THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Always Erase

and

Renegade Poets: Écriture Féminine and the Poetry of Medbh McGuckian and Louise Glück

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Abstracts

The poems in *Always Erase* are concerned with arrival, in every sense of the word, and with the transition from one life stage into the next. The poems celebrate a strong maternal inheritance as I aim to define aspects of myself in relation to and against traditional representations of women in culture/ society. I engage with this otherness through investigations of identity, travel and relocation; the processes of learning as explored through memory; and the ways in which communication falls short. Originally from Los Angeles, and occupying the liminal space of resident alien, my allegiance is split between my homeland and my adopted country of Scotland. This discomfort informs my poetry in that I am always of two minds, creating a landscape that embraces/ rejects both locations, as I reflect on my transformation to adult/ motherhood in a country that is not my own by birth.

In the accompanying critical thesis, *Renegade Poets: Écriture Féminine and the Poetry of Medbh McGuckian and Louise Glück*, I explore differing approaches to women's writing in bodies of work which, in their own markedly distinctive ways, deviate from and disrupt traditional masculine styles of writing – considered ""good writing" as it is defined academically" – that "cuts away all thought and impulse that would lead one astray from the pure linearity of argumentative form. No emotion. No reference to the personal, lived experience of embodied women" (Heywood 8). McGuckian achieves this disruption through investigations of symbolism in language, and of how the meanings of words are established and evolve based on social, gender and cultural associations – always with the aim of disturbing the placid

surface of symbolic meaning. Using anorexia as a framework, Glück uncovers and draws attention to women's perceived powerlessness, wrestling with language as a means by which to reassert control in the creation of a plausible poetic self.

The first chapter, *"This Oblique Trance:" Semiotics in the Early Poetry of Medbh McGuckian*, concentrates on *The Flower Master* (1982; *The Flower Master and Other Poems*, revised edition 1993), *Venus and the Rain* (1984; revised edition 1994), and *On Ballycastle Beach* (1988; revised edition 1995) in the context of semiotics as conveyed by Julia Kristeva. Through representations of linguistic and symbolic opposites, McGuckian demonstrates how the potential for communication is constantly being built and rebuilt through language; additionally, by repurposing other writers' words she depicts the plural nature of linguistic meaning.

"A voice/ without a body:" Louise Glück and the Anorexic Aesthetic examines the ways in which, by actively deploying the model of anorexia as the foundation of a directed aesthetic, *Descending Figure* (1980) and *Meadowlands* (1996) exemplify both the difference between male and female imperatives as embodied within a heterosexual marriage or relationship, and the struggle between male and female paradigms as fraught presences doing battle within a single (female) individual (whether poet or anorexic).

Lay Summaries

The poems in *Always Erase* explore the concept of women's identity – both as a self-construct and something that is externally imposed – through personal experience, and more widely, through cultural representations of women in literature and the arts. The poems enable a kind of role-play in an attempt to assemble a self that confronts and reacts against women's historical inheritance, and the influence of familial and societal expectations. To complement the thematic aspect of the collection, the poems employ a range of traditional, experimental, narrative and lyric forms to emphasise the speaker's costuming, and progression towards distinctiveness.

The accompanying critical thesis, *Renegade Poets: Écriture Féminine and the Poetry of Medbh McGuckian and Louise Glück*, investigates the ways in which these two poets' bodies of work evoke new possibilities for how women, and the issue of gender more widely, may be portrayed through language. McGuckian, the more lavish writer of the two, disrupts symbolic and subtly inbuilt gender representations, prescribing masculine attributes to the moon and feminine qualities to the sun, for example, in order to highlight how the meanings of words are established and limited by their social, gender and cultural associations. Using anorexia as a framework, Glück explores themes of childhood, family and nature in her poetry while at the same time exposing harmful gendered patterns of language in the seemingly innocuous everyday aspects of life.

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Always Erase

Lauren Pope

For my sister

So you ate a beetle – big deal!

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I

Fortune, 27th July 2017:
I've wanted out of that cookie for a long time.

Our Lady of the Macabre

What news of the man who keeps his red-bellied macaw
in the freezer, unable to accept its death? Oh please –
like you've never cried in the mirror, nor yet wallowed at this altar.
Partake in the sorrow left at the feet of Our Lady:
roses carved out of radishes, the girl who whispers 'blue babies'
in the bath, grandma's Botox addiction – vials of injectable filler.
Feel sorry for the basket of poisonous apples
for they know not what they do. Be haunted,
but be handsome too. Above all, be the beautiful sister
wearing velvet frocks at tea time, whose family hangs their happiness from her
as from the Yuletide tree. The sister with the best marriage prospects,
despite never having so much as posted a letter (you can manage
a household, can't you?). Be the girl in the novel
with consumption – tragic like. Die already. When you rise,
be the sister of whom no one has ever heard.

Origin Story

We hammer the tent stakes hard
to drown out Mom's story
of Katie's conception:
her arms spread, spanning our horror,
as she mimics the hawks
kettling
after their 'completion.'

My eyebrows prick into tufty frowns;
Katie pounds
her finger, cursing in the unskilled manner
of a teenager.

I don't ask about mine, Mom doesn't offer.
What could she say (it was 80s West Hollywood)?
'You began with a river, snow-kissed,
on mirror...'

The times I didn't use my name

When I was the [ ] between two sounds, a thought in their heads, a penny oxidising at the bottom of the well, the fabric of becoming before the simplest

linguistic act,

before I howled

ME and felt the warm wind, the buoyancy of it,

being raised like a flag.

*

Picture yourself as a question in the mouths of others.

That's how it was –
the elongated year I learned that staring is the truest expression of interest.

People asked questions –
Where do you live?
Why aren't you in school? --
the way a hammock rocks

against its chain.

Chloe was a decoy, a name I borrowed –
believe me, I was equine –
from Fashion Star Fillies.

*

Ferns burst arrogantly from impossible places;

on my CV, the words *extrovert* and *people-person*.

My kinship lies with the moonflowers –
a mess of anaemic sisters
bruising under the scrutiny.

*

On the sign-in sheet at Planned Parenthood:

You don't expect to be here when your 40
C'mon Barbie/ Jenny from the Block/ Bonita Applebum
Pulling out method
Young & dumb

My second visit I wrote *VOID*, in all caps,

like it was a request.

*

I was thinking about my walls, I was thinking
about the yellow cliffs eroding
along the coastline;
if I am to be named one thing,
let it be that

& then a woman hollered at me on the road.

We were friends in TZ, many years back.
I didn't respond, kept walking, but it was quite something to be reminded

of that life

like stepping into old shoes – both mine, and not;

forced into a discarded skin.

Vile Jelly

It would have been easy
to go sexy for Halloween
like that woman on *Come Dine With Me*,
who, when hungry, said things like,
'I am so ravished'
(when she meant 'famished').

SEXY: that slinky adjective
followed by an unassuming noun
to describe things that aren't actually appealing at all –
a bunny rabbit, jail bait, an off-the-clock crossing guard –
but become so on Halloween.

You did not want me to be any of these things.
You said,
'what about your dignity, your originality?'
your tipped glass condescending
towards the table
in a reliquary of candlelight.

So, on Halloween night
I am Gloucester's eyeball, and you
are Cornwall's sword.
I am wrapped in a sheet, crouching behind
a circular cardboard cut-out,
you are yourself, in jeans and a t-shirt,
holding a blade made from foil.

Eyeballs speak in movements –
a glance to the side, a twitch, a dilation,
but I am a fake eyeball
so I do not speak at all,

though every time you yell
'Out, vile jelly! Where is thy lustre now?'
and pierce me with your sword,
I hope you know my eyes are rolling.

Confessional

Stumbling in from hoarfrost he enters
wet and I know I could push him
over and leave him lying
in a puddle
of gin-infused sweat skin corroding
the Fired Earth encaustic tiles
in our doorway

but I love those tiles
(we lived on tinned tomatoes on toast
and cooking wine
last winter to pay for them)

Be less Dali's *Le Sommeil* I want to say
he's stretched out flat
I'm only just beginning…

our truths
are so far down the spit mine:
mild trichophagia;
his hand that gropes me
in his sleep

Proverb

When you say, ‘the fig that bleeds milk is not ripe,’
it sounds like a proverb. Through the window

I turn my head to better view the landscape. Gold grass hills
have beached around Vinci, and my mind goes to my hair –

bleached into brittle strands of straw, an obsession with light perhaps.
Still, like a niggle or a sting from a fire ant,

all I can think is that I don't like the way you're holding that fig,
the way it unsettles this moment – and others to come –

so that now, when your hand moves to my lower back,
I think of it as a root grounding me to you, an umbilicus.

My gaze settles on the walled geometry of a courtyard
and the male figure of a Roman statue, armless, inside.

My Father Tells Me to Get Married

Face paint made
from cephalopod ink,
carob nibs swapped in
for chocolate
buried in a dollop
of dough, Velcro
laces for teens:
you taught us
the outer reaches
of convention.

Whole days went by
without walls defining
our space, except
the dogwood's boughs
draped in a corridor
around our car,
the windows
down.

Scraped elbows,
busted lips
healed by the science
of crystals: Rose Quartz
to soothe; Galena
for inflammation.

Ears to the dirt,
we listened
for a magnetic shift,
the reverse
of the earth clockwise,
knowing we'd never

hear it coming –

like now,
when from nowhere
you assert my unborn child
cares about wedlock.
You're clasping my finger,
and I stare at you
with a mouthful
of flies.

Hinterland

a compilation of autocorrected and predictive text messages

figure girl video pretty,
through husband grab
lodging, root the cold
from the house.

he wants you twirled
as his morning meeting, a Rubik
of offline fjords; mapped out
little Jigsaw Monster,
blueprint spectre.

but your hobby-fed lips
do not eat the ghost
of chicken hiccups, sip
the amethyst of bedbugs.

figure girl video pretty,
you are always erase.

Miscarriage

I'm told
the moonstone
I carried
in the palm
of my hand
could not alone
will a living thing
to term,

and the eggs eaten
out of superstition
(upside down
on a Sunday)
once held
the same possibility
for which I grieve.

Sometimes things
that do not exist
are real –
the way my ears
hear Etta James
sing 'Cadillac'
not 'At Last,' or how
the opening acoustics
to 'Little Wing'
are, to me, a mimesis
of drowning.

Announce this: today,
the colour of failure
is the robin's
sanguine throat.

Metamorphosis

These caterpillar days,
this drudgery, the slow turn
of a season.

The moon squatting in my belly
dictates the tide
of unseen things; the woman
I have known for years
pads around on swollen feet –
the width of her tightrope widening.

When the kilo sack of oven chips
is empty, my birch tongue
lashes a hundred insults at you
then curls up in tears.

What is it we do
after swapping sides of the bed?
I watch you inhabit
my sleep. Light through
the window makes it harder
to know your face
with my hands; close your eyes
when you look at me.

Backstage

when my bread belly
wastes
from the habit
of denial
and the dark whip
inside of me
is somehow fed
in the process

when I tourniquet
my words
so that ‘unravelled’
ravels again, ‘inchoate’
slims to a whole

when I’m so thin
you can no longer
see me
unless the light
fractures
the windows
just so

watch me be as lithe
as airborne dust
that settles
on the necks
of androgynous swans
suspended
from the rafters

Tinder for the Baroque Age

Even in the portrait's darkest corner,
there is still enough light dispersed
to make out the folds of onyx silk
beneath her bosom:
she is wealthy to be sure, this widow.
Her expression, the correct shade
of downcast, brands her desirable.

Three hundred miles away,
where no one knows her yet,
a merchant receives the likeness, peels off
its protective muslin layer; he approves
of the way she honours the deceased,
studies the drapery that accentuates
her still-childbearing hips.

Theatre

And then I was turned inside out, like jeans just out of the wash, a collapsible Silicon cup you take hiking. When they spoke it was not to me but to the concept of me, and to the homunculus. Everything was directed to the homunculus. The men and women elbow-deep inside of me were not alien – I was. Alien even to those who were present and cared, but could not bear to look. Was it really like that? Yes, then no, and then maybe. Do not rely on the person it happened to to tell the story.

How quickly the mind breaks down. No one wanted to touch me; no one wanted to leave me alone. A strange world of masquerade ensued. I lied when I wore makeup. I lied when I showered and styled my hair. I lied to feel a semblance of power: a big fat hook gleaming through my cheek. And now, I have whole friendships that compete in the realm of deceits. I am the act of perpetual hair twirling – not the finger, not the hair: the actual compulsion. Aren't all little girls told to be compulsions when they grow up?

Sometimes I want to walk up to people on the street and say, 'don't you think the Anna Kareninas and Emma Bovarys have suffered enough? How can accommodation and chasteness be housed in one body?' Some day, the homunculus will also need to be asked this. Quietly kiss the cement and weep and think of those who are boundless, and blurred, and gasping. Think of me as the hands shaking your shoulders to wake you up.

Elsewhere

I see doors in eyelets of lace,
key latches,
bolt holes.

I stare at the washer's rolling belly,
wonder how it would feel
to crawl inside,
be forgotten for a cycle.

I think of Narnia, often,
the White Witch, and her bounty
of Turkish delight.

I contemplate the space beyond the light socket,
the black coves of cornicing,
the perfect o
of the baby's dark mouth.

I look for the crack in my neighbour's fence
that leads to a garden,
that leads to another garden
that leads to a derelict field.

I watch strands of my hair
worm through the shower drain;
a drain that ends up where?

I hear muffled voices off the street
carry through the window,
their thoughts that ramble
this way, that.

My face reflected on the glass –

I am a woman; I could be any woman.

Funeral for my Younger Self

I used to be a whole person, with fully formed thoughts.
I used to smoke mushrooms on the weekends, and think profoundly
as I watched the sun, larger than usual, swallow the Earth
in tender, halcyon light. Now I take my child's medicine
and wait for the pain to become an unformed cloud. It's good,
though, like nostalgia is good, and it does the trick, too.
Oh Asclepius, why does my medicine cabinet always run dry?
In what way does this mother's guilt serve me?
A plague on your reptilian side-eye!

At Starbucks – cracked rib, another swig – the barista's name
is *A.* – *Asclepius*? I tell him coughing caused my injury
(sympathy, please!). He asks, 'Are you really so fragile?'
Show him the scar dammit, the sunroof your son
entered the world through. Say, *How do you like them stitches*?
Now that the medicine's talking, I point out a cracked rib
signals a beginning, not an end, but he just looks at me
like he looks at all the self-medicated mothers – doe-eyed,
so untouched by life I want to punch him in the face.

Petit Socco

Kebab shop, bric-a-brac stalls: she loops
between lapis-hued clothing lines, through
courtyards with fountains, trespasses riads
hunting out carved initials – any sign she lived here
during the comatose years when Westerners
crossed the Strait to smoke and fuck.

The rooms of has-been smoke dens now fucked
by a different type of tourism: ceiling fans loop
overhead so that wealthy westerners
feel comfortable as they voyeur through
the time warp looking glass. No hash here
(unless you want it)! Free love emaciates in the riad's

refurb. Gone is the stained glass, the myriad
of *zellige* tiles, hookah pipes, the master fucking
his harem of wives – the ghostly atmosphere…
I cling to her fringe-trimmed coat, loop-de-looping
through one Moorish door and out through
another as she tells me: 'We aren't that kind of Westerner.'

Even as she says it, I know I'm the hollowest
shade of her bohemian ideal. She inspects the riad's
floorboards for strawberry blonde strands sloughed
from the ghost of her gorgeous mane – 'the most fuckable
thing about her.' She recalls dinners of *loup*
de mer, mint tea, clementine wedges that adhered

to her hunger as we skip from this roof to that, hear
the song of a faith that is anything but Western.
How many milky-eyed moons have looped
the earth since her return to the riad
where the Dutchman asked her to fuck

to the call to prayer? She claims she was throughly

gobsmacked, though something happened through
this maze of intricately carved doors and incoherent
streets to propel us on this kaleidoscopic headfuck –
ugh, family! Like any self-conscious westerner,
I try to blend in, embrace the muddle of ochre riads,
haggle (poorly) for the hand of Fatima now looped

through my strap. At night, we move west
past ethereal storks, nesting along the riads.
The clap clap clap of people fucking on loop.

Fugue

after Donna Stonecipher

It was like wondering whether to will the thought away, ultimately deciding to just keep smiling through your teeth, hoping that your brain would be a hermit crab – timid to the pursuit of truth.

It was like accepting that the truth is not always the lived truth. It was like milk teeth – the conundrum – whether to care for them or not. Were they real? Did it matter? It was a gift to squander, when a second chance is a certainty.

It was like making a list of all the things you know to be certain: 1) a mother who chooses a favourite is human (and that is not meant kindly); 2) colour is an emergent property of light.

It was like being at a cocktail party and telling everyone that cities are an emergent property of human interaction, as if they didn't know. It was like watching a form of contrived conversation spin wildly out of control. It's hard not to hate your mother in moments like these: *chitchat* like the clearing of her throat.

It was like clearing your throat to speak, and nobody hearing you over the 'wild' conversation – *The offspring of a lion and a tiger is called a Liger!* In moments like these, you do not know whether you are invisible or just melting.

It was like wondering whether you are the perpetrator of your own invisibility. Some people are *so* their names, you know? Your name is the gum beneath the desk. Other days, an apostrophe, a radiator on low.

It was like suspecting that the radiator near your restaurant table is on, only to realise that the rioja has turned you into your own internal heat source. Either way, you have missed the conversation. Stains have blossomed in your armpits.

It was like living in one of those armpit towns in a country's middle bit, where every room has a view of the motorway, and where everyone wonders if the motorists can see them naked as they change. Is it worse to be seen or not?

It was like being naked at the spa, on your *relaxing spa day*, in front of your twin, who exercises and cleanses regularly, and who has never had kids. There was a time when you thought the scar on your lower abdomen was a mouth in the dark, grinning like the Cheshire cat:

Beware of women whose sisters are beautiful.

Sleepwalking

As if they were the heads of children,
I pat the boxes of Cream of Wheat and semolina
in our pantry, shush their hyperbolic branding
further into the dark. The cans of tomato soup
need to be unhuddled, their aluminium lids
always threatening to mouth off to each other.
I post one through the laundry chute, roll another
to the yellow-bellied Bogeyman under the couch.

Even in sleep, the gods must be appeased,
which is why I attempt to reclaim my placenta
from the white mulberry by crooning to it
out the kitchen window: 'This land is your land,
and this land is my land...' but the static tongue
of diving board just looks at me.
Even the pool, and I thought we were friends,
warns me with its absence of water.
I summon Coco Chanel, through the medium of perfume:
What would you do if landed with an obstreperous house?
She tells me she would sprawl out on that diving board
like her body is a feast, like she owns the place,
the whole *putain de maison* – which I do.

II

In the toilet, tissue clings
to the ceiling:
in the ladies, we call them *paper flowers*;
in the gent's, *spit wads* or *doofers*.
Such imprecise signage on the doors
to describe these half children,
each with their own
undeveloped star.

Little Sister

She moves around the room
in search of something,
like a hawk kiting on moderate wind
though not as graceful.

"Is the dying thing sad?"
"yes, generally the dying thing is sad."

Mimic my cry. Watch how I shake hands,
listen for the crack in my smile—
it will be a faint noise, like the click of a lock
or the earth opening up.

Christina Maria is a shadow
at her granddaddy's funeral in Pocatello.
She repeats what her mother
shouted as they parked the car
and took out the casserole.

"mommy said we parked
at the ass-end of space."

The guests laugh, some sound like cotton balls,
others are nervous like the dirt waiting
to be discovered under the refrigerator.

She thinks she has made a joke, and repeats,
"ass-end of space."

Then the room becomes quiet,
except for the drier's foetal kick
in the room adjoining the kitchen,

and a whisper—

"someday will I die?"

"Yes, someday you will."

"That will be sad."

Nocturne

She waters the cyclamen –
her hand like a stork's beak
delivers packages of ice
from her vodka tonic.

At the vanity, she plucks
long static teardrops
from her ears,
places them in the jewellery box
the way a child,
or the memory of one,
is put to bed.

Kadupul

Breaths held,
we wonder if
the Kadupul flower
will flirt
with evening –

stretch open
in one long
smoky
post-coital
yawn –

listen
to the curator
describe flowers
as passing clouds.
Mother passes
the water –
Stay hydrated,
we may be here a while –
as if we will wilt
without 8oz a day.

In the space
of her whisper
the blossom opens,
raises its head
towards death.
A feral tongue
blinks
within folds
of fanned pearl,

a spray of pollen
perfumes the air.

Someone sneezes;
the deviant cackle
trails from sight,
leaving,
in its wake,
a pile
of crumpled
silk.

Love in the Language of Mondrian

Right angles recollect the outstretched arms of a hug; I told you
that once, as we stood framed beneath the Brandenburg Gate.
I wore that daffodil sundress, with the finicky buttons. You praised
their perfect verticality, like the stem of a Y incision on one of your
cadavers. You wore a blue becoming of Easter. Funny how
it all seems black and white now, except for our clothes. You said,
'our red is universal', and I blushed where nobody could see.

Date Night

Remember
that swarm of intimacy –
our dinner table's crèche
held together by candlelight,
the ribbon of crepe stars
strung above us;

the way your lips mouthed 'nyama'
tongue touching
your two front teeth –
the word for ‘meat’
having more to do with me
than your meal;

how the first rain fell
during dessert
on a plate of pineapple
and a Milky Way melted
to its wrapper;

how, as the locusts
hatched, we listened
to their hind legs thrum –
like the white noise
of a TV left on?

Pen Pals

Why wasn't I the kind of girl who drew smiles and frowns,
winks and upside down
faces in the dots of her i's,
like Becci, who pencilled in hearts and stars,
and left a lipstick kiss at the foot of the page
abutting "Yours,"?
You always knew how Becci felt, gushing
like a knocked over hydrant.

I once wrote Becci a letter with words like *bikini*,
militia and *rhinitis* in the same run-on sentence,
imagining the dots of my i's floating
towards the surface/ margin.
Would she burden them, on my behalf,
with emotion?
As if my letters were houseplants
etiolating in the absence of light,
Becci often asked,
How are you, really?

I felt
I owed her something –
calligraphy on lavender-scented paper,
prettily packaged snippets
of keratin, though I always imagined a postscript like
sometimes I picture the faces you've drawn in the dots of your i's
among Charlie's and his granddad's at the Wonka Factory
before the whirring of the giant overhead fan.

Her hypothetical response:
one dot comforting another,
courageously
hand-in-hand.

press / preserve

There were better ways to admire the half-eaten cherry leaves

than to press them between the pages of a dictionary.

We tied each stem with fishing line,

hung them

at staggered heights against the window.

The youngest of us called it sheet music;

we understood

in the way we understand a shape with soft edges

in the distance.

We watched afternoon filter through,

the gaping mouthfuls created a strange arrhythmia

of light.

As the season passed, the leaves bleached,

curled in on themselves.

The eldest of us called it a row of hatched chrysalides;

we understood

in the way we understand that a circle has no end.

The days thinned in winter, the leaves had some respite.

Those of us without a superlative to amplify ourselves

said that the leaves were just leaves;

this was understood

in the way we understand the enclosure of a name.

Prelude

We placed the NOS tank
in the room's commanding corner,
christened it *O, Tannenbaum*.

Before every hit
of the rubber lung, we pressed play,
chirruped *the cold never bothered me anyway*.

How numb did we have to be
to think we were laughing
when we weren't,
to always grin like that,
beneath our skin?

The droplets from your nose
formed a cochineal trail
across the bedroom carpet.
I may have cupped them
into something precious –
or tried.

At the Aphasiac's Tea Party

I cannot be sure, though I suspect,
that when you raise your nostrils to the wind
you whiff the ghosts of Apache apricots,
O'Henrys from our orchard – the names of which
you can no more grasp than you can my own.

We sit on a no-name bench, near the no-name lake,
beneath a no-name tree, threading words
for new kennings – butt hug, trout bath, the billowing eye –
while the day progresses into a faraway look
that needs no designation.

Elegy of the Sandcastle

after Anna Journey

If hearing is the last faculty to go,
I need to believe your last moments weren't besieged

by the lady down the hall with the plastic doll pleading, 'please don't take my baby!'
or the Catholic nurse muttering 'Miss Evelyn, go to the light you wretch'

because you mocked her foreign accent with your Southern drawl
that stretched vowels into long afternoons on your daddy's porch in the Ozarks

where you learned as a girl how to make insults skip
from your lips with the air of a compliment – something I could never do.

In your last moments, I need to believe you heard the gulls overhead
and the sound of the ocean rocking the shore with a swell;

our voices buoyant as we held you in our hands
weaving you with the sand between our fingers,

the wet mixture dripping into turrets and caverns of mud and kelp;
the ping of the colander blockading the castle until completion.

I need to know the last sound you heard was the crash of surf
splashing over our toes, our ankles and shins –

that final burst of winter that carried you away,
retreating from us like the sound of rolling pebbles.

Goodbye, House

When I come, claiming
to be your daughter, please remember
the saltwater that passed between us.

I turn up in the garden,
necking a bottle of Two-Buck Chuck
and clutching a wand of agapanthus
sprung from my departed guinea pig;
I tuck a piece of you beneath my armpit, here,
in the region of tender.

This second union is all over
you – new frock, exotic smell –
in high def. Your new daughter's
glorious laugh jaundices my own.
Oh, be sure to show her how
to practice kissing in the mirror,
her saliva smeared with that very shade
of *StrutYourSlut* I wore.

III

I will myself
to be the sunlight,
a mustard field,
a vase
of Sorrento lemons…

Hijo de puta

The three of us lie side by side; the little one,
a Nosferatu, cabbage-eared and swaddled.

We speak in mime:
I shush you with a well-timed finger
trawled across my throat,
a look as grim as any pioneer's
who crossed The Rockies in winter
and may have eaten a loved one
who perished in the cold;
you retaliate, flip the bird at me,
screwing the air with your finger
like it's some invisible asshole.

All the while the smell of my milk,
sweet on the *putto's* breath.

. . .

I

Sometimes you wake in the night reassured by the bathroom tile on your cheek – those tiles like all the hands that never held you

II

The sea parts and in that space are revealed the sea's parts and you look away not because you aren't curious but because you say it's as though your mother had spread her legs before us

so I mouth what I see and you read my lips and this becomes a game that ends with you inside me

III

D*ovetail* scrawled on your wrist. On mine, the word *splinter*. My handwriting is an imitation of my handwriting; our therapist will think this means

Pavement Vomit

A spilled gut spoils
in the light of day. Now
an abstraction of space –
all that food
held together in a fist of yarn
when the night began.

I hope you made it home, Anonymous.
Your stomach's contents –
now a cairn to last night's exploits –
seem too personal
for my morning commute.
I try not to look, but do.

Photoshop

Girl with the shaved crotch:
breathy and fuchsia-cheeked,
hot-house head of flowers and fruits
nestled into a plaited crown
the colour of a Bavarian pretzel.

Why, now that she has my face,
can you not recognise me as the Olympia
of the produce aisle?
Is it that I've spent a lifetime
rethinking my midriff in your name
or wondering whether my tits speak
the language of perfect clip?
If my behaviour's *au courant*?

I've been sliced bread
        in the name of perfection, a closed door,
a severed stem; in the name of perfection
I allowed silence, mistook it
for perfection; I've become the doll
        inside the doll inside for you.

There are times I want to claw
my image on your bicep, there,
where we can both see it –
in ink as black as rage
cloaked in calm.
        Where we can really see it.

BLACKOUT

darkness, to state the obvious.

a man says to another, ‘she's beautiful
on pause like that;’

a man says, ‘we could do anything
within this apostrophe.’

how many rooms
does the human body have?
she’s asking. she wants to know.

she pulls tight every door behind her –
worlds push into other worlds
with a jolt,
with a silence so surprising
it will bleed into noise.

More Asleep Than Dead

Before long
you will spend more time
in the garden with the barbecue
burning the drying brush –
a christening of grey-blue ash –
until you're ankle deep in it.

And I will be inside
retreating further into rooms
you don't enter anymore,
and for some time we will pretend
like two people orbiting
the same sinuous truth –
that ribbon of diaphanous silk –
like the people of Pompeii who,
overcome by shock,
still believed the crops
were just burning.

Through anything other than scissored fingers

a chorus of angels in perfect hierarchy –
church is funny like that – tiers of seraphim, cherubim
& thrones. Imagine needing a throne to access god, like
needing a dining chair to reach the top-shelf porcelain.
O father, son, holy domesticity! Church is a good place
for thinking – your inner face can be a black-eyed flower
whilst everyone is lost in their thoughts & not observing.
For instance, you can ponder your nature, the equivalency
of looking through scissored fingers. Please don't say
peeping through keyholes. One means 'reluctant to know,'
& the other 'eager for information.' Imagine a world
where your skin is a fresco on the ceiling
of the Sistine Chapel. You hold many secrets; you know
so little of the actual world – sun-kissed, salt-bleached,
begging to be touched.

/Meditation on Childhood/

Her speech wheels;
I know the wine has loosened the usual bolts
that keep her upright.

We slip into memory – those after school afternoons
when a kid gets so bored she goes in search of something,
like the chrysalises latched to the back of marble headstones
lining the garden wall.

Her voice tapers –
a trail of breadcrumbs.
I tread lightly, listen,
count tadpoles crossing the vitreous humour,
close my eyes to the sun,
discover the smell of oatmeal and SPF.

She tells me she once crawled inside the boat
in the garage – the whole hull shimmered
with mother-of-pearl scales.
She lay on her back
listening to footsteps – mine and Danny's –
fumbling overhead.

With the fishing poles, she uncovered
a Remington so old it looked to her like treasure.
She became buccaneer – her ship, the *Hispaniola*,
sailed the Tortuga sea. Voice weathered by rum,
she croaked like a seabird, 'Fight or die by this gun!'

When she says the barrel fit perfectly
to the temple of her head,
I feel its coolness inch through me.

My life becomes a sun-scorched lawn.
I'm afraid to move, afraid to speak, afraid my breath,
like the flap of a wing,
will affect the outcome of that moment.

She sinks into the lounge chair –
we're poolside, sipping Viognier

so I think she must be real.

Addenda to my Sister's Personality

a. if the meaning of the condition wasn't known, she might describe the word pleurisy as birdcall, based on its sound.

b. fact: trees are emotional anaemics. They reach and reach and reach and reach.

c. 'If I could name myself, I'd choose *velour blanket*.'

d. when taking a photograph of a group of strangers, always be a perfectionist, even though it is unlikely you will ever see them again.

e. there is logic beyond the folds of time and linen.

f. if presented with the opportunity, she would wrap herself in a capillary, stroke its hair-like thinness.

g. check for hitch-hiking bedbugs. After guests visit, inspect beds, carpets, upholstered furniture. Assume it's bad, especially if they are your kin.

h. 'Forest Lawn is an oxymoron; do not, whatever you do, bury me there.'

i. make-up brushes should sweep in a downwards motion. Always, always.

Hold

I

I make breathing a profession
as I wait for your hands.

Your hands rummaging like that, your hands in the backseat –
feeling for loose change, I think.

Your hands like the sugar-coated shell of a candied almond,
wrist deep in wet plaster; what I could lick from those hands…

if you'd let me. I have ways of keeping time.

When Marvin Gaye played, I knew not to open the door
to my parents' bedroom for 3 minutes and 58 seconds plus one repeat.

I tell you this
as your hand thrums the engine of a '66 mustang convertible
the colour of a silver lining.

You hide in that cloud; I undress in this way.

The distance from your hands to your shoulders
raised earwards
is equal in length to the meaningful stare you are so intent

on denying me.
I have ways of keeping time.

II

I went to school with April Gaye, Marvin's niece. No one said to her,

your grandfather's a murderer, but they were thinking it.
April was quiet, like you are quiet, which I mistook for sweet.

You are quiet / contemplative, but your hands are shouty
when they grab my waist and lift me to x.

Time stops.

My sister says *shouty* is the wrong adjective. I know what it is like to hit a wall
at high speed, or to be stranded –
not like on an island, but like a wheel on the side of the road in a desert.

The right adjective scares me.

My sister says I am the neck on that chicken you broke at army camp.

When I breathe down the phone, and it sounds like *Just one, baby*,
my sister says I'm an addict.

Hello?
Maybe you are not contemplative. Maybe I misjudged you.

III

Who could I tell
that I wanted to be the sweat on the bodies grinding
in that smoky room in the opening scene of *Dirty Dancing*?
Beads of neck-loving curvature, salt poesy.

Who could I tell that I would one day be alone and crying in a room the size of a fist,
cut like the pierced flesh between my legs?

After the riots, we flocked to the suburbs –
white flight was a frozen lake around our ankles.

I have ways of keeping time. Exact time.
Marriage loops when there is nothing to say or do.
Marvin Gaye was in elevators.
Marvin Gaye was at the Department of Motor Vehicles.
Marvin Gaye was in the feminine hygiene aisle at the grocery.
Marvin Gaye was buried, again and again, like Bob Marley is buried under every college dorm room of the last three decades. Bundling time like this is conventional – something I picked up in suburbia.

IV

On hold waiting for a call centre representative:

Ain't that peculiar.
A peculiar-arity.
Ain't that peculiar, baby?
Peculiar as can be.

V

You're going for a lamb dhansak with the guys from church.
What church? Did we / Do we/ Have we *ever* gone to church?

Marvin Gay Sr. was a Pentecostal minister.

I tell my sister I can make a curry; she says this is not about me. I hang up on her a lot: hang up, hang up, hang-up. I have ways of keeping time.

/Prenatal Meditation/

The question: *How much weight have you gained?*
will repeat itself until I am again a sliver of branch.

I canter beyond the row of elms, a branch lashes my cheek as I go,
torso no longer bending forward the way it used to.

I gallop until the question cracks beneath the weight of hooves:
gain ground, speed, distance. I become singular and whole

like a bullet exiting the shoulder blade, whistling
with the rage of all women made to feel less than holy.

Like when I spread my legs for comfort in front of the TV,
and your sulky hand finds a second home between my thighs.

Am I the kind of thirst that haunts you when you flick on
the lights at 2am for a stale glass of water

only to return to bed to find me larger, and more threatening
than I was nine months ago?

Call me dumpling, turnip, a fat round pie as you sink further into me
than either thought was possible.

Mauna Loa

Fissures warp the surface,
sulphur surrounds the roots
of silversword and palm.
We hear the pop
of foliage stunned by lava.
We make lists as we walk
of the things I am not supposed to do
(like this), register
the temperature of the earth
against each footstep, wind our way
to where the molten lava
meets the ocean. I will tell him
he witnessed it inside of me
tangentially, remembering
how my mother said the same.
Pele's Hair streams downwind
in the distance, a reminder
to walk the way we came.

REPETITION [rɛpɪˈtɪʃ(ə)n]

1 : half nap, eyes closed to the flat screen realm /of televised tennis. Every shriek is mirrored /on the opposite side of the court. /In this way, I can see the ball /move back and forth.

2 : Klein Blue /is the colour of my true love's hair… /my love is like a monochrome rose. Dear /Yves, eves, ease: /your name is a water park wave /rolled from my lips.

3 : I said to the cave, 'Hello there.' My words left, /became something /else. /A second later, the cave sang /back. It said it to the point of meaninglessness, /and then we sat in silence.

/KonMari Meditation/

I am a lotus. I count to 10 to keep my mind in check. Picture a flickering light; focus on it. Do I need to be a temple? I could just be a house. A temple is visited on occasion; I housed another being while he grew. I watched his things – his pillow, his bedding, his small comforts – ooze out of me like a long, wet, slippery song. If my face looks serene, will my mind follow? The answer is a nest of Russian dolls – keep looking.

We celebrate the downsizing from one house into another. So much of our time spent in-house, house-bound, feeling house-proud. Beneath all this flesh is the chiselled potential, squinting sideways into the vacant space of a gallery wall. I am a lotus. Imagine a flame. Imagine an empty room. If I were to build my selves into perfect right-angled squares, they would be too beautiful.

Notes

Miscarriage: "Little Wing" is a song by Jimi Hendrix.

Elsewhere: was commissioned for the SEEN / UNSEEN project: a collection of ekphrastic responses to the 'Hidden Gems' exhibition at the City Arts Centre in Edinburgh. The poem was written in response to Anthony Hatwell's 'Face of a Woman.'

Fugue: the last line is taken from Valentine Penrose's surrealist poem collage, *Dons des Féminines* (1951).

Kadupul: the Kadupul flower blossoms at night and fades by dawn. When these flowers bloom, it's believed that the Nagas come down from their celestial abodes to offer them to the Buddha.

Prelude: NOS is slang for nitrous oxide.

Hijo de Puta: translates broadly from Spanish as 'son of a bitch.'

More Asleep Than Dead: the title comes from Pliny the Younger's description of his uncle's body after the eruption of Vesuvius at Pompeii (*Epistulae VI*).

Hold: 'I have my ways of keeping time' is a line taken from Jane Yeh's "Correspondence," published in her first collection, *Marabou*.

Mauna Loa: Pele is the Hawaiian goddess of volcanoes. 'Pele's Hair' are fine threads of volcanic glass, formed when a spray of lava cools rapidly in the air.

Renegade Poets: Écriture Féminine and the Poetry of Medbh McGuckian and Louise Glück

Introduction

Hélène Cixous' essay, "The Laugh of the Medusa," published in English translation in 1976, is a call to women writers to "seiz[e] the occasion to speak" through an *écriture féminine* ('women's writing') that refuses "to confuse the biological and the cultural" (875) or to adhere to a gender-patterned language that inadvertently favours masculine styles of writing (i.e. "good writing" that focuses on "the pure linearity of argumentative form. No emotion. No reference to the personal, lived experience of embodied women" (Heywood 8)):

> Beware, my friend, of the signifier that would take you back to the authority of a signified! Beware of diagnoses that would reduce your generative powers. "Common" nouns are also proper nouns that disparage your singularity by classifying it into species. Break out of the circles; don't remain within the psychoanalytic closure. Take a look around, then cut through (Cixous 892).

Cixous clarifies that by 'woman,' she is "speaking of woman in her inevitable struggle against conventional man" (875). She posits that poetry is the ideal vehicle through which to achieve a women's writing because "it involves gaining strength through the unconscious and because the unconscious… is the place where the repressed manage to survive" (879-80).

Central to Cixous' essay are the following questions: why doesn't woman write her self, and how can woman write her self? The first question is addressed in the proposal that "language conceals an invisible adversary, because it's the language of men and their grammar;" writing is, she goes on to aver, considered "too high, too great for [women], it's reserved for the great – that is, for "great men"" (876-87).

Cixous believes that both men and women are complicit, however unwittingly, in setting limitations on and conditioning women writers to adhere to and emulate a masculine style of writing that does not match their lived experience, instead of creating a space in which women may "inscribe in language [their] woman's style" (882):

> Men have committed the greatest crime against women. Insidiously, violently, they have led them to hate women, to be their own enemies, to mobilize their immense strength against themselves, to be the executants of […] virile needs. They have made for women an antinarcissism! A narcissism which loves itself only to be loved for what women haven't got! They have constructed the infamous logic of antilove (878).

Cixous proposes that woman might come to language and write her self by regaining control of her body and writing with and beyond it, by "kill[ing] the aesthetic ideal through which [she herself has] been "killed" into art" by men (Gilbert & Gubar 17). Not only must women "write through their bodies… invent[ing] the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes…" (Cixous 886) but they must also seize the opportunity to speak, no longer "conned into a domain which is the margin or the harem" (881).

What, then, does *écriture féminine* look like in practice? Cixous reports that "it is impossible to *define* a feminine practice of writing… for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded – which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist" (883). Rather, she emphasises that women will discover themselves and be liberated by challenging female stereotypes generated by the phallocentric social structure, and by occupying roles beyond those approved within this structure – embracing identities that resemble actual reality rather than an imposed fantasy:

> To write. An act which will not only "realize" the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to

> her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal; it will tear her away from the superegoized structure in which she has always occupied the place reserved for the guilty (guilt of everything, guilty at every turn: for having desires, for not having any; for being frigid, for being "too hot"; for not being both at once; for being too motherly and not enough; for having children and for not having any; for nursing and for not nursing…) – tear her away by means of this research, this job of analysis and illumination, this emancipation of the marvellous text of her self that she must urgently learn to speak (880).

Thus, *écriture féminine* is and can be all writing that surpasses the discourse of a phallocentric system, not only by refusing to be subservient to or in the shadow of the "militant male," but also by putting an end to the constructed image of the "false woman who is preventing the live one from breathing" (880).

In the chapters that follow, I use *écriture féminine* as a framework for considering the poetry of Medbh McGuckian and Louise Glück – poets who write in response to their perceived lack of control as women, both culturally speaking and within the masculine-dominated profession of poet. Both McGuckian and Glück provide an answer to Cixous' call for a women's writing, though perhaps not intentionally and directly as a result of her essay, and they do so by very different means. McGuckian's work is characterised by excessive imagery and symbolic upheaval; in contrast, Glück's aversion to overstating creates a seemingly arid landscape that, in its spot-lit sparseness, works to expose gender paradigms. While McGuckian and Glück are joined in their resolve to write of and from specifically female experience and worldviews, it was never my intention that this thesis should compare two women poets with similar, or even complementary praxes. Rather, and given the limited scope of a thesis of this length, I have opted to take an in-depth approach to selected bodies of work, and to demonstrate two different possibilities

for women's writing within poetry. Furthermore, I have chosen these particular poets because, in the realm of literary accomplishment, they are relative equals (despite their differing geographic locations), having been writing from approximately the late 1970s to the present day; their bodies of work are therefore expansive, and both have received many accolades. The size of their oeuvres has meant I have had to be selective not only with the poets I chose to write on but also within their output: I have therefore chosen to discuss collections that I think adequately highlight their unique aesthetics. Following the publication of *The Flower Master* (1982)[1], McGuckian's was immediately recognised as a distinctive voice, and while her two subsequent publications, *Venus and the Rain* (1984) and *On Ballycastle Beach* (1988), build on similar themes, they also demonstrate growth, evolution and departure. With Glück, *Descending Figure* (1980) was an obvious choice since it is widely considered to be about her teenage struggles with anorexia, which she confesses has had a profound impact on her writing style. Additionally, it seemed important to acknowledge Glück's preference for persona, which she adopts in later collections such as *Meadowlands* (1996). Finally, as a poet from the United States who has spent her adulthood in the United Kingdom, it was important for me to choose one American poet, and one from the British Isles.

In relation to my analysis of McGuckian and Glück, it is worth noting that *écriture féminine* is not inherently anti-male, but that it is pitched against a patriarchal system that regulates and attempts to classify women into a range of

[1] McGuckian's first three collections were originally published by Oxford University Press (OUP). Subsequent to the closure of the Oxford Poets list, the edited versions of the books were reissued by the Gallery Press: *The Flower Master and Other Poems* in 1993; *Venus and the Rain* in 1994; and *On Ballycastle Beach* in 1995. In this thesis, I have worked with the Gallery Press versions of all three publications.

stereotypes. Furthermore, it's relevant to mention that both McGuckian and Glück had male mentors, who are widely considered to be "great men" of poetry, and who they credit with assisting their poetic development: in McGuckian's case, Seamus Heaney, and in Glück's, Stanley Kunitz. While *écriture féminine* affords a space for writing that is non-conformist to masculine linguistic structures, it does not require that women's writing should not acknowledge or inspect "the ensemble of the one and the other" without which nothing can live (883). This, of course, can take the form of writing which uncovers both masculine and feminine gender imperatives, and which disrupts its audience's understanding/ conception of both in order to create "the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures" (879).

McGuckian's "subversive thought" is realised through investigations of symbolism in language, and how the meaning of a word is established and evolves based on social, gender and cultural associations – always with the aim of disturbing generally acknowledged symbolic meaning. While Cixous is non-committal in terms of defining a feminine practice, she does suggest possibilities for what it might look like: "For once she blazes her trail in the symbolic, she cannot fail to make of it the chaosmos of the "personal" – in her pronouns, her nouns, and her clique of referents" (888). This is perhaps where McGuckian's poetry most succeeds in terms of Cixous' *écriture féminine* – in her reimagining, and therefore reclaiming, of symbolic space. For instance, in a McGuckian poem, the sun can be female, the moon can be male; often the speaker of the poems, undoubtedly a mirror of McGuckian, appears male. Most surprising, particularly in her early poems, are her depictions of the humdrum

domestic sphere, and the ways in which she "dismantles and 'unmakes' prescribed meanings" (e.g. the motion of a sewing machine equates to sexual frustration/ the eaves of a house to menstruation) (Alcobia Murphy and Kirkland 13). Anticipating the "fear that women describe of looking into the mirror one day and seeing nothing, an allegory of non-identity," or "the collapse of the boundary between self and other," McGuckian offers, as a reflection, a wholly unexpected image (6-8).

Curious, given McGuckian's intentionally disruptive use of symbols, is the common conception among critics that her poetry lacks control: in a piece for *The Connaught Tribune*, "Avril Forrest felt that McGuckian's 'problem in writing a poem' was not 'in finding the words and images she needs, but in gaining control and imposing order on the thronging richness of her poetic imagination'" (2). While I would agree that in certain, crucial respects, McGuckian's poems feel disorderly, and that, as a writer, she intentionally flouts particular forms of agreed order – Venus, after all, undermines the sun's authority by spinning in retrograde in "Venus and the Sun" – reinvention manifests as a means of control throughout her collections, including those which rely heavily on found sources. As a result, she is able to "generate a new form of logic that draws on conventional logic and anti-logic, but that privileges neither and, in the process, there emerges a 'creative renegotiation of meaning' between reader and author" (7). This disturbance between the signified and signifier is central to women's writing that aims to dislocate the discourse of man: "to explode it, turn it around, and seize it; to make it hers, containing it, taking it into her own mouth, biting the tongue with her very own teeth to invent for herself a language to get inside of" (Cixous 887).

In contrast to McGuckian's abundantly loquacious poetry, Glück's aesthetic is characterized by silence, paradox, and depictions of women's shame over their own desires. She deploys the model of anorexia as the foundation of a directed aesthetic in order to draw attention to the difference between male and female imperatives as embodied within a heterosexual relationship, or as fraught presences doing battle within a single (female) individual. Contrary to Cixous' vision of *écriture féminine*, Glück's poems actively "remain within the psychoanalytic [en]closure" constantly surveying, mirroring and uncovering socially accepted gender narratives, which are then unsettled in and by her work (892). As Cixous points out, women have been "Muffled throughout their history, they have lived in dreams, in bodies (though muted), in silences, in aphonic revolts" (886), and so it makes sense that in Glück's version of *écriture féminine* she would not only emulate the silences of women's lived experience, but, in turn, weaponise them, creating within them an ability to "sting" (Diehl 12).

Unsurprisingly, Glück insists that the antidote to silence "is not more language," and what she advocates for "is, of course, the opposite of Keats's dream of filling rifts with ore" (*Proofs and Theories* 82). This should not, however, be taken to indicate that she lacks the compunction to speak. On the contrary, she asserts "I had a strong desire to speak," but "I was born into an environment in which the right of any family member to complete the sentence of another was assumed," and so "that desire was regularly frustrated: my sentences were, in being cut off, radically changed – transformed, not paraphrased" (5). Glück's perceived lack of control, her inability to speak, manifested into a struggle with anorexia in her teens as a means to declare self-control of her body, and this experience has profoundly

shaped her writing. Paradox, she discovered, was a way to assert control within her writing practice because "The sweetness of paradox is that its outcome cannot be anticipated" (5).

Similar to the way in which McGuckian alters gendered symbolic meaning, Glück uses paradox to create the expectation that a poem will end one way, but then delivers an entirely unforeseen outcome, or, indeed, multiple outcomes: such as, for example in "Parable of the Trellis" from *Meadowlands*, where the portrayal of the vine as feminine, and of the man-made trellis as masculine, is problematized almost as soon as it is created. This constant mirroring, uncovering and deconstructing of gender narratives is central to McGuckian and Glück's poetry, and to *écriture féminine* generally. Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that, while McGuckian's poetry is regularly discussed in the context of *écriture féminine*, Glück's is not. In fact, it is very likely a label she would outright reject as something that creates further divisiveness between masculine and feminine, especially within the field of language and literature. Nevertheless, in my view, she is a contributor to the genre because, like McGuckian, she rejects tired representations of the ideal woman, and attempts to "liberate the New Woman from the Old by coming to know her – by loving her for getting by" (Cixous 878), allowing her the space in which to "[cut] through defensive loves, motherages, and devourations: [to move] beyond selfish narcissism, in[to] the moving, open, transitional space" so she can "run her risks" (893).

“This Oblique Trance:”

Semiotics in the early poetry of Medbh McGuckian

With the original publication in 1982 of her first full-length collection, *The Flower Master*, Medbh McGuckian became the first female Northern Irish poet to make her mark alongside major male voices such as Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, Paul Muldoon and Derek Mahon. In the *Faber Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry* (1986), which offers selections from the work of ten poets, McGuckian was the only woman to be included by the editor, Paul Muldoon. Notably missing from this anthology was Eavan Boland who, like McGuckian, expresses a deep commitment to the fabric of domestic life, but in an arguably less imaginative or linguistically disorientating style.

While many acknowledged McGuckian’s images as striking and wholly original, critics’ opinions varied. Douglas Sealy in *The Poetry Ireland Review* wrote, “The intellectual machete is a crude instrument for invading the luxuriant privacies of the Flower Master, but gently parting the surrounding stems reveals no vistas of light” (59). Others wondered whether McGuckian’s bizarre syntactical structures and crowded similes caused her poetry to suffer from its own exclusivity. Most critics, and readers alike, agreed that her poetry appeared to be about ‘women’s issues,’ set within a domestic space, and dealing with the subjects of pregnancy, motherhood and marriage. The tendency to focus on trying to construe the poems’ subject matter has

sometimes led critics to ignore asking crucial questions about her work such as *why* her writing is so obscure and unusual, and *what* she is achieving by doing this.

In an interview with Rebecca Wilson in *Sleeping With Monsters: Conversations with Scottish and Irish women poets*, McGuckian claims:

> Sometimes the poet is using very powerful influences when he's operating at his full potential. I think it is a 'he' very much when I'm writing – which is strange. I think of myself as not being male, but as much male as female, or as being sexless – not essentially female anyway (2).

This statement holds an interesting clue to McGuckian's relationship to the profession of poet in that she ascribes a masculine gender to it. On the surface, this is peculiar given the subject matter of her poems, but she elaborates: "Sometimes I turn things upside down and make the moon male because I get so tired of the moon being female. Why should it be when it's just a piece of matter? Why shouldn't the sun be female if she wants to be?" (4).

Julia Kristeva refers to the experimentation with gendered language and the implementation of opposites as semiotics. She defines this term in *Desire In Language: a semiotic approach to literature and art*, as the practice of "dissolving the sign, taking it apart, open[ing] up new areas of signification" (18). Using French as an example, *le barde* translates as 'poet,' whereas *la barde* is the 'armour on a horse' or the 'fat wrapped around a piece of meat.' Semiotics may be more easily exemplified in a grammatically gendered language such as French as against English, which retains aspects relating to natural gender – gender based on the sex of the referent of the noun (person, animal or character). Nevertheless, the gender associations inherent in our phallocentric language cue us from a very young age – words like barman, policeman, maid, nurse and even poet (a profession typically

associated with the masculine despite its gender neutrality in contemporary usage) shape the way we attribute roles in society.

A good example of shifting gender associations and word play can be found in "The Seed Picture":

> This is my portrait of Joanna – since the split
> The children come to me like a dumbwaiter,
> And I wonder where to put them, beautiful seeds
> With no immediate application…
> (*The Flower Master and Other Poems* 28).

This is the poet's portrait of one of her many selves in the imagined form of floral art as she attaches seeds "by the spine to a perfect bedding" (28); the "perfect bedding" acts as a metaphor for a blank canvas or the body. After the split presumably refers to the breakdown of a marriage. The word 'seed' is traditionally associated with the masculine as it is the man's seed that fertilises the woman's egg. However, in this poem, the seeds have several meanings, as they will grow into children, flowers or poems, which the 'I' in the poem will "guide" or plant "not by guesswork" (28). Therefore, the 'I' in the poem is responsible not only for the planting of the seed (masculine), but also for its cultivation (feminine). The poet's ironic stance on the term 'mastery' is evident as she acknowledges an element of "the clairvoyance / Of seed-work;" she can act upon the seeds, but she cannot impose complete mastery or control over them because they "dictate their own vocabulary" (28). The phrase 'man's mastery over nature' is an example of how mastery is a fallacy since we, as humans, have either little or no control over weather, natural disasters, or in this case, whether a seed will sprout and flower or bear fruit. The same, of course, can be said of the conception of a child, or the moment of inspiration that leads to writing a poem. This, however, is not to say that inspiration cannot be cultivated. The poet

Peter Redgrove explores this central paradox of writing in an interview with the *Poetry Review*:

> The creative process has been well-charted – but is still mysterious. There are basic procedures the artist can use to open up the possibilities inherent in himself and the situation; yet the process can't be forced. Berlioz called it 'careful luck'. 'Inspiration' is thus a composite (54-56).

McGuckian addresses the germinal stages of creativity as 'magical:' "I feel there is someone else writing the poem sometimes. I think it is some outside force, because sometimes I predict things in the poem and they come true, and how could I possibly know them?" (Wilson 2). Elaborating on the theme of mastery within the poem, the speaker in "The Seed Picture" bonds "all the seeds in one continuous skin" with the hope that the "tan linseed" and "spiky sunflowers" will one day grow into a leafy backdrop or border for the portrait, that the "bright lentils" will represent a window, and that the "hook-shaped marigold," oatmeal, "the iris / Of Dutch blue maw," black rape and millet will create a floral likeness of Joanna's attire and physical features (*The Flower Master and Other Poems* 28-29). While the sky is yet another element that forms the seed picture's backdrop, it is described as being "resolved to a cloud the length of a man" (28). This could mean that the post-split father, portrayed as the sky, is a shadowy presence in the portrait, who, while peripheral rather than central to it, is determined to participate in the 'seed picture' by bringing the rain that causes the seed to grow, or McGuckian may be commenting on how the post-split father's horizon or field of vision is limited, and therefore he is not privy to the unseen workings of the garden or the creative process that results in the portrait.

This relates back to the title of the collection since the Flower Master can be interpreted as the sun (masculine), which in Greek and Roman mythology is

represented by the god Apollo. Apollo, among other things, is the god of sun and poetry; the adjective 'Apollonian,' which relates to the rational, ordered and self-disciplined aspects of human nature, is derived from this name. The antonym to 'Apollonian' is 'Dionysian,' which means lust, spontaneity and chaos. The ancient Greeks did not consider Apollonian and Dionysian characteristics as opposing forces, but as forces entwined by nature. Such intermixed characteristics can be attributed to both the garden and the creative process: the sun (routine, predictable), much like the passing cloud that brings the rain, contributes to the growth of the flowers whose "dusty colours capture/ More than we can plan" (unpredictable, spontaneous) (28). Gardening or working the land for crops is often considered to be a male enterprise known as husbandry, though arguably McGuckian's Flower Master intermixes characteristics of both genders as the sun (masculine) and as cultivator/ nurturer of the garden (feminine). The Flower Master plants, fertilises the seeds and rears the garden, or in this case the floral portrait, to fruition in much the same way a poet makes a poem from words. The Flower Master often encompasses one of the many selves of the poet, and as McGuckian has acknowledged, sometimes is very much a 'he' when she is writing. Within the landscape of "The Seed-Picture," male and female are not opposing forces, but forces entwined by nature.

The Flower Master possesses the numerous hermaphroditic qualities of the garden – the feminine imagery of "the floral blouse" and the phallic depiction of the "spiky sunflowers" (28). Then there are the flowers themselves: the "sunflowers" again, and the "hook-shaped marigold," are self-pollinating flowers (28). McGuckian's gender associations are slippery: "the banana of the caraway" and the "black rape" work to enclose Joanna "In the border of a grandmother's sampler"

(28). Transforming an image with its related gender associations into another is at the heart of McGuckian's aesthetic, and embodies the essence of Kristeva's *jouissance*. While the picture's central figure, Joanna, is undoubtedly female and continually referred to as 'her' in the second stanza, I wonder if by "Bonding all the seeds in one continuous skin," blending the epicene qualities of the garden, McGuckian is acknowledging man's role in the moment of conception (28). Somewhat contradictory to this, McGuckian dedicates the collection "for my mother / without my father." McGuckian's father was alive at the time of publication because her fourth collection, *Captain Lavender*, printed over a decade later, was prompted by the poet's father's death. As such, the dedication suggests either of two things: that the use of "without" in the dedication indicates something similar to the Scottish word 'outwith,' i.e. beyond the bounds of (as in the post-split father of "The Seed Picture" whose field of vision is too limited to witness the unseen workings of the garden/ creative process); or that the poems in this collection celebrate a strong maternal inheritance. At the time of writing this collection McGuckian had just given birth to her first child, and perhaps this dedication is an acknowledgment of a mother's physical sacrifice in carrying a foetus to term (e.g. the organ displacement that occurs in order to make room for the foetus), and the labour that follows. The mother is the central figure in an infant's life, both as the body that houses the foetus before birth and the provider of nourishment thereafter, so "The Seed Picture" could also be interpreted as the child or the poem taking the attention of the mother/ poet away from her husband or another aspect of herself, causing the 'split.'

In interview with Kathleen McCracken in the *Irish Literary Supplement*, McGuckian admits that her poetry "has its own logic that may be [the] opposite of

men's" (20). McGuckian scholars have long questioned whether her work is an attempt to establish a women's writing in poetry as outlined by Hélène Cixous' term *écriture féminine*, where women positioned as 'other' within a masculine symbolic order restore their understanding of the world by analysing and embracing their own 'otherness.' Interestingly, Kristeva asserts that poetry is the perfect platform for exploring this 'otherness' since its position to the novel makes it the 'other' form of writing. This is somewhat problematic given that not all poetic forms are considered very 'other,' the epic poem being a good example of a large-scale narrative endeavour. Kristeva is likely referring to the lyric poem, a form that relies on the conveyance of musicality and feeling through a thought, image or phrase that feels important to the reader rather than overt dramatic narrative (Padel 5). To align the lyric with the feminine is problematic; however, it can be reasoned that women would be drawn to lyric poetry as the 'other' form of writing in order to, as Cixous claims, engage with their own 'otherness.' Terry Eagleton provides a clear and convincing argument for poetry's importance to semiotics, which is somewhat less articulated in Kristeva's writing: "Poetry activates the full body of the signifier, presses the word to work to its utmost under the intense pressure of surrounding words, and so to release its richest potential" (89). Addressing the issue of the 'other,' Eagleton contends that while most forms of language focus on conveying information, poetry is more concerned with facilitating communication (88). McGuckian reinforces this conviction when she claims "poetry exists because the way we use words when we are talking to people is so inadequate" (Alcobia Murphy and Kirkland 78).

Since semiotics is more challenging in English because, unlike with French, the gender and therefore meaning cannot be changed by simply altering the prefix, it requires the re-association of symbols: the moon, the sun, the trinity for example. McGuckian achieves this through *jouissance*, translated from French to English as 'pleasure.' Lacan redefined this word in psychoanalytic terms to mean the suffering or pain that takes place beyond the pleasure principle; Cixous applied the word to feminist theory to describe a woman's sexual rapture, combining the mental, physical and spiritual elements that create the female experience; and Kristeva, along with other literary theorists, borrowed the term to depict the fracturing of the structures of signification, calling into question the homogenised meaning and shared cultural identity apparent in language. The evolution of meaning in *jouissance*, as demonstrated above, is precisely what McGuckian is trying to achieve: to evolve a word into new potentialities of meaning, to work and rework, to cleanse words and images of their social and cultural connotations. This often includes her own image as she aims to define the many aspects of herself in relation to the mother, sisters, sister selves and aunts depicted throughout *The Flower Master and Other Poems*, "effectuat[ing] discontinuities by temporarily articulating" these relationships "and then starting over, again and again" as if to chart and alter the interaction between the roles of poet, mother and wife; and to show the journey of young woman transitioning into grown woman (*Revolution in Poetic Language* 26). Deryn Rees-Jones describes this aesthetic as one that "relies heavily on her linguistic attempts to map an idea of the unconscious, whether it be the unconscious of a text, or the poem, or the poet herself" (*Consorting with Angels* 176).

The opening poems of *The Flower Master and Other Poems* are set during adolescence; the speaker navigates a period of transition from girlhood to womanhood, which will be mirrored later in the collection as she moves from young woman to wife, and from wife to mother. In "Smoke," McGuckian observes, "They set the whins on fire along the road. / I wonder what controls it, can the wind hold / That snake of orange motion to the hills, / Away from the houses?" (*The Flower Master and Other Poems* 11). One possible reading of the poem is that, in it, the fire equates to language, still controlled, not yet a threat to the domestic space of the home. The interior is at odds and juxtaposed with the exterior and, in the final stanza, the poet rightly questions whether something as wild and unpredictable as fire, and therefore language, can ever be controlled: "They seem so sure what they can do. / I am unable even / To control myself, I run / Til the fawn smoke settles on the earth" (11). The poet, or the poet's vocabulary, leaves the interior space and runs wild like the uncontrolled spreading of fire. In *Medbh McGuckian: The Interior Of Words*, Elin Holmsten writes, "One of the reasons why it is difficult to express the self in language is, of course, because language cannot be totally singular and personal, but depends instead on the meanings and connotations it acquires as it is used by countless other speakers" (Alcobia-Murphy and Kirkland 94). The various meanings and connotations language can acquire can be determined or altered by the semiotic aspect of the signifying process, which relies on drives and articulations over meaning. For instance, "the extra-verbal way in which bodily energy and affects make their way into language" allow us to determine, for example, whether or not it is socially acceptable to laugh at a joke, if someone is telling a lie, or if an insult has been couched within a compliment (McAfee 7). This "extra-verbal" component

destabilises the symbolic, logical and orderly aspects of the signifying process. While this can aid language interpretation by clueing us in to bodily signifiers, it can also open the door for misunderstanding, particularly on a cross-cultural level. In "Smoke," the various 'meanings and connotations' in language are conjured by the image of the fire running wild beyond all control since word associations can be endless, and it's likely that McGuckian chose this as the collection's opening poem because it operates as metaphorical kindling for a vocabulary and narrative progression that becomes bolder and increasingly unwieldy throughout *The Flower Master and Other Poems* (the collection closes with "the thickening of dreams" so that clarity and meaning are perhaps even less apparent than at the collection's start) (58)**.** The image of the fawn smoke settling on the earth reinforces the ideas of initiation and linguistic beginnings because a fawn is a young deer in its first year. This might also refer to the poet in the adolescent stages of her career, just starting to move into an adult vocabulary because, prior to now, she had not found her distinct voice. While it could be maintained that the domestic space centres on a controlled fire, which is interpreted as safe and approved, here, the poet questions the ability of the fire to be controlled outdoors, hinting at the unpredictability of external forces, such as the wind, to act upon the fire. It is worth noting that the verb 'inspire,' like 'inhale,' comes from the Latin *inspirare*, meaning to breathe or take in air, suggesting that inspiration, while an external force, operates through the poet using language as its vehicle of expression, encouraging language to "run" untamed.

Continuing with the theme of adolescence and initiation, "The 'Singer'" depicts an early encounter with sexuality, or as Leontia Flynn puts it in *Reading Medbh McGuckian*, "a masturbatory disconnectedness" (24). The speaker sits at her

mother's sewing machine, which Flynn registers as a symbol of "domestic womanliness" (24), "Pressing my feet occasionally / Up and down on the treadle / As though I were going somewhere / I had never been" (*The Flower Master and Other Poems* 14). Unable to operate the machine on her own, the speaker is not yet able to distinguish herself from her mother. In the second stanza, there is a sense of passing time and growing tension with "Every year at exams, the pressure mounted—" (14): this contributes to the speaker's "impatience for sexual experience" (Flynn 24). Sex is a dominant theme during adolescence. For the speaker in the poem, all images associate back to a release, "A car was thunder, / The ticking of a clock was heavy rain…" (14). This depiction of one thing (e.g. a car) transforming into another (e.g. thunder) through metaphor is comparable to Kristeva's *jouissance* as a type of idea connection that morphs one sound into another. Metaphor takes the literal meaning and alters it into the 'other' by "enlist[ing] the reader's intellectual and emotive involvement… [encouraging the reader to] participate in making meaning in poetry" (Hirsch). While the images of the car and the ticking clock evoke an 'impatience for sexual experience,' they also hint at a desire for experimentation which may extend itself to language, and the frustration that can follow from routinely slipping into writer's block, the use of cliché or being unable to find the right words: "I sent the disconnected wheel/ Spinning madly round and round" (*The Flower Master and Other Poems* 14). In the final stanza, the speaker draws "the curtains / On young couples stopping in the entry, / Heading home" (14). This is not quite a denial of the speaker's blossoming sexuality since, again, we have the image of the spinning wheel that goes round "Til the empty bobbin rattled in its case" (14). Rather, it indicates unwillingness to leave the private interior, the masturbatory stage of

discovery, with the result that the curtains are drawn on the speaker's entry into adulthood: she participates only in masturbation rather than in a full sexual encounter (14). Naturally, the latter involves a type of metaphoric transformation – the mingling of the self with another. It is worth noting that Belfast did not experience the sexual revolution that other parts of the West did in the 1960s. Contraception was unavailable, and women who had sexual relationships or became pregnant out of wedlock were, in some cases, sent to Magdalene asylums. This sense of repression and constraint, externally imposed and internalised, is important to McGuckian's poems. She has admitted that as a student in a Catholic convent, she promised the nuns that "we'd keep our virginity forever" and that "before we left school, that we'd keep ourselves immune, that we'd keep ourselves away from men and politics" (Alcobia Murphy and Kirkland 203). It is no surprise that McGuckian, aware of the risks and stigma attached to premarital sex, would, in the representation of a youthful self or speaker, take on a tone of sexual voyeurism rather than one of active participation, which is comparable to Lacan's definition of *jousissance* as the pain, or in this case loneliness, that takes place beyond the pleasure principle.

"Eavesdropper" is also about the speaker's initiation into womanhood: "'Eve' and the 'drop' into the fallen world of laboured fertility and childbearing" (Flynn 21). An 'eavesdropper' is someone who listens secretly to a private conversation or, secondarily, the water that drips from the eaves of a house. It is interesting to note, "'falling off the roof'… is slang for menstruation" (Flynn 21). This is particularly relevant since McGuckian has said that a house is often a metaphor for a poem or the female body in her poetry. This element of 'twinning' – where the house is not only the body, but also the poem – suggests a link between sexuality and language similar

to that embodied in the image of the spinning wheel in "The 'Singer.'" The exploration of multiple meanings in words and imagery is indicative of *jouissance*, which Kristeva asserts is connected "to the maternal, the semiotic and the erotic" (Alcobia Murphy and Kirkland 77). This poem encompasses all three elements mentioned above: the house as mother because the speaker is now able to bear children; the house as poem, bearing the "musical, anterior, enigmatic, mysterious and rhythmic" attributes of semiotics; and the speaker's sexual awakening (81). There is an element of 'dressing up' with the "shackling, unshackling of breasts" and the "staging of bleach or henna on the hair" (*The Flower Master and Other Poems* 15). McGuckian employs the repetition of colour, which she will continue to do in later collections – the 'bleach' or virginal white juxtaposed against the stain of 'henna' or blood. We see this again in the second stanza where children's games shift into adolescence: "the red kite / lost forever over our heads, the white ball / A pin-prick on the tide" (15); these images are followed by a description of menarche as a wound left unhealed inside her: "It was like a bee's sting or a bullet / Left in me, this mark, this sticking pins in dolls" (15). The last two lines of the poem finalise the transition into womanhood and reconfirm the dressing up theme with "curtainings and cushionings," alluding to the nesting of the house in preparation for marriage and the arrival of children (15). 'Curtainings' echoes the 'drawing of the curtains' in "The 'Singer,'" except in this case it appears to refer to the rising or opening of a theatre curtain at the beginning of a performance, or the 'first act' of womanhood for which the speaker is presumably now ready. The way the stages of a woman's life are presented as theatrical performances suggests that the speaker is 'dressing up' in attire that does not necessarily match her interior, begging the question as to whether

she is prepared for the stage of life she now finds herself in, and whether this stage is a natural progression or one imposed on her by convention. The final line, "The grass is an eavesdropper's bed," reverberates the collection's wider obsession with the theme of growth (15). We see again in the final line the image of the 'release' and the 'watering,' echoed in "Smoke," "The 'Singer'" and the last line of "The Seed-Picture," where women "sigh for liberation" (29). Just as in the latter poem, the speaker or woman in "Eavesdropper" is both the 'flower' and the 'Flower Master' since she will nurture the seed to fruition on her own "like a wet nurse / Feeding nonchalantly someone else's child" (15). This suggestion of disconnectedness seems to be aligned with the idea that inspiration comes from the 'other,' or as McGuckian has indicated, "from some outside force" which she presumably then channels into the creation of a poem (Wilson 2).

McGuckian's first collection is concerned with developmental milestones, and the transition from one life phase into the next: the focus on language in "Smoke" moves towards an awareness of sexuality in "The 'Singer,'" which in turn develops into a coming of age or dressing up in "Eavesdropper." These stages occur amidst the planting of the garden/ portrait as exhibited in "The Seed-Picture" and propel the collection into maturation – of the garden, the wife, the woman poet, and the language of her poems.

Her second collection, *Venus and the Rain*, develops beyond the coming of age, domestic activities and fertility themes in *The Flower Master and Other Poems*. The poet describes a 'regression' in this collection due to post-partum depression, "a mental breakdown after [her] first child" (Mooney 16-18). The focus evidently shifts

to the desecration of 'the garden' (like the house, often a metaphor for the poem or the female body in McGuckian's poetry) caused by the opposing forces of celestial bodies, of the seasons, and the poet's many 'I's – of the mother and of the wife again pitted against the female poet, and the guilt that ensues because writing poetry has a cost: "if [she's] doing that [she's] not looking after the children" (Brown 180-1). McGuckian demonstrates a desire to map the subconscious, "somewhere unreached by words, such as a fear of pregnancy or an unspeakable guilt," by "drawing together incompatibles, to harness all the cancelling-out hatred and love, going towards and retreating from everything all the time" (Brown 176). This yoking together of unlike images is similar to Surrealist praxis, through which writers such as André Breton sought to channel dream logic or the subconscious through the "juxtaposition of objects, or people, or ideas, that arbitrarily extend our notion of the connections it is possible to make" (Carter 626). Surrealism proposes that poetry is the primary vehicle through which the dream world can intersect with the conscious state. McGuckian, in a statement for *Culture Northern Ireland*, resonates the same belief:

> Poems are very much part of the unconscious mind… They push up through the ordinary language that we use in every day life. The language which we are using now, for example, to try and understand what is written in the poems, it is inadequate, laborious and slow (O'Malley).

The notion that poetry arrives from a place of 'otherness' or from a linguistic state prior to our everyday waking state (i.e. the subconscious) is central to McGuckian's early work.

The opposing forces within *The Flower Master and Other Poems* are advanced in *Venus and the Rain* with a distinctly pagan edge. Venus is the goddess of love, sex, beauty and fertility in Roman mythology. She has been epitomised as

the ideal woman by painters and sculptors for centuries – her appearance assessed, altered and contorted to align with the fashion of the time. She encompasses many of the water-based principles of the sea foam from which she was born, and is often considered to be the balance to the fiery god Vulcan, to whom she was married. McGuckian has said of her poems:

> I live in a house, I am a housewife, I like feminine things, I like beautiful flowers. But they're set in the context of their opposites. I wouldn't think of the moon without thinking of its opposite – I am always thinking of its opposite (Wilson 3).

The opposite of Venus, in addition to Vulcan, are the other fiery gods, which include Mars and Apollo. The sun, represented in Roman mythology as the God Apollo, features heavily in McGuckian's second collection as she portrays Venus as the opposing feminine force. Unlike in *The Flower Master and Other Poems*, a collection concerned with and held within a clearly defined domestic space, McGuckian uses Venus as the ultimate symbol of femininity, and, through her, investigates femaleness on a cosmic level. Leontia Flynn notes correspondingly that the poems in this collection "repeatedly return to the idea of opposites, of male and female principles, in such a way as to suggest that McGuckian's style of 'poetess' is now… the embodiment of a kind of elemental femininity: the achievement of a 'wholly female' sensibility in language" (40).

Hinting further at a distinctly feminine language, McGuckian, in an interview with John Brown in *In the Chair: Interviews with Poets from the North of Ireland*, says that "Words are tools that men mostly created to suit themselves and although I buy into them, necessarily, they do not rule me or, at least, I rebel and fight against their empire" (179). This echoes *écriture féminine* as set forth by Héléne Cixous who, Flynn points out, called for writing, "which is that of women *as* women,

[writing that] is urgent, mystical, erotic – full of lyrical flights and irreverent jokes" (43). In Cixous' framework, language is identity, and for McGuckian it is so in a two-fold manner: as a woman poet; and as an Irish poet admittedly lacking a Gaelic vocabulary, which she "resented very much," and as a result, tried "to make the [English] language do something for [her]self and others, to simply make it less ordinary" (Brown 172).

The collection's opening poem, "Venus and the Sun," depicts a relationship, not only in the context of Roman mythology, but also between planetary bodies. Venus, despite its volcanic surface and intense heat, is named after the most beautiful of the ancient goddesses because it is the brightest of all the planets in the night sky. Venus, as the second planet from the sun and the hottest planet in our solar system, appears to be in a flirtatious conflict with the Sun: "I am the sun's toy – because I go against / The grain" (*Venus and the Rain* 11). This likely refers to the planet's retrograde rotation, which is as yet unexplained by scientists. Even though Venus rotates backwards, and is therefore seen as defiant in relation to its 'sister planet' Earth, it still "feels the brush of [the Sun's] authority" as it adheres to a fixed path orbiting the sun as the centre of its universe, and therefore reflecting the light of the brighter celestial object: "The scented flames of the sun throw me, / Telling me how to move – I tell them / How to bend the light of shifting stars" (11). The poet, as Venus, struggles with the Sun because, "despite appearances, [her status as a writer] is patronisingly granted by the critical tradition ('the sun'), rather than being autonomously claimed" (Alcobia-Murphy and Kirkland 49). In the final stanza of the poem, Venus enviously considers the stars' unrestricted movement compared to her own. Because the stars "are still at large," they can "fly apart / From each other to a

more soulful beginning" (11). This "more soulful beginning" could be a reference to the semiotic chora – a psychic space preceding language acquisition where the infant "experiences a wealth of drives (feelings, instincts, etc.) that could be extremely disorienting… if not for the infant's relation with his or her mother's body" (McAfee 19). The sun is a competitive force; it "holds good till it makes a point" (*Venus and the Rain* 11). This logocentric and Apollonian 'male' aesthetic allies itself with the symbolic, the logical and orderly aspects of signifying. McGuckian positions herself against the logical and ordered sun as her poems in this collection aim to disrupt domestic confines through constant movement and shifting imagery. On a poetic level, "the brush of McGuckian's authority" depicts the symbolic – the moon and the sea as feminine, yielding to the sun as a greater energetic force – and yet she rebels against this by "resist[ing] an easy narrative sequence or even lyrical moments of autobiographical disclosure" (Robinson 119). The sun's mastery, as highlighted previously in *The Flower Master and Other Poems*, is depicted as it tells "itself to whiten to a traplight" (*Venus and the Rain* 11). The poem ends with an admission that, "with any choice / I'd double-back to the dullest blue of Mars" (11). This evocative ending reminds the reader of the Icarus myth, and warns of the dangers of flying too close to the sun. The speaker intimates a longing for the blue of the red planet, dull in comparison to the red of the sun. Patricia Boyle Haberstroh in *Woman Creating Women* interprets McGuckian's 'astronomy' as "modelling a woman's struggle to balance dependence and independence, to be connected to others but maintain a course of her own" (138). This creates a disorienting landscape where "the details do not form a composite whole but a (sometimes vexing) movement of

displacements or estranging linkages" that results in the unsettling of the foundation of symbolic imagery (Robinson 119).

McGuckian's poetry bespeaks a preoccupation with the possibilities of language rather than the willingness to settle on one particular meaning or truth; she emphasises the semiotic over the symbolic aspects of communication while acknowledging that one cannot exist without the other. Likewise, Kristeva in *Desire In Language* discusses how, out of the struggle between opposing forces, a poem is created:

> [The] Sun [is the] agency of language since it is the crown of rhythmic thrust, limiting structure, paternal law abrading rhythm, destroying it to a large degree, but also bringing it to light, out of its earthy revolutions, to enunciate itself (29).

According to Kristeva the 'I,' regardless of gender, cannot help but be bound to the sun as 'the agency of language,' and poetry will continue as long as the poet's need to escape the constructs of language continues, which is presumably a never-ending endeavour since adequate expression is subjective due to, for instance, extra-verbal influences, cultural differences, and so on. McGuckian seems to affirm this sentiment in "Venus and the Sun" and in many of the poems in her third collection, *On Ballycastle Beach,* by cleansing words and imagery of their associations through repetition in order to open up new areas of signification. The struggle between the semiotic and the symbolic in language is similar to the differences between art and science, which give us "the same object in quite different ways: art in the form of 'seeing' and 'perceiving' or 'feeling,' science in the form of knowledge" (Althusser 175). McGuckian's poetry blends the mundane (houses, gardens, doors) with the extraordinary (dreams, alter egos, mythology) demonstrating:

> … that images, whether in poetry or the visual arts, can illustrate the multidimensional lives women lead, so that what first appear to be strange associations among these images are not necessarily so. Toorop's modernist technique, in which he connects images to one another in an associative, non-representational way, is similar to McGuckian's; both fuse seemingly unrelated images into an artistic and symbolic whole (Haberstroh 135).

McGuckian's penchant for experimenting with personal pronouns means that 'I,' 'you,' 'he' and 'she' can be read on multiple levels, hinting at the constant evolution or lack of clear demarcation of the individual. The inability to recognise the self as a distinct individual is reminiscent of Kristeva's semiotic chora, where an infant processes the world through his/ her relationship to the mother's body. Thomas Docherty describes McGuckian's shifting pronouns as a sort of preconscious consciousness where the speaker "always occupies some different temporal moment from the moment actually being discussed in the poem" (192). Through this aspect of her praxis, she blends symbolic imagery (what can be easily observed and understood), and communicates it through language that is influenced by the semiotic. This allows her to inhabit various aspects of herself, as well as occasionally adopting the point of view of the people and objects that occupy her domestic space. The juxtaposition between the semiotic and the symbolic throws up other juxtapositions: the primal maternal space (primal because it is prior to language acquisition) versus the clarity of ordered, civilised meaning; and laterally, the unconscious dreamscape edging its way into the poet's reality. In "Prie-Dieu," for example, McGuckian uses the "untutored" and "defiant" language of her "oblique" dreamscape, her "natural way of speaking," to mock her critics interpretation of her poetry as "always sexed," while proudly reinforcing the notion that her poetry is uncooperative ("a postulant that will not kiss / Until the clothing ceremony") and

inscrutable ("I have jilted / All the foursquare houses" and "My courtyard has a Spanish air, / Defiant as a tomboy") (*Venus and the Rain* 30). Likewise, in "The Rising Out," McGuckian depicts the "heartbeat of my own child" as a "blue crocus" growing "in the middle of a book," conveying, in ambiguous terms, the contrast between the foetus/ child's pure, uncontaminated pre-verbal state within the mother's body as a half-written book (36).

Readers hoping to find distinct meaning in McGuckian's poetry will be disappointed; Clair Wills describes the veiled self in her poetry as "the self in process" which is different from "the self as a finished archaeological find… [and what is] presented in the work is often an analogue for something quite different than autobiography" (Alcobia-Murphy and Kirkland 48). It can then be argued that the poems in *Venus and the Rain* create a tapestry of the unconscious, a dream-world language that is governed by the feminine properties of flowers and planetary bodies that rebel against the ordered verse of the masculine world as represented by the sun.

The title poem, "Venus and the Rain," embodies the dissonance between the poet and her critics and the continuing struggle between poet and mother, and introduces the poet's "gibbous voice," which suggests a uniquely feminine language that is "of the moon" (Flynn 42). Kristeva does not detail how a woman should speak or write, but argues that "the echo of a stage prior to language acquisition, … [is] associated with the feminine in so far as, prior to adopting symbolic language, the infant perceives itself to be in continuity with the mother" (Flynn 53). Flynn rightly points out that this non-verbal semiotic stage prior to language is actually "unthinkable," which is precisely what McGuckian indicates in the opening line of the poem, "White on white, I can never be viewed/ Against a Heavy sky" (*Venus and*

the Rain 32). Venus, as a white planet against a light sky, cannot be perceived easily by the naked eye. While this debatably refers to the invisibility of women in public life, or hints at subversive assimilation, I wonder whether this poem is a more personal commentary on the poet's critics. In the opening stanza, McGuckian writes, "And they ask me in reply if I've/ Decided to stop trying to create diamonds" (32). The 'they' in this poem could refer to her critics, who condescendingly ask whether she's ready to stop "making diamonds," or difficult poems. Making diamonds requires a great deal of heat and pressure, and is a natural process still not fully understood by science, resonating Venus' "white on white." Catriona Clutterbuck summarises 'making diamonds' as "the forcing together of a single material into an unfracturable substance, which is the assumed effect of her work's resistance to practical interpretation" (Alcobia-Murphy and Kirkland 50). In the second stanza, McGuckian takes the opportunity to poke fun at her critics by calling into question their assumptions about her poetry, "What clues to distance could they have,/ So self-excited by my sagging sea,/ Widening ten times faster than it really did?" (*Venus and the Rain* 32). McGuckian insinuates that her 'gibbous voice' functions as a distraction to her critics, who become so 'self-excited' by her libidinous images, and the need to construe meaning in her poems, that they witness the illusory – "widening ten times faster than it actually did" (32). The final stanza of "Venus and the Rain" warns against the act of interpretation and how critical responses have a "propensity to run alongside each other in restoring the authority of an existing canon whose entertainment it is to celebrate such poetry's 'icy domes' of impenetrability" (Alcobia-Murphy and Kirkland 50):

> I told them they were only giving up
> A sun for sun, that cruising moonships find

> Those icy domes relaxing, when they take her
> Rind to pieces, and a waterfall
> Unstitching itself down the front stairs (32).

McGuckian encourages readers to look at the images in a different light, exchanging "sun for sun;" to consider that when the "icy domes" tear a ship's "rind to pieces," or indeed the reverse, when the ship destroys the planet's rind, these are not necessarily acts of destruction, but rather an "unstitching" (32). Readers should recognise this 'unstitching' as the pleasure principle of *jouissance*, or rebelliousness that deconstructs structure – a tactic McGuckian employs throughout *The Flower Master and Other Poems* and *Venus and the Rain*. For example, in "Aviary" she writes, "Yet any wild bird would envy you/ This aviary, whenever you free all the birds in me" (25). McGuckian substantiates the fact that "she is always thinking of its opposite:" with the idea that Venus requires the sun's presence against which to define herself, that disorder can only be recognised in contradistinction to order, and that the symbolic and semiotic aspects of language are both entwined and disruptive (Wilson 3).

In talking about her second collection, composed during a period of severe post-partum depression, "McGuckian said that when she was writing these poems she was at home "going crazy," and "stuck in the house with babies"" (Haberstroh 136). "The Rising Out" conveys the idea that the roles of wife, mother, daughter, sister and poet lay dormant in her, akin to having split personalities or sister selves which emerge and take over consecutively: "My dream sister has gone into my blood / To kill the poet in me before Easter" (*Venus and the Rain* 36). Despite McGuckian's claims that her early poetry is apolitical, given the poem's title and reference to Easter, she manages to inhabit the political domain by echoing the

Easter Rising of 1916, which sought to gain Irish independence from Britain. The execution of the organisers in the aftermath, however, resulted in outrage, and in their subsequent martyrdom. In McGuckian's poem we encounter a different kind of liberation that seamlessly merges the political with the personal – the blood sacrifice of the poet frees the mother, who has gone into hibernation as a result of post-partum depression. She describes the heartbeat of her child as "a little / Blue crocus in the middle of a book," which, when open, has two sides split across opposite pages (36). She feels the poet descending, making room for the mother as "expectant summer," who "gentles me by passing weatherly remarks," and other mundane conversation such as "Rather a poor year" (36). McGuckian attempts to reconcile the life of the poet with that of the mother in herself: "I try and try to separate one Alice / From the other, by their manner of moving," which is a pertinent comparison to Lewis Carroll's Alice, the quintessential mover between worlds (36). Throughout this collection, the 'mother' acts as the opposing force to the 'poet.' This "familiar closing of the unseen room" is imagined as both a death and a birth in the final lines of "The Rising Out":

> If she had died suddenly I would have heard
> Blood stretched on the frame, though her dream
> Is the same seed that lifted me out of my clothes
> And carried me till it saw itself as fruit (36).

The surprising tenderness between mother and poet suggests it is the responsibility of one to 'carry' the other during a time of difficulty. For example, during the prenatal period, often marked by memory lapse and lack of concentration known as 'pregnancy brain,' the mother takes centre lead, preparing the house for the child's arrival. Likewise, following the child's birth, it is the poet's function to guide the mother out from her post-partum depression. McGuckian has claimed, "… a woman

needs a child for every book" (Brown 173). While it should be acknowledged that this is not a general truth, and that some women poets would find this claim ridiculous, if not worrying, McGuckian has found her pregnancies to be a fertile ground (though not the only motivation) for writing: "I felt totally fulfilled and soaring during pregnancy and then there was the plunge afterwards and that learning experience is in the poems" (Brown 173-4). The struggle between mother and poet has been addressed in the work of women poets such as Sylvia Plath, particularly in poems from *Ariel* such as "Morning Song:" "I'm no more your mother/ Than the cloud that distils a mirror to reflect its own slow/ Effacement at the wind's hand" (11). Equally, Adrienne Rich's *On Motherhood* intimately describes the creative and intellectual aridity that motherhood can entail. McGuckian, however, differentiates herself by both rebelling against and accepting her femininity, creating a linguistic dreamscape where staircases symbolise women who move from one realm to another, where "speakers move in and out of shadow and mist, confront the day and hide in the night. Ghosts, mirrors and looking glasses, dream sisters, and phantom lovers materialise and dissolve" (Haberstroh 125).

McGuckian embraces her feminine "un-English language" in "Prie-Dieu:" "This oblique trance is my natural / Way of speaking" (30), and in "Aviary" she claims, "my longer and longer sentences/ prove me wholly female" (25), signalling that "McGuckian's style may indeed be a challenge to logocentric thinking and conventional grammar…" (Haberstroh 125). This unique style is undeniably frustrating for the reader who wishes to experience immediacy of meaning in her poems, or in some cases, identify meaning at all. However, a much greater reward awaits the reader as McGuckian links the seemingly unrelated, moving from

"Although my dresser still contains/ Christmas cards in May" to "I have ceased/ To send the bluebelled notelets mourning/ The world that is dead in me" (*Venus and the Rain* 30). She goes on to compare an upright chair beside a fire as having the ability to "cope as well/ As any honest woman with the rage/ Of one moment, the contentment of the next" (30). It is exactly this type of unpredictability from one moment, image or emotion to the next, that creates a "spinning language" (Alcobia-Murphy and Kirkland 46), and in turn, "defamiliarise[s] given responses and thereby rebuild[s] the potential for communication through language" (Flynn 40-1).

In the opening stanza of "Prie Dieu," McGuckian alludes to a pre-conscious state of the child in close vicinity to her mother: "The world is dead in me, my mother's/ Sleeping hide" (*Venus and the Rain* 30). The dead world refers to the state prior to language acquisition when the infant is in continuity with the mother, as outlined by Kristeva, and "though a 'sleeping hide' is actually a native American portable bed (naturally), there's an unmistakable suggestion here of the proximity of the sleeping infant to the mother's body, missed and mourned," or of the foetus still within the womb (Flynn 54). If this is indeed the case, McGuckian laments the loss of her 'wholly female' language, which existed as "'pure' internal experience free from the social contaminations of language," and yet she strives to re-obtain this form of communication by leaving the established meanings of words behind, or looking at meaning through a more expansive lens (Eagleton 53):

> By exploding the phonetic, lexical, and syntactical object of linguistics, this practice not only escapes the attempted hold of all anthropomorphic sciences, it also refuses to identify with the recumbent body subjected to transference onto the analyser" (*Revolution in Poetic Language* 16).

Her second collection disorientates because it speaks from a place of female otherness – it enacts and reflects upon a fracturing of the self as prompted by a feeling of going through the looking glass due to post-partum depression and the intense gaze of her critics (the latter creating a sense of disillusionment even though she has remained committed to her unconventional writing style). In doing so, "McGuckian also makes herself a fellow-traveller with Kristeva, who has placed women on the side of the 'unofficial'… as 'that which cannot be represented,'" the 'white on white' from the collection's title poem (Flynn 55).

Unlike McGuckian's previous collections, *On Ballycastle Beach* places the reader in a very specific geographical location in Northern Ireland, close to the poet's birthplace. Gone, for the most part, is the preoccupation with flowers, planetary bodies, and gods and goddesses; instead, the poems are "composed in a sort of verbal palette of simple colours and vocabulary" (Flynn 65):

> Like a porch in winter,
> Blue, cold and affectionate, I stepped
> With you for a moment out of my
> Uncompleted story (18).

This differs from the excess of imagery encountered in *The Flower Master and Other Poems*: "Occasionally, as Sunday silver, sit/ In a quiet, eastward-facing room,/ And make a thread from the fibres of the five signs/ Leading to the eight valleys, my lush palace gate" (18), and the abundance of language and comparison of incompatibles apparent in *Venus and the Rain*: "I can already hear in my chambered pith/ The hammers of pianos, their fastigiate notes/ Arranging a fine sightscreen for my nectary,/ My trustful mop" (25).

McGuckian is often accused of being non-political in her early work, "assert[ing] the supremacy of personal memory over political realities, of personal concerns over political issues," and critics generally agree that she did not begin writing about Irishness or the Troubles until her fifth collection, *Captain Lavender* (1994) (Howard 61). Given that McGuckian describes the change in spelling of her name from Maeve to Medbh as "repudiating the Anglicization of [her]self," this response seems somewhat inaccurate (Wilson 6). As in her earlier collections, the poems of *On Ballycastle Beach* appear covertly politicised, both in terms of the Troubles, but also of the relationship between gender and artistry. By blending the personal with the political, the poems in *On Ballycastle Beach* "embody a woman poet's commentary on the problems in her homeland" (Haberstroh 141). As before, the political message is offered within a domestic sphere: "Issues of time, territory, gender, language, and art emerge from images of home, dreams, rivers and fountains, children, mothers, ships, and colours" (142).

Given the politics and poetic legacy of Northern Ireland, and the ways in which poetry has been utilised in response to political unrest and violence, it is important to understand where McGuckian's work is situated in this context. In her preface to *Reading Michael Longley*, Fran Brearton illustrates widely held beliefs regarding the younger generation of Northern Irish poets in comparison to their predecessors:

> One pattern has been to see the generation of Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley and Derek Mahon as formally conservative exponents of the "well-made poem"… The slightly younger generation of poets such as Paul Muldoon, Medbh McGuckian and Ciaran Carson, on the other hand, while they draw on traditional forms, have been seen to destabilise, in a postmodern world, the well-made poem through experiments with, and within, form and language,

> thereby shattering assumptions their predecessors apparently hold intact (9).

Since the body of the poem is often considered a metaphor for the home in McGuckian's poetry, the destabilisation of the well-made poem through experimentation in language could be a reaction to the violated home on both the macro and micro levels – Northern Ireland, Belfast, McGuckian's literal house or neighbourhood, as well as the body. She has openly acknowledged her admiration for the poetry of both Seamus Heaney and Michael Longley, and has adopted Michael Longley's preoccupation – particularly prevalent in the elegies from his second collection *An Exploded View* (1973) – with the relationship between public and private spaces. Both poets have commented on a feeling of division within themselves: McGuckian has spoken of a "sense of being two people" as a result of the Troubles (Wilson 2), and likewise, Longley of being "'schizophrenic,' leading 'a double life,'" in part due to the Troubles, but also to being raised in Northern Ireland by English parents, and as a twin (Brearton 27). The fracturing of the self expands further with McGuckian's claims that she often feels like a man when writing poetry; Longley has similarly said, "I feel the world through the woman part of me more than most men" (Myers 57). This construction and deconstruction of the self, or convening with the gendered 'other,' opens up new areas of signification within the poet, and is the very embodiment of *jouissance* and linguistic revolution. While "the Troubles did render the question 'what is the use or function of poetry' more acute," a question undoubtedly tackled in the poetry of Heaney, Longley and Mahon, the Troubles "also brought into critical consciousness a greater awareness of the potentially hazardous political pitfalls inherent in language itself" (Brearton 50).

McGuckian's poetry explores this issue by means of word repetition and intertextuality (at least in the poems of *On Ballycastle Beach*).

These poems continue the experimentation with gender and repetition established in her first two collections, except "Gone, for the most part, are the heightened personae and occluded narratives" of *The Flower Master and Other Poems* and "gone the cosmic inquiries and dense, richly textured language of *Venus and the Rain"* (Flynn 65). The language is minimalistic and abstract, with words constantly repeated: worked, cleansed, and reworked into the poems. This differs from the wordplay or uncertainty of meaning that McGuckian employs in her preceding collections in that she now attempts to establish or evolve meaning through intertextuality. Thanks to Shane Alcobia Murphy's exhaustive source hunting of Russian texts, scholars now know that this is the first of McGuckian's collections to employ, almost entirely, the use of repurposed sources borrowed primarily from the works of Osip and Nadezhda Mandelstam, and their account of the tragic life of the Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva, with whom Osip Mandelstam had an affair. The language in the collection has an exotic feel despite the Northern Irish location to which the title refers, "(seen in the titles: 'Ylang-Ylang', 'Mazurka', 'Querencia', 'Balakhana'), … [as if] smuggled over some linguistic border" (Flynn 66). Additionally, there are obvious comparisons that can be made between McGuckian and Tsvetaeva. For instance, like McGuckian, "Tsvetaeva was considered highly 'original'… and accused of 'writing extremely melodious nonsense,'" which eventually led to the rejection of her work as "'devoid of true human content:' 'she has nothing to say to the people' and does not include herself 'in the great cause which her people now serve'" (Flynn 78-9). This is reminiscent of

criticism McGuckian received in the early stages of her career when she was regularly accused of focusing on "personal concerns over political issues" (Howard 61). Many critics have considered the question of *why* McGuckian incorporates other writers' texts into this collection, and in the most extreme cases, some have asked if this should be considered plagiarism. Nevertheless, it can be argued that intertextuality is a form of repetition, and a way in which McGuckian seeks to continue her explorations of making old and tired language appear new. In an interview with Shane Alcobia Murphy, she responds to her use of found sources:

> The person who has published the work wants it to be read, and doesn't mind it being read and going straight into someone's head. If it's enshrined in the work of art, even in a truncated or bowdlerised form, still I think when I meet the people who wrote all the books I think they will forgive me. I think that they would think that their work was being given further life (199).

When considering McGuckian's use of borrowed texts, and her tendency towards what has been described as "meaningful meaninglessness," it is important to ask if the poem will "mean something different in the light of the work from which it was borrowed," whether this borrowed material makes sense of the poem, and how taking the words into her own mouth (e.g. "Little House, Big House" and "The Dream Language of Fergus") affects meaning (Flynn 68). A useful comparison can be made between the repurposing of texts and the aim of Russian Formalism to resurrect the word through de-familiarisation:

> They either create the new word from an old root… or split it up by rhyme… or give it incorrect stress by use of rhythm of verse. New, living words are created. The ancient diamonds of words recover their former brilliance. This new language is incomprehensible, difficult, and cannot be read like the *Stock Exchange Bulletin*. It is not even like Russian, but we have become too used to setting up comprehensibility as a necessary requirement of poetic language. The history of art shows us that (at least very often) the language of poetry is not a

> comprehensible language, but a semi-comprehensible one (Bann & Bowlt 46).

McGuckian's poem, "Little House, Big House", has been heavily attributed to Mandelstam's writing on Marina Tsvetaeva. Tsvetaeva's words are reborn and transformed in the context of McGuckian's Northern Irish point of view. 'Little House' suggests the domestic space or the poem, whereas 'Big House' suggests the political arena or country, both Russia and Ireland in this case. While the first conjures up notions of interiority and safety, McGuckian points out that this is a fallacy in Northern Ireland during the Troubles, since "we know that a man can come into your house and shoot you" (Wilson 3). It is also worth noting that, in Ireland, the domestic space has been under great political and social scrutiny, thus making the 'little house' a smaller version of the 'big house,' or a stage on which the issues of the 'big house' are performed:

> In Belfast people place you and you try to place the place. I was on the bus today from home and I was looking at these two men who had politics tattooed on their forearms for everyone to see and I also had the sense that they would know me and my background… In the '50s you were aware of the divisions in north Belfast as people moved and the city became a place where the last house in one street ended with people of one religion and the next street began with another" (Brown 178).

This environment, so clearly marked by divisions in politics, religion and class, may explain McGuckian's comparison of opposites or seemingly opposite forces in her poetry as a way to create and then destroy shapes and linguistic patterns, enacting control over her craft while at the same time allowing the poem to appear out of control to the extent of meaninglessness. The exploration of the paradoxes of public and private, and the concern that "the 'public utterance' can also be an intrusion on the private" is considered "one of the most distinctive aspects of Longley's aesthetic

development," and is particularly noticeable in poems such as "Wounds" and "Skara Brae" from *An Exploded View*; McGuckian, as a contemporary of Longley's, will have been aware of this inheritance (Brearton 78). While the last line from Longley's "Wounds" leaves the reader flabbergasted by the juxtaposition of polite manners with horrific violence, "To the children, to a bewildered wife,/ I think 'Sorry Missus' was what he said" (86), McGuckian's depictions of violence are couched within the commonplace: "And the house like me/ Was tangled with the emotion of cut flowers" (*On Ballycastle Beach* 33). These lines suggest that the sadness and grief from the slaughter outdoors has entered the indoor domestic space.

The first stanza of "Little House, Big House" may allude to Mandelstam's affair with Tsvetaeva: "Those who were once lovers need the minimum / Of furniture, half-people, each with his separate sky" (33). The image depicts a divide, a fracture between man and woman, North and South, public and private. Even the poem's title is split into two contrasting parts by the positioning of a comma. With regards to ownership of the "separate sky," the use of the determiner 'his' echoes McGuckian's assertion that poetry is a male profession and reasserts her own belief in the division of self as daughter, wife, mother (feminine) versus poet (masculine). Despite their female gender, Tsvetaeva and McGuckian, as poets, appear as a 'he' in this poem. Shane Alcobia-Murphy has suggested that this poem is "*about* or in dialogue with Marina Tsvetaeva, [however] it would seem now that, on the most literal level, the language and voices are both McGuckian's *and* Marina Tsvetaeva's;" he also suggests both McGuckian and Tsvetaeva propose that the female poet, in focusing on the domestic, is still capable of reflecting on wider

political realities (184). McGuckian seems to insinuate an embodiment, shared lineage or cellular memory with the Russian poet:

> …Since our blood
> Is always older than we will ever be
> I should like to lie in Tarusa under matted winter grass,
> Where the strawberries are redder than anywhere else (33).

During the Soviet Period, Tarusa became a place where many dissidents and artists oppressed by the Soviet authorities settled – most notably, Osip Mandelstam's wife Nadezhda. While I know little about the artists in Tarusa or how they plied their trade in response to oppression, it is well documented that Heaney, Longley and Mahon felt a certain amount of pressure or responsibility to respond to the Troubles in Northern Ireland in their poetry, and even McGuckian, a generation later, has been widely criticised for shying away from political commentary by taking refuge in the domestic themes of her poems. The dilemma is an interesting one: does political unrest cause art to flourish; and is art that "takes 'the agony of others as raw material'" and proposes itself "as a solace for them in their suffering" disingenuous or morally wrong (Brearton 78)? The closing lines of "Little House, Big House" take the reader to an imaginary dream world where the speaker wishes to convene with Tsvetaeva – a dream world or fantasy because strawberries do not grow in winter. McGuckian, by projecting her experience onto Russia's 'Terrible Years,' is able to explore her relationship as poet, mother and wife during the Troubles, channelling a woman with whom she clearly identifies and has much in common. Through this distancing, she avoids exploiting homeland agonies, while still being able to confront the issue.

Arguably the most examined poem in this collection is "The Dream-Language of Fergus," named after McGuckian's eldest son. This poem is almost

entirely composed of found material from Osip Mandelstam's essay, "Conversations about Dante," "constructed again in continuity, seemingly with a set of ideas about the composition of poetry" (Flynn 75). The poem begins with the image of a sleeping tongue, "Your tongue has spent the night/ In its dim sack as the shape of your foot/ In its cave," which is stirred into wakefulness by "The excommunicated shadow of a name" that "Has rumpled the sheets of your mouth" (*On Ballycastle Beach* 57). The reader encounters the opening and closing of linguistic doors as we move from a pre-lingual state towards one language giving rise to another: "So Latin sleeps, they say, in Russian speech, / So one river inserted into another" is made anew and "Becomes a leaping, glistening, splashed/ And scattered alphabet" (57). In the instance of this poem, "one river inserted into another" works in two ways: Russian, while a Slavic language, contains words that have trickled down from Latin, and migrated over from French; the words of Mandelstam and Tsvetaeva have been repurposed by McGuckian to create something new in the form of "a splashed and scattered alphabet" (57).

McGuckian appears to share the Russian Formalists preoccupation with the moment "words cease to be seen" in the same way that "the sound of the sea vanishes for those who live by its shores, as the thousand-voiced roar of the town has vanished for us, as everything familiar, too well known, disappears from our consciousness," or how, more personally to McGuckian, violence becomes normalized when it is encountered on a daily basis (Bann & Bowlt 44-45). Her poetry draws attention to these realities, altering language into something new and unfamiliar through the 'double-stranded' meaning of words and images: "what began as a dog's bark/ Ends with bronze, what began/ With honey ends with ice," though,

in this collection, the double-strand takes on additional significance in the odd pairing/ blending of Tsvaeteva or Mandelstam's words with McGuckian's (*On Ballycastle Beach* 57). The final section of "The Dream Language of Fergus" reiterates the idea of the seed-fund as a richly textured vocabulary "Pressing out the diasporic snow" (57) in order to return to the "dream-like process of poetic composition" (Flynn 76). The duality of the self divided from the other – whether apparent in the double-stranded meaning of words, the psychic connection as channelled through Tsvaeteva, a schizophrenic split within the self, or the political divide within Ireland – is at the very root of this collection. This twinning or fracturing enables McGuckian to occupy different temporal spaces, and as was the case with *Venus and the Rain*, the poet becomes Alice traversing real and imagined borders, acknowledging "The familiar closing of the unseen room" as she moves between worlds and selves (*Venus and the Rain* 36).

Missing from this third collection, despite references to feminine imagery (the sea, pearls and childbirth), is "the erotic charge of her earlier 'oblique trance'" (Flynn 67). Instead, the issue of gender and comprehension "might be related to a further threshold: that between waking and sleeping" (67). While repetition is utilised in her previous collections, it has not previously been utilised to the extent seen in *On Ballycastle Beach*: "The word 'sleep' occurs twenty-two times… the word 'dream' twenty-one times" (67). In the fourth stanza of "Blue Vase" the word 'dream,' or some variation of it, appears three times – arguably excessive given the confines of the form:

> Not losing his temper will come out
> In one man's paintings of forty
> Of his dreams, his stair-step children,
> As if he had studied all the dreams

Dreamt in one night (29).

The prevalence of repetition in this stanza clues the reader into the fact that a message is being transmitted, though what that message is is not necessarily clear. This conundrum, articulated in the *Manifestos of Surrealism*, may enshrine McGuckian's point:

> If in a cluster of grapes there are no two alike, why do you want me to describe this grape by the other, by all the others, why do you want me to make a palatable grape? Our brains are dulled by the incurable mania of wanting to make the unknown known, classifiable (Breton 9).

The man who has "studied all the dreams/ Dreamt in one night" becomes an ally in McGuckian's search for discovery through means of repetition (*On Ballycastle Beach* 29). "Not losing his temper" comes out in the paintings like a message emerged from the subconscious. Readers should consider what messages are surfacing from the subconscious of McGuckian's collections since a comparison can be drawn between her poems and the paintings in the above stanza. McGuckian closes the poem in a taunting manner, by dangling meaning in front of the reader, and then withholding it to some extent:

> Re-chose you in my dream-speech,
> Without telling you or anyone what it meant:
> To be the insouciance in the room,
> Interrupted, re-created – to be the innocence
> You have just learned to say (29).

Arguably, McGuckian is self-consciously hinting at her process of poetic composition, encouraging her reader to consider the semiotic interpretation in addition to the symbolic, "to make the connection between the fragmented, fluid-but-not-quite-comprehensible nature of the poems and the hallucinatory workings of dream-languages or dream-logic" (Flynn 67). McGuckian's aesthetic aims to meet

the reader halfway by balancing accessibility with a degree of uncertainty similar to what we might encounter when viewing abstract art. There isn't an obvious message laid forth on a silver platter, but rather a series of questions that result from the work. In her musings on style and form, Susan Sontag discusses the struggle between the semiotic and symbolic interpretations of art: "a work of art encountered as a work of art is an experience, not a statement or an answer to a question. Art is not only about something; it is something. A work of art is a thing in the world, not just a text of commentary on the world" (*Against Interpretation and Other Essays* 21). The belief that inspiration "feeds off" inspiration is present in many of McGuckian's poems – just at the moment when the meaning of a word or image seems certain, it is "as if an aeroplane in full flight/ Launched a second plane, / The sky is stabbed by their exits/ And the mistaken meaning of each" (*On Ballycastle Beach* 57). This reflects McGuckian's habit of shifting from image to image (often unlike images) in her poems, and also alludes to the double-helix poetic construction of her words with Tsvetaeva's. By drawing attention to the constructs of language and demonstrating how it fails us, McGuckian succeeds in her task. Her belief that language is a masculine construction emboldens us to "rebel and fight against [its] empire" (Brown 179). While words have potentially endless possibilities of meaning depending on how they are presented and how they are interpreted, individually or collectively, historically or etymologically, so often it is just one superficial or common meaning that is recognised. McGuckian's urge to represent this is best depicted in a poem like "Scenes from A Brothel," where "Any colour lasts a second, three or four / Minutes at most – and can never be repeated" (*On Ballycastle Beach* 48). McGuckian challenges her readers to look beyond the signified structure of

language, poetry being the ideal form to explore this otherness and truth in language because it “has a minimum of ‘redundancy’”… and “produces a richer set of messages than any other form of language” (Eagleton 86). She demonstrates the point at which language fails us when she concludes, “So few words for so many colours” (48).

“A voice/ without a body:”

Louise Glück and the Anorexic Aesthetic

Since Louise Glück’s debut collection, *Firstborn* (1968), she has published sixteen collections of poetry, as well as two highly regarded collections of essays about praxis, and is the recipient of, to name just a few, a Nobel Prize for Literature, a Pulitzer Prize, the Los Angeles Times Book Prize, and a National Book Award. From 2003-4, she held the post of US Poet Laureate. Glück’s “often extremely negative sense of womanhood – as both biologically and socially determined experience” has arguably shaped the “language, tone and style, as well as the thematic content, of her poetry” (Keller 121). For this reason, her oeuvre appears both complicit in its portrayal of the powerless woman, and unexpectedly feminist in its highlighting of the ways in which societal structures culturally and legally govern women’s bodies. In later collections such as *Meadowlands*, Glück develops the use of personae as a means to refract autobiographical experience, to create a “whole new landscape, where narrative and dialogue expand the vista of the lyric,” presenting mythic women, such as Penelope and Eurydice, as masks for her own self-portraits (Diehl 48). This creates a world in which, as Eliot proposed, the poet “is everywhere present, and everywhere hidden,” allowing Glück to cast a critical eye on conceptions of a feminine ideal, in conjunction with her own reality (*The Three Voices of Poetry* 24).

In *Proofs and Theories*, a collection of essays on praxis, Glück appears to situate syntax (technical aspects) and musicality (the emotional core) against one another as opposite attributes within a poem in such a way as to imply that those who value the one will not be invested in the other, at the same time admitting that she is susceptible to the idea, or at least to the fantasy, of both:

> Plainly, I loved the sentence as a unit: the beginning of a preoccupation with syntax. Those who love syntax less find in it the stultifying air of the academy: it is, after all, a language of rules, of order. Its opposite is music, that quality of language which is felt to persist in the absence of rule. One possible idea behind such preferences is the fantasy of the poet as renegade, as the lawless outsider. It seems to me that the idea of lawlessness is a romance, and romance is what I most struggle to be free of (8).

This quotation demonstrates some of the difficulties involved in interpreting a Glück poem: just as McGuckian flips the meaning of symbolic images to their gendered opposites, Glück regularly depicts the struggle between opposing forces (often masculine vs. feminine), simultaneously engaging with both, but not allowing any comfortable resolution. The result is disorienting: the poems set the reader up for one outcome and then deliver another, always scrutinising "the difference between symmetry and asymmetry, harmony and assonance" (9).

Glück's admiration for the sentence as a structural unit is perhaps why she is so successful at manipulating its internal mechanisms: while her poems appear to adhere visually and imagistically to the order of the "academy," they also undermine this paradigm by incorporating the musicality of the 'renegade poet.' This dualism may help to explain why Glück's opus is widely considered by critics to be enigmatic. Following the publication of her second collection, *House on Marshland*, Helen Vendler described her as "a new species of poet," portraying her as "a very peculiar power" and praising the collection as showcasing "… a new style,

commanding in its indifference to current modes" (260). Likewise, in *The Poetry of Louise Glück: A Thematic Introduction*, Daniel Morris suggests that Glück "resists canonization as a hyphenated poet (that is, as a "Jewish American" poet, or a "feminist" poet, or a "nature" poet), preferring instead to retain an aura of iconoclasm, or in-between-ness, because such terms are 'restricting' and 'tyrannical'" (31). Glück has revealed that after each collection she feels a "compulsion to change, a compulsion not, perhaps, actually chosen. I see in this gesture the child I was, unwilling to speak if to speak meant to repeat myself" (*Proofs and Theories* 18). Perhaps the question critics should be asking is not what school of poetry Glück fits within, but why her work creates critical confusion and remains, in many ways, antipathetic to categorisation.

One possible explanation lies in Glück's teenage struggles with anorexia nervosa – a disease profoundly characterised by contradiction. In *Unbearable Weight*, a cultural analysis of eating disorders, Susan Bordo describes "the "relentless pursuit of excessive thinness" [as] an attempt to embody certain values, to create a body that will speak for the self in a meaningful and powerful way" (67). In her candid writings on anorexia, Glück, like Bordo, acknowledges the role of the body as a vehicle for communication and as a statement of autonomy, even though the construction of a self frequently involves the literal wasting away of the flesh: "The tragedy of anorexia seems to me that its intent is not self-destructive, though its outcome often is. Its intent is to construct, in the only way possible when means are so limited, a plausible self" (*Proofs and Theories* 10-11)**.** To draw a parallel with the making of poetry: if the language enacted on the body is culturally given, determined by social, economic and psychological structures that "have combined to produce a

generation of women who feel deeply flawed, ashamed of their needs, and not entitled to exist unless they transform themselves into worthy new selves" (Bordo 47), how can a woman poet create a "plausible [poetic] self" when "the material – language – [she] use[s] for wings is an intrinsic part of the problem" (Heywood 8)?

In this chapter, I will argue, with particular attention to *Descending Figure* (1980) and *Meadowlands* (1996), that Glück's poetry exemplifies both the difference between male and female imperatives as embodied within a heterosexual marriage or relationship, and the struggle between male and female paradigms as fraught presences doing battle within a single (female) individual (whether poet or anorexic), by actively deploying the model of anorexia as the foundation of a directed aesthetic. That aesthetic is defined by four key features: (1) a language that focuses on the enigma of the disease, creating a sort of via negativa where anorexia is represented through the use of silence, omission, and paradox; (2) exposure of "the symbolic and practical control of female hunger (read: desire), continually constructed as a problem in patriarchal cultures… and internalised in women's shame over their own needs and appetites;" (3) the construction of a system of rules and internal orders (i.e. anorexic logic), which are in contrast to the external rules of society; and (4) the "promise of transcendence of domestic femininity and admission to the privileged public world," a world in line with Imagist praxis "in which admiration is granted not to softness but to will, autonomy, and rigor" (Bordo 68). Glück's poems engage with the anorexic struggle by mirroring and deconstructing various forms of female hunger, or physical and emotional desire. If the reader reflects on the poem as a metaphor for the body, or a form in which the self is housed, then a relationship begins to emerge between the anorexic's physical ideal and Glück's stated

preference for poems "that seemed so small on the page, but that swelled in the mind" (*Proofs and Theories* 4-5). It can even be argued that the poem, mirroring the body, becomes an ideal manifestation of anorexic 'dis-ease,' a double-act of resistance that succeeds where the body ultimately cannot:

> While the clinical anorexic is inevitably on the side of silence and the death of desire, poetry, like speech, moves beyond the confines of the body and the self and, through figure, theme and form, can articulate what the anorexic cannot say (Sewell 51).

Through poetry, Glück deliberately employs the anorexic aesthetic to show how anorexia is deeply implicated with the messaging surrounding gender paradigms, and how this messaging informs the anorexic's worldview. More widely, Glück's aesthetic may be nudging readers and non-sufferers alike to consider how they have been conditioned to see the world too.

In order to better understand what "the anorexic cannot say," and the ways in which Glück uses the anorexic aesthetic in her poetry, it is important to briefly outline current medical, theoretical and feminist research on anorexia, a disease which was "barely known a century ago, yet [is] reaching epidemic proportions today" (Bordo 139). While I do not wish to undermine any person's experience of this condition, approximately 90% of those suffering from anorexia identify as female; also, this thesis centres on examining the development of distinctively female poetics. Thus, for the purposes of this chapter I will be focusing on the theorised causes of anorexia in women and the relevance of this research to Glück's poetry (Bordo 50).

Anorexia, considered the "female malady of our time," has garnered the attention of the medical community, psychologists, sociologists, and of feminist,

cultural and literary critics alike due to its recent prevalence (Sewell 49). I say 'recent' because "it is not until the second half of the nineteenth century that something like a minor epidemic of anorexia nervosa is first described in medical accounts" and this pales in comparison to the "dramatic escalation of anorexia and bulimia in the 1980s and 1990s" (Bordo 50). Bordo attributes this increase largely to culture, "working not only through ideology and images but through the organisation of the family, the construction of personality, [and] the training of perception," all of which results in the repression of emotions, the denial of appetite, the regulation of the body, and the inability to speak (50). While many medical professionals and theoreticians cite the causes of eating disorders as either culturally or biologically driven, the latter of which is understandably problematic for feminists, Bordo draws an important parallel between contemporary perceptions of eating disorders and perceptions of female hysteria during the Victorian era: "It is only as hysteria has shed its symbolic, emotional, and professional freight, as it has become a historical phenomenon, that it has become possible to *see* it," suggesting the same might be true of anorexia (50).

Thus, and despite their current prevalence, anorexia in particular and eating disorders in general remain something of an enigma. Hilda Bruch, a psychologist and author of the ground-breaking 1978 book *The Golden Cage: The Enigma of Anorexia Nervosa*, believes the cause of anorexia is rooted in the family interactional approach, which "sees anorexia as a power-strategy within a system of family relations, concentrating on the perceived function, rather than the content of anorexic behaviour" (MacSween 24). In contrast, feminist, cultural and literary critics, particularly in the last decade, have argued for the role of cultural influences on

anorexia because "we are creatures swaddled in culture from the moment we are designated one sex or the other, one race or another" – though curiously this line of inquiry is repeatedly ignored by Bruch and others in the medical profession (Bordo 36). The most persuasive of these cultural analyses are Bordo's *Unbearable Weight* and Morag MacSween's *Anorexic Bodies*, which highlight the ways in which the medical model undermines the influences of culture and society and their role in contributing to the disease:

> …for it is not gender per se that makes women vulnerable to eating disorders, but the way social norms and expectations construct femininity. Focusing on the attributes of refusal, self-denial, and control that are clearly characteristic of the disorder, critics like Bordo and MacSween suggest that the anorexic both exposes the culture's "deep fear of 'the Female,' with all its more nightmarish archetypal associations of voracious hungers and sexual insatiability**"** (Bordo 155) and stages an embodied protest against gender imperatives (Sewell 50).

This 'embodied protest' is the anorexic's response to the internalised struggle between self-control and dependency, both acknowledged as contributing factors to the disease, and is a way of mitigating the power such warring feelings have over the sufferer. Paradoxically, the balancing act between refusal as a means of self-control and the body's dependency on nourishment often results in a situation beyond the anorexic's control, leading to precisely the opposite of what, according to Glück, the anorexic sets out to achieve:

> Out of terror at its incompleteness and ravenous need, anorexia constructs a physical sign calculated to manifest disdain for need, for hunger, designed to appear entirely free of all forms of dependency, to appear complete, self-contained. But the sign it trusts is a physical sign, impossible to sustain by mere act of will, and the poignancy of the metaphor rests in this: that anorexia proves not the soul's superiority to but its dependence on flesh (*Proofs and Theories* 11).

The embodied protest designed to appear 'free of dependency' is a response to, as Sewell notes above, the way social norms construct femininity, and one way this protest manifests is through language. In considering the language of gender, which frequently surrounds discussions of anorexia, Bordo places particular emphasis on the terms 'bloom' and 'transcend.' Likewise, Glück also places emphasis on these terms in her poetry, employing them as an adversarial presence because 'bloom' evokes the image of soft, excessive femininity, and 'transcend' relates to the Platonic ideal of the rational/ ordered masculine mind. 'Bloom' might be seen to suggest an element of freedom. However, in the context of the anorexic aesthetic, 'blooming' is the result of the body's dependency on nourishment and is therefore something to resist. Equally contradictorily, the ability to 'transcend' is achieved only through self-regulation (i.e. ignoring desire by delaying pleasure). Essentially, 'bloom' and 'transcend' cancel each other out (one advocates excess, the other restraint), just as the anorexic cancels herself out in the "struggle between the ideologies of individualism and femininity" (MacSween 53).

Descending Figure: "I felt what I feel now, aligning these words–"

Glück's third collection, *Descending Figure*, is generally considered to be her breakthrough volume. George Laurie describes the collection as complicated: it is a "volume that requires critical exploration to convince sceptical readers that something radically feminist underlies the conventional surface" (2). Why are readers sceptical, and why do they need convincing? I suspect that the combination

of Glück's visually non-experimental form and deceptively plainspoken language are misleading and generally interpreted as 'conventional.' This, coupled with the fact that, on the face of it, *Descending Figure* appears anti-feminist because it "raises crucial, disturbing issues about women's complicity in their own oppression," provokes readerly disorientation on a first read (Keller 129). Perhaps one of the most disorienting features of the poems is the way in which Glück straddles *reflection on* the disease and dramatization of her *personal affliction with* it, standing both outside of and within the anorexic experience. However, to say that Glück's poetry is primarily about her specific experience of anorexia as a teenager would be too limiting. The internal structures and principles that construct the anorexic logic, characterised by ambivalence, inform the sufferer's worldview even after recovery – a worldview that speaks to more than the specific disease itself. It is this logic, this type of conditioning, which Glück's poems aim to uncover.

The collection is at once covert in its messaging and relentless in its iteration of subject matter. Through masquerade and careful staging of the speaker and her female relatives, Glück personifies the concept of 'hunger' in all its various forms. The title refers, tellingly, to a musical phrase in which a small unit of notes "repeats at progressively lower pitches throughout the work. It is not exactly a variation on theme, since the pattern of notes does not change. It is more nearly a repetition of the theme voiced at a different level, in a slightly different context, so to speak" (Dodd 176). This type of repetition mirrors the way covert social messaging regarding gender imperatives reaches individuals, resulting, for some perhaps, in anorexia as one possible response. The aim of such an observed technique is to draw attention to the mechanism of conditioning and manipulation through messaging that besieges

humans at a subconscious level. The effects of this type of repetition are arguably most fully realised in the poem "Dedication to Hunger," a sequence comprising five sections. The identification of daughter with father in the opening image provides a crucial interpretative frame:

> 1. From the Suburbs
> They cross the yard
> and at the back door
> the mother sees with pleasure
> how alike they are, father and daughter–
> I know something of that time.
> The little girl purposefully
> swinging her arms, laughing
> her stark laugh:
>
> It should be kept secret, that sound.
> It means she's realized
> that he never touches her.
> She is a child; he could touch her
> if he wanted to (*Poems 1962-2012* 124).

Glück, as casual observer, appears to recognise something of her own family dynamic in this scene. The use of 'they' refers to the father and daughter, and functions as a distancing mechanism from the mother who is "at the back door" watching them. The lines "the mother sees with pleasure / how alike they are, father and daughter" are particularly freighted. The mother's pleasure results from witnessing a resemblance between the two, which is ultimately achieved through her own exclusion because she, like the speaker, is also an observer in this poem: "pleasure is derived from a likeness, a similitude between father and daughter that negates the daughter's femininity, and by extension the mother in that it removes her from the equation – she is watching, not participating" (Heywood 42).

The likeness between father and daughter will eventually set the daughter up for the realisation that, although they are alike, her gender will ultimately mark her as the 'other' in the relationship. The daughter is portrayed as "purposefully/ swinging

her arms, laughing." The line breaks place particular emphasis on "purposefully" and "laughing," suggesting that this is a self-conscious, performative laugh, and that this 'act' or adopted persona is part of a routine attempt to keep adolescence at bay – adolescence that will cause her to 'bloom,' and in the process align her with the mother, both physically and socially speaking. In order to delay this process, and to remain in the privileged public world of the father, the daughter attempts to regulate and conceal her own physical needs and appetites. While the daughter's performative laugh may signal pleasure, actual pleasure is the very thing she fears because it threatens her sense of control. Glück highlights this complicated relationship in an interview with Ann Douglas:

> …people don't realise you're not anorexic if you don't love pleasure, because pleasure doesn't have that hold on you. If you feel that sensory experience is so powerful that you could be undone by it, that fear can take a number of forms, anorexia being one (121).

The anorexic logic works in a two-fold manner in this section: the daughter identifies with the father and craves his attention and, in an attempt to remain childlike, rejects maturation through the ritualistic 'act' of child's play. Because maturation is inevitable, and because we know that this is the first of five sequential 'studies' of hunger, the daughter could be read as an anorexic-in-training; and the mother, whose pleasure is derived from observing the father/ daughter relationship from afar, might be seen to be complicit in this incipient process through a lack of active participation. Perhaps the most disturbing reality in the poem is that the father "never touches" the daughter. While it may seem that the daughter's innocence is threatened by an impending act of incest (the tone is certainly unsettling), it seems more likely that Glück is symbolising the father's rejection of an aspect of the daughter's identity which he aligns with the feminine Other. The fact that "he could touch her/ if he

wanted to" is an insinuation that "swells in the mind," and is made more sinister by the fact that Glück refrains from further elaboration or clarification; and it is through this principle of omission that Glück causes the reader to ask what is *not* being said in this poem. The anorexic aesthetic posits that the 'unsaid' component of any artwork is its most powerful/ profound / lingering aspect: the poem's messaging transcends the form/ body of the poem, through omission and the move into white space or silence; the poet "continues speaking, but in a manner that his [sic] audience can't hear," at least not in any literal sense (*Styles of Radical Will* 7). While Glück invites the reader to draw their own conclusions about hunger and power dynamics, it does seem apparent that this section is essentially about the looming/ threatening "moment of realisation: that the feminine, figured as difference, is the basis for rejection," and that this realisation will ultimately lead to the daughter "reject[ing] what is most obviously feminine in herself: her body" (Heywood 43).

The portrayal of hunger in the poem's second section is highly gendered. The grandmother passively submits to the domineering masculine intensity of the grandfather:

> *2. Grandmother*
> "Often I would stand at the window–
> your grandfather
> was a young man then–
> waiting, in the early evening."
>
> That is what marriage is.
> I watch the tiny figure
> changing to a man
> as he moves toward her,
> the last light rings in her hair.
> I do not question
> their happiness. And he rushes in
> with his young man's hunger,
> so proud to have taught her that:
> his kiss would have been

clearly tender–
Of course, of course. Except
it might as well have been
his hand over her mouth
(*Poems 1962-2012* 124-5).

The grandfather's appetite for his wife's validation, and his sexual desire, is juxtaposed with the grandmother's victimisation or experiential starvation, which is met with a silencing kiss that "might as well have been/ his hand over her mouth" (125). The grandfather assumes the grandmother's availability and dependence on his return home from work. The opening stanza portrays the grandmother within the regulated, interior domestic space, looking out the window, routinely waiting patiently for the grandfather's return from the privileged public world. She appears willing to put aside her desires in order to satisfy his, and in doing so, is rewarded with a kiss that further negates her ability to voice her desires. The scene recalls the Penelope/Odysseus myth where Penelope, considered the quintessential symbol of feminine fidelity, waits at the window for her unfaithful husband's return after the Trojan War. The parenthetical presentation of "your grandfather/ was a young man then" makes this seem like an aside, or a whispered statement. Though seemingly innocuous at first, it is another instance of material that "swells in the mind:" on closer examination, Glück appears to be attributing the grandfather's lateness to his being a young man, the implication being that he had a young man's appetite for desire (i.e. gallivanting/ philandering).

The section's second stanza depicts a routine scene that is so culturally ingrained it verges on the cliché, creating an illusion/ mask of the perfect heterosexual marriage: the grandfather returns, rushes into the grandmother's arms; they kiss and embrace. The speaker's manner of inserting herself into the scene with

"I do not question/ their happiness" seems to indicate that she is culturally conditioned to accept this, while simultaneously signposting to the reader that this is something to be questioned, thus, again, creating a void-like space within the poem into which the reader may infer meaning. Glück's use of irony in the above statement is intended to uncover and reveal a truth: it is the "poetic equivalent of the anorexic's exposure of the underlying body" (Keller 124). Likewise, Glück prompts the reader to raise a sceptical eyebrow with the depiction of the kiss as "clearly tender— / Of course, of course," which feels tonally sarcastic, although on further reads, this intrusion also highlights how gender normative behaviour, that has become socially ingrained, is casually accepted. While the grandfather's objectives are not necessarily intentionally malicious (he is displaying conditioned behaviour after all), his actions are nevertheless damaging. However, the speaker, though disapproving of the grandfather's actions, seems mostly concerned with the grandmother, "interpret[ing] the grandmother's waiting as an essential passivity that she wants to avoid, for it encodes the grandmother's cancellation" (Heywood 44). By trying to avoid the fate of the grandmother, and seeing this fate as a by-product of femininity, the speaker rejects an aspect of her own identity because she interprets the grandmother's passivity as gender-specific. The "thrust and ache" of the male-female bond is a primary focus of not just this poem but the entire collection, and that hunger, "that chained companionship, the power of conjunction between male and female," creates the section's drama (Douglas 122). Just as anorexia is a symbolic response to "that chained companionship," so too is the use of voluntary silence (in contrast to the grandmother's involuntary silence) as a response to normative behaviour, and a means of constructing a plausible poetic self in the context of the anorexic aesthetic.

The third section of the poem begins as a philosophical reflection on romantic love, and descends into a meditation on familial relationships with allusions to the maternal body and its offspring:

> *3. Eros*
> To be male, always
> to go to women
> and be taken back
> into the pierced flesh:
>
> I suppose
> memory is stirred.
> And the girl child
> who wills herself
> into her father's arms
> likewise loved him
> second. Nor is she told
> what need to express.
> There is a look one sees,
> the mouth somehow desperate–
>
> Because the bond
> cannot be proven
> (*Poems 1962-2012* 125).

The concept of returning to a woman's pierced flesh is depicted as natural or familiar to the heterosexual male because the memory of the pre-birth/ birth experience "is stirred." The line break after "pierced flesh" and the indentation before "I suppose/ memory is stirred" creates a pause that imbues the poem's form with ambivalence and doubt similar to the speaker from section two, who does not question the happiness of the grandparents. Glück uses this pause to undermine what she's about to say, even though she goes ahead and says it anyway (akin to Elizabeth Bishop's poetics of uncertainty, where self-correction is used to set limits, and as a means to refuse inaccuracy). Again, Glück is drawing attention to casually accepted gender normative behaviour – why, after all, should the heterosexual male have easier access to the pre-birth memory, and why should it be more natural for him to return

to/ seek out pierced flesh as a result? In contrast to the male child, the female child has a presumably unnatural/ unfamiliar choice: to become the problematic "pierced flesh" of the mother, or else "the girl child/ who wills herself/ into her father's arms" through renunciation of maturation, and admiration of the attributes of the father – will, autonomy, and rigor – emphasised by the anorexic aesthetic. The line "likewise loved him/ second," referring to the father, is yet another example of Glück's inclination towards statements that mushroom in the reader's mind. The tools of Glück's version of the 'renegade poet' – lack of punctuation; jarring syntax and lineation, which she employs in her construction of a plausible poetic self – render the exact meaning of this statement unclear, though I suspect the meaning is two-fold: the first encounter a child has outside the womb is usually with the maternal body, therefore placing the father as loved second (i.e. as the second body perceived); but, while the daughter loved the father second, it can also be read as suggesting that the father loved the daughter *second best*, possibly attaching greater value to a male child who would not only carry his name, but also resemble him physically, thereby proving the bond. While Glück never explicitly states that greater value is being attached to a male child, the implication is present in the line break after "mouth somehow desperate –." Glück uses the stanza break and ensuing silence that follows as a way to critique unconscious bias, creating a sort of void, or via negativa, wherein the reader inscribes significance.

It is worth noting that Glück utilises silence within her poetry not only as a means to critique the world around her, but as a way of enacting control over some unspoken battle. Coincidentally, Susan Sontag also points to spaces of negation and silence as a defence in the struggle between artist and audience:

> Committed to the idea that the power of art is located in its power to *negate*, the ultimate weapon in the artist's inconsistent war with his audience is to verge closer and closer to silence. The sensory or conceptual gap between the artist and his audience, the space of the missing or ruptured dialogue, can also constitute the grounds for an ascetic affirmation" (*Styles of Radical Will* 8).

Where does this 'war' stem from? Possibly from the way in which art is interpreted. For instance, an audience's first reaction to a piece of art is to endeavour to make sense of it; in doing so, its meaning is diminished, making it smaller, limiting its possibilities. Glück avoids this trap by repeatedly misleading her audience – disrupting the placid surface of her scenes/ settings/ relationships. Her poems are difficult to pin down; one outcome is made to appear all but inevitable only for another, lurking in the silence, to be offered in its place. I would furthermore argue that, in Glück's case, the ruptured dialogue/ inconsistent war takes place primarily *within* the poet, and that this type of reverse shaping within the poems represents the struggle between the poet as speaker and the disease/dis-ease as internal adversary. The poet desires to speak, but the anorexic within fears abundance – "work that is all detail and no shape" (*Proofs and Theories* 82). Glück confesses: "The unsaid, for me, exerts great power: often I wish an entire poem could be made in this vocabulary" (82). By creating a sort of outline or vacuum around the subject matter (through the vehicles of silence, negation and omission), Glück is able to speak for and satisfy both poet and anorexic, thus demonstrating sympathy with Eliot's objective correlative, wherein emotion is evoked rather than stated (73). Such an aesthetic provides exactly the 'ascetic affirmation' both poet and anorexic crave.

While I have highlighted some of the ways in which anorexia functions as an internal adversary in Glück's poems, it should also be noted that, within the framework of her writing, the anorexic impulse is largely attributed to external

influences present in our societal/ cultural expectations, and reinforced by gender paradigms. Michel Foucault highlights the ways in which our bodies have been manipulated by these external forces (societal, governmental, medical, cultural), and delves into the 'historical heritage of disdain' for the body in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*:

> Historians long ago began to write the history of the body. They have studied the body in the field of historical demography or pathology; they have considered it as the seat of needs and appetites, as the locus of physiological processes and metabolisms, as a target for the attacks of germs or viruses; they have shown to what extent historical processes were involved in what might seem to be the purely biological "events" such as the circulation of bacilli, or the extension of the lifespan. But the body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs (138).

Foucault articulates this backdrop of surveillance and covert conditioning to compel the reader to consider the extent of his or her own self-determination and individual governance within society; but what effect does this type of cultural/ political/ medical conditioning have specifically on women? Women, for many centuries, did not have the same freedoms as men, and were in some instances considered the property of their husbands. What they saw in society, and what they saw when they looked in the 'mirror,' was "usually a male construct, the "pure gold baby" of male brains, a glittering and wholly artificial child" that bore no resemblance to the actual reality of their lives, though it set a damaging precedent (Gilbert and Gubar 17-18). Feminist and sociologist Marilyn Lawrence describes anorexia as a product of the social position of women, "pointing out the importance of food and appearance in the female gender role, questioning how far 'independence' is a real possibility for women, and arguing for a connection between the anorexic strategy and women's

relative social powerlessness" (MacSween 70). This sense of powerlessness seems to be a central motivator in prompting the anorexic "to create a body that will speak for the self in a meaningful and powerful way," and one way that the disease achieves this is through a system of self-governance (internal rules and orders regarding, for example, the intake of food), and by no longer adhering to the accepted and unspoken demands of society (e.g. motherhood, physical attractiveness, etc.) (Bordo 67). For Glück specifically, this self is achieved through poetry, which grants her access to the privileged public world (of artistic achievement):

> As Lynn Keller explains: "Anorexia is both a retreat from adult sexuality and a childlike state safe from sexual drives, and an assertion of control – two desirable things for those that share Glück's sense of a woman's powerlessness." What Keller does not emphasise is Glück's perception that the physical state of not having ("the retreat" from an association of significant personal identity with the female body) is in the speaker's mind directly related to her entrance into another arena of power and control – the space of literary accomplishment (Morris 39-40).

The fourth section of "Dedication to Hunger" manifests the ideas presented in the third, as the speaker rebels against societal constructs of the female body through the act of denial and the impossible pursuit of perfection. The construction of the poem – "aligning these words" – is an extension of this pursuit:

> *4. The Deviation*
> It begins quietly
> in certain female children:
> the fear of death, taking as its form
> dedication to hunger,
> because a woman's body
> is a grave; it will accept
> anything. I remember
> lying in bed at night
> touching the soft, digressive breasts,
> touching, at fifteen,
> the interfering flesh
> that I would sacrifice

> until the limbs were free
> of blossom and subterfuge: I felt
> what I feel now, aligning these words–
> it is the same need to be perfect,
> of which death is the mere byproduct
> (*Poems 1962-2012* 125-6).

Like the sequence as a whole, the section demonstrates the poet's commitment to the anorexic aesthetic – as both physical and metaphorical construction. The speaker's hunger vow outweighs the possible outcome of death – whether it is the symbolic by-product of the grandmother's passivity, or the literal result of the girl-child's active resistance to maturation through the guise of extended childhood, "mouth somehow desperate" for the father's acceptance (125). Researchers believe that one of the primary reasons for this indifference towards death is the disease's ability to anaesthetise: by constantly performing rituals around food, the body and exercise, larger, more worldly problems recede from view. It is a disease that rewards the minutiae: shedding weight, not spending money on food, and sacrificing fun for discipline, etc. The architecture of the poem – the particulars of word choice, imagery and line breaks – provides the speaker with the same gratification achieved through her commitment to hunger.

As is the case for the anorexic, an obvious adversary of the adult poet within the context of an anorexic aesthetic is 'blossom,' evoking images of excess flesh and poetry which is all "detail and no shape" (*Proofs and Theories* 82). However the use of 'subterfuge' as an adversarial presence is surprising since this is a tactic Glück appears to embrace, prone as she is to acts of self-contradiction and changes of direction designed to purposefully mislead her readers. On further reflection, 'blossom' may represent the imagination, unwieldy and unpredictable as it is, and 'subterfuge' as the straitening of imagination – a means to manage/ shape the

imagination within the controlled environment of the poem. By drawing attention to the opposing nature of 'blossom' and 'subterfuge,' another type of chained companionship, Glück is commenting on what is/ is not good poetry, the fear being that too much of either will limit her "achievement of sublimity through language" and thus halt the speaker's "entrance into the sublime realm of poetic accomplishment" (Morris 40). Glück's preference for implicit poetry, "present in outline," is compatible with both Eliot's objective correlative (emotion evoked by/ expressed through a situation, a set of objects, or an event) and Plato's Theory of Forms, which asserts that ideas depict the essential nature of things, in a way that the physical form in which they are made manifest cannot, and that "people's attempts to recreate the [literal] form will be a pale facsimile of the perfect idea" (MacKintosh). In this section of the poem in particular, Glück utilises these models/ theories, to create a portrait-in-erasure of herself as an anorexic teenager, and of her poetic process: "lying in bed at night/ touching… until the limbs were free/ of blossom and subterfuge" (*Poems 1962-2012* 125-6). Glück's preference for implicit poetry can be seen repeatedly in her deceptively straightforward speech, which aims to be free of 'interfering flesh' which, in the context of poetry, might look either imagery-ridden (blossom) or contrived (subterfuge). This is not to say that Glück's poetry is devoid of 'blossom' and 'subterfuge,' but rather that the act of editing as a form of self-control, as a means to implement rule and order upon the imagination, is necessary to Glück in a similar way that creating a body that is self-controlled and free of dependency is necessary to the anorexic.

The final section of "Dedication to Hunger" depicts yet another manifestation of the need for perfection, portraying the destructive paradox which exists in the construction of a self predicated on denial:

> *5. Sacred Objects*
> Today in the field I saw
> the hard, active buds of the dogwood
> and wanted, as we say, to capture them,
> to make them eternal. That is the premise
> of renunciation: the child,
> having no self to speak of,
> comes to life in denial–
>
> I stood apart in that achievement,
> in that power to expose
> the underlying body, like a god
> for whose deed
> there is no parallel in the natural world
> (*Poems 1962-2012* 126).

The act of renunciation on behalf of the poet results in the same ecstasy experienced by the anorexic abstaining from food. The speaker asserts, "a woman's body/ is a grave" because, physiologically speaking, "it will accept/ anything." How then can the speaker/ poet transcend her body as a mutable container in order to arrive at ecstasy? Possibly through her authorial, god-like power to expose the process of the "underlying body," which I think, in this instance, equates to truth: "the processes by which experience is changed – heightened, distilled, made memorable" (*Proofs and Theories* 45). The speaker's desire to distil and make memorable the "active buds of the dogwood," immediately draws attention to the mortality of the buds because they will eventually soften into blossom and die, and so the speaker recognises her appetite "to capture them," to make them stay "hard" and "active" forever within the space of the poem. The power to choose between either capturing an image within the changeless space of the poem, or to reject the impulse towards literary

immortalisation, is attributed to the "god/ for whose deed/ there is no parallel in the natural world" (*Poems 1962-2012* 126). The motivations of the anorexic and the renegade poet align: to create a space, whether it is performed within the physical body or within the poetic form, that promotes self-governance, of which symbolic or literal "death is a mere byproduct" (126). In this section especially, we see the ritual and rules of writing, of constructing and deconstructing through language and through a god-like persona, being set in parallel with the anorexic's commitment to build a 'plausible self' through the practical and ritualised control of hunger.

Glück's ability to utilise the adolescent's commitment to starvation towards a mature dedication to the written language, embodied through the anorexic aesthetic, represents an alternative brand of gendered protest. Her choice of the sequence as the form through which to realise numerous poems in the collection echoes the interpretation of 'descending figure' as a musical phrase where the repetition of the notes/ theme is voiced at a different level, in a slightly different register/ context because it "establishes an initial poetic pitch more than a theme or character. The pitch may change; so may the level of diction, the points of reference, and the contexts of evocation" (Rosenthal and Gall 315). The poetic sequence both attempts to capture a moment in time, rendering it immortal, while also rejecting the idea that something can be captured and held complete; it is not the stopped time normally encountered in a poem because the form requires the reader to infer meaning in the negative space, in the lacunae inherent to the form, as the reader trails from one form of hunger to the next.

***Meadowlands*: "The beloved doesn't need to live. The beloved lives in the head."**

In subsequent collections, Glück incorporates the use of personae into the sequence poem, constructing a vocal patchwork that mirrors and exposes conceptions of a feminine ideal in relation to her own experience. Perhaps the most successful example of this in Glück's poetry can be seen throughout her eighth collection, *Meadowlands* (1997), an account of her divorce as told through an Odyssean lens. Again, Glück's poetic practice in *Meadowlands* is "composed from a verbal collage of many voices and texts speaking in different registers, but all about the closely related problem of identity formation" (Morris 235). Though I have noted that Glück's poetry is antipathetic to categorisation, there are obvious connections between her aesthetic and classical poetic impulses such as those emphasised in Imagist poetry, a movement which stressed simplicity, clarity of expression and precision over excess verbiage and elaborate decoration. Leslie Heywood makes a pertinent comparison between "standards applied to "good art" and the mind-set of the anorexic," citing the goals of the high modernist artist and likewise of the anorexic as rejection of and the "will to eliminate the feminine, a will to transcendence, and to shape the "base material" into a "higher," masculine form" (61). Glück's preference for using classical mythology – that "higher masculine form" – as a palimpsest for her own personal experience is reminiscent of H.D.'s Imagist praxis, which "makes possible the occasional glinting of the personal from beneath the ostensibly outward or objective interests of the classical" (Dodd 32). By this means, Glück is able to explore the complexities of her divorce through a parody of classical/ eternal themes, and from a variety of different personae/ perspectives.

Using marriage as a metaphorical battleground, *Meadowlands* exposes the wars waged within, and the damages enacted upon, the female artist (and the physical woman), in a man's world in which 'masculine' qualities and imperatives are privileged above all else. Parody, as a literary device in which the commentary of one text is projected onto another for comedic effect, is especially compatible with Glück's temperament, allowing her to identify with the Odyssean characters while at the same time revealing their weaknesses, and creating a space for her to explore a seemingly depressing and personal scenario in an unexpectedly amusing way.

Meadowlands, though the title sounds pleasant enough, provides a backdrop for Glück's marital tensions, evoking not only the Elysian Fields where the souls of the heroic and virtuous in Greek mythology reside but also a "swampy sludge off the New Jersey Turnpike" (Diehl 53), which was later transformed into the Giants Football Stadium where a "titanic clash takes place on Sunday afternoons in the fall" (Morris 234). The collection is humorous given its subject matter – Glück's title suggests that a marriage encompasses both virtue and sludge, is a "fantasy of pastoral happiness checked by contravening fact" (Diehl 53). The collection repeatedly exposes the reality of Glück's stale marriage now that the excitement of courtship and romance has faded. This is achieved through the interplay of a variety of different approaches which, together, form a kind of tapestry or orchestral arrangement. The volume's eleven dialogue poems act as a sort of on-going thread of "conversational combat" between Glück and her husband. They are both funny and tragic: "the woman speaking in indented stanzas, the man flush left," creates a two-part song (Diehl 45-6). These poems are complemented by persona poems using the framework of *The Odyssey*: six in the voice of Penelope, seven in the voice of

Penelope and Odysseus' son, Telemachus, and four from the point of view of Circe/ a waitress named 'Siren.' It is significant to note that Glück has not written any poems in the voice of Odysseus, because "The beloved doesn't/ need to live. The beloved/ lives in the head" (*Meadowlands* 12). "He is a man of action and cunning, not of song," and this allows him to remain a figure of intrigue and evasion (i.e. subterfuge) to haunt Penelope as an interior paramour through the constant torment of his absence (Diehl 53). The lyric sequence is substantiated by the nine parable poems woven throughout the collection. These act as a sort of chorus, "removed from the action of the main narrative, in order to comment on it" (57). The meaning or lesson of each parable is apparent only to the reader, and not to the characters, resulting in an expression that is "calm in contrast to the passions of the songs. Parables clarify while asserting the underlying mystery in the way things are; hence they often present paradoxes and find truth in enigma" (57). The parable poems, in particular, provide a structure in keeping with both the Imagist praxis of shaping artistic "base material" into a "higher" masculine (i.e. dispassionate) form, and with Glück's anorexic aesthetic, providing an autonomous counterbalance to the passions and desires of the collection's characters.

In *Meadowlands*, the struggle between self-control and dependency – previously acknowledged as the primary and contradictory motivations for the embodied protest of the anorexic – creates the true drama of the collection, and is depicted through Glück as the controlled, god-like poet/ speaker, and Penelope as a mask for Glück's internal self (the emotional adversary who feels loss/ grief over her failed marriage, and on some level wishes to reconcile with her husband even if to do so is to portray weakness). Penelope is dependent on her husband's return from

war to restore her status as wife and queen, and to send her suitors away, while Glück has the benefit of authorial control, constantly rewriting these epic characters to suit her own version of the story – whether it be through the lens of *The Odyssey* or through the lens of her failing marriage. Penelope and Glück are both driven by their complicated relationship with desire: Penelope wants to be a good wife (faithful, loyal and patient); Glück, as author, wishes for what she always wishes for, to write "another poem" (*Meadowlands* 58). While it would be wrong to entirely conflate Glück's motivations and experiences with those of Penelope, or of any of the other Odyssean characters for that matter, there is no doubt that her commentary on divorce is being filtered through them. Assuming a role, particularly in the context of an epic tale, implies the presence of an audience, and suggests that Glück may be attempting to set the record straight, so to speak, or to shape the way in which her divorce is presented. As Eliot points out in *The Three Voices of Poetry*, "What we normally hear, in fact, in the dramatic monologue, is the voice of the poet, who has put on the costume and make-up of some historical character;" the taking on of another's voice can permit the poet to be forthcoming in a way that may not come so easily when they are speaking 'as themselves' (13). In the moments where Glück and Penelope's desires and fears merge, the grandmother and speaker in section two of "Dedication to Hunger" (*Descending Figure*) are recalled, merged into one voice both powerful and vulnerable, longing to indulge in "dark song."

Morag MacSween believes that the root cause of the anorexic symptom lies in the "hidden incompatibility between individuality and femininity" and that this is "the central task of growing up female in contemporary Western culture (3). It is no surprise, then, that Glück's Homeric comedy reinforces this incompatibility:

Odysseus is driven by "erotic desire, the quest for adventure, the reunion with family at home, and the more abstract social needs – for recognition, for the glorification of his name…," whereas desire for Penelope is internalised and "dangerous in its devouring aspects, distanced from any healing or productive human contact" (Morris 233). Odysseus is history and society's paradigm of the ideal man: active and independent, a brave warrior. Conversely, Penelope represents the model (angelic) woman: responsive, available and dependent (attributes which come with a warning label: beware the devouring (monstrous) woman). The gender imperatives to control (masculine) and to be dependent (feminine) war within the anorexic who strives for recognition through suppression of appetite. The distinction between externalised/ sanctioned and internalised/ unsanctioned desire highlights the social construction of masculine and feminine around *difference*:

> The masculine/ neutral self is constructed as independent: complete, separate and active. Masculine/ neutral desire is constructed as active and possessive. The masculine/ neutral body is constructed as impenetrable, active and intrusive; its imagery is of muscular action and phallic penetration. The feminine self is constructed as dependant: incomplete, responsive, seeking merger. Feminine desire is created as responsive; it allows possession but threatens to engulf. The feminine body is constructed as penetrable: simultaneously weak and threatening, its imagery is of orifices: mouth, vagina, womb (MacSween 3).

In *Meadowlands*, Glück's aesthetic attempts to mirror and deconstruct these ingrained fears of female hunger and of women's shame over their desires/ appetites through depictions of gender imperatives within her own heterosexual marriage, woven together with representations of arguably the most notable marriage in classical mythology – that of Penelope and Odysseus. As she waits for her unfaithful husband's return, Penelope is occupied with creating a perfectly managed self, to keep up appearances to the people of the kingdom, and to remain loyal by keeping

her suitors at bay. Likewise, Glück's speaker attempts to portray the fantasy of an intact marriage even after it is revealed that the speaker's husband is having an affair with a waitress named 'Siren.' Throughout the collection, both Penelope and Glück wrestle with their need to stand up for themselves, their sexual desires, and their desire to be good wives, responsive to their husbands' every need. Penelope is a vehicle for Glück to express her inner life, which stands in contrast to the authorial control of the poet.

The friction between Glück and her husband is immediately apparent in the dialogue poems, which constitutes the collection's underlying body/ the loom upon which the whole 'dark song' is enacted. Spoken in the voices of Glück and her estranged husband, these poems adopt "a kitchen-sink realist dialogue" against the backdrop of "Homeric personae" (Diehl 78). The epigraph to *Meadowlands* should be considered the first in the group of dialogue poems:

> Let's play choosing music. Favorite form.
> Opera.
> Favorite work.
> Figaro. No. Figaro and Tannhauser. Now
> it's your turn: sing one for me.

This establishes the collection as a sort of opera told through dramatic song, one that resembles a "complete cantata, with dramatis personae, recitatives, arias, and instrumental passages (Seshadri 93). Glück fulfils her husband's desire to "sing one for me" by launching into the collection's opening poem "Penelope's Song," which is an assemblage of classical and contemporary accounts and references, the most interesting of which establishes an affinity between Glück, Penelope and the most well-known operatic song-bird of the 20th Century, Maria Callas. Callas' sudden and dramatic weight loss led to rumours of damaged vocal chords because she could no

longer support her own voice, further highlighting the role of the anorexic as internal adversary and the frisson between individuality and femininity (the singer lost weight to fulfil one imperative, but then lost the voice through which she had built a career and for which she was internationally famed in an act of self-sabotage/ enforced silence).

In this opening poem, and by means of soliloquy, Penelope addresses her soul as the "little perpetually undressed one," as if it were the source from which desire and vulnerability arise (*Meadowlands* 3). She attempts to separate herself from the soul's "dark song," from its gushing emotion – "passionate, / like Maria Callas" – by asking it to climb the "shelf-like branches of the spruce tree" as if it were a "sentry or look-out" whose job it is to wait (3). Much of the poem is cynical and rhetorical, as she asks her soul: "Who/ wouldn't want you? Whose most demonic appetite/ could you possibly fail to answer?" suggesting undertones of her own dissatisfaction with the soul's "troublesome body" (3). This seems a particularly loaded line, its exact meaning remaining purposefully ambiguous: it could refer to the physical body that becomes 'troublesome' with age, the soul itself (unpredictable, uncontrolled, emotional), or to the body of the poem through which, it can be argued, the sentiments of the soul are conveyed. However, like the soul that performs dark songs, Penelope is also gearing up to perform, in every sense of the word, on Odysseus' return, when she will be expected to cater to the desires of an unfaithful, absent husband, "suntanned from his time away, wanting/ his grilled chicken" (3). The line break after "wanting" exhibits Glück's technique of allowing interpretation to linger in the white space as erotic desire – a need the perpetually undressed soul will respond to by "shak[ing] the boughs of the tree/ to get his attention" (3).

However, in keeping with the anorexic aesthetic, Odysseus' return must be perfectly stage managed, Penelope herself regulated: "carefully, lest/ his beautiful face be marred/ by too many falling needles" (3). The not-so-subtle final image of the falling needles reads as though it is a fantasy of Penelope's – to remove the angelic mask, and with it shame about her own needs/appetites, and to finally unleash the monster-woman's voracious, devouring appetite on the husband who has wronged her. It is a violent allusion to the loom's weaving needles, to a release of sexual frustration, and to pent-up rage at the absent Odysseus.

Crucial to the anorexic crisis is the pressure to succeed academically and professionally versus the pressure for women to be carers (i.e. the struggle between individuality and femininity), which can result in either of the following courses of action: "pursuing individualistic success which is seen to involve rejection of affiliation and femininity; or abandoning this course to become fully feminine… defining the self in relation to the needs of others" (MacSween 67). One of the ways the anorexic responds to this conflict is by establishing limitations, "to increase control by decreasing intake," and, although this control is achieved by stifling hunger, the gratification of limiting intake paradoxically achieves pleasure: "It is a solution which is essentially self-destructive and which seeks to substitute self-control for effective control of the world in which the woman exists" (68-9). Unsurprisingly, much of the bickering that takes place in *Meadowlands*' dialogue poems exposes Glück's issues over control, identity construction and denial of her own needs/ appetite (resulting in its own form of pleasure), which clashes with her husband's constant need for attention and validation. While the poems are still thematically familiar to those seen in previous collections, they depict a new

openness in the speaker who is besieged with moments of stoicism, intense jealousy and a desire to save the marriage. Perhaps the most obvious example of self-control as a substitute for effective control can be seen in "Midnight," when Glück's speaker appears to be gaining points on the proverbial scoreboard as she addresses her heart: "weeping in the dark garage/ with your sack of garbage: it is not your job/ to take out the garbage, it is your job/ to empty the dishwasher./ You are showing off again…" (*Meadowlands* 26). Though subtle, these assertions of superiority expose the underlying intentions of Penelope/ Glück to utilise the gendered domestic sphere in a way that seems initially in contrast to the feminist agenda, but that nevertheless results in a sense of dominance and retribution for being put there in the first place.

Through the collection's dialogism, namely the voices of secondary figures such as Circe and Telemachus, the struggle between gender and individuality is angled through yet another prism. Circe is depicted both as the mythological enchantress/ goddess and as a waitress called 'Siren' with whom Glück's husband is having an affair. She personifies the passionately devouring, particularly sexual, appetite the anorexic fears; equally, however, she embodies attributes which are the opposite of Penelope's (carer, loyal housewife), and which might therefore be seen to be desirable to the anorexic. In "Circe's Grief," a poem directed towards Odysseus, Circe transcends her physical form in order to make "myself/ known to your wife as/ a god would, in her own house, in/ Ithaca, a voice/ without a body," which interestingly parallels the god-like authority of Glück's narrator (46). The final implication is particularly powerful – "a voice without a body" is in sharp contrast to the reference to Penelope's "troublesome body" in "Penelope's Song." While Circe's emotional display of jealousy might appear out-of-control in real world terms, and

therefore something that might frighten the anorexic, in the mythological world, emotions/ passions can be a source of great power. Circe harnesses her apparent powerlessness over Odysseus' departure, and, in a show of masterful control and manipulative warfare, drops a psychological grenade into their marriage:

> …When
> you see her again, tell her
> this is how a god says goodbye:
> if I am in her head forever
> I am in your life forever (46).

In the same way that Odysseus inhabits the role of interior paramour in Penelope's life after his departure, Circe torments Odysseus as a voice inside Penelope's head on the basis that, to paraphrase Seneca, we suffer more in imagination than in reality. For example, Penelope, without any actual way of knowing what has happened to Odysseus in his absence, sits at her loom "hypothesizing/ her husband's erotic life" (24). Likewise, Circe, confronted with her own powerlessness and inability to keep Odysseus for herself, exerts control as a voice without a form, breeding disquiet in Penelope's mind as "not so much her rival as her other side" (Diehl 52). To draw a comparison, these interior voices reside in the head much like the 'dis-ease,' much in the way that anorexia is "in fact a desperate struggle with a powerful internal enemy" (MacSween 229). Interestingly, Circe exists somewhat outwith the anorexic's understanding of the world in that she is both vulnerable and powerful, exhibiting the masculine qualities (will/ autonomy) and feminine qualities (devouring/ passionate) which the anorexic attempts to reconcile through acts of renunciation. Of course, for this Circe is labelled a witch, elevating the concept of the Other to yet another level.

The tension and struggle between opposing forces within an individual is portrayed on a lesser level by Telemachus, who "by maintaining the psychological

distance from his mother… mirrors in emotional terms his father's physical departure from Penelope," but who is nevertheless aligned with her as the abandoned party (Morris 244). In this strand of persona poems, it becomes apparent that the intruding interior voices in Telemachus' head are those of his parents; "Taken together, his lyric represents a cry for help from parents who literally (in Odysseus's case) and figuratively (in Penelope's case) had abandoned or ignored him to pursue their own desires – extramarital affairs for Odysseus and composing "dark songs" for Penelope" (247). Embodying Penelope's mask of emotional indifference, he plays the role of analyst, surveying his parents' relationship, trying to "fabricate," from himself, "the being/ each required;" in so doing, he ultimately fails to develop a strong sense of self (*Meadowlands* 48). Despite being the progeny of a fraught marriage between masculine and feminine attributes, and potentially being able to offer a third way as a male who shares sympathies with the anorexic woman, as well as the female poet, he too is a construct of his parents' ideals, a "glittering and wholly artificial child" as long as he remains their puppet (Gilbert and Gubar 48). His series of vocalisations speaks to an imagined audience of sympathetic friends as he meditates on the destructive nature of passions – how, in his person, his parents' opposing agendas are reflected. This, in many ways, summarises the collection's premise – how Glück sees a reflection of herself in Penelope, and adopts Odyssean personae as a form of embedded self-critique.

"Telemachus' Dilemma" provides another take on desire for authorial control– specifically, control over "the interpretation of family history" (Morris 245). Sharing his mother's taste for "accuracy without/ garrulousness," which largely defines the anorexic aesthetic, he states that he will not "honor the dead by

perpetuating/ their vanities, their/ projections of themselves" (*Meadowlands* 33). Telemachus' version of events will dictate what is conveyed to future generations because his position lends him a great deal of authority after his parents' deaths: "I can never decide/ what to write on/ my parents' tomb" (33). He ultimately arrives at the conclusion that he will deny them what they want ("he wants/ beloved," "she prefers/ to be represented by/ her own achievement") and will instead represent them "together,/ sometimes inclining to/ *husband and wife*, other times/ to *opposing forces*" (33). As MacSween notes, "Denial of hunger is, of course, one of the main anorexic strategies in maintaining control when other people intervene in their eating;" and to make a comparison with Telemachus (who is emotionally starved), the realisation that he has the ability to control the family record, to intervene by refusing to adhere to his parents' version of the truth/ their wishes, is his way of responding to parents who denied him physical (Odysseus) and emotional (Penelope) presence, and used him as a pawn in their marital conflict (Morris 231). Through the act of authorial control, and denying their wishes, he retaliates, giving them a taste of their own medicine.

Compared to the passions of Telemachus, and the collection's other speakers, the parable poems are written in deceptively simple, pared-back language, and in keeping with the Imagist praxis, narrate events by presenting information without emotional investment. These poems are purposefully misleading – full of paradox, and characterized by shifting implications. In "Parable of the Trellis," the allegorical lesson is depicted through nature's reliance on "human inventions" to fulfil its dream: in this case, the clematis' "supported ascent" (*Meadowlands* 17). In the poem's opening stanza, the clematis and trellis are presented as each being required

to realise the other's imperatives. They are depicted not only as inherently opposite – one is natural, the other man-made – but they are also representative of the gender stereotypes mirrored and exposed throughout Glück's poetry: the clematis is portrayed as a devouring mess of "green wires" that "burst… from the heart of the garden" while, in contrast, the trellis is "modeled" and "straightforward" (17). Glück draws attention to this "ruse" by demonstrating how the vine grows independently from the trellis "along the ground… white blossoms like headlights growing out of a snake," the latter image being undeniably phallic (17). The trellis then becomes an image associated with the feminine ideal of constancy, support and patience as it assists the vine repeatedly, "every summer" with its "dream of light." Overtime, the vine "obscure[es] the wood, structure/ beautiful in itself, like/ a harbor or willow tree" (17). The final image portrays the vine-covered trellis as both a shelter and a weeping willow, and so the reader must consider this "final ambiguity – is marriage a place of return or of loss and mourning?" and does this illustrate the "modern parable's resistance to moral tags, its way of being in uncertainties and enigmas, which is a kind of wisdom"(Diehl 60)? Additionally, when read in the context of the Odyssean myth, the parable suggests that Penelope is a source of strength for Ithaca during Odysseus' absence. She is, in fact, performing his role, indirectly enabling him to live out his "dream of light." The mask of strength that Penelope is required to wear to keep Ithaca running, to hold her suitors at bay, and to keep herself from becoming completely 'undone,' comes at the price of her own individuality and desires even though she is operating in the 'privileged public world' of the male.

While Glück's aesthetic is one of acknowledged failure, it exposes the function of the disease, and brings much to light with regard to society's confusing

and harmful peddling of heterosexual gender paradigms. By depicting the anorexic's battle to 'succeed,' Glück achieves success of a different kind; her aesthetic provides an alternative route to self-realisation, and to the "personal distinction, which was linked, in [her] mind, to the making of sentences" (*Proofs and Theories* 5).

Closing Comments

The aim of this study has been to examine how poets Medbh McGuckian and Louise Glück create distinctive poetic voices within the framework of Hélène Cixous' *écriture féminine*. Though their poetry intersects thematically, challenging narratives that confine women through their biology and social status, their form, tone and general style are largely incongruent, highlighting some of the varied forms women's writing can take. For McGuckian, this means dislocating standard language by attaching new gender signification to symbols in order to create a space where masculine and feminine attributes are embodied as one, and are not necessarily seen as separate, opposing entities; conversely, Glück's carefully controlled poems ignite critical confusion through paradox and self-correction/ scrutiny, uncovering and disrupting socially and culturally accepted stereotypes regarding "that chained companionship" between male and female.

While McGuckian and Glück's unique poetic voices may be born of the same frustration of having to work within the parameters of a traditional masculine style of writing that "cuts away all thought and impulse that would lead one astray from the pure linearity of argumentative form," it is unsurprising that they react to this struggle in different ways (Heywood 8). As Cixous notes:

> There is, at this time, no general woman, no one typical woman… You can't talk about a female sexuality, uniform, homogenous, classifiable into codes – any more than you can talk about one unconscious resembling another (876).

McGuckian's disenchantment with gender-patterned language is apparent in her description of her mother tongue as "an imposed language" (referring also to the dominance of English over Irish), one that she is "fighting with… all the time… because every time we open our mouths we're slaves" (Alcobia-Murphy and Kirkland 9); contrary to the belief that her poems avoid meaning, her "disruption of language 'allows for speaking differently, which opens encounters with otherness'" (13). In slight contrast, Glück is concerned to expose gender divisions as perpetuated through language: "By connecting masculinity, activity, and aesthetics on the one hand and femininity, passivity, and bodily flesh on the other, Glück calls attention to a narrative we all have too readily accepted" (Heywood 48), one in which gender narratives inhabit the literary texts of our forefathers "by a long chain of parasitical presences, echoes, allusions, guests, ghosts of previous texts" (Gilbert and Gubar 46). Nevertheless, and despite their differing styles, McGuckian and Glück are united in their determination to put themselves "into the text – as into the world and into history – by [their] own movement," which is to say, on their own terms, using language to alter perception and to depict their worldviews (Cixous 875).

As a poet interested in *écriture féminine* and how my own poetry engages with this concept, I'd like to conclude by giving brief consideration to some of the ways in which these poets have influenced my own practice. In my early twenties, the persona poem allowed me to move beyond writing overtly biographical narratives that suffered from either too much or too little detail, and towards a more accessible style of poetry. It offered a distancing mechanism – the ability to project the personal onto the classical, the historical. Poets like Anne Sexton and Sylvia

Plath were hugely influential to my understanding of the persona poem, and were regularly taught in US schools alongside more contemporary poets such as Louise Glück. It would be accurate to say that Glück's persona poetry inspired me to compose nearly half of the poems in my Master's thesis, which were written in the voice of Lesbia, Catullus' on-and-off-again lover. These were pithy, feisty poems responding to Catullus' accusations of Lesbia's infidelity, jealousy and disloyalty. It seemed unjust that only his perspective, as poet, had been recorded for posterity, and it occurred to me that Lesbia was very much in need of a voice. While I still write the occasional persona poem, I now feel more confident unmasked and inhabiting the role of speaker, and so, over time, I've found that the ways in which Glück's work has been important to me have changed. Even after multiple reads, I continue to discover new meaning and implications that had previously gone unnoticed by me, particularly within the pages of *Meadowlands*. Her use of omission – silences that bespeak what is unsaid, is lurking in the white space – has lessened my need to overexpress, and has encouraged me to trust in the process, and also in the reader. A deceptively quiet line that lingers in the imagination is an incredibly powerful thing, and is among the things I'm drawn to in a poem.

My encounters with McGuckian's poetry have been relatively brief in comparison: in truth, I only discovered her writing in the last few years, on the encouragement of my PhD supervisor and fellow Belfastian, Miriam Gamble. Interestingly, and as an aside, I have recently learned that two of my mentors from the University of Southern California, Molly Bendall and David St. John, have written on McGuckian's work and were proponents of her appointment as Writer-in-Residence at UC Berkeley in the early 1990s (which ended prematurely due to

homesickness). While it is not, then, beyond the realms of possibility that I might have been taught McGuckian's poetry as an undergraduate student, I'm thankful that I wasn't. Her early work – that surreal domestic dreamscape – has resonated with me as an older reader in a way that it simply would not have when I was younger. This is partly because McGuckian's poems require a great deal of work to discern their meaning; also, I am ashamed to say that I would almost certainly have dismissed them as thematically boring, shackled and overburdened by domesticity and motherhood, which I believed, at the time, to be adversaries of the young, independent, feminist poet. Ironically, McGuckian's poetry is, in fact, some of the wildest, most unrestrained verse I have ever read, especially when the political upheaval and social constraint of the Troubles, during which she was writing the collections under discussion in my thesis, are taken into account. During the process of engaging with McGuckian's work critically, I went from writing heavily edited, narratively condensed poems to lengthy meandering lyrics where meaning became impressionistic rather than something conveyed explicitly. Additionally, I was reading McGuckian's poetry, so much of which is centred on childbearing, at a time when I was expecting my first child; and though it is difficult to pinpoint exactly how her poems influenced me in this regard, I think there is something of her apparent in the surreal, sarcastic, sometimes violent poems I have written on the pre/ postnatal experience.

Though I would, of course, hope never to have 'imitated' McGuckian or Glück in my own work, their influences have naturally filtered through. It is only since the completion of my poetry manuscript, *Always Erase*, that I can see how the poems are functioning: continually searching for and constructing identity against the

backdrop of traditional representations of women. On the surface, *Always Erase* may refer to woman's role as the unseen/ invisible figure behind the successful/ powerful/ dominant male counterpart, as in the poem "Hinterland," from which the title is taken; but it is also an appeal to women — to myself really — to wipe the slate clean by rethinking, rewriting and retelling their/ my own stories. In this way, my poetry aligns with McGuckian and Glück's by participating indirectly in Cixous' request for women "to come to language" in a way that "launches your force" (Cixous 882) and, by doing so, to provide a lifeline to the woman within, "trapped on the other side of the mirror/ text [by] help[ing] her to climb out" (Gilbert and Gubar 16).

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