has five parts,<sup>53</sup> which may hint at the Joyful Mysteries, since the Annunciation unifies some early poems in the book with painterly detail: 'It is impossible to tell / from the brocade and feathers / of the robes, wings and hair of Gabriel / [...] / whether he has already spoken' ('A Chrisom Child', BA 30). In this sense, McGuckian seems to take account of 'what great art leaves out', choosing to move beyond the generic expectations of each art form to ask awkward questions about its purpose and meaning. Certainly, the overlapping of verbal and visual expression disturbs our codes of reading, as in 'Studies for a Running Angel', which opens Part 2 of this collection:

She prolongs with words the growing fields  
and, to make draperies, skies and clouds  
on the larger arched surface,  
or knots of gold cord on the ceiling

(BA 28)

Here realistic representation and decorative elements fill a structured space, much as the poems themselves combine moments of emotional directness within a richly imaginative terrain. Increasingly, the importance of painting introduces a stillness at the core of many of these works, an instant of perfect repose around which the dynamic of the poem moves. The idea of the Annunciation itself demonstrates that death is an important driving force from the beginning – the seeds of Christ's suffering lying within the announcement of his imminent birth.

One does not give birth in pain, one gives birth to pain: the child represents it and henceforth it settles in, it is continuous [...] a mother is always branded by pain, she yields to it. 'And a sword will pierce your own soul too ...'<sup>54</sup>

McGuckian herself has admitted: 'Death is always a crux around which I write [...] Death is what poets are supposed to define, not deal with death or even understand or to cope with it, and not give answers but just meditate ...'<sup>55</sup> There is an interesting paradox here between the apparent fixedness of death itself and the flexibility of McGuckian's writing, the endless renewal that attends her poetic process. Hers is not a monumental art but one that is continually transformed as new versions of familiar tropes and images are inscribed in the texts. In this way her work is both familiar and strange, her recognizable style always challenging interpretation. Within a poetic scheme that seems to

resist fixity, there exists an imaginative endurance that has a significant impact on McGuckian's development. Towards the end of *The Book of the Angel* we find poems that stand firm against dissolution, enacting an alternative kind of memorialization. 'Charcoal Angel' begins with a momentous quality, a time set apart from others, 'A moonlit night a hundred years ago [...] / / Sky as hard as a wall. / Sea drowned in the sand' (BA 82). Here the most changeable of forms become fixed; water and earth exchange properties. The '[t]wo knowledges' that come into conflict may be indicative of the increasing divide between West and East – two cultures and two sets of belief. Yet the phrase 'one face upon another' seems at once to suggest the combativeness of coming 'head-to-head' as well as the idea of two identities so similar that they can't be told apart. This possible binary resolves itself into a seemingly singular 'he':

Absence of pupils, but he has eyes  
 in his voice, that scarred voice  
 that seemed so near, it's by his voice,  
 it's in his voice that he dies.

(BA 82)

The synaesthesia so often evident in McGuckian's work emerges here: the idea that speaking is an act of observation not only alters the sensory process on the part of the experiencing subject but also for the onlooker too, who may be forced to consider whether the act of reading itself has now changed. If it is through language that we bear witness to the past, then the speech act lays vital claim to that process, yet there is an implicit suggestion here that our acts of remembrance engage all the senses. This emerging Poseidon is first and foremost a voice – it is at once the means of his continuance and the instrument by which he loses his identity. Here speech sustains feeling and understanding even as the elements blow the markers of death away. McGuckian's imagery is tricky though: further consideration reminds us that the angel is made of charcoal – a porous, organic substance, not the enduring marble that is most familiar. The inscription is in ivory, again emphasizing a material once living, so that this collection ends with these contradictions held in balance.

The underlying resistance that this poem explores suggests that strength is not to be found in stasis but in constant change, in the mutability of existence itself. In this sense the artistic process overlays the foundation of Christian imagery that McGuckian explores. She represents an altered attitude to authority in her use of intertextuality and her rejection of the idea of closure. Every poem gives into another, collections are shaped around repeating images and textual patterns, and themes are picked

up from one volume to the next. Her radical attitude towards memory is expressed through the changing relationship between diffusion and concentration in her work. Multiple subjectivities may be temporarily accommodated in a kind of visual representation that itself expresses variety in unity. The persistent importance of art in McGuckian's work suggests that for her it represents an act of remembering as well as one of creation. Similarly, her tropes of intimacy, both maternal and sexual, are at once reinforced and transcended by the spiritual character of her later poems. In this her own career exemplifies the capacity to retain the concepts of past, present and future at the same time as she allows the distinction between them to disappear. These radical temporalities shape our reading and interpretation of her work in fundamental ways.

### Notes

- 1 Her work has also divided critics: she has been variously described as 'fluid' and 'mannered', as 'forward-looking' and 'non-visionary', as 'humorous' and 'whimsical'. In a review of *Venus and the Rain*, James Simmons described her work as a 'hoax' ('A Literary Legpull?', p. 27) while Patrick Williams castigated her for 'insistent womanliness – or as I find it, pseudo-womanliness' ('Spare that Tree!', p. 52).
- 2 María Jesús Lorenzo-Modia and Cristina Fernández-Méndez, "Longer and Longer Sentences Prove Me Wholly Female": Medbh McGuckian and Feminism(s), in Manuela Palacios and Laura Lojo (eds), *Writing Bonds: Irish and Galician Contemporary Women Poets* (Berne: Peter Lang, 2009), p. 40.
- 3 Brian Friel approaches the same issue from a different perspective, emphasizing the capacity for language to prompt shared engagement: 'I think that the political problem of this island is going to be solved by language, not only the language of negotiation across the table, but the recognition of what language means for us on this island'. For further discussion of Friel and the Field Day project, see Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, 'The Language of Memory: Translation, Transgression, Transcendence', in Frawley, *Memory Ireland*, vol. 3, pp. 247–71.
- 4 Shane Murphy, 'Sonnets, Centos and Long Lines: Muldoon, Paulin, McGuckian and Carson', in Matthew Campbell (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 200.
- 5 Eric Falci, *Continuity and Change in Irish Poetry, 1966–2010* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 91.
- 6 Faragó's study explores the role of creativity and performativity throughout McGuckian's poetic career. She does this by dividing the work into four broad chronological groups, emphasizing both continuity and evolution in the poet's career. See Borbála Faragó, *Medbh McGuckian* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press; Cork: Cork University Press, 2014).
- 7 Nuala Archer, 'Nuala Archer on Blue Farm', *Two Women, Two Shores: Poems by Medbh McGuckian and Nuala Archer* (Baltimore, MD: New Poets Series; Galway: Salmon Press, 1989).

- 8 Shane Murphy is the foremost critic to examine Medbh McGuckian's intertextual strategies. See, in particular, Shane Murphy, 'Intertextual Relations in the Poetry of Medbh McGuckian', in Patricia A. Lynch, Joachim Fischer and Brian Coates (eds), *Back to the Present, Forward to the Past: Irish Writing and History Since 1798*, vol. 2 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), pp. 271–85; Shane Murphy, 'Roaming Root of Multiple Meanings: Intertextual Relations in Medbh McGuckian's Poetry', *Metre* 4 (Winter 1998), pp. 99–109; also Shannon Hipp, "'Things of the Same Kind are Separated Only by Time": Reading the Notebooks of Medbh McGuckian', *Irish University Review* 39.1 (Spring/Summer 2009), pp. 130–48.
- 9 Shane Murphy, 'Obliquity in the Poetry of Paul Muldoon and Medbh McGuckian', *Éire-Ireland: A Journal of Irish Studies* 31.3–4 (Fall/Winter 1996), p. 85.
- 10 Quoted in Shane Murphy, "'You Took Away My Biography": The Poetry of Medbh McGuckian', *Irish University Review* 28:1 (Spring/Summer 1998), p. 121.
- 11 Murphy, 'Obliquity in the Poetry of Paul Muldoon and Medbh McGuckian', p. 86.
- 12 Deryn Rees-Jones, 'Motherlands and Mother-tongues: Writing the Poetry of Nation', *Consorting with Angels: Essays on Modern Women Poets* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 2005), p. 177.
- 13 Medbh McGuckian, 'Mazurka', *On Ballycastle Beach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 22.
- 14 Assmann and Shortt, *Memory and Political Change*, p. 5.
- 15 Leontia Flynn, *Reading Medbh McGuckian* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2014), p. 21.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 30.
- 17 Moynagh Sullivan, 'Dreamin' My Dreams With You: Medbh McGuckian and the Theatre of Dreams', *Metre* 17 (Spring 2005), p. 106.
- 18 Dutch interiors flourished during the seventeenth century when there was a transition from aristocratic and religious patronage towards the middle-class or merchant buyer. The demand for domestic themes in art not only meant the introduction of more accessible images but the transformation of real-world scenes into richly metaphorical texts. See Mariët Westermann, *A Worldly Art: The Dutch Republic 1585–1718* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007).
- 19 Works by Jean-Baptiste-Simeon Chardin (1699–1779) feature in a number of poems by Boland, including, 'From the Painting *Back from Market* by Chardin' and 'Self-Portrait on a Summer Evening' (*NCP* 17; J 12–13).
- 20 Clair Wills, 'Voices from the Nursery: Medbh McGuckian's Plantation', in Michael Kenneally (ed.), *Poetry in Contemporary Irish Literature* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1995), p. 382.
- 21 Sarah Broom, 'McGuckian's Conversations with Rilke in *Marconi's Cottage*', *Irish University Review* 28.1 (Spring/Summer 1998), p. 44.
- 22 Laura O'Connor, 'Comhrá: Conversation between Medbh McGuckian and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill', *Southern Review* 28.1 (1995), p. 590.
- 23 Catriona Clutterbuck, 'A Gibbous Voice: The Poetics of Subjectivity in the Early Poetry of Medbh McGuckian', in Shane Alcobia-Murphy and Richard Kirkland (eds), *The Poetry of Medbh McGuckian: The Interior of Words* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2010), pp. 41–67.
- 24 Kathleen McCracken, 'An Attitude of Compassion: Q & A with Medbh McGuckian', *Irish Literary Supplement* 9.2 (Fall 1990), p. 21.

- 25 Lorenzo-Modia and Fernández-Méndez, “Longer and Longer Sentences”, p. 37.
- 26 McGuckian, in Sommerville-Arjat and Wilson, *Sleeping with Monsters*, p. 2.
- 27 Erll and Nünning, *Cultural Memory Studies*, p. 99.
- 28 McGuckian, in Sommerville-Arjat and Wilson, *Sleeping with Monsters*, p. 2.
- 29 Flynn, *Reading Medbh McGuckian*, p. 146. Flynn notes McGuckian’s engagement with Russian writers as evidence of her prior political engagement. Renate Lachmann also examines stylistic elements of Russian writing that are relevant to McGuckian’s practice: ‘One can ... note a metonymic tendency in authors such as Pushkin, Akhmatova, and Mandelstam, primarily in their use of anagrams, syllepses, quotations, hidden allusions, rejoinders, and repetitions, and in their surpassing of other texts as well as their attempt to identify or to merge the time of their pre-texts with the time of their own texts’. Lachmann, in Erll and Nünning, *Cultural Memory Studies*, p. 306.
- 30 Seamus Heaney, ‘The Poet Who Came Back’, *Belfast Telegraph*, November 23, 1971.
- 31 Thomas Docherty, ‘Initiations, Tempers, Seductions: Postmodern McGuckian’, in Neil Corcoran (ed.), *The Chosen Ground: Essays on the Contemporary Poetry of Northern Ireland* (Brigend: Seren, 1992), p. 192.
- 32 Murphy, “You Took Away My Biography”, p. 112.
- 33 Falci, *Continuity and Change in Irish Poetry*, pp. 90–1. With reference to ‘Harem Trousers’ from *On Ballycastle Beach*, Falci specifically refutes Elmer Andrews’ contention that McGuckian seeks ‘to eliminate the “I” altogether, to escape from a rational, unified self (‘Some Sweet Disorder’, p. 140).
- 34 Lorenzo-Modia and Fernández-Méndez, “Longer and Longer Sentences”, p. 39.
- 35 Helen Blakeman, “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 (2003), p. 61.
- 36 Falci, *Continuity and Change in Irish Poetry*, p. 100.
- 37 Faragó, *Medbh McGuckian*, p. 81.
- 38 Falci, *Continuity and Change in Irish Poetry*, p. 103.
- 39 Batten, ‘Boland, McGuckian, Ní Chuilleanáin and the Body of the Nation’, p. 182.
- 40 In referencing Louis MacNeice’s ‘Snow’ the poem reminds us that it too is ‘soundlessly collateral and incompatible’. Louis MacNeice, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 2002), p. 30.
- 41 The relationship between burial and inscription would become more vexed in the case of Robert Emmet, executed following the later rebellion of 1803. His famous – and contentious – speech from the dock sees the executed rebel as a figure impossible to consign to the past: ‘Let them and me repose in obscurity and peace, and my tomb remain uninscribed, until other times, and other men, can do justice to my character; when my country takes her place among the nations of the earth, then, and not till then, let my epitaph be written.’ See Marianne Elliott, *Robert Emmet: The Making of a Legend* (London: Profile Books, 2003).
- 42 Luke Gibbons, “‘Where Wolfe Tone’s Statue Was Not’: Joyce, Monuments and Memory’, in Ian McBride (ed.), *History and Memory in Modern Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 147.
- 43 W. B. Yeats, ‘September 1913’, *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats*, vol. 1, *The Poems* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2010), p. 108.
- 44 Elena Esposito, ‘Social Forgetting: A Systems-Theory Approach’ in Erll and Nünning, *Cultural Memory Studies*, pp. 181–90.

- 45 Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 4.
- 46 Conor Carville, 'Warding off an Epitaph': *Had I a Thousand Lives*, in Alcobia-Murphy and Kirkland, *The Poetry of Medbh McGuckian*, p. 118.
- 47 Docherty, 'Initiations, Tempers, Seductions', p. 192.
- 48 Julia Kristeva, 'Stabat Mater', in Toril Moi (ed.), *The Kristeva Reader* (London: Blackwell, 1986), p. 162.
- 49 Laura O'Connor, 'Comhrá', p. 596.
- 50 Borbála Faragó, 'Medbh McGuckian: The Angel in Two Parts', *European English Messenger* 13.2 (Autumn 2004), p. 47
- 51 Joachim Schulte, "'The Life of the Sign": Wittgenstein on Reading a Poem', in John Gibson and Wolfgang Huemer (eds), *The Literary Wittgenstein* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 152.
- 52 Jeffrey K. Olick explores the suggestion that what is remembered is determined by present need. *The Politics of Regret: On Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility* (London: Routledge, 2007).
- 53 It also mirrors the structure of *Shelmalier*, inviting parallels between political and religious beliefs.
- 54 Kristeva, 'Stabat Mater', p. 167.
- 55 Blakeman, "I am listening in black and white", p. 63.