

EXPERIENCING THE WOMB: THE MOTHER-CHILD RELATIONSHIP IN *MARCONI'S COTTAGE* BY MEDBH MCGUCKIAN

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Abstract: The poetry of Medbh McGuckian, the Northern Irish contemporary poet, is full of mysterious and dream-like images with an unconventional signifier-signified connection. Since her themes are generally associated with the private life, psychological insights and the body of women, her poetry is mostly considered as solely feminine. The aim of this study is to unveil meanings within this body of poetry acknowledging them not as restrictive but rather universal, by analyzing the poems “Marconi’s Cottage”, “The Unplayed Rosalind” and “On Her Second Birthday”, from the collection *Marconi’s Cottage* (1992). . The main focus is on the mother-child representation during the intra-uterine period, concentrating on the experience of the womb which is generally neglected by critical analyses, leading to the misunderstanding of McGuckian’s poetry.

Keywords: Medbh McGuckian. Poetry. Female aesthetics. Womb.

VIVENCIANDO O ÚTERO: A RELAÇÃO ENTRE A MÃE E A CRIANÇA EM *MARCONI'S COTTAGE* DE MEDBH MCGUCKIAN

Resumo: A poesia de Medbh McGuckian, poetisa norte irlandesa contemporânea, é cheia de imagens misteriosas e oníricas, cuja ligação entre significante e significado não é convencional. Por sua temática ser geralmente associada à vida privada, *insights* psicológicos e ao corpo feminino, sua poesia é lida unicamente como feminina. O objetivo deste estudo é desvendar em sua obra poética significados não restritivos, mas universais, mediante a análise dos poemas “Marconi’s Cottage”, “The Unplayed Rosalind” e “On Her Second Birthday”, extraídos da coleção *Marconi’s Cottage* (1992). O foco principal é a representação da mãe e da criança no período intra-uterino, considerando a experiência do útero negligenciada na maioria dos estudos, o que leva à incompreensão da poesia de McGuckian.

Palavras-chave: Medbh McGuckian. Poesia. Estética feminina. Útero.

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When a writer proposes a work whose main themes are pregnancy and gestation, it is often considered to be constrained by female aesthetics. This is not different for Medbh McGuckian, whose poems as presented in *Marconi's Cottage* are mainly connected (though not solely) to the birth theme. In what follows, I propose an analysis of some of McGuckian's poems from this collection by observing the representation of the experience of the womb. My main argument here is that this experience is not confined to female aesthetics. On the contrary, as Moynagh Sullivan argues, this experience is shared universally:

Culture-wide prohibition of the representation of the experience of the womb, and inter-uterine and early pre-Oedipal, cause the almost universal disgust and fear of women's bodies and characteristics associated with it, which marks Western culture (...) Although not everyone carries a womb, everyone has been carried by a womb, and this is the only experience shared universally by human beings: it is indeed the only universal that can be asserted, and is the very one that Western rationalism sought to deny. (SULLIVAN, 2005, p. 460)

Medbh McGuckian was born in 1950 to Catholic parents in Belfast, Northern Ireland. As a Northern Irish Catholic woman, she was confronted with social, political and religious tensions. Her poetry is full of images of nature, the home, the moon, flowers, water, the colour blue, the house, pregnancy and birth. Another primary theme in McGuckian's poetry is familial relationships, primarily, the maternal relationship between mother and child. Praising McGuckian's *Selected Poems* (1997), Seamus Heaney said, "her language is like the inner lining of consciousness, the inner lining of English itself, and it moves amphibiously between the dreamlife and her actual domestic and historical experience as a woman in late-20th-century Ireland" (HEANEY, quoted in MCGUCKIAN, 1997).

McGuckian's first collection, *The Flower Master* (1982), won the Poetry Society's Alice Hunt Bartlett Prize, the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature and an award from the Arts Council of Ireland. Since then, she has published several collections of poetry. Her work has been the subject of much debate among critics and, despite being the recipient of several awards, she faced

some difficulties in publishing *Marconi's Cottage*. The editor that was supposed to launch the collection ultimately rejected it, claiming that her poems should have “thematic coherence (linearity, narrative, closure) and a reader-friendly text (commonly known literary allusions)” (MURPHY, 2006, p. 74). This editor certainly failed to understand the nature of McGuckian’s poems. Subsequently, Wake Forest Press (which accepted *Marconi's Cottage* for publication) reproduced a reader’s report in her defense which stated that what is required for an understanding of her poetry is “an intuitive, perhaps unconscious, whole-hearted engagement, one that nevertheless places unusual demands on one’s intellectual and academic resources, with an extraordinary poetic imagination (MURPHY, 2006, p. 75). In this regard, the reader’s view of McGuckian’s poetry reflects Sullivan’s claim that it is necessary to look at her poems unconsciously, that is, to put aside as we read what is familiar to the culture we are inserted in, or, as Heaney has said, to divide our reading between consciousness and unconsciousness (the latter as in a dream).

The first poem to be analyzed is the one that entitles the collection: “Marconi’s Cottage”. The title introduces us to a house that acts as a physical and emotional shelter, yet is not completely protected from outside forces. Marconi’s cottage, which is described in the first line of the poem as “Small and watchful as a lighthouse”, is a place of refuge, though it does not offer complete protection as is demonstrated in the third stanza:

Now I am close enough, I open my arms
To your castle-thick walls, I must learn
To use your wildness when I lock and unlock
Your door weaker than kisses. (MC 103)

Hence, the same house that has “castle-thick” walls has a door “weaker than kisses”, indicating the duality presented in relation to a strong-weak house. Throughout the poem, other types of duality can be recognized, which indicate why she has been considered a “threader of double-stranded words” (MURPHY 2006).

The recurrent presence of water in this poem should also be taken into account. In general discourses, water is often associated with pregnancy.

The association derives from such related terms as “amniotic fluid”, which is the protective liquid around the fetus. The amniotic fluid is both inhaled and exhaled by the fetus and is essential for it to develop normally. “Breaking the water” is also a term used during pregnancy; it describes the rupture of the amniotic sac at the beginning of labor. In the poem, water appears in the form of the sea at three different places. In the first stanza, it emerges as follows:

Small and watchful as a lighthouse,
A pure clear place of no particular childhood,
It is as if the sea had spoken in you
And then the words had dried. (MC 103)

When carrying a baby, the mother also carries the water, or amniotic fluid. And it is through this water that the mother communicates with her baby. Here, the speaker says that in this small house, “the sea had spoken in you”, meaning ‘inside you’, which is a clear reference to the prenatal relationship between mother and child. The second stanza starts with the line “Bitten and fostered by the sea” (MC 103), which is also a reference to the amniotic fluid,

The doubleness of McGuckian’s poetry can be examined when analyzing the real cottage to which the poem refers to: Marconi’s Cottage. Guglielmo Marconi was an Italian and a 1909 Nobel Prize winner in Physics. In 1898, Marconi lived at Marconi’s cottage which lies within walking distance of the sea in Ballycastle, Northern Ireland. Knowing the location of the cottage can lead us to “breakwaters”, which is another term in architecture that could also be associated with this poem’s theme. Breakwaters are constructed to reduce the intensity of wave action in inshore waters and to provide safer harbors. In this way, the cottage operates as a breakwater and is “bitten and fostered by the sea”, similar to the baby inside the mother who is enveloped by this water which bites and fosters it. The last stanza says:

Let me have you for what we call
Forever, the deeper opposite of a picture,
Your leaves, the part of you
That the sea first talked to. (MC 103)

Again, a reference to the original cottage would be relevant. Marconi's cottage was used by Marconi to carry out radio transmission experiments, which were part of the development of wireless telegraphy that would transform communication. Radio would mean the wireless transmission of signals through space by electromagnetic radiation of an invisible frequency. In other words, the radio waves initiated at Marconi's cottage would cross the sea invisibly carrying a message. Back to the poem, the last lines, "the part of you/that the sea first talked to", are a reference to the cottage that would send and receive the invisible messages. Analogously, when the baby is inside the mother, their communication is mediated by the water (the amniotic fluid) and it is also invisible to the eye. The doubleness of the meaning in the poem is evident again.

In Charles L. O'Neill's reading of houses as a poetic trope in McGuckian's work, he states that her use of "house" as "an image of both physical and psychic states embodies a constantly shifting constellation of values: it is a refuge and a prison, a place of parturition and poetic activity, a space to be defended and one to be left vulnerable" (O'NEILL, 1999, p. 66). Similarly, in one interview, McGuckian states "a house represents security, but is a false security, because we know that a man can come into your house and shoot you" (MCGUCKIAN, cited in O'NEILL, 1999, 72).

As most of the themes and issues that McGuckian addresses in her poetry are typically feminine, she is generally read as "a poet obsessively concerned with femininity, with her personal life, even with the dimensions of her house, to the exclusion of wider, more public concerns" (WILLS, 1993, p. 61). In this regard, again, my reading of McGuckian's poems proposes that, while she addresses feminine issues in her poetry, this should not be considered as a restriction for general readers. On the contrary, her poems aim at unveiling what is usually erased in poetic representations of motherhood. Instead of constraining, the reading of her poems (taking into account feminine aspects) opens up new possibilities and considerations about pregnancy and maternity.

The second poem to be analyzed here is "The Unplayed Rosalind". This poem, which was also extracted from the collection *Marconi's Cottage*, is about pregnancy and the relationship between mother and child but,

perhaps, may also have a second meaning concerning the political sphere of Belfast during the Troubles.

“The Unplayed Rosalind” presents three deictic pronouns: I, she and he. What is intriguing here is that the speaker does not make it clear who is speaking in distinct moments of the poem and, in each stanza, the reader is supposed to imagine a new distinct speaker.

Following the analysis of “Marconi’s Cottage” in which the house was associated with the pregnant body, in “The Unplayed Rosalind” this association is also recurrent, as is observed in the fifth stanza:

The room which I thought the most beautiful
In the world, and never showed to anyone,
Is a rose-red room, a roseate chamber.
It lacks two windowpanes and has no water jug.
There is red ink in the inkwell. (MC 59)

Here, the speaker talks about this beautiful room, which she has never shown to anyone. Identifying this position as a consideration of the pregnant body, it can be said that this room, representing the mother’s womb, has never been shown to anyone except for the baby that experiences this environment but does not remember it afterwards. This oblivion around what is intra-uterine and pre-natal is explored by McCuckian in order to make it present.

The color red, which carries the meaning of blood, is also repeated throughout this stanza in three different forms: rose-red room, roseate chamber and red ink. Significantly, a chamber is a room inside a building. This roseate chamber has no windowpanes or water-jugs or, in other words, it is closed in by itself and the water is not in a jug, it is everywhere. Red may then refer to the color of the human body on the inside; it is the color of the womb when looked at from within. And red ink is a reference to the blood that is inside us. The co-presence of mother and child in the same space is made clear in the fourth stanza where it is said:

I have been the poet of women and consequently
Of the young; if you burned my letters
In the soiled autumn they would form two hearts (MC 59)

During the gestational period, the mother represents the limits of the world to the child and she mediates the world for the child, who identifies with her. When proposing an image of “two-hearts”, the speaker exposes the doubleness of the pregnant body and clarifies that, although just one body can be seen from the outside, two bodies exist when looking from the inside. Hence, this reading aims to eliminate the notion of McGuckian’s poetry being confined to female aesthetics while also proposing the perspective of the insider who is universal (we all have experienced the womb).

The two-in-one concept is carried forward in the sixth stanza when the speaker says:

Upstairs above my head lives someone
Who repeats my movements with her double
Weeping. My heart beats as though it were
Her, and sometimes I have her within my clothes
Like a blouse fastened with a strap. (MC 60)

Once more, the duality of two minds co-inhabiting the same physical space is restated when the speaker says “Upstairs above my head lives someone”. The speaker continues by saying that this someone is weeping, maybe mourning for something she had lost. As mentioned above, the speaker assumes a different voice in each stanza. In this one, the reader understands that the baby is speaking, due to its inferior physical position in relation to the mother’s mind (the mother’s head is upstairs and the baby’s mind is downstairs). When it is said “My heart beats as though it were her”, the speaker reaffirms the interior voice of the baby and demonstrates the dependency of the child on the mother: the child’s life depends on the mother’s life.

In the ninth stanza, a resonance of the roseate chamber mentioned before can be recognized when the word echo is mentioned:

In her there was something of me which
He touched, when she lay on his arm like the unknown
Echo of the word I wanted to hear
Only from his mouth; she spoke words to him
I had already heard. (MC 60)

If the roseate chamber itself is shut, it could be said that what is spoken in this chamber becomes an echo. As it does not have windows, the sound does not leave this space, it merely resonates as an echo. Similarly, in pregnancy the messages sent from the mother to the child do not leave her insides, they are kept within her inner body and they resonate in the interior of this roseate chamber.

In the last lines of the last stanza, there is no doubt that the speaker is referring to the experience of the womb during pregnancy where it is said:

My seed is a loose stormcoat
Of gold silk, with wide sleeves, in her uterus (MC 61)

Here, the male voice can be heard in “my seed (...) in her uterus”. Then, she who carries something of the speaker is the unknown echo for which McGuckian seeks a word and which she seeks to represent. Thus, this reading does not aim at erasing either the agents or the moment of conceiving from the portrayal. It rather aims at revealing the stage between conceiving and after-birth that is usually erased in representation.

At the beginning of the analysis of “The Unplayed Rosalind”, it was said that it also potentially reflects the political aspects of The Troubles in Belfast throughout its lines. This is because the poem is dedicated to Anne Devlin who was a student in her early twenties when the Troubles broke out. The Troubles is the common name for the conflict in Northern Ireland that spilled over at various times into the Republic of Ireland, England and mainland Europe. The Troubles began in the late 1960s and is considered by many to have ended with the Belfast Good Friday Agreement of 1998. However, sporadic violence has continued since then.

In a book entitled *Straight Left*, Anne’s father, Paddy Devlin, reveals that she was badly hurt during a civil rights march organized in January 1969 from Belfast to Derry in Northern Ireland. He says “Anne was knocked unconscious from a blow on the head and fell into the river. Anne was taken back to the hospital and kept in for observation, suffering from concussion” (DEVLIN 1993, 95). In the second stanza, the following lines may be a reference to this attack:

Rained, and the tumultuous sea was making me
Sterile, as though a hand from within it
Slowly drove me back, we were small objects
On its edge. (MC 59)

After the attack, Anne Devlin fell into the river, “the tumultuous sea”, until someone rescued her, “a hand from within it slowly drove me back”, and she was taken to the hospital. “We were small objects” may be a reference to human life being taken for granted in the period of The Troubles. This is further reflected in the fourth stanza:

I have lived on a war footing and slept
On the blue revolution of my sword; (MC 59)

If Anne Devlin was marching (footing) on a war (The Troubles), the speaker, who now assumes the position of she, is fighting in her interior revolution while the baby is growing and developing in her womb. Blue is another color that is recurrent in “The Unplayed Rosalind”; it appears three times. In general discourses, it is commonly associated with the sky, the sea, ice, cold and, sometimes, with sadness. The “blue revolution” is here associated with a peaceful one that contrasts with The Troubles, which was a violent and bloody period in Northern Irish history.

The last poem to be analyzed is “On her Second Birthday”, which was also extracted from *Marconi's Cottage*. It is important to highlight that this poem is positioned as the last in this collection: the final poem concludes the gestational writing (and reading) period and the book is born. The first stanza says:

In the beginning I was no more
Than a rising and falling mist
You could see through without seeing. (MC 107)

Above all, this beginning mirrors the duality of two minds co-inhabiting the same physical space as already discussed in the analysis of “The Unplayed Rosalind”. When serving as a mediator between the child

and the world, the mother serves as the object for the child. However, when the speaker says “You could see through without seeing”, she inserts herself in this process and it can be noticed that the mother is not only an object but is also a subject. Thus, these lines voice the representation of two subjects – the mother and the baby – that are not clearly separated; they are in a “rising and falling mist”.

Secondly, this passage draws on the Bible when it says “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” (John 1:1-3). Similarly, if in the beginning there was the Word, according to John in the Bible, in this poem, the beginning is not with the Word but is before that; it is in the gestational period when the Word is not considered – the intra-uterine period.

Marconi's Cottage (as well as McGuckian's poetry itself) is considered by many critics (and readers) as obscure, self-centered, mysterious and interior due to its focus on narrating what is outside of consciousness and on exposing dreams, where signifiers are not conventionally associated with the signified and communication happens through peculiar forms. In this way, her beginnings do not reside in the Word.

As the time of labor is getting closer, these two bodies need to fall apart so that the child can be born. The third stanza says:

It seems as though
To explain the shape of the world
We must fall apart,
Throw ourselves upon the world,
Slip away from ourselves. (MC 107)

When the speaker says “To explain the shape of the world/ we must fall apart”, this resonates with what has been said in the first stanza when the mother and the baby are not clearly separated but are in a “rising and falling mist”. That is to say the birth must happen in order to be understood by the outside world; the Word has to take its place in order to make this scene intelligible. Here, the speaker is trying to move from the interior sphere to the exterior one.

In her theoretical account of the similarities between the child's birth and the poem's birth, Moynagh Sullivan states that the latter is a rebirth. She says:

The rebirth involves precise procedures that guarantee the authenticity of the poet being born unto himself: specifically the transcendence of the matter/mater so that the textual father/son can be established as the locus of meaning. According to some critics, the birth of a poem is a primary event, but in psychoanalytical terms is actually a rebirth in which the originary body is replaced by language, which is thereafter understood as the seat and origin of being. (SULLIVAN, 2005, p. 453)

In this affirmation, Sullivan criticizes those who believe that the birth of a poem is primary; she claims that it is “a second birth” in which the maternal body is substituted by a matrix of language. This perspective engages with my reading of “On Her Second Birthday”, which presumes the birth of the child and, *secondly*, the birth of the poem that encloses the collection.

“On her Second Birthday” was dedicated to McGuckian's daughter. Thus, it tells the story of mother and daughter separating themselves, “of the mother separating herself from her collapse into the primary object, into her own voice, back into poetry, and into another relationship with her daughter through the gift of a transformational or transitional poem” (SULLIVAN 2009, 323). The intersubjectivity between mother and daughter is clearly separated when the baby is born. However, as soon as the daughter is born, she starts resembling her mother. The movement of passing through generations is evident in the sixth stanza:

The more it changed
The more it changed me into itself. (MC 108)

Hence, if in the beginning of the poem, the speaker is dealing with these boundaries between mother and the baby-to-be-born, after the partition of the two distinctive subjects and the birth of a girl, the mother realizes their subjectivity is going to be amalgamated again due to the

conventions of our culture. In the last line, the speaker says “One day it will pass my mind into its body” (MC 108).

Before reaching a conclusion, it is pertinent to consider what theorists have said concerning the relationship between poetry, the maternal body and birth. In *Desire in Language*, Julia Kristeva theorizes about this relationship. For her,

poetry and maternity represent privileged practices, within a paternally sanctioned culture, which permit a nonpsychotic experience of that heterogeneity. However, while poetic language and the pleasures of maternity constitute local displacements of the paternal law, they are temporary subversions that finally submit to that against which they initially rebelled. (KRISTEVA, 1980, p. 119)

The poetic language resembles birth in that it permits “nonpsychotic experience of heretogeneity” or, in other words, in the way it opens up possibilities for overcoming the common system of signifiers into which we are all inserted. Nonetheless, similarly to birth, this subversion is temporary as, after the disembodiment, the child is placed within our paternally sanctioned culture and the birth experience is erased.

Three poems extracted from the collection *Marconi's Cottage*, written by the Northern Irish poet Medbh McGuckian, have been analyzed in this paper: “Marconi's Cottage”, “The Unplayed Rosalind” and “On Her Second Birthday”. The main aspect considered here was the peculiar representation of pregnancy and maternity proposed by the author not only in these poems but also throughout her collection (“Visiting Rainer Maria”, “The Most Emily of All”, “East of Mozart”, “Echo-Poem”, “Turning the Moon into a Verb” and “Teraphim” are some other examples where the same theme is evident).

In “Marconi's Cottage” the focus was on the recurrent presence of water; the presentation of strong/weak cottage as a trope for the pregnant body and the invisible communication between mother and child during the gestational period. In “The Unplayed Rosalind”, the main points examined were: the presence of three distinct speakers; the enclosed room as a trope for the womb; the exploration of what is intra-uterine; and the

display of the insider's perspective. Meanwhile, in "On Her Second Birthday", the relationship between mother and child is again perceived up to the moment of birth and, more than that, it also signalizes the future of the newly born. As a concluding poem, it also provokes a discussion of the correlation between the birth of the child and the birth of the poem.

The aim of this study was to unveil meanings within this body of poetry that are usually considered to be interior, self-obsessed, enigmatic, non-coherent and restricted to female aesthetics. Its objective was not to exhaust every possibility for an understanding of McGuckian's poetry. On the contrary, the exposition of Kristeva's and Sullivan's theoretical approaches in relation to birth, language and poetry endeavors to open up possibilities for new readings. The point is that maybe McGuckian's poetry is not interior, maybe we are reading it from the wrong perspective. So far, it seems that the best way of grasping the meaning of McGuckian's poetry is by reading it with "an intuitive, perhaps unconscious, whole-hearted engagement".

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