

Iterations of Silence

Leila Pintér

<https://doi.org/10.30608/HJEAS/2022/28/2/17>

Fadem, Maureen E. Ruprecht. *Silence and Articulatory in the Poetry of Medbh McGuckian*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2019. 310 pages. ISBN 978-1-7936-0707-2. E-book. \$115.

Medbh McGuckian is a prominent figure of the contemporary Northern-Irish literary scene, and she has also gained international recognition in the past few decades. The semantic impenetrability of her poems, however, has made it difficult for critics to provide a solid critical assessment of her work. Difficult as navigating such a terrain may be, Maureen Fadem's book not only manages to be well-informed and informative, but also offers elaborate and convincing alternatives to problematic core assumptions in the critical corpus by positioning McGuckian's oeuvre as political poetry that gains its force from a poetics of silence.

As for its structuring, the monograph consists of two main parts. Part I, including three chapters, discusses specific poetic features—the deconstruction of language, extreme visuality, and rampant intertextuality—that produce silence, while Part II examines the questions of production and reception, and reads the poetry of McGuckian alongside that of Paul Celan's.

In the chapter on language, Fadem details the poet's diverse linguistic strategies that function to alienate her mother tongue, the "imposed imperial language" from itself (McGuckian qtd. in Fadem 51). McGuckian "disrupts . . . persona through pronoun inversions" (58) and she misuses words: as Robert Brazeau noted, adverbs, for instance, can become nouns, like in the poem entitled "Porcelain Bells," in which a line reads "meanwhile is my anchor" (59). McGuckian also creates neologisms (60) and engages in "language play by reversing subject and object" as in "View Without a Room" (59), a title from her 1992 collection, *Marconi's Cottage*. These deviations, however, as Fadem emphasizes, are not simply

decompositional tools; the poems tend to perform and stage the creative work in a manner that suggests not only the dismantling of English, but also the possibility of a “rebirthed, newly living language” (68).

The chapter on visuality underlines the same double function concerning McGuckian’s painterly strategies. The poet uses extremely complex and dense images (89) to undermine linguistic conceptuality (82) and to provide “an immediacy of impact” (Gross qtd. in Fadem 98). Further, the poems often depict mutilated, broken bodies and objects (96) which, in turn, frequently refer to “a dead language within a living one” (100). Nevertheless, these bodies are not just passive sufferers: their transformations “metaphorize both the historical development of language into a calcified, dead, violent political tool” and “the work McGuckian does to undermine and reinvent English” (101).

Similarly, in relation to intertextuality Fadem stresses the simultaneous effect of fragmentation and connection: while McGuckian’s intertextual strategies engender a “substitutional, amalgamated voice” that signals discontinuity (127), their Derridean grafting effect (107) also maps feminist and political “transnational solidarities” (126). Regarding intertextuality, Fadem also makes important suggestions for the revision of some of the crucial critical responses to McGuckian’s cut-up practice. On the one hand, in agreement with Alcobia-Murphy, she draws attention to the apparently gender-based bias in criticism relating to the cut-up. Brian Friel, for instance, “borrowed extensively, but without acknowledgement, from George Steiner’s *After Babel* when writing his masterpiece *Translations*, but he was never once accused of plagiarism,” whereas Irish woman poets like McGuckian or Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill are recurrently incriminated when using this technique (Alcobia-Murphy qtd. in Fadem 122). On the other hand, Fadem cautions that while the intensive detective work around McGuckian’s unrecognizable borrowings can be fruitful, it is also important not to lose sight of the poems themselves (139). A poem which borrows, for instance, from Nadezdha Mandelstam’s *Hope*

Against Hope (1970) is probably not a specific comment on Mandelstam, her husband, her memoir, or the Stalinist regime, but rather a contemplation that addresses primarily “an altogether different . . . milieu, always an Irish ground” (111). Thus, the significance of McGuckian’s cut-up poems, Fadem argues, lies in their collage status which enacts a comparative and circumlocutory mode. This modality, she points out, can also be seen in the art of almost all Northern Irish poets from Seamus Heaney—for whom Russian voices were as important as for McGuckian—to Paul Muldoon and Ciarán Carson (123–25). Their penchant for “working with external voices, histories and biographies” (124) creates a “notional ‘hybridity’ which understands the enunciative split as a replay of the binary divide of colonialism itself” (Graham qtd. in Fadem 116) as well as a form of “post-national collectivity” (128).

McGuckian’s poetic practice as a whole is thus seen as two-sided, rooted in both a “virulent faith in language and a terrible anxiety” (168), and this ambiguous background can be detected in the self-reflexive poems as well. The poetic utterance “constantly calls and pulls itself back from an ‘already no-more’ into a ‘still-here’” (Celan qtd. in Fadem 181), resulting in an effect of suspension, or deferral both for poet and reader: the scene of production comes to be an “unexitable location” (178), while the scene of consumption manifests a circuitous, never-ending encounter (216). In this protracted temporality, then, meaning is never completed and the poem becomes a depository of “multiple ‘hauntolog[ies]’” (Derrida qtd. in Fadem 98), which subverts the system exactly through its effect of postponement, by enacting and calling for an unreasonable, interminable labor (242). For Fadem, however, these unfixed, ghostly meanings do have a significant constant feature, inasmuch as they are habitually situated “within . . . images of political life” even in the earliest poems (9). Accordingly, the author interprets McGuckian’s poetic strategies, in agreement with Thomas Docherty, as postmodern strategies, but also warns that the poems’ tendency to break “away from the ‘place-logic’ which

is central to the formulation of a national culture,” as Docherty puts it, feeds precisely on a place-logic (qtd. in Fadem 10). Specifically, it feeds on the “logic of partition” mirroring, from the very beginning, the precariousness of life in the divided, unhomely Northern statelet (10). With this inflection Fadem also differs from critics like Leontia Flynn and Jonathan Hufstader, who maintain that McGuckian “did not turn to political poetry” until “her fifth volume” (Hufstader qtd. in Fadem 13). As she notes, even the first volume’s opening poem entitled “Smoke” evokes the violence of the Troubles by alluding to the “excesses of the tradition of the bonfires during the July marching season” (8). Another poem from this debut collection entitled *The Flower Master* (1982), as Fadem points out, uses the trope of colonial rape as it brings Columbus into the bedroom (16), while yet another “links images of female sexuality and political conflict” when describing the experience of the first menstruation as a “bullet / Left in me” (Schrage-Früh qtd. in Fadem 7). Therefore, in Fadem’s view, positing the early poetry as merely postmodern is as much a reduction as its positioning as merely feminist (5–10). She urges that it is important “to continue thinking, reading, perceiving the war” in the first four collections, too (28)—a critical orientation that was present already in Clair Wills’s 1993 *Improprieties*, but “had not been picked up on or fully developed until more recently” (21)—in order “to judiciously historicize and locate McGuckian’s work in time and space” (xxv).

On the whole, Fadem’s highly intriguing book offers important critical insights into McGuckian’s poetry highlighting the complex interaction between poetic form and historical context, and exploring the writing and reading processes as mutually interdependent aspects. Importantly, her monograph also provides an unprecedented, illuminating comparative angle—through the parallel with Celan—and reframes the (in)famous opacity of McGuckian’s poems in terms of their traumatic articulacy and performative silence, while positioning them in the context of specifically (Northern) Irish literary silences as well. Fadem’s study will become, without doubt, a cornerstone of McGuckian research, and scholars, students, and enthusiasts of

Irish literature will most certainly find it an engaging reading, as will anyone interested in the relations of politico-historical trauma and poetic silence in general.

Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Budapest

Uncorrected Proof