

# On 'union' and other metaphors

## Moynagh Sullivan gives a feminist reading of the poetry of Medbh McGuckian



**M**edbh McGuckian's poems are often dialogues, either with her 'selves' or with others, and readers are invited not only to eavesdrop, but to converse. Her poetry is famously opaque and meaning isn't necessarily where we think it should be when we first start to look. As a result of this, our attention is drawn to our own reading habits. The reader is thus invited to question the usefulness of their interpretational paradigms. This is a deliberate effect and one which challenges the reader to rethink inherited notions of what symbols mean and of their 'proper' relation to other symbols — a rethinking which has particular repercussions for symbolic practices

relationship of a mother to a child (as psychically one-yet-two). The physical union is broken-up at birth, and the psychic union is broken-up as the daughter is *reborn* into language, a separation marked by the daughter's second birthday. The break-up of the unions is crucial not only to survival, but also to the continued capacity to be *reunited* in a meaningful relationship. Accordingly, both *unions* are broken-up, only to be reformed. The skin of the pregnant belly is, after all, only *its first surface*.

If the physical union were to continue long past the nine months for which it is approximately appropriate then both mother and

will be compromised.

The understanding of union in *On Her Second Birthday* as a constantly negotiated state in which differences can be recognised, but contained within the larger context of ongoing relationship, is attractively suggestive for rethinking models of relations in the disputed history and space in Irish political practices, north and south. This is not to repeat the slogan that the personal equals the political, for in the case of this personal relationship, it certainly doesn't (yet) have any meaningful representational equivalence at a political level. The model of identity most used today - whether in educational, social or political theory — resists understanding the early experience of the mother child relationship as historical. As such it forms no 'meaningful' part of our representational histories.

Moreover, according to established modes of thinking, while the masculine subject is understood as 'universally representative', the female subject is representative of women only; thus a poem about mothers and daughters has no significance except as the aesthetic rendering of a specific relationship — the literary equivalent of the 'chick-flick'. Irish Studies, for instance, tends to rely on discourses of family which function to naturalise literary and political histories. Such genealogies are constructed around inter-generational relations between fathers and sons, or mothers and sons which serve as metaphors of specific narratives of political and

*"In McGuckian's poem things fall apart into the mother-child relationship which is constituted as the centre which simultaneously both holds and falls apart..."*

around identities in the context of Ireland, north and south. McGuckian's exploration of the symbolic possibilities of the term 'union' are particularly fruitful in this respect.

In *On Her Second Birthday* (a poem dedicated to McGuckian's daughter) 'union' is understood in terms of two parallel relationships. One relationship is that of the pregnant mother and gestating child (physically one-yet-two), signalled by the rippling pregnant belly as the child within moves: 'A slight tremor betrays/ the imperfection of the union/ its first surface', and the other, the early pre-linguistic

child are in danger of losing their lives. Similarly if the psychic union were to continue past the stage of its usefulness, then both mother and child run the risk of losing their physical individuality. The mother is in danger of believing she is defined only by her child's use for her and of coming to believe that this is the sum total of her existence, (of remaining an object) inflicting deep psychic wounds on her sense of self as a result. Continued oneness means that the child would be unable to constitute herself as a separate subject, and as such the child's ability to make meaningful relationships, unions, with others

*On Her Second Birthday*  
(for Emer Mary Charlotte Rose)

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

*A flame burnt up the paper  
On which my gold was written,  
The wind like a soul  
Seeking to be born  
Carried off half  
Of what I was able to say.*

*It seems as though  
To explain the shape of the world  
We must fall apart,  
Throw ourselves upon the world,  
Slip away from ourselves  
Through the world's inner road,  
Whose atoms make us weary.*

*Suddenly ever more lost  
Between the trees  
I saw the edge of the forest  
Which had no end,  
Which I came dangerously close  
To accepting for my life,*

*And followed with my eye a shadow  
Floating from horizon to horizon  
Which I mistook for my own.  
It grew greater while I grew less,  
Gliding like a world, a tapestry  
One looks at from the back.*

*The more it changed  
The more it changed me into itself,  
Till I regarded it as more real  
Than all else, more ardent  
Than love. Higher than the air  
Of a dream,  
A field in which I ripened  
From an unmoving, continually nascent  
Light into pure light.*

*My contours can still  
Just be made out, in the areas of fragrance  
Of its power over me.  
A slight tremor betrays  
The imperfection of the union  
In its first surface.*

*But I flow outwards till I am something  
Belonging to it and flower again  
More perfectly everywhere present in it.  
It believes in me,  
It cannot do without me,  
I know its name:  
One day it will pass my mind into its body.*

From *Marconi's Cottage*,  
Gallery Press 1991

literary history.

The mother-daughter relationship, however, is not familiar to us as a metaphor for any collective fiction of historical identity. If it can be said to operate at a metaphoric level, then it signifies domesticity, privacy and interiority—the opposite domain to the political and the historical. There is, of course, no shortage of mothers in our literature, but critical paradigms derived from these tend to fetishize the mother as object, as opposed to the mother as self-constituting subject. Thus a poem which insists on the mother's co-subjectivity, and which frustrates privileged reading patterns into changing their shape in order to make sense of it, challenges the usefulness of established models of reading or interpreting literary and political histories.

The poem's opening metaphor of the mother/speaker as a mist (*in the beginning I was no more/ than a rising and falling mist/you could see through without seeing*) places the reader and the child in the same position: the mother is the *world* to the child, and similarly the mother/speaker frames the representational world of the poem for the reader. In the poem, the mother moves from being the world to explaining the world: *it seems as though /to explain the shape of the world/ we must fall apart*. But in order that the mother/speaker can 'explain the shape of the world' (herself) she must regain the capacity to say all of what she is 'able to say'. The *soul seeking to be born /carried off half /of what [she] was able to say*, that is, diminished her capacity as a symbolising subject. But, as the daughter acquires language around her second birthday, so too the mother is freed up to be something other than her object and can re-enter symbolic life herself.

For as long as the mother is unable to recognise and 'explain' her function as an object there remains the danger of taking this as the containing metaphor for her identity; a danger the poem documents: *Which I came dangerously close/to accepting for my life*, The mother/speaker mistakes the shadow of the object for her own (*it*



*grew greater while [she] grew less ... the more it changed the more it changed [her] into [her]self*) mis-recognising its outline as the sum total of her reality (*till I regarded it as more real/ than all else*). However, when the mother/speaker represents her own object use in this way, then such objectification ceases to be her defining mode of being. Being an object is thus represented as an aspect of how she relates: *But I flow outwards till I am something/ belonging to it and flower again/more perfectly everywhere present in it*. And as such she can realign her self to her daughter and represent the union as part both of their personal histories.

*On Her Second Birthday* also makes a place for such representations in literary history by playfully interrogating a famous representation of birth. The poem's doubled use of *second birth*, its play on *holding, falling* and *centring*, echoes W.B. Yeats' *The Second Coming*, a poem often read as foreshadowing the birth pangs of the (two) state(s). In *The Second Coming* the '*centre cannot [my italics] hold*' and '*things fall apart*' into anarchy; an anarchy the poem connects to the realisation of female subjectivity. In McGuckian's poem things *fall apart* into the mother-child relationship which is constituted as the *centre* which simultaneously both holds and falls apart; the subjectivity of the mother,

and the centred mother-child relation is not merely 'loosed upon the world' but anarchically 'thrown upon' it.

By focusing attention on this relationship, the poem plays havoc with the understanding that our 'meaningful' identities only begin when we have separated from the mother and are able to constitute ourselves in language. It finds a means of representing that period as 'meaningful' in contrast to classical psychoanalytical accounts where the socialisation of the child is marked through the acquisition of language.

In the McGuckian poem subject and object are not opposed as mutually exclusive in an either-or

binary, but, are instead seen as positions that each person can occupy at the same time, in a both/and relationship. In seeking to map this concept of relationship, McGuckian extends a powerful challenge to our received modes of thinking about identity; a challenge which received practices might very well understand as anarchic. But until such practices stop assuming that women's writing is for women only and that men's writing speaks to 'everyone', then the potential of McGuckian's work to provide models for refiguring a whole range of historical and political paradigms and representational practices will be lost, much to the impoverishment of our culture ♦

**MOYNAGH SULLIVAN** is a lecturer in the Department of English at University College Dublin. Her research interests are in modernism, postmodernism and Irish women's poetry. Her publications in this field include articles in *Verse* and *The Harp and New Voices in Irish Criticism* (2000); contributions to the *Cambridge Guide To Women's Writing In English*; the forthcoming fourth volume of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* and the forthcoming *An Encyclopaedia Of Contemporary Irish Culture*. She is currently editing, with Medbh McGuckian and Anne Ulry Colman, an anthology of Irish women's poetry from the 1600s to the 20th century. She has previously lectured on Irish and English literature and cultural theory in Ireland and in Tokyo.

# Girls in the big picture

Three Northern Irish women playwrights brought gender issues into focus. Imelda Foley assesses their impact.



**Eavesdropping during theatre intervals is a professional habit.** In feminist terminology, it constitutes 'Pleasure'. At a Saturday matinee of Gary Mitchell's *In a Little World of Our Own* at the Peacock in Dublin, I tuned in to the talk of a young trendy couple who were visibly shaken by the first half.

Is it as bad as THAT up there?

THAT BAD? It's worse. They even have to have their own Women's Party to do something about it — in this day and age — can you imagine?

Anecdotal evidence of the mileage gained by the South in terms of social progression is matched by more academic appraisals. Journalist Victoria White's advocacy of governmental determinism in the South is light

years away from a concomitant plea in the North. Recognising that a national identity has been fashioned by males, White states that an updating of that identity should be moulded by 'feminism and economics'. In Northern Ireland, the possibility of feminism creating an identity is about as remote as Mars from our new political agenda. The Agreement does include a clause on the promotion of women within politics and the public sector, but this clause had been hard won by negotiation and it was only the persistence of the Women's Coalition in contradicting the adage of the other parties that 'women are treated exactly like men' which vouched this essential if modest recognition of the patriarchal society of Northern Ireland. In the

background the women were told to 'go home and make the tea'. In the foreground, the new ideology of a post-feminist Europe eludes the history and culture of Northern Ireland where feminism has never occurred and its 'post' representation seems like another male ploy.

While our new Assembly sends out promising sound-bites relating to 'pluralism, inclusivity and cultural diversity', the MLAs might well be advised to look at the work of our women playwrights who, together in a strange continuum from different perspectives and backgrounds, present and represent the lives of women within our society. They have all been careful not to allude to 'feminism' or indeed to define themselves within that domain and