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Reading Medbh McGuckian: Admiring What We Cannot Understand

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WHEN DETRACTORS speak of Medbh McGuckian, the first sin they name is an unwarranted obscurity. My purpose here is double: to defend that obscurity as necessary within the terms of McGuckian’s poetic by looking at a few poems closely; and to place that poetic within the canon by making some broad comparisons with other major poets. It strengthens the case for McGuckian to discover that she has venerated precursors, not all of whom are female, as is often assumed. The point of similarity that bonds her with respected poets of both sexes is a content, often erotic, that encompasses what is nearly unsayable. Obliquity can result either from an effort to preserve privacy or because the experiences explored genuinely resist verbal expression or, in McGuckian’s case, for a combination of these reasons.

On the question of thematic opacity, I will ally her with Dickinson, but place her at the antipodes from Moore. On the question of stylistic opacity, I’ll compare her to Crane and finally connect her need for reader complicity to the tactics of Whitman. It seems no coincidence that Crane and Whitman surface as kindred spirits, since both write erotically charged poetry, the latter with greater candor than the former. Both, however, are creating poetry out of a personal perspective that includes an unorthodox sexuality and have evolved poetics that respond sensitively, if secretly in Crane’s case, to these sexual truths. Sexuality and sex also figure at the center of McGuckian’s work and very much determine her strategies with language, revealing and concealing female erotic truths, to which the canon offers limited hospitality. Within the canonic frame of reference it’s still unorthodox to be sexually honest and female. McGuckian, like Dickinson and Crane and Whitman before her, is pushing at the margins of the canon, implicitly questioning the censoring of an inherently obscure and threatening female content, along with the elliptical style forged to accommodate it.

Marianne Moore, in contrast to McGuckian, has laundered herself clean of all traces of female sexuality, hence her embracing of a diametrically opposed poetic. In her poem “Poetry” there is a ringing defense of clarity: “We do not admire what/ we cannot understand.” Similarly, “In the Days of Prismatic Colour” contains this admonition: “complexity is not a crime, but carry/ it to the point of murki-/ness and nothing is plain.” This is also, not coincidentally, the poem that carries her most strikingly asexual opening, an invocation of a time before coupling: “not in the days of Adam and Eve, but when Adam/ was alone.” She goes on, illustrating what the loss of clarity through a messy sexual union
means in terms of a dissipation of prismatic precision. She hankers for a time “when there was no smoke and colour was/fine,” a time she laments as lost, irretrievable: “it is no/ longer that; nor did the blue-red-yellow band/ of incandescence that was colour keep its stripe.” This use of the impure commingling between Adam and Eve as a central conceit further reminds us of that quintessential Moore poem, “Marriage,” where it’s also used. “Marriage,” which is characteristically tart in tone, includes early on a famous dismissal of connubial, above all conjugal, bliss, referring to it as something “requiring all one’s criminal ingenuity to avoid.” Moore’s faith in absolute clarity is linked to a preference for celibacy; McGuckian’s commitment to obscurity is linked to a fascination with erotic love.

McGuckian makes it a precondition for reading her that the crude demand for immediate clarity be dropped like clogs at the door of her exquisitely private poems. Her new book, Marconi’s Cottage, makes this point more emphatically than ever before. It contains a plethora of reflexive comments about the way she writes, what she’s serving through maintaining a certain level of obscurity. While Moore’s defense of clarity comes packaged in a textbook declarative sentence (“We do not admire what we cannot understand”), McGuckian describes her addiction to the inscrutable almost parenthetically in a phrase from the poem, “The Most Emily of All”: “As a sentence clings tighter because it makes no sense.” Her words confess a susceptibility to the seduction of what’s unknown, the other. The Emily of the title must be Dickinson because McGuckian in the last line refers to her own “clove brown eyes.” The reader immediately thinks of Dickinson’s response to Higginson who inquired about the color of her eyes: “the color of sherry in the glass that the Guest leaves.” Emily makes this reference in a letter to Higginson, and McGuckian’s poem is about a letter written to a male friend who has a potent masculine presence. This man’s simplest action, like running his “right hand up and down/in a groove on the door panel,” is endowed with erotic possibility, just as Dickinson might have created elaborate fantasies about Samuel Bowles or the Reverend Wadsworth from small, observed gestures. McGuckian seems to be identifying with Dickinson’s sexual excitability, the hermetic tone, the frequently inscrutable revelations expressed in sentences that indeed do cling tighter because they appear to make no sense. McGuckian anthropomorphizes the sentence, makes it capable of clinging, because verbal expression for her is a sexual act and the sentence is as mysterious as our true sexual motivations. We become attached to such sentences as we do to our own inscrutability. There is as much humility and obedience to a moral imperative in McGuckian’s insistence on dissolving lucidity in the face of genuine mystery as there is in Moore’s need to dispense with hubristic mystification and embrace the morality of fact.

McGuckian’s material is the mercury of sexual arousal, intense erotic feelings that are so much in flux they never assume the stable shape of facts. Given a

poetic which is incongruously grounded in these volatile but always visceral sensations of physical love, the reader must resort to experiential data to describe what it's like to read McGuckian. To complete a reading of one of her poems successfully, with any sense garnered en route, the reader, on perhaps the tenth reading, has to gather momentum toward the beginning and never balk until the end. To stare too long at a single, still intractable word, like a horse at one fence, is to become paralyzed, and whatever accumulated meaning we might have been carrying topples with the jolt of suddenly arrested movement. Motion is critical; so is empathy. The reader needs to be able to merge with the writer in the rapid flow of feeling. Metaphors proliferate with frightening fertility and velocity, like a time-compressed film of a flower blooming. To get caught in one time frame is to miss the climax.

McGuckian has written like this from the start. As a consequence there has always been an all-or-nothing effect to reading one of her poems. Either the central emotional state is understood, almost intuitively diagnosed, and the images that symptomize it enjoy an inevitability or the poem eludes the reader entirely. If Marianne Moore is a "literalist of the imagination," McGuckian, for all her fantasy and flamboyance, is a literalist of the feelings, especially as they lodge in the flesh. Her poems read at times like poetic reportage: bulletins stating what erotic excitement, anticipation, fulfillment, rejection are like at the front, on the skin. She translates into metaphor less conjunctions of thought and feeling than of physical perception and feeling. It is often surprising to discover how literal McGuckian is being for all the apparent obliquity of the image.

There are a number of instances in *Marconi's Cottage* where the only means of bringing an image into focus is to remove the impeding lenses of thought and even feeling, to the extent that feeling lodges in the heart and not the senses. Elementary physical perception is required. For example, "No Streets, No Numbers" opens with this puzzling compound simile: "The wind bruises the curtains’ jay-blue stripes/Like an unsold fruit or a child who writes/Its first word." It's easy to connect bruising with "unsold fruit" but how to make the leap into a shakily drafted first word? If we return the image to its literal beginnings, making it purely visual, then we see a failure of alignment of the curtains' blue lines, which are appropriately the color of ink. By adding this second, more hidden meaning to the trope, McGuckian suggests that a personal, historical bruising has implications for her writing.

Similarly, a very private poem about her father, "The Partner's Desk," on initial readings is defiantly dense. Early on we meet this recondite image: "I arranged the Christmas tree in its green outfit,/Producing its green against the grey sky like handwriting/That has been traced over." The image actually photographs tiny needles sparking off a branch, like the minute deviations from the original line of a pen when we trace. The aptness of the simile is that it sounds the perplexing depths of the poem, also suggested by the title. A partner's desk offers writing space and drawers on both sides, presupposing two authors, like a line traced over. The nervous quaver in any traced line is the product of tension, of trying too hard to conform: spontaneity, authenticity, and hence confidence.
are lost in the effort. The poem, significantly, is at its deepest level about the poet’s identification with her father, their near fusion, that becomes heightened during sex with a man. The title asks implicitly who is the author of the poet’s own life. The metaphor of two lines, one tremblingly superimposed on the other and barely deviating from it, provides a haunting representation of the psychological depredations suffered by the daughter of a seductive father.

To invoke this single instance, however, doesn’t do justice to the mobile sensation of reading McGuckian. It is not an exercise in perceiving a static formal design or some simple thematic coherence above the stream of language but of entering that stream, accepting the fluid interdependence of images as much as the poem assumes the same of lovers. In the title poem, “Marconi’s Cottage,” there are these revealing lines, “It is as if the sea had spoken in you/And then the words had dried.” The poet is invoking Marconi’s special achievement of transmitting radio messages across the Atlantic. The image could not be better suited for McGuckian, with her propensity for totally fluid meanings. But she does write in discrete, visible words, a calligraphy like delicate, dried seaweed, in close juxtaposition to swelling implication.

An early poem which illustrates this tension between the plurality of individual words and a tide of feeling is “The Sofa” from The Flower Master. In a sense, like primitive, telegraphic radio messages, every McGuckian poem requires that a story be made up to explain its ellipses and contradictions. The story makes it possible to stay with the poet as she rides the waves of her own consciousness. “The Sofa” begins with an apology to someone for not writing sooner, not answering, maybe even not opening, a letter. Then we hear that the poet’s “mind was savagely made up./Like a serious sofa moved/Under a north window.” The “serious sofa,” a relatively available McGuckian metaphor, suggests domestic soberness and chastity. Also, those letters, the one she received and the one she didn’t send, initially seem associated with a lover. It’s not only forgivable for the reader to rely on the conventions of penny romances, but natural when the poet refers to her mind being “savagely made up,” as minds often are in cheap novels. As the poem unfolds, however, this facile theory is thwarted, just as the speaker’s simplistic resolve breaks down. The clue to greater complication occurs when the speaker addresses the unidentified recipient of the letter, admitting that she wishes she could interest them in “his gentle stares.” We then know that a more subtle story is being related. We begin to visualize this addressed individual as perhaps a concerned parent, urging a daughter toward the safety and rectitude of marital fidelity and recommending in a patronizing but well-meaning way the therapy of writing poetry. The poem sketches both the difficult relationship between art and life McGuckian endures in isolation and a feminine definition of the poet, someone for whom work doesn’t handily serve as sublimation. Psychic separation proves difficult and the insidious blending of the poem’s linguistic indirections with the unresolved matter of life points to this feminine truth.

The poem accepts the necessity for confusing, distracting experience and the slow process of integrating it into the ego. The work for the reader of piecing
together a narrative which makes sense of the poem runs parallel to the poet’s efforts to explain herself to herself, to fit a disruptive love affair into her domestic and ultimately artistic life. In the end the sheen will be represented by a “serious sofa”—no downy, chintz affair on which to recline sinfully but a button-backed, leather, horsehair object that forces folks to sit up straight, to behave—fails and a slovenly disorder rules . . . “I spread on like a house.” Yet, she speculates, “somewhere a curtain rising wonders where I am.” Suddenly, here, at the conclusion, it all makes sense. This curtain is as much a theatrical appurtenance as a domestic one and at some incalculable distance there will be a revelation of self to self, dramatic in its intensity and formal beauty. Eventually the creation of art will provide a climactic release from domestic constraint and tedium. “The Sofa,” like “The Circus Animal’s Desertion,” is an ironic poem about not being able to write poetry. It’s about failing to make poems in the old way, by the old formulae, of having to forge new ones. Such a reading is by definition hypothetical, but there seems no other way to conduct oneself as a reader of McGuckian except to take this risk and string the gorgeous images and brilliant non sequiturs on a strong narrative thread; what the story turns out to be is the extraordinary one of McGuckian’s gradual self-realization, as woman and artist, and of their integration.

That achievement is always only imminent, however. Process prevails. In another reflexive aside from “She Which Is Not, He Which Is,” the poet tells us, almost ungrammatically, “My words will be without words/Like a net hidden in a lake./Their pale individual moisture.” This version of what her writing represents seems to contradict the distinction made between water and a separate dried substance: clearly formed, separate words. In this second statement words pale and dissolve. Their meaning dilutes, like ink in water. This is an exact trope for the sensation the reader has at the conclusion of a poem, when it returns to the sea of homogenously ineffable impulse from which a formed utterance temporarily surfaced. These poems also celebrate in a way closer to Moore than one would at first appreciate the persistence of personal autonomy even after the self has risked complete assimilation in the tactile world of another and dispersal in the shadows of the subconscious.

“The Sofa,” indeed much of The Flower Master, is pellucid compared to Marconi’s Cottage. It is much easier in the early poems than in the later to glimpse the line of connection that threads disjointed images and exclamations. In “The Sofa,” for instance, even lines from nowhere like “my disasters, my surrenders, all my loss” and the maddeningly interrogative “The impudence of flowers?” find their provenance in identifiable feeling. McGuckian as she has grown, however, has sought to create even more turbidity; and her later poems court remoteness in a blatantly deliberate, insistently contradictory way. A repeated strategy in Marconi’s Cottage, for example, is the use of initials, a code to identify a lover. From “Lac de Galance”: 
When a cloud of letters chose the moment
Of deepest sleep to burst their white ribbons
Into the same ‘M’ room. I discovered your name
There among the ‘E’s....

It’s a serious question in evaluating the success of these poems to ask what effect
this flaunted secrecy has. On the one hand, concealment taken to such an extreme
is a patent rejection of being known, mocks the very effort by others. The poem
hoards knowledge that belongs exclusively to the poet’s private life, beyond the
margins of the poem. This can insult and anger the reader but also relieves us of
the burden of trying. Nonetheless, limits are placed on the poem’s accessibility,
perhaps its universality, even value. On the other hand, to use such an arcane code
is also to adopt the strategy of dangerous love letters, a genre available to many
people, not just poets. This may increase the poem’s availability. The poem
rehearses the rituals of furtive, extra-marital romance and embodies in images
the thrill and anxiety of it. The poem shies away from disclosing its secret as
much as a determined adulterer would. For the poem to make such a disclosure
would neutralize its erotic content.

Does this mean that McGuckian’s poems fold inward solipsistically, refusing
to present themselves for honest inspection as Moore thought all serious art
must? It does not. In fact, it’s ironic that one of McGuckian’s cartographical
devices for mapping emotions is a major resource for Moore: color. If certain
elements of the poems resist decoding, others offer themselves to it. Color is one.
Reading over the oeuvre—The Flower Master (1982), Venus and the Rain
(1984), On Ballycastle Beach (1988), and Marconi’s Cottage (1991)—reveals
how surely this code has evolved. Color in McGuckian is a readable shorthand
as it is also, say, in Wallace Stevens with his “zero green” and “Blue Guitar” and
“Large Red Man Reading.” McGuckian’s most frequently applied colors are red
and blue and, a disturbing non-color, sometimes white or grey or simply
moonlight. The three were present in the first volume. “The Chain Sleeper”
contains these lines: “She dresses under her dressing-gown, her fussy perfume/
Eating into all the storyable floors of blue.” From that same volume, the poem
“That Year” is dualistically structured through the connotations of red and white.
In the first stanza there’s an allusion to “bleach or henna on the hair.” In the next
stanza there is a “red kite” and a “white ball,” and in the next the line “Listening
for the red and white.” This application of paint, however, is spare compared to
the way it’s daubed on in Marconi’s Cottage.

Color by this point is one of McGuckian’s favorite languages. She’s explored
its connotations deeply and is enthusiastic and lavish with its use. Her favorite
pigments—scarlet, china blue, and every muted tone from dove grey to cham-
pagne—have acquired complex meanings about which, surprisingly, she’s
forthcoming. A law operates in her with regard to candor: she can be confidential
when she’s speaking through metaphor but becomes an obscurantist when the
facts of real life appear to slip into a poem. They appear in such impenetrable
mufti that only a fool would call them autobiography. Colors, by contrast, speak
with relative directness through a previously established code. From Marconi’s
The poem “Journal Intime” speaks mainly through the medium of color and pictorial art. The third stanza refers to “Watteau gowns” and the second stanza begins with the blunt statement: “Red is the color of art.” Red is even more precisely the color of female art, a woman’s attempt to cross turbulent passions on the formal, cyclical life of her body to produce art.

White is associated with heterosexual union. (As early as “The Sofa” the woman explains “I must wear white for him.”) Less a sign of purity than of regressive psychological fusion, white is the color that links sex and death for McGuckian, locating the lure and threat of sex. White becomes a male color and in the context of heterosexual sex an indication of male dominance. Again, from “Journal Intime” there is a reference to moonlight and then to the “death-devoted color of masculinity.” It’s predictable, given McGuckian’s poetic, that a title implying utter privacy and confidentiality be in a foreign language and that color, the central metaphorical device of the poem, its chief artifice, lays the emotions bare.

Blue, however, is perhaps the hardest color in her spectrum to deconstruct, maybe because its meaning emanates from a pre-sexual area of consciousness. It is above all associated with the innocence of infants’ eyes, a color of childhood, hence that early reference to “storyable floors of blue.” In “Amsterdam Avenue,” a new poem, a memory of an old lover centers on his eyes (“Your eyes are the one thing now/ Worth visiting”), beginning: “If you exist, make me blue,/ You are blue in my picture.” It’s the color of idealization, aspiration, memory. Going back to the comparison between Moore and McGuckian, it’s interesting that Moore locates a prehistorical time when there was inviolable prismatic clarity “In the days when Adam was alone.” Moore, aiming to observe the world with objectivity, causally connects this external, sharp focus with unsullied masculinity. Eve, again the temptress, is responsible implicitly for muddying Adam’s palette with her confused emotions. McGuckian’s achievement is to transform the manifold obscurity of subjective experience by separating it into discrete meanings, colors. She is, in the end, as precise as possible.

If reading McGuckian through Moore, in relation to the problem of obscurity, is obeying the law of opposites, reading her through, for example, Hart Crane is the opposite of that. Crane and McGuckian use metaphor in a similar way and this coincidence is not unrelated to erotic pressures in Crane’s work. The difference is that he as a homosexual in his time had to be extremely covert about his identity and McGuckian as a heterosexual woman today isn’t under quite such an injunction to obfuscate. Still, being frank about female sexuality is a relatively rare occurrence in canonic poetry. McGuckian enjoys little comfort from precedent even in her veiled disclosures. Both Crane and McGuckian, even when writing about inanimate nature, project an erotic, emotionally complex content onto it and do so through an equally complex poetic. Crane too was accused of being indecipherable and mounted a persuasive defense of his impervious style. Crane’s observations on “illogical impingements” in a letter to Harriet Monroe go a good distance to explaining McGuckian. Crane is speaking of “The Bridge”:
as a poet I may very possibly be more interested in the so-called illogical impingements of the connotations of words on the consciousness (and their combinations and interplay in metaphor on this basis) than I am interested in the preservation of their logically rigid signification at the cost of limiting my subject matter and perceptions involved in the poem. . . . This may sound as though I merely fancied juggling words and images until I found something novel, or esoteric; but the process is much more predetermined and objectified than that. The nuances of feeling and observation in a poem may well call for certain liberties which you claim the poet has no right to take. I am simply making the claim that the poet does have that authority, and that to deny that is to limit the scope of the medium so considerably as to outlaw some of the richest genius of the past.

McGuckian, like Crane, is exercising her authority as a poet to use a technique which matches the “nuances of feeling and observation” that constitute her content. Her most obscure patches, typically metaphorical, serve a complex, usually sexual, truth and that truth could not be adequately served by a less complex discourse. The opacity is not gratuitous, the linguistic tactics not aimed at achieving the “novel or esoteric.” This is simply demonstrated by her not frequent lapses in style, declensions into cliché, as in “Storm-Flap” with its line, “Finding him light as a feather.” No one uses such a trite image if bent on spectacular invention.

The concept of “illogical impingements” is genuinely useful in understanding McGuckian, particularly as Crane explains it in detail:

its apparent illogic operates so logically in conjunction with its context in the poem as to establish its claim to another logic, quite independent of the original definition of the word or phrase or image thus employed. It implies (this inflection of language) a previous or prepared receptivity to the stimulus on the part of the reader. The reader’s sensibility simply responds by identifying this inflection of experience with some event in his own history or perceptions—or rejects it altogether.

This is an uncannily exact analysis of how reading McGuckian works, or doesn’t; it pinpoints the all-or-nothing factor. She requires the reader to understand intimately female sexual experience before intimacy with the poem is possible. If this knowledge exists prior to the reading, then the apparent illogic of statements and figures turns itself around into contextual inevitability.

An obvious, easily convertible instance of illogical logic occurs in “Sun and Moon Child” where she describes the beginning of an affair, saying “and the third/ And fifteenth of every month were our first meeting./ Our first, night.” Aside from the simple possibility that the occasions mentioned are plural and, each month, marked as anniversaries, McGuckian’s phrasing complicates, and in a characteristic way, the issue. For how can the “first night,” singular, take place on the “third/ And fifteenth of every month,” plural? Easily, if every encounter feels like the first or if every time is intended to be the last or if generally there’s a denial that meetings occur so often and so regularly. So the little twist in logic carries with it a large knot of recognizable rationalization, in this case an activity not confined to women.

When McGuckian uses figuration, however, her gift for representing complex, often contradictory states of mind, usually associated with sex, is most on display. Again in “Sun and Moon Child” she describes the house in which the affair begins:

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The house was impossibly fragile, made
Of cloth and glass, the room floated freely
Within itself and the bed was let into
A recess, like a stitch that is slack and loose.

Every detail adds to the overall emotional truth that pleasure, guilt, fear, and anger are all piled on top of each other. The pleasure is that of complete release ("the room floated freely") which also triggers a sense of guilt and self-loathing: the bed is recessed and there's a hint of sluttishness about its hidden location. The gap in the wall where the bed hides is like the gap in a respectable life where an affair takes place, hence the allusion to the slack stitch that anticipates the "blow-away/Hem" in the next stanza. Here's where feminine experience comes in: the slatternly associations, enticing and menacing, that women learn from their mothers go with a loose hem, that it's always a sign of loose morals! The psychological picture, however, is even fuller. Fear is implied by the fragility of the house's construction, and possibly anger, certainly some brittle emotion, by the predominance of glass. Cloth and glass together convey the pleasure and the pain. Also, that phrase, "floated freely within itself," which is exceedingly illogical, uncovers an even deeper layer of feeling. How does something, a room, float within itself? It does if it's a projection of a mixture of sexual ecstasy and utter narcissism. Finally, a single word, the adverb in the phrase "impossibly fragile," indicates anticipatory grief, the leaden certainty of sure loss.

The previous example may not be extreme enough, replete enough with illogic to prove the point. All metaphor is, of course, strictly speaking illogical. It's the degree to which McGuckian widens the angle between vehicle and tenor that gives her poems their compelling mystery, makes them balance on the brink of dysfunction. Discovering the precise way in which apparently senseless statements make supreme sense if transferred from outer to inner reality shows how they vindicate a woman's way of being in the world. There is no better evidence of this strength than in the poem "Clotho." Drawing its title from the name of the Fate who weaves the thread of life, the poem is hermetic but seems to pivot on a homoerotic fantasy. It contains one of McGuckian's most baffling set of lines which blossom after reflection into an extraordinary insight. The third stanza reads:

My arms were stretched as high
And wide as they could go,
A distaff reaching from heaven to earth.
But there was nothing to burn
My tongue on, not even a broken stalk
Of lilac-veined sound behind her broken eyes.

The distaff evokes Clotho but particularly suggests the role this fantasy about a woman is playing in defining the thread of McGuckian's life. Not only is there the faint sketch of a lesbian encounter and the not so faint suggestion of bondage, there is an emotional overlay of sexual frustration that to my knowledge has never been articulated in poetry. The complaint that there was nothing "to burn her tongue on" as it becomes elaborated embraces an ambiguity that involves
such honesty and self-awareness it turns this potentially titillating content from sensationalism to art. “Not even a broken stalk/Of lilac-veined sound” has both clitoral and phallic connotations, conveying frustrations both within the bounds of the lesbian encounter and outside it, that it was not more itself and that it was not something else. And “lilac-veined,” with the myopic vision of sexual contact behind the image, conveys intense physical intimacy. Finally, the nonsense of a stalk becoming a sound and then lodging behind eyes converts to the perfect logic of the orchestration of all the senses in orgasm.

By positing sexuality as the central human reality and by inviting the reader to be sexually intimate with her, albeit by conquering her coyness, McGuckian is also a good deal like Whitman, who is anything but coy. Like Whitman, however, McGuckian puts the reader in an uneasy, tense position, making us privy, if we are sufficiently kindred spirits, to truths that only a sexual partner can have. The obscurity is part of a seductive ritual conducted for the benefit of the reader. The merging of reader and writer parallels the consummations described in the poems. The immediacy and excitement of the poems is the product of this relationship produced by the active participation of the reader. Seducing the reader is equally a requisite for Whitman. McGuckian can even sound like Whitman and express many of his thematic convictions, like the absolute correlation between eros and the cosmos. In this description of pregnancy, she uses a Whitmanesque rhetoric that swings between metaphysical and corporeal truths:

I forfeit the world outside
For the sake of my own inwardness
I am so at one with the scent of its many wills:
Its inexhaustible innocency
Lapses past me like a future not lived strongly,
I abandon myself to its incubative weight.

Whole phrases could be airlifted into a Whitman poem and fit without alteration, like “the scent of its many wills” and “its inexhaustible innocency”; but there is a critical difference too. Whereas Whitman will declaim in “Song of Myself” (Part 7) “All goes onward and outward,” McGuckian has forfeited the “world outside/For the sake of my own inwardness.” Both poets choose a direction for their energies in accordance with sexual dictates. Because they are obeying what for them is the essential life force, everything else is related to it. Sexuality enjoys limitless correspondences; therefore, pregnancy with McGuckian here is a metaphor for the incubation of poetry, for creation per se.

McGuckian has begun to do for female sexuality what Whitman did for male, for the range and complexity of it. Whitman’s bear hug of the reader is as determined by his sexual nature as McGuckian’s teasing and testing of her reader is. Her obscurity above all is a form of self-protection, of not letting anyone closer than compatibility and sympathy will make safe. This explains the attraction of little girl dress-up games in the poems, her lady of the big house and medieval princess fantasies. In “A Small Piece of Wood,” for example, she appears fetchingly as a figure from a tapestry: “In pale frock and raspberry/Boots, my
waist the circumference/Of no more than two oranges/I rode out to the hunt.” Such self-dramatization serves both innocence and adult sexual sophistication at once, permitting both experimentation and protection of the vulnerable child in her. To ask McGuckian to be less theatrical, less secretive, less mysterious is to ask her to abandon her core. We accept these poems on their terms or not at all. This is one way of loving.

Sometimes, however, the reader wearies of the febrile tone and the predictable ploys of secrecy and longs for adult calm, a recognition of mutual ordinariness, even a gender truce. Friends rather than or in addition to lovers would be a refreshment. This seems impossible for McGuckian, largely because she’s too aware of her uniqueness, of the pressure of non-understanding. The poetry presupposes that a woman’s deepest sexual experiences are still news in the world of poetry. Whitman announces to the world that it is far “luckier” to die than we suppose; McGuckian whispers alluringly to the reader that it’s far luckier to be a woman than assumed. She feels, however, for all this, isolated and untranslatable, writing in what she calls “my un-English Language,” (“The Partner’s Desk”), a language next-door to English but not it or anything else with a tag. There are many poems in which McGuckian speaks from within the centuries of imposed definitions on women which label their intensity as craziness, their sure knowledge, because it differs from men’s, as confusion. McGuckian is vulnerable to these classifications, sometimes worrying for her sanity, but usually demonstrates the self-possession to fight back. In “The Man with Two Women” she asserts that the darkness she contends with, be it death or misunderstanding, a similar loss, doesn’t emanate from her: “getting dark/Is the world’s fault.” Her own counter-obscurety, therefore, is partly defensive and not without aggression, not without an element of flaunting; but this does not make it a fault, rather an integral part of a buoyant persona.

Finally, the obscurity is a way of cauterizing an old wound: “Such is a woman’s very deep violation/ As a woman” (“No Streets, No Numbers”). Although the poems stop short of explicitly defining this violation, the hints we receive seem less a smoke screen than all the poet knows consciously of the vague but persistent sources of pain. The clues may not add up but the figures keep circulating in the reader’s mind. Why, for instance, does the image of the distaff in “Clotho,” where unconventional sexuality is explored, reappear in “The Partner’s Desk” as an allusion to crucifixion: “And he took my hands and stretched them out/As if I were on a cross, but not being punished”? The “he” is ambiguous, incorporating both a lover and the father. Nothing in these poems as, say, in Anne Sexton’s or Sharon Olds’s, gives the reader permission to deem them autobiography, to construe their content as literal event.

McGuckian is usually fearless and takes her investigations of intuitions to the edge of consciousness. “Venus and the Sea” opens: “When I return from poetry as from a sea-shore/To the streets of dream.” Here is a prime example of the illogical communicating an elusive psychological truth. McGuckian finds her poems at a psychic level beneath dreams, where the content is even more anarchic and amorphous. Dreams, which we usually regard as chartless, with her
have streets and are mundane by comparison to proto-poems. McGuckian is interested in the uncharted areas of the psyche from which erotic desire comes. In “The Invalid’s Echo” she refers to a “parent-poem” which may be a poem to a parent but is more likely a poem of poems, an ur-poem that confronts the ultimate mysteries of identity, particularly sexual identity, bestowed on us by our parents, and grandparents, about whom she also writes. McGuckian is able to be articulate about what she claims defies articulation. Her obscurity at its highest level serves the paradox inherent in words that sit on the border of speech. Regarding it as a miracle that these silences achieve speech, she often portrays the word as having an agent other than her. In “Echo-Poem” she refers to how a “word chooses its meaning,” giving language itself will and agency. At some level she only knows what she’s writing when it’s written itself.

No poem in her recent collection speaks more candidly about this quality of embodying in images meanings that can’t be defined discursively than “East of Mozart.” It also depicts the loneliness of enduring this burden of perpetual latency, like a constant pregnancy. She begins by referring to a “feeling/With no name in actual language,/Which perhaps does not exist except in me.” She ends by observing:

But some words like some notes
That never define themselves
Are meant for at most
Ten people in the whole world
Whose oxygen are storms.

We know that Emily Dickinson is a possible reader, she who began a poem “Wild nights, wild nights,” someone whose “oxygen are storms,” someone literate of the unpronounceable. This sine qua non of reader intimacy is the common link between McGuckian, Dickinson, Crane, and Whitman. Their ideal readers are not determined by gender, only disposition, but the chances of locating him or her are rare. If McGuckian’s poems in the meanwhile, however, cease to be stormy (and storms do muddy streams), at least temporarily, then they will fail to provide sustenance when this intimate is found. If a reader is constructed by nature or nurture to imbibe McGuckian’s unique form of oxygen, these poems can be a life support.

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