
“Suspended between the Two Worlds”: Gestation Metaphors and Representations of Childbirth in Contemporary Irish Women’s Poetry

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Abstract. Based on an analysis of gestation metaphors and representations of childbirth in contemporary Irish women’s poetry, this article examines the connections and tensions between the realms of creative expression and maternity. While the longstanding literary convention of analogizing the creative process to female gestation has fostered and perpetuated simplified notions of gender, often implicitly assuming that writing is a male privilege and irreconcilable with motherhood, the literary representation of the actual event of parturition poses challenges for the writer regardless of such stereotypes. Drawing on Julia Kristeva’s concept of “abjection” and Elisabeth Bronfen’s “knotted subject”, symbolized by the mark at the centre of the human body that records the incision at birth, this essay analyzes the ways in which poems by contemporary Irish women writers record the primal trauma of human existence: the injury or scar inevitably produced by the separation of mother and child in parturition, which acts as a permanent reminder of our incompleteness and vulnerability as human beings.

Key Words. Contemporary Irish women’s poetry, gestation metaphors, childbirth, creative expression, motherhood, “abjection”, “knotted subject”, trauma.

Resumen. Analizando metáforas de gestación y representaciones del parto en la poesía irlandesa contemporánea de autoría femenina, este artículo examina las conexiones y tensiones entre los ámbitos de la expresión creativa y la maternidad. Si bien la tradicional convención literaria de comparar el proceso creativo a la gestación femenina ha fomentado y perpetuado nociones simplificadas de “género”, frecuentemente suponiendo que escribir es un privilegio masculino e irreconciliable con la maternidad, la representación literaria del propio acto del parto plantea problemas aun sin tener en cuenta estos estereotipos. Utilizando los conceptos de la “abyección” de Julia Kristeva y del “sujeto nudoso” de Elisabeth Bronfen, simbolizado por la marca en el centro del cuerpo humano que registra la incisión hecha durante el parto, este artículo analiza las estrategias usadas en poemas de escritoras contemporáneas irlandesas para captar el trauma principal de la vida humana: la herida o cicatriz inevitablemente producida por la separación de madre e hijo en el parto, que nos recuerda permanentemente el estado incompleto y vulnerable de nuestra existencia como seres humanos.

Palabras claves. Poesía irlandesa contemporánea de autoría femenina, metáforas de gestación, parto, expresión creativa, maternidad, “abyección”, “sujeto nudoso”, trauma.

Introduction

The representation of childbirth in writing is challenging, due, on the one hand, to a tradition that has appropriated simplified images of gestation and birth to describe the writer's creative process and, on the other hand, because of the sheer extremity of the act of parturition. In a letter to his wife Nora written in 1912, James Joyce attributes maternity to the realm of women's, and outside literary experience:

I went into the backroom of the office and sitting at the table, thinking of the book I have written, the child which I have carried for years and years in the womb of the imagination as you carried in your womb the children you love, and of how I had fed it day after day out of my brain and my memory (Ellman 1975: 202-3).

The analogizing of Joyce's literary creation, nourished by his brain, to his wife's experience of maternity in the womb implicitly assumes the existence of a "natural" boundary between the two worlds. Rather than being the product of Joyce's individual bias, this position reflects the predominant cultural paradigm of the time when these lines were written, which was premised upon an inapt dissociation and gendering of male mind versus female body, with the implicit assumption that the corporeal was unworthy of art and literature, with the exception of highly stylized images as in the example above. This conception of the somatic as marginal to cultural representation is in contrast with the ancient Celtic tradition, where, as Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill explains, "[t]he body, with its orifices and excretions, is not treated in a prudish manner but is accepted as *an nádúir*, or nature, and becomes a source of repartee and laughter rather than anything to be ashamed of" (1997: 51-2). As will be argued at more length in the analysis of Eavan Boland's "The Oral Tradition", in modern Ireland this alternative perspective on the somatic was preserved in oral culture and folklore, which have been valuable resources for redressing the aesthetics of representation that the excerpt from Joyce's letter exemplifies.

The cultural environment contemporary Irish women poets contend with tends to be suspicious of such simplified categorizations into gender binaries as manifested in Joyce's statement, but Medbh McGuckian explains that

childbirth is still difficult to record in poetry: "No, it's impossible for the person who was born, and it's impossible for the woman who has gone through it, because she's usually so knocked out or crazy, suspended between the two worlds" (Holmsten 2004: 95). While McGuckian does not identify the "two worlds" between which the mother-to-be is suspended in parturition, the poems discussed in this essay demonstrate that certainly the worlds of creative expression and maternity are not mutually exclusive, as Joyce's letter to his spouse assumes. The first part of this article focuses on the implications of the gendering of the creative process in employing metaphors of female gestation, exemplified by the opening quotation from Joyce's correspondence with Nora, while the second section analyzes how, given the obvious challenges involved in writing about childbirth that McGuckian addresses, this traumatic event is recorded in a selection of poems by contemporary women poets in Ireland.

Metaphors of Female Gestation in Contemporary Irish Poetry

In "Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor", Susan Stanford Friedman argues that "the childbirth metaphor validates women's artistic effort by unifying their mental and physical labor into (pro)-creativity" (1991: 371), whereas in a male text it apparently has the opposite effect:

A male childbirth metaphor has three collisions for the reader to overcome: the literally false equation of books and babies, the biological impossibility of men birthing both books and babies, and the cultural separation of creation and procreation (376).

No doubt the extensive tradition within which male poets have analogized the creative process to gestation and birth (an equation which remains "literally false" when employed by women) causes many problems for a necessary revision of the discourses of maternity and femininity. However, the solution cannot be, as Stanford Friedman suggests, to reserve the childbirth metaphor for the exclusive use by women, which consolidates the damaging biologism at the core of traditional appropriations of this literary device, with the reductive role it assigns to "real" women both socially and in the context of literary creation.

The important question is not whether the pen comparing poetic creation to childbirth is led by a male or female hand, but, rather, whether the concrete manifestation of this metaphor in writing subverts or consolidates preconceived, reductive assumptions about sex and gender. Admittedly, transcending these damaging preconceptions may require different strategies depending on the specific conditions that determine the occurrence of a gestation metaphor, and in this respect it may be relevant that the author using this literary device is writing from a, consciously or unconsciously, sexed position. Alice Jardine illuminates the complex interplay between written text and its actualization with regard to a discursive revision of “femininity” in “Gynesis”. The title of this manifesto refers to a concept that designates “the putting into discourse of ‘woman’ as that process beyond the Cartesian Subject, the Dialectics of Representation, or Man’s Truth” and produces “neither a person nor a thing, but a horizon, that towards which the process is tending: a *gynema*” (1982: 57). This “*gynema*” is constantly in process, as “a reading effect, a woman-in-effect, never stable, without identity”, whose presence is as much the product of written discourse as of the reader’s interpretation, as when “[t]he feminist reader’s eye comes to a halt at this tear in the fabric, producing a state of uncertainty and sometimes distrust - especially when the faltering narrative in which it is embedded has been articulated by a man from within a nonetheless still-existent-discipline” (57). This interactive model is useful for the analysis in this section of two different uses of the childbirth metaphor for literary creation in the context of contemporary Irish poetry.

The following excerpt from an interview with Seamus Heaney illustrates the conflicting nature of the gendering of the creative process through using metaphors of gestation, a position which, making reference to his earlier work, the poet refutes, but subsequently consolidates:

I used to think that my poems came out of something passive, brooding, womb-like. But the longer I live I realize that’s not the whole truth. I must admit it was a kind of myth, that there was a kind of wilfulness in it. These terms, of course, ‘feminine presence’ and ‘masculine drive’ and so on, are now regarded as sexist and suspect and agin’ the law somehow. I was basing my distinctions on the biological facts of

siring and mothering, you know? One is a forced entry, as it were, and the other is a suffered consequence. So you can think of the poems as a consequence of something, as a matter of waiting, or you can think of them as wilful entering (Thomas and Heaney 2002: 52).

As Patricia Coughlan’s detailed analysis of this excerpt in “Heaney, Orpheus and Women” suggests, in the context of the Nobel Laureate’s work this quotation, while self-reflective, consolidates the underlying gender stereotypes. Coughlan discusses the problematic gender bias inherent in this statement, of associating “masculinity” with “wilfulness”, “drive”, “siring”, “forced entry” and “wilful entering”, and “femininity” with “something passive, brooding, womb-like”, “presence”, “mothering”, “suffered consequence” and “waiting” respectively. Even as he is conscious of the “sexist and suspect” nature of these binaries, Heaney’s reductive presentation of his “feminine” poetic persona as “when writing, in the process of female gestation: ‘passive, brooding, womb-like’ ” (2007: 26), Coughlan suggests, reflects a well-established tradition for describing the poetic process of, by default, male authors, in terms of both “femininity” and “masculinity”, leaving a void at the site of “female” literary production:

One of the curious aspects of this metaphorical projection of reproductive upon artistic act is the tendency of male writers to gather in the roles of both sexes. Metaphors of involuntary conception, long gestation and painful bringing forth are all common instances of this appropriation by male authors of female physical experiences and reproductive capacities, which become added to male ones (28).

While Heaney’s biological masculinity is insignificant for determining the degree of sexism in the statement above, Coughlan highlights the fact that Heaney’s comment is not an isolated case, but reflects a firmly entrenched tradition in the context of English-language poetry, within which Nobel Laureate Heaney is a well-established entity. Despite the fact that in this particular quotation Heaney seemingly distances himself from metaphors of female gestation which portray a reductive image of “femininity” and have in the past circulated a reductive view of “woman” as well as marginalizing women writers, his own centrality to the inherited poetic tradition he reflects on, as well as less self-critical past uses

of this convention in his work, render his comment one that consolidates the childbirth metaphor, even as he is hesitantly questioning its integrity. Using Heaney's own terminology, by contrast, Coughlan's deconstruction subverts the meaning of the poet's statement.¹

In comparison to Heaney's comment above, Paula Meehan's "Small Poem", published in her 1984 collection *Return and No Blame*, depicts the process of female gestation and, by analogy, the germination of a poem, as more dynamic and, to use a term associated with "masculinity" in Heaney's epistemology, "wilful":²

You sleep in my head
potent, curious, primed
to explode suddenly
into memory or vision.

You have crawled deep
Into the shell of my heart.
When I listen close
I hear you roar.

1. For a more general analysis of reductive uses of metaphors of female gestation for the creative process, see Sandra M. Gilbert's and Susan Gubar's 1979 article "The Queen's Looking Glass: Female Creativity, Male Images of Women, and the Metaphors of Literary Paternity" (*The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, eds. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, New York and London: Yale UP: 3-45). Speaking specifically in the context of contemporary Irish women's poetry, in "The In-formal Poetics of Medbh McGuckian" Moynagh Sullivan links the extensive use of this convention in male-dominated literary circles in the past to a failure for Irish readers to embrace McGuckian's recurrent focus on the subject of maternity in her poetry. This lack of interest, Sullivan suggests, "does not result from such experience being too particularised and too far outside the ambit of what is properly poetic, but that the explicit treatment of such experience overloads a poetics already deeply imbricated in incarnatory metaphors" (2004: 75).

2. In addition, metaphors of female gestation for poetry also feature prominently in Medbh McGuckian's *Marconi's Cottage* (1991) and *Shelmalier* (Loughcrew, Oldcastle: Gallery 1998), as well as Leanne O'Sullivan's *Waiting for My Clothes* (Highgreen, Northumberland: Bloodaxe 2004). In "Publisher's Notes", from her collection *Between Here and There* (Manchester: Carcanet 2002), Sinéad Morrissey also uses this literary device (17).

You are the clinging seed
in my womb, patient, auspicious.
Given enough heat you will
quicken into the dark (18).

In Meehan's poem, an idea dormant in the poet's head "*explode[s]*" into an image, "*crawl[s]*" into her heart, where the poet "*listen[s]*" to its "*roar*". The image then travels into the womb, a "*clinging seed*", "patient" but also "*auspicious*", from where, if sufficiently well nourished, it will "*quicken into the dark*" (18; my emphasis). While the active part in Meehan's "Small Poem" is largely that of the poem/infant, its description of female gestation is still markedly different from Heaney's "passive, brooding" and "*suffered consequence*" (52; my emphasis). Not only is the description of Heaney's "suffered consequence" highly dynamic in Meehan's poem, but the germination of the original idea into a written text also depends on the poet/mother's readiness to *engage* with this presence through memory or vision, as well as emotionally and, in the closing lines, physically.

In its emphasis on the corporeality of poetic creation, Meehan's poem echoes the conceptualization of the body as a resource for creative production in the context of "*écriture féminine*", which is defined by Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray as a form of writing practiced in *avant-garde* texts by men and women that disrupt the conventions of language and literature, while having recourse to the pre-Oedipal mother-child relationship and favouring expression of the sensual and corporeal over phallogocentric reasoning. In *The Newly Born Woman*, Cixous describes the maternal driving force that inspires "*écriture féminine*" as one that offers closeness and sensuality without obliterating the subject's autonomy:

Text, my body: traversed by lilting flows; listen to me, it is not a captivating, clinging 'mother'; it is the equivocal that, touching you, affects you, pushes you away from your breast to come to language, that summons *your* strength (1986: 93).

It is in this liminal space where self and other meet without merging that Cixous locates the driving force for "*écriture féminine*" and its transformative power. In line with the emphasis on the somatic in the theorizing of "*écriture féminine*", in an interview with Luz

Mar González Arias the poet also identifies the writing process as having a strong corporeal dimension, something her “Small Poem” clearly echoes: “All the elements of poetry are very much rooted in physical experience, like the rhythm of the poem, its music, it is indeed a physical experience” (2000: 195). At the same time, Meehan is skeptical of the gendering of the creative process that the conceptualization of “*écriture féminine*” has been associated with (201). However, it has to be remembered that the concept of “femininity” underlying “*écriture féminine*”, while based in the morphology of the female body – whether genital (in Irigaray) or uterine (in Cixous) – designates a virtual, not a biological category, showing, as Kari Weil argues, “the fundamental inseparability and interdependence of concepts of mind and body, reason and emotion and, ultimately, femininity and masculinity” (2006: 154). In accordance with “*écriture féminine*”, Meehan’s “Small Poem” demonstrates that literary tropes of female gestation can offer useful possibilities for opening up new perspectives on the binaries of sex and gender as well as on the making of poetry. Attempts to record the actual physical event of childbirth, which are the focus of the next section of this article, can be similarly useful for this endeavour.

“A Dance Comes To Mind”: Representations of Childbirth in Contemporary Irish Women’s Poetry

In accordance with McGuckian’s statement on childbirth in the introduction to this essay, many poems by contemporary Irish women poets portray parturition as an event that resists articulation. Childbirth, then, is in the realm of the Kristevan “abject”, defined in *Powers of Horror* as “something rejected from which one does not part” (1982: 4) and linked directly to the maternal, since it “preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be – maintaining that night in which the outline of the signified thing vanishes and where only the imponderable affect is carried out” (10). The traumatic nature of childbirth is also at the core of Elisabeth Bronfen’s theory of subject formation in *The Knotted Subject*, which argues for the navel, the mark that records both oneness with the mother in pregnancy and the subsequent separation, as a

more suitable, gender-neutral emblem of individuality than the phallus. The navel, Bronfen suggests, “points to the vulnerability inhabiting the individual, namely, that the knotting occurs over a wound, both shielding and constructing a site within which are the remains of the traumatic impact” (1998: 10).³ As will be shown, notions of “imponderable affect” as well as “shielding” are important in the poems on childbirth examined in this article.

Leland Bardwell’s “Matisse Woman” contemplates an image of a woman on canvas and observes its failure to represent the fact that she has given birth to a child, suggesting that conventional conceptualizations of femininity have either muted or idealized the discourses of maternity. In Bardwell’s poem, parturition is described as an instantaneous vision that is oblivious to the deep physical and emotional impact of the event. In the image of the Matisse woman, childbirth is emphatically an absence, marked by “the shadows of leaves” and “the twilight / of her skin” (Bardwell 1998: 87). In its reticence about the event of parturition the poem resonates with Bronfen’s theorizing of the navel as a cultural emblem that “signifies that the centeredness of human existence is constructed over a gap, a fissure, a void” (18):

She smiles, her body opens
to produce a child.
Where has he gone? they ask.
She points to the belly

but there is no birth
only the shadows of leaves
tracing the twilight
of her skin (87).

In line with Bronfen’s argument, Bardwell’s Matisse woman points to the belly, the site which bears the mark that records the incision at birth. However, while the central image of the woman is void of a definite referent to the event the poem seeks to capture, leaving her “two-dimensional”, there are reminiscences of childbirth in other elements of the painting, such as “the splash / of blood on the vase – /

3. In “The Bodily Encounter with the Mother” (1991), Luce Irigaray anticipates this idea, suggesting that the umbilical cord, rather than the scar left from the incision at birth, ought to replace the phallus as cultural emblem.

peonies, violets / sprayed against the curtain” (87). The infestation of the environment with traces of the invisible traumatic event in Bardwell’s poem precisely corresponds to the Kristevan concept of the “abject” as “that night in which the outline of the signified thing vanishes and where only the imponderable affect is carried out” (1982: 10).

The speaker in Eavan Boland’s “The Oral Tradition”, originally published as part of her 1987 collection *The Journey*, overhears a woman recounting a story about her grandmother, who gave birth alone, in open nature, to a son who was conceived out of wedlock. However, despite the fact that the poem recurrently employs images from the natural environment to describe the event of parturition, what Boland’s “The Oral Tradition” records is not the “natural” process of birth. The vivid description of the delivery belies the fact that the speaker is depending entirely on secondhand information about an event that happened to a stranger, as well as in a distant time. Rather than portraying childbirth, “The Oral Tradition” captures elements of the embodied experience of maternity that have long remained abject from its public discourses in Ireland, namely the fact that a mother is conventionally also a sexually active woman, and that women’s sexuality has resisted regulation through the public sphere. The poem is divided into two parts, which portray very different images of the woman in question. When the “illegitimate” birth is contextualized with “the remnants of a nation” (Boland 2005: 133), the woman who succeeded in delivering herself of her child without support is at once reduced to a helpless victim seeking shelter. As the title of the poem suggests, however, an alternative account of her story has been preserved in oral culture, the realm from which the speaker takes the material to record the invisible lives captured in this poem. In accordance with Boland’s identification of popular culture as a source of information for revising history, in *The Burning of Bridget Cleary* Angela Bourke draws attention to “[t]he many fairy-legends which tell of women in childbirth being swept through the air” and which “are vividly metaphorical: narratives of passage – analogous to rites of passage” (2006: 36).

“The Oral Tradition” opens gradually. At a social gathering, the speaker initially only picks up snippets of information from a

conversation between two women, but she is slowly drawn further into the story one of them is relating. Despite the actual remoteness of the experience described, which by the time it reaches the reader has been mediated at least twice, the poem creates a vivid sensation of the birth, the account of which is largely delivered through direct speech:

‘She could feel it coming’ –
one of them was saying –
‘all the way there,
across the fields at evening
and no one there, God help her

‘and she had on a skirt
of cross-woven linen
and the little one
kept pulling at it.
It was nearly night ...’

(Wood hissed and split
in the open grate,
broke apart in sparks,
a windfall of light
in the room’s darkness)

‘... when she lay down
and gave birth to him
in an open meadow.
What a child that was
to be born without a blemish!’ (132).

In contrast with the vibrant description of the birth in these lines, which is analogized to images of wood hissing and breaking in the wind, once the societal dimension is introduced, a completely different light is cast on the event:

I was caught by it:
the bruised summer light,
the musical sub-text

of mauve eaves on lilac
and the laburnum past
and shadow where the lime
tree dropped its bracts
in frills of contrast

where she lay down
in vetch and linen
and lifted up her son
to the archive
they would shelter in:

the oral song
avid as superstition,
layered like an amber in
the wreck of language
and the remnants of a nation (132-3).

The closing section of the poem, not unlike Bardwell's "Matisse Woman", finds a void at the site that is supposed to hold the memory of the event of parturition, a "shadow where the lime / tree dropped its bracts / in frills of contrast" (132). In both poems, this gap is produced not only by way of an individual, but also through a collective displacement; in Bardwell's "Matisse Woman", as a result of the limited aesthetic conventions for depicting women in art; in Boland's "The Oral Tradition", originating from a deliberate disregard for the fact that women's sexuality, of which pregnancy and childbirth are potentially an outcome, cannot be fully contained within the binds of paternalist authority.

In a more personalized account, Ruth Carr's "Body Politic" also draws attention to the tensions between the corporeal sensation of the delivery of a child and its discursive construction, specifically with regard to the medicalization of birth. Carr describes how the overwhelmingly physical and deeply emotional experience of giving birth to her daughter Anna, which, like in Boland's "The Oral Tradition", is analogized to images from the natural world, is at odds with the detached atmosphere in the delivery ward, the impartial and sometimes unwanted medical intervention that is administered in the process, and an insensitivity that results in a failure to understand the mother's urge to hold her newborn child:

After you tore me, there was a clearing
still as the moment of stillness after words,

like coming upon a green space between trees
out of the undertow of roots and creeper and
growth in darkness
face, limbs, feet, purpling, peeled raw.

Like this: your remarkable note
rising to meet the blue above our heads,

far beyond the clinical ceiling of this
partitioned room
beyond the unsolicited stab of pethidine in my
thigh
beyond the refusal to deliver you in my arms
beyond blocked roads and minds,

you came out
of my body
to claim your own

your voice breaking over every fixed thing
bearing me on its tide (Carr 1999: 46).

Birth itself is imaged here in terms of vivid contrasts, recording "the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be" that Kristeva describes in *Powers of Horror* (1982: 10). The speaker in Carr's poem contrasts the violent tearing of parturition with the subsequent "stillness", and the child's "growth in darkness" with the bareness of "face, limbs, feet, purpling, peeled raw" (46). Then the level of concrete physical experience is abandoned to introduce a symbolic dimension into the poem, when the child's cry reaches out over "blocked roads and minds" to "claim" its separate physical existence and identity, "breaking over every fixed thing" and "bearing [the mother] on its tide" (46).

Not unlike the vivid description of the delivery in Boland's "The Oral Tradition", this closing image in Carr's poem suggests that the lived experience of female embodiment has resisted expropriation at the hands of paternalist authority. As both the title and the closing lines of "Body Politic" indicate, the implications of Carr's poem, while based on an experiential account of childbirth, consciously transcend the personal dimension. In accordance with Carr, Clair Willis's *Improprieties* draws attention to the politicization of the discourses of maternity in Northern Ireland, where "the regulation of sexuality and reproduction (particularly of women's sexuality, as their bodies are all too often treated as a national resource) is one of the principal means by which the national 'family' is both constituted and controlled" (1993: 3). Boland's "The Oral Tradition" addresses a similar problematic in relation to the Irish Republic, portraying women as dispossessed of their bodies and hence compromised in negotiating their identities as women.

Medbh McGuckian's more oblique poetry arguably resolves the dilemma of having to negotiate between the private and public discourses of maternity, or between embodiment and representation. Her poems seek to capture the experience of motherhood from within, disrupting notions of language as a tool for the mimetic representation of a unitary reality. Consequently, McGuckian's poems are often hermetically sealed almost to the point of impenetrability; an intended effect, as the poet's following comment in "Comhrá" demonstrates:

I feel that every poem is a whirlpool around me to protect the inner inwardness - that if anyone did actually pierce to the centre of the poem, the poem is then ... that there always must be some part of it that cannot be penetrated (McGuckian, Ní Dhomhnaill and O'Connor 1995: 21).

McGuckian has recurrently stated that she began to write poetry in an attempt to restore her sense of integral subjectivity after suffering from postpartum depression. In "Comhrá", McGuckian explains that "[t]he watershed event" that initiated her into writing "was a total psychotic breakdown I had after the birth of my first baby, from which I drew all my energy" (12). Given that her incentive for writing poetry was apparently so acutely personal, the "private" character of McGuckian's work seems a logical consequence. While shielding the poet's "inner inwardness" (21) from penetration, however, McGuckian's poems do offer the reader a glimpse of this perspective from within.

As the title of the poem indicates, McGuckian's "Breaking the Blue" enacts the separation between self and other in parturition, as well as evoking oneness in pregnancy, states which in the poem coexist in simultaneity. In the following lines an image of the prenatal union of mother and infant is framed by references to parting, casting maternity outside conceptions of linear time. Rather, the poem is sympathetic with Kristeva's elaborations on an affinity between maternity and "monumental" time, which designates an entity's position in a larger structure, and the realm of which encompasses reproduction, designated by terms like "survival of the species, life and death, the body, sex and symbol" (1986: 189-90):

Single version of my mind deflected off my body,
Side-alter, sacramental, tasting-table, leaf to my
Emptying shell, heart with its aortic opening,

Your mouth, my dress was the scene that framed
Your shut eye like hands or hair, we coiled
In the lifelong snake of sleep, we poised together

Against the crevice formed by death's forefinger
And thumb, where her shoulder splits when
desire

Goes further than the sender will allow
(McGuckian 1991: 84).

The fusion of self and other in the central image of "the lifelong snake of sleep" (84) is enclosed by references to a splitting of mind and body, thus mirroring at a conceptual and a formal level the point of departure as well as destination of the passage into independent subjectivity during parturition.

The two closing stanzas of McGuckian's poem convey a sense of release, merging references to the somatic dimension of parturition and the creative process, both of which are portrayed as originating in the body. In doing so, McGuckian's poem questions the simplified appropriation of birth metaphors to represent the creative process as exemplified by Joyce's and Heaney's statements in this article, a convention which, according to Moynagh Sullivan, has cultivated a "poetic economy" that "masculinises voice, and feminises form, that is, the body of the poem" (2004: 75):

Womb-encased and ever-present mystery
without
Release, your even-coloured foliage seems a
town garden
To my inaccessible, severely mineral world.

Fragments of once-achieved meaning, ready to
leave
The flesh, re-integrate as lover, mother, words
That overwhelm me: You utter, become music,
are played (84).

The sound the speaker in the poem wants to play is both "[w]omb-encased" and a "town garden", simultaneously located inside and outside the speaker's body. The sound then reintegrates as "lover" and "mother", evoking two important formative relationships with other human beings that have a strong physical dimension and challenge an individual's sense of integrity as an independent subject. Eventually, the creative energy the poem seeks to record turns into a flow of "words" that is released and subsequently converted into "music", thus suggesting that the meaning captured resists the binds of logical reasoning and pertains instead to the realm of endeavours "to break the code, to shatter language, to find a specific discourse closer to the body and emotions, to the unnameable repressed by the social contract" as identified by Kristeva in contemporary artistic practice (1986: 200).

McGuckian's "House without Eyebrows" also attempts to resolve the conflict between

the event of birth and its commemoration within language by “speak[ing] corporeal”, following Luce Irigaray’s suggestions for the writing of maternity in “The Bodily Encounter with the Mother” (1991: 43). In the opening lines of “House without Eyebrows”, the speaker acknowledges her visceral memories of parturition using ruptured and fragmented images to represent the tear of the initial separation of the infant from the mother’s body:

I will remember, with my entire body,
how you were torn. It was wind-still.
A room of idols. You were light-blue
on the inside, drowning in darkness;
the sun also spread a despairing
light for me. Great sheaves of lightning
stroked your neckless face, your straight
throat, your small, smooth head,
your yawning eyes, wide-open hands
(McGuckian 2006: 27).

In these lines the speaker constantly moves between references to her own body, the infant’s body, the presence of “idols” in the delivery ward and the outdoors, echoing the infant’s passage into separate existence. Other people’s presence is described as having an estranging effect that renders “the blue fog of [the child’s] dress” into “a muffled creeping / in the breathed yellow of [its] blouse” (27). These punctual references to clothing in the context of parturition anticipate the child’s subsequent entry into the societal context, a simultaneity that is also present in “Breaking the Blue”.

The closing stanza again locates the speaker’s knowledge of the experience of childbirth in the body and testifies to its resistance towards articulation, thus again positioning childbirth in the realm of the Kristevan “abject”. While the “blood-red words” that would describe the event of parturition “have no wings”, a dance may succeed in releasing what the speaker wishes to communicate:

But your arm, made up of all whiteness,
underfed, warmed its sleeve,
your hair, unwound, touched the ground
like a track in snow or a coin’s embossment.
A dance comes to mind
though the blood-red words of your skin
stand in the worn grass and have no wings
(27).

Like in “Breaking the Blue”, the speaker in “House without Eyebrows” comes to the conclusion that the impressions of childbirth she holds in her body can only be partially captured through language. The association of the event with “a coin’s embossment” is suggestive of trauma, something indelibly imprinted in the speaker’s existence, which however can only be transliterated by way of metonymic displacement.

Conclusion

The use of birth metaphors for the creative process and the representation of childbirth in poetry, both of which explore the limits and limitations of the transliteration of experience into writing, have the potential to offer new insights into the discourses of maternity, as well as more generally into the negotiations of gender and personal identity, of which the individual’s relationship with the maternal is a crucial part. While the different contexts in which metaphors of gestation have been used by Joyce, Heaney and Meehan respectively show that this literary device may either consolidate or help to overcome unhelpful gender bias, Bardwell’s “Matisse Woman”, Boland’s “The Oral Tradition”, Carr’s “Body Politic” and McGuckian’s “Breaking the Blue” and “House without Eyebrows” all emphasize that the actual event of childbirth can only be represented partially within language. The limitations these poems encounter, as McGuckian’s “House without Eyebrows” shows, are not only caused by the reductive inherited aesthetics of femininity that Bardwell’s poem addresses, or by the inappropriate position in which maternity is cast at a societal level that Boland and Carr emphasize, but also result from the fact that parturition represents a fundamental trauma at the core of human existence.

In line with Kristeva’s notion of “abjection” and Bronfen’s “knotted subject”, symbolized by the mark at the centre of the human body that records this traumatic event, the poems on childbirth analyzed in this article testify to the fact that the separation of mother and infant at birth inevitably leaves a scar, a constant reminder of our incompleteness and vulnerability as human beings. While direct articulation of this trauma is impossible, writing may facilitate access to the closeness

experienced in the pre-Oedipal union, and may consequently help to retrieve culturally displaced aspects of maternity and personal identity, as Cixous explains in “The Laugh of the Medusa”:

To admit that writing is precisely working (in) the in-between, inspecting the process of the same and of the other without which nothing can live, undoing the work of death – to admit this is first to want the two, as well as both, to ensemble of the one and the other, not fixed in

sequences of struggle and expulsion or some other form of death but infinitely dynamized by an incessant process of exchange from one subject of the other (1991: 340).

Childbirth offers a powerful image and motif for capturing this circulation of energy in the “incessant process of exchange from one subject of the other”, which characterizes the creative process and our most important formative relationships.

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